No Strings on Me

by northbound

Summary

Breaking News: Petyr Baelish, reputable business mogul and club owner, reports daughter Alayne Stone missing from summer home in the French Alps early this morning. Police investigating, foul play suspected.

In other news, in the small town outside of Cardiff, a girl with Sansa Stark's face shows up, with her eyes on the new police commander Jon Snow.
Chapter 1

There are red and gold leaves falling into the street. They’ve fallen from the little trees lining the concrete, once green and now a myriad of sunset colors that make the little shopping center outside of Cardiff look a little more enchanting than it had any right to. When cars drive by the glass windows of the coffee shop, the leaves get kicked up in their haste and Alayne can watch them fall all over again.

Alayne Stone sits at a corner table in the Mole’s Town Café, the back of her chair nestled against a wooden wall by the bathrooms and the table stuck up against the glass windows of the café. She cradles a large hot coffee between both her hands, her eyes firmly glued out the window and across the street.

She lifts her coffee to take a sip. Its bitter black and gone cold, it had been nearly two hours since she got it from the barista. It tastes nothing like sweet coffee she had in the Vale. Mya always drank it black, but Alayne always thought it unbearable that way. Her friend would laugh when she saw Alayne in the kitchens pouring a heap of creamer and sugar into her mug during the early mornings the two friends would eat together, but Alayne could never take it any other way. Bedside’s father always indulged Alayne’s sweet tooth, and he said black coffee would stain Alayne’s pretty white teeth. How angry father would be now.

Not father, Alayne thought, closing her eyes as she fought her better senses, father is dead.

Now, she had no money to waste on things like lattés or macchiato or all the other sweet drinks that the Mole’s Town menu had to offer. Black coffee would do just as well. Besides, the taste hardly mattered anymore. Alayne had ordered it, needing something to wake her up from her sleepless night on the bus from Liverpool, only having just gotten to the city that morning. It no longer mattered if her teeth were white or pretty.

Alayne lifted the cup and drank the cold coffee, still looking out the window and the police who was getting out his parked car and going to distribute a parking ticket to a very angry man.

The police officer was young, moderately tall, with dark curls sticking out of the bottom of his hat. From across the street, hidden behind the glass wall of the coffee shop, Alayne thought the man could have been a stranger or a long-lost ghost. She’d told herself that he was a stranger about a million times since she’d seen the article about him in the Liverpool Newspaper that was on the check-in desk of the dingy motel she’d been living in there. His picture was in printed in black in white next to the article about Cardiff’s youngest police commander who was newly elected. Alayne hardly believed her own eyes when she read the little article, tucked into the newspaper as an afterthought, meant to fill up space during a slow news week. Of course, there was no mistaking a name. Jon Snow.

He looked good; at least Alayne thought he did. With the distance between them, it was hard to tell. Jon looked taller now, his hair a little shorter, his face a little sharper, but all that came with age and growing up. Alayne looked different too. It had been years since she last saw Jon, and since then she’d grown considerably. She doubted that Jon would even recognize her if she went up to him, and that thought soured her stomach considerably. It shouldn’t though, Alayne didn’t need Jon to recognize her, that wasn’t what this was about. She only came to see if he was okay, that was all.
The officer turned his head, looking across the street and Alayne saw his face. Her breath nearly caught. Yes, John Snow was certainly a ghost, a missing string in the life of a dead girl.

Alayne looked away quickly, turning her head away from the window from someone who wasn’t even looking her way. *Don’t be a fool,* Alayne chided herself, *He’d only see a ghost if anything.* And then quietly she thought, in a voice that lived far away in her heard away from the conscious, *You are not even her.*

“Is everything alright?” A waiter had come over to Alayne’s table, dishrag tucked into her apron, blue eyes looking at her nearly empty cup and the torn-up napkin that was occupying space, and perhaps even at the green backpack tucked under her feet that held everything she’d taken before fleeing the Vale, though that was probably just Alayne’s own paranoia talking. Despite, or maybe because of her unwashed hair, wrinkled clothes, and dark rings under her eyes Alayne looked like a university student who’d come to a coffee shop to waste some time between classes. She was hardly a suspicious figure, and no one would connect her to the missing daughter of the wealthy stock investor in the Vale.

Alayne nodded, smiling slightly at the boy, “I’m fine, thank you.”

It was a dismissal. Alayne spoke and then looked out the window again and back to the street. She saw Jon go back to his squad car, pulling out a cardboard box, the kind that kept files or papers for offices and then started walking down the street. In a few moments, he would be gone, and that was well enough. Alayne had only come to look, to make sure he was alright, and now she knew that he was. Still, when he disappeared around the corner, her throat constricted and she found herself looking away from the window.

“Actually,” Alayne said turning back to the busboy who’d already started his retreat, he looked up, and Alayne smiled again placating, “Can I get this to go?”

The police station was not far from the coffee shop. Alayne wandered down the street, taking her time to look in storefront windows, pretending to find the pretty dresses displayed behind glass interesting, while really just buying time before she had to make a decision. This wasn’t meant to be anything more than a fact-gathering mission of sorts. That’s what Alayne was telling herself, but now that she’d actually seen Jon with her own eyes, she was having trouble making the decision to leave all over again.

What would Jon say if he saw her? It had been six years since she’d last seen him, but even before then Alayne had never been close to the foster son of her late father. She remembered how cruel she’d been as a child, perhaps never stooping to the point of bullying, but she’d certainly done her best to make Jon feel unwelcomed in their household. If Alayne came to him now would he turn her away? What reason did Jon have to do anything kind for her? Everything they shared was dead now, swept away in the five years since Alayne started being Alayne and everything that she was before crumbled.
Of course, none of that had been Alayne. That little girl Jon knew died in the riots outside the parliament building in London five years ago, lost in the chaos, body never found. Presumed dead, but so had many other people. There was so much death that day; a terrorist attack had coincided with the riots, allegedly at least.

Alayne remembered an explosion, but after that, she’d been spirited away and taken out of the city and then out of the country. A dark day for England the BBC called it, a dark day for the world. Twenty dead, another fifty injured in a deadly event that coincided with Tywin Lannister being elected Prime Minister the day after his grandson died at his own birthday.

Alayne woke up the day after the riots in the Vale manner in the mountains outside Grenoble, France. When she awoke, she was given a new name, a new father, and a chance at a second life. A safer life, a happier life, and life that would never leave Alayne wanting of anything.

And then you left. Alayne swallowed another sip of coffee, the cup running empty, and now look at you.

Left was putting it kindly. What Alayne had done five months ago was hardly just leaving. People don’t just leave in the middle of the night, with a stolen passport and a bag with their most essential belongings, sneaking out of a house large enough to be a castle and scaling a fence so not to engage the alarm on a gate with enough security to protect the queen. When people leave, they intend to go back. What Alayne had done was run away, and now for the second time in her life, she was without a home.

Alayne hardly knew when she came to stand in front of the police station, looking up at the sign printed on the entrance door. She’d somehow climbed the steps up to the building, crossing the busy street without any thought, but now she was here. It took her another two minutes before pushed up the station door and stepped inside and out of the cold.

Alayne could have gone unnoticed in the busy station as she weaved between complaining citizens and officers coming in with arrests. It was comforting to remind herself that she could slip in and out, virtually unknown if she changed her mind. She kept telling herself she wouldn’t, but Alayne’s heart was already beating like a war drum and she hadn’t even seen Jon in the station yet.

You are not a coward, Alayne said to herself as she entered another hall, one much less busy and approached a desk with an officer sitting behind it, his eyes somewhere else.

The officer’s name was printed on a plaque on his desk, Satin Flowers, it read. Not a very intimidating name for an officer, who looked like he couldn’t possibly much older than Alayne herself. But he looked the least intimidating of the officers in the station, and likely the most incompetent, and so she gave him a smile as she approached.

Officer Flower’s desk was tall, and considering if was the first desk she came across since entering the station this was probably a reception desk of some sort. Alayne set her empty coffee cup on the edge of the desk, waving the other hand to get the officer’s attention since he was preoccupied with something on the desktop computer in front of him.
“Hello,” Alayne said as the man looked up, she leaned her elbows against the desk, trying to be dazzling. A hard task to accomplish when one hadn't showered in several days.

“Oh,” Officer Flowers said as he pushed away from the desktop to sit up right, looking a little flustered, as if he hadn't expected anyone to speak to or notice him, “Hello, sorry—“ he was moving something around on his desk, looking for something it seemed, before he looked up, with wide blinking eyes, “Can I help you miss?”

Alayne curled her fingers around the desk as discreetly, moving them from where she had them laid to behind her back. Behind Officer Flower’s desk, there were other more standard desks set up, officers, or investigators working behind them, looking something out of the day-time crime shows Alayne watched on the motel television set. What caught her eyes though, was further back where the closed off offices with glass windows and white blinds obscuring the contents were. On one of those office doors was a gold plaque with the name Commander Jon Snow written on it.

So Jon really was commander of a police station. Alayne had read the little article in the newspaper, but part of her didn't believe that it was true. It was hard to believe, Jon being so young, and the last Alayne had heard he was in the military, in some obscure branch that she hardly recalled the name of. Somehow in those few years of them being apart, he'd risen higher than she thought possible. And Alayne, in that same amount of time hadn't really risen anywhere. She was somewhere stuck between sinking and floating, though it often felt more like just sinking. Seeing Jon's name on the door was a reminder of where he was in the world, and what Alayne would ruin if she showed her face. Why would he want to see you? Alayne couldn't help but wonder.

Officer Flowers cleared his throat and Alayne looked away from Jon’s office door and back to him. Flowers gave her a kind look, but Alayne could recognize that lace of concern underneath it, as if the officer had taken in her appearance and surmised that she was some homeless teen looking for sanctuary, or worse, he’d heard of the missing Alayne Stone and recognized her. This was a police station after all, surely they must know those sort of things.

Alayne was always afraid to check if Baelish reported her as a missing person. She was almost certain he had, but Alayne also couldn’t imagine a man as smart as he was would circulate an image of Alayne when there was already another missing girl with her face. Although she doubted anyone would recognize her as the dead daughter of another dead diplomat, there were still some people in London who would see past her aged face and dark brown hair and recognize the little girl who'd died in the riots. The Lannister’s being one such example.

Still, this was a police station, and Alayne’s mind was screaming at her to run before Officer Flower’s recognized her from some missing person’s report in France and call Father to come pick her up before she could run again.

Not father, Alayne reminded herself again, father is dead. You saw him die, you saw the blood. Shot with the same gun that these officers would carry, the same strapped to their hips. Sansa’s heart sped up, Baelish is not father. No, Baelish was still alive, and he was looking for her.
“No,” Alayne shook her head, as she stepped away from Officer Flower’s desk. She felt short of breath, and a bit like she was running through a rapidly narrowing tunnel, “I’m sorry, I got turned around. I’m meant to be somewhere else.”

Officer Flowers furrowed his brow and he started to stand from his desk, with all that false concern on his face, “Where are you supposed to be, I can help you—“

“No,” Alayne said sharply as she backed away, lifting her hands in a halting motion, “Thank you, but I’ll find it on my own.”

She turned on her heels, sneakers squeaking on the linolium floor as she turned. She waited until she turned the hall way before running.
Five years ago, in a small town in the French Alps, renowned club owner and business mogul Petyr Baelish reveals his bastard daughter, thirteen-year-old Alayne Stone to society. After the death of Alayne’s mother, whom she’d previously lived within a town outside of Bath, Alayne was taken in by her estranged father and brought to live in the ornate Vale property.

(This is what Petyr told Alayne when she wakes up in an unfamiliar bed in France, the rest she ends up learning on her own)

Of course, the Vale was not truly Petyr’s, but the property of his late wife’s, Lyssa Arryn who died shortly after Alayne arrived in the Vale. (A terrible fall down the marble staircase, Alayne tells the police in the report. She did not think people screamed so loudly when they slipped, but Alayne doesn't say this) In the short period of a month, Alayne was motherless for the second time in her life, reunited with a long-lost father, and now the sister of the six-year-old Robin Arryn.

Petyr, though, made sure that Alayne’s transition into her new life was flawless. She was given the finest private tutor in the Alps, a bedroom the size of a small home, and as many pretty dresses and treats she could want. In time, Alayne nearly had forgotten about her life before the Vale, before Petyr. It was easier that way, and safer. Father got terribly upset when Alayne mentioned something of her life before in England. He always apologized after though, taking Alayne aside in an empty hall of the Vale and placing his hand on the crook of her neck, bending slightly to look into her eyes. Alayne was nearly as tall as Father, even at thirteen, but she always felt so small when he touched her these ways.

“I don’t mean to scare you,” he would say as he rubbed his thumb along the vein in Alayne’s neck, pressing against it as if he might stop the blood from flowing to her brain. She wanted to say that Petyr didn’t scare her when he got angry. She was never afraid when he was angry, it was when he took her aside like this and they were all alone and when Petyr touched her like he did now did Alayne feel afraid. “You are just so important to me Alayne, I can’t think about losing you, not like how I lost your mother. I was so lucky to have found you.”

This was something Petyr said: how lucky he was to have found Alayne. After a while, maybe a year, maybe less, that Alayne started to hear it differently. Not how lucky I was, but now she heard, how lucky you were to have been found by me. Petyr made it very clear to Alayne that the world outside the Vale was far too dangerous, and Alayne would only be hurt if she left him. Without Petyr, Alayne soon understood, she would be dead or worse.

Now Alayne couldn’t help but wonder if Petyr had been right. She left the police station and spent the rest of the day wandering the streets of Cardiff, mentally berating herself for being such an idiot. When the sun went down and the city started to slow down, Alayne walked over to a bus stop and took a seat on the empty bench, feeling the weather drop from chilly to unpleasantly cold.
In Liverpool, she’d worked as a maid at the hostel she lived in. They never asked for any identification papers before hiring, and Alayne hadn’t been prepared to give them. She used her passport to get to England, but even that frightened her, thinking Petyr would be able to track her down from that. Alayne didn’t want any more of a paper trail than she already had.

Alayne never had a job before then. Petyr always told her that she never needed to worry about working, and Alayne never really pushed the subject. She hardly ever left the Vale, and other the Mya, the daughter of one of the groundskeepers, Alayne didn’t have an example of what a regular teenager was supposed to be. Mya worked at a mule farm on the weekends a little outside of the town near the Vale. Alayne had no interest in working with mules. Even if she did want a job, Robin kept her more than busy and would probably have a fit if he thought something like a job was going to take away his time with Alayne.

At the hostel, her job as a maid was cleaning the rooms, making beds, laundering sheets, and scrubbing toilets all the while making less the minimum wage given her “illegal status” in the workplace. Her boss often shorted her paychecks, inviting her to his office to "negotiate promotion opportunities” but Alayne never took up that offer. As long as she could pay for her room in the hostel, and a meal or two days, Alayne wouldn't complain.

She had to quit her job in the hostel, using the money she saved up during it that was stashed under her mattress to pay for the too expensive train ticket to Cardiff. Alayne thought she would have enough to pay for a bed in a hostel in the city, but with only a few pounds left, Alayne thought it better to save it for an emergency. This trip had been too impulsive. Alayne hadn't really thought travel expenses through when she got the ticket, assuming she would figure something out after arriving in Cardiff.

This was to say, it wasn’t the first time she slept in the streets. As Alayne daughter of Petyr Baelish, she slept under a canopy bed, often with her little brother sneaking in to lay by her side, but as Alayne the runaway, she’d slept more than once in a bus station, and even once, across the bench at a public park, or simply on the ground.

When she first got to England, Alayne hadn’t been able to find a hostel her first night. She slept in a chair in the King’s Cross station, too afraid to venture into London at night and so Alayne decided to stay there until the sun came back up. After that she hitch hiked out of the city, finding a ride on a long-haul truck to Bradford, where she stayed for two months until the money she stole from Petyr ran out. When the money was gone, she was kicked out of the hostel she’d been staying at, thrown on her ass into the street. She slept in a park there until she decided to hitch hiked to Liverpool where she stayed until she saw the news article about Jon.

At least it had been summer still when Alayne slept in the parks in Bradford. Now it was October and the chilly wind was making Alayne shake, even with her thick jean jacket buttoned up to her neck.

Alayne sat her backpack down and rest her head on it, the hood of her jacket pulled over her head to help keep her warm. She imagined tomorrow she might try and find a truck stop somewhere outside the city and find someone willing to take her somewhere. Anywhere but London she thought, anywhere but London or here.

The next day she walked to a truck stop that was near the edge of the city. Alayne hadn’t slept well the night before. She’d gotten used to the relatively safe hostel in Liverpool, and wasn’t prepared for the fear of sleeping in the open city still gave her. Alayne forgot how much it scared her when she’d down in in Bradford, how every passerby and every voice felt like a threat. She hadn’t really slept at all until the sun started to come up over the city buildings, and by then it had been too late.
to really sleep.

Exhausted she took a seat in the café outside of the truck station, giving a smile to the waitress who was working behind the counter. She used some of her depleting funds for another black coffee before taking a seat at the counter on one of the chrome and teal leather stools that made the place look like a 1960’s time capsule.

The café was full of resting truckers, set up on the booths and tables, and a few sitting at the counter like Alayne. While she started to sip her coffee, she looked for potential rides, going for the men who looked the scrawniest or the oldest.

This search for frustrating though, Alayne knew she was a poor judge of character. She thought that her time in the Vale had taught her to be better at it, but she struggled in discerning who should be trusted and who shouldn’t. And then more importantly who was safe and who was dangerous.

“That’s a pretty necklace,” Alayne commented to the waitress who refilled her white coffee mug.

The waitress was wearing an ugly yellow dress uniform that fit the motif of the café and had greying hair and a wrinkled face. Around her neck was a silver pendant that looked something like a dove, with a blue jewel where the eye would be. The waitress brought her hand up to the necklace when Alayne commented on it.

“This thing?” The waitress let her hand drop, setting the coffee pot back on the heater and turning to Alayne, “My ex gave it to me. I should have tossed it by now, but I think it would be smarter to pawn it, haven’t gotten to it yet, of course.”

Alayne nodded her head, “You should keep it. The blue brings out the color in your eyes.”

The waitress gave a wry laugh, shaking her head as she went to help another customer and Alayne waited until she came back around.

“Hey,” Alayne said getting the waitress’ attention again, “Are any of these guys’ regulars?”

The waitress’ brow creased, her hand setting on her hip, “You looking for a ride?”

Alayne nodded. She'd done this one or two times before. After one ride with a long haul trucker that went horribly wrong, Alayne had realized that it was the waitresses at truck stops that knew who was safe to ride with and who was dangerous.
“I need to get out of the city, the noise is driving me crazy here.”

“How old are you? Do your parents know that you’re leaving the city without them?” The waitress hiked an eyebrow, setting a sun-spotted hand on her hip.

Alayne’s lip quirked in a smile, it took an annoying amount of effort as Alayne rather remain undead to the world until she got a little more sleep, but the waitress needed some convincing, “I’ve just turned twenty. I’m taking a gap year, traveling the UK, you know?”

“Tired of Cardiff already?” The waitress looked at Alayne scrutinizing, taking in her rugged appearance. Alayne should have at least washed her hair in one of the sinks in the public restrooms near the truck stop before coming in, but she thought pulling her hair up in a knot would hide the knots and oily scalp well enough.

“I’ve seen what I need to,” Alayne shrugged indifferently. This was already taking too long, the more questions the waitress asked, the less Alayne was able to convince her of her story, “Time to see something new.”

The waitress leaned back against the back counter by the window for the kitchen, staring at Alayne thoughtfully, before letting out a loud sigh, “A man should be coming by tomorrow, he always stops here before leaving the city. He’s a good man, I’ve known him for a few years now. He’ll take you with him if you need a ride.”

Alayne bit her lip. She wanted to leave Cardiff today. Being in this proximity to Jon was making her feel unexpectedly nervous. It was bringing up too many buried memories. Every time she thought of Jon, Alayne also thought of her past life and how terrible it would be if those two lives collided. Alayne would only bring trouble to Jon's life, and Jon would only bring trouble to hers. It was better if she just left now.

“No one’s leaving today?” Alayne tried hopefully.

The waitress shrugged, “Some sure, but none that I would trust.”

Alayne sighed, reaching for her coffee and taking a long sip. The coffee burned all the way down and as Alayne set the cup aside and rested her chin on her hand she wondered if she’d be better off gambling her safety with a ride with a different stranger. She remembered the first time and the last time she did that. It didn't feel worth reliving.
In the end, Alayne decided to stick with the waitress’ recommendation. She left the café after a few
hours and wandered back up the street and back to the city. There was nowhere safe to sleep in the
transient truck stop where being on your guard was a requirement, and so Alayne went to the city
to look for a place to stay for the night.

As she walked, she passed the police station one last time. She stood across the street from it.
Alayne wondered if Jon was still there, working late on some important case or if he'd gone home
already. She wondered if he had anyone to go home to.

She hoped he did. Alayne didn't want Jon to be lonely. A man as handsome and successful as him
must have some beautiful girlfriend to go back home to, Alayne thought as she stepped away from
the station.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, so here is some Alayne backstory, more to come on it as we progress. Right
now Alayne motivation might be a little confusing, she thinks she's protecting herself
and Jon by staying away, since she doesn't want to screw up his life by inserting her
drama, and she's also a little embarrassed to see him considering her current situation.

Leave comments! Once again i subsist off of them so if you don't i could very well
shrive up and die.

BTW I am not from the UK, europe or wherever. So i'm going off of american rules of
the road. I've got no idea if wales has truck stops nearby major cities, all i know is that
america does and so i'm going with it. if anything is majorly wrong let me know
though and i'll try to fix it!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Alayne had fallen asleep on the stoop of a corner shop sometime after the city started to get quiet. She awoke to the heavy toe of a boot prodding her stomach and growling at her to get up.

Sometime between then and now, Alayne had been handcuffed and pushed into the back of a police cruiser and was currently inside Jon's police precinct.

Officer Thorne, the man who'd arrested her, brought Alayne into the station, dragging her towards the end of the hall by the firm grip on her upper arm. He shouldered past a line of people who gave them a wide berth, avoiding eye contact with Alayne as she struggled to keep up with the officer’s pace, her feet occasionally dragging beneath her when she lost her footing.

“You can’t arrest me,” Alayne threatened blindly, as he let her go and pointed to a wooden bench for her to wait on until they could register her to the station’s system. Her backpack had been confiscated when she entered the building, with it the ID she refused to show to officer Thorne upon her arrest and everything else that would tie her to the Vale and Petyr Baelish.

She sounded angrier than she thought she would be, while stuck in a situation where she rationally knew she should only feel afraid. Alayne should be in tears, begging that they don’t report her to Baelish and send her back to the Vale.

Except, Officer Thorne didn’t know Alayne’s name yet, and that had been the problem hadn’t it? Having refused to show him her ID he’d taken her in for disobeying an officer, or whatever excuse he’d come up with to punish her for sleeping on the stoop of a quick-mart.

Officer Thorne spared Alayne the shortest of glances, beady eyes narrowed, “Be quiet.” He turned back to the desk he was walking towards and requested a form from the woman standing behind it.

Alayne’s blood started to boil, “I have rights.” And she was missing her ride out of the city. She was meant to be on the truck out of the city by now and instead she was in handcuffs. “You can’t keep me here if you don’t have charges.”

Officer Thorne was filling out paperwork, “Trespassing, refusing to corporate.”

“That’s horseshit, I didn’t trespass anywhere!” Alayne shouted, standing up from the bench and attempting to toss her arms out, before remembering that she couldn't. Maybe if I’m enough trouble he’ll just let me go, it’s not like he has any real charges for me, he’s just trying to make an example
“Sit down,” Officer Thorne ordered, pointing one thick finger to the bench, his lips pulling up in some sort of silent snarl that made his face look redder and uglier. He was not an attractive man, but the hateful look on his face only made him look worse.

Alayne almost did back down when he shouted, her feet taking a step back without her brain’s permission. But she kept her back straight and refused to sit. She’d faced far worse things than rude police officer's and while Alayne didn’t have much, she did have her pride. “I demand to know what I am being held for. I can’t have trespassed, the sidewalk is city property—”

Officer Thorne walked up on her and Alayne shrunk back as he got closer and closer. The back of her knees hit the bench as she lost balance, Officer Thorne was less than a foot from her, pointing his meaty finger in her face.

“If you don’t—”

“Is there a problem, Thorne?”

Alayne, at first, could not see who spoke. Her view was blocked by Officer Thorne’s hulking frame, his shoulders keeping the speaker from view. The voice sounded like the countryside though. Beneath the question and harsh tone were buried memories of fields and a stone built home older than the earth and laughing children running with wolves. Alayne for a moment could not breathe.

Officer Thorne stepped to the side, his eyes narrowing as he did, a sneer on his lips. When he moved away, Alayne looked up from beneath her lashes to confirm what she already knew. Jon looked even better than Alayne thought when she saw him outside the window of the Mole's Town Cafe. He looked like a hero from a storybook Alayne would read to Robin back in the Vale, with his dark hair and strong shoulders.

Jon was standing just feet from her, arms crossed over his chest as he stared Thorne down. His eyes didn't wander to Alayne once, but she couldn't take her's off him.

So close he looked real. Alayne had convinced herself that he was just a lost memory, something that existed in the past and then outside of her world, even from the shop window she told herself that she was a ghost who could watch but not touch, not speak, not really see.

“No problem, Snow.” Officer Thorne said as he reached over to grab Alayne’s shoulder and push her down on the bench. She let out an Oof, as her back dug into the hard wood, but did put up a fight. “I’m just waiting to process this vagrant.”
Alayne bristled at the word, hunching her shoulder like she was trying to make herself smaller. She waited to see how Jon would react to it, staring up at Jon and waiting for him to look at her and acknowledge her presence. Then Jon did. For a moment, their eyes met. He had the same deep brown eyes as the Stark’s, and while he was not blood, he looked more like he belonged to the family than Alayne ever did. She matched his gaze and held her breath. There was no running now.

Jon looked away, “Are we arresting people for being homeless now?” he asked Thorne, voice as even and cool as before.

Alayne choked, turning her eyes down on the linoleum tiles as she found that she could not even blink anymore, let alone breath. *He doesn’t even know me,* she thought as she finally closed her eyes, *And why should he? I’m only a ghost.*

“She resisted arrest, refused to show me her identification and fought me the whole way here.” Thorne sent a curling lipped sneer Alayne’s direction, “Keeping her in a holding cell for a few hours will change her attitude, I’m sure.”

“I didn’t resist arrest,” Alayne bit her tongue to keep from saying anything else. Jon was looking at her again, *maybe he sees me now.*

“You’re calling me a liar?” Thorne scoffed, “She’s hiding past arrests from us, is what she’s doing. I’m having her things processed to be searched, we’ll find out who you really are, girl.”

*It doesn’t matter anymore,* Alayne told herself when Jon still looked at her with absent eyes. She had been right to leave the station a day before. Jon didn’t recognize her, he had moved on with his life and Alayne needed to do the same. *I need to leave the city now.*

There were more pressing matters Alayne needed to think about than her own hurt feelings. If they tried to search her name in a database her missing person’s report would come up and Baelish would find her again. All of this would be for nothing.

“I don’t think we need to go through all that trouble,” Jon said and then looked away from Thorne, and turned to watch Alayne, “For one girl.”

Alayne felt Jon’s eyes on her, staring at her bent head, where her hair had fallen in her face. She felt like a child, who was trying to hide something from her parents. Stuck somewhere between ashamed and afraid. Alayne’s heart was beating in her chest, loud and hard like it was calling for something again. She tilted her head up and swept her hair out of her face. *I am not a little girl, I can be brave too.*
“I agree, Officer,” Alayne forced the word out of her mouth as she moved gracefully to stand, “I’d hate to waste everybody’s time. If it’s alright with you, I’m on my way out of the city already, I won’t be bothering anyone.”

Officer Throne, tossed an arm out to keep Alayne from strolling away, but it didn’t matter. She wasn’t Alayne the Runaway anymore, she was Alayne Stone. If anyone could charm an officer and walk out of a police station, it was her. If anything, Father had taught her that much—he always said charming men was easy, they all loved a pretty face, and even with oily matted hair and dirt on her face, Alayne had that.

Except, being Alayne had never been so hard before. Jon was looking at her with those Stark Brown eyes that couldn’t see her, with his voice that sounded like home, and Alayne was just a little girl again with a different name, screaming for him to hold her.

“Wait a minute,” Thorne said and Jon was blinking his eyes and looking away. He’d been staring at Alayne just then, but Alayne did her best not to take notice. He stared in the way all men did, not in the way she wanted him to. “We can’t just let this criminal walk out of here, just like that. She resisted arrest—“

Jon looked annoyed now, he rubbed the bridge of his nose and pursed his lips. Apparently, he did not like dealing with people like Thorne. That at least meant he was a decent person, not that Alayne ever doubted that he was. Jon had been many things, and looking back now, Alayne could tell that one of those was that he’d been the best amongst them.

“You’re meant to be working on that breaking and entering report,” Jon told Thorne in a cool tone that suggested more of frustration than anything else, “Perhaps you should be more focused on that than arresting young girls.”

Alayne’s heart clenched when he said missing persons, it's not you, she told herself as she crossed her arms over her chest. She suddenly felt like crying, as her face grew hot and her eyes started to water. Alayne discreetly, wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket; acting like she was scratching her nose while Jon stared down Thorne. Perhaps this is the real reason she didn’t want to see Jon, she didn’t want to deal with him staring right past her.

“Go back to your desk,” Jon told the other officer, and Alayne thanked the gods that she was finally going to get to leave, “I’ll finish up with her.”

Alayne’s heart plummeted past her stomach, falling out of her chest and then through every layer of concrete until it reached the core of the earth. Thorne made some sniveling response as he
turned and left, and Alayne almost called out for him to stay, to not leave her alone with Jon.

“Sorry about all that,” Jon said once Thorne was out of earshot, “I have him on track for retirement but I don’t think he likes that much.”

Alayne stayed quiet, nodding her head. He sounded so kind. Alayne hated that he did, she wished he sounded as rude and snarly as Officer Thorne, or as clever and manipulative as Baelish, but instead Jon just sounded kind, even to a ghost girl he didn’t know.

Jon looked at her, his head ducking as he tried to meet her eyes, “I’d let you go, but Thorne already has your things being processed. As soon as your ID checks out you can go.”

By then it would be too late, Alayne knew that even if Baelish was being subtle, he’d still have her name put in a police record. She didn’t know if that would only mean she could be found in a French police log, or if she was a missing person in Wales too, Alayne couldn’t risk finding out.

If Jon just walked away to leave her waiting on the bench she could run. It could be just like the other day, where she lost herself in the crowds of people on the street, missing from the station like she was never there. Alayne would lose her bag with her change of clothes, the money she had left, and the other little things she’d taken from the Vale when she ran, but when her name came up in the system as a missing person, she would at least be on her way out of the city with no way to be found.

“Thank you,” Alayne forced herself to meet Jon’s eyes, taking a seat on the bench, and folding her hands in her lap, “If you don't mind uncuffing me, I’ll just wait here until then.”

She watched him, waiting for Jon to walk away. He didn’t, though his hand did go to his hip where a pair of keys would be.

“I’ll have an officer come wait with you,” Jon said, turning to wave someone over, as he reached into his pocket to get the set of cuff keys.

Alayne held back her disappointment, “You don’t need to do that. Like I said, I’d really hate to be a bother.”

“You’re not a bother,” Jon said somewhat distracted as he found the key he was looking for, his tone utterly dismissing. He frowned as if remembering something and looked at Alayne, gesturing for her to reach out her wrists, “What did you say your name was?”
Alayne hesitated before extending her arms forward for Jon to unlock the cuffs. She felt the rough calluses of his hands brush over her skin as he slipped the key in place and turned the lock. He wasn't even looking at her, and Alayne knew that it was better that way.

“Alayne,” She answered withholding her surname, she folded her arms and free hands against her chest and slouched back in her seat.

Jon gave a rye chuckle, shaking his head, placing the cuffs in his pocket, “It doesn’t really suite you.”

Alayne's face wrinkled as she looked up sharply, but no. His face was still void of recognition, he still thought she was a stranger, “Well that’s rude.”

“I’m sorry,” Jon stuck his hands in his pockets, “I shouldn’t have said that; wasn’t thinking. It’s a nice name.”

“Don’t you have somewhere else to be,” Alayne sounded almost shrill now, and she turned her head away before she felt like crying again. Was she really that forgettable, that even a boy who was practically family couldn’t even recognize her? How many nights had Alayne dreamed of the family in the countryside, praying that someone would find her, when she first arrived in the Vale? All that time, did Jon forget she ever existed?

Jon’s eyebrows shot up, “Alright,” he said taking a step back, “I’ll grab Officer Tarth to watch you, and then I’ll go check on your things.”

“Fine.” Alayne said as he turned his back to her to go call over the woman who was behind the other desk. She refused to watch as Jon walked away. *I’ll never see him again, she thought to herself,* and that’s for the best. Jon had a life now, a real one with potential. It was nothing like her mother used to say would become of him. Mother liked to say that Jon would never amount to much, not like her real children. But look at us now. Jon is a police commander, and what of the rest of us? Dead, missing, dead, lost, and me.

Alayne shut her eyes tight. There was nobody but herself. Alayne had no siblings, no brothers or sisters. It was just her and father and that was it. *And sweet Robin, he must miss me and I left him behind. What would father tell him? Would he say that I was kidnapped, or would Robin know better?* Alayne didn’t have to think much about it, considering she would find out from Father when the station ran her name through the system and she came up as a missing person. *And I’ll be back in the Vale like none of this ever happened. Like I never looked Jon in the eyes, like I never tried to get free.* She refused to think of what it would be like when Father came to get her, how he
would put his arms around her and squeeze Alayne tight around the waist. He would cradle the back of her neck like he always did and she would feel his breath against her cheek, *Give your father a kiss.*

Alayne felt her stomach roll as a tear began to roll down her cheek. *He is not Father, Father is dead.*

“Are you alright, Miss?” A woman’s voice asked.

Alayne looked up to see the tallest woman she’d ever set her eyes on. The officer must have been six feet tall, if not taller, with the homeliest round face, and short cropped blonde hair. She was not much to look at, except for her large, striking blue eyes that Alayne found herself staring at. Those were quite beautiful, and in a way, so was the rest of the woman. She looked strong and powerful. *She’d never let Baelish kiss her. She wouldn’t let herself get caught again.*

Alayne nodded her head, “I’m fine,” she wiped her eyes, Alayne was brave too, “Is there a restroom around here I can use.”

The officer frowned, but nodded her head, “Yes, there’s one just around that corner.”

“Thank you,” Alayne said as she stood up, passing the woman as she walked with her head down, “I’ll only be a moment.”

The officer looked about to follow Alayne, but by something blessed, she held back. Alayne sent a silent prayer to the gods as turned the corner the officer had pointed to, looking back once to see if she was being followed. The hall was empty, and so Alayne broke into a jog past the restroom and towards the emergency exit at the end of the hall.

AND SO THEY MEET! One of the things i hate the most about most Alayne fics is that jon or whoever always recognizes her immediately. like she would look completely different since he’d last seen her, she was eleven the last time she saw him and in my fic its been at least 8-9 years since then. Then given her hair is dyed and jon
already thinks Sansa is dead, he'd have no reason to think this homeless girl who came into the station would be her. Obviously this sucks for everyone involved, Alayne/sansa especially.
also, so enters the beginning of the very popular trend of completely made up police procedure, stay tune for more of that

Leave comments please!! I may shrivel up and die without them
Chapter 4

Alayne lost herself in the streets of Cardiff, blending into the crowd and pulling up the hood of her jacket to keep herself hidden. An alarm had gone off when Alayne went out the emergency door of the police station and she’d been running several blocks before she thought it was safe to rest. She’d taken to a brisk walk now, heading back towards the truck stop she went to the day before. It didn’t matter anymore of who she went with, as long as she got out of the city.

Sometime during her sprint from the station and then jog through the city though, Alayne lost her way, and so she began trying to retrace her steps from before to get back on track.

The overcast weather from the morning had turned into a steady rain. Alayne hunched her shoulders as she tried to keep warm as the rain soaked into her jacket. She wondered if the police would be looking for her, or if her name had come up on the system and if they’d already called Baelish to come get her.

Alayne wondered if Jon knew she’d run from the station yet. He must have, Alayne had been wandering around for at least an hour, if not longer. He must have thought that Officer Thorne was right about her and she was just some vagrant with a record who was avoiding the law. That was for the best though. Alayne reminded herself that it was for the best several times, hoping if she did it once more she’d start believing it.

If I told Jon the truth he could have helped me. Alayne thought as she found her way under a bus stop to keep out of the rain, I could have told him who I am, I could have told him who I was running from and he could protect me. Alayne rubbed her hands together, trying to keep the numbing cold from reaching her fingers, she cupped her hands and breathed into them, and then you would have ruined his life. No one can protect you, but yourself. There are no heroes; you’re just a stupid girl. Alayne stepped away from the bus stop and kept walking down the street. She needed to find the truck stop again, and she needed to get out of Cardiff before everything came crashing down.

Alayne gave up on the truck stop hours after it grew dark and the rain heavier. She knew that there was no way she could retrace her steps in these conditions and so she found an awning that hung over the side of a shop and sat down on the concrete, folding her legs against her chest to try and stay warm. She wrapped her arms around her knees, wishing she still had her backpack, in it was a pair of cashmere gloves that she got from Baelish for her fourteenth birthday. There were pink and soft and expensive, not that any of that really mattered, but they would have been warm.

There was some noise by the alley beside Alayne that kept Alayne vigilant. It sounded like cats fighting, banging against the metal trashcans, and then occasionally a car would drive by, splashing water at Alayne as they drove past and soaking her already wet sneakers and jeans. Worse was when people would walk by, either crossing the street as soon as spotting her as to not run into trouble, or if they were bold (and it was always the men that were bold, walking slow and punching their buddies on the arms to point her out) they might call out to her, and make some comment as they passed by. And then, if she could ignore all that, the brick building Alayne rested against was uncomfortable, digging into her skull and spine, and the awning above her was leaky, dripping water on her head and shoulder in little drops, and the rain had soaked through her jacket.
to her bones so that she couldn’t even feel the cold anymore, and every few minutes her stomach would rumble and remind her why she felt so dizzy. But it’s still better than the Vale. And in the morning, rain or shine, Alayne would get back up and she would leave Cardiff.

Perhaps hours passed before the lights from a car drove past her. Alayne was nearly asleep from just exhaustion. It was the hour where people weren’t really about anymore, save for the people like her who wandered the street, and at least they paid her no mind. Alayne almost felt safe enough to close her eyes for a few minutes and get some sort of rest before the sun came up and she would try to find the truck stop again. But then the lights from that stupid car drove past, waking her from her daze. She was ready to try and sleep again when she saw the car reverse suddenly and drive back up to the shop she was beneath.

It was just some normal car, small and black. The sort of cars people without families had when all they had to worry about was driving themselves around. The car parked at the shop, the headlights were still on when somebody stepped out the driver’s door.

Alayne balled her hands up in fists, not making eye contact as the person approached. She knew that they couldn’t have been there for her, but she still refused to breathe until they passed. And why they didn’t, Alayne felt a familiar knot tie up inside her.

She saw a pair of black boots stop feet from her, just standing there waiting, they were old, scuffed up in the side with the black fading, like they were worn very often. Alayne waited for another second, silently praying that the owner of these shoes would pass her by. The person crouched down so that they were at her level.

“Hey, mate, there’s a hostel up the road.” They held out a few folded bills, “Keep yourself there for the night, the rain’s supposed to get worse.”

Alayne couldn’t believe her rotten luck. When she tilted her head up, she was looking at Jon. His mouth fell open a little when he recognized her as the girl who’d ran from the station. At first it was surprise, but then his eyes narrowed and he pulled the money away and stood back up. Jon wasn’t in his uniform. He had a rain jacket on half zipped up over a black t-shirt, his jeans were ripped at the knee, but otherwise were quite nice, and his black boots looked more expensive than Alayne would have thought he’d buy. Despite looking like the average man, and even like the boy Alayne remembered, he had the posture now of an officer, and Alayne had the feeling that she was about to be put under arrest.

Alayne bit her bottom lip as she pushed herself up from the wall, keeping her arms crossed over her chest. Time to face the music, she supposed. Even if she ran now, she wouldn’t get far. She was cold and hungry and she didn’t know where to run, and at the moment, there were worse men to face than Jon.

Jon ran his hand through his curly, black hair, looking away as he laughed bitterly, “Don’t tell me you’ve been here all day?”

Alayne was startled by the question, “Why?” she asked unable to keep what little pride she had left
from her tone, “It’s public property isn’t it?”

Jon pointed to the flats that were above the shop, “I had two officers looking for you and you’ve been beneath my flat the entire time.”

Alayne tilted her head up, turning slightly to see the flats with the little balconies hanging over them. They were nice apartments, while not in the best part of town, they looked well made and clean, even from the outside, and Alayne had chosen this spot with that partially in mind. She really did have rotten luck.

She looked back to Jon and shrugged her shoulders, he was staring at her still, brow furrowed like he was simultaneously trying to solve a difficult puzzle, “Sorry, didn’t mean to.”

And then Jon was laughing, a real laugh this time, and Alayne could only stare as the skin beside his eyes crinkled and his head tilted back with a smile on his lips. It was so alien, so foreign, and completely familiar. He hadn’t laughed much when they were growing up, Alayne certainly never was to make him laugh either.

“Suppose you didn’t mean to run from an officer either,” Jon’s laughter was slowing down, but he still had a ghost of a smile on his lips when he said, “For a girl who didn’t want to be a bother, you made quite a bit of trouble.”

Alayne couldn’t stand the near-normality of the conversation. This was something they might have said to each other if they were just friends on the street, or two people familiar with the other’s presence. She needed it to end, she needed to be far away from Jon.

“Am I under arrest?” she asked, bluntly awaiting an answer.

Jon’s smile disappeared, slowly and then it was gone, “Your name cleared the system. You wouldn’t have been in any trouble if you hadn’t run from an officer and sounded the fire alarm when you left the station.”

Alayne looked up at Jon, eyes wide, “I’m not in the system?” she breathed.

Jon frowned again, he answered slowly, “No, though I hardly think that’s what matters.” He then asked suddenly, as if he hadn't considered it before, “Should you be?”
Alayne shook her head, “No, I’m sorry.” she spoke quickly, relief filling her to the brim. Baelish hadn’t put the missing person’s report out in the UK yet. He must have thought she’d stay in France, maybe they hadn’t traced her passport to here, or maybe he was too paranoid to report her as missing somewhere that someone might recognize her face. “I shouldn’t have run from the station, I was just scared.”

“No, it wasn't, but Alayne was feeling too relieved to lie just then. She shouldn't feel that relieved though, while Petyr might not have a missing persons report on her now, she might currently have a police warrant attached to her name, which could be just as bad.

“Are you going to arrest me now?” Alayne sounded very young when she asked. She never paid much attention to those crime shows, she didn't know what was supposed to happen next.

Jon’s lip quirked up in an almost smile, he shook his head, “I could, but I think that you’ll come back on your own, if you want your things back. You’ll get a fine, but that’s it.”

By then, the relief Alayne had been feeling was gone. She was pulling the sleeves of her jacket over her hands nervously as she thought about the emergency money she had in her backpack. There wasn't much of it left, maybe a hundred pounds if she was being optimistic, realistically probably much less.

“How much is the fine?”

“Can’t say off the top of my head,” Jon said, turning his head up at the rain, with an annoyed look on his face. It was getting worse, just like he said it would. The wind had started to pick up as well. “Come by the station tomorrow morning. They’ll have to process you, but as soon as the fine is paid you’re free to go with your things. They’ve got someone there who will help you work it out. For now, though you should get out of the rain.”

“I’ve got nowhere to go,” Alayne said dumbly. She felt like a fool, probably because that’s what she’d been. If she hadn’t run away at the station she probably could have been out of Cardiff by now, with no trouble following her. Now, whether she paid the fine or not her name would be in the police system, and Alayne had no doubt Baelish would find out about that and trace her to the city. She should have been smarter, more patient, isn’t that what father always taught her?

Jon was frowning and Alayne hardly remembered what she had said to make him that way. “You don’t have friends in the city?”
Alayne shook her head, “If I had friends I don’t think I’d be out in the rain right now.”

Jon’s face got red, and Alayne realized he was blushing. She didn’t think her tone was too rude, but apparently, it had been enough to embarrass him.

Jon went back to his pocket and pulled out the wad of bills from earlier, “There’s hostel around the corner. This should be enough for the night.”

Alayne had seen the hostel already, having walked past it before choosing to stay under the awning of the shop. It was a seedy place that charged by the hour and had a neon sign outside the office door. There were men sitting in their cars smoking cigarettes, and every few minutes men would leave one of the hostel rooms and another would take their place. Alayne may not be very street smart, but even she knew that it was better to sit out here on the street then go there and find trouble.

During her first night after running away, when she fell asleep in the King’s Cross station in London a man had approached her asking if she was alone. He asked if she was new to London and needed a job, and it only took Alayne a few seconds of conversation to realize he was, at best, a pimp, and at worst a human trafficker. After realizing that it didn’t take her long to back away from the conversation and tell him that she was taking a connecting train out of the city and she was about to miss it. She stayed on the bench at the terminal barely able to sleep after that. Since then Alayne had been on guard about avoiding places that would wind her in that sort of trouble.

As an officer, Jon should have realized that, but he was looking at her with such open kindness that Alayne wondered if he hadn’t thought of the danger a young girl alone might face in that situation. He was still holding out the bills, but Alayne already knew that she wouldn’t take them. This was exactly what Alayne was hoping to avoid in Cardiff, interrupting Jon’s life. She was meant to leave the city without a trace, and now Alayne was already becoming a burden, disturbing Jon’s work life and now taking his money.

“I can’t take that,” Alayne stepped away from him, and then said, hoping to further dissuade him, “Besides, I don’t think I’d be able to sleep there anyway.”

It took Jon a moment to realize what she meant, “Oh,” he said dumbly, shaking his head, “Right, I suppose that’s not the most reputable place, but you really should find somewhere else to stay. I’ve only been out here a minute and I think I might lose a few fingers to the cold. This autumn’s brutal.”

Alayne shook her head when he tried to hand her the money again, “Well,” she said trying to sidestep past him, hoping to get away before he tried to shove the money into her pockets or remind her anymore about what she couldn’t have, “Winter is coming.”
you have no idea how long i've been waiting to use that line, ya'll. Literally the very reason this fic takes place in the fall, was so that i could get someone to say winter is coming.

so shorter ch. but things are going to start picking up, and we'll be getting a Jon pov ch soon, which should help clear a lot of mysteries up, since alyane isn't very forthcoming with any sort of info.

Thanks for reading, next ch. should be up tonight! Please leave comments/criticism they are how i decipher my self worth so do with that as you will
Sometimes, Alayne would dream about everything before London. Back when she dreamed about visiting the city and entering what she thought was high society, where people were posh and elegant and spent the night dancing at parties and going to brunches the mornings after. Back during a time where Alayne thought she’d marry the prince, or at least someone important who’d take her to cities like Paris and Venice, and she’d be on the covers of fashion magazines, and she’d be in love. In her dreams, Alayne was always so stupid.

When she woke up in the Vale she couldn’t afford to be stupid. Father didn’t like when Alayne was stupid, or sometimes he did, but only if it meant he could take her aside and put his hand on her cheek and tell her what she’d done wrong. He liked doing that very much, and he would tolerate her stupidity and even relish in it, as long as it meant that she didn’t embarrass him in front of anyone important.

No one else thought Alayne was stupid though. Father’s business partners who came to visit always praised Alayne on her academic achievements, home-schooling of course, but Petyr always bragged about it anyway. Mya always thought Alayne was clever, and Myranda said she was smart, if not a bit empty-headed at times. And Robin often said Alayne was the smartest girl he knew, but Robin was also nine. Still, it had to count for something.

Still, father always found a reason to bring Alayne aside, usually at night, usually when she was alone in her room, and he’d sit her on the bed and kneel down in front of her and grasp her chin in his cold hands, his nails digging into the skin of her face. He’d make her look him straight on and he’d correct something she might have done wrong that day, or maybe he’d praise her on something she did right. Either way, when he was finished, his hand rubbing her thigh, the other holding her face still, it was all the same: give Father a kiss.

Jon was staring at Alayne, and that stare held her in place like a gun held on a criminal. She held her breath wondering if she said something wrong, if Jon had changed his mind and he was about to arrest her like he was probably supposed to. She was already two steps into the rain, getting soaked to her bones. Just start walking, she told herself, but she couldn’t move, not until Jon looked away.

“You should spend the night with me.”

“What?” Alayne’s voice came out in a breathy gasp; hopefully, the rain obscured most of that though.

Jon’s face was red again, and he was shaking his head, taking a step towards her, his hands out like
he was trying not to startle an animal, and that’s exactly how Alayne felt: startled. “That’s not—I don’t mean it like that. I meant—it’s raining. If you don’t want to take my money, I’ve got a sofa that’s pretty comfortable up in my flat. I can drive you to the station in the morning. It would be a lot warmer, and probably safer than spending the rest of the night down here. This isn’t the safest neighborhood to be in.”

This wasn’t some normal offer; men didn’t usually hand out casual offers to the transient to sleep on their sofas.

Alayne still trusted Jon, she still remembered the kind, quiet boy he used to be, but Jon didn’t know her and Alayne couldn’t decide if it was possible that Jon really was dumb enough to invite a relative stranger, who was most likely a homeless vagrant into his flat for a nap. Was this something he did often, that he was confident enough to invite Alayne to spend the night after just meeting her?

If Alayne were smart she would say no, because she was meant to be staying away from Jon. It was too dangerous and too painful to be near him when he had no idea who she was. But it was so tempting to say yes. To let herself be a little closer to Jon for a little while longer. To feel that familiarity of family again that she thought was lost forever.

*It would be so sweet to be with him a while longer.*

“You’d let me inside?” Alayne had to be skeptical; she was at least smart enough to be that. She may have once known Jon, but she didn’t know him anymore. In the years since she’d last seen him, she didn’t know what sort of person he’d become. Besides Alayne had been raised to be courteous, she had to offer him an out before it was too late.

Jon looked as if he might be considering revoking the offer, but the way he pulled at his bottom lip and looked at Alayne, “It wouldn’t be right to leave you out here. Besides this way I know, you’ll come to the station tomorrow to pay the fine.” Alayne waited too long before giving her answer, because Jon was suddenly backtracking, speaking all at once and mostly drowned out by the rain Alayne was still standing in, “Of course, if you’re uncomfortable you don’t have to,” he said as he lifted his hand behind his head nervously, “It’s just an offer, you don’t have to agree. I mean if you say no I won’t have you arrested or something, I trust you’ll come back to the station without this.”

Alayne wouldn’t have. She still might not, even if she does agree to stay with Jon. It’s not like she can afford a fine, and they’ll be putting her in the system anyway. A smart person would say no and hightail it out of town, but Baelish always said, Alayne was her dumbest when it concerned matters of the heart, and right now Alayne was only thinking that tonight might be the last night she would ever see Jon. Even as artificial of an interaction as this, it still felt worth risking something for.

“I’ll sleep on the sofa,” Alayne answered slowly, stepping out of the rain and back under the
“Of course,” Jon agrees, and his face was going red again as if he thought Alayne was thinking he was going to try and take advantage of her tonight, “Just to get out of the rain, this weather is just awful.”

Alayne let him have his excuses, she already had her own so it was only fair, “Okay, then yes. As long as I’m not an imposition.” She said as she followed him towards the door that would lead to the apartments. It was tucked not far from the shops, and Alayne had passed it before not thinking anything of it.

Jon walked to the metal door beside the shop Alayne had slept under. He took off one of his gloves to punch a code into the numbered panel by the door and then pulled it open, holding it for Alayne to go through first.

She sighed as she stepped inside the little hall of the apartment complex, warm air circulating through a vent and keeping out the cold. She pulled down the hood of her jacket and took a few more steps inside, waiting for Jon to shake out his rain jacket before following her.

“It’s no imposition. Besides, I offered.” He answered as he walked towards the lift and pressed the button for the third floor.

Alayne hummed folding her hands in front of her as she waited and then stepped onto the lift, “So do you let the homeless into your apartment often.”

She was trying to make small talk to avoid the tension that was forming between them when the lift doors shut. It was a small space, and Alayne thought all the lies between them was taking up more room than necessary. Part of her wondered how he could not realize who she was, and the other part was screaming at herself for not just saying it for him. Instead, she lied; Alayne was more comfortable with that anyway; it was safer. The truth could hurt people, but a pretty lie never did.

Jon gave a low laugh like before. Alayne tried to remember that laugh from childhood, but she couldn’t. This laugh was too self-directed. It was nothing Alayne said that caused it, just Jon quietly mocking himself for something Alayne was yet to be privy to. She didn’t like it.

“No, not often,” Jon said with that half smile, looking at her with almost teasing eyes, unsure if it would be accepted if he did, “Only in very bad weather.”
Alayne hummed again, aware that Jon was trying very hard not to stare out her in any obvious fashion. She waited until the elevator dinged and the doors opened, quickly stepping out, glad to put a little space between her and Jon. She and her lies needed some space to breathe. “I’m grateful by the way. I didn’t say that yet, but thank you.”

“Like I said, no trouble.” Jon walked down a hall, as Alayne followed a few steps behind, walking until he reached apartment 3F and brought a keychain out of his pocket to unlock the door. “And this really isn’t a good neighborhood anyway, not to be alone at night at least. I wouldn’t advise anyone to stay out here at night.”

“Well, you did offer to pay for a hostel in this neighborhood.” Alayne wished she didn’t say that. It made her sound ungrateful, and she knew better than to speak without thinking.

Jon cringed a little, holding the apartment door still, keeping them in the hall, “I couldn’t see that you were a girl before in the rain,” Alayne wasn’t so offended by that, but Jon’s reaction almost made her wonder if she should have been, “And the other time, well I was just thinking that a room would be better than the street.”

“It would have been,” Alayne agreed as he opened the flat door finally and let her inside, “I’d have been grateful for that too, I just—People are less likely to confront you when your sleeping on the street, I was afraid people might think that they could talk to me if I went to the hostel.”

She was trying to voice her concerns without coming across as whiny. Myranda always said Alayne came off as to paranoid, and she didn’t want Jon to think she manipulated him into letting her inside the flat. She only brought up the hostel because she couldn’t think of something else to say. Jon was being so kind to her and Alayne was only causing him more trouble.

“Yeah of course,” Jon said as he went to turn on the lights.

The flat was small. Compared to the Vale it was miniscule. It was the definition of a bachelor pad, and a lonely one at that. There was a basket of clothes beside the old brown sofa in the living room, a coffee table with a bunch of Times magazines piled up on top of it, and an old armchair that Alayne vaguely recognized but couldn’t quite place. As she stepped further into the apartment it was the pile of cushions pushed against the window that caught her eye.

“Your dog—“ Alayne’s voice caught as she forced herself to shut up. Alayne didn’t know Jon had a dog, Alayne wasn’t meant to know anything about Jon.
“His name’s Ghost,” Jon had a smile on his face as he noticed her staring at the dog bed, “He’s a husky, but not here right now so you don’t have to worry.”

Alayne felt tears prickle at her eyes, “Is he alright?” she didn’t think her voice was shaking, but she couldn’t be sure. She tried to imagine Ghost; put all she could picture was the little grey and brown puppy that was put down in the vet during her stay in London years ago.

Jon nodded as he tossed his keys on the counter, “Oh yeah, he’s fine. I have him at a kennel right now. I’ve been busy with a case at work and, well you don’t care about any of that. Point is, I haven’t been home enough this week so I had him boarded until the weekend.”

Alayne wished she could see a picture of the little puppy all grown up. She wanted to ask what happened to Summer, and Shaggydog, and Greywind but Alayne wasn’t supposed to know about them either.

These were all things Alayne hadn’t let herself think about in the Vale, she’d nearly forgotten about the litter of puppies all of that belonged to the dead girl, and it was easier to not think about that girl’s life, which had ended in the riots years ago.

Alayne was too quiet again, because Jon cleared his throat, “You’re pretty soaked. I can get you a towel if you want, or something to sleep in. I know we have all your stuff at the station still, so we haven’t left you with many options.” He was rubbing the back of his neck, cringing as he spoke, as if her missing bag was the only reason Alayne had been sleeping on the street.

Alayne started to shrug of her jacket, realizing she’d left a rain puddle in Jon’s living room, “Right, you won’t want your sofa all wet.”

“I didn’t mean—anyway,” Jon took her coat and put it on the rack beside the front door. Alayne felt exposed without it. She rarely took it off, it being so cold and her living mostly on the street these past days. Her t-shirt was clinging to her skin, soaked through along with her jeans and shoes. Jon appeared to be avoiding looking at her at all, “I’ll go grab you something to wear. There’s a bathroom through that door,” he said pointing to one of the two that rested against the opposite side of the room, “It’s the only one in the apartment, so you can use it first if you need to dry off or—“ Jon started walking to what Alayne assumed was the bedroom, leaving the sentence unfinished as he disappeared inside.

Alayne, alone, considered leaving the flat now, but only a small part of her was considering it. It was something she knew she wouldn’t do, but had to mention to herself all the same. The temptation of a night of actual sleep in a warm place was too much. Even if she didn’t know Jon
was someone safe, she would have probably stayed anyway just for the chance to clean up in an actual bathroom.

The said bathroom was quite small, but Alayne didn’t mind as she stripped off her t-shirt and kicked off her trainers. She put the shirt over the empty towel rack and the put her jeans there when she took them off. Alayne tried not to look at herself in the mirror. It wasn’t the prettiest of pictures at the moment and so instead she went to turn on the adjoining shower, putting it on hot as she finished stripping off and climbed inside.

Jon didn’t have much in the way of products. There was a shameful two-in-one shampoo and conditioner that if Alayne weren’t as desperate as she was, probably wouldn’t ever touch with a ten-foot pole. She put it in her hair until it was all bubbly, wondering if she were close enough to Jon she’d smell the pine scent on him too. It wasn’t so unbearable to think about, Alayne quite liked the scent actually. She picked up the bar of soap that was on the shower rack and started to scrub her dirty skin, trying to be quick. Alayne took her time getting ready in the Vale, where hour-long showers were not uncommon, but since running away that had changed. In the motel in Liverpool she was lucky if water stayed hot for ten minutes, and then before that Alayne was very common with sink showers in public restrooms. It had been a while since Alayne actually felt clean.

She turned off the shower after rinsing off and stepped out of the tub looking around for a towel. She found some under the sink and wrapped herself up. Alayne reached for the door handle and peeked outside the restroom to see if Jon was nearby. The door to his room was cracked open and in front of the bathroom door, on a neat folded stack on the ground were some clothes. Alayne picked them up and closed the door to change.

Clean clothes, really clean clothes, was also somewhat of a luxury now. Alayne went ahead and pulled the black t-shirt up to her nose, after she put it on, to smell the clean scent of laundry detergent and then that woody scent Alayne was beginning to associate with Jon.

Jon had given her the t-shirt and a pair of grey joggers to wear, all of which was a little too big and required folding over to keep up on her hips. But it was soft, and clean and warm, and Alayne stayed still for a second letting herself wonder if Jon was this kind to a stranger, maybe he wouldn’t mind helping Alayne if he knew who she was.

But that was selfish and so Alayne opened her eyes and stepped outside.

“Finished,” she called out, feeling a little out of place in the apartment. The place was fairly bare; missing traces that might have made it feel more lived in. Alayne wondered if Jon had recently moved in, accompanying his new promotion, or if he just preferred the impersonal design choices.

Jon walked out of the bedroom with a pillow under one arm and a blanket in the other. He put the pillow down on one end of the couch and draped the blanket across the middle, stepping away to let Alayne through. He had changed out of his jeans and jacket into a pair of joggers and t-shirt like the one he gave Alayne. On him they didn’t look nearly as ridiculous, he actually managed to look quite handsome in the whole attire.

Alayne went over and sat on the edge of the sofa, “Thank you for all this. The clothes, the couch
—“Even when she was trying not to be selfish, she still managed to be just that.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jon answered, rubbing the back of his neck again, “I know it’s strange, inviting a total stranger into your apartment, but, well I—you remind me of someone.”

Alayne held her breath, “Oh?”

Jon continued taking a seat on the armchair nearby, and stretching out his legs as he sat, “I had a sister—two really—but well one of them would be about your age. I just thought, well I wouldn’t want her sleeping on the streets if she was in your position.”

Alayne felt as if they were both so close to something real. It would be so easy to tell him that she was the sister he thought about, that she was here, that they could be a family again and they both could be safe, but she knew that she had to hold her tongue. There was no way Alayne could bring Jon into her life, not with Baelish looking for her and everything that entailed. Alayne was dirty, she was broken, and everything she touched, tended to shatter.

Still, she had to ask, “What happened to her? Your sister?”

Jon looked away, his hands folding as he leaned forward in his chair, “She died. It was years ago, I guess it doesn’t really matter anymore. I say she was my sister, but she wasn’t really. We weren’t close, I was just the family’s foster son.”

Alayne swallowed down the lump in her throat. She’d been right not to say anything. Jon didn’t owe her anything, not after their childhood and how awful Alayne had been towards him. There was no reason that if he knew who she was, he wouldn’t just turn her away at the door.

“I’m sure they loved you though,” Alayne said, like she could try to make up for the past this way, convince him that he was wrong.

Jon shrugged like it didn’t really matter, he stood up and walked to stand behind the chair, “They did, but it’s not the same, you know? And that was all years ago, like I said, it doesn’t really matter anymore.”

Alayne pulled at the comforter holding it in her lap, “Right, all of that’s in the past.”
Jon had a strange look on his face, “Do you have a family I can call for you? Your ID said you were twenty, that’s quite young still. I’m sure if you asked—“

“No,” Alayne shook her head, “I don’t have a family, not one that matters.” She looked up at Jon and said, “It’s better if I’m on my own.”

“Alright,” Jon nodded his head and walked towards the light near the kitchen, “I’ll go ahead and let you sleep. We’ll leave for the station in the morning and have everything sorted out.”

“Okay, thank you.” Alayne said as Jon switched off the light following the light coming from his room, his shadow passing Alayne by, “Goodnight.”

Jon paused at the door, hand still against the doorway, his shoulder’s deflated, “Yeah, night.”

The door shut and Alayne was in the dark. She stretched out on the sofa, the blanket covering her.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so this is another trope I kind of hate. The whole inviting a stranger to stay in your apartment thing is always so bizarre to me, right now im justifying it because Jon already (finally) is starting to feel that Alayne is familiar he just hasnt figured out how yet. Also he is a cop, and Alayne really does need to go back to the station to pay her fine. Honestly i really just wanted these characters to start interacting and this felt like the natural progression. and lets be honest, Jon is definitely dumb enough to let a stranger into his place if he thought they needed help and felt like he had responsibility to help them.

Anyway, I just want to say thank you for all the amazing comments! Literally ya'll are so sweet and incredible and my heart is totally gushing for all of you!! And thank you for the reader who pointed out cops in the UK don't carry guns, I'm going to reread that ch. and fix that as soon as I've got the time. Again disclaimer, I'm from america, so if there are any "americanisms" that are just super blatant tell me and I'll try to fix them.
Okay! so next ch. is going to be from Jon's pov, so get hyped. It should (hopefully) be out tonight!
and as always, these comments are giving me life! I love hearing from ya'll even if it's just your grocery list, it really does keep me going
Jon Snow shut his door carefully behind him, before resting his back against it and tipping his head towards the ceiling and closing his eyes. He could still here Alayne on the other side of the door, quietly moving around as she settled in for sleep, all the while, Jon was asking himself what he’d just done.

Sam would kill him when he heard, Brienne might help.

It certainly wasn’t the smartest thing Jon had done that day; it also wasn’t the dumbest either. That place was reserved for uncuffing the girl who’d been brought into the station, only for her to run away minutes later, setting off the fire alarm with her. The conversation with Thorne that followed that a while later wasn’t a particular highlight of Jon’s day.

Of course, the choice to let the girl who ran from the station into his flat wasn’t that much better. Jon had seen the shadowy figure sitting outside the store that connected to the apartment building when he drove up. He meant to go to the covered car park behind the building to stay out of the rain, but he’d changed his mind when he saw them sitting there.

Jon only meant to offer them some money to pay for a room in the hostel around the corner, but when he saw that it was that girl was Alayne his offer had inexplicably changed to inviting her to sleep on his sofa.

He was still trying to piece together how that happened.

Jon walked away from the door going over to his bed and pulling the sheets back to sleep. He’d taken the bedspread off of the bed and one of the pillows to give to Alayne, who seemed like she’d need them more than he did.

Her lips had been blue when she’d spoken to Jon outside. And even when she came into the flat Jon saw that she was shivering and he wasn’t even sure that she noticed. Of course, that just made him even surer of his decision to let her sleep here for the night. Jon had become an officer to protect people; most days he felt he was just arresting them. Sometimes he’d see the young girl’s come into the station and Jon would always be reminded of Arya and Sansa. Sansa was dead of course, for almost seven years now, but when Jon had been with Alayne in the station he couldn’t help but think that Sansa would have been about her age.

Jon wasn’t sure what it was about Alayne that made him think of Sansa after all these years. After he heard about her dying in the riots of London, Jon had stopped trying to think about her at all; just liked he’d done with Robb when he got the phone call that Robb had died overseas in the war. It hurt too much to think about them, the closest thing he had to a family, dead and fallen apart.

It might have been Alayne’s eyes though; the same pretty blue color that Sansa’s were, framed with thick dark lashes.

For the first time in a while, Jon thought about the old family photo that he kept in the bottom of a drawer in the bedside table. It was a picture taken years ago, back when Jon was signing up for a military camp, and Ned Stark was planning on taking his two daughters to London with him for work. It had been Catelyn Stark’s idea, as she lined her five children up in front of the country
house outside of York. Catelyn had set up the camera on a timer, holding Rickon on her hip and calling the other children to her. When everyone stood in front of the camera, Ned stark beside his wife, Robb beside them and the younger children down in front, Jon had watched nearby. It was Arya who spotted him and dragged him by the hand into the photo, Robb looping an arm around his neck when he got close so that he would fit in the photo.

Jon couldn’t imagine Catelyn Stark had liked that much. He wasn’t meant to be in the photo and she didn’t even print it out after it was taken. It was Ned who brought Jon into his office the night before he left for London and handed him a printed copy of the photo, which Jon had kept on his bedside until he heard about Ned Stark’s assassination on the news. After that, Jon kept the photo hidden away, too afraid to look at it, but too much of a coward to throw it away.

Alayne had said that Jon’s foster family must have loved him, but Jon wasn’t so sure that was the case. Catelyn Stark did a great deal to show Jon that he was not wanted in their house, and Jon sometimes found himself wondering why Ned always let her.

Jon closed his eyes, listening to the cars drive by outside his window and wondering if Alayne would still be in the apartment come morning. Jon liked to think that she would be, but after her having run from the station earlier he had a hard time believing that she was the sort of girl that stayed in one place for too long. He also couldn’t help but wonder what exactly Alayne Stone had been running from.

That was part of the bigger mystery that Jon was trying to unravel. Alayne Stone was one of many Alayne Stones that came up in a quick Internet search, she had no police record and no record of ever living in the UK, to begin with. The photo on the ID looked very little like the actual girl. In the photo, Alayne looked clean, with her hair and makeup looking like an ad in a magazine. The girl in Jon’s living room looked tired, with dirty nails and dark circles under her eyes and oily hair that must have gone several days without being brushed. When she’d finished in the bathroom and stepped into Jon’s living room, Jon was shocked by the difference the shower had made. She still didn’t look like the ID photo. Alayne was too skinny, and still had the dark circles under her eyes, but compared to before, when she was first brought into the station, she looked worlds better.

Still, Jon couldn’t help but remark how young she looked in his clothes, huddled on the sofa like she was afraid to take up too much room. Sometimes Jon would notice that she would just stare at him, not talking, but just looking at him with her big blue eyes and Jon would wonder what she was thinking. He really hoped the whole doe-eyed helplessness wasn’t an act to lull him into a false sense of security so that she could rob the place while he was asleep, and that her staring at him was just part of that act. He didn’t think that was it though, Alayne just looked like a scared girl who needed some help.

Maybe that was why Jon didn’t arrest her when he saw her sitting outside his flat. Jon didn’t like to think he was in the business of arresting young girls or people who hadn’t really committed any harmful crimes. Jon still believed that there were matters of grey when it came to the law. Sometimes people did things because they believe they had any other choice, and Jon thought that this should be accounted for.

Whatever choices had lead Alayne to Jon, he hoped that a good night sleep somewhere safe might just help, even a little. He also hoped that doing something good for once might help him get some sleep too.

Every morning Jon woke up at 6:00am, no exceptions. He normally took these early mornings to take a run in the park that was near the flat or at least go to the gym that was in the basement of the
apartment complex. This morning though, when Jon woke up, he started the day by lying in bed, listening to the silence in the other room. It took him several minutes before he got himself out of bed and went to his door, almost hesitating to open it in case he did and would come to find his flat ransacked and Alayne far away.

When he opened the door, that wasn’t what he found.

Alayne was still asleep, one arm tucked behind her head and the other hanging off the side of the sofa. Her long brown hair, which was still wet the night before, was dry and splayed across the pillow, her legs bent towards her chest like she was still trying to conserve space.

Jon didn’t let himself stare too long. He knew that was a rabbit hole he didn’t need to jump down. It had been over a year since Ygritte left him and Jon hadn’t looked for a relationship since, he was still human though, and Alayne was a very pretty girl.

He went over to the kitchen and went over to the coffee pot to start it up. He stayed quiet as he did so, wanting to let Alayne sleep for a while longer.

They would need to get to the police station soon; Jon wanted to be there before it got busy, particularly before Alliser Throne came in. He thought it was best to handle Alayne’s situation without a crowd, in case she got spooked again and ran before she could pay the fine and get her things back.

After the pot of coffee was brewed and Jon had a cup of it in his hand, he scrolled through his emails on his phone, pausing over one from a social worker who he had been in contact with for a few years. Osha was the social worker charged to Jon’s little brother, Rickon’s case. Rickon was eleven now, but it had been six years since Jon had seen him last. When Catelyn Stark was seen as an unfit parent, following her suicide attempt after she heard about Rob’s death overseas, Rickon, along with Bran, were taken into the foster care system. At the time Jon had just turned eighteen and lost the custody case for them, partially due to the letter Catelyn handed over to the court, painting Jon as an unfit guardian. Bran and Rickon were taken into the system, and Jon was given an order from the courts that he should not have any direct contact with them until they came of age.

Jon read Osha’s email over, his eyes catching on the paragraph that explained how Rickon had been placed with another family (his eighth one in six years time) and how he was reportedly having behavioral issues in school.

He sighed as he began to type up a reply to Osha, thanking her for keeping him informed. While Jon wasn’t able to have contact with the boys, Osha knew Jon through the police station, as he’d met her more than once during a domestic disturbance call that involved foster children. Their emails weren’t quite on the books, and so Jon took what he could, grateful that he knew where one of his siblings was.

Over on the sofa, Alayne stirred. Jon checks the clock on the stove and walked over to her, bending down and putting his hand on her shoulder. Alayne let out a gasp, sitting upright as she forcefully pulled herself away from Jon, clutching the bedspread in one of her hands.

“Sorry,” Jon said putting his hands up as he stepped away, he felt like a heel for touching her without thinking. Of course, she was scared now, she still didn’t know him. Jon was just the man who invited her over to his flat to spend the night; she didn’t have any reason to believe he was a decent person, let alone, trust him. “I didn’t mean to scare you, I was just coming to wake you up.”
Alayne was breathing heavy, but she nodded her head and slipped her legs off the sofa, pulling the bedspread away as she went to stand. She couldn’t even meet his eyes, staring off in middle distance like she was in some sort of daze.

“It’s alright,” she told him as she straightened Jon’s shirt that she wore. The neck had slipped over her pale, bare shoulder sometimes in sleep and she fixed it so that she was covered again, “It wasn’t you, I thought you were someone else.”

Jon wondered if whoever she was talking about was the reason she was living on the street. He wants to ask, he wants to ask Alayne a lot of things. Mostly he wants to ask why she’s so scared, and why Jon feels so compelled to help her.

“I made coffee,” Jon interjected lamely, wishing Alayne would look at him again, “I thought you could drink it while I drove to the station. We should get there before it gets too crowded.”

Alayne nodded her head, glancing down at her oversized clothes, before Jon stepped away to let her into the bathroom. After she was dressed in the clothes she wore the night before (still damp from the rain, making Jon wish he put them in the dryer before she went to sleep) Jon handed her a thermos of coffee and one of the energy bars Jon usually ate after his morning runs.

“Sorry, it's not much,” He said as Alayne walked down to his car with him, “I usually eat at the station, I don’t keep much food in my flat.”

Alayne peeled the wrapper as she climbed into the passenger seat of the car and took a bite, “It’s perfect,” she said in between bites and Jon began to drive.

She didn’t say much as they drove to the station; Jon fiddled with the radio for a while before letting them lapse into silence. Alayne had finished eating the energy bar and was folding the wrapper into smaller and smaller pieces, occasionally glancing Jon’s way before looking back out the window.

“I looked it up this morning,” Jon told her conversationally, “The fine is about a hundred pounds for setting off the fire alarm when you went through the emergency door.”

Alayne cringed, and Jon wished he started with a different conversation topic. If she really was homeless, she might not even have that much money with her.
“You can get the fine waived of course,” Jon continued, “You’ll just need to do some paperwork for that and I can get one of the public defenders from another office to come and talk to you about your options.”

Alayne shook her head, “I really would prefer not to deal with all that trouble.”

Jon understood that, she did say yesterday that she planned on getting out of town. She probably didn’t want to deal with paperwork and lawyers, and Jon couldn’t blame her for that. Still, he wished there was more that he could do to help. Sam should be in the office this early, maybe Jon could talk to him to see what could be done for Alayne.

“Well,” Jon said as they rounded the corner for the station, “You have other options if you can’t, you know—“

“Pay for it?” Alayne finished, a frown on her red lips, “I can. I don’t care if I have to pay, but will my name be in the police records for this?”

Jon felt his face flush; he hadn’t meant to insult her. He felt like he was fifteen again, trying to figure out how to talk to girls and failing miserably. It was hard to dissociate those feelings from now and the fact that he was in his twenties and more or less on the job already.

“Technically, yes,” Jon told her, watching the way Alayne’s face fell when he told her. He was quick to add, “But we’ll see if we can get something worked out.”

“Good,” Alayne told him, her arms wrapping around her waist.

Jon parked the car, hesitating slightly before getting out. He wasn’t sure when a better time to ask Alayne this would be or if there would be a better time, “Is there a reason you don’t want your name in the police database?”

Alayne looked up, “Do I need a reason?”

Jon shook his head, fumbling with his keys, “Course not, but you just seem very insistent on it. And then yesterday you said you were scared in the police station, and Thorne said he brought you
in because you wouldn’t show him your ID—“

“I just don’t like police,” Alayne said quickly as she opened the passenger door and climbed out. Jon was slow to follow and when he did she continued speaking, “Let’s just go inside so I can get my stuff and leave, I’d rather not be here longer than I need to.”

Jon led her inside the station, and as he thought it was mostly empty, save for a few of the night employees who were getting up to go and the ambitious morning staff who were getting a jump on the day. Jon brought Alayne to his office and told her to take a seat while he went to get her stuff and the paperwork she would need to sign.

After he had grabbed it, he went over to where Sam worked in the station achieves and pulled him aside.

“I need you to do me a favor,” Jon told his friend.

Sam was a graduate student at the university, who worked early mornings in the station for extra cash. Jon met Sam when he was taking some part-time classes at Uni a few years ago and Jon had been the one to offer the archival job to Sam earlier that year. Jon liked to think he trusted everyone in the station, but he trusted Sam most of all.

Sam put the file he was holding aside, “Is this about your sister’s case? I haven’t got any new news about it—“

“It’s not that,” Jon said, thinking about Arya’s missing person case that hadn’t had any new leads in six years. He had Sam keeping tabs on it since Jon wasn’t technically supposed to be working on it himself. “This is about that girl that came in the other day, the one Thorne brought it who sounded the fire alarm.”

“Oh,” Sam said, nodding his head, “Did Brienne ever find her?”

“She’s in the station now,” Jon admitted, “Her name is Alayne. I think she might be in some sort of trouble though.”

Sam was shaking his head, “This isn’t like the time with Ygritte is it, Jon? I know you hate talking about that, but I told you that I wasn’t going to let you date another convict—“
“She’s not a convict,” Jon hissed, keeping his voice low as an officer passed them by, “And it’s not like that. I think she really needs some help, and I think I could help her Sam. I just need you to make sure Thorne didn’t put her name in the system last night after I left.”

“Shouldn’t it be in the system?” It was clear that Sam wasn’t convinced by anything Jon was saying. He didn’t like breaking the rules or doing anything reckless, and while Jon was the police commander now, that didn’t mean he was impervious to getting in trouble.

Jon shook his head, “It’s just some low level fine. If she would fill out some paperwork she could probably get it waived. Just got check the system and see if her name is there, I’m not asking you to do anything that could get you in trouble.”

Sam looked like he was about to say no, but then let out a loud sigh, “Fine, but this better not be like it was with Ygritte. I can’t take that sort of stress again.”

“Its nothing like that,” Jon said as Sam left the room, wishing he could convince his friend that he was just being altruistic and nothing else.

Jon went back to his office and found Alayne still in the chair he left her in, but now with a framed photo in her hands.

“That’s Ghost,” Jon said as he dropped a form down on the desk in front of her, catching sight of the photo of Ghost who had a red bandanna tied around his neck, his tongue flopping out of his mouth, “My dog I told you about. I took that picture on holiday a year or two ago.”

Alayne's eyes looked watery as she set the frame carefully back down on the desk, “He’s very handsome. Is this what I need to fill out to get my things back?”

Jon nodded and went to take a seat on the chair beside Alayne’s, feeling it was too formal to go to the one behind his desk, “It’s all just formalities. It’ll be stuffed away in some box, won’t even be filed online.”

Alayne reached for one of the pens on Jon’s desk and started filling it out, balancing it on her knee, “I’ve got the money to pay the fine in my bag. I’ll pay you as soon as I get it back.”

Jon shook his head, “Don’t worry about it.”
Alayne stilled, setting the pen down carefully as she looked up, saying in a rather insistent voice, “I can pay the fine, Jon.”

Jon felt something in his chest twist when she said his name. He didn’t recall telling her it before, but he supposed she could have looked at the plaque on his desk and figured it out herself. It wasn’t so much that Alayne said his name, but how she said it, like a familiar word that had always belonged in her vocabulary and that Jon had always been the definition of that word.

He cleared his throat, “You can get the fine dismissed in court, easy. You don’t need to bother paying it. You shouldn’t have even been in the station in the first place. Thorne shouldn’t have brought you here without any real charges. You don’t need to show an officer your ID without probable cause, and he didn’t have any.”

“So who’s going to pay the fine?” Alayne was staring him down, her question already having an answer as far as she was concerned.

Jon had never felt so guilty for doing a kind thing, “I’ll have it handled. Just fill out that paperwork.”

Alayne already had her mouth open to say something else, but thankfully Jon’s phone rang before she could. Jon reached for it, stopping when he saw the name on the caller ID.

“Give me a second,” Jon murmured, putting the phone to his ear, “Osha? What is it?”

Osha was a thirty-year-old woman from Northern Ireland when she spoke it always sounded angry or suspicious, mostly due to working with disreputable families and troubled children, Jon’s brother included. When she spoke this time she sounded angry.

“They say Rickon bit the father,” Osha told him, sounding like she was in the middle of a crowd, dozens of other voices behind her, “The family wants to press charges.”

Jon pressed his hand to his temple, “Are there officers already on the scene?”

“They took him in an hour ago, I just got the call. I’m about to go see him, but I wanted to let you
know first.” Osha said as Jon let out a frustrated growl, “This is his second offense, Jon. The family wants to press for juvenile detention.”

Jon didn’t even want to think about little Rickon ending up in a juvenile detention center. He knew Rickon was angry and had been difficult with past families, but Jon never thought it would amount to this. This was exactly why Jon wanted to get custody over Rickon, who needed a stable environment with people he trusted. He was already working on a court case to get Catelyn’s character letter dismissed, but by the time all of that would pass, Rickon might be in prison.

“What station is he being held in?” Jon asked sharply, watching the way Alayne sat up straight, apparently listening to the conversation.

“We’re in Bristol, Jon, but you can’t come,” Osha was not a woman to argue with, “You aren’t even supposed to know where Rickon is, if you show up here, we’ll both be fucked.”

Jon was angry, at Catelyn, at himself, at the bloody foster system that screwed more kids over than it helped, “I’m not going to come, but I am going to call the station. I know the chief there; I’ll see what I can do to help him. Just get him a lawyer, don’t let him talk to anybody until he has one with him.”

“I’m not a bloody idiot,” Osha said, hanging up the phone.

Jon put the phone on his desk, falling back on one of the chairs and running his hand over his face. Jon would get Sam, or maybe Brienne to call the Bristol station. Probably Brienne who knew one of the officers there quite well and can help get the process slowed down enough that Osha can get Rickon a lawyer and get this whole thing straightened out.

“Is everything okay?” Alayne had finished filling out the paperwork and had her hands folded in her lap.

Jon grunted a laugh, “Not really. You’ve finished the form?”

Alayne nodded and handed it to him. She was biting her bottom lip hard, like she was trying to break the skin, “So what was that all about?”

Jon shook his head, “It’s my brother. He’s in some trouble.”
Jon looked up to take the form, but what he saw instead was Alayne’s face, turned completely white. She didn’t even look like she was breathing, her hand unknowingly crumpling the edge of the form and creasing it.

“Your brother?” She repeated in a hollow whisper.

Jon was staring at the unmoving way she held herself. He nodded his head, “His name is Rickon,” he said watching the way Alayne’s eyes started to water up, “He’s living with a foster family now and he bit the father. They want to press charges.”

Alayne quickly wiped away a tear that had rolled down her cheek, “Is he alright though? Everything is going to be alright?”

Jon watched as Alayne started to crumble, tears spilling down her cheeks, turning her porcelain skin red. He forgets his previous anger and reached out for Alayne’s hand, taking it in his.

“Yes,” Jon nodded, wondering how this had turned into him comforting her about his brother’s arrest, “He’s going to be alright. I know some officers at the station he’s in, I’m going to see what I can do to help him.”

Alayne pulled her hand away, using it to wipe her eyes again, “Okay, good.” She let out a shuttering breath, shaking her head, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to get so emotional there.”

“It’s alright,” Jon said wondering exactly why she did, “You’ve got one?”

“A brother?” Alayne asked, “Yes, a little one. His name is Robin; I left him—” her voice trailed off, an absent look on her face.

Jon took the form she filled out from her hands carefully. “I’m going to go get you a cup of tea and check on your things,” Jon told her hoping that might help the situation and calm Alayne’s nerves, “I’m sure you’ll want to get out of the station soon, maybe go back to your brother?”

Alayne looked up, watery blue eyes startlingly clear, “Yes,” she said, “I’d like that very much.”
Here ya go! We're getting into plot folks, it's just on the horizon. Just a heads up, it might take Jon a while to figure out that Alayne is Sansa, I've got it mostly plotted when I want it to happen, but Sansa is pretty motivated to keep him in the dark about it for reasons not yet fully disclosed. She's going to need some big motivation to reveal her identity, but luckily it's going to happen (somewhat) soonish.

I hope you enjoyed getting some more Stark backstory. I personally like book Catelyn, but from Jon's perspective she kind of screwed him over big time so he isn't a fan. Next ch, we're going to get a more motivated Sansa, she's found something she is willing to work towards now, she isn't going to leave Jon's life until she knows Rickon is okay, and she's probably going to want to find out what happened to her other siblings to. Sansa to me has always been a very caring, empathetic person, especially when she gets into the vale and started taking care of Robin, it's because of this that she is willing to stay in Jon's life until she knows that they are okay, even if she thinks she's going to put herself in danger.

Disclaimer: I play it fast and loose with editing, also I love reading comments
There was a brochure in the hostel office displayed on the desk for tourist attractions in Cardiff. The brochures were gathering dust, pushed back into the corner of the desk, forgotten. Alayne doubted many tourists stayed in this particular motel.

“I’d like to rent a room for the week.” Alayne handed the hostel manager what little she had left of her emergency money. It would cover her for the first three days of her stay, but she promised she would have the rest of the payment by the end of the week.

The manager eyed her suspiciously, counting the bills in front of her like she might be shortchanging him and then slid the key across the desk, telling her the room assignment.

Alayne considered using her emergency money stash for a train ticket to Bristol, but she couldn’t be so impulsive this time. Jon said Rickon would be all right for now, which meant Alayne had enough time to start saving up money to actually pay for the expenses the trip would take.

She had left the police station soon after Jon got off the phone call about Rickon. He looked upset and Alayne didn’t know how to get more information out of him without arousing suspicion. She wished so dearly that she could just tell Jon who she was, maybe then he could just take her to see Rickon himself, and she wouldn’t have to do all these things behind his back. But she couldn’t. Even if Jon even wanted to see his dead sister again, bringing that girl back to life would only put them all in danger.

*You remember what Petyr said,* Alayne thought, *Who was the one who identified your body after the riots? Cersei Lannister wanted you dead. If you come back what will stop her this time from killing you for real?*

Petyr was the one who protected Alayne. He was the one who gave Alayne her name and new life. He was the one who hid her from the Lannisters for all these years, and now Alayne had to hide.

The why, though, had always plagued Alayne. It was a question Petyr would never answer, *Why did Cersei Lannister want me dead?* She asked him once, and he did the same that he always did, bringing Alayne aside and petting her cheek, telling her that these weren’t questions Alayne should ask. Of course, Alayne never met Cersei Lannister, Alayne only ever saw her on the news, Alayne wasn’t there that day in London when the riots began, she had been where she was always supposed to be, by Petyr’s side.

*Alayne had no brothers,* she thought, *Robin was never your brother, Petyr only ever called him that, but you know the truth. Petyr isn’t here with you now, Cersei isn’t here with you now, you don’t have to be her.*
Alayne shut her eyes. These were dangerous thoughts. As soon as Alayne brought the dead girl back to life in her mind, the sooner she would want to be her again. *You can’t do that, you have to be Alayne, you are Alayne.*

And so Alayne opened her eyes again and she straightened her back. Dead girls could afford to be scared, but Alayne was not dead yet.

She stowed her backpack away underneath the bed she'd been assigned to in the hostel, the room was empty, anyone else who would be staying there gone for the day. It also wasn't the height of tourist season, so Alayne hoped that the room would stay reasonably empty, and her things would be safe if she just left them here, instead of having to rent a locker to keep them in. She then spent some time cleaning up the room the best she could before leaving in search for the coffee shop she visited a few days ago.

She spoke to the manager when she arrived at the Mole’s Town Café, asking if they were willing to hire a waitress on the spot. Alayne had seen the 24hour sign advertised on the door when she came in last time and knew that coffee shops were always looking to hire late-night employees. The manager interviewed Alayne for a few minutes, while Alayne sipped some complimentary tap water, and by the end of it she was hired and told to come back at twelve A.M. to start her first probationary shift.

“Where did you say you were from?”

It was one A.M. and Alayne was scrubbing down a table with a dirty dishrag. The woman who spoke was the barista, a young student named Gilly. She attended the local UNI with her boyfriend and was studying early childhood development on account that she wanted to be a primary school teacher so that she could have flexible hours to be with her son, Sammy. Gilly was originally from up north, but she’d recently moved to Cardiff after meeting her boyfriend over the summer. Gilly was quite the talker, but this was the first time she’d asked Alayne a question since she started her shift.

The café was empty; occasionally one of two people would come in, order a coffee and then leave after sitting down for a few minutes. Alayne enjoyed the quiet; it gave her time to think about what she planned to do. Her first goal was to make enough money to afford to go to Bristol for some time, but before she could do that, Alayne still had to find out where Rickon was staying. The only person she could think of who might tell her was Jon, but she hadn’t figured out how to get that information out of him just yet.

“All around,” Alayne said as she went to another of the café tables, sprayed it with some bleach and then wiped it with her rag, “I don’t usually stay in one place for too long.”

Gilly moved from behind the counter to sit in one of the empty chairs near Alayne, leaning her elbows on the table in front of her, “That’s what the boss said. Not that we gossiped about you, but
when she told me a new girl was going to be working the graveyard shift with me I asked if you went to the Uni too.”

Alayne forced a wry grin, “I’ve never been to Uni.”

“No? Well, its not for everyone. I probably never would have gone if it wasn’t for Sam—my boyfriend—I’m the first in my family to go, all my sisters stayed at home and had children, which is fine, of course, but I didn’t want to have to raise little Sammy like how I was. I wanted more for him than what was given to me.”

Alayne set the dishrag down on the table and looked around the empty shop. The streets outside were empty, and so she took a seat, turning the chair to face Gilly. There was nothing Alayne could do at the moment that would bring her to Rickon faster, she wasn’t being paid per table she scrubbed or dish she cleaned, and so Alayne allowed herself to let her guard down, just this once.

“How old is Sammy?” Alayne asked, letting herself sink into normality for the first time in a long time.

Gilly sat up a little more, excited that Alayne was finally taking an interest in their conversation. She must have been bored too. Gilly started her shift at eleven pm and it didn’t end until three. This gave her time to get a few hours sleep before she would go to morning classes at school, and get off just in time to pick Sammy up from day-care. Alayne didn’t think Gilly was afforded much time to have friends. Her life revolved around her son, going to school for him, and then going to work for him, and then spending all her free time with him. It took a selfless person to sacrifice their life like that for someone else.

“He’s just turned two,” Gilly grinned as she began to think about him, “He’s my whole world, you know? I’m just so glad I met someone who feels the same.”

“You mean your boyfriend?”

Gilly nodded, her face twisted a little into something more sour, like someone remembering an unpleasant memory, “Sam isn’t the father. The father is…unimportant, but Sam is great. He’s the smartest person I know, and he’s so sweet with Sammy.”

Alayne smiled. She wondered if she would ever find someone who could love her with all the baggage she already had. Alayne couldn’t imagine that any man would see her life and fall in love
with her. That was just too romantic of a concept. Not everyone fell in love, not everyone was worthy of love. Grand romances only existed in stories, and brave knights only ever wanted glory. It was a nice idea of course, but Alayne just didn’t think love was all that realistic anymore.

“But what about you,” Gilly asked, grinning, leaning forward in her chair like they were about to tell secrets, “What’s brought you to Cardiff?”

Alayne shrugged her shoulders, wishing Gilly would continue talking about Sam and her son. It was nice to hear something good again and hear about someone’s life turning out well, “I’m just passing through.”

Gilly laughed, “Well don’t tell our boss, I think she was looking for a more permanent employee.”

“I’ll be here for the next few weeks,” Alayne promised, not wanting this conversation to get back to the manager and have Alayne ending up fired, “I’m just trying to save up some money before I go to Bristol. There’s someone there I need to see.”

“A boy?” Gilly asked and Alayne shook her head.

“Not like that,” Alayne was fidgeting in her chair, “It’s hard to explain—”

And then the bell to the shop rang, as a group of teens entered the café. Gilly sighed, pushing herself up from the chair to go greet them. Alayne stood up as well, her chest less tight now that the conversation was over. Maybe Alayne couldn’t get normalcy just yet. No one can make friends when they were keeping so many secrets.

Alayne went over to the tray where she was stacking the dirty cups of half drunken coffee and tea, and plates with pastry crumbs left over. She carried it over to the kitchens where the dishwasher was, resting her palms against the sink as she let out a deep breath. She reached to her wrist, pulling a hair tie from where it sat and then took her hair and pulled it to the top of her head. She started up the faucet and turned the hose to the plates, spraying them down before moving them to the side to put in the washer.

“Sorry about that,” Gilly said coming through the kitchen door and leaning against the wall, a troubled look on her face.

Alayne turned off the faucet, setting another dish aside, “Oh, don’t worry about it.” She frowned, Gilly was looking off to the ground, a glazy look over her eyes, “Is everything okay?”
Gilly nodded her head, her eyes lighting up a little bit, “Yes, sorry. I’m fine,” she said suddenly back in the present, “It was just one of those kids, did you see the emblem on their jacket?”

Alayne shook her head, turning to face Gilly as she leaned her hip against the sink, “No I didn’t even look at them. Why, what was it?”

“It was a gang symbol.” Gilly explained as she began to frown again. “There was one spray painted right outside the library at university the other day.”

“A gang?” Alayne didn’t know that there were gangs in Cardiff. She supposed she grew up rather sheltered; gangs were only things that Alayne heard about in fiction and newsreels.

Gilly nodded, “You probably shouldn’t worry. Whatever it is, I don’t think it will last. The symbol was just something I recognized on the news.” She slinked off the wall and stood straight, fixing her apron, “I just wanted to let you know, in case you want to call someone to walk you back home after your shift. I usually get Sam to pick me up, I didn’t know if there was someone who you would want to have come get you.”

Alayne shrugged a shoulder, “I should be okay, I don’t really know anyone in the city, but I should be fine.”

Gilly shook her head, “Oh no, I can get Sam to drop you off somewhere. He’d be more than happy to.”

“I live out of the way,” Alayne really didn’t want to inconvenience Gilly and her boyfriend in any way, “I’m staying at a hostel over by that park? The one with the pretty fountain.”

“I know that park,” Gilly smiled, as she went to open the kitchen door, “I know someone who lives around there, one of Sam’s friends. I’ll call him, I’m sure he’ll come and give you a ride back over there.”

“You really don’t have to do that—“

“It’s no trouble. Sam and him are always up late anyway working on some secret project that they
don’t tell me about,” She waved a hand like she had no interest about hearing about the secret project anyway, “When I call Sam, I’ll ask about it, I’m sure he’ll say yes.”

Alayne sighed, watching Gilly leave the kitchens. She might have argued more, but Alayne thought that Gilly was probably right to tell Alayne that she needed to get a ride back to the hostel. Alayne never liked walking around cities at night, and now with a gang in town, it was probably better to just surrender and let Gilly call the friend. And it was a far walk, and the neighborhood wasn’t nice, Alayne just had to try to be comfortable with letting people help her again. Sometimes people could be kind without wanting something from you, Alayne had to remember that.

Chapter End Notes

Okay short chapter, and no jon, I’m sorry! School is starting to get hectic and i’m trying to find time to get these chapters out. My goal is to have this fic done in two weeks, but unfortunately i won’t be posting anymore until the weekend. But, hopefully when i post this weekend I’ll have 2-3 more chapters done.

Also sorry I haven't answered any comments! I'm reading them, promise, but once again, I've been busy. But to clear some things up:
Sansa is 18, but Alayne is 20. In the books Sansa ages herself up while she's alayne and she's doing the same here.
Jon is 25, so he's a bit older than their age gap in the books, but i had to make his character being a police commander a little more believable.
Also, Jon is not originally from York, but he was raised there once he was fostered by the Starks, Sansa was born in York and has lived there up until she goes to London with her father.
Also, it wasn't clear, but the reason Catelyn doesn't have bran and rickon is because she is currently in a rehabilitation center or mental institution depending on the way you see it. The reason the letter she wrote was able to stop Jon from adopting/fostering them is because it pretty much said that he was an unfit guardian for several serious reasons that will be explained later on. I know there are a lot of unanswered questions right now, but I'm getting to them, promise.

Also (again) if anyone has any suggestions to where Jon is from, i'd be happy to hear them! I don't know much about UK cities, and I've basically been googling maps so far and just picking out cities that feel like reasonable distances and locations.
It was 3am when Alayne heard Gilly call from the other room that she was leaving for the night and that Alayne’s ride should be getting to the café soon.

Alayne had finished cleaning the last of the dishes some time ago, choosing to stay in the back to avoid Gilly and any more possible questions about her past. Her past already had too many holes in her own mind; she didn’t need anyone pointing them out. With Gilly gone though, Alayne went to the front of the shop to wait for the next barista to come in to take Gilly’s place. Today was only Alayne’s probationary employment. She was only working three hours and if everything went well, the boss of the Mole’s Town Café would hire her full time after tonight.

It was minimum wage, but in a week or so Alayne should have enough to pay for a train ticket to Bristol and still have enough money so that she could pay for a room in the city instead of sleeping on the street. Besides, this gave her plenty of time to find out where Rickon was staying, and that was the most important part of it all.

Petyr would be furious if he knew what Alayne was doing. First seeing Jon, which was dangerous enough, but now Rickon. He always said that Cersei Lannister was a paranoid woman, and wouldn’t rest until she knew that Alayne was dead. If there was some way that Cersei would end up knowing that Alayne was back in the country, somehow tracing her through Rickon, Alayne was afraid that she’d end up killing them both.

But that’s only what Petyr said. It didn’t mean that it was true. Petyr said a lot of things, usually Alayne could tell if they were lies or not. He said that Arya was dead, but Alayne couldn’t believe that. He said Rickon and Bran were still with mother, but that wasn’t true either. Petyr also said that Jon was overseas in the war, and he lied about that too.

Alayne was pulling at a string and she could feel things start to unravel. She’d been Petyr’s for so long, and she was just starting to see the world without his shadow over her face.

I’m not his anymore. I’ll never be. I’m safer now than I was then.

The shop bell rang as a young man came into the Café. Alayne sat up, standing from the chair she’d been resting in, suddenly, as if she was being caught doing something wrong. The man was young, with dark hair and strong arms, handsome, but clearly unaware.

He glanced up from his phone, just noticing Alayne, “Hey, I’m Gendry.”

Gilly hadn’t told Alayne the name of the friend who was supposed to pick her up, but she didn’t think this was him. Gendry was reaching over the counter to slip one of the black aprons of his had, stuffing his phone into his pocket, as he settled in for the night. No, he was Gilly’s replacement; the other barista Alayne would be working with.
“Alayne,” she introduced herself, moving over from across the room, “I’m the new hire.”

Gendry nodded his head, as he went to sit on the stool behind the counter. He was a bit shorter than Alayne, but stronger everywhere else. He looked like someone who did physical work for a living, probably something rustic like farming, or maybe metal work, something that would make you strong and callous your hands.

The shop bell rang again, and Alayne thought it might be her replacement coming in, but instead, it was Jon. He was pulling down the hood of his jacket from his head, walking towards the counter, looking like a young man who had just stopped in for a coffee during a late night of studying.

“Jon?” Alayne asked, taking a step towards him, as if this was a mirage and not the boy she grew up with. It was still so strange to see him after so many years apart. Each time felt like the first again.

He looked up, his lips lifting in a smile, “Alayne.” He said and Alayne felt crushed. She didn’t know why she expected him to recognize her each time their eyes met, why that stupid hope was still in her heart. Alayne couldn’t even recognize herself anymore, why would he?

“Are you here for coffee or something?” Alayne asked, looking to see if Gendry was watching them. He wasn’t, soon after figuring that Jon wasn’t about to order anything, Gendry had put his headphones in his ears and was slouching his back against the wall, closing his eyes like he might fall asleep.

“Actually, I’m here for you.”

Alayne’s heart skipped a beat, “Me? Why would you—“

“Gilly called me to pick you up,” He explained, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his trousers, “She said you lived near me. Surprising since I thought you were leaving town.”

Of course, Jon was the friend Gilly had talked about. Who else could it have been with Alayne’s luck? Alayne told herself that she was unhappy that it was him, but truthfully Alayne was glad to see Jon again. She left so suddenly that morning after she got her stuff back from the station that she hadn’t had time to really look at him. Alayne didn’t want to forget Jon, she didn’t want to forget how kind he was, or all that he’d done for her. She didn’t want Jon to be another thing Petyr took from her.
“You knew it was me?” Alayne asked as she untied her apron and put it behind the counter.

Jon went over to open the door for Alayne as she started to walk out of the Cafe. She didn’t say goodbye to Gendry, he looked like he might be asleep.

“I figured as much,” Jon answered as they began walking to wherever Jon parked his car, him leading the way. The air was chilly, and Jon went to zip up his jacket to keep out the cold, “Gilly said that a girl named Alayne who was new to town needed a ride to the hostel she was staying at. I put the pieces together.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Alayne told him as she pulled open the passenger door to the car, it was parked right in front of the shop, illuminated by the light of the Mole’s Town window. “You’ve already done so much for me, I don’t have any way to repay you. I’ve just been such an inconvenience in your life so far.”

They were both in the car now, Alayne rubbing her hands together to chase away the cold, waiting for Jon to turn on the heater so she could press her hands up against them and speed up the process.

“You shouldn’t say that,” Jon said, his lips pulling into a frown, “You aren’t an inconvenience, Alayne.”

He was staring at her with that intense gaze. It would hurt too much to meet it, and so Alayne just laughed instead, like it was some kind of joke, resting her head against the side of the window.

“Do you need the address of where I’m staying?”

Jon was still frowning, but he started up the car, pulling them out of the parking spot, “Just the name will be fine. I know most of the places around here.”

“It’s called The Peach.” Alayne told him, wishing she wasn’t the reason for his frown, “The one right by your flats, I think.”

Jon’s brow furrowed as he started driving that way, “I thought you said last night that you didn’t want to stay there. It was dangerous or something.”
“It’s cheap,” Alayne amended, “And I think I’ll be in town for a couple more days. I don’t want to be sleeping under shops for that long, and I can’t expect kind men like you to open their doors up to me.”

“I would have,” Jon said, looking at Alayne as they came to a stoplight, “If you asked.”

Alayne’s face flushed. Jon was looking at her with that intense gaze again. It was like he could see through her bones and flesh into her soul. She was laid raw when she was near him, every time disarmed by his kindness and honesty. This was a man who wouldn’t have survived long living in the Vale where all anyone knew was lies and manipulation.

“Well, that’s stupid,” Alayne crossed her arms over her chest, feeling flustered and angry now. She wished Jon would stop talking to her like she was something special to him, like she was someone who deserved all the kindness he was offering, “You shouldn’t let strangers into your home, Jon. You can’t trust us, we’re only looking out for ourselves.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“I’m not surprised,” Alayne laughed and turned to look at him, “You’re too good, but most people aren’t. You probably only see the best in them, but that’s going to hurt you one day.”

“You keep trying to convince me that you aren’t worth it, Alayne,” Jon laughed a little, shaking his head, “But you haven’t done a thing to show me that you aren’t.”

Worth what? Alayne thought as she looked out the window again. Alayne wasn’t sure she was worth anything anymore. Petyr thought she was worth something, but that was only because he wanted to use her. He never cared about her and he never loved her. The whole time Alayne was with him, he was just working towards his own goal. Alayne was just a piece of the bigger picture, worth as much as the end goal of his plans rewarded.

They drove in silence. Alayne felt caught up in her own head, thinking about the past and Jon seemed to understand that, turning on the radio to fill up the empty space. She wished Jon wasn’t so kind. If he was a bad man it would be so much easier to leave him, but Alayne wasn’t sure how she was going to be able to do that anymore. She had tried to not think about last night all day. About how he brought her into his home and gave her a place to sleep and clothes to wear. If he were horrible, it would be so much easier to turn away and not look back, but Alayne wasn’t sure how she could leave and continue to live knowing Jon was good and she just let herself walk out of his life.

It would be so easy to tell him. He would believe me, he could keep my secret, he could protect me. But Alayne couldn’t make Jon do all that. She couldn’t ask this of him. It wasn’t Jon’s job to
protect her, it wasn’t anyone’s job.

“Your brother,” Alayne asked as she saw that they were nearing The Peach, “Did you get all of that sorted out? Is he alright?”

“For now,” Jon parked the car in the Peach’s lot, leaning back in his seat as if just thinking about Rickon was causing physical exhaustion, “It’s a complicated situation. I’m trying to help, but I can only do so much. I’m in the process of getting custody over him, but first I need to get a character letter from the boy’s mother dismissed by the court. Even then it’ll be an uphill battle. I’m not legally a relative since I was never adopted into the family, and Rickon isn’t making it any easier for me.”

Alayne wanted to start crying. While she had been in the Vale, her entire family had fallen apart. Here Jon was trying to pick up the pieces, but he was doing that alone and the whole thing was so shattered. At least Alayne was there now, she could try and help—she would help, and she would keep them all safe. She just had to think with her head, not her heart.

“He’s being fostered over in Bristol?” Alayne asked carefully.

Jon nodded, “Originally in York, but they’ve moved him around quite a lot. I’m just glad he’s nearby now, at least I can keep track of one of them.”

“You have other siblings?” Alayne forced her voice to stay even, “Other than just your brother and then your sister who died?”

“I had five,” Jon ran his hand through his hair, displacing the curls so they fell haphazardly, he didn’t seem to notice, “Two of them died, but the others, Arya, Bran, and Rickon are still alive. Or at least, as far as I know, they are. Arya was about nine during the riots in London a few years back, but I know she made it out of the city. Then Bran and Rickon went into the foster system a few years ago, after their mother was institutionalized. Rickon’s still there, but Bran, he ran away with a few other kids from the home he was in and I haven’t heard about him since.”

Alayne was quiet. She stared at Jon’s profile, watching the anguish on his face as he explained just how broken their family was. Alayne knew about some of this already. She knew Arya must have survived the London riots, her body was never found and Alayne knew that if anyone could survive on her own for this long, it was Arya. But for the others, this was the first time Alayne had heard about any of this.

Petyr kept Alayne so isolated in the Vale, that for the first two years that she was there Alayne
didn’t speak to anyone but Petyr and Robin. She wasn’t allowed to watch the news during those years, and whatever news she heard about her family came from Petyr and he only told Alayne enough to control her.

But still, Petyr always said that he loved Catelyn Stark. Alayne couldn’t imagine that he didn’t know that she was being institutionalized, and if he did, Alayne didn’t know why he wouldn’t tell her. Unless he thought that Alayne would leave him if she knew her little brothers were in trouble.

“It’s heavy,” Jon gave a bitter laugh, “My family hasn’t had the best of luck.”

“I’m so sorry,” Alayne told him, thinking about Bran, wheelchair-bound, off somewhere on his own, and Arya still missing after all these years. “You shouldn’t have had to deal with this all on your own.”

Jon shook his head, “Who else is there? And it’s fine, really. Part of the reason I became an officer was so I could help children like them. I don’t know who I would be if it hadn’t happened.”

“Probably an officer in the military,” Alayne thought, imagining the world where Ned Stark wasn’t assassinated and their family was still together. Jon signed up for army the same time Robb did. If Robb hadn’t of died and Jon hadn’t dropped out, they probably would have been officers by now.

“What?” Jon asked, his voice bubbling up like a startled whisper.

Alayne looked over to him to explain her logic when she saw his face. The way his eyes were crinkled with confusion, and mouth slightly open like he planned on speaking the moment he figured something out. And Alayne realized her mistake.

“How did you know I was in the military?” Jon asked, already poised to ask more questions and demand more answers. He turned in his seat to face her, looking Alayne dead on as this began to turn into an interrogation.

Alayne’s face heated up as she rushed to think of a lie. How would she know he was in the military? What excuse could she give that was believable?

“It’s the way you carry yourself,” Alayne explained in one breath, “I’ve seen it before. In the Va—where I grew up,” she corrected, “military officers would visit from time to time. You carry yourself the same way they did. I don’t know, I just made an assumption.”
She held her breath waiting to see if Jon would believe her. She wanted to kick herself for being such an idiot. Twice she almost said too much. Alayne had to get better at lying around Jon. She had to be more careful.

Jon blinked his brown eyes, “It’s a very good assumption. I joined the military when I was eighteen, but I had to leave after my brothers were sent to live in the foster system.”

Alayne nodded her head quickly, “I’m very good at reading people,” she explained, “I guess I just picked up on it.”

She could see that Jon didn’t believe her. His eyes were slightly narrowed, his lips pursed together in a frown. He knew she was lying, he must have.

“I should go inside,” Alayne reached for the handle of the door, “I’m really very tired. You probably are too. Thanks for driving me, but I should go.”

She kicked open the door and stumbled out. It was time to make a strategic retreat. Alayne needed to compose herself if she was ever going to talk to Jon again. She still needed to find out where Rickon was being kept and the next time they spoke Alayne couldn’t be so careless.

Jon’s door opened up as he climbed out of the car. “Let me walk you to your door.”

There were still people standing on the porch of the hostel. Alayne would have to walk past them to get to her room. She’d rather do that alone than have Jon try and pursue more answers.

Alayne turned around to face, walking a few steps backward as she did, “I think I’ll make it there in one piece, but thank you.”

“Well, when can I see you again?”

Alayne halted. Jon was still waiting for his answer, but Alayne didn’t have one for him yet. “Would you want to see me again?”
Jon’s lips quirked up in a smile, his arms were resting on the hood of the car, and he leaned forward when he spoke, “I would. Are you going to be working in Mole’s Town again tomorrow?”

Alayne bit her tongue. She wanted to see Jon again, and she wanted more information on Rickon. Here Jon was presenting the perfect opportunity to do both, how could she say no?

“My shift starts at midnight.”

“I’ll be there.” Jon grinned, and Alayne found herself doing the same. She didn’t know what his angle was here, but she was willing to risk a little danger to find out.

“Good,” Alayne smiled, “It’s a date.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m a liar who hates doing homework. I really meant to wait until the weekend to post, but I woke up crazy early this morning and just knocked this chapter out. Here we get a little more stark info. Bran was in the foster system, but ran away (guess with who) and Arya is MIA. We also get Sansa revealing a few more hints about why she left the vale, and also getting more comfortable around Jon and letting some secrets loose.

Thanks for reading, I’m not promising any more ch. until Saturday, but I hope you’ll liked it! We might be getting another Jon ch. somewhat soon, and we’ll find out what’s up with Rickon and what’s been going on in the vale since Alayne left, so stay tuned.
“It’s not a date.” Alayne said to Gilly for the second time that night.

She just started her shift at Mole’s Town thirty minutes ago, and already Gilly was trying to weasel information out of her as to why Jon would be stopping by that night.

Alayne was picking up a tray of mugs from a recently vacant table, moving about the room in a timely fashion to make herself seem busier than she actually was. Alayne had been officially promoted to waitress that evening, meaning she would be added to the payroll and be getting her check for her work next week. Something about that made Alayne want to try a little harder to do her job, and with Rickon being so close by, Alayne finally had something to work for.

“Well, what are you two going to talk about?” Gilly asked as she took care of their last customer who was leaving the café, placing his coffee in a paper to-go cup and waving at him as he went through the door.

Alayne knew what she wanted to talk about, but she wasn’t quite sure what Jon had in mind. She wasn’t actually sure what prompted Jon to ask to see her again for. “I don’t know, things.”

“Things?” Gilly shook her head as if disappointed and then teased, “Me and Sam talked about things on our first date too.”

Alayne rolled her eyes. She shouldn’t have even mentioned it to Gilly in the first place. This was ridiculous. Jon was Jon—he was practically her brother, they’d grown up together, been raised by the same parents. She wouldn’t ever go on a date with him.

Except, part of Alayne knew that wasn’t true. Jon had only lived with them for six years before he joined the military when Ned Stark left for London. He’d been twelve when he was first fostered with them, Alayne being five, and while Alayne may have grown up with him, he didn’t grow up with her. Most of his growing happened while he was still in the foster system in Enfield, and it had made him quiet, more reserved than the other Starks, and with brutal edges, they didn’t have. He was as much of a stranger then as he was now.

“It’s not like that,” Alayne tried to explain, “He’s just being nice to me because he feels guilty.”

“You don’t know that,” Gilly argued, “Jon’s nice to everybody, but I haven’t heard about him
talking to a girl since Ygritte.”

“Who?” Alayne looked up, unfamiliar with the name.

“His ex-girlfriend.” Gilly explained as she sat down on one of the chairs around the table Alayne was cleaning, “I never met her, but Sam told me about her. From what it sounded like, Jon was pretty serious about her until they broke up.”

Alayne took the seat beside Gilly. Jon was pretty serious about everything so Alayne didn’t know how important that was, but she did know that Jon never dated back in York. Robb had a dozen relationships, but not once did Jon ever go on a date, or even talk to a girl as far as Alayne could remember.

“Why did they break up?” Alayne asked, sitting forward.

“Well, from what I understand, Ygritte and Jon met after she was imprisoned during a protest.”

“What?” A laugh bubbled up from Alayne. She had to smile thinking about Jon dating someone who he met on opposite sides of a jail cell. It seemed too reckless for him, but there had to be sides of Jon that Alayne didn’t know about.

Gilly nodded, smiling too, “She apparently threw a brick through the window of some company that was accused of pouring sewage into the ocean. Tried to attack one of the police too, if I remember right. Anyway, that’s how they met and then for sixth months, they were perfectly happy. Then, one morning Jon woke up and she was gone.”

“She just left him?” Alayne could hardly imagine someone just stepping into Jon’s life and then leaving out of the blue. Then again, that’s what she planned to do, wasn’t it?

Gilly shrugged her shoulders, “The boys made a big deal about it, but from the way I understand it, this girl was a free spirit. You can’t keep someone in a box when they don’t want to be there.”

“That’s true,” Alayne agreed quietly.
Still, just leaving someone like that, with no note or pretense. It seemed cruel. But once again Alayne was reminded that she’d done the same thing before. Leaving the Vale in the middle of the night, and while she might not have felt guilty about leaving Petyr, there was still Robin and he had to be so confused.

Gilly sighed and stood up, stretching her arms above her head, “I’ll take care of the customers tonight if you and Jon want to go in one of the back booths to talk. It shouldn’t be too busy, I can probably handle it on my own.”

“I can still work,” Alayne argued, “And you’re probably tired with school and Sammy.”

Gilly shook her head; “The work will keep me awake. Besides, maybe you don’t think this is a date, but from what I know about Jon, if you’re the first girl he’s really talked to since Ygritte then he probably thinks this is.”

Alayne’s stomach sank. She wished she never called it that when she spoke to Jon the other day. She hadn’t meant to, but it just slipped out of her mouth while she wasn’t thinking. She’d been careless again, Alayne found it to be so easy to do that when she was around Jon. She forgot that even around him she had to watch her words.

Alayne finished collecting the used cups from the tables around the café, taking them into the kitchens to be cleaned. When she came out and back into the main floor of the café, Jon was sitting at one of the tables beside the window, tilting his head up as he talked to Gilly. He looked happy, grinning as Gilly spoke with her hand on her hip and the other around a pot of coffee.

“Alayne,” Jon smiled when he spotted Alayne over by the kitchen doors.

Alayne tried to mirror the grin, but she only felt knots in her stomach, “Jon, you’re late.”

“I know,” He rubbed the back of his neck, “I meant to come earlier, but I got tied up at work.”

It was nearly 1 am, “You’re still working this late? That doesn’t sound healthy.”

“He means his and Sam’s secret project,” Gilly explained as she stepped away from the table, “The one they don’t tell anyone about.”
Alayne remembered Gilly talking about this secret project yesterday, she hadn’t thought much of it then, but she wondered if it was something important now.

“It’s nothing,” Jon ducked his head, Alayne taking the seat across from him, “Just police work.”

Gilly rolled her eyes again as she walked back to the counter, leaving Alayne and Jon alone.

Alayne took one of the cups that were on the table and took a sip of the tea Gilly had left her, “What sort of police work?” Alayne asked, wondering how much information she could get out of Jon regarding his project.

Jon shook his head, “The sort I’m not supposed to be working on.”

Alayne was intrigued, “Do explain.”

Jon huffed out a laugh, “It’s nothing. It’s just some cold cases.”

Now Alayne was really curious. She wouldn’t ask more though, not yet. If she pushed Jon too far he’d run away. Alayne had to be smart this time; this wasn’t going to be like yesterday where she let herself get swept away with her emotions.

“Have you picked up your dog yet?” Alayne settled on asking. It was a safe subject, and Alayne wanted to know about that too. It was the weekend, and Jon did say he would be picking up Ghost then.

Jon’s shoulders deflated a little, he looked like a sad balloon. “No, I had to extend his stay at the kennel. I’m a horrible dog owner, I know.”

Alayne shook her head, dismissing the thought, “Of course you aren’t.” She remembered Jon being the best with the pups out of all the Stark children. She even remembered him sneaking Ghost inside the house to sleep in his bed one time. It was only the once though, Catelyn Stark caught him and after that, it never happened again.

“Why are you keeping him in the kennel though?” Alayne asked, “More work?”
Jon shook his head, taking a sip of his coffee, “No, I’ll be going out of town this weekend, on Sunday actually.”

“Why is that?” Alayne hoped that she didn’t ask to quickly. She didn’t want to come across desperate for answers, but if Jon was going out of town Alayne wanted to know why.

“I’ll be going to see my brother,” Jon said, “The one in Bristol. I was able to negotiate with the courts to let me get some visitation, finally,” he sounded frustrated, upset that it had taken this long to let him do that much.

“Bristol?” Gilly said as she came back over to refill Jon’s coffee cup, “Alayne’s going there too.”

Alayne looked up at Gilly, her eyes stretched wide in panic. Gilly caught a glance of it and her mouth fell open.

“No, sorry.” She said shaking her head, “I’m mistaken, I misheard, I don’t know what I’m saying.” She pulled the coffee pot away, pointing to the counter, “I’m going to go back over there, you two keep talking.” And then Gilly made a strategic retreat of her own.

Alayne wanted to bang her head against the table, she settled for just digging her nails into her thighs where Jon couldn’t see.

“You’re going to Bristol?” Jon asked, pulling back with a curious look on his face.

Alayne shook her head, she stared into her mug, “I was thinking about it. It was a while ago, I probably won’t anymore.”

Jon was still frowning, “You didn’t tell me. Do you have family over there or something?”

Alayne shrugged a shoulder, pressing her lips into a thin line, “No, can’t a girl just visit Bristol? I hear it’s very…vibrant.” She settled on the word, cringing as she said it. Alayne had never been this bad at lying before. She could feel it physically affecting her, as her face grew red and her pulse sped up.
Jon’s expression had not changed. He was staring at her like he was thinking of something, trying to put two puzzle pieces together and realizing that they wouldn’t fit.

He knew. He must have known. The ground was beginning to crumble.

“Alayne—“ he began saying, voice serious and somber.

“Alayne!” Gilly shouted from the counter.

Alayne bolted up from her chair, “Coming!” She called back, not sparing Jon a glance as she ran over to the counter, pulling Gilly by the arm and dragging her over to the kitchens.

“What was all that?” Gilly whispered as soon as they were behind closed doors, “Are you alright? You looked like you were about to faint.”

Alayne shook her head, “Gilly, why did you tell him about Bristol?”

Now he must have known that there was something wrong about Alayne. She just told him the other day she planned on staying in Cardiff, and now as soon as she knows about Rickon being in Bristol she plans on going there? He either thought she was stalking him or worse, he was catching on to her identity. Jon wasn’t stupid; he had to be putting it together. Alayne let too many things slip. First the military officer comment, and now this—how could he not know?

“I didn’t mean to.” Gilly’s voice was shrill, “It just slipped out, I’m sorry. I didn’t think it was important. Was Jon not supposed to know?”

Alayne continued to shake her head, going over to the wall and sliding down it until she was sitting on the floor. She put her head in her hands, “He’s going to ask questions now. I don’t know what I’m going to tell him.”

Gilly was kneeling next to Alayne, setting a hand on her shoulder, “I’ll ask him to leave. You don’t need to tell him anything.” She promised, “I’ll say that you aren’t feeling well or something.”

As tempting as that offer was, Alayne couldn’t take it. She had to fix this before there was any
more damage. Alayne couldn’t be a child anymore, she was an adult. She only had herself to rely on to fix her problems, there was no Petyr hide behind, and Alayne couldn’t run from everything.

“No, it’s okay,” Alayne said, taking Gilly’s hand to stand. “I’m fine.”

Gilly frowned, “Are you sure?” She asked, and it sounded very much like she thought Alayne should consider changing her answer, “You didn’t look fine in there.”

“I am now,” Alayne assured her, sending a tight smile her way as if to prove her point, “I should go back. Jon’s probably wondering what happened.”

Gilly looked like she wanted to argue, but she let Alayne pass through the doors leading back into the café.

Jon wasn’t in his chair anymore. He was standing, walking towards the kitchen door and pausing when he saw Alayne come out. He still had that troubled look on his face but it was more worried now than suspicious.

“Is everything alright?” He asked, sounding like a police again.

Alayne gave a sharp nod, “Gilly thought she saw a rat.” She explained going back over to the table that they’d been sitting at, “It was nothing, we’re fine now.”

Jon was still standing halfway between the kitchen and the table, he was looking back and forth between them, his frown getting deeper, “Gilly hadn’t been in the kitchens. She was standing by the register that whole time. How would she have seen a rat in the kitchens?”

Alayne sucked in a breath. This was too much, Alayne had dug a hole and now, if she didn’t do something, she was about to be buried in it.

“You should go,” Alayne said, standing to face Jon, “It’s late and I have work to do.”

Jon looked peeved as he glanced about the empty shop, “I just got here? You’re kicking me out already?”
Alayne was hostile now though. She couldn't charm her way out of this, was too exhausted to try. She needed Jon gone now, and didn't care about how she did it. “Yes, well I am at work, some of us take those things seriously.” She started to herd him towards the door, leaning to open it up, holding it wide for him, “You really ought to go, our 2 a.m. crowd is going to be coming in soon and Gilly and I need to prepare.”

Jon was standing out of the shop, but he didn’t move away from the stoop, “What’s this about? Is it something I said? Is it about Bristol.”

Alayne became rigid at the word, and she answered in a cold voice, “It’s really about work, Jon. You should go.”

He looked perplexed, slack-jawed and with angry eyes. Alayne wanted to close her eyes and dispel the image, but for some reason, she knew that wouldn’t work. That look would probably haunt her for the next few days.

Part of her thought maybe she was being paranoid, but a better part of Alayne knew that she was just being careful. Jon was fire, and Alayne was going to get too close and get burned.

“What aren’t you telling me, Alayne?” Jon demanded. Maybe he was hurt before, but now he was pissed. “I thought things were going fine, but then—I don’t know, you close up on me.”

She wanted to scream, *I’m not Alayne! Why can’t you realize that? Why don’t you remember me! Why have I been forgotten? You remember all the others, why not me?*

She said instead, “That’s because you don’t know me, Jon. You’ve just inserted yourself into my life without permission. I swear, everywhere I turn: there you are. It’s getting insane. I don’t know if you’re stalking me, or if these are just creepy coincidences, but I’m not into it anymore. We aren’t friends, you don’t get to come into my place of work and ask me questions. Now, I’ve told you to leave, so leave before I make you.”

Alayne didn’t know when she started shouting, but by the end of it, she was. She finished speaking and was out a breath. Her face had gone red, and Jon looked horrified.

“Fine.” Jon said taking a step away from the café, he was looking down, face pale, “I’m sorry to have bothered you.”

“Fine,” Alayne shot back, her voice wet as she started to feel tears in her eyes, “Good.”
Jon stuffed his hands deep in his pockets, his shoulders hitched as he turned around to leave. Alayne wanted to shout at him again, maybe throw something too, scare him away good enough that he'd never come back. More than all of that though, Alayne wanted to run out into the street and chase him down, shake his shoulders and beg him to remember her.

Alayne did none of these things. She stood still, watching from the door until Jon got into his car and drove away.

Chapter End Notes

I am such a liar. Here's another ch.

Not a very happy one I'm afraid. Alayne is starting to get more paranoid, and while this all stems from a place of her wanting to protect Jon from the truth, she isn't thinking very rationally anymore. As for Jon, he's starting to put some things together. It won't be long now folks.

Also, I've just got to apologize to any people from the UK/Europe for how terrible I am at making this place actually sound like england/wales. I really am trying, but I'm not the most careful editor and i usually forget to fix things that should be basic like dollars to pounds, and the fact that apparently ya'll don't have busboys in england (literally the first time i heard about that) I'm going to try to do better, but please stay with me here. I'm just an ignorant american so this is an uphill battle for me.

I'm not going to make anymore promises about updating, because apparently i suck at keeping them. Thank you for all your wonderful comments on the last chapters! Ya'll are literally so sweet for tolerating all my bad grammar and typos (another thing i'm working on), I really hope you like this ch. even though its a little sad, but it just means that we're going to be getting happier chapters soon! Also thank you to user Idk1 for giving me the suggestion to where Jon is from, super helpful! You're amazing.

please kudos (if you like it) and comment (even if its just about your day) I love hearing from you guys!
Chapter 10

Jon slammed his hand against the wheel, cursing. He was imagining the argument in his head again; replaying exactly what Alayne had said when she all but pushed him out of the café and onto the street. He was pissed, he was confused, he didn’t know what he’d done to make her so angry. He wanted to go back to apologize but didn’t trust himself enough to not get in another argument if he saw her again.

Jon pulled the car over to the side of the street. He shouldn’t be driving when he was like this, and besides, Jon didn’t know where he was driving to. He didn’t want to go back to his flat right now, and he’d planned on staying with Alayne for several hours before she decided that she was done with him.

He shut his eyes, resting his head against the street as he listened to the muted sounds of the city outside his window, trying to calm himself down. This was just like when he was a kid, frustrated at the world and ready to take it out on everybody or himself. He tried to remember what Ned had taught him, something about deep breathing or maybe it was something else.

She was just so damn frustrating. Jon could just picture her now; with her big blue eyes, and her high cheekbones, and red lips that always smiled at him like they were hiding a secret. It was infuriating. Alayne was infuriating. One minute she was asking about his family, listening like she really cared, like it was something more than just some baggage Jon carried around, and then the next she was shouting him on the street, making up lies and excuses to hide things that Jon still didn’t understand.

There was a reason Jon hadn’t dated anyone since Ygritte. This was it.

It had been a bad idea to meet with Alayne in the first place. She was trouble, she’d practically told Jon so herself. There was something about her, beneath her doe eyes and sweet exterior that was feral. Something a little wild and a little scared, like an animal that’d been living in a cage for too long.

Which was to be expected, and going into it Jon should have known and stopped himself before he got to close. Girls like Alayne bite, and why wouldn’t they? Alayne may not have used her sweet exterior to rob his flat that night or take advantage of the law, but Jon realized that she didn’t leave with nothing. Jon had been conned, conned out of nothing but his dignity.

He picked up his phone from the passenger seat where he threw it when he came in, picking it up and dialing Sam’s number. He’d still be up with Sammy at this time, probably waiting for Gilly’s shift at the café to end to come get her.

“You were right,” Jon said as soon as Sam picked up the phone, “I’ve got a type. I’m an idiot.”

“Is this about your date with Alayne?” Sam sounded nervous on the other end, “Didn’t go well?”
“She kicked me out of the café.” Jon laughed, “You were right. She’s just like Ygritte—worse, at least Ygritte had the courtesy to walk out of my life instead of pushing me out of hers.”

“You’re talking awfully fast, Jon. I can’t really understand you.” Sam said and Jon probably was. He was angry, he was trying to vent, and it would be better to do it in person.

Jon started up his car, pulling back into the street, “I’m heading over to your flat. I’ll be there in five.”

Sam and Gilly had a one bedroom flat that was equal distances from the University and Sammy’s daycare. Jon parked his car and went over to their little patio, reaching for the spare key in the hanging basket beside the door.

Still angry, Jon fumbled with the key and the lock a few times before getting the door open and stepping inside.

The door opened into the lounge. Jon could still hear the television going, playing some child’s show, despite the fact Sammy must have been asleep by now. Jon took a few more steps into the flat, locking the door behind him, looking up when he heard Sam come into the lounge from the bedroom.

Sam looked at Jon and sighed, tilting his head towards the sofa, “Sit down, I’ll go grab us some beers.”

Jon nodded, relieved. He went over to the sofa and collapsed on it, stretching out his legs in front of him, “You weren’t sleeping, were you?”

Sam came back to the kitchen with two glass bottles in his hands, putting one in Jon’s open hand and taking the other for himself, “It’s fine, Sammy woke me up before you did.”

Jon rested his head against the back cushion, “I’m such an idiot, Sam.”

“Hmm,” Sam hummed, taking a sip from his bottle, cringing and then setting the drink down on the table in front of the sofa, “That’s terrible.”

Jon snorted, “Why do you buy it then?”
“It’s Gilly’s,” Sam explained absently, ”But tell me what happened.”

Jon hardly wanted to think about the evening, but he recounted the necessary details to Sam, who listened quietly, only sighing every so often. By the time Jon finished telling Sam the story, his beer was empty and he was leaning over to the table to grab Sam’s bottle. Jon’s explanation of the events quickly turned into a rant, and he went on a tangent about why he was a fool and why Alayne was trouble. It was during this that Sam’s face became increasingly troubled.

“I knew girls like her back in Enfield,” Jon said shaking his head, “I thought, I don’t know. I thought maybe she was like me.”

“A foster child?” Sam asked.

No, that wasn’t it. He shook his head, “I can’t really explain it.”

Sam was quiet. He opened his mouth once, and then shut it, and then repeated the process again.

“Just spit it out,” Jon told him.

Sam sighed, and leaned forward, looking very serious. “There’s something you should probably see.”

Sam left the room, going over to the bedroom and leaving Jon alone. In that time, Jon finished the rest of Sam’s beer and then went over to the kitchen to get another. He would buy Gilly another pack tomorrow, but right now all Jon wanted to feel was numb.

Jon went back over to the sofa, beer in hand and fell back into his spot, watching the cartoon play out on the little screen across from him. He wondered what Alayne was doing now. If she was still at the café, or if she’d gone back to the hostel she’d been staying in. Jon planned on driving her back there tonight after the talked, but he didn’t think that would be appreciated anymore. It probably wasn’t appreciated, to begin with, since Alayne apparently thought he was stalking her. Jon should have realized that she didn’t want to be around him, all those times she told him that she didn’t want to be a bother was just the polite way of telling Jon to fuck off, only he’d been too dense to realize it.

Sam came back into the lounge, carrying a stack of papers and his laptop in his hands. He set the papers down on the table first and then went over to the sofa.
“You remember when you told me to check to see if Thorne put Alayne in the police system?” Sam asked as he began to pull something up on the laptop screen, “Well, I did, but after I did that I decided to do a little more research about her.”

“Sam.” Jon admonished. It wasn’t the first time used the police database to do some extracurricular work, but usually, when he did it was to help Jon look for leads on where Arya and Bran might be. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“I’m sorry,” Sam gave a nervous laugh, “But I was worried that you were going down the Ygritte path again. I just wanted to make sure Alayne wasn’t a criminal.”

“Her background check cleared,” Jon was confused. Sam already knew that Alayne wasn’t a criminal, he’d been with Jon when Alayne’s ID cleared the system.

Sam nodded his head, a smile on his face. It was the same smile Sam had when he was about to explain something, “Yes, for Wales and England. Our systems only scan for crimes that were committed in the UK, but I wanted to check to see if Alayne committed any crimes outside the country.”

Jon sat forward, leaning over to look at the screen. He looked at the digitalized scan of Alayne’s ID, momentarily distracted by the way she smiled in the photo, grinning at the camera like it was her best friend.

“Did anything come up?” Jon asked, looking away.

“Now, that’s an interesting question,” Sam said as he pulled up another photo scan, “You see, Alayne’s ID said she was from Bath.”

Jon already knew this, “Yeah, what of it?”

“Well, there isn’t an Alayne Stone from Bath.” Sam said, hovering the cursor over a list of names, “This is a list of all of the babies born in Bath on the birthday listed on Alayne’s ID, and there isn’t one Alayne Stone.”

Jon reached for the computer, going over to scroll through the list himself. It didn’t make any sense, “There must be some sort of mistake with the ID then.”
“I thought the same, but, Jon, I looked at the hospital records from the past twenty years, and in all that time there isn’t one Alayne Stone. Then I thought, well the mother could have had a home birth and it wouldn’t be in any hospital records, so I even looked up the surname in the property records and there’s only one person in Bath who has it: a seventy year old man who never married.”

Jon felt sick. He set his beer down, knowing it wouldn’t help anymore. “So it’s a fake, she’s not really Alayne Stone.”

Sam grabbed the laptop from Jon, “I don’t know. This is where it gets really confusing, because Jon, an Alayne Stone exists, but just not in the UK. I did an advanced search in the EU databases, and I found this.”

Jon took the screen again, squinting as he read the photo scan of a newspaper article from a local paper in Grenoble, France. It was a little black and white piece, part of some crime column.

He read it aloud, “Petyr Baelish, reputable business mogul and club owner, reports daughter Alayne Stone missing from her summer home in the French Alps early this morning. Police investigating, foul play suspected.”

Jon’s voice trailed off at the end. The article didn’t mean anything. Alayne wasn’t French, and surely there could have been another girl named Alayne Stone living somewhere in France. But the article gave Jon pause anyway. He’d heard the name Petyr Baelish before, somewhere a long time ago.

“Now,” Sam continued, “Maybe your Alayne just stole this girl’s identity. She might have read the name in the newspaper and made a fake ID with it, but this article was only ever printed in this one newspaper. I searched several other new sites because I figured if the daughter of a wealthy businessman were kidnapped we’d have heard about it. But nobody else knows about this. I looked and Alayne Stone isn’t even a missing person. Her name isn’t on any missing person records anywhere, not even in France.”

Jon pushed himself off the sofa and walked across the room. He didn’t understand any of this. If Alayne wasn’t Alayne, then who was she? What was she apart of? What the hell brought her to Cardiff, to begin with?

There were explanations for the false ID, but none of them made sense when you took in account the article from Grenoble.
“Was there anything else about an Alayne Stone in Grenoble?” Jon asked, turning back to Sam, “School or hospital records?”

“Nothing.” Sam laughed, looking almost giddy, as if this was all very exciting, “This is the only mention of Alayne Stone, anywhere in France. So what I did next was look up Petyr Baelish, the father, and I was able to find a picture from a charity gala last year.”

Sam leaned over to the table, taking up some of the papers and leafing through them. He eventually came to the one he was looking for and stood up to hand it to Jon.

The photo was grainy, taken in some grand foyer, with black and white marble floors and a high ceiling with a crystal chandelier hanging from it. The subjects of the photo were several men and women, all dressed in smart suits or ball gowns. Jon’s breath caught when he found Alayne in the photo, standing at the end of the group beside a man who had his arm resting on her hip. She wasn’t smiling in the photo; her head was tilted to the side as if looking at the hand on her hip, an emotionless expression on her face as if the photo had been taken when she was caught off guard.

“That man,” Sam said pointing to the one who had his hand on Alayne, “Is Petyr Baelish.”

“Her father?” Jon mouth twisted as he tried to get a better look at the grainy photo to be sure he saw it right. He felt sick; Jon had originally assumed that the man had been Alayne’s date. The way Alayne’s father touched her did not look innocent, and Alayne did not look comfortable.

Sam nodded, “I found the photo in the archives of a website for the opera house in Grenoble. The article the photo came with lists the names of all the benefactors for the fundraiser. Baelish was one of them. They don’t list Alayne’s name, but it looks just like her, doesn’t it?”

Jon pushed the photo away. He couldn’t look at it anymore, it made his skin crawl, “That’s her.”

“The article also said that the fundraiser was hosted in the Vale Manor. I did some research and I found out that Petyr Baelish is the current owner. He got it after his wife, Lyssa Arryn, the previous owner died, and you won’t believe this, but apparently, she died less than a month after they married, after falling down that flight of stairs.” He pointed to the curved staircase that could be seen in the background of the photo.

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this sooner, Sam?” Jon fell back on one of the armchairs in the room. He was thinking about Alayne again, if that was even her name. The UK ID was definitely fake, but was the Alayne Stone from France anymore real?
Sam went over to rest against the table, setting the photo aside, “I didn’t find out about the France stuff until today when I finally got access to the police archives. Before I just didn’t want to tell you anything until I knew I was right about her. I’m sorry, Jon, I know you liked her.”

“I didn’t even know her.” Jon choked out, wanting to laugh at himself. Wasn’t that what Alayne told him when she kicked him out of the café? She’d been right, Jon didn’t know her at all.

“Still,” Sam shrugged, “I’m sure you didn’t expect it to turn out like this.”

Jon certainly had not. He tried to recall all of the things Alayne had said to him before, anything that might help explain what he was learning. Alayne said she was just passing through Cardiff, she said that she often had military officers in her home; she said she didn’t have a family that mattered.

“Her father,” Jon said trying to think of this like it was just another case that passed his desk, “Why wouldn’t he have her reported missing if she’d already gone missing from home? The other article said they suspected foul play, so the police must have already investigated. Why wouldn’t she be on the missing persons database?”

“I’ve no clue,” Sam admitted, as he began to flip through some more papers, “Perhaps her father told the police that she ran away on her own? If she is twenty then they could have decided that she just left and that they’d been wrong about the foul play. Maybe she called her father and told him not to look for her?”

That was all possible, but none of the options sat right with Jon. He knew he was missing something. There had to be something Alayne said that would put all the pieces together, but he just couldn’t remember.

And then, Jon still was trying to remember where he remembered the name Petyr Baelish. It wasn’t something Alayne told him; the memory felt much older than that. He went over to the gala photo again and picked it up, holding it in his hand as he tried to place Petyr Baelish’s face.

“I’m still not sure who Alayne’s mother is supposed to be,” Sam said absently, unaware that Jon wasn’t paying attention, “She doesn’t take Petyr Baelish’s name, which is odd. I thought maybe she took her mother’s, but I can’t find any record of another Stone connected to Baelish. There is a brother though, the son of Baelish’s deceased wife—“

Jon looked up, “Robin.”
“Yes,” Sam looked surprised, “That is the name. How did you know?”

“Alayne told me, she left her brother Robin,” Jon looked back to the picture, “What does that have to do with anything, though?”

“Not much, I guess.” Sam admitted, “It’s just so strange. There are a few articles that mention Petyr Baelish having a daughter, but none list her by name, but then there are at least a dozen that list Robin Baelish. I emailed a man, a caretaker of the Vale property in Grenoble, who was supposed to be sending me a picture of the Lyssa Arryn’s funeral. I think that maybe Alayne might be in the photo’s and that at least can give us a frame of reference to how long she’s been living with Petyr Baelish, but before that Baelish lived in London and absolutely no one knew he had a daughter.”

“London?” Jon asked, “When did he live there?”

“I’m not sure,” Sam went over to his laptop to find the information, interrupted when his phone beeped. He picked it up from the table, “It’s Gilly,” he said as he went to answer the text message, “Oh, Jon? Where is Rickon staying in Bristol again?”

“St. Mordane's Home for Boys,” Jon answered going over to grab Sam’s computer from him.

He typed Petyr Baelish’s name in the search bar, resting the laptop on his knee. Jon must have known him from somewhere. He didn’t recognize the photo at all, but the name was familiar, hadn’t that been someone Ned Stark mentioned working with while he was in London, before the assassination?

“I need to go pick up Gilly from work,” Sam said, looking up at Jon, “Can you stay here and watch Sammy? He’s sleeping so he should be fine. When I get back we can try to figure the rest of this out.”

Jon nodded, not really listening. He had no problem watching Sammy, before he was promoted at work and given more hours, he used to watch Sammy while Gilly and Sam were in school.

“Jon,” Sam then said when he reached the door. He sounded nervous when Jon looked up he saw that Sam couldn’t even meet his eyes, “Should we put a warrant on Alayne’s name? I don’t think she’s dangerous, but it sounds like she might be apart of something that could be. Would it be best to have her maybe detained for now, at least until we figure out if she okay or not?”
Jon hadn’t even thought about that. He thought about a police driving to the café, taking Alayne to the station in handcuffs to be put in a cell. They certainly could have her charged for possessing a false ID, but as of now, that was it. Jon thought about how skittish Alayne was around police, even if Jon just asked a police to follow her, she’d probably notice and bolt.

He shook his head, “Not yet. We don’t even know if she’s done anything wrong. She’s scared of something, Sam, if we put an officer on her she’ll just try to run.”

Sam nodded, “Okay, do you want me to say anything to her when I go to the café? Maybe I could invite her over and see if she’ll cooperate with us?”

“I don’t think that’s going to work,” Jon could just imagine how horrible that would turn out if Sam tried to talk to her about all of this. The moment someone contradicted the intricate lies Alayne painted she went on the defense. He wasn’t sure how he didn’t notice it before—it was so obvious now—but Alayne was living on that line between fight or flight. That reminded him of something, “Could you offer her a ride, though? To the hostel she’s staying at, if you’re comfortable doing that.”

Sam huffed a laugh, “I’m not afraid of her Jon, besides, I’ll have Gilly there to protect me.”

Jon nearly cracked a smile, suddenly so grateful that he had a friend like Sam in his life, “Thank you.”

“Keep researching,” Sam told him, “I’ll be back soon.”

Jon obeyed. He looked at his internet search for Baelish’s name and started scrolling through the recent news articles that came up. As Sam said, there were no articles about Baelish’s missing daughter.

Jon pulled up the most recent article and skimmed it over, settling on the photo at the bottom of the page. The article was about the newest club Petyr Baelish opened in Cannes last month. If Jon had guessed right, Alayne ran away long before that. Still, in the photo Baelish was shaking hands with some other man, standing in front of the busy club on opening night, looking like he had not a care in the world.

It disgusted him. Here, Alayne was sleeping on the street while Baelish was opening an overpriced club in the wealthiest part of Cannes. He wasn’t even looking for her, it didn’t even look like he cared that his daughter could have been dead or in a situation much worse.
Maybe that’s why Alayne ran away. Maybe her father didn’t care about her, maybe she didn’t even run away, maybe he just kicked her out of their home. That didn’t make sense though, Alayne had definitely run away—why else would she have the fake ID, and be so resistant to having her name in the police records?

Jon wondered why she even bothered staying in Cardiff in the first place. He hadn’t thought about it before, but now that he had some time to think, Jon realized how little sense that would make for someone who was so obviously afraid of being found. Alayne even said she planned on leaving the city the day Thorne arrested her, so why did she end up staying? Jon wasn’t so narcissistic to think it was because of him. There must have been something or someone tying Alayne to the city though.

In the other room, Jon heard Sammy start to cry. He’d forgotten that he was supposed to be watching the little boy. Jon shut the laptop and grabbed the stack of papers Sam brought out and took them with him as he went to Sammy’s room.

Sammy had mousy brown hair like his mother and big round cheeks. He was standing up in his bed, watching the door and Jon as he came into the room.

“Hey, Buddy,” Jon said dragging the chair in the corner of the room over by Sammy’s bed, “Your mum will be back soon, you ought to go to sleep before she gets here.”

Sammy sat back down on his bed, pulling his blanket in one arm and his stuffed bear in the other up to his chest. Jon’s lip quirked in a smile, and he grabbed the fallen stuffed wolf from the floor and back up to the bed.

Jon envied Sam sometimes. Jon wanted this life, not meaning he wanted Gilly and Sammy, because while they were great, they were so perfectly suited for Sam, that Jon couldn’t imagine a world where the three of them didn’t meet. What Jon envied was the family, something he never really had. The Starks were good to him, and Jon would always consider Robb, Sansa, Arya, Bran, and Rickon as a family, but he wasn’t so naïve to think it was the same relationship as it was for the five of them. Jon was always the outsider, even from the perspective of the younger ones who’d only ever known Jon in their lives. It was different for the older ones, especially for Robb and Sansa.

Robb was Jon’s best friend, but they’d both been twelve when he was fostered in York. They’d never really be brothers, even if Robb said that they were, Jon knew better. Even Sansa, who’d been five at the time, never treated Jon the way she did Robb. Maybe no one would say it, but they could all tell that there was a sense of otherness on Jon that made him incapable of fitting in with the Starks. He was a little bit damaged, with rough edges that couldn’t ever be polished to shine.

Maybe that’s what drew him to Alayne in the end. Like him, she had those rough edges that could only be acquired in the worst of ways. He thought she would understand him in ways that the Starks, Sam, Gilly, and even Ygritte never could. Jon could see it in those blue eyes, Alayne knew what being alone was, and true loneliness was hard to find in other people. It’s part of what makes it so isolating. You start to think you’re the only person in the world who’s been so alone, who’s been without a family, without friends, without anyone who cared about you. You start to think that you’re the only person who you can ever trust, and when that happens you enter into a cycle of
self-destruction. Loneliness was a wheel, always spinning and always crushing you underneath.

Jon had spent most of his teenage years trying to relearn the way he saw the world and teach himself that he was the only one who could really isolate himself from the rest of the world. When he met Alayne, he thought she was someone who could understand this, and maybe she could, but with that came problems Jon couldn’t even begin to understand.

Sammy was settling into sleep and so Jon picked up his papers, and using the light from the hall, seeping through the crack in the bedroom door, he began to read.

Jon was starting to slip into sleep, his eyes getting heavy as he read the form that covered Baelish’s previous work in France and his marriage to Lyssa Arryn, when he heard the door to the flat open. He looked over to Sammy, who was still sleeping and stood up, walking over to the lounge where Gilly and Sam were coming in.

Gilly yawned, stretching her arms over her head. She glanced over to Jon and then immediately looked away, face going blank as she stared at the floor. Jon was startled by her reaction; he and Gilly had always been friendly. Maybe she was embarrassed about what happened in the café earlier, or maybe she was just nervous now that she knew about Alayne, assuming Sam told her.

“I’m going to check on Sammy, and then get some sleep,” She said quickly, going over to kiss Sam’s cheek, and sparing Jon the very smallest of smiles, before scattering from the room, heading to where Sammy slept.

“She’s tired,” Sam explained with a pained expression. He must have also picked up on Gilly’s unusual reaction to Jon’s presence, “I told her about Alayne, well most of it anyway. She said Alayne didn’t tell her anything that would be useful. But did you find anything?”

Jon shook his head, “I know this man,” he pointed to the picture of Petyr Baelish on the coffee table. I can remember Ned Stark mentioning his name."

“Ned Stark worked in politics,” Sam shrugged his shoulders, “He probably mentioned a lot of influential people, and they could have been working in London around the same time.”

“No, there was something different about this.” Jon wished he could remember what it was; “I think they knew each other before then too. I remember the name from before Ned went to London.”

Sam sighed, falling into one of the chairs and looking at the mess of papers on the table. He ran his hand over his face.
“I think we should take a step back from this,” Sam said, “It’s late. Let’s give it the night to think about it and then in the morning we can look at it again.”

Jon wanted to argue, but he knew Sam was right. Whenever Jon got too into a case and was only finding dried up leads the best thing to do was take a break until his mind cleared. Between now and the morning nothing would change. He knew where Alayne was staying and where she’d be working, solving all of this tonight wasn’t going to make any difference.

And Jon really was exhausted. His eyes hurt to keep open and he had a pounding headache. If anything his memory of Petyr Baelish would clear up after some sleep, and as much as Jon hated the idea of stopping when he felt he was so close to an epiphany, he knew nothing was going to get solved tonight.

“We’ll finish this in the morning.” Jon agreed, rubbing his eyes, “Do you mind if I sleep here tonight?”

Sam shook his head, “Take the sofa, it’s yours.”

Jon tried to smile, but he really was too exhausted. When he did go to lie down, he fell asleep in minutes.

When Jon dreamed it always was of wolves. He dreamed of snowy mountains and places he’d never been to. He dreamed of running through the snow and he dreamed of a missing pack. Tonight when Jon dreamed though, he only saw blue eyes and a red mouth open wide and screaming.

Jon didn’t feel better rested in the morning. He felt dead to the world, looking over an article about Petyr Baelish with a cup of coffee in his hand.

“I think Baelish might be a dead end.” Jon shook his head, setting the printed copy of the article aside, “There’s nothing here about Alayne.”

“This is bigger than Alayne,” Sam argued as he took a seat across the kitchen table, going over to where Sammy was sitting to help feed him breakfast, “She’s just part of this Jon. I think we’re onto something big.”

Jon disagreed. The whole point of this was Alayne, at least for Jon. Nothing else right now really mattered.
“Where’s Gilly?” He asked, glancing at her empty spot at the table.

“She went to the library this morning. She’s got a paper due in her early childhood development class.” Sam shrugged.

Jon took another sip from his coffee, finishing the cup. He stood up and stretched his arms; “I want to figure this out before tonight if we can. I don’t know how much longer Alayne’s going to stay in the city. If you are right and she is a part of something dangerous then she’s safer here than she is anywhere else.”

Sam made a little sound of agreement, more focused on feeding Sammy his scrambled eggs.

“Did she anything when you picked up Gilly?” Jon asked. Sam said that Alayne didn’t tell Gilly anything important, but maybe Sam picked up on something that Gilly hadn’t.

Sam shook his head, “Oh, no, I didn’t even see Alayne.”

“Didn’t you see Alayne at the café?”

Sam shook his head, “No, Gilly said she was upset and left early.” He set the fork in his hand down, “I told you that last night.”

“No, you didn’t.” Jon answered, feeling a cold pit in his stomach.

Sam’s mouth fell open, “I meant too—“

Alayne wasn’t just upset, she was scared. And Jon knew something horrible had just happened.

“I’m going to go check on something.” Jon went towards the door, stopping for nothing, “I’ll be back later. See if you can find out anything else about Baelish and his time in London.”

Jon didn’t wait to hear Sam’s reply. He opened the door and went to his car, getting and driving towards the Peach.
He had to check to be sure that Alayne was safe. With all these new developments Jon just needed to be sure she wasn’t going to fall into old patterns.

He pulled up to the Peach after the twenty-minute drive, that took too long with morning traffic. He pushed the car door open and walked across the park over to the door he’d seen Alayne go through that night he dropped her off. There were a few people standing outside the hostel, up on a cement porch, smoking cigarettes and drinking from glass bottles. They watched Jon as he knocked on the door, but he paid them no mind. When the no one answered Jon knocked again.

The door opened a young woman with black curly hair, half dressed in an oversized shirt, opened the door, “Yes?”

She spoke with a Mediterranean accent, one eyebrow poised expectantly.

Jon cleared his throat, “Is Alayne here?”

The woman frowned, “Who?”

“Alayne Stone,” Jon said impatiently, “She’s got brown hair, blue eyes, tall.”

The woman continued to frown and then suddenly her eyes lit up, “Oh, her! You just missed her.”

Jon’s chest relaxed with relief, “She was here.”

“Was,” The woman agreed, “She left. She just stormed in here and grabbed her bag last night. Very rude actually, I was sleeping and she woke me up. She’s very loud.”

“Do you know where she went?” Jon asked, looking around the lot to see if she was still around somewhere.

“I never even spoke to her. I didn’t even know her name until now.” The woman crossed her arms, “And if I did know, I wouldn’t tell you.”

Jon turned away. This woman wasn’t going to be any help. He went over to the office in front of the hostel to see if he could get any information out of them. Jon had his badge in his car, if he showed them that, they’d probably show any records of Alayne they kept on file. When he pulled
the office door though, it was locked.

Jon turned away, storming over to his car and kicked the tire. This what he was afraid would happen. Alayne was gone. Jon could probably drive around the city and look for her, but he doubted he’d find her. He was about to get into his car and try anyway when his phone rang.

“What is it Sam,” Jon said, pressing the phone to his ear.

There was some rustling on the other side, “I found something about Petyr Baelish that I thought you would want to know.”

Jon pressed two of his fingers over the bridge of his nose, leaning against his car as he exhaled deeply. He couldn’t even think about Baelish right now. Jon wanted to hang up the phone and just drive, he wanted to shout at Sam for not telling him about Alayne sooner when could have actually done something, instead he growled out.

“What is it?”

“You asked me to look at what Petyr Baelish was doing when he was in London, well when I was doing that I came across something that I think you should know. Petyr worked in London for almost ten years, but he quit and relocated to Grenoble the day after the London riots.”

Jon felt a cold sweat on his back. He heard Sam, but it was like he was listening through a tunnel. The London riots had been where Sansa had died.

“There’s another thing, Jon,” Sam continued, “I finally got an email back from the groundskeeper at the Vale manor. He sent me a picture from Lyssa Arryn’s funeral—here I’m sending it to you right now.”

Jon heard his phone ding as it received a text of the photo. He could hear his own breathing, loud in his ears, only ever drowned out by the beating of his heart. Jon pulled the phone away and opened up the text.

The photo was taken of another picture, an old one with a water stain on the corner and slightly bent. Jon could still make it out. There was an open casket. Petyr Baelish stood near it his head tilted down like he was upset, holding the hand of a little boy who looked to be openly weeping. That must have been Robin Baelish. There were other people in the photo, but none of them mattered. Jon almost dropped his phone when he saw her.

She didn’t look any different from the way she did the day Jon said goodbye to her before she left
for London with Ned Stark. Her hair was brown instead of red, but it was still her. Standing on the outskirts of the photo, somewhere behind Petyr Baelish Jon saw a ghost.

“Jon?” Sam called over the other end.

He hung up the phone and got into his car. He had to be sure it was her.

He sped the entire way to his flat, nearly getting in an accident twice, but he couldn’t even care. Jon parked crookedly in the lot and ran to the building. When inside he rushed to his room, tearing open the drawer beside his bed and digging through it until he found the metal framed family photo. He hadn't looked at in years--Jon didn't realize how much he forgot about what his family looked like, or how long he'd been repressing thinking about them.

Jon pulled up the funeral photo on his phone to compare the two, holding his breath as he matched the faces of Alayne at the funeral and his dead sister.

It was a match.

Both the phone and the photo fall to the ground. Jon leaned back against the wall, sliding down to the ground. It wasn’t possible. It couldn’t be possible. Jon thought of every second he’d been with Alayne, every moment he looked at her and hadn’t seen what was right in front of him. And now she was gone.

His phone rang again and Jon felt numb as he answered it.

“It’s her,” Jon said like he was trying to convince himself it was true, “She’s not dead.”

“What?” Sam asked, “Is everything okay. You went to the hostel, didn’t you? Was Alayne there?”

Jon choked, “No. She’s gone—I don’t—when I got there, they said she left—But Sam I know her.”

“I’ll call the station and see if we can get some police to start looking for her,” Sam told him as if he hadn’t heard the last part of what Jon said, or maybe he just thought Jon was talking nonsense, “We’ll find her.”

How had Jon been so blind? Everything seemed so glaringly obvious now—it had to be her. They looked exactly alike, but how was that possible? Jon knew his foster sister died in the London riots years ago, but then there she was at Lyssa Arryn’s funeral.

And she’d come back to Jon’s life, even when Jon wasn’t looking for her, she found him. But where was she now?
“Don’t,” Jon said as he stumbled back to his feet, “I know where she is.”

Jon didn’t even remember the drive to Bristol. One moment he was in his flat and the next he was pulling into the car park in front of St. Mordane’s School for Boys.

Jon didn’t pray, but right now he was calling out to every higher power that existed that he was right.

He crossed the street over to the red brick school, following the sound of children playing. He went around the building over to the fenced-in playground that sat behind it. Among all those laughing children must have been Rickon, but Jon hardly processed that.

Across from it was an open field, a few picnic tables set up around there. On one of those benches sat a figure alone.

Jon wanted to run, but he could only walk, approaching slowly like she might disappear if he rushed. He so wanted to believe that she was real, but Jon had lived for so long thinking that she was dead, now when he saw her Jon wondered if he was seeing a ghost.

She must have heard him because she turned her head from the playground across the way, tears built up in her familiar blue eyes. They fell down her cheek, her full bottom lip wobbling. She looked at Jon, a whimper escaping her lips.

Jon couldn’t move, he couldn’t be sure that any of this was real, not yet.

His voice came out ragged when he said, “Sansa?”

Chapter End Notes

YAY!
I can't believe we've finally made it to this point! Alayne's identity is revealed!
This chapter was a real bitch to write honestly. Its crazy long and its also Jon's pov, which is not my fave to write in and so much hinged on this ch. so it was tough. I hope i did the drama of the situation justice.
Anyway, alot about the vale and littlefinger is revealed! its going to leave a lot of unanswered questions that i will be answering in future ch.
Also, cliffhanger! The next ch, should take place at the same spot this one ended at, with the possibility of a flashback ch. between now and then
I'd consider this the end of pt. 1 of a 2pt fic. Now Jon knows alayne is sansa they're going to start focusing on the other starks, also we'll finally start developing the relationship between them.

I hope ya'll like this ch. It is supremely unedited, but i wanted to get it out here today

Please comment and kudos! You are all amazing, and your comments make my day!
(also, i've changed the age Jon was when he went to live in york--i've fixed that in the last ch. but he was now fostered there at 12 and not ten, so sansa was 5 at the time, arya 3, bran probably a baby, rickon not yet born)
Sansa Stark died in the riots of London six years ago, but she remembered them like it was yesterday.

It was almost two months after Father was assassinated, and Sansa still was not allowed to go back home to York where the rest of her family was. Cersei Lannister told Sansa that her mother was not well and that she would be safer staying in the Lannister flats in Knightsbridge. All Sansa wanted to do was go home—Father was dead and Arya was missing, hadn’t been seen since the assassination. Cersei promised Sansa that they were looking for her, but Sansa wasn’t sure that she believed that anymore.

The day of the riots, a maid was the one who woke Sansa up, shaking her shoulder and telling her to get dressed. There would be an announcement in Parliament and they all should be there to hear it. No one needed to wake Sansa up though, she hadn’t gotten any sleep.

The day before had been Joffery’s fourteenth birthday celebration, hosted in Kensington Gardens. Sansa could still remember how purple his face looked when he choked on his cake. All night, when she closed her eyes, she only saw Joffery’s purple face and wormy lips. She imagined his body decomposing, and worms coming out of his eye sockets and his skin tearing like tissue paper. When the maid came into her room and told Sansa to get up, she couldn’t have been more thankful.

She thought that maybe the police had come back to the flat to talk to Alayne again. They’d already spoke to her at Kensington, when the paramedics came to collect Joffery’s body, prying him away from Cersei Lannister, who’d clutched him in her arms.

Sansa had been so afraid when they questioned her that all she could do was cry. All the police and paramedics—it reminded her of when Father was killed. She ran to hide somewhere in the gardens, only found later by one of the officers who drove her back to the flats in Knightsbridge and handed her over to Jaime Lannister, who’d already been waiting there with Myrcella and Tommen. Cersei was still with Joffery, wherever that was.

He put his hand on Sansa’s shoulder and guided her into the flat. He looked tired, his hand dragging across his face as he told Sansa that she should get some sleep. Sansa couldn’t sleep though, and when she went to her room she pulled a single letter from under her pillow and folded it open. This was the last of the things she had from father. She’d grabbed it from Father’s office in parliament—the rest had been either tossed or sent back to York. There used to be several other papers, but Cersei found them one night, demanding if Sansa had read them. Cersie had tossed them into the fire soon after, her face contorted in rage.

Sansa didn’t understand why Cersei did that. She remembered shouting at her, and then she remembered Tyrion Lannister, Cersei younger brother, taking Sansa out of the room and telling her that it was best if she stayed out of Cersei’s way for a while. Sansa didn’t even know what the letters said. She’d opened them once, but none of it made any sense to her, and now they were all gone, save for one, that Cersei must have missed when she grabbed the others to toss in the fireplace.

The letter was the last things Sansa had to remember her father by though, and while it was not the same as hearing his voice, Sansa liked to trace her fingers over the handwritten script on the folded
up paper. At night when she wanted to remember him, she did just that.

When the maid woke her up the morning of the riots, Sansa dressed in her prettiest dress. It was a dark purple, bought by Cersei in a shop in Chelsea. Cersei thought it would make Sansa happier after Father died, it hadn’t, but she thought Cersei might like seeing her in it now—considering everything that had happened the day before.

Myrcella and Tommen had already left Knightsbridge earlier that morning and so a car came to pick Sansa up. The maid told Sansa that she would meet up with everyone else when she got to Parliament, and that she should hurry before the announcement was made.

Alayne sat in the back of the black car, folding her hands in her lap as they drove through the city. She recognized the driver vaguely as Joffery’s former chauffeur. He did not look to be in mourning, Sansa could hardly find fault in that.

Once, Sansa thought she was going to marry Joffery. She’d been so certain that’s why father took her to London with him—to meet Joffery and his family. They were descended from a royal line in Italy and could trace their lineage back hundreds of years. Sansa wanted to be just like them, but then sometime during her stay, Joffery wasn’t the shining golden haired prince she thought him to be.

It only got worse after Father was killed. Joffery would pinch Sansa and leave bruises, he’d push her against the wall when he walked by her in the halls, and the worst were the things he would say. He’d tell Sansa about how bodies decomposed and how her father would look like a corpse by now, stinking of rotten skin and pussing flesh.

Sansa supposed Joffery would start to look like that now too.

The drive was slow. There were crowds of people in the streets and cars were stacked bumper to bumper. People would walk right in front of the car, sometimes banging on the windows as they passed and frightening Sansa. They carried picket signs in their hands and shouted at each other—it was impossible to drive any faster than a slow crawl.

Sansa knew where they were though; she looked out the window of the car and started to recognize the buildings. They were close to parliament, but the closer they got, the thicker the crowds became. At this rate, Sansa would miss the announcement.

“We’re nearby,” Sansa told the driver, leaning over to the driver’s seat to speak, “I think I know my way from here.”

“We’ll get there soon.” The driver answered in a gruff voice, dismissing Sansa completely.

She looked at the clock on the dash of the car, the Lannister’s maid had told her to be at Parliament by the hour, there wasn’t much time left.

“I can walk,” Sansa unbuckled her seatbelt. She didn’t want to be late. Cersei Lannister would already be so upset, Sansa didn’t want that to turn into anger directed at her if she were late, “It’s
not far, I really don’t want to be late.”

The driver sighed and turned his signal on as he started to push through the crowd and pull over into a spot on the side of the road, “Well, come on,” he said as he stopped the car, “Let’s get out.”

Sansa was glad she wouldn’t have to walk alone. She didn’t mind having to do so if it was really necessary, but with the crowds all around, she was afraid she’d get lost in the masses.

Sansa waited for the driver to get out of the car, staying on the curb of the street until he joined her. He leads the way towards Parliament and Sansa followed, trying to weave around the bodies pressing against her, apologizing as she elbowed her way through them. She could still see the top of the driver’s head not far from her. But the crowd was getting rowdier. At some point, she lost view of the driver completely, but Sansa could see that she wasn’t more than a few steps away from the stairs leading to Parliament. She tried to push through, ignoring all the shouting voices around her. Part of her wondered why everyone was so upset, and what was happening. Another part of her wished she just stayed in the car, even if she got in trouble for missing the announcement.

Sansa felt something knock against her head—one of those signs that people were holding. She held a hand to the back of her scalp and turned to see who’d done it. She saw a man holding a sign that read *Death to Imperialists,* she looked around and saw another that said *Don’t feed us to the Lions,* with a picture of Tywin Lannister, the Lannister Patriarch, underneath.

Sansa turned around, she thought it was more than time to get out of this crowd, which was very quickly turning into a protest, and get inside parliament.

It was then that she heard the first explosion.

It knocked her to the ground. Sansa felt someone fall on top of her, and she started to try and push them off in an attempt to get up. Her ears were ringing, and all around she could just hear screams. Sansa felt blood trickle down from her scalp where her head hit the ground in the fall. She pressed her hand against it as she stumbled to her feet, trying to stay standing as she was pushed and pulled by the crowd that was running through the street. Sansa saw the steps of parliament through her fuzzy vision. She saw someone climbing down the steps, almost as if they were coming towards her. Then there was another loud boom, and Sansa fell, her head cracking against the steps. She didn’t get up again.

The next time she opened her eyes, Petyr Baelish was standing before her, and she was Alayne.

Alayne too the 3am train to Bristol, her bag clutched to her chest as she curled up on her seat looking out the dark window. She counted the lights as the train passed the by, eventually resting her head against the window and closing her eyes.

She tried to picture that last happy memory she had of Jon. The way he smiled at Alayne when he saw her approaching his table at Mole’s Town before everything went to hell.

Alayne didn’t blame Gilly for any of that, Alayne’s secrets were bound to spill eventually, and it
was best that she left before they did. She just wished that it hadn’t been so soon. But Alayne was
doing the right thing, leaving before Jon figured out that Alayne wasn’t Alayne, and before she
screwed up his life more than she already did.

After today, Alayne would take what little money she’d have left and get back to Liverpool. From
there she’d try to get the furthest away from her past that she could.

But before all that, Alayne had to see Rickon. She couldn’t leave until after she knew he was okay.
It was the selfish part of her that bought the ticket to Bristol when she knew it was better if she left
for the other side of the country. But Alayne was selfish, and she couldn’t leave just yet.

After Jon left Mole’s Town, Alayne had burst into tears. She remembered how panicked Gilly had
been watching her. Already, Alayne knew that tonight was going to be her last night in Cardiff, and
but she still had to find out where Rickon was before she left.

It was so easy to tell Gilly the bare minimum of the truth. After keeping all those secrets locked
away for so long, it just came pouring out of Alayne as soon as she opened her mouth.

“I need to leave the city,” Alayne told Gilly, clutching her arm, “My father is looking for me—he
can’t find me.”

Gilly just nodded her head, going over to the register and taking enough pounds out for a train
ticket, “I know a thing or two about bad fathers,” she said as she placed the money in Alayne’s
hands, “If you think you need to go then go.”

Alayne shook her head, “Jon can’t find out, about any of this. He’ll just do something stupid, you
have to promise you won’t tell him anything, Gilly.”

“I won’t tell no one,” Gilly promised, starting to look more alarmed, “But Jon would understand if
you told him. He could help you.”

That wasn’t true. No one could help Alayne, not anymore. The only person who could help her
was herself.

“I need you to do one more thing for me,” Alayne said, “I need you to ask Jon where his brother
is.”

Gilly frowned, taking a step back, “Why do you need to know about that?”

“Please,” Alayne realized how desperate she sounded, like a half-starved dog begging for scraps, “I
can’t explain it but I need to see him before I go.”

Gilly had to step away from Alayne. Walking across the room and saying something under her breath. She was torn to helping Alayne flee her abusive father and then her friendship with Jon.

“Why do you have to see his brother?” Gilly asked turning back around. It was more of a demand than anything, asking why Gilly should betray Jon for Alayne.

“I can’t tell you,” Alayne’s voice broke, “Please, I just—I know him, Jon’s brother. I just have to see him before I leave. I need to know that he’s okay.”

Gilly shut her eyes, her face screwed up as she continued her inner debate. Finally, she took her phone out of her apron.

“He can’t know I asked,” Alayne said feebly, as she watched Gilly send the text.

“He won’t,” Gilly stared at the phone as she waited for the response, looking for frustrated than anything. Alayne wished she could give her satisfying answers, but she couldn’t. The phone dinged and Gilly read, “St. Mordane’s School for Boys, I think that’s somewhere in Bristol.”

“I’ll find it,” Alayne picked herself up and untied her apron as she went to the café door, she stopped and turned to Gilly, “Thank you, Gilly.”

Gilly nodded her head, “If you don’t plan on staying you should leave, Sam’s on his way to get me—but Alayne. You don’t have to go, Sam and Jon could help you.”

Alayne shook her head, “No, they can’t.”

Alayne went to the Peach next, running to her room and grabbing her things from under her bunk. She heard her roommate, a woman named Shae, mutter something in her sleep, telling Alayne to be quiet, but that was all she heard before she was out the door, heading to the train station.

The train to Bristol stopped with a jolt. Alayne picked her bag up and started to file out of the train with the other stray passengers. The station wasn’t busy, Alayne found her way out of it easily and
onto the street, stopping once when she passed a city map on her way out.

“Excuse me,” She asked one of the station employees as they walked by her, “Do you know where St. Mordane’s School for Boys is?”

At night, with the dim streetlights and empty roads, the city felt like it was waiting. Just like her, it was holding its breath.

Alayne found the St. Mordane’s church easily and a few blocks away was the School for Boys. A few of the homeless already took up residence sleeping on the church steps and so Alayne passed them by, going over to the park across a dirty field from the School for Boys. She took a seat on one of the picnic benches there, eventually setting her backpack down and laying down to rest her head on it.

Alayne hoped that Jon was safe now—she hoped that now that she was gone he could be happy again. She thought of all those terrible things she said to him when she pushed him out of the café. He’d hate her, but she hoped that she wounded his pride enough so that he would not come looking for her again. Eventually, he would forget that Alayne Stone ever existed, just as he’d done for the ghost she used to be.

Hours passed and sleep evaded her, eventually, Alayne closed her eyes and fell in a fitful dream about snarling wolves fighting bloody lions. Her dreams turned into memories as Alayne saw Joffery’s purple face and worms crawling through his rotted teeth—and then Alayne saw Ned Stark, standing at a podium with a red blossomed on his chest and Alayne heard the sound of a gun.

She awoke to the sound of laughing children. Alayne pushed herself up from the bench and looked across the yellow grass field to the gated playground. She watched as they ran around a climbing frame and slides as she tried to track the faces of each and every one of them.

Eventually, she saw him. Alayne felt unspilt tears in her eyes, as she spotted Rickon Stark standing with his back to the wall of St. Mordane’s watching the other children with an uninterested gaze. He looked so much like Robb did at that age that Alayne thought she could be looking at a picture. They had the same curly red-brown hair and blue eyes, the same gangly limbs and freckled skin. But Rickon also had a dark bruise around his eye, and Alayne could just make out the red broken skin of his knuckles. Rickon curled his lip in a sneer when a group of kids got near him, and they scattered away. He was not the little boy Alayne remembered playing with.

And then her tears fell because while Alayne had been off in France, living in a mansion and going to parties, Rickon had been surviving on his own. All those times Alayne told herself that her only brother was Robin, and every time she made herself forget her family name, Rickon had suffered for it. Had far had Alayne gone trying to protect herself? Maybe if she found Rickon sooner she could have done something for him—Jon was trying to help his family, but what had Alayne ever done for anybody other than herself?

Sansa Stark died in London, but Alayne was never alive, to begin with. She was just a ghost, the shell of something someone else wanted her to be. Alayne had never been a person, just a thing, the puppet of a man who said he would protect her, but never really meant to. But if Alayne wasn’t Alayne, then who was she left to be?
She heard footsteps coming up to the picnic table. Alayne’s head turned to see who’d come up to her—if it was a policeman who was going to tell her to leave or some family who wanted the table for themselves. Instead, she saw Jon.

He looked at her with wide eyes twisted almost in horror like he was seeing a ghost. Alayne looked at him, and she knew that she couldn’t lie anymore, she started to sob. She wanted her brothers back, she wanted her family back. Alayne wanted Jon to hold her in his arms and tell her that things were going to be all right and that they were going to keep Rickon safe. She didn’t want to be Alayne anymore.

Then Jon’s voice came out as a ragged whisper, “Sansa?”

Chapter End Notes

So here’s Sansa’s ch. of events. I literally left it on the same cliffhanger, i’m sorry, buuut the next ch will be out tonight if that helps.

I love Gilly, she is amazing and the definition of female camaraderie. Like Alayne, she too has experience with horrible fathers, which is why she is so willing to lie to Jon and Sam to help Alayne out.

Fun fact: Jon is the first person in this fic to call Sansa by her actual name, which i think is kinda cool.

So we get some events of the London riots, and Joff’s birthday/deathday, we also get a little insight on Cersei, who will be somewhat featured in ch. to come.

Also shae makes a guest apparence bc i love her too.

And thank you for your amazing comments on the last ch! I wasn't sure how i felt about that one, so i'm so glad that ya'll seemed to like it! I'm always so overwhelmed by the reception this fic has gotten, i literally do not deserve it, you are all perfect.
That’s all it took for the last shred of her resolve to crumble.

“Sansa?”

She burst out into tears, tearing herself from the bench and running into his arms.

“Jon.” She breathed, burying her face in his chest, as she felt his arms come to circle around her, holding her so tight, like thought she might disappear if he let go.

“You know me,” and for the first time since she died in London, she was Sansa again, “It’s me—I’m not Alayne, I’m so sorry—I’m so sorry!”

She heard Jon’s soft gasp and felt him bury his hand in her hair, the other still holding her around the waist, his fingers digging into her skin as he held tighter.

“It’s really you,” He breathed, pulling back ever so slightly to look at Sansa’s face. His eyes were wet, red. He brought one hand up to Sansa’s face, hesitating like he was afraid to touch, “This entire time it’s been you—why didn’t you say something, Sansa? I thought you were dead.”

Sansa buried her face again in Jon’s shirt, which she kept grasped in her hands. She wouldn’t let go, not yet. She just wanted to stay in this moment for a little while longer, away from questions and the problems of the world. But Jon was already asking questions, and Alayne owed him answers.

Sansa let go of Jon and took a step away, her knees hit the picnic bench and she let herself sit down, holding her head in her hands. She tried to take several deep breaths, clearing her head from all the emotions plaguing it.

Jon followed her to the bench, kneeling down on the ground in front of her and pulling her hands away from her face.
Sansa shook her head and took them back, “I’m so sorry, Jon.”

“Don’t apologize,” Jon plead, “Sansa, just tell me. Why didn’t you tell me it was you, where have you been? In Grenoble with Petyr Baelish?”

Sansa wrapped her arms around her middle. Jon knew about Petyr. Of all the things she wanted to keep hidden from him, this was the most painful, the one she always wanted to keep a secret no matter what. Jon shouldn’t know about those things—the things Sansa gave to Petyr to keep herself safe…

“Please don’t ask me that right now, Jon,” Sansa begged him, shutting her eyes.

Sansa could hear Jon breathing in deeply, she was afraid he would push her, make her tell him all her secrets at once, but he didn’t. Jon stood up and held out his hand, helping Sansa off the bench.

“Alright,” Jon said, looking unhappy to be saying so, “Not right now. Let’s go to my car, we’ll get a hotel room, you can get some rest. You can explain everything when you’re ready.”

Sansa shook her head, looking over to the playground, “No, Rickon—“

Jon pulled her forward by the hand, “We’ll see him tomorrow. I promise. Come on, Sansa, please let’s just go somewhere we can talk.”

Jon must have been afraid that Sansa would run again, because he held onto her hand until they reached his car, only letting go so that he could drive. Sansa kept her arms wrapped around herself. She was still so caught up in her own head, afraid that the next time Jon spoke he would call her Alayne and forget about her again. She tried to think clearly, she tried to think about what was important.

They reached a hotel, and Jon went inside to get them a room. He asked Sansa to come inside with him, but she asked to wait in the car. Jon looked like he was going to argue, but he didn’t. Somehow Jon knew that he still couldn’t push her yet. Sansa needed a few minutes alone to really think about what she was about to do.

If she told Jon about Petyr, she couldn’t tell him everything. There were things he didn’t need to know, things Sansa didn’t want him to know. He wouldn’t look at her the same if he knew how much of herself she gave up in the Vale—how she abandoned her family and mother and father. Sansa had betrayed them all; let Jon think he was alone while he tried to carry the little that was left
of their family.

Sansa had to think about what she was willing to tell him, and she had to think about exactly how much Jon would demand to know. Already he knew about Petyr, Sansa just had to find out how much that was.

Jon came back to the car and showed Sansa to the room. He went to grab her hand, put Sansa pulled it away. She’d been weak long enough. Sansa was not made of porcelain, she was made of steel.

“How did you know?” Sansa asked as they stepped into the hotel room, “That I—that I was me?”

Jon let out a loud sigh, raking his hand through his hair. He looked exhausted and Sansa felt even guiltier. She wondered if he’d got any sleep the night before, or how long he looked for her until finding her in Bristol. She certainly hadn’t made things easy for him.

Jon sat down on the edge of the bed, “It was Sam. I don’t know why I didn’t realize it sooner, but he found a photo of you at Lyssa Arryn’s funeral. You looked just like you did before you left for London,” Jon almost laughed as he thought about it, then that near smile faded as he looked to where Sansa stood, “I know you don’t want to talk about it, but can you at least tell me why you didn’t say anything? All those times we spoke, why did you think you couldn’t tell me the truth?”

Sansa closed her eyes, “I’m so tired, Jon,” she said after a while, “Can I just rest for a little while, I’ll tell you everything, I promise, but I just…”

Jon nodded his head, he understood, at least a little bit.

Sansa tried to smile. She wanted to be so happy that Jon finally knew who she was, but Sansa knew better than to think that this meant she was done hiding. It would only be harder now to protect Jon from everything else. Sansa knew Jon wouldn’t stop until he had the answers he was looking for, Sansa could only keep them from him for so long.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Sansa said to him, looking towards the washroom door.

“Yeah, of course,” Jon said staying on the bed, “take your time.”

Alone in the washroom, Sansa quickly undressed and stepped into the shower. As the cold water poured over her body, she realized that she could not leave the room until she knew what she could
Sansa decided that she could tell Jon that Petyr raised her in the Vale after the riots. She would say that she pretended to be his daughter—Jon must have known that much already so Sansa couldn’t lie about that. She would tell him that Cersei Lannister wanted Sansa Stark dead, and that she’d been the one to identify the false body and tell the world that she was. He would need to know that much, to understand why Sansa lied for so long. Sansa hadn’t thought of a lie yet for why she left the Vale. Jon would want to know why Sansa ran away from Petyr, and what he’d done to her to make her run. But telling him why she ran would mean she would have to explain all the times she hadn’t. She would have to explain why it took her so long to decide that she couldn’t live there anymore. He’d be disappointed when he learned the truth—he’d think Sansa weak and stupid for not realizing how Petyr had been using her all those years.

Getting out of the shower, Sansa wrapped herself in a towel. She combed her fingers through her hair, and looked at herself in the mirror. She’d seen herself as Alayne for so long that she’d forgot which parts of her were Sansa. She had Tully blue eyes, the same as her mother—not the mother Petyr told her she had, but the real one who raised her in York. She had freckles across her nose just like Robb had, and at the roots of Sansa’s hair, she could see where the red was starting to grow in. She must have noticed it before, but this was the first time that Sansa thought of it as her own hair, and this being its true color.

She’d need to buy some dye soon. Sansa couldn’t let it grow out for much longer. With red hair she might look like all those pictures of her when she was younger—it would make it easier for people to recognize her and Sansa couldn’t have that.

Dressed back in her old clothes, Sansa stepped back into the room, watching how Jon sat up when heard the door open. He’d been on his phone, just ending a call.

“IT was Sam,” Jon explained, setting the phone beside him, “He wanted to know what happened.”

“You didn’t tell him about me,” Sansa felt her stomach twist, “Did you?”

Jon’s face was troubled, but he shook his head, “I told him I couldn’t talk right now, but that I’d explain it all later. He was the one who found out everything about you.”

Not everything, Sansa hoped.

She pulled up the chair that sat against the wall and brought it over beside the bed, sitting down. Sansa took in a deep breath, folding her hands in her lap.

“Okay,” she said, “I’m ready to tell you.”
Jon moved to sit closer so that his knees almost knocked against hers. “I’m listening.”

Sansa took in another deep breath, wondering where she should start. Jon wanted to know why she lied about being Alayne, that felt like the most important question and it was also the one Sansa felt most comfortable revealing.

“The riots in London,” Sansa started, “I didn’t die in them.”

Jon gave a short, sharp, and bitter laugh, “I can see that.”

Sansa shook her head, “No, Jon, I didn’t die in the riots, but Cersei Lannister said I did. She wanted me dead, Jon. If I hadn’t disappeared in the riots, she would have killed me outside of parliament, just like Father.”

Jon sat back, his brows drawing together, “Cersei Lannister? The PM’s daughter? Sansa, why would she want you dead?”

“I’ve no idea,” Sansa honestly said, “But, Jon, she’s the one who identified my body. She knew it wasn’t me, but she let the world believe I was dead anyway. Why do you think she would have done that?”

Jon didn’t have an answer, he shook his head and tried to come up with one anyway, “Maybe she made a mistake, everything that happened that day was so chaotic, and they said that you’d been trampled—she could have thought it was you.”

“Cersei is not that stupid,” Sansa told him, “She knew that it wasn’t me, but she let everyone believe I was dead anyway, because she wanted me to be dead. As long as the world didn’t think Sansa Stark existed I wasn’t a problem for her. That’s all I know Jon, I wish I had a better answer. I didn’t tell you who I was, because I didn’t want to be Sansa if it meant putting you and myself in danger. Being Alayne was safer.”

“I wouldn’t have told anyone if you were afraid that somehow Cersei Lannister would have found out about you,” Jon was frustrated, apparently not satisfied with Sansa’s answer, “You didn’t have to lie to me.”

“I didn’t know what else to do,” Sansa put her head in her hands, as if she was about to start crying, “I’m sorry, I wanted to tell you the truth, but I was afraid.”
Jon’s hand was carefully put on Sansa’s knee. He leaned forward, “No, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you upset—I understand that you were afraid. I don’t even know what I would have done in that situation.”

He sounded so guilty. Sansa hated herself. With her face covered, she closed her eyes, letting out a shallow breathe. She couldn’t even successfully tell the truth without slipping in a lie somewhere.

Sansa pulled her hands away, acting as if she had wiped tears from her eyes before covering Jon’s hand that was on her knee still, with her own.

“Petyr Baelish was the one who saved me,” Sansa continued with the story, trying to remember the events of the riots correctly. She didn’t remember much of them; mostly only what Petyr told her what happened after she awoke in the Vale. “He must have known what Cersei planned to do, because he was looking for me outside Parliament when the first explosions went off. I knocked my head against the steps outside, when he found me. I don’t really remember what happened, but he put me in a car and then out of the city. I was in and out of consciousness for a lot of it, but when I finally did wake up, I was in France, in the Vale.”

Jon seemed to slowly begin to understand, “Sam said that Petyr Baelish called himself your father.”

Sansa nodded, “It was a lie to explain why he suddenly had a young girl living with him. He said I was his bastard daughter who he’d only recently been reunited with. The lie meant that I could have a relatively normal life still without any danger that Cersei would find me.”

Jon opened his mouth to say something, but then shut it as he stood up, walking around Sansa’s chair and crossing the room. Sansa was afraid to turn around, wondering how angry he must be at her for hiding all of this for so long.

“Okay,” Jon said slowly, and Sansa finally turned in her chair to watch him. He was facing her, one hand on the back of his neck. “Then what changed? What made you think it was safe to be Sansa again?”

Sansa hadn’t expected him to phrase the question like that. It demanded a different sort of answer, and one she wasn’t prepared for. Nothing about being Sansa was safe yet.

She thought about everything that had happened in the last six days, and how in that short of a time so much had happened.
“I don’t know,” Sansa breathed, the words barely louder than a whisper. She truly did not know. “I just—when I saw Rickon, when I saw what was left of our family, I just couldn’t keep running anymore.”

“God, Sansa, you never had to run,” Jon slid his hand down his face, “I could have protected you. I wish you just told me at the start who you were. I could have kept you safe, I could have been the one to protect you from Cersei.”

Sansa made a noise that was a cross between a laugh and a sob, “You wouldn’t have. Not when I was younger. I was so terrible to you, Jon. I couldn’t have ever asked you to help me.”

“You wouldn’t have had to ask,” Jon said walking up to Alayne and kneeling by her side, just as he’d done in the park, “If I’d just known you were still alive I would have done everything I could to help you.”

Sansa had to look away. Jon was too kind, it hurt so much to be around someone who was just so honest. Everything he said was dripping with truths that Sansa couldn’t think about. Jon still didn’t understand that she’d only been protecting him by pretending to be Alayne. He thought he could beat Cersei, but he couldn’t, not even Petyr could do that.

Sansa stood up and walked away from Jon, going over to the window and looking down onto the street below, and the rain that began to steadily fall, “It doesn’t matter anymore. I’m here now. I want to see Rickon, Jon. I saw him in that playground and he looked so different. He looks just like Robb did, they could be twins.”

“We’ll see him tomorrow,” Jon said, watching Sansa as she traced the raindrops that slid down the window, “I’ve scheduled a meeting with him at St. Mordane’s. It’ll be supervised, but you can talk to him. You can tell him who you are.”

Sansa shook her head, “No, no one else can know.”

“Sansa—”

“No, Jon,” Sansa turned to face him, her hands dropping to her sides, “I’m not going to take anymore risks. You’re the only one that can know about me, but we can’t tell Rickon. He probably doesn’t even remember me, it wouldn’t even matter.”
Jon stood up, walking over to her, “Of course he’ll remember you Sansa, he’s your brother. How couldn’t he remember?”

“You didn’t.”

The words hung between them, and Sansa wished she could take them back and swallow them. She shouldn’t have said that. It made her sound angry when she wasn’t. Sansa knew she couldn’t blame Jon for not knowing that Alayne had been her, but part of Sansa was hurt that he couldn’t somehow tell who she was anyway. They’d grown up together for six years, and it took the same amount of time for Jon to forget her face.

Sansa opened her mouth, “I didn’t mean it like that,” she said quickly, shaking her head, “I know that you thought I was dead, I wouldn’t expect you to see someone with a different name and think otherwise.”

“No,” Jon took a step back, “You’re right. I didn’t remember you, I should have though. The moment I saw you in the station I should have been able to tell who you were. When I heard that you died in the riots part of me stopped thinking about you entirely, I did the same with Robb, thinking about it hurt so much. The one photo I had of all of us, I kept buried in the bottom of a drawer. If I looked at it more, I would probably have recognized you.”

“None of that’s your fault,” Alayne grabbed Jon’s hand and made him look at her, “It’s not like I was much better. At least you’ve been trying to look after Rickon all this time; I’ve only been looking after myself. I’ve been so selfish. I’m not going to be that way anymore—I’m going to help you. We’re going to get Rickon back Jon, we’re going to get our family back.”

Chapter End Notes

as promised, the next ch.
If everyone thought that it was going to be smooth sailing for sansa from here, you were wrong. She'd still dealing with some issues that come with being raised by a manipulative sociopath for a few years and she'll need to work through them. Jon is taking things reasonably well i’d say, he's definitely frustrated with sansa for lying still, and he doesn't really understand her reasoning for it just yet. He's taking it
in stride though.
Next ch, we'll get to see Rickon! I'm pretty excited to write him and all that's going to go into his contribution to the story. Sansa's got a clear cut goal now, and she's not going to go anywhere until she's accomplished it.

I hope you guys enjoyed reading this ch.! Next one should be out tommorow (just in time for the season 7 finale!!!) Please kudos and comment!!
Jon was watching Sansa sleep. He still couldn’t believe that she was here in front of him, it was like some dream and Jon was so certain he’d wake up from it any minute and she’d be gone again.

Jon hardly slept because of that fear. There was only one bed in the hotel room he rented, and while Sansa didn’t seem bothered by the idea of sharing, Jon was afraid of getting too close. She wasn’t Alayne anymore, this was Sansa, Jon had to remind himself of that one or two times, especially when Sansa was telling him about why she’d lied about her identity for near a week.

She was still lying to him, he could read it on her face, in the moments where her eyes never met his.

There were things that Sansa wasn’t telling him, and Jon knew that he couldn’t push her for those answers just yet, but he couldn’t exactly wait for her to be ready either. Sansa couldn’t have understood what she’d been wrapped up in. She was too close to the problem, convinced that there were enemies in every shadow. Whatever she wasn’t telling him, Jon needed to find it out for himself, it was the only way he could protect her.

Jon answered his phone on the first ring, “Have you found anything new?”

Sam was moving around on the other end, sorting through something, “Not much, Petyr Baelish seems to have covered his tracks fairly well. He’s traveled a lot in the past year, last I could find he was in Liverpool, but I haven’t found much else.”

Jon had expected as much, still, he was frustrated. This all would be so much easier if Sansa just told him the truth. She said she was afraid of Cersei Lannister, but nothing she said made sense. Why would Cersei Lannister want a twelve-year-old girl dead? And why, after six years, would she still be looking for her?

“What’s this about, Jon? You said you couldn’t tell me, but it would be much easier to research if I knew what exactly I was looking for.”

Jon knew Sam was right. He looked over to Sansa; she was curled on her side, still fast asleep. Jon stood up and walked across the room, going over to the adjacent hall beside the room, “It’s really complicated, Sam.” He warned, “Alayne, she wasn’t Alayne at all—there is no Alayne.”

“We already knew that, didn’t we?” Sam asked, “You found her, didn’t you? What did you find out
about her?"

Jon sucked in a breath. Sansa had asked him not to tell anyone about her, but if she wasn’t going to
tell him the truth, Jon needed Sam to help him figure it out for himself, “I did find her,” Jon
admitted, “She was in Bristol. I’ll tell you everything about it at the station tomorrow, but I can’t
talk about it right now. But I need you to look something up for me.”

“What is it?”

“Cersei Lannister, the PM’s daughter—just anything you can find on her that could be
incriminating. Traffic tickets, misdemeanors, anything.”

“I’ll look,” Sam said, “But don’t be sure that I’ll find anything. Someone like that will probably
have a clean record.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jon rubbed his temples. The fact that he knew that made it all the more confusing
as to why Sansa thought Cersei wanted her dead.

“I should go,” Sam said, “I’ve got to leave for classes soon. I’ll call you when I have an update.”

Jon hung up the phone and reentered the room. He wished Sansa would just trust him enough to be
honest. If she was he could actually protect her from all the things she was afraid of instead of
wasting time trying to find all the missing pieces she had scattered around.

“Jon?” Sansa asked, sitting up in the bed, the light from the window hitting her face and making
her look angelic, “Where did you go?”

He stuffed his hands in his pockets so that he wouldn’t reach out for her, “Just a call from the
station, I stepped out to take it. I didn’t want to wake you.”

Sansa ran a hand through her dark hair. In the proper light, Jon could see the red roots in her hair—
he wasn’t sure why he never noticed them before, he hadn’t been looking. He should have been.

“Can we see Rickon yet?” She asked getting up from the bed.
Jon shook his head, “My appointment with St. Mordane’s is at twelve; we’ve still got a few hours until then.”

Sansa pursed her lips, sitting on the edge of the bed. She looked away, thoughtfully.

“I missed you, you know.” She finally said when she looked up, “When I was away, I thought about all of you, especially in the first years.”

Jon hated the way she said that. He wanted to yell that she never went away, she was taken. Petyr Baelish stole Sansa from her family, making her assume a fake identity for some sick game he played. Jon had thought about this much during the night while Sansa slept, trying to piece together every hint that she said. The more he thought about it, the angrier he became.

“I missed you too,” Jon told her, trying to not let his frustration show.

Sansa lips ticked up in a smile, “I miss Ghost too. When you told me about him all I wanted was to see him again. I remember how you snuck him up into your room at our home in York that one time.”

Jon laughed as he remembered the incident Sansa referred to. He’d forgotten about that, it was so long ago. Jon must have been fifteen when it happened, and Ghost was still just a puppy.

“Your mother caught me, I think she lectured me for hours about bringing a dog into the house,” Jon shook his head, “I was afraid she was going to tell Ned to send me back to the foster home.”

Sansa shook her head, frowning, “He wouldn’t have. Father thought of you as a son, Jon. Besides, if you ever left Arya would have left too. I think she threatened Mother with that once, saying that she planned on running away with you when Mother said she couldn’t join the wrestling team.”

“Father let her join anyway,” Jon laughed, he’d forgotten about that too, “I remember that. We all went to her first match. You were so angry that day. I remember you were just sulking in the stands the entire time.”

Sansa looked at the floor, curling her toes in the carpet, “Well, I was stupid then. I thought that people would make fun of me if my sister were on the wrestling team. She was the only girl at the school who did it—I thought it was embarrassing. I was terrible back then, wasn’t I?”
“Not terrible,” Jon disagreed, “Just young. I remember that I wasn’t much better. All I remember about high school was staying in my room listening to that god awful screamo music.”

Sansa gave a startling laugh, her entire face lighting up. Jon wanted to savor that moment, and remember it forever. She looked so beautiful then, almost like herself.

“I remember that!” She said covering her face, “That was absolutely horrible. It was so loud, I could always hear it in my room when I was trying to sleep at night, and you never turned it down.”

Jon smiled, “Ned never told me to turn it down though, I can’t believe how much he put up with me.”

“It’s because he loved you,” Sansa told him, her face becoming serious, “You do know that, right? He always saw you as a son—that’s what he called you in London. Whenever anyone asked, he always said he had six children.”

Jon never knew that. He’d always seen himself as such an outsider in the Starks. The odd end that never belonged anywhere. Jon always wanted to be Ned Stark’s son, but he never really saw himself as actually being one.

“They never adopted me,” Jon said, ignoring the lump that had formed in the back of his throat. He wasn’t completely comfortable discussing this. It was just buried resentment that Jon thought he got over a long time ago.

Sansa’s face was pained, “I—he must have wanted to.”

Jon shrugged, looking at the floor, “I understood why he didn’t though. I was a little older than Robb; if I was adopted I’m sure your mother thought I’d be the one to inherit the family property in York.”

Sansa sighed, standing up and crossing the room she stared out the window for sometime before speaking, “Why are things so complicated. Everyone just wants money and things, and none of that really matters.”
Jon laughed, he thought of his own childhood, growing up with nothing, poor and hungry, always wondering what horrible things the next day might bring. “You wouldn’t feel that way if you hadn’t grown up in a mansion, Sansa. When you’ve got nothing, things can be awfully important.”

She turned away from the window, her sharp brows drawn together, her face startlingly still, “Jon for the last five months I’ve been sleeping on the street. I know what it’s like to have nothing, and I’d rather have that than manipulate and hurt people to have everything.”

He’d forgotten himself. Speaking to Sansa like this made him forget the world they now lived in, where Sansa wasn’t just the wealthy daughter of the family Jon always wanted to be a part of. It was easy to fall into those memories when they spoke about the past like this and there was light in Sansa’s eyes, but she was right. She knew just as much about having nothing as Jon did, maybe more because she also knew what it was like to live without ever wanting and then that was taken away.

“I’m sorry,” Jon shook his head, cringing when he thought about what he just said, “You’re right, I forgot. Things are different now, you’ve been through so much that I still don’t know about.”

That didn’t help anything. Sansa was still frowning. She turned away from Jon and looked back out the window, staring at something in the distance, maybe at the steeples of the church that must have been St. Mordane’s.

“We don’t have to talk about that, Jon.” Sansa finally said, “It’s not very pleasant, and you aren’t going to like it very much.”

Jon wished that she would turn around to face him. Her voice was absolutely unreadable, void of any emotions. He wished that she sounded like she felt something, even if it was just anger at him for not being there when she needed him.

“I’ll still listen, though,” Jon told her, “Whenever you’re ready to tell me.”

Sansa turned her head, “What if I’m never ready to tell you?”

Jon didn’t like thinking about that. Whatever Sansa was hiding, it was obviously hurting her, and it was leaving Jon with so many unanswered questions. There was nothing he could do for her if she refused to tell him what was wrong. He could try to find out if she was right about Cersei Lannister, but past that, Jon was only working on speculation. He knew that there was more to her
story with Petyr Baelish than what she was telling him.

“Sansa,” Jon asked trying not to let his voice betray his intentions, “Why did you run away from Grenoble? You did run away, didn’t you?”

Sansa was looking out the window again, but he heard her let out a sigh, “I don’t want to talk about any of that right now. Jon, can’t we forget about it all? We’re together now, that’s what matters. We’re about to see Rickon, we should be thinking about that.”

And Jon knew that there would be no more talk on the Petyr Baelish subject. He went over to the bed and sat down. She was right though; they needed to talk about what they were going to say to Rickon.

“So are you going to tell him that you’re Alayne too?” Jon asked, unable to keep his frustration from his tone.

Sansa had turned back around, going to sit in the chair that she moved by the bed last night, she had a frown on her lips, “I should. Sansa is too unique of a name, I don’t want to tell anyone that it’s mine.”

“So you’re still hiding.”

“Of course I am, Jon,” Her voice was harsh, face openly hurt, “Nothing about what I told you last night has changed. Cersei is still looking for me.”

“And Petyr Baelish.” Jon said watching the way Sansa recoiled when he said the name.

“We aren’t talking about that.” Her voice was final. Jon had pushed too far and now she was done.

Jon closed his eyes, leaning back and laying down on the bed. He stared up at the ceiling, trying not to imagine all the reasons Sansa was so afraid to tell him the truth.

“I’m trying to get custody of Rickon,” He said after a while.
Sansa’s voice was hesitant as if she wasn’t sure if they were still arguing, “You’ve told me.”

“Yes, but if today goes well I’m going to see if the Youth Worker at the Boy’s Home will write a recommendation for me to show in court.”

Sansa looked up, “Will that help?”

Jon pushed himself up and nodded his head, “It will. I need several character letters to prove to the courts that Rickon living with me is in his best interest.”

“Why would they think that it’s not?” Sansa asked, “You grew up with him, you’ve got a stable job.”

“When I tried to get custody of Rickon before, your mother wrote a letter accusing me of some things—”

“What sort of things?” Sansa sat forward, “You said she was in an institution, Jon, but you never explained why or for how long she’s been there. What happened?”

This question was inevitable. Jon knew that Sansa was always close to her mother; he just hadn’t wanted to be the one to tell her.

“After Robb died, Catelyn was different. Bran called me one day and asked me to come home—I didn’t know about any of it before then, but when I got to York, Catelyn refused to let me into the house. Bran had to come outside to the gates to meet me. He said your mother had locked herself in her room and hadn’t left in four days. She dismissed everyone else from the household except for Bran and Rickon and refused to even see them.”

Sansa sighed, putting her head in her hands, “They must have been so afraid.”

Jon nodded, “Bran was afraid to let me inside, he thought it would only upset you mum more if he did, and so I told him that I was going to go out and get the boys some food. Bran said that they’d run out of things in the fridge and so I went to pick some things up. I was only gone for an hour, but then I got a call from Bran,” Jon didn’t know how to go one, but Sansa deserved to know, “Sansa,
are you sure you want to hear this? She looked up and nodded her head, and so Jon continued, “Bran had already called the paramedics before he called me—he said that Rickon tried to get into your mother’s room, and when he did he saw—hanging.”

“You didn’t know,” Jon, said, “There’s no point in speculating over a past we can’t change. You were already in France by then, there wasn’t anything you could have done.”

Sansa shook her head, “If I knew I would have come back.”

“You were thirteen.” Jon said, “What could you have done?”
Sansa was a loss for words. She looked away, looking as if she’d never considered this before.

“Father wanted to go home,” She said just when Jon thought the conversation was over, “When we were still in London, something happened and he told Arya and I that he was going to take us back to York. We were going to leave that day, but I begged him to stay a while longer. I wanted to stay until Joffery Baratheon’s birthday. Father told me, no, but I went to Cersei Lannister and told her to ask father to reconsider. I thought maybe an adult could convince him to stay. I don’t know what happened after that, but we ended up staying until the end of the week. On that Sunday, Father was shot.”

Jon didn’t know what to say. He hardly understood what Sansa was telling him. Ned Stark wanted to leave London before the assassination, and Sansa had been the one to stop him. She was admitting guilt to the entire ruin of their family. If Ned Stark had come home from London, Robb never would have left officer training and gone overseas. Arya never would have disappeared from London. Catelyn Stark never would have killed herself, and Bran and Rickon would still be living in the manor in York. And Sansa Stark never would have called herself Alayne Stone.

“It’s not your fault, Sansa,” Jon grabbed her hand, rubbing his thumb over her soft skin. She wouldn’t look at him and so Jon continued, “We were all just children then, maybe we still are. None of us knew what would happen when your Father went to London. I could have stopped him too, I could have asked your father to stay in York with the rest of us, but I didn’t. Your mother could have done the same, and Ned would have listened to her. If I had stormed into the house the first time Bran called me, maybe I could have stopped Catelyn from hanging herself. You can’t change history, Sansa. Dwelling on it doesn’t help anyone, it only hurts you.”

Sansa wiped a stray tear from her eyes, and nodded her head, “I know, still,” she let out a remorseful laugh, “I just hate it, you know? If Sansa Stark hadn’t existed our family would still be together.”

“Our family doesn’t exist without Sansa Stark,” Jon looked into her eyes, “We’re together now, that’s what matters.”

Chapter End Notes
Early chapter!

I felt like there were some mixed feelings on the last one, so i got inspired and wrote this to try and make up for it. We've got alot of info dumped here, as well as some cute stark backstories to lighten up the beginning. We find out a little about Arya breaking gender roles and kickin ass, and then some more depressing backstory. We find out the circumstances of Bran and Rickon being taken away from Catelyn, as well as some Jon angst, and how he's still hurt that he was never adopted by the Starks and so therefore never really felt like he was part of the family. Also no Rickon, but he'll definitely be in the next ch. which will be up tomorrow.
Sansa and Jon arrived at St. Mordane’s at exactly twelve. For several moments after the car is parked, Sansa considers just staying in the car and letting Jon go in for the interview alone. It’s a rather important thing, and Sansa doesn’t want to end up being part of the factors for why the Child Worker won’t give Jon the recommendation letter. In the end, Jon doesn’t give Sansa much of the choice. He holds open her door, looking at her with that quizzical expression like he didn’t have the faintest idea why she might be hesitant to going inside.

“What will we tell them?” Sansa said as she walked beside Jon through the empty halls of the school, their footsteps echoing through the narrow hall, “You can’t say I’m your sister.”

“My friend?” Jon shrugged, offering a solution that felt far too simple.

“Will they even let me see Rickon?” Sansa began to worry, “If they don’t think I’m a relative would I even be allowed to talk to him? What if they make me wait outside while you take the meeting—“

“You’re going to get to see him, Sansa,” Jon promised as they reached the end of the hall and went to take a seat in the chairs outside an office door, “Just don’t worry about it, we’ll sort out the problems when we come to them.”

Sansa huffed out a breath. Jon was behaving so casually, did he really not realize that Sansa couldn’t afford to just wait until problems arose? She was trying to fight these things before they become problems. Living a reactionary life just wasn’t good enough anymore, not when people wanted you dead.

The office door opened and an older gentleman stepped out. He had greying hair and wrinkles around his eyes—but wrinkles that came from being out in the sun, not the sort that just accompanied old age. Creeping down from his arms, Sansa saw the peak of tattoos on the man’s wrists. The man looked down the hall before turning to the chairs and letting out a soft sound of recognition.

“Jon Snow,” The man stepped forward, holding his hand out for Jon to shake, “I spoke to you on the phone earlier, my name is Davos Seaworth.”
Jon stood up to shake Davos’s hand; “It’s a pleasure to meet you in person. I appreciate you helping to arrange this meeting.”

Davos waved the comment away, “Nothing I wouldn’t do for any of the children here. Why don’t we go back to my office and discuss a few things before you see Rickon.”

Davos opened the door wider, waiting for Jon to go through. Jon hadn’t moved yet, glancing over at Sansa and then reaching for her hand so that she’d stand up. Sansa took his hand and stood up, letting go to walk forward and shake Davos’s hand like Jon just had.

“This is Sans—Alayne.”

Sansa cringed as Jon nearly screwed up the names. She knew that if Jon knew who she was it would be difficult for him to adjust to her lies again.

“I was wondering if she’d been able to take the meeting with me,” Jon continued with Sansa standing by his side.

Davos looked at Sansa with a frown, before glancing back at Jon, “It’s not the policy of St. Mordane’s to let strangers meet with the kids—no offense miss.”

Sansa saw her opportunity slowly disappearing in the distance. She felt so close to Rickon now, being denied seeing him would hurt too much.

Jon had opened his mouth to speak, but Sansa quickly intercepted, reaching down to wrap her hand in Jon’s. For a moment his hand froze, before slowly lacing itself with Sansa’s.

“Actually, I’m Jon’s fiancée,” Sansa said leaning into Jon’s gravity, “I was hoping I’d get to meet with Rickon since we plan to have him living with us.”

She saw Jon’s jaw tick slightly, the grip on Sansa’s hand tightening. He must have been bothered by the lie, but Sansa had known that saying that they were friends wouldn’t have been enough. Families come to visit children in these homes all the time. Father came to speak with Jon before he was fostered, and mother once went to one of those meetings near the end of the process.

Davos looked down at Sansa’s empty ring finger, and so she sent him a pretty, reassuring smile. He has no reason to think I’m lying, Sansa told herself, A lie is best when you believe it too. And so Sansa brought Jon’s hand clasped in hers, up to her lips and gently kissed his knuckles there as if
sharing a gentle and casual reassurance to a worried lover.

Davos’s averted his eyes ever so slightly, suspicion gone, “I’ll go grab some forms in my office that you’ll need to sign Ms.—”

“Alayne.” Sansa smiled, as Davos nodded his head, going back into the office to find whatever forms Sansa would have to sign to see her brother again.

With Davos gone, Sansa dropped Jon’s hand. There was no reason for her to keep holding it without the audience, and she could feel how rigid Jon had been through the whole exchange.

“Sorry,” She quietly spoke, folding her hands together and looking at her muddy trainers, “Didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

In her peripheral, she saw Jon shaking his head. He cleared his throat, coughing into his hand, “It’s fine.”

Sansa sighed. Of course, Jon was even more uncomfortable now. She should have come up with some other kind of lie that wouldn’t have involved Jon’s participation. They couldn’t exactly quit this charade now. Hopefully, Jon would loosen up enough that the interview still went well, besides, having Jon seem like a family man certainly couldn’t hurt his case with the court.

“Here you are, Ms. Alayne,” Davos came back out of the office with a clipboard and a pen in his hands, “You can go ahead and come on back with us and fill it out while we discuss Rickon.”

The three of them went to through the office door, which leads to another hall with several other doors. Davos lead the way taking them into a room that looked more like a classroom than anything else. It had a large circular table with chairs around it and a blackboard in the front of the room.

Sansa took a seat on one of the chairs and started filling out the paperwork on the clipboard Davos gave her, while the boys did the same.

The forms asked for Sansa’s background information, including name, place of residence, and other things such as that. She let the pen hover over the paper for a while before she finally found the nerve to start writing. A place this old probably didn’t even use digital files. This paper would be put in a box and filed away somewhere Cersei Lannister and Petyr Baelish would never find. She put Alayne Stone for her name, along with all the other information Alayne had, except for the place of residence, for that Sansa put the address for Jon’s flat in Cardiff.
“I wanted to talk to you about Rickon before you saw him,” Davos had begun saying to Jon as Sansa filled out the paper, “He hasn’t had the easiest transition to St. Mordane’s.”

Jon sucked in a breath, “Is he alright?”

“He’s fine,” Davos said quickly, “It’s the other kids who I’m more worried about. He’s only been here three days, but I’ve already seen him about several fights he got into with the other boys.”

_Oh, Rickon_, Sansa thought mournfully, pushing her filled out paperwork across the table towards Davos.

“His social worker told me about the biting case the police are still dealing with,” Davos continued, taking the paperwork and putting it in his lap, “This is all part of the reason I arranged for you to visit him, Jon. If Rickon keeps up his behavior St. Mordane’s won’t be able to keep him here much longer. He makes the other kids uncomfortable, and frankly, as he is now, I’d say that they’ve plenty of reason to be uncomfortable. The next place they’d send him is a juvenile delinquent center, and I don’t think he belongs there. I thought seeing you might knock some sense into him. If you do plan on pursuing guardianship your case is going to be even harder if other parties are pushing for Rickon to be put in juvenile detention.”

“I understand,” Jon sounded troubled, and Sansa could see he was putting on a brave face. He too must not have known the extent of Rickon’s issues, or maybe he did, but hearing about it in person must have been so much worse.

Davos nodded, slapping his hands on the desk, “I’ll go get him then.”

When Davos was gone Sansa leaned back in her chair and let out a loud sigh.

“I don’t want to lie to him,” Jon finally said after a while.

Sansa looked over at him and frowned, “Rickon?”

He nodded, “I don’t want to lie to him, Sansa. You heard everything Davos said, do you think lying to his face is going to help him in any way?”
Sansa became very still, “I’m not lying to Rickon because I want to, Jon, I’m doing it to protect him.”

Jon shook his head, “Protect him from what? Sansa, you said you wanted to bring our family back together, but how are we supposed to do that if you refuse to be a part of it. Rickon needs to know that his sister is still alive.”

“Stop it, Jon.” Sansa was not going to talk about this. Jon had no right to say those things. She told him that she wasn’t ready to tell anyone else yet, and she told him why that was. “Everyone in the world thinks Sansa Stark is dead. Don’t you think its just going to be more confusing for Rickon if his sister is suddenly alive again?”

Jon was poised to say something, but the door to the room opened and they both turned around.

Rickon was nearly as tall as Sansa, even at twelve. His curly hair was just like Robb’s, same with the freckles around his nose. He walked with a swagger that came with confidence, yet there was acidity in his blue eyes. And yet, Rickon looked so much worse than what Sansa had seen on the playground the other day. The bruise on his face was a motley purple and blue, spreading from around his eye to his temple. His knuckles were bruised and scarred. He looked so angry.

Rickon fell back in one of the chairs around the table, spreading his legs out in front of him. He was glaring at Jon, only nodding his head ever so slightly to prove that he recognized him.

“Jon.” Rickon said, glancing over to where Sansa sat, mouth gaping, “Who’s she?”

“Young brother’s fiancée,” Davos told him, kicking Rickon’s feet so that he’d sit upright, “Now, why don’t you say hello properly.”

“Rickon,” Jon said finally, “God, you’re so much bigger.”

Rickon shrugged his shoulders, “It’s been five years, Jon. I guess I’ve grown up since the last time you’ve bothered to see me.”

Sansa could hear the anger in Rickon’s voice. It wasn’t the same as the anger Robb or Bran ever had, Rickon’s was so much harsher, so sardonic like this whole thing was just a big joke.
“I would have visited if I could,” Jon sat forward, “Rickon, you know that I’ve been trying to, but you’re mother’s letter.”

Rickon looked away and gave a half laugh, “Right.”

Sansa’s heart broke. She saw that Davos was waiting for Jon to say something else, but Jon was just staring at their little brother now, a frustrated and pensive look on his face like he was waiting for Rickon to be the one to crack.

Sansa swallowed down the lump in her throat, “Rickon,” she said trying to get her brother’s attention. Rickon’s head turned to her, eyes drawn together and frowning, “How—how have you been?”

Rickon gave another sardonic laugh, “Swell.” And that was all he said.

Sansa’s eyes traced the bruise on his cheek. It looked new—Davos said that Rickon had gotten into fights with the other boys, but a bruise like that had to have been made by someone bigger and stronger than a twelve-year-old.

“Where did you get that bruise?” she asked carefully.

Rickon’s hand lifted like he was about to touch it, but then it turned into a fist and dropped to his side, “Ran into a wall.”

Davos sighed, running a hand through his thinning hair. He knew that excuse was bullshit, just like Sansa did. How many times had she told Mya that the bruises on her wrists where Petyr would grab her were just from banging it against a corner table?

“Awfully hard wall,” Sansa scrutinized, suddenly wondering why Rickon had bit the father in his last foster home.

“Yeah, who are you exactly?” Rickon asked turning on her, “I don’t even know you. Why the fuck are you even here?”
“Rickon!” Jon’s voice was sharp, and suddenly everyone’s eyes were on him.

“What?” Rickon asked, “It’s a valid question. I didn’t know that you were taking auditions to add more people to our family, Jon. I guess we have to replace the one’s we lost somehow.”

Jon took a deep breath, “We’re not replacing anybody, Rickon.”

Rickon stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked back at the floor, “Whatever. Can we just get to the point of this? I have things I need to do.”

Jon sighed and glanced over to Sansa. She held his gaze, wishing he could hear what she was thinking. Their brother was a complete stranger now. Sansa didn’t know why she thought that after all these years he’d still be the same as the six-year-old boy she left when she went to London. He’d been through so much, and that had to have changed him.

“Rickon,” Jon started, “I’m trying to get custody of you again.”

Rickon stilled slightly in his chair. Sansa could tell that he was surprised, watching the minute details of his face change when Jon said this. He must have thought that Jon had forgotten about him, just like Sansa had.

“Why would you bother doing that?” Rickon hedged his shoulder’s defensively, prepared to hear Jon take back what he said.

“Cause you’re my family, Rickon,” Jon shook his head, moving his chair to sit closer to Rickon, “For the last few years I’ve been trying to build up a case for adoption. I’m getting your mother’s letter dismissed from court records—I’m going to do this, but I need you to help me.”

Rickon shook his head, refusing to look up, “What am I supposed to do?”

“Not get in fights,” Jon gave a humorless laugh, “Listen to Mr. Seaworth and Osha. I need you to start behaving so that when I go to the courts again they actually consider my case and I can bring you home.”
“They’re never going to let you adopt me,” Rickon told him finally, “Not while Mom’s still alive. I’m not that stupid anymore, Jon. You’re just wasting your time.” And then Rickon looked up finally, his eyes find Davos’s. They were cloudy—Rickon looked like he might start crying. “I’m done here. Can I go back to my room?”

Davos sighed but nodded his head. Rickon pushed out of his chair and it screeched against the floor. He went out of the classroom, the door slamming shut behind him.

“When kids have been in the system this long they start to lose hope,” Davos explained after a beat, “He’s wrong about them not letting you adopt him because of his mother. It’ll be more difficult since they always try to place children with the closest blood relative, but considering the situation, I don’t think it’ll be much of a hindrance. You shouldn’t let that discourage you.”

“It won’t,” Jon promised, his own face very somber.

Davos nodded his head, “I’ll ask Rickon if he’ll want another visit, but for now, unless you have any questions, you can go.”

Jon stood up and Sansa numbly followed suit. She was thinking about everything Rickon and Davos had said.

“Mr. Seaworth,” Sansa said as the three of them walked down the hall, Davos walking them back to the entrance, “How long would you say adoption cases like these take?”

Davos thought about that for a moment, his face didn’t portray anything but disappointment, “With any luck, months, but I’ve heard cases lasting a year or more at times. Fostering will take less time, but even that could mean a few more months. If Rickon starts behaving he’ll be kept here until then, which will help the process.”

Sansa nodded her head. The answer wasn’t anything that she didn’t already suspect.

“And how long would you say it would take if Rickon did have a blood relative who wanted to adopt him?”

Jon’s head snapped up. Sansa could feel him staring into the side of her head, but she kept her eyes on Davos, awaiting his answer.
“Oh, well if Rickon did have a familial relative who wanted to adopt him then the process would be much faster.” Davos mused, “As long as everything checks out with it, they could take him home the same day. They would have to be cleared by Rickon’s social worker of course, but he could be fostered with them almost immediately. Adoption would still take some time, but that would just be the legal aspects of it.”

When both Jon and Sansa were safely behind the doors of the car, Jon turned on her.

“What was that about?”

Sansa looked at him, “You were right. I didn’t think—“ she shook her head, “I said I wanted to bring our family together so that’s what I’m going to do, even if that means becoming Sansa Stark again.”

Chapter End Notes

new ch! Hope y'all enjoy reading! We're going to get more investigations in the next few ch, as Sansa starts trying to see if she really can become "sansa stark" again, and what her real threats are. Rickon is pretty bratty here, but its understandable. He feels abandoned by all his family, with jon never being able to visit him, and bran running away without him. He's lost all faith in the system working out for him and so we get a very sullen and dark rickon here.

Please comment and kudos!! I'll try to get another ch. out soon!
The drive back to Cardiff was filled with tense silence. Sansa had her arms crossed, slouched down in her seat, glaring at the window and the cars driving past rather than look at Jon again. He was just as angry, refusing to look or speak to Sansa since they first five minutes into their drive.

“You do not get to tell Sam.”

“Sansa, I’ve already said that he knows everything, why can’t we just tell him the rest?”

“This is my secret, I get to say who knows.”

“He already knows everything else! Sansa, if you want to figure out if Cersei is really trying to kill you—“

“She is trying to kill me!” Sansa turned completely in her chair to yell at Jon, “Why do you keep acting like I made that up. Jon, she’s the one who identified the body after the riots, she’s the one I’ve been hiding from for the last six years. If you can’t take this threat seriously then how can I trust you to help me?”

Jon was silent, hands tightening on the wheel of the car. This is how the conversation had been going for the last twenty-minutes, round and around like an amusement ride that neither of them could get off of.

Sansa was exhausted. She felt emotionally drained after these last few days. “I do trust you, Jon. You’re the only person I trust anymore. But I can’t let anyone else know who I am, not until we know its safe. I don’t want to put Sam and Gilly in danger, it’s bad enough that you might already be.”

Jon sighed, “I’m not in any danger, Sansa. There is no way Cersei Lannister knows that you’re in the country, let alone that I know about you.”

“I know,” Sansa looked back out the window, “I know I’m being irrational. I’m not crazy, but I just don’t want to take any more risks. Maybe you’re right and Cersei isn’t dangerous, but I’ve spent the last six years thinking she was. I don’t think Petyr just lied about that all this time, some
"I understand where you’re coming from, Sansa.” Jon said looking over to her with that ridiculous pity in his eyes that made Sansa want to bury herself under a rock, “But if you really want to figure out if Cersei is dangerous then we need Sam’s help.”

“Why can’t it just be you and me?” Sansa sounded like a child, desperately clinging to something she knew couldn’t be true.

Jon looked torn, more frustrated than anything, “We both want to get Rickon back soon, and Sam is the best way to do that. He’ll be able to help with the research better than I could.”

And that’s all Sansa really wanted. Rickon needed to get out of the foster system. It wasn’t that Sansa thought he was in any danger at St. Mordane’s, but the longer that he was there and away from their family the more angry and resentful he’d become. Davos said that the children became hopeless, but Sansa wanted to get to Rickon before all his hope was gone.

They arrived back in Cardiff by early evening. Jon drove them back to his flat and when they got inside he went to his room, coming back with a pen and pad of paper, looking focused and tense in the way Sansa recognized as his officer persona. He’d called San during the drive, who’d now be on his way over so that they could start the research process, that’s when Jon began to become an officer again and not just Sansa’s foster brother.

Sansa was sitting on the sofa and Jon handed her the paper and pen.

“I need you to write down all the reasons you think Cersei might want you dead.” Jon said quickly crossing the room for his laptop.

“I’ve already told you that I don’t know why she’d want me dead,” Sansa set the paper down beside her, “Petyr never told me.”

Jon didn’t appear to be looking at her, now looking for something else in one of the cabinets under the table, “I need you to think of something,” he looked over his shoulder towards her, “We need somewhere to start, so any ideas you have.”

“Fine,” Sansa picked the paper back up and poised the pen over the notepad. She didn’t have any ideas. This whole activity felt like an exercise in wasting time. Sansa was eleven the last time she saw Cersei, and she had no idea why an adult would want an eleven-year-old dead. Sansa never did anything to Cersei, and after father died, Sansa did everything she could to stay out of Cersei’s
There was a knock on the door and a few seconds later Sam stepped inside. He gave a tentative smile when he saw Sansa, taking off his winter gloves to hold out a hand.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Sam said as Sansa stood up to give his hand a shake, “Jon told me about your—uh—situation.”

Sansa had listened to Jon tell Sam about her during the drive. The conversation sounded very unpleasant, even though Sansa spent the majority of the phone call trying to pretend that she was anywhere else but there. Every time Jon mentioned Petyr or Cersei, Sansa could practically hear the doubt in his words.

“Thank you for coming to help,” Sansa told him sitting back down to work on her empty list.

Sam went over to put his coat on the rack beside the front door, brushing the sleet from his hair.

“Sam,” Jon walked back into the room from his bedroom, “Good you’re here. You’ve met Sansa—"

“We just met,” Sansa told Jon, writing the number one on the paper and thinking of something else to put beside it.

“Right,” Jon went over to his chair, Sam going over to the other side of the sofa, pulling his laptop out of his bag, “We should get started. Sansa?”

She closed her eyes, setting the list beside her and brushing her hair back in her hands and tying it with a rubber band. Sansa needed to do something to keep her hands busy as she came up with what she was going to say to Sam and Jon. She couldn’t afford to hide much, not with Rickon on the line.

“Where should I start?” Sansa asked, taking a shaky breath that she hoped the boys didn’t notice.

“Where ever you’re comfortable,” Sam said with a shy smile of support, “The beginning is always
The first time Sansa Stark met Cersei Lannister was during Robert Baratheon’s promotion party when he became CEO of King’s Landing Incorporated.

It was a year before everything became bad, and Sansa just turned eleven. The party was being held in York and father was hosting it, since it had been several years since father and Robert last spoke. Later Sansa would find out that Robert had asked Father to be his liaison between the company and parliament. That’s why they went to London in the first place.

Sansa knew about Cersei beforehand. Cersei Lannister used to be one of the presidents of Casterly Banks, but that was all before she married Robert. Still, Cersei was one of London’s socialites, and Sansa used to go through magazines and find photos of her thinking that one day, Sansa could be just like her.

During the party, Sansa had two missions. One was to meet Joffery Baratheon and make him fall in love with her, and the other was to see Cersei Lannister in person.

Arya made fun of Sansa because of how long she took to get ready that night, stealing her hair ribbons and running from the room. Sansa chased her down the hall, the sounds of the party going on the floor below.

“Give them back, Arya!” Sansa shouted as Arya darted into another room.

She made the turn to follow her, running right into Robb.

“Woah, what’s going on here?”

“She stole my ribbons, Robb,” Sansa pointed her finger at where Arya was hiding behind Jon, “I was trying to get ready for the party and she just ran into my room and stole them!”

Robb looked over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow towards Arya, who was standing on his bed, holding the ribbons behind her back.

“I don’t have them anywhere, Robb. Sansa is being crazy.”

“Liar!” Sansa lunged forward, held back by Robb.
Robb held Sansa in front of him, leaning down so he could look in her eyes, “Hey, look here.”

Sansa looked up at her big brother, watching his stern blue eyes as he looked Sansa over.

He pushed Sansa’s hair behind her ear and smiled, “You don’t even need the ribbons, Sansa. You already look great.”

“Really?” Sansa wanted to tie her hair back, the ribbons matched her new dress, “Mum bought those ribbons so I could wear them with the dress.”

Robb shook his head, “You look beautiful. Anything else would be overkill.”

Sansa looked over Robb’s shoulder, but Arya was gone, the ribbons with her.

“Will they like me at the party?” She asked, knowing Robb would tell her the truth. This was her first grown-up party and she wanted everything to go well.

“They’ll love you,” Robb promised with a laugh, “Unless you’re late. Come on, let's go ahead and go downstairs.”

“She told me that my dress was pretty,” Sansa looked down at her feet as she relived the memory. She’d been so happy that night, not realizing that it was just beginning of all the Stark’s misery. That was one of the last real conversations Sansa had with Robb before she left for London. Sansa spat a laugh at herself, “I don’t think I’d ever been so happy.”

“Well, you were eleven.” Sam said shrugging his shoulders, “I think my happiest memory at that age was going to summer camp.”

Jon laughed at that, shaking his head, before looking back at Sansa, “Did she ever seem angry at you around then? During those first weeks in London, did she ever say anything that made you uncomfortable?”
Sansa shook her head, “No. She was always kind to me. She took me shopping with her and Myrcella once because Father was busy working. I always thought she liked me.”

Jon sighed, running his hand across the back of his neck “Did that ever change? Surely you had other reasons to believe that she wanted you dead rather than just her identifying the body after the riots?”

_Sansa had been standing next to Father when he was shot. He’d been giving a speech, something about stepping aside from his position at King’s Landing Incorporated. He was in the middle of the sentence when Sansa heard something that sounded like a firecracker going off from the crowd._

_There was a blood splatter stain on her pink cashmere sweater. She didn’t remember who held her back, as she ran forward to grab her father as he stumbled forward and collapsed on the stage. It doesn’t matter, a few moments later Sansa’s world turned black._

_When she awakes she is lying on a cushioned bench, there are police all around. She’s inside parliament, and there is chaos. Sansa pushes herself up and looks across the hall. Cersei Lannister is kneeling in front of her children. Sansa can see that Joffery is laughing._

_There is a policeman standing nearby, but he isn’t watching Sansa. She sits up and stands, her hand resting against the wall as she takes a few steps forward. Father is gone. He’s dead, and his blood is on Sansa’s skin._

“After Father died,” Sansa shrugs, feeling a flush on her skin. She hadn’t thought about that day in a very long time and reliving it like this is making everything come back. “I was supposed to stay in London during the investigation, but even after Cersei made me stay with her, but she was different then. I remember looking at her and thinking that she didn’t really want me there, but every time I asked to go back home she would make up some excuse to get me to stay.”

Jon looked at Sam, a frown etched on his face, “Why would she do that?”

Sam shrugged, “I don’t know. Did she ever say anything else to you?”

Sansa tried to remember. It had been so long ago, “I don’t know. She’d try to talk to me about Father a lot, but I think she just thought she was trying to comfort me.”
“What would she talk about specifically?”

“I don’t really remember. It was so long ago,” Sansa leaned back on the couch, rubbing a hand on her temple, closing her eyes as she tried to picture the first night Cerei came to see Sansa after Father died.

Sansa couldn’t sleep with the lights off. She felt like a baby, too afraid to sleep without a nightlight, but every time it was dark she’d see Father in the shadows with all that blood leaking from his chest. Sometimes she’d imagine what he must look like now. Joffery said that her father must be rotting by now, stinking like old flesh and crawling with worms. In the dark, Sansa would see that too.

The door creaked open and Sansa turned her head. Cersei Lannister came into the room with a gentle smile on her face.

“Are you alright?” Cersei asked sitting on the foot of the bed, “I’ve heard that you haven’t been sleeping well.”

“I’m fine.” Sansa pulled her legs up to her chest, wrapping her arms around her pillow, “I miss my family. I thought I might be able to see mum and the others soon.”

“Soon,” Cersei promised, reaching to grab Sansa’s hand and giving it a squeeze, “You must miss your father terribly.”

Sansa nodded. She did. She tried to remember the last conversation she had with father, but she was only brought back to the fight they had a few days ago. He wanted to leave London, but Sansa put up such a fight about it.

“Your father and you were very close?” Cersei asked moving a little closer.

“He was closer with Arya,” Sansa tried not to think about where Arya was. She’d apparently gone missing in the chaos that ensued after the shooting. Sansa hoped that she was okay. “And with the boys.”

“Fathers tend to do that,” Cersei’s smile strained, “They see themselves in their sons, but in us, they only see their failures. But he must have spoken to you about other things? Tell me, Sansa,
what was the last thing he told you?”

“I don’t remember.” Sansa squeezed her pillow harder, “I’ve tried to, but I only remember the last fight we had. I yelled at him—do you think he ever forgave me?”

Cersei looked away, expression straining, “Sansa, I need you to focus. The last fight you had with him? That was when he wanted to leave London, wasn’t it? Did he tell you why he wanted to leave?”

“She wanted to know if Father told me why he wanted to leave London.” Sansa told Jon, sitting forward a little, “He just wanted to see the family again, or at least that’s what he told me. She tried to talk to me about that twice, and then she asked me if Father ever spoke to me about his work, and I always thought she looked angry when I gave her the answer. After that, she stopped talking to me about it.”

“Did Father ever talk to you about work?” Jon asked.

Sansa was taken off guard a little. Jon never called Ned Stark, Father. Not since he was younger. She wondered if Jon was finally seeing them as a family again after all these years.

“He might of,” Sansa shrugged, “I never paid attention to any of that. That’s what I told Cersei, she never seemed to be happy with that answer. I don’t know why that would make her want to kill me though.”

Jon looked frustrated again. Another dead end.

Sansa rubbed her temples again, her headache coming back in earnest.

“Maybe we should take a break for a minute?” Sam volunteered, “This all must be difficult to remember.”

Sansa looked at Jon and he nodded, “I think that would be a good idea,” Sansa stood up from the sofa and dusted her jeans, “I’ll be right back.”

Sansa went over to the restroom and shut the door. She leaned over the sink, her hands braced against it as she took a deep breath. It was difficult to remember this after suppressing it for so
long. Petyr never let Sansa talk about her family or anytime that was before she became Alayne. Part of her was ready for him to come sauntering into Jon’s flat to pull Sansa aside and chastise her.

Sansa agreed to do this so that she could know that it was safe to become Sansa again so that she could get custody of Rickon, but she hadn’t pictured it going like this. Jon told her that they would need to find out the exact reason why Cersei wanted her dead, and while Sansa agreed, she didn’t think it would require reliving this much of the past.

There was a knock on the door, “Sansa?”

Sansa let out a deep breath, turning to open the door, “I’m alright, Jon.”

Jon was leaning against the doorframe, a broody expression on his face, brows drawn together. “If you need a longer break.”

“I’m fine,” Sansa repeated, stepping past him. Sam was in the kitchen, meaning Sansa and Jon were alone, “I just wish I remembered more. I should have paid more attention when Father would talk to me, even if it was just about his work.”

“You were young,” Jon followed her to the living room, “I barely remember what he spoke to me about either.”

“Did he talk to you about work ever?” Sansa asked sitting back on the sofa, “I never thought about it before, but it is a strange thing for Cersei to ask me, isn’t it?”

Jon shrugged, “He talked to Robb about it more than me. He knew I always wanted to join the military, he knew I wasn’t interested in the family company.”

Sansa shook her head. So that was another dead end then.

“Don’t feel too bad,” Jon reached over and rested his hand on her knee, “It probably wasn’t a lead anyway. We’re just trying to get some background information on everything so when we do get a lead we’ll be able to explain it faster.”

“I just feel so stupid,” Sansa rested her head in her hand, glancing down at Jon’s hand, which still rested on her knee. It surprised her a little that she hadn’t moved away. She wasn’t uncomfortable, it was strange whenever Jon touched Sansa she always thought it felt so natural like it was always
meant to be there. She shook her head, “Father used to invite me to his meetings sometimes. I think he wanted me to go into the company when I was older, and I resented him so much for it. Now I keep thinking that if I’d gone to one or took it more seriously maybe I’d have more answers for everything.”

Jon laughed, “You didn’t miss much.” He promised, “When Robb and I were thirteen he took us to work with him once and we went to a meeting with him and Robert Baratheon’s companies VP, Stanis Baratheon, and I fell asleep in the middle of it.”

Sansa’s lip quirked in a smile, but then she stilled, “Stannis Baratheon?”

Jon nodded, “He was the vice president of King’s Landing and Robert Baratheon’s older brother.”

Sansa shook her head, a frown on her face, “No, I know his name from somewhere.”

“What—”

“The letter!” Sansa bolted up from the sofa and crossed the room as she thought aloud, “I had a stack of letters I stole from Father’s office after he was assassinated. I remember Cersei found them under my pillow one night and burned all of them, but they were addressed to Stannis Baratheon.”

Jon was still sitting on his chair, a frown on his face, “Sam, get in here.”

Sam came back to the room, “What is it?”

“What do you know about Stannis Baratheon?”

“Well, he used to be the VP of King’s Landing Incorporated, but a few years ago he made his own company, Dragon Stone Manufacturing, I think they make steel or something—”

“What’s his relationship with Cersei Lannister like?” Jon asked.

“Well, he’s her brother in law,” Sam frowned, “I don’t know—I’d have to look, but I don’t think
they have much of a relationship now.”

Sansa stepped into the conversation, “Why do you think Cersei would burn letters from him?”

“I don’t know, what did they say?” Sam asked.

Sansa let out a frustrated growl, pulling at her hair, “I don’t remember. I barely read them, I just liked seeing Father’s handwriting.”

Jon fell back onto his chair, “We could call Stannis. Maybe he kept copies of the correspondences?”

Sansa started to pace again. Sam was on his laptop now, looking into Cersei and Stannis’s relationship and Jon was going through his phone looking for an email address from Stannis he could use. She was trying to remember the letters, what they said, and what she’d done with them.

“What happened to my stuff, Jon?”

Jon looked up from his phone, “What?”

“My stuff,” Sansa continued, speaking quickly as she tried to keep up with her thoughts, “After Cersei said I was dead, they must have sent my stuff back to our home in York, wouldn’t they?”

Jon nodded slowly, “Yeah, I suppose.”

Sansa’s face broke into a smile, “I’ve got one of the letters then. When she burned them she missed one of them. After that I kept it stuffed in my pillowcase where she wouldn’t see, it has to still be there. If my things are in York we could go there and read it, maybe it’ll tell us something about why she wanted me dead.”

A slow smiled spread across Jon’s face and he glanced over at Sam, and then back at Sansa. “We’ve found our lead.”
Here ya go!
We're right in the center of plot now. Things are going to be picking up pace.
I really love writing Robb, i don't know why, i just feel like he'd be the best big brother ever and i will take every opportunity to showcase that. Also, we'll be getting more action and drama in the next few ch.
I plan on making this fic somewhere around 70 or 80k, so we're over halfway there. It might end up being a little long though.

Hope you guys like this! Not too much Jon/Sansa interaction, mostly just scooby doo level problem solving. Next chapter though will feature the two of them much more heavily as they go and roadtrip to York!
They couldn’t leave for York for two days. Jon had to request time off of work, and arrange for Ghost to stay in the kennel again for a while longer, which he seemed rather upset about, but didn’t say anything about. Sansa was a little upset as well. She still hadn’t seen Ghost, and she hadn’t asked about Bran and Rickon’s dogs either, afraid to know the answer. She thought maybe Ghost could take the drive to York with them but figured that would just be more of a hassle for Jon to deal with and so she didn’t suggest it.

When Jon left for work Monday morning he seemed rather hesitant to leave.

The night before, after Sam left, Jon offered Sansa his room, insisting she stay there for the time being.

“Absolutely not Jon,” Sansa crossed her arms, unwilling to bend on the subject, “I’m not putting you out of your room. I’m perfectly content on the sofa.”

“Sansa,” Jon began, standing in the doorway between rooms, leaning against the wall, “Just take the room. I don’t mind sleeping on the sofa.”

“Neither do I,” and then Sansa sat down on the old brown sofa to demonstrate her point, challenging him to say something. Jon sighed, turning to go back to his room to bring her a pillow and blanket like the time before.

Sansa remembered waking up at some terribly early hour to the sound of Jon coming into the living room and going out the front door. It was very obvious that Jon was trying to be quiet about it all, but Sansa had gotten so used to waking at the smallest sound of a door creaking open or footsteps walking past her. The times she did fall into a hard sleep she usually woke up panting, stuck in some horrible loop of a nightmare. She was glad Jon hadn’t noticed that yet. When they shared the room at the hotel, Sansa was afraid she’d spend the night tossing and turning, waking up every few hours as she forgets where she was and imagined she was back in the Vale, but that never happened.

An hour or so later, Sansa woke up again as Jon came back into the flat. Sansa peaked open her
eyes, tilting her head slightly to look out the window to see the sky just starting to bloom into morning colors. It couldn’t be earlier than maybe seven.

Jon was moving around the kitchen, the coffee pot buzzing as it came to life. Sansa closed her eyes again, prepared to try and sleep for another hour when she heard Jon walk into the living room and pause as his footsteps stopped right in front of the sofa where Sansa slept.

She kept her eyes closed, waiting for him to say something to wake her up, but he never spoke. She heard him sigh, and could practically feel him bending over her. Sansa hardly breathed as she waited for something to happen, realizing she couldn’t appear to be awake now without making Jon feel embarrassed. Did he think he was watching her sleep? Sansa felt herself blush at the idea. Of course, he wasn’t, he had no reason to do that. She stayed still until she heard Jon step away, going back to his room and only then did Sansa let out a breath she’d been holding the entire time and open her eyes again.

Later when she was really awake Jon asked what she planned to do while he was at work. Perhaps he thought she might run again, but Sansa wouldn’t do that. She told him that she would go on his laptop and try to remember more about Cersei, maybe add more to the empty list she tried to start yesterday, this time just writing things she could remember about London, and less of specific reasons Cersei would want her dead.

“I’ve asked Gilly to come over later,” Jon said as he finished putting on his uniform, “She should be by with Sammy after her classes at Uni.”

“You shouldn’t have asked her that,” Sansa frowned, “I’m fine being on my own for a few hours, Jon. I’m not a dog. I don’t need to be watched.”

Jon rolled his eyes, “I know Sansa, I thought you and Gilly could go shopping though. I’ve left some notes on the counter, you’re probably tired of wearing the same three things over and over again.”

Last night, before she went to sleep, Sansa had gone and washed her clothes in Jon’s flat, borrowing his joggers and a shirt again as she slept. She was still wearing them now, the clothes having gone in the dryer when she woke up.

Sansa was sensible enough to realize new clothes might be a necessity by now. Her jeans were wearing thin, ripped on the knees and holes forming in the pockets. The same went for her shirts, ripped and stained, and she didn’t even want to think about the dismal state of her bras and panties. For the last few months, she alternated between washing things in Laundromats when she could afford it and in the sinks of convenience stores when she couldn’t. It would be nice to have some new clean things.

“Thank you, Jon.”
Jon smiled a little, probably surprised Sansa wasn’t putting up more of a fight about spending his money.

“It’s no problem, Sansa.” He went over to the front door, “There’s not much in the fridge, but across the street, there’s a grocer you can go to. I’ve left a spare key by the notes that you can use. I should be back late, but you can call me whenever. I’ve left my number—“

“I’m going to be fine, Jon,” Sansa laughed at his worry, “You don’t need to worry about me. I have been left on my own before.”

“Right,” Jon blushed, “Well, I should be going.”

Sansa felt a little unsure of herself. She thought that she should get up and go give Jon a hug, maybe kiss his cheek and wish him a good day. She wasn’t sure what gave her that urge, it was all rather domestic, something Mum would have done for Father when they were all children and Father left for work. That whole idea was rather ridiculous of Sansa, Jon was practically a brother to her and hear she was entertaining the thought of going up to him and kissing his cheek before he left for work like they were some sort of domestic couple. It must have been because Sansa was so unused to feeling so familiar and comfortable around someone.

She tucked her hands under her legs to keep herself from reaching out, “Have a good day.”

Most of the day Sansa kept herself on the couch, her legs tucked up and the notepad in her lap as she wrote down her memories from London. She tried to remember more about Stannis Baratheon and what he meant to Father or even anything Cersei might have said about him, but that led nowhere. She moved on to trying to think about what were some of the last things Father said to Sansa, and even anything about their argument when he tried to make them leave London. A few hours into it, Sansa’s stomach started growling and so she put the list aside and went over to the kitchen, grabbing the notes Jon left and slipping on her trainers to go to the grocer he spoke about.

She came back a few minutes later with a paper bag full of biscuits and crisps. Sansa didn’t know much in the way of cooking, and it had been a while since Sansa ate the snacks she actually enjoyed. She went back over to the couch with a box of Lemon cheesecake Digestives that they sold at the grocer and grabbed Jon’s laptop off the ground.

Gilly came to Jon’s flat in the late afternoon. She and Sansa spent an hour sitting on the floor of Jon’s living room, watching Sammy walk around, playing with some toys Gilly brought with her.

“So your name isn’t really Alayne?” Gilly asked as Sammy played with his toy cars.
Sansa shook her head, “I didn’t want to lie to everyone, I just thought it was safer that way.”

Sam had already told Gilly that Sansa wasn’t really Alayne. Even if he hadn’t Sansa might still have told Gilly. She already knew more about Petyr than both Sam and Jon did, and Gilly had yet to tell either of them about any of that. Part of Sansa trusted Gilly with those secrets more than she did Jon.

“And your father, or Petyr, or whoever he was kept you in France all these years, against your will?” Gilly sounded like she was trying not to sound horrified.

“It wasn’t against my will,” Sansa explained, “He never made me stay in the Vale. I chose to.”

Sansa hated herself for that. She had so many opportunities to leave Petyr. It was one of the reasons she still hadn’t told Jon about him. She couldn’t explain why it had taken her so long to leave when there were so many other times she should have.

“But if he never made you stay, why did you have to run away?” Gilly asked, watching Sansa.

Sansa picked at a loose string on Jon’s shirt, her clothes were dry now, but she hadn’t bothered to change. “I don’t know. I thought I was safer in the Vale, with Petyr protecting me. I was stupid, I didn’t see that he was using me the entire time.” Sansa closed her eyes, “I should have left before, I was just too afraid, I thought staying him was my best option.”

Gilly looked away, opening her arms for Sammy to walk into her lap, “I never told you who Sammy’s father was.”

Sansa looked up waiting for Gilly to continue. Gilly only ever mentioned Sammy’s real father once before, and that was only to say that it was Sam. Sansa always thought that Sammy’s father was some boy she knew from up north before she met Sam and moved to Cardiff with him.

Gilly took a deep breath, “It was my father. Sammy’s father was my father.”

Sansa sucked in a breath, “Oh, Gilly, I’m so sorry.”
Gilly shook her head, “Don’t be. It was never—it was the same for all my sisters. I grew up around it, I suppose. My oldest sister had a daughter who was our father’s too. I knew it was wrong, and I knew that I didn’t want to be near him, but for the longest time, I never saw it as rape. I think that’s because I never fought him off, and even after I found out I was pregnant I never left our family home. It wasn’t until I met Sam that I realized that I didn’t have to stay there, that I could leave and I would be fine. Even now I have to remind myself that I didn’t want any of that. That I never did anything to get my father’s attention or did anything to make him want me. I’ve still got to remind myself that it was his fault, not mine.”

“That’s so terrible, Gilly.” Sansa wrapped her arms around herself, “That must have been so terrible having to grow up with.”

Gilly shrugged, “It’s better now. I’ve got Sammy and Sam. Everything that my father did is a part of me, but it’s not all of me. He used to say that I was so stupid and that without him I’d be sleeping on the streets. Now I’m in university and I’m going to be a teacher one day. I think I must be the first in my family to ever do that. He was wrong about me, and the only thing I regret is that it took me so long to realize that.”

Sansa smiled, but there was an edge to it. She started to think about Petyr and how he used to tell her the same things. He always said how helpless Sansa would be without him, of course doing so in those candy-coated words that made it seem so much less sinister and more like he was just looking out for Sansa’s best interests.

“Ala—Sansa,” Gilly said carefully, “Did Petyr ever—“

Sansa shook her head, she felt awful that Gilly could share all of her past but Sansa was still wrestling with her own, “If I tell you, you’ll think I’m awful.”

“I won’t,” Gilly promised, “You can tell me. I won’t tell Sam and Jon, it’ll be between you and me.”

Sansa knew Gilly would never tell anyone else, but Sansa was still afraid to verbalize her past. She’d never told anyone before, she never thought she would. But Gilly had been brave enough to tell Sansa about Sammy’s father, it was only fair that Sansa tried to be just as honest, even if she was afraid.

“He never raped me,” Sansa began, thinking that this might be the most important thing to clarify, “Petyr never would have done that, at least not while I was being his daughter. I was so young when I came to live with him, I don’t know if he even thought about doing something like that.”
Gilly had her arms wrapped around Sammy, lips pressed in a frown, “But he did do things, didn’t he?”

Sansa gave a breathy laugh and looked at her socked feet, “Yeah, he did things. Just touching—he liked to touch. When I was little it was just my knees, or he’d rub my thigh. Then as I got older it was always a little more.”

Sansa remembered her first month in the Vale when Petyr first touched her and made her afraid. She woke up crying; dreaming about Father and Petyr must have heard her and came into the room. He climbed into bed with her and put his hand on her leg. Sansa stopped crying after that, doing everything she could to convince Petyr that she was fine and ready to go back to sleep on her own. When she fourteen his touches started to escalate. He used to always ask Sansa for kisses, but it was when she was fourteen that he became so much more insistent. When Sansa gave him a kiss now, he’d hold her by the wrist to keep her in place, so that it wasn’t just a peck anymore. When Sansa turned fifteen she remembered Petyr coming into her room one night and joining her on the bed while she was pretending to sleep. This was around the time that Petyr stopped letting Robin sleep with Sansa. Before then Sansa used to encourage Robin to sleep in her room. Her little brother would have night terrors, and keep Sansa up at night, kicking her and talking and shrieking in his sleep, but when Robin slept in her room she realized Petyr never visited. That stopped when she was fifteen, Petyr deeming Robin was too old to keep doing that. That night while Sansa pretended to sleep, she felt Petyr stroke her hair, tracing his hand down her neck to where her sleep shirt ended whispering the name Cat. Sansa kept her eyes shut and tried to make herself fall asleep, knowing she wouldn’t be able to feel or think if she were asleep.

At sixteen Petyr would take Sansa to work events, where she often acted as his date. Sometimes, if he were meeting with business partners who’d never met Sansa before, Petyr wouldn’t introduce her as his daughter. When this happened, his hands would always wander to her waist, sometimes dipping lower when others had their backs turned. He would tell her after that it looked good for Petyr to be seen with a beautiful younger woman, that it would impress potential business partners.

It seemed with every year Petyr pushed his boundaries more and more. Sansa tried not to think about the other ways Petyr touched her or the ways he’d try to make Sansa touch him. It made her feel sick to remember.

“That was it though,” Sansa promised, feeling some need to clarify the situation, unsure if she was defending herself or Petyr, “He never tried to rape me. He never forced me to do anything. I always chose to let him. I never pushed him away.”

Gilly was still frowning, “I never pushed away my father either.”

“That’s different,” Sansa looked away again. She knew that it really wasn’t but she couldn’t start to think of herself as some victim of sexual assault. If Sansa told herself she chose to let Petyr touch
her it meant that she had one less trauma to contribute to herself.

“Is that why you left him, though?” Gilly asked, “Because he touched you?”

Sansa shook her head. Shutting her eyes to keep tears from spilling out. She would not cry about this. These were Sansa’s choices and she would not cry. “No. No, that wasn’t the reason. It should have been, but I never thought leaving was an option before. I still thought I was safer with him than anywhere else.”

Sansa felt Sammy pulling at her shirt and she looked up and smiled at him, reaching over to hand him a toy truck, and watching as he took it and went over to the floor to play.

“You shouldn’t blame yourself.” Gilly told Sansa, “You know if you ever want to talk to someone about it more—when I first came to Cardiff and enrolled as a student, Sam took me to the counselor on campus. I got to talk to her about everything, and it really helped. They don’t get to tell anyone about what you say, and they just listen. I could even go with you to sign up for an appointment if you want.”

Sansa shook her head, “If I start going to a counselor, Jon will just start asking questions. I don’t want him to know about any of this.”

“You know he wouldn’t blame you either.” Gilly looked so sad, and Sansa wished she’d given another excuse to not go to the counselor.

“I know,” Sansa said, “But he would just ask questions, or feel like he needed to do something to help me. Its already bad enough now, I can’t stand it if he looks at me with any more pity.”

Gilly nodded, biting her lips, “If you change your mind, the first session is free. It might help, and we could keep it from him.”

Sansa nodded, “If I change my mind, I’ll let you know.” She sighed feeling like she’d just opened the cap to a bottle that she’d been shaking for years. Something in her felt released. Part of Sansa wanted to start sobbing and the other part of her wanted to just laugh. All the secrets that Petyr always expected Sansa to keep were just spilling out of her, “Do you want to go to the store now? I don’t think I can stand being in this flat much longer.”
Gilly smiled, standing up to go get Sammy who’s found his way across the room and was trying to climb into the dog bed, “There’s a charity shop near the café that I like to go to. Everything there is so cheap and usually good quality if you know how to look. If you want some higher quality items though we can go to the shopping center nearby.”

“And the charity shop sounds good,” Sansa told her as they headed towards the door. She’d hate to spend more of Jon’s money than necessary.

It was late when Gilly and Sansa parted ways. Gilly had to get ready to head to work and Sansa wanted to get back to the flat before it got dark. They’d take the bus to the thrift store before, but Sansa chose to walk back, enjoying her time alone that let her think.

That night when Jon came back to the flat he found Sansa sitting on the ground, with her back resting against the sofa and his laptop on her lap, dressed in one of the new outfits Gilly helped her buy. He got changed in his room, coming back out to ask Sansa if she wanted to order takeaway.

They spent the night sitting on the floor around Jon’s coffee table with plastic tubs of Thai food around them.

“Did you get time off of work?” Sansa asked she ate some curry.

Jon said around his own meal, “I’ve got the next three days off. We can leave for York tomorrow morning if you want.”

Sansa nodded, “The sooner the better. We’ve waited long enough to get Rickon back. I’m ready for all of us to be a family again.”

Jon was smiling, ducking his head like he was trying to hide it from Sansa, “I’m glad. Did you and Gilly have a good time?”

Sansa thought about the conversation she and Gilly had in the flat. She thought about everything Gilly said—it had been the first time Sansa ever felt like she wasn’t be judged or pitied for her past like someone actually understood Sansa and what she’d been through. She thought she might have nightmares tonight afraid dredging all of that up, but part of Sansa knew that it would be worth it. Petyr was still somehow controlling her even with all the distance between them, but Sansa felt that telling Gilly about what he’d done to her today, had cut one of those strings he held her down with. He didn’t have this over her anymore, and part of Sansa felt a little more like a person again.

“I did actually.” Sansa smiled. She wasn’t free yet, but maybe she would be one day, and for now,
that was something she could wait for. For Jon, for Rickon, and for herself.

Chapter End Notes

Shorter slightly filler ch. I know i promised a roadtrip and instead y'all got angst. I really wanted a ch of Gilly and Sansa talking about the shared traumas, partly to allow Sansa to have some hope that her trauma isn't going to define her and partly because I feel like she needs to know that she isn't alone and that there are places she can get help.
This ch. isn't totally relevant to plot, mostly just to help develop Sansa's character. If you want to skip you totally can. Next ch. will definitely be the roadtrip ch.

Hope you enjoyed! I took my own knowledge/experience regarding the subject matter to try and write a different perspective on the topic. I didn't want this to be something that was really going to hold Sansa back and make her weak. While it certainly continues to affect her, she knows that it doesn't have to define her. She still might not want to tell Jon about it, but its no longer something LF can use to control her. Sansa now feels like this past is something that belongs to her.
If you found something about this ch. offensive, please let me know. I certainly don't pretend to be an expert on this subject. If you think that there is something i could have done differently to better represent this topic let me know and i'll go back and fix it.
They wouldn’t leave for York until Wednesday. A work emergency came up Tuesday morning, taking Jon away from the flat and leaving Sansa alone again for the entirety of the day. She spent the time on Jon’s computer looking up custody laws, knowing that if everything in York went well, Sansa might be able to start building a case to bring back her brother soon.

When Jon does get back to the flat, its late at night. He comes through the door with no fanfare or greeting, dropping his keys on the kitchen counter and walking straight to his room and shutting the door. Sansa traced his path with her eyes, holding her tongue to keep back any questions. Jon wanted to be alone right now and so Sansa let him.

On Wednesday morning, Jon comes back from his morning run, takes a shower and then asks Sansa if she’s ready to go to York. She’d only woken up a few minutes prior, but she nods her head.

The first thirty minutes of the drive is in silence. Sansa sips her to-go cup full of coffee while Jon listens to some news radio station. They’re stuck in some morning traffic that will put them behind schedule by an hour.

Sansa sets her coffee down, “You came back late last night.” She comments casually, watching as they finally make the exit out of Cardiff.

Jon’s shoulders tense, but only for a second, as if he’d remembered something unpleasant and then dismissed it just as quickly. It had been like this all morning, Jon either pretending not to hear Sansa's questions before they left or bypassing them completely. In the car though, he didn't have many excuses, other than plainly ignoring her, which Sansa figured was far too passive aggressive for Jon to actually do.

“Work was hectic.” He said tonelessly as if commenting on the weather.

“I’ve never asked you about work before,” Sansa feels bad realizing that this is true. She still knew so little about Jon’s life. “Last time I saw you, you wanted to be in the Special Forces, and now you’re in charge of one of Cardiff’s police stations.”

“Situation change,” Jon looks out the window, weaving through the traffic, “I made the choice that was best for me at the time.”
The answer was so impersonal that it left Sansa feeling like she’d been left out in the cold. It was the sort of answer you give to an acquaintance, who was inquiring about your life, not an answer you gave to someone you cared about.

Jon was still holding himself in some tense way, looking a bit out of sorts. Sansa tried to think about why that might be, but once again she realized that she didn’t know enough about Jon to properly support him.

“Tell me what happened at work,” Sansa began, thinking that yesterday had been the start of Jon’s bad mood.

“Its nothing, Sansa,” Jon dismissed, “I was just called in to help with a case.”

“What case?” Sansa asked and when Jon kept his mouth shut she sighed, “I’m not trying to pry, Jon, I really want to know. I thought you were the one who wanted us to be more honest with each other.”

Sansa realized what a double-edged sword saying that claim was. Invoking honestly from Jon only meant that he would expect the same from Sansa, and there was still so much she didn’t want to tell him. He’d stopped pushing questions about Petyr a few days ago, but she didn’t know how much longer that would last. Jon clearly already had his own suspicions, and he wouldn’t be content with her non-answers for much longer.

Jon kept one hand on the wheel and the other he rested with his elbow against the window and his head in his hand, “I don’t want to worry you.”

Sansa stilled, “Is it something I should be worried about?”

She imagined Petyr Baelish walking into Jon’s police station, or him getting a call from Cersei Lannister asking if he’d seen Sansa in town lately. She then realized how selfish that was, and realized that maybe this was about Rickon and not Sansa. Maybe something had happened at St. Mordane’s and Rickon was being sent away again.

“Nothing like what you’re thinking of,” Jon answered quickly, apparently picking up on Sansa’s tone, “It was just, well, an officer found a body near the flat early Tuesday morning.”
“Near our flats?” Sansa sounded very worried.

“At the hostel actually.” Jon clarified, as if that made any difference, “It really isn’t something that should worry you. We think it was probably part of some gang initiation.”

Sansa thought that made it all the more horrifying. Some gang’s initiation consisted of murder? What a terrible thought. She knew the world could be twisted and cruel, but senseless murder still crossed some very deeply drawn line.

“When you say gang, do you mean the one that’s come in from London?” Sansa asked remembering what Gilly had told her on her first night at Mole’s Town.

“How do you know about that?”

“Gilly told me,” Sansa explained, “She saw some teenagers wearing a jacket with a gang sign on it. That’s why she called you to drive me to the hostel that night. When she told me about it, she said the gang was probably just passing through.”

Jon’s hands tightened on the wheel, “We thought the same. Apparently not though. London’s had plenty of trouble with this gang in the past, we’ve got someone from their office coming in later this week to help us with the case.”

“So this is very serious then,” Sansa felt a cold chill run up her spine. She imagined the world had enough problems already, and especially now, Sansa and Jon had plenty of their own. She was angry that this was going to be affecting them too. “What’s this gang called?”

Jon sighed, “They call themselves the Faceless Men. We think they must be smuggling drugs into the city, but we haven’t got any proof of that yet. Right now we’re just trying to find members of the gang and get some information for why they’re migrating from London.”

Sansa scoffed, looking out the window, “It’s all so ridiculous. As if the world doesn’t have enough problems.”

Jon seemed to agree, staying silent, but nodding his head.
“Don’t you wish you could just fix everything?” Sansa asked, the question more of a muse, a what if, or an idealistic thought that served no purpose to anyone. She still said it, wishing that it could be true. “There’s so much I would change if I had the chance.”

They continued to drive, the mood turning somber. It only got worse when Sansa realized they were getting closer to York. She hadn’t given her family home much thought, knowing if she did it would only twist her stomach unpleasantly. Sansa didn’t feel like she was worthy to step foot on Stark property anymore, not since she abandoned her family for so long.

The combination of both their sour moods made for an awful beginning for a road trip. Sansa became hyper-aware of how loudly she was breathing, or how she made a slurping noise when she downed the last of her coffee and even began noticing how often she found herself staring at Jon's profile. Flushing furiously as she realized she was admiring the sharp curve of his jaw during a particularly long stretch of traffic. A car was simply too small a space for the two of them, made even smaller by the absence of noise, other than the god-awful radio station Jon settled on. Sansa was aware every time she shifted in her seat, either leaning closer to Jon or pressing herself against the window to get away. His car was small enough that if she put her elbow on the center consul her arm would brush him, and the first time that happened, Jon had moved away like she’d given him a shock. She tried to do her best to not touch him after that--choking on the tension in the car and wondering if it wouldn't have been a better idea to take a train to York, where at least there would have been the bustle of other passengers to ease the tension.

Jon must have sensed all of this too, much to Sansa's complete mortification because after getting a few minutes out of Cardiff, Jon was pulling over to a smaller street, stopping to get breakfast. Sansa nearly ran out of the car, grateful for the distance, taking her time picking out a booth at the fast food place Jon stopped out to prolong the time before they would get in the car again. While Jon ordered them a meal, Sansa kept staring at the window they sat next to, looking at the road and trying to count the distance that was left until they were in York, now able to focus on the mounting stress of that than the confusing and troubling feeling being around Jon while being stuck in small space was starting to cause.

“What are you thinking about?” Jon asked taking a bite of a chip.

Sansa ignored her flush and shrugged. She answered truthfully, “We’re so close now. I didn’t think I’d ever go back to York.”

Jon looked away, troubled, as if the thought of that upset him greatly. When he did look back at Sansa though there was a smile playing on his lips.

“Do you remember what you all used to call it?”

Sansa was still for a moment, before laughing. “Winterfell.” She shook her head, “God, we were all so dramatic.”
When Sansa and her siblings were younger they used to refer to their family home as Winterfell, mostly due to the brutal winters that seemed to come early every year. One fall night the Stark children went to sleep to a yellow grassy lawn and then in the morning when the five of them looked out their windows they saw a sheet of snow and ice covering the earth. Winter simply fell from the sky that night, Sansa liked to think that was when they started calling the property that.

“It was nice,” Jon disagreed, “It made the whole place seem magical.”

Sansa arched an eyebrow, “Dramatic.”

Jon laughed, “Maybe. I spoke to Bran once a while back when he first was in the foster system and he still called home that. He said he wanted to go back to Winterfell. That was the first time I heard one of you call it that since Ned Stark died.

Sansa’s smile waned. She thought about Bran, and how he wanted to go into the military like Jon when they were younger, at least he did until his accident at Robert Baratheon’s promotional party where he became paralyzed.

“Do you think he went back there?” Sansa asked, tearing the edges of the paper napkin in front of her.

Jon looked subdued now too. He must not have meant to turn the conversation so dower, but when it came to the Starks the conversation always found its way there anyway.

“I’ve looked. It’s what Sam and I have been working on.”

“Your secret project?”

Jon nodded, “He and I have put together a case file for both Bran and Arya, independent to the one the police have investigated with. We’re still looking for leads on both of them—for a while I thought I might be able to find them, but in the last few years I haven’t found any new leads.”

Sansa was surprised that Jon found any to begin with. From what Sansa understood, Bran had just disappeared from his previous foster home, and Arya hadn’t been seen since Father died years ago.
“What do you know?”

“I found a lead on Arya six years ago. It was right after I left the military. Around the time Bran and Rickon were put in the system. Her name came up in a police report in Cardiff, they caught her image on a security cam in a store she stole from.”

Sansa suddenly understood what Jon was doing in Cardiff in the first place, “So that’s why you moved there.”

Jon gave a slight nod, barely an inclination of his head as he continued, “When I got here she was already gone. Then maybe three years ago there was another security video of a girl who looked like her going onto a boat to Spain. I took some time off work to look for her there, but she just disappeared, and then I had to go back to Cardiff to start working on my case for Rickon.”

Spain? Sansa tried to think about why Arya would go to Spain, but she couldn’t think of any connection that Arya would have to that country other than the fact that Arya’s wrestling coach had been from there originally. Jon must have already known that, and apparently that didn’t give him anymore leads on her location either.

“What about Bran?”

Jon shrugged, that frustrated look on his face, “I thought he’d go to York, but I never found anything that pointed to that in my search. I’ve looked all over, but I can’t find him anywhere, and Rickon had no clue where he could have gone. He barely talks about Bran anymore actually. I think he’s angry that when Bran left he didn’t take Rickon with him.”

Sansa couldn’t blame him for that. She remembered how angry she used to be when she remembered that Arya left her in London and ran away on her own. That wasn’t anger she had initially, but after she was first taken to the Vale, Sansa thought about it a lot.

When they were back on the road Jon started to ask Sansa what she remembered about their childhood in York. He must have been trying to get her out of her sour mood, just like she tried to do for him that morning. She appreciated the effort, but couldn’t vocalize that she wasn’t upset about what the spoke about in the restaurant, but that she was upset because they were almost in York now. Jon talking about all their memories in their home only made it worse. Sansa hated herself in every moment of that life. How she took everything for granted—her home, her family, Jon. Maybe Jon could somehow and look back at their time in Winterfell fondly, but Sansa only saw regret. Why had she been so eager to leave? Why didn’t she see her childhood for what it was—a blessing, and one that she’d been so stupidly excited to leave behind.

What Sansa wouldn’t give to be able to go back and tell that stupid eleven years old to stay home
with mother instead of going to London. If she had, maybe none of this would have ever happened to her family. Arya and Bran would be safe, still in York, instead of lost somewhere in the world. Rickon would be happy—raised by mother instead of by the hundreds of homes and facilities he’d been tossed around in. Robb would be alive, and he and Jon would both be in the military, probably officers, able to come home and visit whenever they desired. Mother and Father would both be alive and healthy. And Sansa—Sansa didn’t care if her life was any different than how it turned out. She’d gladly give a thousand lifetimes as Petyr Baelish’s daughter if it meant that everyone else would be fine.

The further they drove the emptier the streets became. The road began to wind, twisting and turning around bends and rough roads lined with thick trees. Sansa sat up, turning to press her face against the window as she began to recognize her surroundings. The car drove over a little bridge that a stream ran under, bubbling loudly from recent rain, and orange and red leaves colored the old road, fallen from the trees above them, that created a canopy over the car.

“The wolfswood.” Jon had a clever little smile on his face, saying the words fondly, “That’s what Robb and I used to call them. We used to come out here with the neighbor’s boy—Theon. He had a BB gun that he used to shoot rabbits with.”

“I remember Theon,” Sansa scrunched her face remembering the rebellious older boy. Theon was nine years older than Sansa, and she only remembered him as the horrible influence that mother used to claim he was. “He lived with us for a while, didn’t he?”

Jon nodded, another dim smile on his face, “For a few months after Ned found out his family went on that vacation to Norway without him. You were just a little girl then.”

“I wasn’t that little,” Sansa ruffled a little at his tone, “Not much younger than you.”

Jon laughed out loud, “I’m seven years older than you Sansa. I was thirteen when Theon came to stay at the manor. You were just, what? Six?”

“That’s not that much younger.” Sansa looked away from Jon. His smile looked too bright. She wondered if it always looked that way. When he smiled he was so handsome, not like a movie star or a celebrity that Sansa would fond over when she was just a girl. Jon looked like a real man—strong and brave and resilient. You could see all that on the lines of his face, in the dip of his mouth when he smiles and by the way his eyes lit up when he was working on something. Sansa tried not to stare when she noticed these things. It was hard not too. When she was Alayne it had been so much easier to ignore that butterflies in her chest when Jon directed that smile at her. She could tell herself that he was looking at Alayne, not Sansa, and that those bright, dazzling looks were meant for someone else. As Alayne, it was easier to pretend that those looks could have meant something a little different than what they obviously meant now. Jon wasn’t smiling at Sansa because she was anything worthwhile, he was just smiling at the girl he thought of as a little
Jon rolled his eyes, “A good deal younger still. By the way—I’ve been meaning to ask, why did you say you were twenty? You’re only eighteen.”

That seemed like an odd lie to address. Sansa had expected and was dreading another question about Petyr.

“It would have been more strange for Petyr to have had a daughter the same age as Sansa Stark, wouldn’t it? Especially if I just happened to show up the moment Sansa died.”

Jon bristled, his hands shifting on the wheel, “I hate when you say it like that. You never died. You lived through the riots, and Petyr Baelish just called you Alayne. You never stopped being Sansa.”

It was such a naïve thing for Jon to say. Sansa didn’t even want to correct him, afraid it would just lead to another argument. He said it like it was such a fact, Sansa never died, she never stopped being herself. If only that were true. But the truth was, Sansa Stark did die seven years ago in the London riots, it was only after she found Jon that she came back to life.

“It’s just how I thought of things,” Sansa did not elaborate, and still Jon looked uncomfortable with the statement like he wanted to push for more. “Anyway, it was easier being older. Everyone else in the Vale was older, I mean other than Robin. It was easier to make friends if I wasn’t seen as such a child.”

It was also easier for Petyr to use her. If she’d been younger than maybe someone in the Vale might have recommended her to have a governess like Robin used, but if Sansa was fourteen instead of twelve then the question would have never been bothered being posed. People didn’t look after Alayne like they would have a child. They didn’t notice the time Petyr lingered in her presence or the attention he gave her like they might have if she was younger. The didn't raise eyebrows at the way he’d let Alayne sip from his glass of wine. She could still feel that cloying taste on her tongue.

“You had friends?” Jon asked sounding far too casual for the question to have been natural.

Sansa nodded, thankful for the distraction. She cleared her throat, dismissing her thoughts and instead began to recall all the people who she left behind. “I did, not many, but some. There was a girl who lived on the property. Mya, she was the daughter of the stable hand who lived on the sister.
property. She was my best friend. Then there was Myranda, she was the daughter of one of the men who Petyr worked with. She’d come over to the Vale during the summer months and stay with us.”

Jon was quiet, fighting between speaking and staying silent. Sansa wished he would just say what he wanted to. It was so much worse if he avoided asking questions because he was afraid of upsetting her, especially when Sansa could see the curiosity written on his face, plain as day.

“You can ask, Jon,” Sansa told him, leaning back in her seat, “I may not answer, but you can always ask.”

Jon shook his head, “It’s nothing. It’s just—if these girls were your friends, did you ever think you could tell them who you were?”

Sansa looked away, glancing out the window to the long gravel driveway that they were nearing. It was still a few good minutes until the Stark manor was in the view, but they’d been on the property for a good while now. Through the trees to the left there would be the beginnings of the old stables that were run down a few years before Sansa was born, and then beyond that would be the beginnings of the marshy fields that would be covered in ice and snow every winter. A lake would sit near there, one where the Stark children would go ice skating on during the dead of winter when the lake was frozen several meters deep.

“No,” Sansa said with certainty, “No, I never even considered telling them. They were Alayne’s friends, not Sansa’s.”

“And if Petyr Baelish found out you told someone who you really were, would you have gotten in trouble?”

He was digging now. Sansa shouldn’t have told him he could ask anything. That had been a fool’s mistake. She needed her secrets, they were what kept her safe, and she couldn’t have Jon trying to pry them away.

Sansa took in a shaky breath. When she looked up she could see the wide metal gates that would lead to the Stark manor. They were iron, brutal and harsh looking, with the head of a wolf-shaped out of metal and placed in the center. The wolf was the main component of the ancient Stark Family crest, and this iron wolf’s head was from the original Stark gate hundreds of years ago that used to surround the property that had evolved into the Stark manor. At least thats the story she was told as a child, Sansa had no real reason to think it true.
“I don’t want to talk about Petyr,” Sansa said, her voice raw and vulnerable. She did not want to even utter Petyr’s name once they crossed those gates. He had no place in Stark Manor and he never would. Sansa would rather die than have him step foot in her family home. Sansa could see that Jon wasn’t satisfied with this answer. She couldn’t give up her secrets yet, but they couldn’t stay hidden for long. If things turned out true about Cersei then Sansa would have to tell Jon at least some things about Petyr and why she left. That would be the last hurdle before she could be sure that her family would be safe. “Not now, not here. But when all of this is done and we’re back in Cardiff I’ll tell you every thing you need to know. I swear.”

Jon didn’t relax. He was staring very intently at Sansa, and Sansa could feel that gaze burn into her skin, “Everything?”

Sansa nodded, maybe not everything, but she would tell him enough. There were some things Jon should never have to hear. After having disclosed some of it with Gilly, Sansa decided that she was fine keeping the rest of her secrets to herself. She would tell Jon enough to have him know why she left the Vale and why she would never go back to Petyr, and that should satisfy him.

“Everything you need to know.” Sansa repeated, “Once we’re back in Cardiff.”

Jon seemed to relive the enormity of this promise because he didn’t push for anything else. He turned back to the road and drove through the open gates of their home. And as the car came up over a hill, Sansa saw the stone turrets and the massive grey brick walls of the Stark property, and after eight years lost and destroyed, Sansa Stark was back in Winterfell.

Chapter End Notes

I haven’t updated in forever! I’m so sorry! I had family staying with me that came in from around hurricane harvey so i just didn't have much time to write.

Anyway, if anyone thought that random gang from a few ch ago was just a throw away thing to get Jon and Sansa back together, you were wrong. It is definitely going to contribute to the plot moving forward. Also we find out why Jon came to Cardiff in the first place, as well as more about Arya and Bran. I don't really think Spain is the equivalent to Bravos. I think somewhere a little more in the mediterranean (like greece, idk) would be a little more similar, but i figured Spain is big enough that a little girl like Arya would blend in unnoticed. I will be mentioning more about Bran coming up. I meant to do that in this ch, but i got carried away with some of the arya stuff.
Also we get a Theon mention! I know that not a lot of people like Theon in the show, but he's got one of my favorite character archs. Anyway, on to more romantic things, Sansa is definitely feeling some attraction to Jon, but obviously recognizes that they've got more important things going on so she's pretty much trying her best to ignore it. Will that work? IDK, we'll see.

Thanks for reading!! Please comment and kudos! You guys are all amazing and i hope you enjoy the ch.!
Sansa walks up to the wide wooden doors of Stark Manor almost reverently. Her dirty trainers crunch underneath dried fallen leaves and gravel as she cuts across the yard toward the intricately carved mahogany wood of the double doors. She traces her hand over the carvings, mirrored after those of the original door of the property that the manor was built upon. Sansa drags her hand down, ghosting over the brass doorknob and she sucks in a breath upon feeling the cold metal under her fingertips.

Behind her, Jon is walking up the driveway from where he parked the car, holding the old house keys from where they property holder told him they were hidden underneath the rocks beside the decorative gazebo Ned Stark built for his wife when the first married. She hears Jon’s weight settled behind her and Sansa forces herself to step aside and make way for him.

“Every time I see it, its hard to imagine that I ever lived here.” Jon says as he places the key in the lock.

Sansa agrees. She spent so long pretending that she lived here, that she barely remembered how ancient the house felt. It was larger than the Vale, almost twice the size, made up entirely of pale brick and then the original stone that the manor was first built from. Several wings had been expanded upon and re-built in the hundreds of years that the Stark manor had existed. With each new addition, history was built atop of each other, creating the strange and intimidating ambiance the manor was said to bring on upon strangers.

*But I am no stranger.* Sansa thought, taking another step back and looking across the yard towards her mother’s gazebo, half hidden behind the house that sat on top of a valley, where she was first taught her prayers. Past that would be the groves where there would be pale white birch trees, growing out of the grown like skeletal bones clawing their way to the surface, with them would be great oaks and pines, along with hazel trees with their wide green leaves and hollies with their sharp leaves and red berries. The Stark children used to run along those groves, playing princesses and knights, and Sansa knew them like a familiar song. *This is my home, and no one can take that from me.*

“Sansa,” Jon called, his voice carrying over the moors. Sansa had wandered away from the house over to the edge of the cut grass where the groves began. She felt something in the earth calling to her—beckoning her forward like Jon and Robb’s wolfswood and the memories buried in the trees could make her clean again.

Sansa took a step back, “I’m coming.” She called to Jon, turning away and jogging back to the front door. Jon had the door propped open, waiting for her to come through. He was looking
towards the tree line where Sansa had been moments before.

“I haven’t been back there in a while,” His voice was heavy. The groves were where Father went to pray.

Catelyn Stark had raised her children Catholic. Even Jon was forced to go to mass with them on Sundays, despite how he so obviously hated it. A little, painted, crucifix even hung in the gazebo where Mother would read her children verses from the Bible and had them recite Hail Mary’s. Despite this, even Sansa knew about the rumors regarding her Father.

Sansa couldn’t remember a single time that her father came to mass with the rest of the family, save for the christenings of each of his children. Even during Christmas and Easter mass Ned Stark stayed home. It was never something anyone mentioned. Sansa could vaguely remember being a toddler, no older than five or six, wearing a Christmas dress and standing by the door with her chubby little hand in Robb’s, Jon helping a baby Arya put on her shoes, as mother stood in the doorway asking father if he would attend midnight mass with everyone else. He said no, and Sansa did not remember Catelyn Stark ever asking again. Sansa knew what was said, and she knew about the Stark history to assume everything else.

The Starks were of the first people of England, who settled the land a thousand years ago. They’d been part of the Celtic tribes in the land during the Bronze Age, and even after Christianization, Sansa still heard the whispers of the Stark’s pagan past. Robb used to tell a story of how there’d used to be human blood sacrifices in the groves outside the property, where the first Starks would make sacrifices to appease the spirits who lived in the trees. The Great Father was what Robb called it, saying that the Great Father was an ancient Celtic god who lived inside the groves, demanding blood sacrifices, and pointing to the never falling red leaves of the great tree in the center of the grove to prove his point.

No one was ever brave enough to ask Father point blank if he worshipped pagan gods. It was not something the young Starks, who grew up attending weekly confessionals and learning about false idols in mass, could even conceive to asking their father. They all must have known the truth though, maybe they could feel it in their blood, the same ancient blood that could have been spilled amongst the knotted roots of the grove.

Sansa had to look away from the forest edge again, but when she looked at Jon, she could see that he had yet to look away, “Have you been to the house since…”

Since mother, Sansa didn’t know how to put it into words, Since mother tried to hang herself? Since she abandoned Rickon and Bran? Since she gave up on our family? Since you came to try and pick up the pieces?

Jon nodded his head, finally looking away, “A few times. Mostly to pick up things for the boys, and then again when I was looking for Bran. The place is in the custody of a trust until Bran was to come of age, or at least that was before. Now I suppose the property belongs to you.”
“I know.” Sansa looked uneasily at the tall stone turrets, the shingles stack atop looking like dragon scales.

Jon nodded. Of course, Sansa would have known. She was the next Stark in line who was eligible to inherit the property. Technically, the Stark manor already belonged to Sansa, passed to her on the day of her eighteenth birthday when she came of age. She knew this all too well, memories twisting in her mind like a dance.

Jon handed Sansa the key, “It’s yours now. This belongs to you.”

The key felt like it could have been made of led. She felt the weight of a thousand resting in her palm. She folded her hand around the key and stuffed it in her back pocket. Was she even worthy of holding such a thing?

“We should go inside,” Sansa said wrapping her arms around herself, the thick jacket she and Gilly bought not warm enough, “It’s getting cold.”

“It’s like you said,” Jon looked up at the overcast sky, it looked as if snow could descend upon them at any minute, “Winter is coming.”

Inside the house was warm. Winterfell was always warm, even when one of the several fireplaces on the property wasn’t going. In summer it was almost unbearable and the Starks always tried to spend as much time outside during those months.

Sansa took a step into the hall, the dark wood of the floor beneath her creaking. The Stark manor looked like a place frozen in time. Half of it felt like ancient antiquity as if you’d woken up and found yourself in another world hundreds of years in the past, with knights and dragons roaming about the moors and rolling hills outside. The other half felt like home. The creaking wood was as familiar as the tapestries on the stone walls, or the gems from the dim chandelier overhead.

Walking further in Sansa saw the winding wooden staircase that leads to the other floors of the manor, where the children’s rooms would be. Sansa set her hand on the banister, looking down at the warm carpet the lined the wood stairs and trying to remember every stitch. She pulled away, she didn’t want to rush this experience, or else she might forget everything again.

The manor was ancient, decorated with things collected over several lifetimes, but nothing about it felt excessive. Sansa remembered the Lannister’s flat in Knightsbridge, that had been excessive, a blatant display of wealth. Sansa remembered thinking how plain Winterfell had been in comparison, but now she realized that it wasn’t plain at all, just refined.
Behind her, Jon was walking slowly through the entry hall, as if he was taking everything in as well. Sansa looked over her shoulder and could see the solemn expression on Jon’s face as he looked at the family portrait on the wall. Sansa walked over to him.

“You should have been in it,” She said, looking at the portrait of the Starks, taken when Sansa was nine.

Jon shook his head, “It wasn’t my place.”

Sansa gave a breathy laugh, “Jon, your place has always been beside us.” She looked into his eyes so he could see her sincerity, “You’ve always been a Stark.”

Jon looked away quickly, stepping back from the portrait. He looked almost flustered, pushing his hair back with his hand.

“I’m a Snow,” Jon said when his back was turned, “I could only dream about being a Stark.”

Sansa was frustrated. She wanted to shout at Jon to stop being so obtuse. He didn’t need to dream about being a Stark, he already was one. The day Father brought Jon home he’d been a Stark. Sometimes Sansa thought Jon was more a Stark than she could ever be, she just wished he’d realize it.

Sansa frowned, “Jon, you know Father loved you just like he did the rest of us. You were always his son.”

“Sure,” Jon forced a smile, which read as him being finished with the conversation, consenting so Sansa would stop trying to convince him of her points. “We should start looking for the letter, shouldn’t we?”

Sansa looked around the hall. She wanted to explore, to feel the marble countertops in the kitchen or walk along the smooth polished wood floors of the great room where Mother would entertain guests, or run her hands along the leather-bound books in the library.

Sansa turned away from the hall and back towards the staircase. She wondered what her room must have looked like after all these years.
“Yes, I guess we should.”

Closing her eyes she could imagine the sound of little footsteps running through the hallways between rooms. The sound of children laughing and screaming. Even with her eyes shut, Sansa could navigate through the hall towards the bedrooms, her hand resting against the wall as she walked, counting the dips in the wood where each door began and ended. Hers was the third room, down the hall the nursery and Arya’s room on the other side and Robb’s at the very end. Jon room was on the opposite of Robb’s, nestled against the far side of the house.

When she opened her eyes, Sansa was standing at her door, pushing it open with a quiet creak that always accompanied old homes.

It did not look the same. Half the room was packed in boxes, the other half covered in white sheets. Sansa took a step inside, going over to her little bed and pulling the white sheet that covered it off, as dust kicked and danced in the light that came through the half-closed curtain at the window. She waved the dirt away and looked at her pink bedspread, the pretty flowers that decorated it the same as she remembered.

Sansa’s throat felt thick and she looked away, going over to the toy chest against the wall and kneeling down in front of it. She pushed open the lid of the box, and reached for the fabric doll on top. She remembered this one, it had the same red hair that Sansa once had, the same blue eyes. Father got her this doll while they were in London. It must have been shipped back and put away with all her other things.

A hand rested on Sansa’s shoulder, and Sansa gasped. It was only Jon though, and Sansa found herself leaning into his weight where he knelt on the ground beside her. She set the doll back in the toy chest and didn’t move away.

“He got me that while we were in London. It was the last thing he ever bought me and I told him that I was too old to play with dolls.”

Jon shook his head, reaching for the toy with one arm while keeping the other on Sansa, as he looked it over.

“It looks like you.” He ran his thumb over the blue button eyes.

Sansa wanted to laugh, maybe she might have if she didn’t feel so much like crying. “It used to. Not so much anymore.”
Jon put the doll down and turned, moving his arm away as he did, now facing Sansa. His hand moved up to her face. Sansa watched, sitting very still. She thought Jon would pull his hand away, instead, he reached towards Sansa’s cheek, brushing her hair back from her face and holding her dark brown locks in his fingers.

“Still beautiful,” He said, voice low.

Sansa felt a shiver go up her spine. She couldn’t be sure she was breathing anymore. The two of them were sitting so close, Sansa imagined all she would need to do is lean forward a bit more and their lips would touch.

She moved back, brushing her hair behind her ear as in unwound from Jon’s hand, “Wrong color though.”

She felt hot, burning even, and she had no idea where to look. Not back into the toy chest where she might start crying, but certainly not at Jon who was looking at her with those eyes again.

Jon cleared his throat. He stood up quickly, walking to the other side of the room and stuffing his hands deep in his pockets. His voice was thick, “Right. Well, I already see the roots coming in. We could run up to a store and fix the rest, easy.”

“Dye it?” Sansa was glad for the change of conversation, as it shifted back to something she understood. She shook her head, “I would need to bleach it first. This color is too dark, red dye wouldn’t stick. I would need to go and get it done somewhere.”

Jon shrugged, looking elsewhere other than Sansa, “We could go somewhere then.”

It was such a simplistically male thing to say. Of course, Jon didn’t understand the intricacies of hair coloring. Why would he? Its not like Jon ever had to dye his own dark curly hair. He didn’t understand the time it took, or the damage bleaching hair could do.

Sansa said what Jon would understand, “It’s expensive. And I haven’t got a job, I spent all my money from the café on my train ticket to Bristol.”

“I’ll pay,” Jon said.
Sansa was blushing again, “You don’t need to do that Jon, it’s just hair.”

“Well, yeah, but if you want it,” Jon looked out the window, “It was a nice color before. I don’t know why you would change it.”

Sansa felt herself sober somewhat. No one even had to say his name, but somehow Petyr always found himself in the conversation. Jon couldn’t have known it was Petyr who had Sansa’s hair dyed. She hadn’t even been truly awake for the process, it being done sometime on her way to the Vale after London. But Sansa didn’t want to think about any of that here, not in their home.

“I’ll consider it.” Sansa said, ending the conversation. She stood up and brushed off her jeans, “Let’s start looking for the letter.”

Nothing ever comes easy. Nothing is ever in the last place you left it. Sansa knows that for a fact. Things that are missing have a penchant for staying that way, people will say otherwise, but once you’ve lost something, chances are it’s truly gone.

This is the way of the letter, and in a grander sense, this is the way of Sansa’s pillow.

The pillow Sansa took with her to London is not in her room. She looks through every box that stacked up on the floor, she looks on every shelf of the closet, under the bed, and then even in her toy box, tearing everything apart to no avail. Jon even looks in the linen closet in the hall, and then in the garage where some of the other boxes from London were stored.

“It’s not here,” Sansa tossed a stuffed bear at the bed. She can feel herself unraveling. This was their only lead, the only contribution Sansa had made to anything as of yet, and it had somehow disappeared, “Are you certain they sent all my things back from London? What if Cersei found the letter somehow and burned it like the others—“

“That didn’t happen,” Jon promised as he goes through the closet for the second time, “If she found the letter she would have sent back the pillow. Your mother was very specific that she received all of your things back from London.”

Sansa shook her head, if that was true then where was the pillow? “Do you think it was tossed? I know it was old, but Mother knew that it was my favorite. I mean, if I was dead then it didn’t matter much, but I don’t think she would have thrown it away, not if she kept all of this other junk.”
Jon let out a heavy groan as he came out of the closet empty-handed, “There were some other boxes in the library, some of Ned’s things, it might have gotten mixed up in there, we should look.”

The boxes in the library don’t have the pillow. What it does have is some of the things from Father’s office in London. Taking a break from the pillow search, Sansa and Jon sit on the carpet on the floor of the library, picking apart the box piece by piece. Inside they find family pictures that Sansa remembered Father keeping on his desk, some with the Stark children and others with Father’s own brothers and sister. Sansa looks intently of one of Uncle Brandon and Uncle Benjen with father on a camping trip from before Sansa was born.

Uncle Brandon was killed several years before Mother even married Father, killed horribly when he was strangled to death. Father never elaborated on the story, and Sansa never asked for more information. Then there was Uncle Benjen, Father’s youngest brother.

“Whatever happened to Uncle Benjen?” Sansa asked, remembering that Benjen had been in the military, actually he’d been a captain in the same branch Jon applied for.

Jon reached over for the photo. Sansa handed it to him, careful not to let their finger brush. She was stupidly afraid that even touch might ignite that hot tension she felt in her room before. Sansa felt fairly mortified, and hopefully, Jon was oblivious enough to not even have picked up on it before. She’d been so stupid. What had she thought? That Jon might kiss her? That he might cradle her face in his warm calloused hand and then hold her in his arms? Please, Jon saw Sansa as a girl still. He’d nearly said as much in the car ride over. Even if he didn’t, Jon must have seen Sansa as a sister, no different than Arya.

“Missing in action,” Jon set the photo down, face down so the picture faced the floor. Jon’s voice was passive, “About a week into my training I heard that he went missing in some scouting mission. They wouldn’t even tell me where he’d been sent or what happened. Apparently, it was top secret.”

“I’m sorry,” Sansa told him, wishing she wasn’t so afraid to reach out, “I know that you were really close with him. He was the reason you wanted to join the military, wasn’t it?”

Jon nodded, “One of them. Ned always told me each generation had a Stark man serving in the British Army. I think I thought that if I joined it would make me more of a Stark, that I’d finally be a part of the family.”

Sansa did reach out now, fear be damned. She set her hand atop of Jon’s where it still rested on the picture frame and curled her hand around his fingers. She felt Jon still, “Honestly, Jon. If I’m a Stark, so are you. That’s the only way I see it. If you’re a Snow, then that’s what I’ll be, if you don’t want to be anyone that I’ll be no one with you. But we’re in this together now, you and me.”
Jon’s fingers tightened around hers, so tight it almost hurt. He had his eyes closed, taking in a deep breath as if to banish emotions. Sansa didn’t care, she’d hold on forever if it helped him even a little. She already trekked across England for Jon, she’d do much more if he just asked her.

Jon was the one to pull away, albeit slowly, “You’re too good, Sansa.” He said reaching back into one of the cardboard boxes, trying to go back to how they were before, “It’s unfair how good you are.”

Sansa felt the irony in that. Hadn’t she thought the exact same thing about Jon, though she imagined it was for entirely different reasons.

“I’m not that good,” Sansa told him as she went to the box and pulled out a file, “If I was really good it wouldn’t have taken me so long to find you.”

Jon shook his head, “I should have found you. That should have been my responsibility.”

Sansa wanted to say that Jon never would have found her. She didn’t doubt his zeal, but up against Petyr, Jon didn’t stand a chance. No one did. The only time Sansa had even come close to beating Petyr was when she ran away. That hardly counted—that wasn’t really winning. If Sansa had won she wouldn’t still be hiding if she won she wouldn’t have had to run in the first place.

If only Jon could understand that, but Sansa imagined that even if she did try to explain it to him he wouldn’t believe her. Sansa just wanted Jon to know that nothing that happened to her was his fault. She needed him to know that before she could tell him anything that happened to her in the Vale.

Sansa tried to shrug her shoulders like she felt indifferent regarding the whole matter, “It wasn’t your responsibility, Jon. I’ve never been your responsibility.”

Jon gave a humorless laugh, features set hard and serious as he stared at Sansa, “Of course you have.”

Sansa looked up, frowning. She didn’t want to say it, but she needed to hear it out loud. If she heard Jon say it out loud it would banish all of her confusing feelings, “Because I’m your little sister?”
Jon looked taken aback, completely blindsided by that guess. “No,” he said and Sansa wished she could read that tone he used. Was is confusion, disgust, anger? “Because I care about you. Do you know what the first thing I remember your mother telling me? She set me aside in the kitchens while you and Robb were playing out in the gardens outside the window and she pointed at Robb and said that I wasn’t meant to be any sort of bad influence on him, only ever a friend, and then she pointed at you and said that I was never to hurt you and that my only role to you would be stranger or protector.”

“Mother said that?” Sansa’s voice was shrill, an octave too high, cloaked in disbelief, “Jon that’s horrible, you were just a child. You were Robb’s brother, and you were my—” Sansa did not know the word. He had to have been her brother, but the word didn’t feel right saying now. She shut her mouth and changed directions, “You shouldn’t have been given that responsibility. Of course, you weren’t my protector, you were twelve. You should have been pulling my braids and playing games with me like Robb did. She should have never put that pressure on you.”

“She was right,” Jon said shaking his head, “That was my role for all of you, Bran, Rickon, and Arya too. If I’d done my job right, none of this should have happened.”

“Oh, Jon,” Sansa couldn’t stand it, she wanted to go over to him and give Jon a hug, “No, god, how could this be anyone’s fault? Least of all, yours.”

Jon gave a shaky laugh, “It’s fine, Sansa. As long as you forgive me for all of it, it’s fine.”

“Of course I forgive you!” Her voice was shrill again, “There’s absolutely nothing to forgive! Do you forgive me?”

“For what?”

“For everything?” Sansa couldn’t begin to list it all, “If you’re making me forgive you then I expect the same treatment.”

Jon laughed, a real one this time, or at least close enough, it was a beautiful thing to see, “Christ, Sansa, yeah. Of course, I forgive you. I never blamed you for anything, to begin with.”

“Good,” Sansa didn’t realize how much she needed to hear that out loud. She hadn’t really even meant to ask for it, but when Jon started asking, Sansa couldn’t stop herself from pointing out how some of this was her fault too, “Fine, then we’re both good?”
Jon was laughing still, and Sansa couldn’t help but smile at the sound, “Yeah, we are.”

For another few hours they went through the boxes in the library, reading over old files and mail, but finding nothing interesting or that even pertained to the Lannisters. It was getting late by the time they decided to take a break for the evening. Jon found Father’s old work laptop in the bottom of one of the boxes and was going to take it back to Cardiff to see if Sam could get it to work again, but besides that, the search revealed nothing useful.

Sansa’s stomach began growling loudly by the time everything was put back in the boxes and Jon offered to go pick up some dinner for them. He asked if Sansa wanted to drive with him, but Sansa felt that she needed some space. She wanted to keep looking for her pillow, and she couldn’t imagine being stuck in that tiny car with Jon again, not after all the emotions of the day.

Alone in the Stark Manor Sansa began to walk around. First in the living room, and then going to one of the entertainment halls, and then just wandering about all the rooms she never paid attention to as a child.

The walls started to feel smaller. Each photo she passed Sansa felt like they were staring down at her, judging her for betraying them all. Sansa had given up being a Stark for seven years, what right did she have to be here now?

Sansa took the kitchen door out to the yard, breathing the fresh air of the moors deeply. It was clean, crisp, like the grass and heather and streams and the rolling hills. She walked blindly through the yard, at some point towing off her trainers and taking the wet ground in barefoot. She remembered walking through these open fields hundreds of times before. She closed her eyes and remembered running through them with her brothers and sister.

“You’re too slow!” Arya shouted as she pushed her shoulder into Bran, causing him to go tumbling into the grass.

“You’ll mess up your dress!” Sansa yelled at her, they’d just come back from mass, still wearing their Sunday best, “Mum will be mad and she’ll blame me.”

Arya didn’t hear her, she just kept running. Sansa would have shouted again, but suddenly a pair of arms was picking Sansa up off the ground and was twirling her blindly through the air.

“Robb!” Sansa shouted, holding onto him, afraid she’d fall.

Robb laughed, setting Sansa back down, where she beamed up at him. Behind him, walking a little slower was Jon, his tie already undone and hanging loosely around his neck and the sleeves to his dress shirt rolled up.
“Where are the others going?” Robb asked, squinting his eyes, as he looked up over the horizon.

“To the groves,” Sansa said, crossing her arms, “I think they’re being stupid. They’ll just mess up their clothes, and there’s nothing over there but trees.”

Robb looked over to where the forest line began, “Oh, no, Sansa, there are things much more magical in there—Wild Men and Leannan Sidhe, direwolves and wizards.”

“You’re making that stuff up!” Sansa shouted, “Mum says you aren’t supposed to talk about that.”

“Why not?” Robb made a face, “If none of it’s real, what’s the harm in talking about it?”

Sansa didn’t have an answer to that. She looked back at the groves, where Bran and Arya had disappeared.

“It’s safe, isn’t it?”

Robb shrugged, “Course it is, if you have someone to protect you. You know the fey like to take little girls.”

Sansa made a face, mirroring Robb’s from before, “They can keep Arya.”

Jon was the one to laugh first, then Robb. Robb gave Sansa a smack on the shoulder and shook his head, “Why don’t we go and find them. I think between the three of us, we’ll be able to take on anything that comes our way.”

Sansa smiled, she waited a second before she started running. Looking back over her shoulder for only a second to make sure her brother followed.

Sansa didn’t remember walking there, but now she stood in front of the Stark family graveyard that lay beyond the property. Her feet felt sore from the walk, her eyes burning from the tears. Twelve generations of Starks were buried here, headstones rising up around rocky ground, a stone wall that
reached Sansa’s hips surrounding it. She walked through the arched gate, trailing her hand out to touch the stones as she passed them. Uncle Brandon was buried here, so was Grandfather Rickard, and her Aunt Lyanna, who died in childbirth years before Sansa was born. Somewhere in it all, Sansa would have had a headstone as well.

She had not looked for it, but suddenly Sansa was standing in front of a modest size headstone, near the back of the yard, the words simply written in script, *Robb Stark, Son, Brother, Friend.* Sansa fell to her knees, catching herself on the stone and she wept aloud, her arms wrapping around the stone as her tears fell upon the dirt.

*I should have been there,* she wept, begging, *Please let me say goodbye. Let me make this right.*

Sansa heard an echo, the wind carrying her name. She kept her face pressed against the cool stone for a second longer. Finally, she sat up, brushing the tears away. Up atop the hill, Sansa could see Jon walking towards the graveyard, he’d been the one calling her name. Sansa used the stone to help her stand up, leaning down once to place a kiss to the surface, silently saying her goodbye.

“I’m going to make this right, Robb.” Sansa promised, “No one needs to protect me anymore. I’m going to protect them.”

She turned away from the stone finally, knowing that it would not be her last time there. She walked across the home of the dead, stepping through the arched fence to join the living. Sansa Stark was not dead; she didn’t belong there anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Okay!! I really loved writing this ch. and we're finally getting back on tracks with updates

Anyway, we're also finally getting a little more feelings between Jon and Sansa, as well as hearing more about the Stark past. I figured that the stark kids wouldn't ever hear about Ned's religion if they grew up more catholic and also paganism is sometimes seen as a taboo. I figured that the faith of seven is most like catholicism, and Cat definitly is the mom to take her kids to like midnight mass on christmas eve, all the while never pushing Ned to give up his own religion. Another little myth thing i threw in there is the mention of the Leannan Sidhe, which are just these fairy women who pretty much seduce and fall in love with human men, and i thought there was a metaphor in there somewhere.
*edit, lennansidhe actually are fey who become the muses for artists/whatnot, and over*
time can drive them to suicide, still super interesting! Not as good of a metaphor tho
Thanks for reading! I'll try to have another ch. out tommorow!
Despite the chill in the air, sweat clung to the back of Jon’s shirt, sticking to him like a second skin. The attic in the Stark manor was immense and poorly ventilated. Heat certainly rises and Jon was suffering for it.

“Have you found another box?” Sansa shouted from the bottom of the old stairwell.

Jon wiped the sweat from his forehead, “No.” he yelled, looking around the dusty room, the beams from the ceiling swooping down and making the place look like a maze.

While there were dozens, if not hundreds of boxes stuffed in the attic, none of them were labeled with manufacturing stamp from London like the one’s in Ned’s library were.

Jon could hear Sansa grown softly, frustrated surely. It was the middle of their second day in York and they hadn’t found any boxes with any pillows that could lead them towards Cersei Lannister’s secrets.

“I’m coming up!” Sansa shouted again, followed by the creaking of the staircase as someone began to climb up.

Part of Jon wished she wouldn’t. Even though the attic was quite large, all the boxes and stored furniture pieces made moving around difficult, there wasn’t much room to sit and chat without bumping into another person. Not that Jon would have minded bumping into Sansa, but that wasn’t the point. The point lay in Sansa’s bright blue eyes, and soft lips, and the fact Jon was an idiot who lacked self-control.

He thought about yesterday when Sansa and he were alone in her room. He’d only meant to comfort her, instead, Jon nearly let himself get carried away in some ridiculous moment. There Sansa was almost in tears, and what had Jon been doing? Thinking about how easy it would be to kiss her, and how she would fit against him so well. He was horrible, and Ned would have him by the throat if he were still alive.

“You don’t need to do that, Sansa,” Jon sighed, he could hear that she was already at the top of the stairs. He turned away from a stack of boxes to look at her, pulling his hand through his hair, “I don’t think we’re going to find anything in here.”
The disappointment on her face was so obvious. Jon had to remind himself that the look wasn’t
directed at him, just the current state of circumstance. Sansa was pouting, eyes drew together in her
awful frown. Even like this—hair mussed up from sleep and work, face pinched together, covered
in dust from working in unused rooms—she was still beautiful. Sansa could be shouting in fury and
she would be beautiful; she could probably condemn Jon to his death and all he would think about
was the effortless beauty she possessed.

It was ridiculous. Jon was ridiculous. He hated himself for it, but there was nothing to be done
about it, but ignore that those feelings even existed.

Sansa sighed, “I don’t know where it could be. I know you said it wasn’t, but what if the pillow is
still in London? Maybe it just got lost in the move or maybe it was mistaken for Myrcella’s.”

“If that’s the case then we’ve lost our only lead.” Jon hated to think that, but Sansa was probably
right.

Finding this fabled letter that Cersei Lannister would have wanted to be burned seemed more and
more like a fairytale each day. Jon would have abandoned the lead completely if it wasn’t the only
way he knew Sansa would stay with him. She still believed that she was unsafe as herself, that
someone like Cersei Lannister wanted her dead, and she was certain that this letter Ned meant to
send to Stannis Baratheon was the way to make everything right.

If Jon had it his way, they’d forget the letter completely. Petyr Baelish seemed like the only threat
to Sansa’s life, even if she wouldn’t admit it yet. But she would soon. When they drove up to the
gates of Stark Manor, Sansa told Jon that she would tell him everything he needed to know once
they were back in Cardiff. Jon could wait for that, and maybe then he could actually help her.

Sansa took another step into the attic, her shoulder brushing Jon’s as she went over to bend down in
front of a box, reading the label written in marker on the side.

“These are Rickon’s things.” She said quietly, going to open the box.

Jon nodded, “From when he was still in the nursery. I remember when your mother had everyone
pack them up and moved up here.”

Sansa gave a slow nod. She must have remembered that to, even though she couldn’t have been
older than ten when it happened, and she hadn’t had anything to do with the move at all. She’d
been allowed to play outside with the other children while Jon and Theon helped the interior
decorator move all of Rickon’s nursery items from his room and replace them with a new bed and
Sansa pulled out a stuffed toy dog from the box. It was the first item on top, “I remember this. It looks just like the dog Rickon picked.”

“Shaggydog,” Jon kneeled beside her, careful to keep some room between them, “I remember that, he’d been absolutely horrible.”

“Was he?” Sansa asked setting the toy aside to ask, “I don’t remember much about the dogs. We left for London so soon after Father got them for us.”

That was right. Jon had forgotten about that detail, but Sansa was right. They only must have had the husky pups for a few months before Ned Stark left for London.

“What happened to them?” Sansa asked, standing up from the floor.

Jon sighed, standing as well and walking to the other side of the room, “Shaggy was taken to the pound. He was too feral for anyone to adopt after the boys were put in the system. Summer as well, but I think he got adopted.”

Sansa looked downtrodden at the answer, but it couldn’t have been anything she didn’t expect. Still, Jon wished he had some better answer.

“What about Greywind? Robb’s dog.”

Jon didn’t want to tell Sansa the truth. He hated the reality enough as it is, and he had years to get used to it. “Robb kept him here in the manor when he went off for service. When the pound came to collect Greywind afterward, he attacked someone.” Jon looked at the window, swallowing the bitter truth, “He was put down.”

When Jon looked, Sansa had her eyes shut. She shook her head and walked back over to the stairs, “Of course, that would make sense wouldn’t it.”

There was such resigned revulsion in her voice. Her arms were crossed over her chest, eyes
narrowed now and staring at the wooden planks on the floor. Jon wanted to reach out to her, but he resisted. He wanted to ask what happened to Lady and Nymeria, but he doubted those were very happy stories either.

“I’ve sent Sam some pictures of documents we found in Ned’s things in the library,” Jon volunteered, “That and the laptop might give us some more information about what he was working on before he was assassinated.”

Sansa continued to frown, “Maybe something in it will mention Cersei as well.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Jon said, “If it does we won’t even have to worry about this other letter.”

Sansa perched herself on the end of a stack of boxes that rested near the door. She was already starting to sweat in the hot air of the room, but it didn’t seem to bother her.

“You think looking for the letter is a lost cause?” There was no judgment or anger in her voice anymore, maybe she was looking to Jon to confirm a suspicion she already had.

Jon admitted honestly, hoping it didn’t end up screwing him over, “Maybe. I sure whatever is in the letter would be useful, but there might be other ways to find the answers we’re looking for.”

“You’re right,” Sansa pushed herself up, “If we want to get Rickon back we can’t keeping wasting time looking for it. Maybe we should go back down to the library and see if any of those documents mention Cersei.”

Jon wasn’t about to put up an argument if it meant getting out of the attic finally. Sansa waited for Jon to go down the stairs first, and so he squeezed past her and took the stairs two at a time. He could hear her let out a deep breath behind him, following a few moments later.

The next hour they were sitting on the floor of the library going through Ned’s files again and finding nothing that they didn’t already know yesterday. It was frustrating work– work that Jon was used to in the police department. He and Sam would spend hours combing through sources only to find maybe one lead by the end of the night. This was work he was used to, but for Sansa, it was obvious that her patience had run out a long time ago, and the longer they looked without finding anything the more frustrated and angry she got.

Finally, she stood up off the floor with a frustrated growl and stormed out of the library. Jon waited a second before following, hearing her open the back door and slam it shut behind her. He looked
out to the window to where she was stalking across the yard, and he sighed. How much longer
could she wait out, until she decided that she would never be safe and she’d leave again. Now with
Rickon on the table, Jon didn’t think she’d up and leave him again like she tried to in Cardiff all
those days ago, but part of him still expected to see her gone when he woke up in the mornings,
disappeared and never to be found.

The groves were Jon’s favorite part of the Stark Manor. They’d been left unkempt and overrun
with trees and moss, undisturbed by man, is the way Jon saw it. The Stark children used to tell
stories about human sacrifices that happened in the groves hundreds of years ago; they spoke about
the spirits that lived in the trees and the ancient creatures that made their homes there. Jon never
got in on that fun, he didn’t see the groves as a place of mystery, but of a place of peace.

Once, while the other children were away at school, Jon followed Ned Stark into the groves. It was
never something that was forbidden, but Jon knew none of the other children ever tried to follow
their father when he went to the groves. It was never stated so, but they all felt as if it was
forbidden. Hiding behind the trees, Jon saw Ned Stark kneeling beside a great tree with red leaves,
his head bent as if he were praying. Jon knew the rumors about the Stark’s pagan past, and then
those about how Ned still practiced that old religion. Jon didn’t know if any of it was true until
then.

He found Sansa sitting against one of the trees in the heart of the grove, her knees tucked to her
chest and her arms hanging loosely on top of them. The tree she rested against was massive, with
gnarled roots and red leaves that hung over them like a canopy.

“We’re going to figure it out, Sansa.” Jon said as he walked up to sit beside her, “Somewhere in all
that stuff is something that’s going to help us, we just have to be patient.”

Sansa shook her head, “We don’t have time for that. Every day we don’t find anything is another
day Rickon is alone. I can’t help him until I know that we’ll be safe, and I can’t do that until I
know why Cersei wants me dead. We don’t have time to go slow, Jon, we need to find something
that’s at least incriminating to her now.”

She looked up at Jon, her blue eyes fierce. Sansa was not the same little girl Jon knew growing up.
That girl never would have survived what Sansa had. Sansa was stronger and braver than Jon ever
thought possible. He wanted to tell her so—wanted to tell her that he was sorry that she ever had to
become that person.

“We’re doing everything we can,” Jon said instead, “Once Sam has Ned’s computer he’ll be able to
give us some more information. Right now there isn’t anything else we can really do.”

Sansa sighed. She stretched her long legs out in front of her and tilted her head up to the leaves of
the tree.
“I hate this,” She said after a while, “I feel so powerless. Like there isn’t anything I can do to help anyone.”

“You’ve already done plenty,” Jon reassured her, putting his hand on her shoulder, the way a brother might.

Sansa glanced at his hand, reaching for it and wrapping it in hers. Jon felt his pulse jump as she ran her delicate fingers over his palm, looking at the lines that crisscrossed over his skin. Her eyes were studying his palm, doing so with an expressionless look. Jon wished she wouldn’t touch him like that. It hurt too much, knowing that she didn’t realize what it did to him.

“My friend Myranda said she could read palms,” Sansa said absently as she cradled his hand.

Jon took a deep breath, staying very still, “Could she?”

Sansa shook her head; “It was something she told people at parties. She liked to see who looked panicked and who looked intrigued. It’s how she decided if she liked you or not.”

Finally, Sansa let go of Jon’s hand and he folded it into a fist, trying to will himself not to feel the ghost of Sansa’s touch.

“It’s how she decided she trusted me,” Sansa looked away, face a little redder than before, “When she offered to read mine I thought—I don’t know—I guess I thought she might be able to see who I really was. It was all just a game for her though, but she must have liked my eagerness.”

Jon felt his heart clench in the way it always did when Sansa reiterated the past. Every time he thought that he should have been looking for her all these years. There was nothing he could do about the past though; Jon could only help Sansa moving forward. It was like she said, they were in this together.

“It must have been hard for you,” Jon said, “Having to lie to everyone.”

Sansa shrugged, “It’s not the lying that bothered me.” She said almost flippantly, “That was the easy part. After a while, it didn’t even feel like I was lying. When I was younger I told myself that I
was just playing a game, but when I got older it was just like breathing.”

That was hard for Jon to hear. He thought words had to mean something. Honesty had to mean something, or else there was no such thing as truth. It was what Ned Stark taught all his children growing up, and it hurt to know that Sansa had abandoned it so completely, and cared so little that she had. But of course, she hadn’t done so willingly. What other choice would she really have had, being so young and so utterly controlled by Petyr Baelish? Still, if it was not the lying that made Sansa leave her false home in France, what had? Jon already felt that he knew the answer.

“It wasn’t so bad,” Sansa continued, looking as if she was elsewhere, gaze lost in the tree line, “It was nice in the Vale. I got to go to parties and I slept in a big bed. Sometimes it was lonely, but even that wasn’t so bad.”

Jon was quiet. Sansa told him that she’d tell him everything when they were in Cardiff, but he had to ask now.

“Then why did you leave?”

Sansa looked up at him, mouth falling open as if she was about to answer, but then stopped herself. She shook her head, leaving the daze she was in, and her lips set in a hard line.

“We should go back inside,” She stood up and brushed the leaves off of her, “We don’t have much longer until you’ve got to go back to work.”

Jon went to follow, but something was holding him back. He was thinking about honesty, and how he was already pushing Sansa for it, when there was so much he still hadn’t told her.

“Sansa, wait,” Jon said, and Sansa stilled, turning back around to face him, “Before we leave York tomorrow night, there is something you should know.”

Sansa held herself still, “What is it?”

“Your mother. She's being kept in a facility nearby. I thought you should know in case—“ his voice trailed off.
Jon should have told her sooner, Sansa had the right to know where her mother was and should have the choice if she wanted to see her. Maybe he didn’t mention it until then because part of Jon resented Catelyn Stark for everything she’d done, not just to him, but also to Rickon and Bran. Sansa may have blamed herself for everything that happened to their family, but part of Jon only blamed Catelyn Stark. At the very least she could have kept Bran and Rickon safe.

“Oh,” Sansa said quietly, staying in her spot, “I—okay.” She turned around and walked.

Jon was taken aback. That certainly hadn’t been a reaction he’d expected. He followed her.

“I thought maybe you would want to visit her,” Jon said a little ways behind Sanas, “Or maybe give the facility a call to see if you could talk to her.”

Sansa kept her back to him, “It’s alright, Jon. I know you wouldn’t want to see her.”

Something in the statement didn’t sound like complete honesty. Maybe there were other reasons Sansa wouldn’t want to see her mother.

“I could still drive you,” Jon said, he almost had caught up with her.

Sansa shook her head, “It’s fine. I doubt seeing me after all these years would be any help. She thinks I’m dead.”

Jon didn’t mention that in the state he’d last seen Catelyn in he doubted she’d even recognize her daughter. Knowing that wouldn’t make Sansa feel any better. She already must have been angry with Jon for not having recognized her, knowing her mother also didn’t know who she was would just make things worse.

“If you change your mind—“

“I’ll tell you.” Sansa finished the thought.

They were out of the grove now, standing on the dried lawn that led to the manor. Sansa still had her arms crossed, she was still looking away.
“He—” Sansa began to say, before stopping as if someone had caught her breath. She made a face and continued, “He knew Mother.”

They were talking about Petyr Baelish. Jon could tell because every time Sansa mentioned him her eyes went a little cloudy like something was keeping out their light.

“He did?” Jon asked quietly, wondering what else Sansa would reveal.

She nodded, “Yes, when they were children.” She tilted her head down so that she looked at her feet, her face obscured by her dark hair so that Jon couldn’t read her expression, “He said I looked like her.”

“Everyone said that,” Jon remembered. Sansa did take after her mother, with the same blue eyes and red hair, but unlike her mother, Sansa had some sort of kindness and resilience in her that she could have only gotten from being a Stark.

“He was in love with her.” Sansa admitted, “I don’t know, I just think that seeing her, I would only think about him.”

Now Jon understood. He didn't stop himself from reaching out and putting his arms around Sansa in a hug. She fell into his gravity, her head resting on his chest, arms still hanging loosely at her sides, but she didn’t look like she was going to pull away.

“Don’t let him take everything from you, Sansa,” Jon whispered into her hair, “Your mother belongs to you, not him.”

Sansa nodded, and then she took a step back, wiping her eyes with her palms, “You’re right. I’m being stupid. Let’s just go inside.”

It wasn’t stupidity though, it was fear. Every time Petyr Baelish entered the conversation, everything Sansa acted on was fear. What had Baelish done to Sansa that made her so afraid? Jon didn’t want to push Sansa for more answers, what he wanted to do was find Baelish and make him sorry he ever set his sights on her. Jon felt livid, he felt murderous, but right now Sansa needed him and so he pushed all of that back. Whatever she needed, that’s what Jon would be, right now she needed a brother and despite Jon’s new and inconvenient feelings, he could be that too.
Chapter End Notes

Jon chapter where literally nothing interesting happens! This is totally a filler chapter for drama to come that needed to be written even though it's pretty boring. Next ch will be a little more intense and the plot will actually move forward. That one should be out tomorrow or the next day so at least we've got that to look forward to!
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The earliest memory Sansa had of Jon was when she was seven years old. She must have had memories from before—memories when Jon first came to live in the Stark Manor, but it’s the memory of when Sansa is seven that she remembers vividly.

Sansa had just woken up from a nightmare. It must have been a particularly bad one because Sansa got out of her bed and went out into the hall to look for someone. Sansa hadn’t gone to someone after a nightmare since she was four, and at seven she thought she was already too old to run to her mum with bad dreams. Sansa remembered that she walked to Robb’s room first, hovering outside his door, hand poised like she was about to knock, but at the last moment she pulled her hand away and decided not to. Instead, she turned down the hall, taking the turn and going to the back room.

Jon must have still been awake because his music was thrumming lowly from the other side of the door. It was horrible music, that’s what Sansa’s mum said, Sansa had to agree. It was loud and angry, and there was no sense of beat or lyrics, just screaming.

Sansa knocked on the door twice, took a step back and waited for it to open. No one came and so Sansa looked around. The hall was dark and it felt cold. She remembered her dream—she’d been running from something, something that had been chasing her through a slowly narrowing woods. It had been a creature, a monster. What had it looked like? Sansa couldn’t remember anything but fangs and talons and a shadow creeping over her. The hall was so dark, just like her dream had been.

She took a step forward and knocked several times, banging on the door really.

The music quieted, not turned off, but certainly turned down. Sansa looked behind her, the hall was still empty, but she thought she could see something like glowing eyes all the way at the end. She knocked three more times.

“What?” Jon looked different when he was young. His curly hair was always cut shorter, his face a little chubby. He had acne along his forehead and chin and he always looked angry, just like his music. When he spoke it was with bite.

He was looking up, expecting someone taller. Sansa hadn’t grown into herself yet, she was gangly and short, and when Jon looked down and finally saw her he frowned.

“Sansa?” He said as if he might be mistaken, “What are you doing here?”

What was Sansa doing here? Out of her room at a very late hour, wandering the halls, and standing
outside Jon’s room instead of her parent’s or older brother’s. Why had Sansa chosen Jon’s room? Maybe because she knew that unlike Robb, Jon wouldn’t tell her parents about the nightmare, he wouldn’t tell them how she’d been too afraid to sleep in her own room.

“Can I come inside?” She asked hesitantly.

Sansa never really spoke to Jon. Sure he played games with the rest of them in the groves and he’d help Sansa with her homework when Robb was busy, sometimes he’d even help her pull her hair up into a braid before mass (not that he was any good at it, the first few times Sansa asked him to help, he only ended up making her hair look more like a mess, getting them both in trouble with mum. Sansa had stopped asking for that sort of help years ago.) But Jon was not like Robb. He never felt like her big brother like Robb did, she could never tease Jon like she did Robb, or go to him to talk when she was upset. Neither of them would have felt comfortable with that, Sansa was young, but she knew that was true.

Jon blinked, looking behind him to see the state of the room and then taking a step back, letting Sansa in.

The room was a mess. There were dirty clothes on the floor, along with piles of books and magazines. Jon’s school things were scattered on his desk haphazardly like he didn’t really care for them. Even the bed was a mess, unmade and with the sheets hanging half off. It was very different than what the room looked like when Jon first came to live with the Starks. Back then everything was in its exact place. For the first year, Jon kept all his things in his bag, clothes, books, everything, as if he was waiting for Father to tell him that it was time for him to leave. In these past two years, Jon had settled into the Stark household, no longer so afraid of being kicked out at any minute.

Sansa walked around the dirty clothes, careful not to step on anything. Mum would never let Sansa keep her own room in such a state, Sansa wouldn’t want her room so dirty anyway.

“Why are you awake?” Jon asked, closing the door only a little so that it still sat partially open, “It’s nearly three, Sansa, you should be in bed.”

Sansa went over to the chair beside the desk. There was a jacket slung over the back and a dirty sock on the seat. She climbed on it anyway, letting it swivel so she faced where Jon was standing near the bed.

She shrugged her shoulders, wondering if Jon would turn her away. Maybe he would tell Mum she was awake after all. “Why aren’t you asleep?”

Jon frowned, sitting on the edge of his bed, “I don’t have a bedtime, unlike you.”
Sansa copied that frown. If she were Arya, Jon wouldn’t be asking why she wasn’t asleep, but Sansa was not Arya, who didn’t care what Mum said about Jon not really being their brother. Sometimes Sansa wondered if Arya was even her real sister. Arya was much more like Jon than she was like Sansa.

Sansa didn’t want to talk about why she was awake, it would mean talking about her dream, which would only make her feel more afraid. She turned her head and looked at Jon’s stereo, “Mum doesn’t like when you play that music. She says it’s inappropriate.”

Jon looked at the stereo as if he might turn it down. He didn’t, “I like my music, and Ned doesn’t say anything about it.”

“Why don’t you call him Father?” Sansa asked, tucking her knees up onto the chair.

Jon shrugged, “He’s not my Father.”

“I know that,” Sansa wasn’t stupid, “But no one else calls him Ned, not even Mum.”

“Maybe she doesn’t call him it around you,” Jon crossed his arms, “Why are you still awake?”

Sansa reached over to Jon’s desk and pulled one of his textbooks from the top. She turned the pages and frowned at the text. There weren’t any pictures, how could anyone read anything without any pictures?

“This is what they make you read in school?” She blanched at the thought, “No wonder you hate it.”

“I don’t hate it,” Jon walked forward and snatched the book away. He looked upset, “You ought to be asleep. Go back to your room.”

No one ever spoke to Sansa like that. She wanted to start crying. She didn’t want to leave the room, not if it meant going back into the dark hallway and then all alone in her room. Sansa would only start thinking about her dream then, about being chased through the woods. About monsters coming after her. Monsters wandering the halls, monsters hanging over her bed as she slept.
Jon let out a sigh, he shook his head and walked over to the desk again, “Don’t start crying, please.”

Sansa wasn’t going to cry. She wiped her eyes stubbornly and blinked away any tears. Arya always made fun of Sansa when she cried, she said only babies cry and Sansa wasn’t a baby.

“I’m not crying,” Sansa told him stubbornly.

Jon looked about the room helplessly, “Do you want me to get Robb?”

Sansa shook her head fiercely, “No, don’t do that, please. I don’t want him to know.”

“Know what?”

Sansa wrapped her arms around her knees. Jon didn’t look like he would laugh at her and so she told him, “I had a nightmare about the groves. It woke me up and now I can’t go back to sleep.”

“It was just a bad dream,” Jon told her, kneeling beside the chair, “Everyone has them, you don’t have to be upset.”

Sansa shook her head, “I know, I just don’t want to be by myself. Are you going to make me leave?”

Jon looked up at the ceiling and sighed, he shook his head, “No, I’m not going to make you leave. But I’ve got things I need to do.”

“That’s okay,” Sansa sat forward, “I won’t bother you, I’ll be very quiet.”

Jon laughed, he was smiling and Sansa couldn’t remember if she’d ever made Jon smile, “It’s just some schoolwork. I’ll be very boring so if you’re looking for entertainment—“

“I’m not.” Sansa promised earnestly, “I can even help you if you want. I’m very good at school, I’ve got the best marks in my class.”
Jon smiled at that, “Alright,” he said, going back over to his bed and picking up a book there, “Why don’t you read this chapter for me, and then when you’re done you can tell me what happened.”

Sansa looked at the cover. Its title was Lord of the Flies. Like the textbook, it had no pictures. Sansa went to the bookmarked page anyway and started reading.

It was difficult. She didn’t know what some of the words meant or how to say them. Sometimes she would quietly mouth a word out loud trying to figure the sound, only to give up and move to the next one. Jon had gone back to the bed and was stretched across it with a notebook, copying something from another paper.

It took Sansa a while to finish the chapter, maybe an hour or longer. It wasn’t very long, but she was a slow reader. By the time she finished and looked up to summarize it, Jon had his eyes closed, his notebook lying on his chest, snoring quietly.

Sansa shut his book, placing it back on the desk and went over to the stereo, turning it off. With that done, she went over to Jon and poked his shoulder. He muttered in his sleep but did not get up. Sansa didn’t want to leave. She could still remember her dream, and she felt safer here with Jon than she would have in her own room. But she was also tired. Sansa got up on the bed and climbed over Jon onto the other side. She’d done the same thing with Robb before, sleeping in his bed. This still felt different, but Sansa didn’t really care why. She pulled up the covers over her shoulder and turned to face Jon, watching the rise and fall of his chest until she fell asleep.

In the morning, Catelyn Stark found Sansa in Jon’s room. She didn’t say anything, but the look was clear. Sansa left the room, silently, knowing she’d done something wrong, but not sure what exactly. Sansa didn’t know what her Mum told Jon, but after that night he didn’t speak to Sansa for a long time.

They both agree its useless, but Sansa still keeps looking for the pillow with the letter. At the very least, there is no harm in looking, not while Jon is busy taking a work call in the kitchen while Sansa goes through her old room one last time.

It’s their last day in York. Still the morning, but already Sansa is unsure if she’ll miss the home when they’ve gone. There is a tragedy in being in the last place their family was whole, but there is a sweetness in it too.

When she is done with her room, Sansa goes through Arya’s room, and then Bran’s. Both of them missing, they’re things untouched after all these years. She wonders if they miss their Winterfell as well, or if they, like Sansa, have tried to forget their past in order to survive moving forward. She hopes not, the tragedy is really in the forgetting.

“We can come back,” Jon says when he finds Sansa in Rickon’s room, an hour later, “With Rickon maybe. I don’t know if he’d want to or not, but maybe he’d like to come back to his room and get some more of his things back.”
Sansa picked up the plastic picture book on the shelf, a smile playing at her lips, “I think he might have outgrown some of these things.”

Jon laughed, “Yeah, probably. He’s grown so much.”

They were both on agreement on that. Sansa set the book down and sighed. She went over to the edge of Rickon’s little bed and sat down on it, “When all of this is done—I mean when we’ve gotten enough information on Cersei to know that I’m safe, will we tell Rickon who I am?”

“Of course,” Jon was taken aback, “What else would we tell him?”

“I mean he knows me as Alayne already, Jon,” Sansa sighed, “Remember when we saw him I was introduced as your fiancé. Don’t you think that would confuse him?”

Jon’s face was tinged pink, “We’ll explain it to him. It’s not like we could keep a lie like that up for very long.”

Sansa couldn’t resist the tease, “Our engagement or me being Sansa?”

Jon’s blush grew deeper, “The Sansa lie.”

It shouldn’t have, but it made Sansa smile, which only made Jon frown. He didn’t care for any of her lies. Jon was too honest of a man, it was unfair. Someone like that was hard to live up to. At any given moment, Sansa was unsure where she stood with him. Sometimes she thought he judged her for her past, other times she thought it was pity. Sansa thought it before, but it was worth remembering that Jon was not someone who could have lasted in the Vale. His honesty ran too deep; it showed on his face with every look and action.

“I’m sorry,” Sansa, conceded, “I know you don’t like when I make jokes about before.”

Jon shook his head, “It’s not that, you’ve got the right to make jokes.”
He still looked bothered. Sansa decided to move past it.

“I’ve been thinking,” She started, tugging at a lock of her hair, “Maybe I should dye it red. I mean, once everything is settled and we’ve got Rickon. It would be nice to look like myself again. Might help him remember me.”

Jon looked relieved. Sansa wondered if he liked the color that much, or if his relief was from something else.

“That’s good,” He told her, “The brown color doesn’t suit you.”

Sansa wrinkled her nose, tilting her chin up, “Actually, Jon, I’ve been told by several people that I’ve got beautiful hair. My friends in the Vale always said that it was the loveliest color, and I’d like you to know that you’re the first person to ever tell me otherwise.”

Jon laughed, shaking his head as he came over to stand beside the bed. He reached down and pulled at a lock of Sansa’s hair, holding it up as if to survey. She batted at his hand and he laughed, “It’s nice, sure, but a little boring. You know, back when I was in military training, a man in my unit said that red hair meant you were kissed by fire, I think that suits you much better.”

Sansa was the one blushing now. When Jon said things like that, how could she stop herself? He didn’t even realize how infuriating it was.

“If that’s true, then this color must mean I’ve been kissed by mud,” She wanted to end the romantic tension here and there, “What does your color mean? Have you been kissed by coal?”

Jon rolled his eyes and walked back a few steps, “Did your friends from the Vale also tell you that you’re funny? Not very honest, are they?”

“Shut up!” Sansa laughed, taking a pillow from Rickon’s bed and throwing it at Jon’s chest.

He laughed, catching it in his hands, “What? I thought someone owed you the truth.”

“You’re terrible, Jon Snow,” Sansa told him with a wide grin. It was easy, this. Being with Jon felt
so natural. Never before had Sansa ever felt so comfortable with a man, not since she’d been taken to the Vale. “I’m remarkably funny, you’re just too dull—“

Her voice stopped. Sansa’s eyes had been caught looking at the pillow. At the edge of the pillowcase, embroidered in white string were the initials SS.

“Oh, I’m too dull for what,” Jon shook his head, “If we’re being honest—“

“Stop,” Sansa held up her hand and pushed off the bed.

“What—“

“No, Jon, stop,” Sansa was standing in front of him, grabbing the pillow from his hands. He gave it up willingly. Sansa ran her hand over the embroidery, a smile spreading on her face, “This is it, Jon. This is my pillow!”

Jon looked down at it, noticing for the first time the initials, realization dawning on him. Sansa went back to the bed, sitting on it as she turned the pillowcase inside out, reaching down for the fallen letter. It was still there. She couldn’t believe it. Part of her really thought that the letter would have been gone after all these years, either having fallen out or been removed. When she couldn’t find the pillow in her room, she’d been so certain it was still in the flat in Knightsbridge in the clutches of Cersei Lannister.

“We found it, Jon!” Sansa couldn’t keep the excitement out of her voice, she jumped off the bed and threw her arms around Jon in a hug, “It’s been here the whole time!”

Jon wrapped an arm around Sansa’s waist. His large hands splayed across her hip. Under different circumstances, Sansa might have noticed the intimacy of the gesture, but she was simply too excited to think about that.

“Let me see,” Jon said, reaching for the letter.

Sansa handed it over, taking a step back. She could hardly stand still, waiting for Jon to read the letter. This was the moment of truth, wasn’t it? This is when they would find out if Sansa’s hunch had been right and Father had put something in that letter Cersei Lannister didn’t want getting out.
“Well, what does it say?” Sansa asked after waiting a few moments.

Jon frowned and Sansa felt her heart plummet. That was not the positive reaction she was hoping for.

“What does it say?” She pressed, walking over and grabbing it.

She read the letter quickly. It didn’t make much more sense than it had when Sansa was twelve. In the letter, Father explained to Stannis Baratheon how he planned to step down from his post in King’s Landing Corporations. Then it went onto some large expanse of nonsense, speaking of lions and stags, ending with the line the seed is strong.

“What does this even mean?” Sansa muttered turning the page over. Surely there had to be more.

Jon took the letter from Sansa to read it for himself again, “I don’t know.” Jon was frowning. “It reads like its written in some sort of code.”

“Why would Father write in a code?” Sansa paced the room, “That doesn’t even make sense. How would Stannis even have understood the code if he did? It doesn’t even mention Cersei, why would she have wanted to burn it?”

Jon shook his head again. He didn’t have those answers.

All this time Sansa had been hedging all her bets on this letter, and for what? It was total nonsense. But then, what had Sansa really expected to find? Any easily written letter that carefully explained Cersei’s evil intentions and her desire to see Sansa dead? The perfect note to deliver to the police so that Cersei would be locked away and Sansa would be safe to live her life again? Of course, the letter wouldn’t have that; nothing was ever so easy.

The frustration Sansa felt all of yesterday was back. She wanted to scream at something, to throw things around and demand answers. After everything she’d been through in the last six years, couldn’t one thing in Sansa’s life be simple? Didn’t she deserve one stroke of luck, one single win? Instead, all she got were codes about wild animals and seeds.

“Why would Father even write this?” Sansa growled, “Couldn’t he have just written something that made sense? I mean do Stags and Lions mean anything to you?”
“I don’t know,” Jon was still reading the letter, voice detached, as it always was when he was being an officer, “We should send it to Sam, maybe he’ll make some sense of it.”

Sansa laughed, “Right, let’s just wait for Sam. Just like for the laptop and all the other files. How long will all that take? Another month, two?”

Jon looked up and frowned, “This is a win, Sansa. We’ve got the letter.”

“And it makes no sense.” She seethed, “Just like everything else. When Sam is done with it, it will probably still make no sense. How are we supposed to protect ourselves from Cersei if everything we find is just bullshit.”

“I’m doing the best I can,” Jon stepped back, “If you let me, we wouldn’t even need the letter. I could protect you.”

Sansa laughed, cold and bitter, “Of course you could, Jon. You can just protect me from everything, can’t you? But when Cersei comes for us, who do you think is going to protect you?”

“I don’t need protection.”

“And neither do I.”

Sansa stood her ground, lips pulled in a snarl. She felt wild, dangerous, and very angry. It took a moment, set during their silent stare off of heaving chests and ice-cold eyes, to realize that she wasn’t really angry at Jon. Well, no, she was angry at him, but not for the obvious reasons. He was being stupid and aggravatingly simple-minded, but Sansa was really just angry at herself, for hedging her bets on some stupid letter.

She curled her lips and turned away, “Tell Sam about the letter.” She said coldly, “Have him try and figure it out, whatever.”

“Sansa—“ Jon began to say, but she’d already started to walk out of the room.

He followed, Sansa was about to turn on him and start shouting again, but she’d miscalculated his
distance. When she turned, she ran right into Jon’s chest. She tried to step back, but it must have looked like she was about to fall, because suddenly, Jon’s arm was around her waist, holding her in place.

Sansa breathed. Face hot, chest heaving, mind very still. Maybe he was going to shout at her before, but now Jon was very still too. He must have known there was no risk of her falling now, but his arm didn’t move from its spot, holding her almost flushed against his chest.

“You don’t get to walk away from this, Sansa, not now.” Jon breathed, voice low.

Sansa’s heart stuttered; she wanted to shut her eyes and lean in and close the distance. God, it looked like Jon wanted it too, staring down at Sansa’s lips like he was waiting for something. Just push him away, Sansa told herself, You’ve indulged yourself long enough. Now push him away.

“Jon—“

His phone rang. Sansa shut her eyes and stepped away. The spell had been broken.

Jon’s eyes hardened, he reached into his back pocket and pulled his phone out. Frowning when he saw the number. He hit the answer button and held it to his ear.

“What’s wrong?”

Sansa could only strain to hear the muted reply. Whatever it was, it made Jon suck in a deep breath. He turned away from Sansa to give a quiet response.

“Okay, I understand. I’ll leave right now.” He hung up the phone and turned back to Sansa.

“What is it?” Sansa asked, wringing her hands, afraid of the answer.

Jon looked so troubled, everything between them before completely forgotten. “It’s nothing, everything’s fine, but I need to go back to Cardiff.”

“What for?” Sansa asked.
Jon was not a good liar. He was actually a fantastically bad one. She could always tell when he was lying because his eyes never met hers. It was his tell, Petyr had taught Sansa to look for everyone’s lying tell. Mya’s had been how her voice always rose an octave during a lie. Myranda’s had been how she’d over explain every lie she told, adding unnecessary details that made the story suspicious. Robin’s had been the way his face turned red. And Petyr—Petyr’s tell, at least when he lied to Sansa, had been when he’d finish his lie by leaning in and kissing Sansa’s cheek. The memory made her turn cold, reminding her too much of being alone in his office, glasses of wine, and those chilling words that always accompanied it. Now Sansa just felt anxious, a sickening feeling accompanying the memory and made worse by whatever Jon was hiding from her.

Jon shook his head, “It’s nothing. I’ll tell you later, I don’t want to worry you right now.”

“Should I be worried?” Sansa stepped forward, “Jon, is this about Rickon? Is everything alright with him—did something happen?”

“Please don’t worry about it, Sansa,” Jon put his hands on Sansa’s shoulders, holding her in place. “I’m going to go to Cardiff, but I want you to stay here, alright? I’ll come back tonight, then we’ll go back together.”

“You’re leaving me here?” Sansa’s voice was pitched like a child. She felt like one, scared and being left behind.

“Only for a few hours,” Jon promised as he started heading for the stairs. Sansa followed, “It’s nothing to do with Rickon, the call was from work. I’ve just got to take care of some things, and then I’ll come back.”

Sansa felt relief. At least Rickon was okay, but that meant that there was still a reason Jon was worried enough that he’d leave Sansa here while he went back to Cardiff.

“What am I supposed to do while you’re gone?” Sansa asked, her hands hanging uselessly at her side.

Jon looked up, he was already at the door, keys in hand, “Go back to Ned’s library. Maybe you can see if any of the codes from the letter match anything else he wrote.”

Sansa already knew she’d been left with some bullshit task that Jon thought would keep her busy. He knew as well as she did that none of Father’s other letters contained anything about Lion and
“Are you serious, Jon?” Sansa asked, following Jon to his car, “Can’t I just come with you?”

“Sansa,” Jon stopped short. He looked exhausted in a way that he hadn’t a few minutes before. “Just stay here, please? I need to sort some things out back at home. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Sansa already knew that she wasn’t going to push him anymore. She nodded her head and stepped away as he got in his car.

“Oh, Sansa said, wrapping her arms around her middle, “Just be safe, okay?”

Jon nodded, for a moment Sansa thought she might have seen longing in his expression, “I will. I’ll see you tonight.”

"Wait--" Sansa ran towards the car, stopping in front of Jon. She had no idea what she planned to say, it had to be something though, this was her chance to say something. "I want to talk when you get back," she took a shaky breathe, leaning to grab Jon’s arm to keep her steady, "So come back soon, okay?"

It looked like Jon wanted to smile, but there must have been so much else on his mind. He nodded his head, "I will, just stay here."

And then Jon did something unexpected. He leaned in and kissed Sansa’s cheek, right beside her temple. It was just a goodbye, something completely innocent, but it still made her jump. Everything she and Jon did felt intimate, this was no exception.

Jon moved quickly now, maybe regretting the chaste kiss. He got in his car and gave a little wave, as Sansa stepped back, still feeling the traces of his lips on her skin. She wanted to reach out and touch where his lips touched her, but she knew that would just make her look like a silly girl. She instead walked calmly back to the house and watched Jon drive away.

Sansa couldn’t stand still. She was consumed with worry about Jon. She wished he just told her what was wrong, at least then she wouldn’t be stuck with the not knowing.

For an hour after he left she’d gone into Father’s office and went through the papers there again.
The entire time she was thinking about Jon. It started off as just worry, but then it morphed into reflection. In the beginning, she’d been thinking about how she hoped that Jon wouldn’t be too upset with her about their argument from before, and then in the next second she was thinking about how Jon had wrapped his arm around her waist in the hall.

Sansa flushed just remembering it. What had she been thinking? It must have just been adrenaline—the leftover seeds from their fight that morphed into something completely different. If Jon’s phone hadn’t rang, Sansa didn’t know what she would have done.

And then, of course, there was the barely kiss goodbye. Barely having brushed her cheek and still, Sansa felt obsessed about it, over analyzing what it could have meant.

But Sansa should have been worried about Jon’s safety, not her own stupid emotions. The problem was, it was all so foreign to Sansa. She barely had a name for the feeling, but she knew that it must have been desire. That was the force that made Sansa’s spine tingle every time Jon brushed against her, it was what made her flush and avoid Jon’s gaze yesterday when they were in the attic and Jon’s shirt clung to him like a second skin. Desire was the reason, Sansa felt the urge to reach out and touch Jon every chance she got. Desire was a real bitch.

Because it was foolish. Because there was no way Jon would feel the same, and even if he did, as soon as he learned about all the things Sansa let Petyr do to her, he’d turn away completely, and that wasn’t something Sansa could risk. She wasn’t so selfish as to threaten her relationship with Jon because she was feeling, what? An infatuation?

But Sansa had never felt something like it before. Before, Sansa had been so certain that she’d never desire anybody. Before the very thought of a man touching her caused revulsion, and now all Sansa could think about was how good it felt when Jon put his hands on her skin.

You’re being stupid, Sansa thought, You know what reality is, so stop living in a fantasy. There are more important things than your childish pining.

Sansa decided then that she had to get out of the house. Being there did her no good, she just felt trapped with her own thoughts. She also decided that she was right, there were more important things than whatever she felt for Jon. She looked down at one of the files she found. A letter sent from Dondarrion Memorial Hospital. It was a payment receipt that must have been sent to the manor ages ago. Sansa folded the letter and put it in her pocket. Jon may have been wrong about a lot of things, but he’d been right about one thing. Sansa’s mother wasn’t something that belonged to Petyr. Sansa had the right to see her own mother and not be plagued by Petyr’s shadow. Sansa didn’t know when she would be in York again, and so she set out of the house and began walking to the road.

With some of the notes Jon had given Sansa before, she paid for a taxi to take her to Dondarrion Memorial Hospital. The drive took her right outside of York, to a large white building on a hill.

Inside it smelled clinical, like antiseptic and cold air. Sansa felt out of place between the clean white walls and people in lab coats. She followed the signs that pointed to the psych ward, avoiding the eyes of the doctors who looked her way.

She reached the ward and walked up the clean looked desk, tapping on the glass divider to get the nurse, who sat behind it, attention.

“Hello,” The nurse slid the glass divider open, “Can I help you with something?”
Sansa nodded, “Yes, I was wondering if I could speak to a patient.”

The nurse frowned, looking Sansa up and down, “Do you have an appointment?”

Sansa shook her head. Perhaps this had been a bad idea. Jon made it sound so easy the other day, “No, but I’m a relative.”

The nurse nodded her head slowly as if deciding if she believed Sansa or not, “Who are you wanting to see?”

Sansa wet her lips, “Catelyn Stark.”

The nurse turned to her computer and typed in the name. She read something over, still looking at the screen, “And what did you say your name was?”

Sansa couldn’t exactly tell the truth. Even if she could, a simple search would tell the nurse that Sansa was supposed to be dead. There were no relatives Sansa knew of that she could impersonate, which only left her one last option: lie and do it well.

“Alayne Stone,” Sansa leaned against the desk, “I might not be on the visitation list, but I’m—“

“Nope,” The nurse looked up and smiled, “I see your name right here.”

There was a pause, “What?”

The nurse nodded, “Yes, right here.” She pointed at the screen that Sansa couldn’t see, “You’re Catelyn’s goddaughter? That’s so sweet of you to visit. We all know Catelyn, she doesn’t get visitors often.”

Sansa tried to keep her expression neutral. How was Alayne Stone already on her mother’s approved visitation list? She felt a sick feeling in her gut. None of this felt right.

*Don’t be afraid,* Sansa told herself, *You’re safe. There is no way anyone could know that you were*
here. Jon didn’t tell anyone who would let the secret out, you were the one who chose to come here today, you’re safe. Don’t let him take this from you too.

Sansa kept her smile forced, “I’ve been out of the country until recently. I wish I could have visited sooner.”

“Right, well its no problem,” The nurse reached over for a clipboard, “I just need you to sign in here and then we’ll have a nurse take you back to see Catelyn.”

Sansa took the clipboard and went to sit in one of the waiting chairs. She played it safe and put false information down for everything. She knew none of it would actually be checked until after she left, and if there was any way Petyr did get the information from the hospital it would just give him false leads to her location. *You can be clever too:* she put her address for London and then put the postal code for Leeds. It would send Petyr in circles when he saw it, and if he ever did figure out where Sansa really was, she already is safe and back with Jon, and by then there would be nothing Petyr could do to hurt her.

“Alayne?” A different nurse came through a door and spotted Sansa, “Are you ready to come back?”

Sansa nodded and stood up, handing the nurse the clipboard as they walked down the hall.

“You’re lucky you stopped by now,” the nurse said as they passed through the halls. Unlike the rest of the hospital, this place didn’t smell clean, it smelled like rot, unwashed bodies, and stale air. “Visitation is still going on so there are a few more families still in the visiting room. I’ll need you to remove your shoes before you enter.”

“What?” Sansa looked down at her trainers and frowned.

“The laces,” The nurse explained, “If you’re wearing a belt I’ll need you to take that off too. The patients can get creative sometimes. I doubt you’ll be handing it over to a patient, but its protocol.”

“Right,” They were stopped at the end of the hall, facing a room with a frosted glass panel door with the words *Visitor Room* written on it. Sansa toed off her shoes, bending to pick them up and handing them to the nurse.
She tried to imagine her mother living in a place like this. Catelyn Stark was elegance, always so composed and proper. Now her mother lived in a place where you weren’t even allowed show laces because the staff thought you’d hurt yourself with them.

“Are you feeling alright?” The nurse asked gently.

Sansa nodded, “Yeah, sorry.”

“It’s alright.” The nurse said, “When people visit here for the first time it can be difficult. It really does help the patients though. When family visits it can really lift their spirits.”

The way the nurse said it made it seem like Sansa was making a huge sacrifice to be here. It made her afraid of what was on the other side of that door. Sansa hadn’t braced herself for anything dire. She just wanted to see her mum, to make sure that she was okay, to try and figure out why Catelyn Stark would abandon Bran and Rickon like she did.

“I’m not wearing a belt,” Sansa responded dumbly, gritting her teeth, “Is there anything else I should know before going in?”

The nurse shook her head, “No, let’s go.”

The visitation hall was mostly empty. There were a few people dressed in grey and white pajamas sitting at square tables across from their small families. For how big the room already was, the lack of people made it feel immense. The nurse left Sansa at the door, and so she walked by the different tables trying to find her mother alone.

Some of the patients were bound to wheelchairs like Bran, eyes absent and glazes over, others were laying with their faces pressed against the table, drool spilling from the sides of their mouths while their families tried to get them to talk. Sansa tried to block out the sound of their desperate pleas, Please just say something, one woman said to one of the patients, Anything, just let me know you’re still there.

Sansa walked quickly trying to see where her mother was placed and praying that she wouldn’t be as bad as Sansa was starting to imagine. Please let her be okay, Sansa begged, Let her being here be a mistake. Please let my mother still be herself.

Her heart stopped when she caught sight of red hair. Dull and darker than Sansa’s own natural color, but so distinctly Tully that Sansa knew it must be her mother’s. Catelyn's back was to Sansa, her hair hanging loosely around her neck. Her back was straight, shoulders back, not slouching and half bent over like some of the other patients were. From this angle, Sansa could almost imagine that her mother was sitting at the table in the kitchen, maybe with a book in front of her or a pair of
needles and yarn, knitting something for her children.

Sansa’s relief was so palpable that she thought she might start crying tears of joy. *Maybe one thing can be right.*

She was so caught up in her moment of relief, Sansa didn’t even notice the black haired little boy sitting across from Catelyn at the table. The boy looked up at Sansa, a smile spreading across his face.

“Alayne!” He shouted, jumping out of his chair and running towards her, “You came!”

Sansa could not breathe. All the oxygen had been sucked out of the room, and she could feel herself dying. Her body turned cold and her heart stopped as the boy threw his arms around Sansa’s waist.

“Robin.” She breathed, numbly placing her hand on his shoulder.

This was it, she had to run now, she had to get out of here. It wasn’t too late, she could still run.

“Not Alayne,” A voice chided Robin from behind her. A hand went to her neck, cupping it as the person walked forward, “It’s Sansa now, remember?”

Petyr Baelish came to stand in front of Sansa, right behind Robin, his hand still holding her neck, his thumb brushing against her still pulse. Petyr smiled, “We’re so happy you finally joined us.”

Chapter End Notes

CLIFFHANGER!
this might be my longest chapter so far, and it was a mess to write. I hope the ending threw everyone off as much as it did Sansa. Next ch. will be straight up angst and drama.
Other little notes about the ch. I love writing flashbacks, i would write a whole story of just flashbacks between Jon and Sansa. Also this story is so much longer than i
expected it to be, but we're over halfway through so it's almost over(ish). Also I know everyone thought Cat would have Sansa's pillow and I did consider going that route, but I like the idea of Rickon taking something of his dead older sister's to try and comfort himself in a moment where everyone was abandoning him. I feel like Rickon had barely any relationship to the other Stark kids (other than Bran or Robb) in the books and I wanted to expand on that and show how he did care about his other siblings, especially since his and Sansa's relationship is going to be important moving forward (at least in the fic). Also I wanted Sansa's motivation to see her mother be based solely on wanting to see if she was okay and not be motivated by pillowgate, also I thought it would be a little more tragic if Sansa was doing something solely for the purpose of reclaiming part of her life and then LF show up to ruin it. Also, I love all of your comments on the last few chapters!! Literally I'm always so blown away by the support this fic has gotten! I'm glad y'all like reading it as much as I like writing it!!

Please comment and kudos!!! You guys are so amazing and I love hearing from you!!!!!
Alayne was leaning against the doorway of the entertainment room. Robin was lying on the floor, elbows propped up with a pillow as he watched the projection screen in front of him. Alayne had just come back from visiting the stables with Mya, she still smelled a bit like horses, dirt and the fresh mountain air. Robin heard her walk in a turned his head to look at her, a big smile on his face.

“Alayne! Want to watch?”

Alayne suppressed a grin and shook her head. Robin was watching the Disney cartoon, Pinocchio. Alayne thought eleven was a little old to watch cartoons, specifically those about singing puppets. Still, she stood in the doorway to watch a few of the scenes pass over the projection on the wall, trying to remember if she ever watched this movie when she was younger.

Then something brushed against Alayne’s shoulder and she tried to keep her back from tensing. Father had just come back from a business trip that morning after a week away and she could smell his peppery cologne over her shoulder now.

Alayne didn’t know when she started to feel relieved when Father was away, she wasn’t sure when she realized she could breathe a little easier when he was gone, or why she slept better a night when he was not in the manor, all she knew was that’s how she felt now. Without the fear of Father finding Alayne alone or inviting her to his office and making her take a drink from his crystal wine decanter, Alayne knew she could breath easier. Father sometimes felt like a great big shadow that followed Alayne wherever she went, and sometimes it felt like that shadow might suffocate her.

She felt Father brush his hand over her hip and Alayne looked to make sure Robin wasn’t watching them. He shouldn’t see this, he shouldn’t be near it, and luckily his eyes were turned to the screen as Pinocchio joins some cartoon crook’s puppet show. He was getting bolder with these touches now that Alayne was older. Before touches like these were reserved for those times they were alone together in Father's office, back when he'd have to pour Alayne a drink from the glass wine decanter that sat on his office desk and urge her gently with the words *drink, you'll feel better soon.* Alayne let out an involuntary shudder at the memory and willed herself not to move away from Father's touch.

“You didn’t greet me this morning,” Father said into Alayne’s ear, his hand moving to her waist.
Alayne kept watching the projection screen, “I know, I’m sorry. I was at the stables with Mya all day. There was a new colt that her father bought and she wanted to show me.”

Father hummed, she felt the vibration against her neck and Alayne closed her eyes pretending she was not really there with him. She was able to breathe again when Father pulled away.

“I brought a present for you,” Father said, as he took a step away from Alayne to pull something out of his coat pocket.

Father often brought Alayne gifts from his trips. Usually expensive things, like dresses or jewelry he liked to see her in. Alayne used to like getting them, parading around the manor and showing off to Mya and Myranda. That changed at some point too, Alayne couldn’t be sure when.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Alayne said turning away from the projection screen to face him, the movie playing in her peripheral, “You were only gone a week.”

“Yes, but this isn’t an ordinary gift,” Father said holding something in his hand, cupped away and hidden from view, “It’s a birthday gift.”

Alayne frowned, wrinkling her brow, “It’s not my birthday.”

Alayne’s birthday had been three months ago. Father threw a party in the Vale for it, inviting several of his business partners over to celebrate. Alayne was gifted with an amethyst necklace during the dinner.

“No,” Father agreed, “It’s not Alayne Stone’s birthday, but it is Sansa Starks.”

Alayne only stared, resisting the urge to look around to see if anyone overheard Father say that. It was only her secondary reaction to consider if this was true. Was it Sansa’s birthday? That girl had been dead for so long, Alayne couldn’t even remember.

“Today,” Father said, “You turn eighteen.”

Alayne’s mouth pulled into a frown, as she shook her head, “Why are you telling me this? Sansa’s
dead, I’m Alayne now.”

“But you don’t have to be,” Father held up the gift, revealing a little, velvet jewelry box. Alayne’s stomach twisted as she realized what it was. Realized why eighteen was important.

“What are you saying?” Alayne felt stiff, answering with an unfeeling voice.

Father opened the box. Inside was a diamond ring. It had a gold band and a rock the size of Alayne’s nail. She shook her head.

“What is this for?”

The world felt hollow all of a sudden like Alayne was watching all of this happen in a dream. She could still see Father in front of her, she could still hear Robin’s movie going on behind her, Pinocchio taking to the stage to sing, but Alayne couldn’t feel anything. Nothing except a cold, sickening twist in the air.

“I can protect you now,” Father said taking a step forward, “Not just as Alayne, but as Sansa. As my wife I can protect you, we’ll take back your family estate, we’ll go back to London. No one can hurt you anymore.”

Alayne stared down at the ring. She could still hear Robin’s movie behind her as if proving that she really was here, and this really was happening. That the world was still spinning, and people were still living normal lives, and everything was the same as it was a few seconds ago, except that it was much darker and the shadows were coming towards her.

“But I’m your daughter—“ Alayne tried to take a step back, but Father was following her, reaching for Alayne’s hand like he was going to put the ring on her finger by force if he needed to.

“And you could be my wife,” Father snatched her hand, taking the ring from the box. “Sansa don’t you see, this is what we’ve been waiting for. You don’t have to hide, I’ll protect you.”

And then father slipped the ring on Alayne’s finger, only letting her pull her hand away once it was securely on. Alayne snatched her arm back, bringing it up to her chest. She could feel the ring searing her skin, it felt like ice. She could not talk, she could not breathe.
“We can be together now like we always wanted to.” Father caressed Alayne’s face, upon seeing her fear, “I will never let anyone hurt you.”

I’ve got no strings to hold me down, to make me fret, to make me frown, Alayne heard the song go in the background, as she felt the world plummet and her gilded cage shrink. A door slamming shut, a lock turning into place.

“What if I don’t want to?” Alayne asked wrapping her other hand around the one that held the ring, “What if I want to stay Alayne?”

“You were never really Alayne,” Father cooed, his thumb rubbing against Alayne's neck, “You’ve always been my Sansa. We’ll take back what was yours, we’ll take back what is rightfully ours. And nothing will ever take you from me. You’ll always be mine.”

I had strings, but now I’m free.

Alayne nodded her head, tucking her hands behind her back. She saw Father smile as he leaned in to place a kiss on the side of her mouth.

“I’m so happy,” He said against her cheek, “I’ll make plans tonight. By the end of day tomorrow, everything will be as it always should have been.”

Alayne nodded again, as she slipped the ring from her finger, curling her fist around. He was right, by tomorrow things will be as they should have been a long time ago.

There are no strings on me.

The velvet ring box was sitting on the table, across from Sansa. She kept staring at it, listening to the blood rush to her head, her heart beating louder than the sound of anything else in the room.
They were sitting at her mother’s table. Sansa at one end, her mother at the other and Petyr and Robin on either side. Petyr pushed the box closer to himself, toying with it in his hands, turning it over and inspecting it. Sansa watched, eyes unblinking.

She couldn’t run. There were nurses posted at the doors of the visitation room, she wouldn’t get past them before Petyr caught her and made up some lie. She couldn’t start screaming, or shouting for help, oh, Petyr would have a field day about the lies he could make up to explain that. Sansa was trapped, stuck, and hopelessly, hopelessly a fool.

*You should have run as soon as you saw your name on that list.* She wanted to hit herself, *You’ve no one to blame but yourself.*

Petyr cleared his throat and smiled, “Look at this, a family reunion.” He set his hand on Catelyn Stark’s. Her mother did not react.

Sansa cringed. *You are not my family,* why couldn’t she just say those words out loud? Jon was Sansa’s family, Rickon was family. Petyr was not family. With the memory of bitter wine in her mouth, Sansa thought, family didn’t do the things he did to her to each other.

“Alayne—er… Sansa,” Robin pulled at the sleeve of Sansa’s coat, doing so several times before Sansa reacted and looked at him. “Does this mean we can finally go home? I’ve missed you so much! Your holiday’s lasted forever.”

“It wasn’t a holiday.” Sansa’s voice was barely above a whisper. She sat rigid in her chair, pulling her arms to wrap around herself. Maybe she could still get away. Somehow pass a message onto a nurse who could call Jon and tell him what happened.

“Of course not,” Petyr agreed sympathetically, “We all need a break from life for a little while, but eventually we must come back to the reality. Those who don’t, well, all you need to do is look at your own mother.”

Sansa already had. She didn’t want to look again. Catelyn Stark, Sansa’s mother, looked like nothing more than an upright corpse. Her skin was sallow and dry, dark circles under her eyes, which were open, but rarely even blinked. There was a red mark around her mother’s throat, and among it, there was a thin red scar.

Even with Sansa sitting in front of her, Catelyn made no sign that she recognized her daughter at all. Her face stayed as impassive as ever. The only way Sansa could even tell her mother recognized her surroundings was the way Catelyn’s gaze would drift to look at whoever was speaking. She herself, never spoke.
“You knew about this,” Sansa’s voice was thick with betrayal and anger.

Petyr sighed, “It’s a tragedy, one I thought best to protect you from.”

“She’s my mother.” Sansa’s voice broke and she covered her mouth with her hand and looked away before she started crying. How had no one told Sansa about any of this? Why did it have to be Petyr who was here when Sansa finally saw the truth?

Petyr reached out to grab Sansa’s hand, but she pushed her chair back the moment she saw him move towards her. The chair screeched against the floor, drawing the eyes of several patients and nurses. The room felt quieter suddenly.

Petyr kept his cool smile, looking around at the staring faces. Sansa could see the tick of his jaw, he was angry. Had he expected her not to do anything to fight back?

“Alayne?” Robin’s little voice chimed in, afraid. He tried to reach for her again but held himself back.

Petyr turned to Robin, “Why don’t you go over to one of the other tables and see if anyone wants to talk to you.”

“But they’re all old.” Robin frowned.

Petyr’s face hardened. He still smiled, but any pretense of choice was absent in his voice. “Go to another table, Robin. Your sister and I have things to discuss.”

Robin nodded slowly, slipping out of his chair and passed Sansa. She felt her body seize up; she couldn’t be alone with Petyr, not here, not with Mother watching. Sansa’s hand darted out and grabbed onto Robin’s arm, holding him in place.

“No don’t,” Sansa begged, her eyes wide with fear, “Stay here, with us, please.”

Robin froze looking between Sansa and Petyr. Petyr’s expression was unchanging. Sansa could see the struggle Robin was having with the choice. Robin had never seen Sansa like this; as Alayne,
she was the one to always take care of him, but now as Sansa, she found herself having to beg him to protect her this once.

“Let go of him, Sansa.” Petyr’s voice had a musical quality to it, the command quiet, but firm.

Sansa let go, and Robin fell back several steps, before turning and running to a different table. She watched him go, her hands still reaching out like she could still grab him. Slowly they fell, and Sansa let them retreat to her chest as she went still.

Petyr sighed, “Now, that wasn’t too hard, was it?”

He still watched Sansa carefully as she moved like a ghost to sit back at her chair.

Sansa listened to the steady rise and fall of her chest, “Let me go.” She whispered her plea, feeling an unknown force hold her down. She felt paralyzed.

“Sansa,” Petyr gave a little laugh, “You act like I’m keeping you here against your will. Have I stopped you from leaving, even once?”

No, he hadn’t. But that wasn’t the point. Maybe Sansa really could get out through the doors of the visitor room, but where could she go now where Petyr wouldn’t find her?

*Don’t be a coward.* Sansa shut her eyes tightly and told herself, *You aren’t Alayne. You don’t have to be afraid of Petyr anymore.*

Sansa opened her eyes and let out a deep breath. Petyr was watching her, his eyes glowing with intrigue. What was he thinking? What was he planning? Sansa had to try and be smarter than him in whatever game he was playing.

“I’m not going back to the Vale.” Sansa gripped the edge of her chair and stared Petyr down.

“We don’t have to go back there,” Petyr replied casually, “Where would you like to go? Paris, Rome? Didn’t you always say you wanted to go to the tropics, we could go there?”
Sansa’s mouth fell into a hard line, “I’m not going to go anywhere with you.”

“Please don’t be difficult,” Petyr sighed, “I’m trying to be amiable here, and your hostility is making it very difficult.”

“My hostility?” Sansa’s voice pitched as she leaned back.

Petyr nodded, “Look at little Robin there, do you know what you put him through? And then what about your friends, Mya and Myranda—none of us knew where you went. We were worried sick.”

*He’s a liar, remember that he’s a liar.*

“You told Robin I was on holiday, he couldn’t have been that worried.”

Petyr clicked his tongue, shaking his head; “I did that for his own health. You know how he worries when you’re not near. You hardly left me with any other choice.”

“And everyone else? I’m sure you told them the same lie.” Sansa dug her nails into the wood, trying her best to keep her calm. Sansa could see the game Petyr was playing—blaming her for hurting everyone when she ran away as if that could guilt her into coming back.

“What are you trying to prove here, Sansa?” Petyr asked, mouth turned in genuine concern.

What was she trying to prove? Sansa felt her blood rush to her head, she couldn’t think straight. Petyr was already winning the game and they’d only just begun.

“I could scream.” Sansa looked around wildly, seeing who was left in the room, “I’ll tell them you kidnapped me.”

“And then what?” Petyr leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers and waiting for the response.
Sansa’s vision started to cloud. She shook her head, she had to think clearly, “They’ll arrest you, they’ll take me back to—“

“Jon Snow?” Petyr supplied and Sansa stopped breathing. Petyr knew about Jon, of course, he did. “Do you really believe things are so simple, Sansa? I thought I taught you better. You’re thinking with your heart again, try thinking with your head for once.”

Sansa was trying. She had to focus on what was important. If she let her emotions rule her nothing was going to get done.

“How do you know about Jon?” She swallowed down her fear and tried to compose herself again. Across from her, Sansa thought she saw a flicker of something in her mother’s eyes, but it was gone too soon.

“Oh, I’ve known about Jon for a while,” Petyr explained easily, “Sad story, isn’t it? The orphan turned foster son a wealthy businessman, turned orphan again? It’s almost as sad as what happened to your brother, Rickon.”

Sansa composure was gone, again, just like that. Every wall she built, Petyr knew exactly how to knock down. “If you’ve hurt him, I swear to god—“

“I don’t want to hurt anyone, Sansa.” Petyr splayed his hands, his voice sounding so honest, “I’ve only ever wanted to help you, you know that. So why would I hurt your brother? No, Sansa, the only thing I want to do is help him.”

“Help him?” Sansa repeated. *He’s a liar, Petyr always lies.* “How would you help him?”

Petyr sat back in his chair, “I’ve heard about Jon Snow’s case to try and gain custody of Rickon. He’s having trouble in the courts, isn’t he? Something about Cat’s character letter blocking his motion.”

Petyr had known about everything, didn’t he? For seven years he told Sansa that her little brothers were safe in Stark Manor and that Jon was away in military service, but not for a moment had he ever thought any of that was true. This entire time, he’d been lying to Sansa’s face about everything.
“Jon doesn’t need your help,” Sansa tried to keep her voice even, “He’ll get the letter dismissed himself.”

“Will he, though?” Petyr leaned forward, his elbows almost touching Sansa, “These court cases are so very complicated. If Cat’s letter is dismissed, it would only take one person to come forward and claim that everything she wrote in it was true to cast enough doubt to a judge.”

Sansa shook her head, “That’s not true.”

“I’m trying to help you, Sansa,” Petyr frowned, “Why would I lie to you?”

“You lie,” Sansa hissed, lunging forward, “You always lie. You aren’t trying to help us at all, you’re just making threats.”

“I’m sad you see it that way,” Petyr sighed, face truly looking hurt, “If you would only listen, I’d tell you how I plan to help. I have connections in the court systems here. All I want is for Rickon to return to his family, if I ask for it, Jon Snow will have custody of Rickon as early as the end of the week.”

Sansa felt herself being pulled in several directions, “You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

“Then you’re keeping something out. You never do something for nothing. If you get Rickon into Jon’s custody, what do you want in return?”

She knew the answer, Petyr said it anyway, “You.” Sansa felt herself shrink back. Petyr folded his hands in his lap, casually leaning against the back of the chair, “I’ll forgive this past indiscretion. I understand proposals can be stressful, and you weren’t expecting it. Perhaps that wasn’t very fair of me to spring it on you like I did.”

“No.” Sansa shook her head, bile filling her mouth, “Absolutely not, no.”

“I’m already being very generous,” Petyr warned, “I’ve protected you after all these years, but I
don’t have to. I don’t want to, of course, but I’m sure Cersei Lannister would reward me if I brought you to her, she at least, understands loyalty.”

“You’re still lying.” Sansa called his bluff, “You’d never bring me to Cersei. You know she’d just kill me.”

*If that’s even true.* Sansa wondered if everything Petyr told her about Cersei had been a lie as well. Sansa never thought so, but maybe she’d been wrong.

Petyr waited a moment as if considering if what Sansa said was true, and then nodded, “You’re right. My biggest fault, I suppose is my devotion to you.” He sighed, “No, if I had to threaten you I’d use Jon Snow, wouldn’t I? It appears that’s where your devotion lies. It's not hidden well, even now I can see how your breathing stopped when I mentioned his name. If I needed to threaten you, I would just have to use him. I’m sure you know how easy it is to get rid of people, especially in this day and age, with those rampant gang activities—all it would really take is a phone call. And with Jon Snow gone, I wonder what would happen to little Rickon? Nothing good I suppose. If you needed further persuasion I could always use him.”

Sansa sat still. Petyr didn’t make false threats, Sansa knew that well enough. He may not dangle Sansa over the flames, but there was no reason he wouldn’t hurt Jon or Rickon if he thought it would keep Sansa at his side.

If this were a game, really truly a game, then this meant Sansa was out of cards. She had no more pieces to play, nothing left on the board to move. And Petyr knew it too. He wasn’t smiling so much as he was smirking, hands folded on the table, as he waited for Sansa to speak.

But there was nothing for Sansa to say. She’d lost, that’s what this meant. There was no other way this story could have ended for her—Petyr always won.

Sansa felt detached. She’d become a ghost again, watching the world spin as she stayed still. Voices were muted, sensations, gone. Like her mother, Sansa felt like a corpse, lifeless, with a predetermined future that would leave her with no choices. And isn’t that what she was running from this entire time?

Petyr slid the ring box across the table again, and Sansa was staring at it again. Her hand slowly lifted, she was shaking, she hadn’t even noticed until then, as she reached the distance to set her hand on the box.

A deep guttural groan made Sansa freeze. Sansa looked up at her mother, who’d been nothing more than some lifeless prop until that moment. Her hand was frozen, floating just above the box. Her mother let out another pained moan, and Sansa stared into her eyes.

Catelyn’s eyes were fixed on her daughter, intense and burning. Her lips peeled apart just barely as she let out another groan, “Nhhaaa”.
“Sansa.” Petyr pressed voice tight with impatience.

“She’s trying to speak.” Sansa’s voice was quiet, “I thought she couldn’t.”

Petyr cleared his throat, “She can’t. Sansa, dear, please focus.”

Her mother gave another groan, this time a little louder, her body almost leaning forward ever so slightly, like the effort of making that sound was causing exhaustion.

She’s still alive. Sansa thought, She’s not dead inside, she’s just trapped. Mum knows who I am, she knows what’s going on. She’s a prisoner in her own mind.

Sansa felt a tear fall down her cheek. Unlike her mother, Sansa still had a choice. The game’s conclusion may have been predetermined, but there were still a few moves left until the very end. Sansa could choose how they got there.

She pulled her hand away, forcing herself to look back at Petyr. Sansa Stark was not hopeless yet.

“Fine.” Sansa said, “I accept your proposal.”

Petyr paused, slowly he began to smile, but there was doubt in his eyes, “I’m glad you’ve seen it my way.”

“But,” Sansa continued, “I have conditions.”

Now Petyr understood. This was still a negotiation, and this time Sansa would be leading it. He sat back and gestured for her to continue. It was clear he was intrigued or maybe just amused and curious to see what Sansa was going to say next.

Sansa didn’t have long to think, but she already knew what she wanted. Petyr thought Sansa never paid any attention during the business meetings he used to bring her to, but Sansa always listened. She knew that the marriage was non-negotiable. It was what Petyr wanted, and Sansa knew why. The marriage meant two things that Sansa never could give Petyr as Alayne: it meant that she would be bound to him by law in a way her being his child could never secure, and it meant that Petyr would gain control of Stark Manor and Sansa’s inheritance. That’s what Petyr always wanted, control, power, and wealth, and his marriage to Sansa could give him all three.
“You have to guarantee Jon and Rickon will never be hurt,” Sansa said, voice finite, “If I marry you, you’ll never use them as a threat ever again. You’ll stay out of their lives, you’ll never touch them.”

“Is that all?” Petyr knew that it wasn’t, but he was indulging Sansa in her efforts.

Sansa shook her head, “You’ll get Jon custody of Rickon, and you’ll do it by the end of the week like you said you could. Mother’s letter against Jon will be dismissed and Jon will have sole custody.”

Petyr contemplated this, but Sansa knew he wasn’t about to say no, not yet anyway. These were the easy conditions, the one’s Sansa knew she could get. The last one was the gamble.

“And there’s one more.” Sansa sat back in her chair, “The marriage will be postponed a year. During that time I get to live with Jon and Rickon.”

Petyr laughed, head tilted back and a hand on the table to keep himself steady. Sansa waited for his theatrics to finish. Her own expression had not changed.

“And you’re finished now?” Petyr asked, still grinning. Sansa nodded, and so Petyr’s shoulders set and he entered the game, “Now, I know I taught you better than this. Sansa, you know that there is no reason I would agree to any of that. Why would I? I know you’ll agree to the marriage even without it, so what do I have to lose by refusing your demands?”

Now it was time to show her hand. Sansa did have one last card: it was herself.

“Because if you don’t agree to them I’ll fight you every step of the way.” Sansa leaned in close, voice unemotional, the threat dripping from her lips, “I’ll be your wife, maybe I won’t have a choice in that, but I will make it hell for you. There won’t be a day of peace for you, not until one of us is dead.”

Petyr’s jaw ticked. He was angry, “Would you really risk the safety of your brothers like that by testing my humanity in this way?”

You have no humanity. “The moment you touch my brothers is the moment I slit my own wrists. I said you wouldn’t have peace until one of us was dead, Petyr, and I meant it. My self-preservation
is gone. If I even think you might have hurt them, I’ll kill myself, don’t doubt that.”

Petyr was quiet, anger and frustration written on the lines of his face. *He may have lost his humanity, but he still wants mine.* Sansa’s life was her last card; she only hoped that it meant more to Petyr than her wealth.

A smile crept back on Petyr’s face as he leaned back in his chair, he understood the rules now. “And if I do agree to these terms?”

“Then I’ll be your obedient loving wife.” Sansa shrugged, pretending the words didn’t hurt her to say, “And you’ll get everything you ever wanted.”

Petyr must have liked these terms. He nodded his head, looking pleased, “Fine, but not a year. I want to be married soon; Robin needs a mother in his life. I’ll give you a week with your brothers before the wedding.”

Sansa’s face-hardened. She knew that it wouldn’t be that easy. “Six months.”

“Two weeks.”

“Three months.” Sansa folded her hands into fists under the table. She needed more time.

“A week and a half.”

Sansa narrowed her eyes, “One month.”

“Deal.” He probably wanted it to be a month all along; Petyr sat forward, “Now let’s hear my conditions.”

Sansa felt a chill go up her spine. She didn’t let her face betray her, she was just as emotionless as ever. Cold eyes, and a stone heart. Sansa looked over to her mother—there was pain in her eyes now, desperation. Sansa hoped that she couldn’t understand enough to know what was going on. Sansa was negotiating away her life, her freedom, and whatever else Petyr asked for her. But she was doing it for Jon and Rickon. If her mother did understand what was going on, Sansa also hoped
that she understood that she was doing it to protect their family.

“I can’t have you telling any lies about me to your brother while you’re away.” Petyr told her sternly, “You’ll tell him the truth. I was the one who took care of you all these years, and our marriage is the result of mutual love.”

“Love?” Sansa choked. It was impossible to tell if Petyr was serious—he certainly looked like he was, but he still sounded like he was feeding Sansa a script like he used to when she was Alayne. She supposed that’s what their marriage would be—becoming Sansa would turn her into the same painted puppet Alayne was.

“What else would it be? I love you, Sansa, I always have, even when you were just a little girl.”

Hearing those words was like being stabbed in the gut. The memory of being alone with Petyr in his office--being along in her bedroom--still felt raw. All those times he pushed wine to her lips, all those times she’d just stare at that glass decanter on his desk feeling numb, or curled under the covers of her room waiting for the door to creak killed something in her and made Sansa into a ghost and what was it to Petyr? Love?

Sansa looked to her mother again. Wishing neither of them had to be here for this. Her mother made another pained guttural moan and Sansa looked away.

“I’ll tell Jon,” Sansa swallowed down bile, “About your love, as long as you uphold your end of the bargain.”

Petyr’s lip twitched, “Let’s not make this sound like a transaction, Sansa. You’re free to choose, I would never force you into anything.”

She wanted to lunge across the table and make his throat as red as her mother’s. Sansa gripped the seat of her chair so that she wouldn’t. This was almost over, she’d gotten everything she needed to, Sansa couldn’t provoke Petyr now.

*He’s a liar, but so are you.*

Sansa reached across the table and took the ring box in her hand. She flipped the lid and took the sparkling diamond out, slipping it down her finger. She smiled, bitter and cold, “Of course not. You can’t force love, can you?”
Petyr’s smile was no more vicious, “In time you’ll understand the things I’ve done. You’ll thank me for them.”

Sansa looked at her mother one last time. If Petyr were not here, she would reach out and apologize to her for what she was about to do.

“Are we done here?” Sansa asked, blinking back a cold tear.

“Of course,” Petyr stood up from his chair, “I’m sure Jon will be on his way back to our house in York by now, you wouldn’t want him to think that anything is wrong.”

*It will never be your house*, Sansa held back her contempt, “Of course not.”

“Then you should go. I’ll have a car drive you back,” Petyr went to stand in front of Sansa, his hands ghosting over her arms, “I look forward to seeing you again, until then you know I’ll always be watching.”

And Sansa could feel his eyes as she walked away, she could feel the puppet strings being pulled, of course, she could, she’d tied them herself.

Chapter End Notes

The stress of writing this!

I had the flashback written a while ago. While I didn't really have much plot plans for the fic, I wanted her reason for leaving the Vale to be this since the beginning. Also, i’m super lame and wanted to include the fic title into the story somehow. Anyway, Sansa has sacrificed herself for her family, which is what she's been saying she would do since the beginning. While Petyr wants Sansa's inheritance, what i think he wants more is her obedience, and she took advantage of that and bought herself some more time with the boys. Before she'd been lulled into a false sense of security but moving forward she's going to much more paranoid about what she can and cant tell jon. Also Rickon will be coming back into the story!!
I hope ya'll like the ch! please comment! You guys are amazing!!!!!
“Are you alright, Sansa?” Jon asked and Sansa’s head snapped. She’d been staring at the wall, lost in a daze. She felt asleep, like Jon and everything else was a dream and she was waiting to wake up and be in the Vale.

Jon was still waiting for her answer.

Sansa nodded her head, “I’m fine.” There was nothing else to say. If she tried to speak anymore her voice would break and she would start to cry. *Tell him, coward. He’s going to find out anyway.*

Jon continued to look at her, eyes narrowing as if he was trying to piece together her mood from the last hour. He must have known something was off.

Sansa cleared her throat, and forced a smile, “So uh, what were you saying about um—” She waved her hand hoping he’d fill in the pieces. She hadn’t been paying attention to what he said before.

“The apartment was broken into,” Jon said with a frown, watching Sansa’s reaction.

“What?” Sansa took in a breath. Of course, Petyr had known Jon was away, he must have known about the break in to, maybe he’d been behind it. Didn’t Petyr say he’d be watching Sansa, how long had he been watching her?

Jon nodded, “I wasn’t sure what it was—when the station called they didn’t know if it was a random break-in or if it was intentional. I thought maybe it was…” Jon shook his head. He didn’t even want to bring up the possibility.

Sansa knew what he was going to say, “You thought it might have been Petyr.” *It was him, it must have been.*
Jon’s face said everything. It was his eyes, they gave away all of his intentions, his worry, his fear, his anger. Could Sansa tell him the truth and make it worse? He’ll blame himself, you know he will. You were supposed to protect him.

“It wasn’t,” Jon assured her, voice so very earnest. He reached across the table to grab Sansa’s hand—a gesture of comfort and solidarity, but when his skin brushed against her’s, Sansa jumped back.

Jon’s hand shot back to his chest. He looked up at Sansa with near horror in his eyes.

“I’m sorry—“

“Don’t be.” Sansa swallowed down her fear and sat back down. You’re scaring him, get it under control, “I’m just jumpy.”

Jon still looked guilty. Sansa wanted to say that it wasn’t him who she was afraid of touching her, it was Petyr, the memory of his hands on her skin all too clear. He’d gotten in her head again, and Sansa was still trying to get it out.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Jon asked so perfectly caring.

Sansa nodded, wringing her hands, “Of course. What happened to the flat, was anything stolen?”

Jon sat back in his chair and shook his head, “Not as far as I could tell. Someone just came in and trashed the place. Nothing was taken, that’s why we’re suspecting it was a targeted hit. I must have been the Faceless Men. I was looking into that murder investigation before we left, this must have been a message from them.” Jon ran his hand over his face and his shoulders dropped. He looked exhausted.

“That’s terrible, Jon. I’m sorry,” Sansa, said—she wanted to reach out and grab his hand. That’s what they did to comfort each other. The little touch always relieved so much fear, the reminder that one of them was near and with the other. Jon had tried to comfort her and Sansa had been too afraid to let him, but surely she could be braver if it meant helping Jon. She started to reach out her hand, but Jon stood up.

“Don’t be. They’re trying to intimidate the station into dropping the case, but that’s not going to
happen.” Jon paced across the living room, “I’ve got officers Tarth and Flowers on surveillance over the flat. If the Faceless Men come back we’ll get them. As for us though, I think it might be better if we stay in York for now. I can make the drive to work in the morning, but until all of this gang business is settled, it would probably be safer to stay here.”

“No,” Sansa shook her head. She thought about the dark woods surrounding the manor—they were so exposed here. Petyr has people watching Sansa at this very moment, hiding in the woods and tracking her movements. Was that too paranoid? Sansa didn’t know. She remembered how Petyr’s driver had watched Sansa go inside the manor from the driveway, staying out there for nearly an hour after she’d gone inside. At least in the city, she could blend in with the masses—she and Jon could go more unseen in Cardiff than they could all alone in the hills of York. Sansa took a deep breathe, knowing that she was being watched closely by Jon too, “No, Jon. I’m not afraid of the Faceless Men. I want to go back to Cardiff. We’d be closer to Rickon there and Gilly and Sam are there. If we can’t stay in your flat we could go stay in a hotel or something.”

It didn’t even sound convincing to Sansa’s ears. Certainly being near Rickon was a good excuse, but even Sansa knew that it would be smarter to stay in York until this Faceless Men business blew over, especially if it meant Jon might be in danger by them in Cardiff. But he was in danger in York too. Petyr threatened Jon once already—maybe he would use the Faceless Men to kill him. It didn’t matter where they were then, either way, Sansa had to keep up her act.

_You have to tell him. He’s going to find out once Rickon comes home, anyway. Just do it now._

Jon shook his head, “I don’t know, Sansa. I’m not going to bring you back to Cardiff while someone is threatening me.”

“I’m not worried about that, Jon.” Sansa had too many other things to worry about, the Faceless Men hardly made the list, “Let’s just go back. We’ll be all right. I know you won’t let anything happen to me.”

And then Jon sighed. He sat down on the edge of the sofa and tilted his head to the side, “You’re making that task awfully hard.”

Sansa’s face flushed. Her pale skin got red far too easily around Jon. He had the ability to look, and completely disarm her, even when he said the most innocent things.

It was so easy to be light around Jon. He encouraged the feelings of carelessness and freedom around Sansa. She’s hardly started being Sansa too long ago, but around Jon, it felt like maybe she never stopped. Around him, Sansa Stark never died; she was just waiting for something to come out for.
“Jon,” Sansa started, steeling herself for what she was about to say.

“No, you’re right.” Jon sighed, “We should be close to Rickon. You’ve had to run away from enough things already, I’m not going to make you run from something else. I’ll see if we can stay at Sam’s flat tonight, after that I’ll start looking into another flat, I’ve been meaning to do that anyway.”

Sansa pressed her lips flat, “You have?”

Jon nodded, “Well, you can’t sleep on the sofa forever. And if we want to get custody of Rickon we’ll need to have a room for him too. There are a few three-bedroom flats we can afford that are near the station. I thought that would be nice, the uni isn’t far from there—not that—I mean I thought maybe if you wanted to go back to school that would be nice for you.”

“Right.” Sansa wouldn’t be around long enough to go to any university. She had to tell Jon, she was going to, but now Jon was looking so hopeful. When did he start planning out their future? Here, Sansa was living day by day, but Jon already had long-term plans.

Jon opened his mouth and shut it. He looked away, “We should still stay here for the night. We’ll go back to Cardiff in the morning.”

“Okay,” Sansa wasn’t really listening anymore. She was caught in her own web of thoughts.

Sansa stayed in the living room until it grew dark, staying long after Jon left the room. She fell softly back on the sofa, eyes looking towards the window. She wished she could live in the world Jon had planned for them. It was idealistic, the three of them living in a flat in Cardiff, Jon working at the station, Sansa going to university, and Rickon safe and happy with them.

But it wasn’t possible, was it? Even if Sansa wasn’t going to leave for the Vale in a month, she couldn’t ever have such a normal life. That wasn’t in her cards anymore. That option had been given up the moment she woke up in the Vale.

She felt a cold chill pass her by, and Sansa looked up at the groves. In the moonlight, the shadows among the branches and roots looked darker. It was supposed to be frightening, a dark forest hanging in the light of the full moon. Wasn’t that something out of nightmares and scary movies? Sansa didn’t feel afraid—the groves were calling to her.

The night air was cold, but that didn’t matter. Sansa walked barefoot through the grassy yard until she reached the tree line, and then waited there and watched. How many times had she looked out her bedroom window at night only to see the groves and feel afraid?
Sansa took a step forward, her foot crunching against fall leaves. She stepped inside the groves.

“You’re just afraid.” Arya put her hands on her hips as she stood in front of Sansa with a prideful tilt of her chin.

“I am not.” Sansa crossed her arms, “I just don’t want to get in trouble like the rest of you. Mum says we aren’t supposed to go into the groves at night.”

Arya gave an exaggerated roll of her eyes, “You do everything Mum says. Well, then go back to the house, we don’t want you here.”

“Arya!” Bran shouts, from one of the tree branches where he sat, “We all said we’d stay in the groves tonight. Sansa can come.”

Sansa appreciated Bran’s defense, but she didn’t need it. She didn’t want to spend the night in the groves—at night they weren’t any fun, just scary. Bran and Arya didn’t think so. They wanted to see if the fey and direwolves they grew up hearing about really did come out to the groves on nights of the full moon. Mum would never let them stay out of the house at night, but they planned on sneaking out once everyone else was asleep. Sansa had overheard their plans, and while Bran had invited her along, Arya wasn’t so excited about her joining. Arya rarely was.

“Bran you shouldn’t even be up in that tree,” Sansa glared, “Mum says you aren’t supposed to climb them anymore.”

Bran frowned, “You’re uninvited.”

Arya laughed, falling back into the grass.

“You’re all terrible!” Sansa yelled, she turned to go stomping back to the manor.
It was easy to lose your path in the groves. At night the trees all started to look the same. The groves had no real trail, just the traces of a subtle path worn into the earth after years of people walking through it.

Sansa didn’t bother keeping to the path. She had no end goal in sight, nothing she was looking for. Sansa was just walking, feeling the earth under her feet, and savoring what free air tasted like. It was sweet, it was bitter, it was fading.

One month. Why hadn’t Sansa fought for more time? She wanted to badly to leave Petyr’s presence that she settled for the first reasonable option presented to her. One month wasn’t enough time. How was Sansa supposed to tell Jon and Rickon that she wouldn’t ever be able to see them again, in only a month? What about Arya and Bran? Hadn’t Sansa wanted to try and find them too—once Rickon was settled with Jon and her, she was going to try to find them too, and now she wouldn’t have the time.

How am I supposed to tell Jon?

That was the real question. How could Sansa tell Jon that she was choosing to go back to Petyr. Sansa had been ready to tell Jon everything about her past less than twenty-four hours ago, and now how could she do that knowing what choice she was going to make? Jon was too stubborn. He would never let her go to the Vale again if he knew the truth, but Sansa couldn’t stay knowing that he would be in danger. Petyr would kill him, Sansa didn’t have a single doubt in her mind that this was true. Sansa couldn’t be selfish, she wouldn’t be. Jon’s safety was more important than Sansa’s freedom.

She had to remember that. Sansa couldn’t be selfish anymore, but how was she supposed to do that while trying to protect Jon from the truth?

Sometime during her walk, Sansa came upon a great oak tree. She stood at the base and looked up, feeling tired and emotionally drained. She put her hand on the trunk and sucked in a breath. Sansa remembered this tree; it was Bran’s favorite one to climb. He wanted to build a fort up there when they were younger, but Father never let them. Bran used to be so good at climbing; perhaps if he weren’t so good then he never would have climbed the side of the manor and fallen. If it weren’t for that, Bran could still have been able to walk.

Sansa walked around the tree, dragging her hand over the bark. She came to the little foot hole Bran would use to start climbing it, and Sansa waited a moment before putting her foot on the edge and stepped up, reaching an arm up to grasp the low branch.

Sansa never climbed trees when she was little. She used to be afraid of heights, and Mother never liked when the children climbed them. Sometimes Sansa would watch Bran and how easily he climbed up the branches of trees and she would be envious. Nothing ever felt like it came so easily to Sansa.

It was easier now that she was taller and stronger. Sansa made it to the second low tree branch before climbing up a little higher. Bran used to say he could see the manor from the top branches, Sansa wanted to know if that was true. Every branch Sansa climbed, every time the bark dug into and broke Sansa’s skin, and every time she had to wrap her arms around the tree to keep from falling, Sansa felt further and further away from the world. It started to feel that if Sansa climbed high enough everything she was afraid of wouldn’t be able to get her. Petyr couldn’t reach her up in the trees, Cersei couldn’t reach her, Alayne couldn’t reach her.

Maybe she was starting to lose her mind. Sansa certainly felt like she was. The feeling started as soon as Sansa saw her mother, and since then she’d been unraveling. Nothing made sense anymore
—the rules Sansa was playing by were wrong, everything she thought she understood was wrong.

Sansa reached up to grasp the next branch. As she reached into a nook on the tree to grab hold, she felt something brush against her fingers. Sansa froze, it felt like paper. Sansa reached in deeper, blindly grasping for the paper again until she got hold and pulled it out. Slowly Sansa sat down on the large branch she’d been standing on, resting her back against the trunk of the tree as she unfolded the paper she found.

It was dark out and Sansa had to squint to make out the words on the paper. It was crude handwriting, as if written by a child. The paper didn’t say much only: *The Three Eyed Crow.*

Sansa quietly said the words out loud, realizing that this must have been written by Bran sometime long ago when he could still walk and climb.

Sansa laughed—she wasn’t sure why, but once it started she couldn’t stop. She couldn’t remember the last thing Bran ever said to her, but at least now Sansa had this one last secret message—it was ridiculous. At some point, the laughter turned to tears and Sansa couldn’t tell them apart. She was flooded with emotions—none were discernable from each other, all Sansa knew was that she felt, and she wasn’t sure that if by the end of the month she’d ever be able to say that again.

And this wasn’t something Sansa wanted to lose. For the last six years, Sansa had forgotten what truly feeling was like. She didn’t even realize how numb she’d been before, living like a revenant, no different than her mother in the hospital, a prisoner in her own mind. After experiencing true feelings again, Sansa knew there was no way she could go back, not without a fight.

This is why she needed to tell Jon she’d seen Petyr. There wasn’t a way around it anymore. They didn’t have very long—one month was nothing, and in that time Sansa needed to make sure that Petyr couldn’t do anything to hurt them. She suddenly decided that she had no intentions of going back to the Vale, not if she could help it, but if Petyr could still threaten to hurt Jon and Rickon then Sansa wouldn’t have a choice. Her safety was secondary to theirs, she’d gladly give up her freedom for them, but if there was another option…

If there was another option—if Sansa could guarantee Jon and Rickon’s safety, then Petyr couldn’t take Sansa back. She wouldn’t let him, not anymore. Sansa couldn’t go back to being a ghost if she did it would truly kill her this time.

Sansa climbed down the oak tree and walked forward to the manor. Bran’s little note was folded and tucked away in Sansa’s pocket. One day, if she ever saw him again, Sansa would give it to him. Now that was an option, Sansa’s fate wasn’t sealed yet.

Inside the manor, Sansa followed the sound of Jon’s voice into the library. He was ending a phone call, looking up as Sansa walked into the room. He looked relieved, shoulders relaxing as she walked up to him, and the tension leaving his bones.

“Sansa,” Jon let out a breath as he stood up from a chair, “God, where were you? You’ve been gone for hours.”

Had she? Sansa barely felt like any time had passed. It didn’t matter, not really. Sansa had decided to tell the truth, at least the most truth she could stomach. For what she needed to do, Sansa knew she couldn’t do it alone, and once Jon knew the truth, he wouldn’t care how long Sansa had been
missing either. They would have more important problems.

“Jon, we need to talk.”

Chapter End Notes

This took way too long to write.
Next chapter will be much longer and have a lot more going on. This was mostly a filler chapter that set some stuff up and gave some insight on what Sansa was thinking. Also, everyone was wondering why Jon would have left Sansa in York, and now we get to find out why! His apartment was broken into and bc of reasons (to be revealed later) he thought it must have been done by LF, which is why he wanted to leave Sansa at the manor where he thought it was safe.
Next up we'll get more of the stark mystery gang solving some things, and hopefully very soon we'll be getting more rickon!
Sorry this took so long to post! Hope y'all enjoy it!!
It would have been less painful to be hit by a bus.

Jon sat quietly on the edge of the large chair in the library, his hands folded into fists as he forced himself to be still while Sansa continued to tell him how Petyr Baelish had managed to find her and threaten her all over again. The worst part was how calm she looked while she told him. Sansa’s face betrayed no emotions, voice cool and contained. She didn’t even look like she was talking about something happening to herself, rather that she was talking about some danger that was happening far away and wouldn’t affect her.

It hurt to watch, to know that Jon had failed Sansa for the second time, and to also know that she held no blame for him on that. She had told him so, several times, each following one of Jon’s long, desperate apologies.

“He was going to find me,” Sansa would say, “It was only a matter of time. If it weren’t at the hospital it would have been at the flat while you were at work. Trying to blame each other for this isn’t going to do anything—the only person at fault is Petyr.”

_Petyr_, Jon hated when Sansa said his name. It gave her that dead look in her eyes, that made Jon want to reach out to her and banish.

He held still. Maybe Jon could reach out and hold Sansa, but as she was now, he didn’t think she would appreciate it. Jon thought about how he tried to grab her hand before, and how she nearly jumped out of her skin. Jon thought she just didn’t want to be touched by Jon—as if that was some sort of subtle rejection—at first, it bruised his ego, but Jon thought it was more than a little suspicious. Now he knew why.

All of Jon’s previous worries about the break-in at the flat were gone. What a fool he was, thinking that Petyr Baelish was searching for Sansa in Cardiff when all along he’d been waiting for Sansa to come to him here in York. Jon even was the one to suggest visiting Catelyn in the hospital. Sansa might not have blamed Jon, but Jon certainly did. He should have brought Sansa with him to Cardiff, he never should have left her side, and after this, he might not ever leave her alone again.

“You aren’t ever going to have to see him again,” Jon promised Sansa, holding himself back so he wouldn’t reach out to comfort her.

Sansa looked away, she was wringing her hands in her lap. Jon heard her let out a slow breath, “Jon, there’s more that you should know.”
Jon felt sick. What else was there to know? Baelish had found Sansa and he had threatened Jon and Rickon in order to try and manipulate Sansa back to his side. Wasn’t all that bad enough, what more had Sansa suffered?

When Sansa came into the library, looking disheveled; her hair tangled and elbows red and scraped up, shoes inexplicably missing, Jon thought something horrible must have happened to her while he was taking some work calls, giving her the space he thought she needed. But Sansa came back to him even calmer than she was before. He thought the worst of her explanations must have been over. She was being so strong, Jon could at least match that.

Jon’s felt tense, nodding his head, “Okay, you can tell me.”

Sansa hadn’t really shown any emotion until that moment. She couldn’t meet Jon’s eyes. She stood up from the chair she dragged over near him and started pacing the library, pulling her hand through her hair and letting it snag on the tangles. Her reaction only served to make Jon feel more anxious. He felt so useless—so unable to reach out and help, not at least, without making everything worse.

“It’s why I left the Vale,” Sansa finally said as she stood still, “It’s the same reason Petyr wants me back.”

Throughout Sansa’s whole explanation, she’d left out any mention of what her time in the Vale was like. Jon hadn’t pushed for details, he could assume enough based on her reactions, and Jon didn’t need her to go through the discomfort of reliving it to tell him. Part of Jon didn’t want to know about what happened there. He wasn’t sure if he could keep himself calm if Sansa confirmed all of his worst fears, and he needed to be calm, for her.

Jon couldn’t give a verbal answer, so he just nodded his head again, preparing himself for the onslaught.

Sansa bit her lips, pulling it between her teeth. She had started to wring her hands again, “It’s not —” she took a deep breathe, “It’s not what you probably think…”

Jon hoped Sansa couldn’t tell what he thought. He hoped that it wasn’t that. Jon didn’t pray, but he would pray for this now.

“Petyr—“ Sansa started but then lost her nerve and began to pace again. She looked so desperate to tell Jon, but every time she started something stopped her.
“Sansa,” Jon spoke calmly, standing up and walking near her, “You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to.”

Sansa gave a short laugh, it sounded crazed and upset, “I know that—I just…” she shook her head again, her delicate hands closing into fists. “I just don’t want you to get upset when I tell you.”

Jon blinked back his surprise. He took a step back, a frown on his face. None of this was about him, it was about Sansa. “I won’t be upset.”

Sansa gave another humorless laugh, crossing her arms over her chest, “You’ll be upset, but when I tell you, you’ve got to thinking clearly.”

Jon couldn’t believe what she was telling him. Sansa was coaching him through what an appropriate reaction to her news should be. It would almost have been laughable if it hadn’t served to just make Jon more confused. More worried.

“I’m thinking clearly, Sansa.” Jon was certainly, clearly getting frustrated. “You don’t need to worry about how I’ll react, whatever you say isn’t going to change the way I feel about you.”

Sansa frowned. That felt like the wrong thing for Jon to say, he knew it, she must have known it too. Jon never could seem to say the right thing around Sansa.

“The way you feel about me,” Sansa said slowly as she worked through her thoughts, “isn’t what I’m worried about. I’m worried that when I tell you, you’re going to do something stupid.”

Now Jon really was offended. Pride completely shot, and even more useless than he already thought he was before.

“No, that you are stupid,” Sansa explained quickly, “But you’re just so…protective. Petyr is playing a game and we’ve got to keep to the rules, that’s how these things work, Jon. If you do something reckless once I tell you what Petyr wants with me, then you could put yourself in danger and I can’t have that happening. I’d rather not tell you at all than have you in danger.”

It was frustrating, but Jon knew Sansa must have been right. While he didn’t think himself reckless,
it must have been something Sansa was worried about and so Jon had to prove that he could be calm.

“I promise I’ll be calm, Sansa. Just tell me, it can’t be worse than what I’ve imagined.”

Sansa looked doubtful, but she nodded her head and began to speak. “When I left the Vale, it was the night after my birthday. Petyr had—he uh…just got back from a trip. He came to find me and he said he got me a gift—a present.”

Jon went over to sit back down, listening intently to the story Sansa was telling. He knew she was drawing it out because she was scared.

“It was…” Sansa paused as she reached for something in her back pocket, holding it in her fist. She took a breath and then said very quickly, as if ripping a band-aid off, “It was a ring. Petyr, he proposed to me.”

It was simultaneously better and worse than what Jon could have imagined. He wanted to lunge out of his chair and track Petyr Baelish down, he wanted to choke the life out of the man who thought he could try and marry the eighteen-year-old girl who he had kidnapped and tried to raise as a daughter. It all only confirmed Jon’s worst fears about what Sansa must have endured.

“It’s why he found me.” Sansa was still speaking quickly, the floodgates opening as the story spilled out of her, “He still wants me to marry him. It’s because he wants the manor and the inheritance Mother and Father left for me. I couldn’t let him get it, it belongs to Rickon and Bran too and I couldn’t let him take it from them.”

Jon jaw clenched. He was fairly certain that Petyr wanted more than the manor and Sansa’s inheritance. Sansa was trying to spare Jon the details, and it hurt so much more that she thought he was the one needing protection from the situation.

Sansa must have been grasping the ring in her hand. She moved over to the table and set it there, looking relieved now that it wasn’t on her person. She went back to wringing her hands and pacing. Jon could hardly think about anything other than finding Baelish and making him regret ever hurting Sansa—but Sansa had told him that she needed him to stay calm, and so Jon kept to the chair, glaring at the ring, as he tried to reign in his emotions.

“I didn’t think he would ask again,” Sansa couldn’t seem to stop herself from talking, “I was being stupid—it must have been his goal all along. I thought that maybe once I was older he would let me go out on my own. I never really expected actual freedom, but I knew that he couldn’t keep me
in the Vale forever—the older I got the more people would ask questions about why I was still living with him. I mean, at twenty, Mya already asked questions. I was so stupid; I don’t know why I never thought that marriage was his end goal. Before I thought I could handle everything he did, because I knew that one day I would get to leave, but as soon as he proposed I knew that I would never get that.”

Jon closed his eyes and forced himself to stay calm. Sansa’s further explanation wasn’t helping him accomplish that. Every new detail made everything so much worse, vividly painting a picture of Sansa’s torment.

“You aren’t going back to him.” Jon was surprised by how steady his voice came out, considering what a mess he felt like.

Sansa looked up, falling still. Her face turned pained, “I don’t plan on going back, Jon. But you need to know that this is what he wants, and I don’t know what’s going to stop him.”

“We’re going to stop him.” Jon didn’t see what other choice they had, “But, I’m telling you, Sansa, I’m not letting you go back to him. Whatever happens, whatever you decide, you aren’t going back there.”

Sansa pulled her lip between her teeth, steadying herself and standing firm, “You don’t get to decide that, Jon. If it comes between the choice of your safety or me going back to Petyr, I’m going to choose to protect you.”

“And I’m not going to let it come down to that choice.” Jon was crossing the room, standing a step away from Sansa.

Sansa let out a deep breath, her head tilting up to look Jon in the eyes. Maybe this is what she meant about him being reckless. Jon certainly felt reckless, but he always did when he was around Sansa.

Sansa sighed and turned her head away. Her hair fell into her face, obscuring the look of frustration there. “Jon,” her voice sounded so torn, desperately clinging to control, “Please don’t make this difficult.”

And just like that, Jon knew he wouldn’t argue anymore. He shouldn’t have started to—not when Sansa so clearly needed someone to listen to her, not disagree.

Jon couldn’t have stopped himself, not when Sansa sounded so upset and Jon knew he was the
reason for it. He took the last step and closed the distance between them, and Sansa turned at the same moment to grab onto him. She pulled him in closer by his jacket, burying her face in his shoulder. Jon felt Sansa nuzzle the side of his neck, taking a deep breath.

“I didn’t want any of this to happen.” Sansa’s lips moved against Jon’s neck, and he shut his eyes, ignoring the sensation that jolted through his body. “I was trying to protecting you from all of this—I didn’t think Petyr would’ve been able to find me here. I thought I was finally safe.”

Jon kept his hand on the back of Sansa’s neck keeping her close, the other wound around her waist. He tried to savor the feeling of her being close—it was starting to become something like an addiction. Jon craved the closeness between them, missing her touch every time it was absent. He wished that the times they touched weren’t due to either of their personal traumas; he’d never touch Sansa again if he thought it would bring her peace.

“You’re going to be safe,” Jon promised, holding her fiercely, “We’re going to figure this out.”

Petyr Baelish, Cersei Lannister, Sansa had a lot of enemies. Jon was going to protect her from all of them, and now there was a time limit to it. One month, Sansa had told him. One month to make Petyr Baelish an inoperable threat. At least Jon already had Sam digging into Baelish’s past, not that the research had come up with anything useful as of yet.

Sansa began to pull away, and Jon had to tell himself to let her go. He pulled his hands behind his back. She hadn’t been crying, but she wiped her eyes anyway, before tucking her hair behind her ear.

She was hesitating. “Can we stay together tonight?” she asked finally, doing so somewhat shyly all things considered like she was embarrassed to be asking at all. “I just—I keep thinking that when I wake up I’m going to be back in the Vale already, can we just stay in the same room tonight?”

Since being at the manor Sansa had been sleeping in the living room, stretched across the large sofa there. Jon had been staying in the library, sleeping uncomfortably on one of the large chairs in there, mostly because he kept up research until late in the night and didn’t want to keep Sansa up with his constant phone calls to compare information with Sam.

Jon nodded his head, knowing that with Sansa near him, he wasn’t likely to get any sleep, “Yeah, of course.” Jon set his hand on Sansa’s shoulder, wanting to be close to her for another second more, “Of course we can.”

Sansa didn’t smile, he wasn’t sure she was going to be able to after today, but she looked grateful.
Jon knew that it was late; late enough that Jon was already starting to get worried by how long Sansa had been gone before in the groves. He looked over to the clock on Ned’s desk and it confirmed his thoughts.

“We can sleep in one of the rooms upstairs.” Sansa said taking a step towards the door, “Then there will be enough room for both of us to sleep.”

Jon blinked back his surprise. He thought Sansa was going to sleep on the living room sofa while Jon camped out on the floor. Of course they’d slept in the same room before, doing so in the hotel room in Bristol, but that had been when Jon was still in shock that Sansa was still alive, it felt different now, doing so under Ned Stark’s roof.

Sansa hung in the doorway, “Are you coming?”

Jon took a deep breath and turned to follow Sansa through the hall. Jon reminded himself that Sansa needed someone to look after her—this whole thing in her mind was totally innocent, and Jon was horrible for thinking otherwise. He felt horrible, flooded with guilt that even after knowing everything Sansa had been through that he still selfishly desired her nearness. Although, even if Sansa hadn’t asked Jon to stay with her, he probably would have kept close anyway. Just like she was worried about waking up in the Vale, Jon was worried to wake up and have her gone.

There was some awkwardness when they reached the top of the stairs and they decided which room to sleep in. Sansa started walking towards her old room, but stopped halfway there, pulling her hand away as if it had been burned. Jon understood. Jon already knew how much she regretted her childhood choices; he doubted that being in her old room brought back too many good memories.

Jon’s childhood memories weren’t that much better, but he started towards his old room anyway. He hadn’t gone in there during their time in York, Jon was avoiding it. There weren’t any traumatic memories wrapped up in the place, just unpleasant ones. Jon lived in that room during a very conflicted time in his life, where he hadn’t yet figured out how his past corresponded with who he was.

When Jon opened the door, he was unsurprised to see how much of his things were put away. The posters on his walls were taken down, the books and knickknacks put away in boxes. No doubt Catelyn Stark was counting down the days until Jon turned eighteen and moved out of the manor, of course, Jon had done the same. The same week Ned left for London, Jon left for military training. Part of him would miss York, but the other part finally felt like he could truly find out what sort of man he was going to be.

Sansa stepped inside the room, trailing her hand across a dusty shelf as she went over to sit on the edge of the bed. Jon didn’t let his eyes linger long. The same awkward tension that he felt in the hall had followed them into the room like they both could tell that they were doing something wrong, or at least something that Ned and Catelyn would have disapproved of.

Jon pushed open the curtains on the window and looked over into the woods. He could hear Sansa
moving around, finally standing.

“I’m going to take a shower,” She told him from the door.

Jon nodded his head. He’d taken the time to take one that morning after he went on his run. He heard Sansa leave the room, closing the door quietly and Jon took a moment before pulling out his phone and sending Sam an update on the new situation.

He left Ned’s laptop with Sam that afternoon, but neither of them expected much to come from it. When Sam got it to turn on, he said that he noticed some viruses that could have potentially wiped some of the software from it.

It was frustrating, especially now knowing that along with Cersei Lannister, Jon also had to worry about figuring out what sort of threat Baelish was going to be. Was Baelish’s power real, or just an empty threat to taunt Sansa with? It seemed that for a club promoter and a businessman, Baelish had a surprisingly large stretch of power, having somehow tracked Sansa back to York, as well as finding out about Jon and Rickon. Sansa seemed to believe that Petyr Baelish could simply bypass the entire court system and have Rickon come live with them in a weeks time, but Jon had time wrapping his head around that. Jon didn’t doubt Sansa was telling him the truth though, he doubted her once already, but it was clear now that her fears were completely valid. He didn’t even doubt that Cersei Lannister was a threat anymore. While they didn’t have any evidence that Cersei wished harm upon Sansa, Jon had dug up evidence that Cersei Lannister was involved in bribery to cover up Lannister involvement during the London Riots. Jon also found a connection between the officer who ended up shooting Ned Stark to the Lannisters, who’d previously employed the man on a private protection detail.

Jon had already previously scheduled a meeting with Stannis Baratheon, hoping that he might be able to give Jon some more information about the Lannisters, but after today, he might have to cancel it, in order to refocus on Petyr Baelish.

Jon hadn’t told Sansa anything about this yet. He was waiting until he found out more before he let her know, but keeping it from her didn’t seem like something he could do anymore.

The bedroom door opened again, and Jon turned from the window to watch Sansa walk back in, wet hair pulled over her shoulder, a pair of Jon’s joggers and one of the old shirts Sansa bought with Gilly on.

“What are you looking at?” Sansa nodded her head towards the window.

Jon looked out it again for a second and shook his head, “Nothing. The trees, really.”

Sansa nodded her head, seemingly agreeing. “We should get to sleep. I want to leave for Cardiff early in the morning if we can. We need to get ready for Rickon, and I want to talk to Sam about Petyr.”
Jon was glad that Sansa was starting to trust Sam to help them with all of this. There were a few other officers in the station Jon thought he could ask for help. It was going to take more than the three of them to solve all of these mysteries. He could trust Brienne and he knew that she would be willing to help. At the very least she could stay with Sansa during the day to make sure Petyr didn’t come for her again.

Sansa was moving across the bed, going to the spot against the wall and moving a pillow to her lap and wrapping her arms around it. She looked up at Jon with wide blue eyes, waiting for him.

“I’ll take the floor,” Jon reached over for one of the other pillows.

“Jon,” Sansa’s voice carried, “You don’t need to sleep on the floor. This is your room.”

Jon was standing near the bed. He was twenty-five, somehow still inexplicably avoiding sharing a bed with a girl. Of course, this girl was younger, practically raised as a sister, and currently very vulnerable. Jon’s feelings put aside, he still wasn’t sure how he would feel sharing a bed with her.

“I’ll take up too much room,” The bed wasn’t very big, the statement wasn’t untrue, “Go ahead and lay down, I’ll be right here.”

And Jon went over to turn off the light, proverbially ending the conversation before it could really start. He heard Sansa flop onto her back with a quiet sigh, as Jon went over to the ground, laying his head down on the pillow and closing his eyes.

Jon tried to remember when his last night in this room was. It had to have been the night before he went to training for military service, but Jon was trying to remember what happened that night. Robb had wanted to go out for drinks, he even invited Theon to come over and join them. They must have come back smashed because Jon could barely remember falling into bed, but vividly remembered waking up and feeling sick.

Jon tried to forget all of that. He didn’t like thinking about Robb, who had actually gone into service and died in some other country, and whose body was never recovered. Jon should have been there with him if he had maybe Robb would still be alive. For all of Jon’s talk to Sansa about not feeling guilty for things they couldn’t change, he still felt an awful lot of guilt over his past choices.

It was times like this that Jon liked to throw himself into his work. If Sansa weren’t in the room Jon would probably turn on the lights and start working on an old case or start looking into old leads for Bran and Arya. Things like that helped keep Jon sane, knowing that he could do something useful in moments where he felt the exact opposite.

Jon moved over to lay on his back, looking up to the ceiling where the last of Jon’s metal rock posters were kept up, having been forgotten in the cleanup. On the bed, above him, Jon could hear
Sansa moving around, tossing from one side to the other. In a perfect world, Jon wondered what a girl like Sansa would have been doing. Probably entering University, dating some handsome diplomats son who her mother would have loved, and living an amazing life that could surpass anything Jon could ever give her.

Jon’s biggest worry before was wondering how he was going to support both Sansa and Rickon when they were living with him. On his salary, he was barely going to afford a three-bedroom apartment, and he imagined that Sansa was going to want to go to Uni once things settled down, and Rickon would need new clothes and things once he was out of the system. Jon still wasn’t sure how he was going to pay for everything, while also trying to fund Sansa’s investigation. He would need to take off more time if he planned on going to see Stannis, and he wasn’t sure how many more times he could do that before he started getting in trouble with the higher-ups.

The bed creaked again and Jon shut his eyes, listening to the sounds of the bed shifting as Sansa started to move around again. Jon wondered if Sansa was having a nightmare, and he was about to sit up and check on her when he heard her feet hit the ground beside him.

“Jon?” Sansa whispered, walking over and kneeling beside Jon, “Are you asleep?”

For some reason Jon kept his eyes closed. He hoped that Sansa would see that he was asleep and then get back on the bed and fall asleep herself. After today she’d be exhausted, Jon wasn’t even sure how she was still awake now.

“Jon?” Sansa asked again, poking Jon’s shoulder. He stayed still, acting asleep and listened to Sansa sigh. He thought she was going to get up, but instead, he heard her pull the blanket from the bed and then felt it settle near him. Jon cracked his eyes open a little to see Sansa’s back to him as she put a pillow down beside his and move down so that she was laying at his side. He shut his eyes again as he started to see Sansa turn around.

Sansa settled down at Jon’s side. Her head rested on his shoulder, her body tilted towards him, and her arm came around holding Jon at his middle. He kept very still as she started to get comfortable, moving around some until finding her place. She let out a sigh as she closed her eyes, curling around Jon.

Slowly, Jon moved his arm from beneath her until it was wrapped over her shoulder. He shifted his position so that they’d be more comfortable, and when Jon closed his eyes, he finally felt at peace.

Chapter End Notes
I am so cheesy. Literally thats all i could think while writing this. Once again, i'm not a fan of bed sharing tropes, but i just had to with these two, and so i found the loophole and made floor sharing a thing.

Anyway, plot is going to pick up in the next chapter. We're also getting stannis and rickon soon!
I never planned for this fic to be so long. I'm trying to wrap it up without sacrificing plot, my hope is that it will be done by ch. 30 but we'll see.

Hope you guys like this chapter! Thank you for all your comments on the last few chapters, I'm sorry i haven't replied to any of them yet, school has been killing me and my focus has been getting these chapters out before i get busy again!
Petyr kept his promise and did so before the week was over. He must have been trying to impress Sansa; that was her secondary thought when Jon got the phone call from St. Mordane’s telling them that they could pick up Rickon in the middle of the week.

Sansa’s first thought was that she was going to get to see her brother again.

Since getting back from York, Sansa and Jon had been staying at Sam and Gilly’s flat. An air mattress had been blown up in the living room, Sansa taking that while Jon slept on the sofa. Sansa wished she could be comfortable there, but she kept thinking about how Petyr was probably watching her, even here, and now he had to have known about Sam and Gilly too.

Jon was already looking into another flat to buy. His old one was still a crime scene and it also wouldn’t be big enough for the three of them to stay in. He had a few lined up that him and Sansa were going to tour, but that search had to be excelled when they got the call about Rickon. They would be picking him up on Thursday, which didn’t leave them much time to get the place ready.

Jon had Sansa wait at the police station with Sam while he went back to York to grab some things for Rickon. He knew more about the foster system than Sansa did, and apparently, he figured that Rickon wasn’t going to have much in the way of things. While Rickon would have outgrown most of the stuff in his room, things like pillows and photographs might still be useful. Jon also said he would go through the boxes in his room and bring some of that for Rickon to choose from, figuring that Rickon might favor that over his childhood toys.

Sansa tried not to feel like a child when Jon stuck Sam with babysitting duty. It was obvious that Jon rather take Sansa with him to York, but it was better for her to stay in Cardiff in case they got another call about Rickon and needed to pick him up sooner. Besides, Sansa could spend her time with Sam trying to piece together what she knew about Petyr, and what he had found out during his time of research. It would be easier to do without Jon present, where Sansa felt self-conscious revealing everything she knew. She told Jon the most truth she could bear, but spared all the gory details, if any of these details came to light while investigating with Sam, Sansa would prefer Jon not be present.

About halfway through the day, Gilly came over to the station with little Sammy holding her hand. She’d finished with her Uni classes for the day, and just picked Sammy up from daycare. Gilly took Sansa off Sam’s hands, taking her over to the shopping center to pick out a few more things for the new flat. Sansa noticed the large officer who followed them out of the station, she recognized her as the same one who Sansa ran away from when she escaped the station and sounded the fire alarm. It frustrated Sansa to think that Jon was having a police tail her. She understood why he would, but it angered her all the same.

Gilly tried to distract Sansa by asking her about Rickon and helping her pick out bed sheets and posters that he might like for his new room. They went to the second-hand store where they bought Sansa’s clothes and spent the afternoon finding things that would fit Rickon. Jon said he wouldn’t have a large array of clothes either and Sansa wanted to make sure Rickon would have everything he needed to be comfortable in their home.
She was also very aware of how much money everything was adding up to be. Jon had given her some for this very purpose, but she knew he couldn’t have that much on his own salary. Sansa also knew that there was another option. When they arrived back in Cardiff a few days ago, an envelope was waiting on Jon’s desk at his office at the station. It was addressed from the Vale. Inside was a certificate of void for Sansa’s previous death of absentia. Sansa had legally risen from the dead. With it was a passport with Sansa Stark’s name, and a stack of notes, that would have more than paid for Jon’s new flat. Neither of them had touched the money. Jon took the envelope and stuffed it in the back of his filing cabinet, looking angrier than Sansa had seen him look in a while.

At the end of the day, Sansa went to the new flat Jon had purchased that rested near the station—it wasn’t very nice, an older building that hadn’t been updated in several years, but far better than Sansa thought they could get so last minute. Gilly helped her start moving Jon’s old furniture around the place, even getting the officer who tailed them—a formidable woman who Sansa learned was named Brienne—to help them move the larger items.

Jon ended up coming home late. He had a small moving truck parked outside the building that they would unload in the morning, but for now, Sansa and him sat in the practically empty living room eating from a box of pizza.

The day they went to pick up Rickon from St. Mordane’s, Sansa couldn’t contain her nerves. She tapped her fingers against the window of the car, listening with only half interest as Jon spoke about work to try and distract her. Apparently, they were still looking into the break-in at his flat, but there were no new leads. A member of the Faceless Men was in custody, but they said they didn’t know anything about the break-in and the station didn’t have any charges to hold them on so they had to be let go.

Sansa should have been more concerned about all of it, but she was also fairly certain that it was Petyr who orchestrated the break-in at the old flat. Maybe he used the Faceless Men to accomplish that, but Sansa didn’t really see that much reason to believe that the gang wanted to hurt Jon.

They arrived at St. Mordane’s midday and were greeted at the door by Davos Seaworth again. He seemed more than a bit confused about how Jon had managed to gain custody of Rickon so quickly. He looked suspicious, carefully trying to pry answers out of Jon as leads them down a hall to collect Rickon, without coming across as hostile. Sansa didn’t blame him for his suspicion and if there were any good answers she could have given him, she probably would have. Sansa tried to stay quiet the whole time though, hoping to go unnoticed. Davos still thought Sansa was Alayne, and all things considered, it was probably best if he kept thinking that.

Jon and Sansa stood out in the hall while Davos went inside the dormitories to get Rickon for them. The paperwork for Rickon’s release was all filled out, and all that was left to do was take him home.

Sansa leaned against the wall, unfolding and then folding her arms as she tried to work through her thoughts. She knew that explaining to Rickon who she was wouldn’t be easy. She also knew that explaining that she might not be with them for more than a month was going to be even harder. Hopefully it wouldn’t actual come down to that though.

She and Jon had a plan now, or at least some semblance of one. During their drive from York they came up with the game plan—who’s goal was ultimately find a concrete charge to stick Petyr with and have him arrested and put in jail for an insurmountable amount of time. Sansa knew how vague and simplistic the plan was, but it was nice to at least have something to start working towards. At the very least, if they could find a charge that could stick to Petyr maybe they could threaten him
into leaving Sana alone. Surprisingly, Jon had no qualms about blackmail, at least where Petyr was concerned. Sansa had been the one to suggest it, but Jon hopped on the train pretty fast once it was out there.

Sansa had spent most of the last few days explaining what she understood and knew about Petyr’s business ventures to Sam, which would allow him to dig into some deep research on them to see what would come up. They were hoping for embezzlement or maybe bribery, something that would at least give them a jumping off point, since kidnapping would be a harder charge for them to prove, especially since Petyr probably assumed they might try to use that against him and he had more that certainly erased any traces of Alayne’s existence by now.

The door to the dormitory opened and Davos stepped out with Rickon walking up from behind him. Rickon looked angry, though that was no surprise anymore, still, Sansa hoped he might be relieved or happy to be going into Jon’s care. Rickon instead was glaring at the floor, his old beat up backpack hiked over one shoulder.

There was a new bruise on Rickon’s cheek, and his lip was split.

“What happened?” Sansa stopped herself from stepping forward and grabbing Rickon’s face to get a better look.

“He got into a fight with an older boy,” Davos sent a disapproving look in Rickon’s direction.

Rickon’s split lip quirked up in a smirk. He looked in Sansa’s eyes and said smugly, “I won.”

Davos sighed and pushed Rickon forward, shaking his head, “The other boy would disagree. Why don’t you say hello to your brother, and pretend that we’ve tried to teach you manners.”

Sansa hated that this is the person her little brother had become. He looked so unhappy, so angry. He was the sort of boy who scared children and got into fights with boys that were bigger than him. He hadn’t always been that way, he used to be the sort of boy who stole his sister’s pillow when he was scared, but he certainly wasn’t that way anymore.

Rickon nodded in Jon’s direction ever so slightly, still barely meeting his gaze, before walking past the two of them and down the hall. “I’m ready to go. Nice knowing you Davos.”

Davos shook his head and looked over to Jon now that Rickon was out of earshot, “He’s happy to see you, he may not seem it, but he is. This all happened so suddenly, I think he just hasn’t had the time to properly process it all.”
Sansa hoped that was true. It sounded believable enough, but things were never so simple.

"Is that all he has?" Jon told Sansa that Rickon wouldn't have much, but all his belongings fitting into one backpack still felt extreme. Surely he must have accumulated more over the years?

"It's all he claims he has." Davos clarified, looking skeptical, "Things get lost every time these kids move homes. Some of them start getting the habits of packing light. Other times though, they'll trade items with other kids, or leave stuff behind for someone else."

At least that made sense. Jon hadn't come with much when he came to live with the Starks either.

Jon nodded his head, “Thank you, Mr. Seaworth, and thank you for looking out for Rickon while he was here.”

Davos waved the comment away, and Jon and Sansa parted ways with him to follow after Rickon who was already out of the building and sitting on the stairs of the school waiting for them.

“Done talking about me?” Rickon asked reaching into the front pocket of his backpack to pull something out.

Jon shook his head, “We weren’t talking about you—“

“Are those cigarettes?” Sansa let out a gasp, leaning down to snatch the carton from Rickon’s hand.

“Hey!” Rickon shouted, standing up and facing Sansa, “Those are mine, give them back.”

Sansa was horrified to discover that the carton was already half empty, “How did you even get these?”

Rickon reached forward and grabbed the box from Sansa’s hand, “None of your fucking business. Why is she even here, Jon?”

Jon took the carton back, this time walking over and tossing them into a bin. He came back looked
even more frustrated than before. They had to tell Rickon who Sansa was, but right now didn’t seem like the right time.

“Let’s go to the car,” Jon grunted out, walking down the steps of the home towards the car park across the street.

Sansa held in her breath as she climbed down the steps and waited for Rickon at the bottom, “Come on.” She told him as she waited for the angry look on Rickon’s face to fade and for him to stop moving.

“Christ,” Rickon muttered walking ahead of Sansa, “When did Jon turn into such an asshole?”

The car ride was predictably tense. Rickon sat in the back while Jon and Sansa exchanged looks from the front seat. Now would probably be the best time to tell him, but how did you start a conversation like that? Sansa hadn’t even really told Jon, he figured it out for himself. Telling Rickon wasn’t going to be as easy as that.

Luckily, Rickon gave them their opening.

“So is this girl going to be living with us?” Rickon asked as he leaned back in his seat, his feet pressing against the center consul.

Jon took in a deep breath, “That’s something we need to talk about, Rickon.”

“Good, cause I’m not looking for a mum here.” He side eyed Sansa, “hate to crush your dreams.”

“I’m not—“ Sansa caught herself and turned around in her seat to face Rickon. She wished that she dyed her hair before coming to get him. It would be easier if she looked more like herself, but there hadn’t been any time to do that when they got back in York, “I’m not trying to be your mother, Rickon.”

“Lucky you, the last mum I had tried to kill herself,” He said casually, “Still sure you want to join the family?”

“Rickon!” Jon barked.
“It’s fine, Jon.” She hissed. Sansa could understand the place of anger Rickon was coming from. She could sympathize with the frustration and anger of being forgotten; she’d felt that way for a long time before Jon remembered her. When she first ran away from the Vale, one of the only emotions she could feel was anger, and then it was just fear.

“Yeah, Jon, it’s fine.” Rickon mocked, a twisted grin on his face, “What was your name, anyway?”

Sansa’s face curved unpleasently. It was now or never, wasn’t it? “Rickon, that’s the thing Jon wanted to tell you. I’m…my name is Sansa. I’m your sister.”

Rickon’s face froze for a second. The smug, prideful look slowly morphed into something else. “What the fuck?”

They spent the entire drive and then another hour trying to explain everything to Rickon. There was a lot of shouting involved. Several times Rickon demanded Jon pull the car over and let him out. He was convinced that they were both lying to him. Rickon made the claim that she couldn’t be Sansa because her hair wasn’t red, and Sansa bent over and showed him the red roots growing from her scalp. Rickon then said Sansa was dead, and that he remembered her funeral. Jon apparently remembered that too and told Rickon that it hadn’t been Sansa who was buried in the coffin, but a stranger. Rickon then just started shouting and by the time they arrived at the new flat, Sansa was nearly in tears, unsure of what she could possibly do to make Rickon believe that she was really Sansa.

When they pulled over at the flat, Jon asked Sansa if she could go inside so that he could talk to Rickon privately. Sansa didn’t make an argument, stumbling out of the car and walking straight to the flats and up to their floor.

She sat in the living rooms and tried to contain her own emotions. Sansa couldn’t start crying now; she had to keep it together for Jon and Rickon. Maybe she had been stupid enough to think that Rickon would actually believe that she was herself, but now she had to think of a way that she could prove it to him.

An hour later, Jon and Rickon came through the door of the apartment. Rickon didn’t even look at Sansa as he stormed past the living room and to the hall. He walked to one of the rooms and slammed the door shut behind him. Jon was still standing at the door, rubbing the back of his head, his arm flexing with the motion.

“He didn’t believe you.” Sansa looked away, and back to the door Rickon slammed.
Jon sighed and went over to sit next to Sansa on the sofa, “He’s just angry. I tried to explain everything to him, I don’t think he thought I was lying, but it’s a hard thing to believe. He thought you were dead for years.”

Sansa nodded her head; Rickon believed Sansa was dead for a little less than half his life. If Sansa were him, she probably wouldn’t have believed it either. “I didn’t think this was going to be the hard part.”

“Me either.” Jon slouched back on the couch, his arms spreading across the back, “He just needs some time to think. I showed him a picture of you from when we were younger. I think he can see the resemblance, he just needs time to process everything.”

Sansa leaned back, slowly moving until she was at Jon’s side, faintly aware of the weight of his arm behind her. She should move away, at least to the other side of the sofa, but she was so comfortable near Jon. Ever since she slept beside him during their last night in York, these casual touches felt much more dangerous. Sansa liked to think that she just went to him for comfort, but that lie was getting harder and harder to swallow. While Sansa certainly went to Jon for comfort, she couldn’t really deny her attraction to him anymore. Not that it mattered. Those were just other feelings Sansa was going to have to learn to push down.

“He’s going to hate me,” Sansa confessed her worst fear, “He’s going to hate that we lied to him. He was so little when I left, he doesn’t even remember me, and I never even looked for him. I would hate me if I were in his shoes.”

“He’s not going to hate you.” Jon promised, “He just needs some time to get used to the idea of you being alive again.”

Sansa shook her head and sat forward, “It doesn’t matter. We should start looking into the files Sam sent over about Petyr. We’ve only got four weeks left.”

Jon didn’t look like the reminder was appreciated. Sansa knew how much he hated to be reminded about Sansa’s dwindling time with him. When they got back to Cardiff she had made a countdown calendar for the time she had left before she was supposed to go back to the Vale. She needed the reminder of how much longer she would have, but when Jon saw it he’d just gotten angry. He was still under the belief that Sansa staying with him was their only option, Sansa wasn’t. While staying with Jon was certainly the ideal scenario, and certainly, the one she was working towards, she had to keep in mind that if they couldn’t find a way to protect themselves from Petyr, Sansa would be going back to the Vale one way or another.

They spent the evening in front of Jon’s laptop trying to piece together what they knew. Halfway through the night Sansa got frustrated and they switched back to researching Cersei. She felt like
she was being attacked from all sides. There was nowhere to turn where someone wasn’t after her.

For the remainder of the night, Rickon didn’t come out of his room. By the time Jon and Sansa decided to give research up for the night, Rickon hadn’t come out once, not even when Jon called him telling him that they had dinner ready. It had been Sansa’s room that Rickon had stormed into, and so Sansa took the room across the hall that they’d set up for Rickon to stay in. Jon told her that he could get Rickon to come out, but Sansa didn’t want to force anything. She told Jon as much, and he took it as well as could be expected. Jon always seemed so in control, but while there were exceptions to that, none seemed stronger than when he was around Rickon. Something about their little brother managed to send Jon into a deep frustration, where he had no patience and no control. That was something Sansa would have to look into when she had more time, but for now, it was good enough if she could just keep Jon from snapping at Rickon.

She went into Rickon’s room alone. It was sparsely decorated; neither she nor Jon wanted to invade the space with their own tastes before Rickon got the chance. Still, Sansa didn’t want it to be bare when Rickon got there so she put up some of the things Jon brought over from the manor. The bed had a blue jersey bedspread, with two old pillows from Rickon’s old room. There was a mostly empty bookshelf against the wall that Jon and her had tried to fill with some old books from Jon’s room. They also tacked up some old rock posters on the walls, and Sansa even sneaked in the old wolf stuffed animal over on the cabinet beside the bed, and next to it an old family photo in a black frame.

Sansa went over to sit on the bed, bringing her knees up to her chest as she pulled the picture from the table and held it in her hands. It was from when they were all little, taken outside in the front yard. Sansa was maybe seven in it, with a gap-toothed smile; Rickon was just a baby, held up in Robb’s arms, holding Rickon like he was holding up a trophy. Arya was in the background, her face half turned towards the camera as she tried to catch a frog that she spotted seconds before the photo was taken. Bran was holding Sansa’s hand, pointing at something in the sky, and then there was Jon, who was half bent over as he went to grab Arya and bring her back into the photo.

It couldn’t have been the best picture Jon could have found of them in the manor, but Sansa was glad he picked this one. It felt like the right photo of them to have, not liked the staged photos where Mother had them dressed in their Sunday best, all lined up according to age and smiling brightly at the camera. This one felt real, and looking at it Sansa tried to remember when it had been taken, and what that day had been like. She thought that maybe if she could place it, she could spend the night imagining that nothing had changed and that they were still those children hastily pulled into a photo and told to smile.

The door cracked open and Sansa looked up. She was going to tell Jon that she was fine and that he ought to go to sleep already since he had work in the morning, but standing in the doorway, with a very reluctant and stubborn look on his face, was Rickon.

“Can I come in?” He asked, looking like he hoped Sansa was going to say no.

Sansa sat forward on the bed and set the photo down on the table, “Yeah of course.” She waved him in and Rickon slowly stepped into the room, sticking his hands in his pockets as he looked around.
“So this is supposed to be my room?” Rickon asked, his eyes drifting over to the posters on the walls.

Sansa nodded her head, “If you like it. If not we can redecorate, or we can paint the walls—you can take the other room instead if you want—“ Sansa felt so off balance. She wasn’t sure what to say around Rickon. She was starting to realize that she knew absolutely nothing about him, other than what he was like before the age of six. Past that, he was a total stranger.

Rickon shrugged her shoulders, “S’fine.” He stepped over to the bed and rocked in front of it, “So you’re really Sansa?”

She nodded her head, “It’s really me.” What else was there to say? Should she apologize, or maybe try and do more to convince Rickon? If so, she wasn’t sure how. Sansa was ready to answer any question Rickon had though. She’d played every scenario over in her head since she got out of the car. Anything he wanted to know, Sansa would answer if only to regain some of the lost trust between them.

“You’re not actually engaged to Jon, are you?”

Sansa gave a sudden laugh. She shook her head, trying not to smile, “God, no, we aren’t engaged.”

Rickon let out a relieved breath, “Okay, good. That would have been a little too weird.”

Sansa agreed. Her attraction to Jon felt taboo enough like she was crossing an invisible line. Maybe that was because they grew up together, or maybe it was just because she knew that Jon wouldn’t have felt the same way about her. Other than a few isolated incidences, Sansa was pretty sure Jon just saw her as a little sister figure. She wished that wasn’t the case. Jon was the only man Sansa ever felt want towards. She tried to tell herself it was because he’d been the one to figure out who she was and to protect her, but Sansa also thought that even without that she'd still want him.

Rickon went over and sat at the end of the bed, he looked over to the table and saw the wolf, “Was that mine?”

Sansa reached over and handed him the stuffed animal, “We found it in your things at the manor. We figured you wouldn’t have wanted most of the stuff there anymore, but this reminded me of your dog, I asked Jon to get it for you.”
Rickon held the stuffed animal in his hands, a look of vulnerability passing his face, “Shaggydog.” He shook his head and the vulnerability was gone, “He went to the pound, didn’t he?”

Sansa nodded, “I’m sure he got adopted by a nice family.” That probably wasn’t true, but unlike Jon, Sansa had no qualms about lying, especially when it meant sparing feelings. “And Jon still had his dog, Ghost. Maybe tomorrow we can pick him up from the kennel.”

Rickon set the toy aside and shrugged, “Sure, whatever.”

That felt like the maximum amount of friendly feelings Rickon would be able to muster for one night. Sansa still felt in shock that he managed any at all, given the circumstance. Maybe this meant that he wasn’t going to spend the remainder of the month hating her, which was already more than Sansa had hoped for.

She stood up from the bed and walked over to the door. Looking back at Rickon one last time.

“I’ll go ahead and let you get some sleep.”

Rickon nodded, “Okay,” Sansa was already halfway out the door when Rickon spoke again, “Hey, wait.”

Sansa looked back and saw that Rickon was standing again, arm almost outstretched like he was going to reach for her. The hand went back to his side and Rickon’s face grew still. Like this, the bruise on his cheek looked even harsher, even more out of place on someone so young.

“I’m going to get to stay here, right?” Rickon asked, the words clearly a struggle to vocalize.

Sansa’s heart broke, she would have run up to Rickon and held him if she thought it would doing anything other than scaring him off. She held onto the doorframe to keep in place, “Of course, Rickon, you aren’t going anywhere.”

Rickon mulled that over, “You and Jon aren’t going to send me back?” he asked, needing one last confirmation, “You aren’t going to lie to me again, are you?”

Sansa nodded her head and promised, “We’re a family, Rickon, no one is going anywhere. We’re staying together, I swear.”
And so Rickon nodded his head, looking as close to peace as someone like him could get. He sat back on the bed and tried to rebuild the walls he kept around himself, “Okay, good. Night, Sansa.”

“Goodnight.” And Sansa shut the door. She was going to find a way to keep her promise; it was the only thing that really mattered now. Sansa wasn’t going to let what she said to Rickon be a lie, she owed him that much.

Chapter End Notes

I love writing Rickon. literally angsty tweens are just fun to write. Second ch. in one day! next ch things should be heating up as the investigation continues. I want to continue to explore the Rickon and Sansa sibling relationship, so he'll continue to be featured, but hopefully we'll also be getting more Jon/Sansa as things move forward, bc i've still somehow managed to get 80k in and not have them kiss. At least now they both realize they're into each other so they just have to get over their hang ups and we'll be good.

Please comment and kudos!
First thing in the morning, Sansa and Rickon go to the kennel to pick up Ghost. Ghost had already been staying at the Kennel for over a week, and Sansa had been eagerly waiting to pick him up. She thought that maybe seeing Ghost would help Rickon too, make him feel more at home with Jon and her.

When they leave the flat in the morning, the sun peeking out of a cloudy grey sky, they are greeted on the street by Brienne. The officer sticks out like a sore thumb on the busy streets. Brienne easily towers over everyone around her, and with her badge and uniform, she looks even more intimidating. She spares Sansa a small smile, standing out of their way as they leave the complex, and Sansa and Rickon start down the busy street. Its only after a few blocks that Rickon starts looking bothered. He hunches his shoulders, looking over them and then darting his eyes away. And even though, Sansa knows the right way to the kennel, when Rickon starts leading the way, she doesn’t outright object.

“I think we missed our turn,” Sansa said, looking back, as Rickon takes a hairpin turn in the wrong direction, weaving through the crowd like a snake in the grass.

Rickon roughly grabs Sansa’s wrist and pulls her forward. She stumbles from the force, as she tries to keep up; she could have probably pulled away—she was at least, stronger than a twelve-year-old—but she goes with it, letting Rickon drag her towards a busy crowd. Several times she tries to address him, but each time she is met with a sharp turn, or the crowds drown her out. The only reason Sansa and Rickon aren’t separated was that almost painful grip he had on her wrist.

“Where are we—Hey!”

Rickon dragged Sansa through another close turn until they were standing in an alley between two shops. Rickon put his hand out, keeping Sansa in place, their backs against the brick, her heart beating loudly in her chest, and feeling a little out of breath.

Sansa pushed Rickon’s arm down, trying to look around the alley, “What are you doing?”

Rickon peered his head around the corner, “Okay, I think we lost them.”
“What are you talking about?” Sansa said, once again trying to get a look at what Rickon was talking about.

Rickon looked down the street one last time, before looking at Sansa. His face was pinched unpleasantly, “I think we were being followed.”

Sansa blinked. Followed, by who? Was Petyr so blatant that he’d have someone follow her around Cardiff in plain sight? Sansa had to play through the scenario several times before she knew what Rickon was talking about.

“Oh, Rickon,” Sansa shook her head and started to walk out the ally, “That’s Brienne, she’s an officer who works at Jon’s station.”

Rickon was still trying to keep Sansa from stepping out, holding her back by the wrist, this time she didn't let him win. “What are you doing?”

“It’s fine, Rickon.” Sansa frowned, carefully wrapping her fingers around Rickon’s grip and peeling them back. She wondered what Rickon knew that made him so paranoid.

They walked back on the street and Sansa flagged Brienne down. Rickon was stalking behind her, glaring at their surroundings at unseen threats still, looking extra intimidating when they came face to face with Brienne. Sansa introduced the two of them, listening to the stilted and hostile exchange.

“Be polite,” Sansa hissed when Rickon refused to introduce himself to Brienne.

Rickon turned back to glare at Sansa, before looking back at Brienne, his head tilting way up to meet her eyes, “I don’t talk to pigs.”

“Rickon!” Sansa shrieked, grabbing his wrist and pulling him back, “Brienne, Christ, I’m sorry.”

Brienne’s face looks a little redder, twisted in an unpleasant grimace, “No need to apologize.”

Sansa disagreed, but she was worried that the longer she kept Rickon near, the bolder he was going
to get with his insults.

Sansa marched them to the kennel. She really hoped that she was right and Ghost would somehow help Rickon cope with his new change in life. Maybe Rickon didn’t hate Sansa, but he still seemed to hate everything and everyone else.

The kennel was located in an ice part of town, the complete opposite direction of where Jon’s old flat used to be. When the employee at the kennel, a young girl who looked disappointed that Jon himself wasn’t coming to pick up Ghost, came out the back with the giant white husky on a red leash, Sansa felt her breath catch in her throat. It was surprising what a visceral reaction she had to seeing him, what was more surprising was Rickon’s reaction. Sansa had braced herself for his indifference, instead, she saw Rickon step forward and go to his knees and sit in front of Ghost, his hands hovering over the dog’s fuzzy snout. Sansa watches, absently listening to whatever the employee was telling her, only really thinking about the relief she felt at how normal Rickon’s reaction was.

The girl who checks them out asks Sansa to tell Jon to stop by and say hello. Sansa gives the girl a tight-lipped smile, discretely looking her over. She was much too young for Jon, with that bit of hero worship in her eyes. She tells the girl that she’ll try to, and then she and Rickon leave. They take Ghost on a walk in the park by the station. Sansa hands over the leash to Rickon and lets him lead the way as they walk along the sidewalk between grassy gardens. The park is some sort of sanctuary to nature in the center of a busy, polluted city. Here, the air smells fresher, and the sunlight looks a little brighter. There’s a sort of magic to it that reminds Sansa of the groves. In London father used to go out to the gardens in he needed to think, Sansa imagines that if he ever came to Cardiff, this is the place he would go instead.

Once they’d fallen into a steady rhythm, Sansa chances a question, “Why did you think someone was following us, before?”

Rickon’s lip twisted between his teeth. Sansa remembered how startled and insistent he was, holding Sansa back from being seen. He shrugged his shoulders, “Jon told me that someone was after you. That’s why you used a different name when you visited me.”

Sansa hid her displeasure. Neither her nor Jon wanted to lie to Rickon, but Sansa’s version of honesty was still different from Jon’s. He believed in the absolute truth, Sansa believed in telling people what they needed to know and keeping the rest undercover until it became relevant. Telling Rickon about Petyr and how he was after her was one of those things she wanted to keep undercover.

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Sansa explained to Rickon, having to pick up the damage from Jon’s cavalier statement, “I’m not in any danger. Nobody is going to be following me.”

Rickon shrugged, “That officer is still following us.”
“That’s because Jon asked her to.” Sansa looked back to where Brienne was keeping a casual distance from them. If she thought Rickon would’ve reacted well, she would of asked Brienne to walk with them, but she didn’t think Rickon was ready for that yet. “She’s actually very nice, you don’t have to be afraid of her.”

“I’m not afraid.” Rickon snorted, “and what about the other one?”

Sansa stilled. She looked at Rickon again, who was kneeling down beside Ghost and scratching him behind the ears, and he looked up and waited for Sansa’s answer.

“What other one?”

Rickon stood up, a deep frown carved on his lips, “The other one who was following us.”

Sansa must have looked disturbed. She certainly felt it, turning on her heels and rushing over to where Brienne was looking at a rose bush. Rickon was jogging behind her, Ghost panting along.

Sansa grabbed Brienne’s arm to get her attention, “Did you notice someone following us, before?”

Her voice is a demand, unflinching and fierce.

“What?” Brienne’s face bent in confusion, “No, I didn’t.”

Sansa looked at Rickon and then back to Brienne, “Rickon says he saw someone tailing us when we left the flat.”

“It was only me,” But Brienne was looking around now, body poised for a threat.

“There was another one,” Rickon stepped forward, “I lost them when we went in the ally, but they were following us when we left the flat.”

Brienne shook her head, not disagreeing, but either processing or trying to recall what Rickon was telling her. Sansa watched it all happen with a sinking feeling in her gut. She had been wrong; this
is what Petyr must have meant when he said he was going to be watching her.

“We’re going to the station.” Brienne finally decided, directly Sansa and Rickon out of the park.

They waited in Jon’s office for an hour. Ghost was sitting at Rickon’s feet as he sat on Jon’s big chair behind his desk, scrolling through Jon’s laptop. Sansa was pacing, chewing her lip as she tried to work through all of this new information. Petyr had someone following Sansa, what did that mean he knew now? Could he know that Sansa was looking into his past to try and find something to use against Petyr?

“What did they look like?” Sansa asked Rickon as they waited. Everyone the clock on Jon's desk clicked, Sansa grew more afraid.

“I didn’t get a good look.” Rickon said, “They didn’t stand out as much as the big lady did.”

Sansa wished that Jon were at the station, already. He was apparently out on some call. Sam wasn’t there either, which was also disappointing. Jon might help Sansa calm her nerves, but if Sam were there, Sansa could at least tell him that Petyr had someone following her, and then maybe they could start using that as a building block in their investigation.

But Sansa really just wanted Jon. She felt unraveled again, losing herself down a rabbit hole of speculation and fear. Jon always knew how to bring her back to the surface. She was trying to keep it together for Rickon, but the longer they waited; the more afraid Sansa began to feel.

At an hour and a half, Jon finally came back to the station. Sansa watched him through the blinds on the glass window as he spoke to Brienne, before striding over to the office was a fierce determined expression.

Ghost left his head up and let out a single bark when Jon entered the office, his tail wagging back and forth.

Jon’s first move was to reach out, and placing his hand on Sansa’s shoulder and stepping close, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Sansa wanted to lean into his touch, but with Rickon watching she took a step back, her arms wrapping around her waist. “We’re both fine.”

Jon looked over to Rickon, a conflicted look on his face. Neither of them wanted to talk about this in front of him, apparently. At least on that, Sansa and Jon were on the same page. If there was an imminent threat they were facing, it was best to talk it out with each other before letting Rickon know about it.
“Rickon, why don’t you go with Brienne and take Ghost on another walk,” Jon told him.

Rickon sat up in Jon’s chair, glaring, “Why do I have to go? Whatever you’re telling Sansa, you can tell me.”

Sansa sighed, “Rickon, please.”

“No, I’m the one who saw the guy.” Rickon stood up, looking like he didn’t plan to move anytime soon. “I’m not a child.”

“You are a child.” Jon said with tempered patience, he sighed, “Rickon we aren’t trying to hide things from you—“

“Yes, you are.” Rickon spat, his hands turning into fists, “You both are. If it weren’t for me neither of you would even know that Sansa was being followed. Where were you when this was going on, Jon?”

Sansa sat down on the other chair in the office, putting her face in her hands. She couldn’t sit through another argument. Ghost perked up his head and padded over to Sansa, sitting down and pressing his wet nose against her knee.

This all was just going to keep going in a circle. Rickon and Jon felt like they were at each other’s throats. They had been since Rickon got back. She didn’t understand what was going on between them, she suspected that it probably started before she even left the Vale. The issue was Rickon wasn’t going to listen to Jon. She was reminded of Robin and how he would never listen to anyone but Petyr and Sansa when he was told what to do. Robin knew that he could get away with a lot more with other people simply because they all pitied him because of his sickliness and the fact his mother was dead. While that was not an angle that Robin probably played, he didn’t have to, other people did it for him and he just learned to go along. Something about Jon and Rickon’s interaction reminded Sansa of that. Jon kept trying to discipline Rickon, but Rickon was smart enough to know that Jon didn’t have any threat to hold over him. Jon felt too much guilt over what happened to Rickon, and even Sansa knew that when it came down to it, he wasn’t going to be a disciplinarian in any situation.

Sansa looked up and gave a firm expression. She was lucky enough to have experience with this age group, although Rickon wasn’t ever going to be as meek at Robin. “Rickon, go out in the hall.”
“What—“

“Go to the hall. Jon and I need to talk.” Sansa looked him in the eyes, “When we’re done we’ll tell you what’s going to happen, but there are things you don’t need to hear.”

Rickon balked, looking between her and Jon with increasing frustration. “Are you serious?”

Sansa wasn’t about to back down. She felt like was letting the frustration out on Rickon, like this was the one thing she thought she could have control over and she was taking what she could get.

Rickon scoffed. He looked vengeful, going over to Ghost and snatching the leash off the ground and pulling him to the door, muttering under his breath the entire way.

The door slammed shut and Jon sighed, falling down into the chair Rickon previously occupied, “Thank you for that.”

Sansa sat up in her seat and shrugged, “I didn’t do anything you hadn’t already tried to do.”

There was a pause. They didn’t have that much time to talk; Rickon would only stay away so long before deciding that he deserved to hear what they had to say, again.

“You and Rickon should stay in the flat this weekend.” Jon finally said.

“Me and Rickon?” Sansa raised an eyebrow, “What about you?”

“I’m not worried about myself. It’s clear someone is trying to intimidate me—“

“Intimidate you?” Sansa leaned closer, she needed Jon to understand what was going on, “It was Petyr who had someone following us. I’m the one who he’s trying to intimidate.”

Jon grimaced, looking away, “Maybe. It could have also been the Faceless Men.”

Sansa placed her head in her hand, slouching in her chair, “Who are being employed by Petyr. He
knew that you weren’t going to be in York, because he was the one who ordered the hit on your flat, Jon. I’ve already told you this. I don’t know why you refuse to listen to me—the Faceless Men aren’t the threat.”

“That’s your opinion, Sansa,” Jon’s jaw ticked. On this, they disagreed. It wasn’t an opinion anymore, it was a fact. Jon didn’t see it that way. “But I’m the one who’s been investigating the Faceless Men, and Sansa, they’re a real danger, especially if they don’t want the station looking into their past.”

Sansa was shaking her head, which was tilted at the window where Rickon was slouched down in a chair, glaring at the office door. “They’re only a threat, because of Petyr. He used them as a distraction to get me alone. You even said that whoever broke into the flat didn’t even take anything.”

Jon was too quiet. Sansa looked his way to see him staring at his folded hands on his desk.

Sansa sat up, “They didn’t take anything, did they?”

If they did Sansa couldn’t see why it was such a major issue. There wasn’t anything that looked personal in Jon’s apartment, nothing that had any significant value, as far as Sansa could tell. But Jon’s reaction made it look like this point was significant.

“I was at the flat,” Jon said with a pause, “I was going to grab some things to take back to our new place, but while I was doing that I noticed that a photograph was stolen.”

Sansa licked her lips, her foot tapping against the linoleum, “Was this photo important?”

Jon ran his hand through his curls and sighed, “I didn’t want to worry you.”

Sansa balked, “Really, Jon? You’re lying to me now.” She couldn’t believe this, after she’d actually been honest to Jon and told him the truth of her situation, he was still hiding things from her—as if she couldn’t understand the gravity of her own situation and deserved to know things that could involve her.

“I never lied.” Jon rejected the accusation, standing up to walk across the office like he needed to let out some frustration. “I was going to tell you, but not until I found out if it was actually going to
“I can’t believe you.” Sansa shook her head.

“Like you never kept anything from me?” Jon shot back.

That was different, the things Sansa hid from Jon were personal—some stolen photograph wasn’t. This was going to be a pointless argument though, one that Sansa didn’t have time to deal with. “That’s not even the point—just tell me what photo was taken already.”

Jon was still angry, but he knew that this wasn’t going anywhere either. “It was a family photo. I hoped that if the Faceless Men were trying to intimidate the station, they would just target me. But with the photo missing, they could recognize you and Rickon now, and they could link you to me.”

Sansa processed that for a minute. Jon was still thinking of this as if it was the Faceless Men who were after them, but Sansa was thinking about why Petyr would have someone steal a family photo from Jon. There wasn’t any clear logic to it—Petyr didn’t care about any of the Starks other than Sansa, and maybe her mother still. He wouldn’t have any use with some photo of them.

But if Jon was right, and the Faceless Men were trying to intimidate the station into dropping the murder investigation then the photo being stolen made more sense. It still felt like a stretch to Sansa. She didn’t believe that the Faceless Men were going to be a threat to Jon or any of them. Petyr clearly had some sort of connections to the group, as he, at the very least, hired them to break into Jon’s flat—Sansa thought that this was the only reason they even targeted Jon.

Jon wasn’t going to listen to her, though. He already had it in his mind that the Faceless Men were a threat to them, and Sansa didn’t have enough proof that they weren’t to convince Jon otherwise.

“Okay,” Sansa was thinking through her next move, “So you expect Rickon and me to just stay in the flat until you’ve figured out, what? How to take down an international crime organization?”

Jon sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose, “I don’t expect anything, Sansa. I’m just asking you to stay in the flat until I come back from my meeting this weekend.”

“Who’s this meeting with?”

Jon hesitated before answer, and Sansa’s hackles rose. Another thing he was hiding from her.
“I’m meeting with Stannis Baratheon.”

Sansa wanted to laugh. Of course, Jon was meeting with the one lead Sansa brought to the table, and he planned to do it without her, without telling her about it. Investigating Cersei was Sansa’s responsibility, but somehow Jon had delegated her to stay at home and watching Rickon instead, like what Jon found out at that meeting wasn’t going to end up affecting her—like she didn’t deserve to be apart of the process.

She stood up from her chair, grabbing her jacket from behind it and shoving her arms through the sleeves, “Well thank you for the offer, Jon, but I’m going to have to have to refuse.”

Jon sighed, “Come on, Sansa—“

Sansa was already at the office door, but she turned to glare at Jon one last time, “I’m going with you to see Stannis. I’m the one who found out about his connection with Father, I’m the one who told you that Cersei was a threat, even though you never believed me. If anyone is going to see him, it’s me.”

She could see the frustration on Jon’s face. Good, Sansa thought, Maybe now he won’t lie to me about things like this again.

Jon looked up, a new hope glinting in his eyes, “And what about Rickon?”

What about Rickon? Their half feral little brother, who certainly would not fit in well at an important business meeting,

“I don’t know, Jon. I guess he’s going to have to come unless you want to stay home with him.”

Sansa wasn’t about to be cast as the babysitter. She wasn’t going to be the girl in the story who stayed home with the kids while all the men saved the day. Maybe some of this was rooted in logical fallacies, but Sansa didn’t care. She was angry and hurt. Jon had lied to her—she thought that they were in this together, but she’d been wrong. At this moment, she could be as illogical as she wanted, as long as she proved to Jon that he couldn’t keep making decisions without her.

Jon looked like he was about to say something else, but Sansa wasn’t going to listen so she turned to the door and walked out. Jon called out her name from behind, but she walked forward and with
Rickon looked up from the chair he was sitting on, Ghost’s head perking up slightly from where it rested on the floor. Rickon was sneering, slouched over and ready to spit venom Sansa’s way.

“Oh, have you and Jon finally—“

“Come on,” Sansa interrupts Rickon in the middle of what he has to say. She takes Ghost’s leash and starts walking him out of the station. Rickon scrambles behind her to keep up. Sansa wants to get out of the station before Jon decides to come after her.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it took so long to get this chapter out! Stannis should be coming up in the next ch, which will be out this weekend!

So, in this ch. we've got some more tension between Jon and Sansa, she finds out he's been keeping some stuff from her, and so she's going to be a little annoyed moving forward because of that. We also get the return of Ghost! I've been wanting to get ghost in here since ch. 4, but it kept getting pushed back because of plot. Originally Sansa was going to have a much more emotional reaction to seeing him, but i feel like after being reunited with Jon and Rickon, being back together with the family dog doesn't quite stack up.

Anyway, please comment and kudos!! This week has been a killer, but reading all your comments on the last chapter totally helped me get through it! You guys are always so amazing and sweet, and give me way more credit than i deserve
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

There wasn’t a lock on the refrigerator like Rickon was used to. While everyone was asleep, Rickon quietly left his room, and went to the kitchen, grabbing a bottle of water and then going over to Ghost’s bed that sat against the wall with the window that overlooked the city. The curtain was closed, but Rickon pulled it open a little to look out onto the still bright lights.

Ghost’s bead bobbed up, but he set it down when he saw who it was. Rickon scratched between Ghost’s ears and wondered how the dog even recognized him. Rickon didn’t even recognize Ghost, not really at least. He felt familiar though, and unlike Jon and Sansa, Ghost didn’t try to tell Rickon what to do or look at him with tragic eyes. Rickon liked Ghost.

Rickon’s room was too quiet. He couldn’t remember the last time he had a whole room to himself. At the homes, he was always stuck with four or five other bed wetters and criers. There wouldn’t be a moment of silence of peace all night—if it wasn’t some crying baby, or some kid asking the older boys where his mummy was, it was police sirens or some drunk dad shouting keeping everyone up. Rickon couldn’t fall asleep without it.

Jon’s flat was too quiet, in Rickon’s room, it was practically silent. He hated it. He hated that the bed was too soft and that the room smelled too clean—like detergent and lavender. He hated that no one was shouting or crying, or that Rickon couldn’t hear sirens outside his window, or see the flashing lights of a police car driving up.

Ghost head perked up as some sirens sounded outside the living room window. Rickon went over to the sofa and pulled the pillow back over to the window, setting it down beside Ghost’s bed. He lay down, listening to the slowly disappearing sirens and Rickon closed his eyes to sleep.

“How much longer?”

Rickon could see Jon, through the mirror, tense at the wheel. “Three hours.”

Rickon slouched across the backseat, kicking his legs up on the back of Sansa’s chair. He might have kicked a little harder than he needed to, and that wasn’t to be vindictive (although Rickon was still pissed that she ordered him out of Jon’s office the other day), but he did it to get a reaction out of her.

Sansa continued to look out the window, glaring out it, really. She and Jon hadn’t talked since she left his office. They’d gotten in a fight, or at least Rickon thought they had. He wasn’t really sure.
No one yelled at each other, no one hit each other. Rickon even tried to look, but Sansa didn’t have any bruises, and neither did Jon. But they must have been fighting, or at least this was the event leading up to a fight because they wouldn’t even look at each other, much less talk to each other.

And now they were driving to Dover to visit some guy who used to know their Father. And that’s about the extent of what Rickon knew, mostly because everyone was being so damn quiet and keeping him in the dark about these things.

Rickon groaned, slouching down even further. He kicked the back of Sansa’s seat again, and she tensed. Still, she didn’t even bother to look back, and so Rickon did it again.

“Will you cut that out?” Jon growled, looking at Rickon through the mirror to glare.

Rickon curled his lip, and pushed himself up with the palms of his hands, “It’s not your seat, Jon.”

“Rickon,” it was Sansa’s voice, low like a warning. She didn’t even look away from the window, but Rickon still felt like he was being watched, “Can you please sit up.”

Rickon put his feet on the back of her seat but used them to push himself upright. “You know,” Rickon crossed his arms over his chest, “I thought you said you weren’t going to be my mother.”

Rickon watched as Jon tense, but Sansa just rolled her eyes. She was much harder to piss off compared to Jon. Jon was a lit fuse, ready to blow at any minute. Maybe he needed to get laid. That’s what the boys at the home would say when Davos got after them, and Jon was way higher strung than Davos.

“I need to piss.” Rickon said, turning his head towards Jon.

“I told you we weren’t going to stop.” Jon had them on a schedule, “You should have gone before we left the flat.”

Rickon gave an exaggerated eye roll, tilting his head to see if Sansa was watching. She was, and there was a half amused smile on her face. Maybe she also thought Jon needed to chill.

“So you’re not going to stop?” Rickon asked, starting to look around, rummaging around the backseat, “That’s okay. Does anyone have an empty bottle?”
They pulled over to a petrol station. Rickon climbs out of Jon’s car and stretches his legs. Jon barks at him to hurry up, but Rickon isn’t exactly in a rush to get back to the car and live out the sequel of that awkward car ride.

Jon starts filling up the car, Sansa walking past him to go inside the station. Rickon heads over around back where the bathrooms are. He doesn’t spend much time in there, it reeks and Rickon makes a break for the fresh air the second he is able to.

He goes ahead and walks inside the old convenience store connected to the station. Sansa is looking at the magazine rack, her eyes glued to the cover picture of some blonde lady and her equally blond brother. The lady is sitting on an ornate chair, a playful smile on her lips, behind her; the guy has his hand on her shoulder.

Rickon walks past her over to where the snack shelves are. He looks up to see the guy at the check out is watching. He’s not; he’s staring at Sansa with moony eyes. Rickon rolls his eyes and grabs a chocolate bar from the shelf and stashes it in his pocket while the guy isn’t looking. Rickon keeps walking down the rows. The cigarettes are sold behind the counter, and so Rickon doesn’t have a chance to get his hands on some. It’s not like he even likes smoking them. Rickon actually threw up the first time he tried them, while he was fostered at some home in Sheffield. He was getting better at it though, probably could have gotten a lot better if Jon didn’t throw his pack away.

Rickon grabbed a bag of chips and stuffed them in the big pocket of his jacket Jon gave him. There’s not much room left so Rickon starts heading towards the door, walking out of the station and back onto the concrete. He’s about to take the chocolate bar from his pocket when a hand snatches him at the wrist. Rickon gets ready to fight, but when he looks up, its only Sansa.

“Hey, back off.” Rickon pushed her off of him and takes several steps back.

“Go back inside and put everything back.” She says it like an order. Rickon hadn’t even noticed that she saw him take anything.

“I don’t know what you’re talking—“

“Rickon.” She warned, “Put the stuff back.”

Rickon hand drifted to his pockets protectively. “I’m hungry.”

Sansa sighed, “And if you want something you can pay for it.” She reached into her pockets and handed Rickon some notes, “We don’t have to steal.”

Rickon wasn’t going to take the money. Of course, Sansa didn’t have to steal, apparently, she’d
been living in France for the last couple years, with some rich creep if anything Jon said was true. Rickon emptied his pockets, leaving the stuff he took on the concrete outside the shop.

“Happy?” Rickon walked past her, over to where Jon was getting back in the car.

“What was that about?” He asked, Jon’s eyes were narrowed, and he was watching Sansa who was staring at the things Rickon dropped like she was considering taking it inside.

“Why don’t you ask Sansa?” Rickon spat, getting into the back seat and slamming the door shut.

They're about to continue the drive. Jon is trying to reset the GPS and Sansa is flipping through the magazine she bought. Its silent, dead air fills up the car, and Rickon hopes that he can just choke on it to get out of here. He wonders if Sansa is considering sending him back to St. Mordane’s yet. She said she wouldn’t, but Rickon was still waiting for it to happen. Maybe it wouldn’t be Sansa to suggest it, but Jon might. He barely even spoke to Rickon, and when he did it was just tense and guilt-laden. If Jon wasn’t feeling guilty about abandoning Rickon these last six years, he was trying to guilt Rickon into behaving. If that’s how it was going to be, Rickon almost wished they’d just send him back, like every other family who got tired of him.

But then, Rickon knew what would happen if he got sent back. Davos and Osha told Rickon how the Freys were still trying to press charges against him. And if Rickon didn’t end in some sort of delinquent housing, he was going to end up in another home, one that was just going to be worse than what the Frey’s had to offer.

Rickon could still taste Olyvar Frey’s blood in his mouth. He had nightmares where he was choking on it; other dreams he would just keeping biting Olyvar until there was nothing left. Rickon wished he’d done more than just bite him. Olyvar Frey was…Rickon didn’t like to think about what Olyvar Frey was like. He told himself that it didn’t matter anymore. Rickon was out of that house, and he wasn’t ever going back.

Jon goes to start the car. It rumbles and then sputters.

“Dammit.” Jon mutters as he tries the ignition again.

Sansa leans forward in her seat, “Why isn’t it starting?”

Jon tries the keys one last time, cursing and throwing them down as he pushes open the driver door and gets out, slamming it shut as he leaves. Rickon and Sansa go over to the windows to watch as Jon throws his hands up over his head and starts pacing. Through the glass, Rickon can hear Jon’s murmured curses.
Sansa watches for a moment before climbing over the center consul onto the driver’s seat and sitting down. She looks unfamiliar behind the wheel of a car—maybe even more unfamiliar than Rickon would have been. She tries to start mimicking what Jon was doing, hand hovering over the keys, looking down as she tries to figure out where her feet are supposed to go.

“The other one is the brake,” Rickon says leaning over the shoulder of the seat and pointing to the correct pedal, “No, the other one.”

Sansa finally puts her foot on the brake pedal, and turns the keys to try and start the ignition, “You shouldn’t even know how to do this.” Sansa grumbles, ending in a frustrated groan as the car refuses to turn on.

“Maybe we should try and hotwire it?”

“You shouldn’t know how to do that either,” Sansa says turning in her seat. She’s breathing erratically. Finally, she looks away and leaves just like Jon did.

Rickon stays in the car. He looks over at the wheel and considers climbing over the seat and trying it out himself. If Sansa could reach the pedals then so could Rickon, but he imagines that even trying was just going to piss off Sansa and Jon.

He looks out the window again, pressing his nose against it as he tries to make out what’s going on. Sansa is standing in front of Jon now, she’s pointing at the car and saying something. Rickon can’t make out the words anymore; they’ve gone too far away. Jon looks away from Sansa, face half bent in amusement, but it's all wrong. He’s angry and suddenly he interrupts Sansa and yells something. Rickon can almost hear that, Yeah, what about you? He shouted. Now the fighting really begins. Rickon watches as Sansa’s face morphs from shock to anger. Rickon watches as Sansa watches as Jon leans in, the anger on his face completely gone. It’s an expression Rickon has never seen before. He’s waiting to see if Jon is going to change, if he’ll lash out and hit Sansa, and Rickon will have to go running out of the car and pull him off of her, but that never happens, and Rickon doesn’t think it’s going to. Jon doesn’t look like he’s going to hit Sansa—Rickon thinks it looks like he might kiss her.

Sansa turns her head in the last moment, her eyes lock onto the car, and then they see Rickon. Sansa is suddenly wrenching her wrist from Jon’s hand and she pushes him back. She doesn’t say anything, but she starts walking to the car, head tilted down, and arms crossed around herself. Jon watches her walk away, hand half reaching out.

Rickon jumps back when the door opens. He almost falls forward and onto the gravel, he would have if he hadn’t caught himself on the headrest. Sansa is standing there, her hand still on the door.
“Let’s go for a walk.” And then she’s turning and walking towards the road.

Rickon is still sprawled across the car seat, hand still holding onto the headrest. Slowly he slides out onto the gravel and looks back at Jon. He’s not watching them anymore; instead he’s dialing something on his phone, facing the other direction. Rickon starts after Sansa.

He’s afraid to say something. Sansa hasn’t spoken, but her face is a sea of emotions, all raging against one another. Rickon wonders what she and Jon were fighting about. He wonders if it’s about him—if they’ve reconsidered and decided to send him back to St. Mordane’s.

He asks slowly, “So what were you fighting about.”

“We weren’t fighting,” Sansa answered too quickly—it’s too defensive, and the way her mouth twists after she said it, lets Rickon know that she knows it too. “We were just talking.”

Rickon knows what just talking looks like and that wasn’t it. He isn’t going to say that, not yet at least. Sansa wouldn’t answer anyway. “Where are we going?”

“There’s was a garage a mile or two back.” Sansa says, “We can get someone there to tow the car.”

“So we aren’t going to Dover, anymore?”

“We are,” Sansa looks frustrated again, “I’ll call for a ride at the garage.”

Rickon thinks of Jon and him already on the phone. Wouldn’t it be easier for him to just call for the garage and the taxi to take them to Dover, instead of having Sansa walk all the way down the road to do it herself? Maybe that had been part of the argument, maybe Sansa just wanted to get away from Jon. Rickon thought about the look Jon had on his face when he was leaning in, looking like he was about to kiss Sansa. Rickon wondered if he’d read the situation wrong.

He starts to think about that for a while

“Why did I have to come with you?” Rickon kicks a stone as they walk. The road beside them is empty; he hadn’t seen a car drive past for several minutes.
Sansa sighs, “I didn’t want to walk alone.”

“Why didn’t you just bring Jon then?” Rickon feels snide, “You two seem awfully close.”

Sansa stops walking. When Rickon looks back she has a far-off look on her face, before shaking her head and glaring at Rickon. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Rickon snorts, “Maybe you don’t, but Jon definitely does. I thought he was either going to hit you or kiss you.”

“Jon wouldn’t hit me,” Sansa answer is too quick again, she shakes her head, face getting red, “He wouldn’t hit anyone—and he wasn’t going to—it’s not like that Rickon. Jon wasn’t about to kiss me either.”

Rickon shrugs, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “So what were you guys talking about then?”

Was it about him? Had they finally decided that they were done with him? Better sooner than later. Rickon didn’t want to get comfortable, and then have them decide that they wanted him gone. If Jon and Sansa were so close, why would they want Rickon there to ruin things?

“Just things.” Sansa sighs, “It doesn’t matter.”

Rickon bites his lips, pulling it between his teeth and he tried to get himself to shut up. “He doesn’t want me around, does he?”

“What?” Sansa’s steps falter, she looks over to Rickon, “Why would you think that?”

Rickon shrugs, he tries to play indifferent, he thinks he accomplishes it. “Jon doesn’t like me. He doesn’t talk to me. He feels bad, but not bad enough to keep me around forever.”

“Rickon,” Sansa’s voice pitches, “That’s not true. God, Jon loves you, we both do. You’re our brother.”
Rickon rolls his eyes, “I guess.” But when has being related to someone ever meant that they would stay with you? Bran was Rickon’s brother, but that didn’t stop him from leaving. Mum left Rickon too—she didn’t seem to care that she still had two sons when she tried to kill herself.

Sansa was quiet for a while, “We aren’t going to send you back, Rickon. I’m not going to let that happen, and neither is Jon.”

Sure, of course, they weren’t. Not now maybe, but they could still change their minds. Rickon didn’t want to think about it anymore, “You ever find out what happened to Bran?”

Sansa shook her head and Rickon held back his disappointment. He didn’t think Sansa would’ve known, but he still wanted to ask.

“Jon is looking into it,” Sansa told him, “He’s got a case file, and he’s still trying to track Bran and Arya down. If they’re out there, we’re going to find them.”

“Whatever,” Rickon hunched his shoulders, “He’s probably dead—it doesn’t matter.”

Rickon kept his eyes to the pavement as the continued down the road. It was getting cold, clouds covering the sun and making everything darker. Jon’s schedule was shot to hell by now.

“You know,” Sansa started after a pause, “We went back to York—me and Jon. Do you remember what we used to call the house?”

Rickon nodded, “Winterfell. You and Robb, thought of it, didn’t you?”

Sansa shrugged, she probably couldn’t remember, “We should go back there—when everything is over with. We could take a weekend there, bring Ghost with us. It could be nice.”

Rickon’s last memory of Winterfell was the officer coming to collect him and Bran after Mum hung herself. Rickon didn’t ever want to go back there.

“I’m good, thanks.” Rickon kicked another rock in the road.
Sansa sighed, tilting her head up at the clouds, “Do you remember that tree Bran used to climb all the time?”

Rickon barely remembered a time when Bran wasn’t stuck in his wheelchair. He tried to remember what Sansa was talking about anyway, straining to remember that big clump of trees just off the property where they all used to go to play games.

“I don’t know, maybe?”

Sansa nodded her head, “I found it the last day I was there.” She had a small grin on her face, “Maybe you were too little to remember, but you and Bran were always close, so I thought maybe you had games you used to play there.”

Rickon frowned. They played a lot of games over in the trees. Rickon was a dumb kid back then and he liked stupid games. “We all played games.”

Sansa reached into her pocket, “Yeah, I know. I just didn’t recognize this game.” She held something out to Rickon. They were walking side by side and so Rickon reached out and took the little folded piece of paper. “I thought maybe it was something you two played together after I left for London. It was stuck up in that tree Bran liked.”

Rickon read the words over, The Three Eyed Crow. He shook his head, “This wasn’t a game we played.”

Sansa’s brow creased, “Oh? Okay, I just thought—Do you know what it means then? It’s Bran’s handwriting, I’m pretty sure it is at least.”

Rickon didn’t know about that, but he did remember the Three Eyed Crow. He remembered it all the way back to the first home he and Bran were sent to, back when Bran just started to meet those two other kids.

“The Three Eyed Crow was something some kids talked about in the first home we were sent to,” Rickon looked away from the paper, trying to remember, “It was these two kids, they used to talk to Bran, they were the ones who told him about it.” He crumbled the paper and handed it back to Sansa. It was around then that Bran stopped talking to Rickon altogether, a few weeks later, Bran was gone.
“That’s not—” Sansa was walking faster to keep up with Rickon now, “That’s not possible Rickon. Bran had to have known about it before. It was in his tree in York. How could it have gotten there if the first time he heard about this Crow was when you were both already in the system?”

Rickon shrugged, “I don’t know. Does it matter?”

Sansa grabbed Rickon arm and held him in place. He looked up and saw the steely determination in her eyes. Rickon debated whether or not to push her back and keep walking, or turn around and go back to Jon and the car. But something about the way Sansa was looking at him like he was about to be useful instead of a hindrance made him pause.

“This could be important, Rickon.” Sansa told him, “Are you sure that Bran didn’t say anything about Crows before he fell?”

Rickon shook his head, “No, I don’t think he did. It was a really long time ago, but the first time I remember anyone saying something about the Three Eyed Crow was when we were put in our first home. There were these two kids, they spent all their time with Bran—he barely even talked to me anymore, but when he did he said he was going to see the Three Eyed Crow, those kids told him about it.”

Sansa looked like a statue for a minute. Her eyes wide open and thoughtful. She nodded her head and started walking again, and now it was Rickon’s turn to try and keep up.

“Wait, is that important?” Rickon asked, as he came to her side.

Sansa was biting her bottom lip, pulling it with her teeth, “I don’t know. I think so. Do you remember anything else about it? What was the Three Eyed Crow?”

“I thought it was made up.” Rickon said, “They made it sound like it was a name—like some person who was going to get us out of the system. Bran said he was going to find him.”

Sansa gave a slow nod, “Okay, that’s—that’s useful.”

Was it? Rickon still didn’t know what any of this meant, except that Bran found a way to leave a note about the Three Eyed Crow somewhere back in York. “Do you think—could we find him with this? I mean, like, do you think Bran is actually still out there?”
Rickon was so certain that his brother had to have died. That’s what all the other kids in the homes would say. The last things Rickon remembered about Bran was how completely out of touch he got near the end. He kept telling Rickon how he was going to make everything better, and how he was going to fix everything. It used to scare Rickon when he was little—and then one day Bran was gone, and just like that, Rickon was alone. He thought if Bran never came back for him, then Bran must have been dead—and then he thought maybe Bran left because why would he want to be weighed down by Rickon’s dead weight. Then Rickon started believing maybe both of those things were true.

But if Bran was still alive…If that was possible, maybe there was the chance of a fourth option. Maybe Rickon could finally find out why his big brother left him behind to chase after Crows.

“Yeah,” Sansa nodded her head, “I think he is.”

Chapter End Notes

Ever since we got Rickon back on the scene i wanted to write a chapter in his pov. We also finally get some news about Bran! Hopefully we'll be able to expand what happened to him soon. Next chapter i promise we're finally going to get to Stannis.

Hope you guys enjoyed reading! Please comment and kudos!
The cab drops them off in front of the Dragon Stone manufacturing headquarters, located near the coast of Dover. Sansa is the first to climb out of the car. She desperate for some space after being crammed in the backseat of the cab with Jon and Rickon for the last three hours. Takes a few steps towards the large and imposing headquarters while Jon goes to pay what has to be an outrageous fee. Rickon comes up beside her, sticking his hands in his pockets while he tilts his head up at Dragon Stone.

“That’s one ugly building.” He spats on the sidewalk and starts walking towards the large front doors.

Sansa looked up too. Dragon Stone Manufacturing must have been built back during the gothic era and hadn’t been redesigned since. There were stone gargoyles of twisted animals hanging off the side of the building, large arched windows with paned glass overlooking the cliffs of Dover and into the bay. It was all grey stone and brick—and it looked more like a gothic mansion than the headquarters to a well-known manufacturing company. It looked like a castle.

Jon finished paying the cab and walked over to where Sansa was standing on the sidewalk. She felt herself stiffen—hyper-aware of his presence near her. She thought back to their fight at the petrol station and Sansa felt hot all over. She stepped away from him, walking to over where Rickon was standing.

She refused to play over their argument at the petrol station over again in her head. Not right now, not when she had to compose herself and go to the meeting with Stannis Baratheon that they were already several hours late for.

Jon had apparently called the office and gotten them an appointment for that night. It was an hour before the office would close, and they would catch Stannis right before he left for the night. Sansa wasn’t completely sure how Jon had managed to get that worked out.

They walk inside to the reception desk. Sansa and Rickon hang back while Jon speaks to the receptionist, walking over to the floor map on the wall by the ancient looking set of elevators.

“Are we really expected to get inside one of those?” Rickon asks, poking his finger at the rot iron cage, polish black. Sansa leaned in close and could see that the curving designs in the metal looked like they were supposed to be dragons.

She stepped back, “I’m sure it’s perfectly safe.”
The machine creaked and Sansa took another step back, Rickon with her.

“This place is like the haunted fucking mansion,” Rickon muttered as he looked around at the stained glass chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, casting the room in an ominous orange hue, and the old red patterned carpet that covered the floor.

Sansa hit his arm, “Don’t curse.”

She saw Rickon roll his eyes. He did have a point: Dragon Stone Manufacturing looked like the horror movie you told people to run away from. Thinking of it, Sansa wasn’t quite sure what Dragon Stone even manufactured.

“We’re on the fifth floor,” Jon said walking up to them and leaning past Sansa to hit the button for Stannis’ floor.

Sansa nodded her head and looked around. The place was empty, save for the receptionist, “Are you sure that you got the meeting extended—“

“You saw me make the call.” Jon bit out, and Sansa crossed her arms.

So he was still pissed about the fight. That’s fine, so was Sansa.

And really, she had a much better reason to be angry than he did. Jon had accused her of withholding important information from him—information that could help Jon lock Petyr away, which was a total lie. Sansa told Jon absolutely everything he needed to know, more than he needed to know, really. She’d been way more honest with him than he’d been with her in these last few days.

He was angry that they hadn’t made any more progress on finding something to extort Petyr with. It was frustrating—a week had already gone by and they had nothing that they didn’t already know before. That along with the investigation into Cersei Lannister, and now the Faceless Men, both Jon and Sansa were understandably stressed, and in some twisted way, they both started to believe that the only person at fault was each other.

Sansa catches Rickon looking back and forth between them. She tries to send him a comforting smile, but how much was that really going to help? Rickon was much more perceptive than Sansa would have given him credit for, he knew something was wrong. And that was another problem because Rickon was smart enough to perceive that something was wrong, but he didn’t have enough information to know what it was. Jon’s closed off, aggressive behavior was just making
Rickon think that he was unwanted.

Another problem was now that Sansa actually had something important to share with Jon, like a lead that could possibly tell them where Bran might have tried to go, she couldn’t even really tell him, because he was being such a pig-headed jerk, that he wouldn’t even listen.

Which was also fine, because Sansa didn’t even want to talk to Jon right now. Of course, that was easier said than done. Looking at Jon, Sansa struggled with the memories of yelling at him in front of some dingy petrol station beside an abandoned road, and then those memories where Jon held her while she slept, or the moments he’d lean in close enough to touch before thinking better and moving away.

The elevator dinged and they slid open the metal caged doors and the three lost Starks stepped inside.

The fifth floor wasn’t any less gothic than the first. They walk down the long hall, towards the door at the very end where, presumably, Stannis Baratheon’s office sits. There is a young man sitting at the end of the hall, with his desk pushed in a corner. He looks up shrewdly at the three of them as they approach.

“Hello, can I help you?” The man asks, leaning forward in his seat.

Jon clears his throat, stepping up first; Sansa can see the tired lines on his face, it had been a long day and it showed. “I’ve got a meeting with Stannis Baratheon.”

Sansa wants to roll her eyes; we have a meeting with Stannis. Of course Jon would prefer to control everything, so of course, he thinks it’s his meeting. It was hard to be sympathetic towards him when he was still resenting Sansa presence in the trip, still refusing to see her point of view.

The man frowns and goes to his computer, typing something in, eyes scanning the screen, “We’re about to close for the night, I don’t think Mr. Baratheon has any meeting scheduled for this time.”

Sansa coughs, looking away, back down the hall, as Jon narrows his eyes. The man looks between them, waiting for an answer. Probably deciding whether he should ask them to leave or not.

Rickon pushes past Sansa and steps up, cracking his knuckles and he leans against the man's desk, “Yeah, well this guy here is an officer,” he points a thumb in Jon’s direction, leaning in close to the secretary, “So you’re going to let us into that office, or else—“

“Rickon,” Sansa hisses, pulling Rickon back by the arm so that he’s well and hidden behind her again. The secretary has wide eyes, his hand reaching for the phone on the desk like he's about to call security.
“What?” Rickon whispers, pushing her off of him.

Jon clears his throat, “Sorry about that,” Jon shakes his head and tries to smile, “He was kidding. But I really do have a meeting with Mr. Baratheon. If you’d just tell him that I was here, my name is Jon Snow.”

“Oh.” The secretary’s demeanor completely changes, apparently deciding to be helpful all of a sudden, “Mr. Snow, yes, you’re late. You can go ahead and go on back.”

Jon nods and starts forward, Sansa and Rickon following behind. She smiles at the secretary as they pass, the secretary standing to hold open the door for them. Sansa keeps her hands on Rickon’s shoulders as he sends daggers in the man’s direction. Maybe bringing Rickon wasn’t the best idea. From what she understood about Stannis Baratheon, the man lacked all varieties of a sense of humor.

Sansa leans in close, whispering in Rickon’s ear, “Don’t do anything stupid.”

Rickon rolls his shoulders and Sansa dropped her hands, “I’m not going to. Chill.”

Sansa shakes her head. Sometimes she thinks she getting through to Rickon, like he’s slowly letting her into his inner circle, and dropping his walls around her, but other times she thinks that Rickon wished Sansa and Jon never even found him. It was impossible to tell one of his moods from the other, and every time Sansa took a step forward, there were another two steps back she’d take next.

She needed Jon to understand this too. As much as Sansa planned on staying with Jon and Rickon, she had to plan for the scenario where she didn’t. If she did go back to the Vale, she needed to make sure Jon wasn’t going to scare Rickon off, and that Rickon understood his brother cared about him. Of course, that meant Jon would need to show something akin to affection or care towards Rickon, which she knew Jon felt, but for some reason he refused to express.

“Mr. Baratheon,” The secretary says as they step inside, announcing their entry, “Mr. Snow is here for a meeting.”

Stannis Baratheon is broad-shouldered and sinewy. He had to be near fifty, but he could have passed for a much younger man, even despite his greying black hair and the harsh lines to his face. His suit helps, cut sensibly, but not lacking a certain style, that Sansa was surprised a man like Stannis went for. Stannis had a sternness to his face, pulled tight and unpleasant. His dark blue eyes
are framed by a heavy brow and thin white lips. He looks up from some files on his desk, frowning as he sees the three of them.

“I had a meeting with Jon Snow that was rescheduled for an hour ago. Who are these other people?” His voice is harsh, like ice, cold and unyielding.

Sansa suddenly looks at the three of them self-consciously. They’re weary and dirty from a day of traveling; they don’t look like they belong in Stannis Baratheon’s fortress.

“Mr. Baratheon,” Jon goes forward to shake Mr. Baratheon’s hand, but Stannis doesn’t rise to meet him. Jon lowers his hand back to his side and shifts uncomfortably, “I’m sorry we’re late. We ran into some trouble on the road.”

Stannis is looking at Sansa now, eyes narrowed thoughtfully, “Is that so? And what am I supposed to do about that, Mr. Snow? And I’ll ask again, who are these other two people who were not invited to our meeting?”

They hadn’t discussed how to introduce Sansa. With the papers Petyr supplied she wasn’t dead anymore, but neither knew if it was safe for her to really be alive. They hadn’t spoken enough since their fight in Jon’s office to decide how this meeting with Stannis was going to play out. But, Jon looks back at her, floundering, and so she steps forward and clears her throat. She walks up to Stannis’ desk and holds out her hand.

“My name is Sansa Stark. I’m the daughter of Eddard Stark. I believe that you might have been the last person to be in contact with him before he was killed.”

And Stannis Baratheon blinks. He slowly leans forward and takes Sansa’s hand, giving a firm shake before dropping it, keeping eye contact the entire time.

“I was under the impression that Sansa Stark was killed several years ago.” He said, and Sansa couldn’t tell if he thought she was lying or if he was just stating a fact.

She nods her head, “So are a lot of people.”

There was almost a smile on Stannis’ lips before it’s gone completely, and he looks behind her where Rickon is standing beside a plastic tree, pulling off the fabric leaves.
Jon clears his throat and Rickon looks up, eyes wide and caught unaware. He sees Stannis staring at him and he coughs, “I’m Rickon.”

“He’s our brother,” Sansa takes the lead to explain, “Our younger brother. He was put in foster care after our mother was—“

“I’m well aware of the Stark’s descent from grace,” Stannis answers briskly, causing Sansa to flinch, “I’m also aware that Sansa Stark was killed during the riots in London, and that I only agreed to this meeting with Mr. Snow by goodwill from his late foster father.” And then Stannis is standing up from behind his desk, reaching over for a briefcase, “Because of that I’ll do you the courtesy of not calling my security to escort you out of the building.”

“Thank you for that, Mr. Baratheon,” Jon steps forward, blocking his exit, “I know Ned would appreciate you meeting with me. But I swear to you that Rickon and Sansa are his children. That’s why we wanted to meet with you. Sansa has reason to believe that you might know what the last letters from our father said.”

Stannis jaw ticked. He lifted his arm to look at his watch, “Your meeting with me was originally scheduled for this afternoon, Mr. Snow. I was then gracious enough to reschedule it for this evening, which you were also late for, and now you have also brought two guests to come along with you, one of which is destroying my plant.”

Sansa looked back to where Rickon had froze, hand hovering over one of the fabric leaves he was about to rip from the plastic branch, a startled look of shock on his half-open mouth.

Stannis continues, “The other claims, with no proof, to be a girl who died six years ago—a girl whose funeral I personally sent flowers to. You have now made me late to dinner with my wife.” He walks past Jon and the rest over to the door, he stops and takes in a deep breath, “I anticipate you won’t make similar mistakes tomorrow.”

“What?” Jon’s mouth falls open.

Stannis turns back to face them, unimpressed, with barely repressed aggravation. “Speak to Pylos at the door. He’ll arrange for a hotel for the three of you to stay in. Our meeting will be at seven-tomorrow morning.”
Jon nods his head, as he tries to recover from his surprise. “Of course. Thank you, Mr. Baratheon.”

Stannis gave a halfhearted wave from behind his back as he walked out of the office. Sansa let out a breath she’d been holding in. She feels actual shock about how that situation turned around, although she’s still not sure where any of them stand with Stannis, or whether or not he believed them. But it’s a step, hopefully in the right direction.

Pylos ends up being the secretary who let them in the office. He and Jon talk for a few minutes and the next thing that happens is a cab is driving over to pick them up and drop them off at a hotel across the road near the cliffs. It’s apparently where Dragon Stone manufacturing has all guests stay, and a room is quickly prepared for the three of them.

Surprisingly, it’s Rickon who won’t shut up during the drive. He’s asking how close to the cliffs are to the hotel and if it’s still light enough to go out to the lookout point the cab driver tells them about to see the water.

“It’s going to be too dark,” Sansa looks up at the orange and red sky, “By the time we get to the hotel it’ll be night.”

Rickon leans over her to look out the window, “Want to go with me to look at them in the morning?”

Sansa pauses. She’s caught up in the realization that Rickon asked her to do something with him—no sign of snide or taunt in his voice. He just sounds like an excited kid, and Sansa holds her breath.

“If you want,” She says carefully, “You’ve never been to Dover?”

Sansa came when she was very little, but it was before Rickon was born, back when Mother was still pregnant with Bran. The whole family came to Folkestone for a holiday. They got a cottage on the beach and spent the days building castles in the sand and chasing each other at water’s edge. They drove to Dover for a day to see the White Cliffs while they were there.

Rickon pressed his nose against the glass, looking out to where the sunset could almost be seen dipping to the edges of the cliffs, “Never seen the ocean.”

Sansa let out her breath, feeling the cold, sobering shiver run up her spine. It made her remember why doing all of this was so important. She might not have any chance left for a good childhood,
but there were still a few more years left for Rickon, and Sansa couldn’t let Petyr take that away.

The hotel is nice. It reminds Sansa a little of the hotels she used to stay in France when Petyr would take her on one of those rare excursions out of the Vale. Rickon is in absolute awe of the place—and Sansa doesn’t even bother reprimanding him when she catches him stashing a handful of complimentary chocolates on the reception desk in his pocket while no one is watching.

They head up to their room on the third floor. Things still feel tense with Jon, and Sansa chances a glance in his direction. Enough time has passed that she doesn’t feel like screaming at him anymore, part of her realizes that the things between them are just stemming from stress and fear and it’s not actually personal. Besides, Sansa really wants to tell him about what she and Rickon found out about Bran, it would be so much easier to do that if they weren’t fighting anymore.

The room consists mostly of two full sized beds, and a large dresser with a television set sitting on top it. Rickon makes a grab for the remote and flips through the channels. Jon goes over to the empty ice bucket and starts heading for the door, Sansa catches him there.

“Can we talk?”

Jon hesitates and nods, “Alright.”

Sansa looks at Rickon one last time. He’s sitting cross-legged on the edge of the bed, eyes glazed over as he watches something explode on the television screen. She goes with Jon outside the room to look for the ice machine.

“What did you want to talk about?” Jon asks as they pass through the halls. He sounds cautious as if he isn’t sure what to expect from Sansa this time.

Sansa bites her lips, pulling at her hands, she decides to start with something she thinks is safe to ready the waters, “Rickon is doing better, right?”

Jon shrugs, “He’s not been with us very long. I think his bruise is fading if that’s what you mean.”

It wasn’t, Jon had to know that it wasn’t. “No, I mean how he’s doing mentally. Like how he’s adjusting to us.”

Jon lets out a long sigh; “It’s going to be complicated for him. It’s not easy adjusting from the system to regular life.”
Sansa was quiet, counting the doors they passed before chancing a suggestion, “You know, it might help if you talked to him.”

“I don’t think so,” Jon shook his head, a half smile on his face.

Sansa stopped walking, standing in place until Jon realized she wasn’t walking anymore and stopped too. He looked back and frowned.

“I’m serious, Jon.” Sansa placed her hands on her hips, “I think you should talk to Rickon.”

“I’ve talked to him.” Jon sounds defensive.

Sansa frowns, “I mean really talk to him.”

Jon starts walking again, and Sansa feels her patience thin as she starts after him.

“I’ll consider it,” Jon’s tone implies that he plans on doing no such thing.

Sansa works through her frustrated thoughts, trying to stay in control, “I think it would really help if you did. It would probably help both of you.”

Jon’s brow crinkles, “What does that mean?’

Sansa wants to roll her eyes, but she doesn’t, knowing Jon was watching her closely, “Nothing, never mind.” She sighs, “I wanted to apologize, for the fight before.”

Jon blinks several times, in surprise “I’ve been wanting to do the same thing. I shouldn’t have said some of those things.”

Sansa nods, feeling a little more relieved now, like some of the tension between them is gone. Of course, some of it is still there. Sansa tries not to think about it, but she can still feel Jon’s breath across her face from the moment she thought he might have kissed her. He didn’t, of course, but for a second Sansa thought he might. For a second she wanted him to. Stupid thoughts, selfish
thoughts, ones that absolutely couldn’t go anywhere and just made Sansa feel worse.

But the bigger problem was the fight they had, and the air they needed to clear because of it.

“I know you’re doing your best to try and help me,” Sansa continues as they walk, “It’s a lot to juggle, with all the investigations and then the work you already have at the station.”

Jon nods, “We’ll manage. You working with Sam is helping. I’ve been meaning to thank you for that, I know it’s difficult for you to, er, share some of those things with him.”

Sansa presses her lips together. The conversation felt stilted. They were saying all the right things, but between the lines, Sansa was getting at what Jon really meant, “What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing,” Jon shakes his head, dark eyes looking heavy, “I just meant, I know how protective you are of your secrets.”

“My secrets?” Sansa repeats, shoulders hunching defensively, “That’s a simplistic way of putting it.”

Jon drags out a long sigh, “You know that’s not how I meant it.”

“No,” Sansa shakes her head, looking away, “That’s fine. I know you’re very protective of your secrets too.”

“I don’t keep secrets from you, Sansa,” Jon grits out, muttering, “It’s not like you’d even let me.”

Sansa stops walking, she looks back down the hall. Jon kept plenty of secrets from Sansa, that was the problem. She needed some space from Jon before she gets angrier. Apparently, there was still enough tension between them to charge them for another fight.

“Where are you going?” Jon calls as Sansa starts down the hall.

“For a walk,” Sansa spits out, not looking back.
Two hours pass and Sansa found her way over to the rooftop pool of the hotel. It was late enough that the lights along the outside deck were turned off, but the pool with still illuminated blue, giving off enough light for Sansa to navigate her way over to the balcony. She rested her elbows against the glass edge and looked over towards the water line. She could see just across the road, over to the sea—could just smell the salty waves of the ocean. Tomorrow she should take Rickon out here, let him see the ocean before the meeting at Dragon Stone. Sansa closed her eyes and let the cool wind blow over her, setting her nerves at ease.

She should be asleep. It was already too late and they had that seven o’clock meeting with Stannis tomorrow that, on threat of life, they could not be late for. Jon must have had a game plan for what they needed to ask, not that he told Sansa about it. She imagined that it went first about Father’s letters to Stannis, then about Cersei, and last, the code. That’s the plan Sansa had for it at least; she’d probably talk to Jon about it in the morning once both of them had cooled off some more.

Sansa had run over the code in those letters about a hundred times, going over different algorithms and searches Sam came up with, and they all turned out empty. It was gibberish as far as any of them could tell. With their luck, tomorrow, Stannis would tell them exactly that. Any other solution would be far too easy and convenient. It wasn’t enough that Sansa had a tick ing clock on her freedom; she also needed any possible leads to make freedom possible completely dry up. She had to remind herself that today had been a win. Stannis was giving them a chance tomorrow to plead their case, and that had to be good enough.

The only thing Sansa had to worry about right now was how to stand in front of Jon and not lose her cool. She was still playing over their near argument in the hall—how each time one of them spoke it was a thin dig at the other. It traced back to the petrol station and the argument there. But maybe it started before then. Maybe Jon could feel that Sansa was lying to him, just like she thought he might be lying to her. Neither of them was lying with any real words, but they certainly were hiding things from each other. Every time Sansa looked at Jon and felt that burning heat in her chest and pushed that feeling away. That had to be lying to--only Sansa didn’t think Jon would object to her keeping those sort of secrets.

Standing near Jon and knowing that her feelings for him weren’t nearly as familial as they should have been and then having to ignore them was starting to get to her. Suddenly everything Jon said just set her off, every time he breathed near her she was set on edge. It started after the left York and it was just getting worse. It was so much easier to yell at him and make half-baked accusations than let herself realize the truth. It was so much easier to tell yourself you hated someone than admit to yourself that you might love them.

Not that Sansa could ever understand what love really was. Petyr had screwed her up too much for something as pure as love to live in her. She didn’t even really know what love was, other than manipulation and lies. Love was all the thing Petyr said he felt for her, but if that was love Sansa didn’t want a part in it. Sansa felt like she was entering some sort of sick cycle, telling herself that she loved Jon and then lashing out at him the moment he got close.

The doors that lead from the hotel to the pool opened up—sounding with a quiet click—and Sansa looked up. It’s too dark to really see from any distance, but Sansa could make out Jon’s presence by sound alone. He moves like a ghost from the door, over to where Sansa stands at the balcony. He stands at a safe distance, far enough away that Sansa would have to reach out to touch him. She places her hands atop each other to keep them in place, ignoring the shiver that ran up her spine and the way her heart started to speed up like it always did when he was near. In the hall it had been easier to ignore—she had a focused mission to address, but out here she was out of sorts and unprepared.
“Rickon’s asleep.” Jon says, looking out to the water. They can see the break of the waves in the moonlight, as they hit the cliffs. It’s peaceful—if Sansa strains her ears, she can just barely make out their sound like a lullaby.

Sansa rolls her shoulders, trying to work out the tension from them that can only be made by sitting in the back of a small car for several hours. This wasn’t even something Sansa wanted to start again, but she can’t stop herself from asking. So she asks in a measured tone, “Did you talk to him?”

Jon’s jaw ticks, hands curling against the rails, “He doesn’t want to talk, Sansa.”

That’s almost funny. Does Rickon not want to talk, or is it Jon who’s avoiding the conversation? Sansa already knows which one she believes, “Well, have you tried?”

“He’s a young boy. They don’t want to talk about their feelings—especially ones like Rickon.” Jon says with a sharp tone as if he’s the supreme qualifier of what boys want. They’re both still in wait—waiting for the other to snap and for a fight to begin again. “I’m not going to push him, Sansa.”

Sansa shakes her head and turns to look at Jon’s profile. He keeps his head forward, refusing to match her gaze and that just makes her angrier. “He thinks you hate him, Jon. This is exactly the time to talk to him—Christ, I mean I found him sleeping on the floor in the living room the other day with Ghost. He’s not okay, he’s afraid to reach out to us. Rickon needs help.”

Jon lets out a frustrated deep breath, hands bent over the railing, as he leans forward, "I’ve already told you, pushing him to talk about his feelings is only going to make things worse. You can’t force this stuff, Sansa. You can’t control what everyone thinks and feels.”

Sansa takes a step back from the rails, letting out a cold, dark laugh. She can't believe that Jon was really implying what she thought he was. Sansa thought all of this drama had been settled before they left York. “Oh, so this is what it’s about.”

Jon freezes, startled, but then he relaxes, resting his head on the rail before standing up straight; “We don’t need to get into this right now—“

“No.” Sansa puts her foot down, “Why don’t you say what you really mean, Jon. You’re still pissed that I’m not telling you more about Petyr—“
Jon blinks, maybe that’s not what he was thinking about, but it sure is now, “Well, if you’d tell me the full truth, I could actually find something to charge him with—“

“I told you already,” Sansa growls, wondering why they’re even still fighting about things she thought they were settled with weeks ago. Jon had enough information to go on, more than Sansa even wanted to tell him, “I’ve told you everything important. You don’t need to know more than you already do.”

Jon laughs, looking just as perplexed, “This is exactly what I mean. You think you’re trying to protect me from everything, but you’re just protecting yourself.”

“How dare you—” But Jon starts walking away, back towards the hotel. Sansa stomps after him, grabbing him by the arm, “How dare you, Jon. You lied to me about contacting Stannis for a week—and you lied about the Faceless Men not stealing anything—“

“I didn’t lie,” Jon pulls his arm away and steps back, “I just hadn’t told you yet.”

“Yeah, well, why do you get to not tell me things, but as soon as I try to keep, just one thing to myself I’m the bad guy.” Sansa spits, tossing her hands up, “You don’t get it both ways, Jon. You don’t get to be mad at me for keeping something personal to myself, but then get to keep your own secrets in the name of protecting my feelings. It’s bullshit!”

She was shouting, face hot and out of breath. Sansa wanted to explode—to break out into a rage and kick and scream. This all felt so built up, slowly stacking up day after day, week after week, until it was this tall unstable tower the was wobbling and ready to tumble. Sansa wanted to knock it down before it got the chance. She wanted every hidden word, every quiet intention to come crashing down until there was nothing left but rubble.

“I’m just trying to protect you!” Jon fought back, “Why do you have to make it so difficult?”

“You’re not protecting me,” Sansa voice suddenly felt choked—she didn’t even know who she was yelling at, why she was so angry, it was all a blur of emotions and rage, “You’re trying to manipulate me. You’re keeping things from me, you’re lying to me!”

“It was one lie.” Jon shouted, tossing his hand over his head, “I’ve said I’m sorry—I’m not trying to manipulate you. You’re so stuck in your own head that you’re refusing to see what’s actually
going on. I’m on your side—I’ve always been on your side! I’m not him, I’m not Petyr, I’m not going to hurt you. Why can’t you just trust me?”

And Sansa fell back. She felt cold tears falling down her cheeks. She had no defense, she felt herself laid raw. And Sansa felt rage.

“Go fuck yourself, Jon.” She spat, pushing the palms against Jon’s chest, getting even angrier when he refused to move, “I’m not some stupid child—I don’t need to be told what to think—I’m not fucking delusional. Just go to fucking hell—I hate you.”

And she was screaming at him now, her hands pounding absolutely uselessly at Jon’s chest. He grabs her by the wrists and tries to hold her still, but Sansa is fighting back now. In a chance moment, Sansa looks up and sees Jon. He’s not combatting her—this isn’t even a fight. His pupils are blown out, mouth open and red. Sansa feels a strange calm pass over her as a moment passes them by.

“Damn it, Sansa,” Jon growls, face contorted in pain, “I’m just trying to protect you. Do you have to make everything so damn hard?”

And Sansa doesn’t think, she just leans in.

It's not a perfect kiss if there is even such a thing as that. Even so, its worlds better than anything Sansa experienced with Petyr. And that's how she wants it. She doesn’t want closed mouths and cold lips, where every second she dreams of coming back up for air; she wants something real, something driven by want and desperation. That’s what this is. It’s fast, its all teeth and curled lips, and a gasping breath, and then its over. Jon pulls back. If he was angry or frustrated before, he isn’t now. His face is a blank slate of shock, and Sansa feels the world plummet.

She sucks in several deep breaths, slowly backing away, but Jon grabs her hand and holds her still. Sansa waits for the other shoe to drop, her head running through every scenario and lie she could come up with to explain her stupid, reckless kiss. Sansa waits for the inevitable crash of reality, where the walls crumble down and Sansa is buried in the rubble.

Instead, Jon reaches his hand out and slowly sets it on the back of Sansa’s neck, drawing her closer. His other hand has slowly found its way to her hip, and Sansa watches the rise and fall of his chest.

“Sansa,” Jon says quietly. It sounds like a promise that he couldn't possibly keep.

She shakes her head, hearing her heart hammering in her ears, “I didn’t mean to—that was a mistake.”
She hears Jon breath catch and she looks up. His eyes are bearing down at her when he speaks his voice is low, rough with some deep set desire that Sansa can’t even place. “Tell me this is a mistake again, and I’ll let you go.”

Sansa shuts her eyes, a shiver running through her body as she feels herself draw close. Jon’s hand tightening on her hip. He rests his forehead against hers and Sansa listens to the murmur he whispers against her cheek, as Jon begs, “Push me away if you don’t want this.”

And Sansa never felt desire quite like this. This was a mistake Sansa was willing to make again and again. Sansa is flushed, she tilts her head up, and then Jon’s hand was on her cheek and she meets the warm press of his mouth against hers. And Sansa has no plans for coming up for air anytime soon.

Chapter End Notes

And we've finally made it! Wow, this was a trip to write. I rewrote this last scene about four different times, trying to figure out what the right moment was going to be. I knew that the first kiss was going to happen after a build up of every past fight and frustration Jon and Sansa had, where i could get everything out of the way before they did it so everything was out in the open. I also knew that Sansa needed to make the first move, because honestly, the girl deserves to choose what she wants for once. Still, i feel like i'm going to go back and edit this again later to try and make it perfect, but for now, i wanted to get it out there.

In less steamy news, i had a lot of fun writing Rickon at Dragon Stone and the hotel. He's just the culmination of every bad behavior a child could have, mixed with this youthful excitement and its just super fun to write. Also, i was sort of dreading writing Stannis, but he's kind of fun to write too. I feel like my ideal fic would be writing Stannis babysitting Rickon for a weekend and watching the chaos that would ensue from that clash of personalities.

Please comment and kudos!! I really hope you guys end up liking this chapter, i wrestled with it alot and i hope i did the moment justice.
Jon can’t keep still. He tells himself that its nerves, worried that Stannis will finish reading Ned’s letter then he handed him and then tell the two of them that its total nonsense. Jon is very worried about that—Stannis has been looking over the letter for several minutes now, with only a small grunt every now and then as acknowledgment that he still with them. But truthfully, Jon is mostly on edge because of Sansa.

She’s sitting in the seat next to him, poised on the edge of her chair and leaning forward, uneasily waiting for Stannis to finish reading. She looks beautiful, but of course, Jon always thinks that. Today its even more startling though, even more apparent. Maybe that’s because Jon now knows that if he leaned in to touch her, she wouldn’t push him away—that if Jon brushes that strand of hair that fell out of the braid she made this morning, and he leaned in to press his mouth against hers, she would only pull him closer.

Stannis cleared his throat and Jon jumped.

“How did you get this letter?” He asked, sitting straight, hands folded on his desk, “I was under the impression that all of Ned Stark’s things were either disposed of or returned to his residence in York.”

Jon looked to Sansa and let her answer.

“I took it from his office after the assassination,” Sansa explained, licking her chapped lips. Jon didn’t let his gaze linger. “You understand it, don’t you?”

Stannis stood up from his chair and walked towards the window. He looked just as intimidating as he had when Jon met him eight years ago, maybe more so now. Jon had no idea how he fell asleep in that meeting Ned took him to. Stannis had such an imposing nature, that it was difficult not to stand at attention when the man was in the room.

When they arrived at the office this morning, Sansa brought the paperwork that waived the previous death certificate with her. She was hesitant to tell Stannis about where she’d been all these years, leaving him with vague answers that didn’t really serve anyone, but by some luck, Stannis believed her anyway. Of course, what really convinced him that they were telling the truth was the letter. As soon as they showed Stannis that Jon knew he wasn't going to turn them away.
“What do you know about the history of your surname?” Stannis asked still looking out the window.

Sansa shot a confused look to Jon and frowned. Jon knew that the Stark’s surname was very old, originating from very early times that could be traced back to the Iron Age, at least according to legend. Sansa answered slowly, “I know that the Starks have lived in York for hundreds of generations. We’re said to have ruled over some of the lands in York during the Elizabethan era, if not longer.”

Stannis nodded his head, looking somewhat impatient now as if he was waiting for a different answer. “and what of your house crest?”

“It’s a wolf.” Jon answered suddenly, remembering the tapestry that hung on the walls in a hall at the manor, “On a white field. We have a coat of arms hanging in one of the halls at the manor.”

“Yes, it seems that Ned managed to teach you something, Snow.” Stannis came back over to the desk and picked up the letter, “Your father was an astute student of history, as am I. It’s something my brothers never shared, least of all Robert. The crest for the house of Baratheon was a stag, did you know that?”

Sansa and Jon shook their heads and Stannis sighed.

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t, or else this letter might have made more sense.” Stannis handed it back to Sansa as he went around back to the large chair behind his desk and sat down.

“That’s the code?” Sansa asked, “It says, the Lion is overtaking the Stag. You’re the Stag?”

“My brother, Robert, was the stag,” Stannis corrected.

“And the lion,” Sansa looked up from the letter, looking to Jon, “That’s the Lannister’s isn’t it? Cersei used to call Joff her Brave Lion.”

Stannis hummed in agreement, “Yes, she did, didn’t she? The Lannister’s are a very old house as you must know.”
“From Italy.” Sansa agreed, “I didn’t know about their coat of arms.”

“It’s a lion,” Stannis said indifferently, “As you’ve probably guessed.”

Jon reached out for the letter, which Sansa handed over easily, a new look of focus on her face. Jon had read the letter several times already, but now he did it with more understanding of what it must have been talking about.

Even with this new information, the letter was still a puzzle. Ned had gone through the extra trouble of making the letter extremely cryptic, even beyond the code words for names. Sam had found traces of a virus on Ned’s laptop that they believed meant that whatever Ned was doing on it was being watched; so these letters had to have been the most secure line of communication for him while he was in London. But Catelyn Stark never received a letter, neither did Jon or Robb. The only letter, as far as he and Sansa could tell, was sent to Stannis, and Jon still had no idea what that meant.

“What about the rest of it?” Jon leaned forward, setting the letter on the desk and pointing to a passage, “What does the seed is strong mean? That’s not about of coat of arms, is it?”

“No, it’s not.” Stannis did not elaborate further. He was watching Jon and Sansa closely as if deciding whether to ask them to leave or not. So far he’d been willing to hear what they had to say, not questioning them or their story since they’d arrived at his office, but that didn’t mean that he trusted them.

Sansa was biting her lip, in what would have been a very distracting fashion if Jon didn’t know that there were more important things to be focusing on. He tried not to think about the kiss last night—the kiss that they hadn’t spoken about since it happened. Shortly after it occurred some more guests came out to the rooftop pool, creating a firm ending to that moment of passion. After that Sansa practically ran away from Jon, saying that she should check on Rickon and then leaving him out on the deck by himself. She was asleep by the time Jon got back to the room. Jon planned to talk to her about the kiss this morning, but when he woke up, both Sansa and Rickon were gone. Apparently, they hiked to the lookout point before sunrise to watch the sun come up over the white cliffs. By the time they came back, it was time to leave for the meeting.

“But you know what it means.” Sansa pressed.

Stannis watched Sansa with shrewd eyes. While he seemed to believe who she was, Jon could tell that her lack of information informing him one where she’d been the last six years was making him suspicious. It made Jon suspicious, even though he knew the truth. Part of Jon wanted to ask why it took Sansa so long to run away from Petyr, why she never tried to reach out for help sooner, but he knew that asking those questions was only going to lead into a fight, so he wouldn’t ask. Still,
watching the suspicion on Stannis’ face only made Jon want to step in front of Sansa and defend her.

Stannis finally looked away, “Tell me, Sansa, what do you know about Cersei Lannister.”

Jon could see the way Sansa tensed at the question.

“A lot,” Sansa gave her answer, “I know that she identified the wrong body as me after the London Riots. She let everyone believe I was dead.”

“Why would she have done that?”

Jon shook his head; he couldn’t stand the tone Stannis was using—like this was some sort of interrogation. “Sansa doesn’t know why. That’s why we’ve come to you.”

“Jon,” Sansa whispered harshly, “It’s fine.” She looked back up at Stannis and held her shoulder’s back, “He’s right, I don’t really know why she would have done that. I do know that she became increasingly paranoid leading up to the riots, and then after Joffery died she became…withdrawn.”

“Before you said that you think she wanted you dead.” Stannis said sighting something Sansa said when the meeting first began, “Is this your only evidence?”

Sansa was twisting her hands underneath the desk, clearly starting to feel anxious.

“Is this important?” Jon asked, Stannis, “What does any of this have to do with Ned’s letter?”

Stannis turned to Jon, an unreadable expression of displeasure on his face, “Mr. Snow, unless there is some reason Ms. Stark can’t answer for herself, I will ask you to stay quiet.”

Sansa shook her head, “It’s—“ she stopped and starting pulling at her lip with her teeth, before finally saying, “I was told by a reliable source that she wanted me dead. A very reliable source. I don’t think he would have lied to me about it.”
It was another incredibly vague answer, but Jon knew that Sansa was already pushing herself to say that much. Why she felt so uncomfortable telling Stannis about Petyr, Jon didn’t know, but now wasn’t the right time to ask her about it.

Stannis nodded his head; maybe this answer was satisfying enough for him. “Ned Stark never trusted the Lannisters, for good reason. I’m sure you both know that my brother was set on marrying your Aunt before she ran away with that musician.”

Of course Jon knew about that, everyone knew about how Aunt Lyanna ran away with Rhaegar Targaryen—the previous heir of King’s Landing Inc. before he left his position as Vice President of the company to become a musician, running away from England with Aunt Lyanna who’d been engaged to Robert Baratheon at the time. Robert and Rhaegar’s father who’d been the President of King Landing Inc, during all of this got in a huge fight, which essentially created a rebellion within the company, resulting in Robert taking control. In the end though, he never got Aunt Lyanna back. She’d been in Spain at the time, in hiding from her parents, when she died of what everyone believed to be a miscarriage. At least that’s what the Stark children were told. What always interested Jon was what happened to Rhaegar, after hearing that Lyanna died, he’s apparently jumped off a bridge and killed himself after a confrontation with Robert. Of course, the other version of the story said that Robert had pushed him.

Stannis cleared his throat, “Well, after all of that nonsense passed, Robert married Cersei Lannister. Her father was on the board of advisors to Aerys back when he was still in control of the company; apparently, he’d been trying to get Cersei married to Rhaegar back when he was still a candidate for President after his father died. None of that ever sat right with Ned, which is why he never took a position at the company after the takeover.”

Sansa shook her head, “What does this have to do with the letter.”

Stannis, for a moment, almost looked like he might have started smiling. It was short-lived if it even had occurred. “Your father was right not to trust the Lannisters. That Tywin had a mind for business, I’ll give you that, but his children were never as sharp as him. You were probably too young to know this, but there were rumors about the Lannister twins.”

Sansa’s brow creased, “Cersei and Jaime?”

Jon frowned too. He recognized Jaime’s name as one of the military officers he met at the promotional party Ned threw, “I don’t remember ever hearing about any rumors about them.”

“Yes, well I wouldn’t expect you to have paid attention to this sort of gossip, Mr. Snow.” Stannis
said it like an accusation, and Jon was left unsure if he’d been paid a compliment or insulted, “At the time we all thought it was just slander. I told Tywin once that he could pursue a case against one of the tabloids that insinuated the story once, but he thought it was best never to address it. As I said, no one thought it was true.”

Sansa’s let out a little gasp, and Jon looked her way. Her mouth was still bent open, eyes wide in sudden understanding, “I know what rumor you’re talking about.” She looked over to Jon, leaning over in her chair, “I remember reading about it in one of the magazines I would get when we were younger. Apparently, there were photos of Cersei and Jaime leaving a club together and everyone started saying that it looked like they must have been sleeping together.”

“Torrid trash,” Stannis clarified, and Sansa wilted, “But as it seems, true.”

“What?” Jon sat forward and took the letter from the desk, “How do you know—“

“The seed is strong.” Stannis repeated, from memory, “Robert’s seed, as it were.”

“Oh god,” Sansa cringed, looking away as her face twisted unpleasantly.

Jon coughed loudly into his fist, “Wait, you mean by seed—“

“My brother had a penchant for fathering bastards.” Stannis elaborates dryly, as Jon remembers his past as a lawyer at King’s Landing, “I know personally because I housed one of them in my home until very recently. I oversaw several court cases regarding child support and paternity cases. Every child had thick black hair.”

Sansa seemed to have recovered from her momentary disgust. She sat up sharply, “But Joffery, Myrcella, and Tommen are all blond.”

“Your father found that to be suspicious too,” Stannis told Sansa, “In his previous letters to me, he let on that he was testing for the paternity of Cersei’s children. As it turns out, they were never Roberts.”

Sansa was shaking her head, “But—so you mean to say that they are Jaime’s?”

“So it would seem. Or at least this is what your father believed.”
It was…shocking, that was certain. Jon never paid attention to this sort of socialite gossip like Sansa did, but even he knew what a scandal this would be, especially now that Cersei was in line to take over King’s Land Inc. A scandal like this would disinherit her children from the Baratheon fortune, as well as completely ruin her chances of taking the company.

Jon tried to imagine how Ned even came to this information. He wasn’t one to believe rumors either, but apparently, he had enough reason to believe that Cersei’s children weren’t Roberts that he tested for their paternity in secret. If Cersei knew he found out about this secret, what lengths would she have gone to so that it was kept a secret?

Sansa sat back in her chair and crossed her legs, the skirt she was wearing pushed up a little, revealing a bit more of her pale thighs than Jon was used to seeing. He felt himself flush as he looked away. He wondered how different he really was to Jaime Lannister.

“This is the secret she was trying to keep,” Sansa thought aloud, “She must have thought I found out about it, that’s why she wanted me dead. But if she knew Father knew about it…” the blood drained from her face and she uncrossed her legs and sat forward, “Would she have…I mean, could she have been behind the assassination.”

Jon felt like a cold bucket of ice had been poured over him, “The officer who shot Father—he was contracted by the Lannisters, as security for the announcements.”

Stannis had an impassive look on his face, but his jaw was ticking as he shifted it in thought. Did he already know about all of this? Did he know that the Lannister’s were behind their father’s murder?

“I wouldn’t know about any of that,” Stannis answered slowly, “But I would advise that you children stop looking into Cersei Lannister.”

“What?” Sansa sputtered, shaking her head and hands clamped down on the arms of the chair, “But if Father knew about her children she could have killed him to keep it quiet—she could have tried to kill me—”

Jon nodded, “Sansa’s right. We can’t just ignore something like this. We can report all of this to the London Police—this is enough evidence to warrant an investigation—”

“And then what?” Stannis asked, and was met by silence.
Sansa’s mouth was half open as she was thinking of what to say. Wasn’t it obvious what would happen next? This is the sort of information on Cersei they were looking for. She could be arrested for Ned’s murder and Sansa would be safe, at least, from her.

“Cersei Lannister would be arrested.” Jon informed, “For a very long time, if she’s convicted.”

Stannis sighed, leaning back in his chair, “A very idealistic review. I wouldn’t expect anything less from two children.”

“I’m not—“

Stannis held up his hand, silencing Jon. He sat forward, folding his hands in front of him on the desk, “There is a reason that it has taken the world this long to find out about the Lannisters. Tywin Lannister in Prime Minister, Jaime, if nothing else, is a decorated war hero. Cersei is poised to become the next president of King’s Landing Incorporated. These are powerful people, and if you are to accuse them of a crime such as assassination, you will need a lot more proof, than some circumstantial evidence and hearsay.”

Sansa’s face was red. She looked close to tears and she folded her arms and got up off her chair to start pacing the room. Jon wanted to reach out and hold her, but that probably wouldn’t help improve their meeting with Stannis.

Jon folded and unfolded his fists, “Well, what are we supposed to do then? We find out who Ned Stark’s killer was and you’re saying we can’t do anything to avenge him?”

“Oh?” Stannis said dryly, “Is it revenge you want?”

Jon blinked and shook his head, “No—“

But was it? He thought about how everything horrible that happened to their family started after Ned was killed. Robb was killed, Sansa was taken away, Arya disappeared, and Bran and Rickon were abandoned, and all because the Stark Patriarch was taken from them. The only family Jon every knew was destroyed in a second because a bullet lodged itself in Ned Stark’s chest and he bled out in a crowd of strangers. Didn’t that warrant revenge? Was Jon wrong to want that?

“Because, Mr. Snow, I will tell you revenge is short lived. Revenge is for small men with small
ambitions.” Stannis’ face fell into a hard line, “Revenge is easy. Do you not believe that I wanted revenge after my brother was killed, or after the company that rightfully belonged to me was taken under my feet? I could have taken it—I could have used what I already knew about the Lannisters set a campaign against them, but I didn’t. And do you know why?” Jon swallowed hard, shaking his head, trying not to feel the burning scrutiny of Stannis’ eyes. “Because vengeance’s purpose ends after it is taken, and then it is useless. I do not plan for the short term, Mr. Snow, I do not imagine Ned Stark raised a son to do the same. So tell me, do you plan to take revenge, or take action?”

Jon looked at Sansa, who was looking out the window, lost in the realization that she lived in the home of those who murdered her father. He looked back to Stannis, his face hardening, “Sansa is in constant danger of Cersei. She’s been living in secret for years so that she wouldn’t be found. This isn’t about vengeance—it’s about protecting her.”

And Stannis sat back, a satisfied expression on his unchanged face, “Then, Mr. Snow, I believe that is something we can discuss.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay!
So yes, i know, i totally cut out all the resolution to the kiss. But i promise the next chapter is all about that, including a flashback! We just had to start moving plot forward too, so we had to get the Stannis ch out of the way first, although he will be a reoccurring character from here on out.
Also in case anyone was wondering where Rickon was during all of this, that will also be found out in the next ch. but he is somewhere safe and probably getting into trouble wherever he is.

Thanks for reading!!! I promise this fic is close to done, it was supposed to only ever be 40k words but i totally lost control of it along the way. I'm so glad y'all are liking it though, and i'm really happy y'all were satisfied with the kiss that i made you wait 100k to read!
Please comment and kudos!! Next ch should be out by friday.
Sansa stepped out of Stannis Baratheon’s office in a daze. The meeting was still going on, but she couldn’t be in there anymore. She didn’t even remember what Jon and Stannis had been talking about when she left, all Sansa could think about was that Cersei had killed her Father. As soon as Sansa left the office, she made a line straight to the bathroom, locking herself in a stall and falling to her knees as she started to vomit.

Part of her must have known already that somehow Cersei had to have been responsible for Father dying. Everyone blamed it on that one angry officer who stole a gun and shot father during his speech in a moment of protest, but that narrative never sat right with Sansa. Petyr never contradicted it, but whenever Sansa brought it up, Petyr always got so angry, insisting that Sansa should have no interest in the death of a man whom she had no connection to. Sansa was supposed to be Petyr’s daughter, not Ned’s.

It made so much sense though—Cersei must have had Father killed, especially if she wanted to hide the fact that she had some sort of incestuous relationship with Jaime. Something like that would have ruined Cersei and her whole family.

Sansa heaved again, spitting up bile. She pushed herself away from the bowl, flushing everything down before standing up on shaky legs and going to the sink. Everything felt like she was stuck in some sort of dream—too foggy and unclear, and like frightening things were lurking around every corner.

Sansa splashed a little water on her face, dapping it with a paper towel before slipping out of the restroom and taking a walk down the hall. She couldn’t go back to the office, not yet. Sansa still hadn’t sorted herself out, besides, she wasn’t sure how much more of that talk she could take.

Instead, Sansa wandered into the break room on the floor, where Rickon was sitting with a red haired woman.

Sansa understood red hair. She’d been born and raised with it, but compared to the woman sitting across from Rickon; Sansa’s hair had been comparable to a carrot. This woman had true red hair—the same color as a roaring flame or blood. She was beautiful, almost otherworldly as if she didn’t belong on the same plane of existence as someone like Sansa, who hadn’t showered in three days. The woman dressed in a red dress, that was nearly the same color as her hair, a ruby necklace hanging above her breasts. She appeared to be having a staring contest with Rickon.

Sansa leaned in the doorway and gave the frame two knocks, “Hey, everything alright in here?”

Rickon looked up, he looked relieved, “Thank fuck.”
“Rickon,” Sansa hissed, sending an apologetic smile to the woman—what was her name? Melody, Melissa…Melinda? “Sorry, he can be a bit rude.”

The woman shrugged her slender shoulders, crossing her legs as she turned to face Sansa in her seat, “Oh its no problem. Rickon and I have been having a little chat, haven’t we Rickon?”

Rickon glared at the woman, “Sure.”

Sansa felt the need to apologize again as she went to take the third seat at the table they were at, “It’s Melisandre, isn’t it?” Sansa hoped she hadn’t butchered the name. Melisandre bowed her head, as she took a sip of her coffee, and so Sansa continued, “So what have you been talking about?”

“Do you take tea?” Melisandre asked getting up from her chair and going to the little coffee bar on the counter behind them.

Sansa felt a little unsettled by the sudden change in topic. She nodded her head, “Yes, I do. It’s been a while since I’ve had any.”

Melisandre hummed, “Sugar? Milk?”

“No thank you,” Sansa answered, looking across the table to Rickon, who was shaking his head, a deadly serious expression on his face. What? Sansa mouthed while Melisandre’s back was turned. “Plain is fine.”

Melisandre came back with a cup, handing it back to Sansa easily as she reclaimed her seat. The tea wasn’t strained, little clumps of tea leaves floating around the cup that Sansa had to drink around. She looked across the table to the full cup of tea in front of Rickon and wondered if she should finish her sip.

Melisandre didn’t work in any official capacity at Dragon Stone. When they met in the morning, Stannis said Melisandre provided him counsel, but when Stannis left them in the office alone to go get a cup of coffee, Jon had told Sansa that Melisandre was really Stannis’ mistress. It was a bizarre thought, a man as straight-laced as Stannis openly cheating on his wife, but then again, what did Sansa know about love?

“Your accent,” Sansa asked hesitantly, “It’s very pretty. Do you mind if I ask where you’re from?”
Melisandre gave a tight smile, “I don’t mind at all. I was born in Kumrovec, a small village inland in Croatia, but as a child, I traveled to many different places.”

Sansa nodded, as she tried to imagine what that would have been like. She didn’t know anything about Croatia, except that she thought it might have been close to Italy, locked somewhere between the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe. Sansa imagined romantic coastlines, and quaint little villages in the mountains, nestled between snowy mountaintops, and lush green fields with white sheep wondering about. The location would make a woman like Melisandre even more impressive. The beautiful dark eyes woman with the flaming red hair, wondering the countryside, only to find her way into the office of a powerful and closed off man like Stannis. It was almost too romantic—the sort of romantic Sansa hadn’t fantasized about in years, not since she was a little girl, sneaking passages of romance novels. It was the sort of romance Alayne would have laughed at, because it was so unrealistic. Even now, Sansa had to remember that Melisandre was Stannis’ mistress—knowingly sleeping with a man who had a wife and child, and nothing about their indiscretions could be seen as romantic with that in mind.

Still, it was a nice thought, one that was distracting her from everything she just found out about Cersei and Father, and so Sansa would lean into her uncharacteristic romanticism in the name of staying calm.

Sansa thought about all of this, reaching for her cup of tea to take a sip, “Oh, why did you travel so much?”

“I was in a church,” Melisandre explained easily, shrugging her shoulders as she took a sip from her own cup, “The Followers of Dazhbog.”

Sansa almost choked on her tea. She’d heard about this church, but calling it a church was saying it kindly. Sansa remembered hearing about it on the news once when she was little. The Followers of Dazhbog were an extremist religious movement, best known for the cult-like practices back in the day.

Sansa reached for the stack of napkins on the center of the table, quickly dabbing at the tea that was dripping down her mouth, “I’m sorry—” she held out a hand in apology, “I didn’t mean—“

Melisandre held up and hand, stopping Sansa’s babbling. She had an easy smile on her face. Maybe she got this sort of reaction often, she took it in stride, “It’s alright. My faith, I understand is very misunderstood. It is my understanding, that your father also practiced a misunderstood religion?”

Sansa flushed, glancing over to Rickon whose face was twisted in confusion. She didn’t want to talk about the rumors that surrounded her father, Sansa didn’t know enough about them to defend
“We were raised Catholic,” Sansa answered shaking her head, “I don’t know anything about my father’s…beliefs.”

Melisandre hummed quietly, “Yes, well. I was trained as a priestess for my faith. I traveled across Europe preaching Dazhbog’s message, that is how I found myself with Stannis. If it not had been for my faith, I would never have left that little village in Croatia, I owe everything to my god.”

Sansa didn’t know what to say. She felt like she must have offended Melisandre enough, and so she just continued to sip her tea, wondering if this is what Melisandre and Rickon had been talking about before Sansa arrived.

Sansa set her empty cup of tea down, folding her hands under the table as she tried to think about something else to ask Melisandre. She didn’t end up needing to.

“May I?” Melisandre reached for Sansa’s cup and brought it close.

“Oh,” Sansa frowned, not really sure what was going on, “Um, of course.”

“Don’t,” Rickon warned lowly, getting Sansa’s attention, “Don’t trust her.”

Sansa shot a warning look Rickon’s way. She trusted her little brother’s judgment enough to be suspicious of Melisandre, but it was just a teacup.

Melisandre held the cup up, flipped the teacup over before holding it up, and then flipping it back around to look over the brim to the black tea leaves that were sticking around the inside of the cup.

“Divination was part of my training in the church,” Melisandre explained, her brow creasing as she looked inside the cup.

Sansa’s brow rose, “You’re reading my tea leaves.”

She had begun to assume as much. Reading tea leaves was one of the party tricks Myranda pretended to do when she was bored. It was all just silly games back then, but as Melisandre peered into the cup, Sansa felt herself hold her breath, waiting to see if there might have been something
more to all of this.

“What do you see?” Sansa asked, nervously, looking towards the door as she suddenly felt the sensation of being watched.

“You don’t actually believe this?” Rickon hissed, moving his chair closer to Sansa, “It’s bullshit.”

Melisandre kept looking into the cup, and when she spoke, her voice came at in a starling hush, “Tell me, Sansa, is there someone who you should fear?”

Sansa felt a chill run down her spine. She sat forward, “Is that what the leaves say, that I have someone to fear?”

“Yes.” Melisandre looked up, face open with sincerity and worry.

Rickon pulled at Sansa’s jacket, “It’s bullshit. She’s lying.”

But Melisandre wasn’t lying, Sansa could tell, she could see the truth on Melisandre’s face. “What else does it say?”

Melisandre moved her chair closer to Sansa, bringing the cup with her. She sat close, showing Sansa the images left behind in the tea leaves, “This one means that there is an enemy near you,” Melisandre explained pointing to another bunch of leaves, “And then this is a comet, it means that an unexpected visitor will come soon. This next one is a dragon, and it means that unforeseen trouble will be coming your way.”

Sansa sat back, willing herself to stay calm. None of that had to be alarming, although it did make Sansa feel uneasy. But she’d dealt with surprises and unforeseen problems before, and she knew that with Jon, it was always going to be something they could overcome.

She forced a smile and shook her head, “Well, I thought it was going to be a lot worse. That’s not so bad.”

Someone cleared their throat in the doorway and Sansa turned to see Jon standing there, an uneasy
smile on his face. Sansa let out a deep breath, smiling at him. She thought about last night and their kiss. It still managed to make her feel flush. Sansa had avoided the awkward aftermath with Jon last night, but she knew that today she would have to say something about it. Sansa just didn’t know what. Half of her wanted to feel excited that Jon seemed to want her, the other part was afraid that after a good nights sleep, Jon had reconsidered everything and thought it was a mistake now.

“I’m not interrupting something, am I?” Jon asked.

Sansa shook her head and stood up, “Not at all. Is the meeting over?”

Jon nodded, giving Melisandre a polite smile as the woman had begun to stare in his direction, “Just ended. We should get on the road, I’ve got to be at the station in the morning.”

“Right,” Sansa wouldn’t exactly be able to talk to Jon about the kiss while they were stuck in the car with Rickon. It would have to wait until tonight, once they were back at the flat in Cardiff.

Jon and Rickon were already leaving the room, starting some argument that Sansa didn’t catch. Sansa started to follow when Melisandre caught her hand. Holding it tight, with something akin to urgency. Where she touched Sansa felt her skin burn as if Melisandre’s blood was boiling.

“Sansa,” Melisandre said her brow creased in worry, tension holding her shoulders stiff, “There is one last thing that I need to show you.” Melisandre picked up the cup from the table, and held it out to Sansa one last time. She pointed one of her pale, white fingers at a design the leaves made in the cup, it looked like a chain.

“What does it mean?” Sansa asked, glancing to the break room door, to see if Jon and Rickon were waiting for her.

Melisandre lips fell in a hard line, “A marriage. One that will occur soon.”

Sansa wanted to laugh, but there was no joy there. She shook her head and pulled her hand away, desperate to alleviate the heat, “Fine, but these are all just options aren’t they? Nothing these leaves say is for certain.”

Melisandre’s expression hadn’t changed. Something in it told Sansa that Melisandre knew more than she was letting on. She looked so sad, as if she was already mourning something, as if
something terrible had just occurred, “This message, I’m afraid, is imminent. It was not just the leaves, I can see it—I’ve dreamt it. You will be in a wedding soaked in red.”

Sansa blinked, slowly stepping back, holding out her hand to hit the door and ground her again. She felt as if she was stuck in a dream again, just like before. “That’s not going to happen.” Sansa shook her head, “I’m not going to marry anyone.”

“I’ve seen it. A little bird will fly down your throat and choke you the day of your wedding, and you will spit up blood.” Melisandre’s voice did not waiver, conveying no doubt or uncertainty. Her dark brown eyes looked red, “Watch yourself Sansa Stark. There are those among you who should not be trusted.”

Chapter End Notes

Quick update!
So this ch. was really short, but the next one will still be out tomorrow and it'll be much longer and we'll finally deal with the kiss!
I just wanted to get this one out there.
Also disclaimer: I totally made up Mel's religion, i know that Dazhbog is a eastern european type god, but everything else Mel says about the religion, even the name of it, is totally made up. I didn't want to take from any religion and misrepresent it so i made up some eastern european cult based off a pagan god. Hopefully this doesn't offend anyone, but if it does let me know! I'll definitely change it if it does!
Sansa knew she was being too quiet during the drive back to Cardiff. She hardly spoke, attempting to join the conversation at times, but always fading out after saying one or two things.

*A little bird will fly down your throat and choke you,* Sansa felt chilled remembering Melisandre’s prophecy. Sansa remembered the letterhead on all of Petyr’s official documents for work, it had his initials and then a mockingbird, the symbol of his company. That had to be the little bird Melisandre meant.

*On the day of your wedding, you will spit up blood.* Sansa couldn’t even begin to know what that meant. Was Petyr going to kill her? He might, once they were married all of Sansa’s assets would be his, and he wouldn’t need her anymore. It’s what he’d done to Lyssa Arryn—they’d only been married for a month before she conveniently fell down a flight of stairs. Sansa closed her eyes as she held back that memory. But Sansa wasn’t Lyssa, Petyr wouldn’t have gone through all of this trouble of allowing Sansa to stay with Jon for a month to make her happy, just so that he could kill her so early on in their marriage. Petyr said he loved Sansa, and she really believed that he thought he did.

But none of this even mattered. That’s what Sansa told herself. She wasn’t going to ever marry Petyr, she and Jon were going to find a way out of it—they would find something to blackmail Petyr with and he’d be forced to let her go free. Once that was done with, Sansa didn’t think she’d ever marry anyone—she would remain a Stark until she died.

*You will be in a wedding soaked in red.*

Rickon kicked the back of Sansa’s seat, and she turned around, hissing, “Will you cut that out.”

Rickon rolled his eyes, “You wouldn’t answer my question.”

Sansa bit her lip and looked away. She didn’t even realize Rickon had been speaking to her, “Ask it again.”

She heard Rickon sigh, “I asked what that witch talked to you about after we left?”

“Nothing,” Sansa shrugged her shoulders and looked out the window, “She just told me to stay safe. And don’t call her a witch, it’s rude.”
“She’s not here to hear it.” Rickon muttered.

“Are you talking about Melisandre?” Jon asked, “Why would you call her a witch?”

Rickon scoffed, “Did you see her? She tried to read my palm, and then when that didn’t work she tried to read those tea leaves like she did with Sansa. What a freak.”

Sansa turned her head slightly to see the frown forming on Jon’s lips. “I thought that Melisandre was just a consultant for the company.”

Sansa shrugged her shoulders and looked out the window, “I don’t see why it matters. What else did Stannis tell you after I left the meeting?”

“He’s going to help us,” Jon said quickly going with the change in topic, “It sounds like he plans on retaking King’s Landing Incorporated anyway and has been wanted to take the Lannisters down for a while. Stannis is going to start building a court case against Cersei and her Father. He said he already had some proof that they might have been responsible for Robert’s death, but with the new information Ned’s letter gave him, he can start piecing together a stronger case for everything else.”

“How long do you think that’s going to take?” Sansa asked anxiously, “It’s not like we have loads of time. A court case is going to take months, I thought our plan was to intimidate Cersei into leaving us alone.”

Jon sighed, tapping his ring finger against the wheel, “That was our plan when we didn’t think we had another option. This is a long-term solution.”

Long-term thinking wasn’t something Sansa had the privilege of considering at the moment. She had three weeks left with Jon and Rickon before she had to go back to the Vale and get married to Petyr. A marriage that apparently already had a doomsday prophecy attached to it.

This was another thing Sansa couldn’t explain to Jon, not with Rickon in the car. She didn’t want to worry her little brother, and something told Sansa that if she told Jon that she was worried about some prophecy a company consultant gave her it wouldn’t go over well.

“We’re going to work this all out, Sansa,” Jon continued saying, pausing a moment as he chose his next words, “You can start planning for the future now. University, work,” another pause, “A boyfriend.”
Sansa coughed, and in the seat behind her, Rickon made a gagging sound.

“Whose desperate enough to date Sansa?”

Sansa reached for a bottle of water that was rolling around on the ground by her feet, twisting the lid and taking a large gulp. She must have turned the same color red as Melisandre’s hair. Was Jon implying something about himself? Was he really trying to work out this conversation right in front of Rickon like this?

“Excuse me?” Sansa asked, her voice coming out in a high squeak.

Jon’s face was just as red as hers, he kept his eyes firmly planted on the road in front of him, “I just mean, once you can officially start your life again you’ll have the chance to meet so many new people. You’re not going to want to live with me forever, not once you start going out into the world.”

Now she understood. Jon wasn’t testing the waters to see if she wanted a relationship with him. Jon was trying to hint that Sansa should start considering a life with other people. In any other moment Sansa would have felt a flush of embarrassment as this rejection, but instead, Sansa was pissed. Jon didn’t have to be interested in her romantically, but he couldn’t just rewrite history. He’d kissed her too, and been enthusiastically interested in it all if Sansa remembered correctly. He didn’t just get to pretend that none of that happened and start pushing Sansa out the door.

“Maybe I want to live with you and Rickon, Jon.” Sansa’s voice sounded icy, the same sort of cool calm that occurred right before the ice broke under your feet and drowned you. “I did just reunite with both of you after six years.”

Jon flinched a little, but he didn’t look regretful, “Yes, but there is still so much of the world you haven’t gotten to see. You’re still so young Sansa, you’re going to want to experience as much as you can. You can’t honestly expect me to believe that you’ll be content with a life in Cardiff.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Sansa narrowed her eyes, “I like Cardiff. What’s wrong with Cardiff?”

“Nothing.” Jon hunched his shoulders defensively, “But you could do a lot better. There are hundreds of…cities that would want you. Cities your own age.”
Rickon wrinkled his nose, “What does that mean?”

“I don’t want cities my own age,” Sansa argued, her skin prickling with anger, “I want Cardiff. Unless you don’t think I belong there.”

Jon shook his head, “That’s not what I’m saying. It’s just that you can’t just settle with the first place you see.”

“Oh, so I’m settling now,” Sansa scoffed, “Right because I’m so incapable of making a smart decision myself, there’s no possible way I actually might know what I want. Thank god you’re here Jon to make every decision for me, where would I be without you.”

“I’m not—” Jon growled in frustration cutting himself off as he took a deep breath, “Sansa I just think you should actually consider your options and not rush into anything that you might regret later.”

Sansa huffed, turning away from Jon to look out the window. She couldn’t believe Jon’s nerve. A night ago he was kissing her, practically telling her that doing so wasn’t a mistake, and then today he decides that Sansa is, what? Too young for him? Too vapid, too fickle? She wasn’t even sure what she was specifically being condemned for, only that Jon wanted to convince her that she shouldn’t have any interest in him.

And as if Sansa couldn’t decide for herself what she wanted. That’s what pissed her off the most. Jon had accused her of trying to control everything before, but he was the one he was attempting to convince Sansa that she didn’t know what was good for her.

“Are you both high?” Rickon was looking between Jon and Sansa, his mouth half open as he tried to piece together the conversation. “What even was that? Is everyone going crazy?”

“It’s nothing, Rickon,” Jon answered shortly, glaring out the driver window. “Forget it.”

Rickon rolled his eyes, kicking the back of Jon’s seat, hard, before crossing his arms and laying across the back seat.

About halfway through the drive back to Cardiff, Jon pulled over at a petrol station and got out of the car. They hadn’t spoken since that stilted argument, driving in silence, but now with Jon out of the car, Rickon moved over to the middle of the seat and leaned over the center consul.
“So you’re still fighting with him? I thought things were getting better.”

“We aren’t fighting.” Sansa reaffirmed stubbornly, “We just had a disagreement.”

“Uh-huh. Right, about cities your own age.” Rickon raised an eyebrow. His bruise really was going down, barely noticeable unless you looked now. “I’m not stupid.”

Sansa held her breath, “I know that you aren’t.”

“So you don’t actually think I thought you were arguing about cities.” Rickon climbed over the consul and took the driver’s seat, “You already promised me that you weren’t going to leave. I know that you aren’t going to move anywhere, Jon has to know that too, so what were you really arguing about?”

Sansa let out a stilted laugh, shaking her head; “I’m not going to talk to you about this.”

There was absolutely zero chance that Sansa was ever going to discuss her romantic entanglements with Rickon. It wasn’t just that he was twelve, but he was her little brother too. There were certain things that one could not discuss with little brothers, and while Sansa had gone many years without one, she still had enough instincts to tell her that talking about her love life made the list.

“Why not?” Rickon glared at her, “Is there something I shouldn’t know?”

Sansa gave an exaggerated eye roll, “Rickon, I promise if Jon and I were arguing about something relevant to you, I’d let you know. I’m sure if I just told you the truth you would just find it boring.”

“Then tell me,” Rickon played, “If it’s just going to bore me, why does it matter?”

“Because,” Sansa said between gritted teeth. She did not have the patience for this right now, “This is none of your business.”

Rickon face contorted in frustration, “If something is going on between you and Jon it is my
Sansa’s face fell flat. It must have been obvious, but Sansa really didn’t think Rickon was going to pick up on the tension between Sansa and Jon. She hoped that she was wrong, and he wasn’t referring to an actual romantic relationship with her and Jon, but rather some familial spat.

“Nothings going on between us.”

“Bullshit.”

“Nothings going on, Rickon,” Sansa repeated, glaring in his direction.

Rickon matched her stare, “If you don’t tell me, I’ll just ask Jon.”

Sansa laughed, “Yeah? Go ahead.”

She’d like to see how Jon handled that.

The driver door opened, but Sansa and Rickon were still locked in a glaring match.

“No, get out of my seat,” Jon said holding the door wide for Rickon to climb out.

It was only then that Rickon finally looked away, climbing back over the center consul into the back seat. Jon was frowning, looking at the state of the two of them to try and figure out what happened in the short time that he was gone.

_Let him be confused_, Sansa thought, _It’s not like he ever clarifies things for me._

Sansa wished that Jon were right. She wished that there was some other guy out in the world who she could be interested in, but Sansa couldn’t even imagine that such thing existed. In the Vale, there had been men, boys really. There was Harry, who’d really been Sansa’s only option when she was Alayne. Petyr never discouraged her from seeing him, he encouraged it really, thinking it would help him gain favor with Harry’s father, but Sansa never cared for him. It had been years since Sansa actually wanted someone, actually desired, and craved a man’s touch. It was only ever Jon, he was the one Sansa wanted.
She could still feel his lips against hers. Sansa could still taste him on her tongue. She remembered the way he held the small of her back and drew her closer to him, the way his hot breath fanned across her cheek the moment before he connected his lips to hers.

Sansa never wanted to be touched by a man before—she used to dread the idea of it in the Vale, always terrified that Petyr was going to force her into a relationship with one of the son’s of his business partners, or that he’d one day decide to take her for himself. When Mya and Myranda would brag about past conquests or fantasize about what it would be like to sleep with a certain man, Sansa could never relate. She’d never wanted that, and before, if it was up to her, Sansa would have picked to join a convent rather than be married to a man and endure a physical relationship with him.

Part of Sansa thought, during her time with Petyr, that part of her, the sexual and passionate part, had broken. Being with Petyr, enduring those few touches he would give her during the nights he came to her room, and the kisses he’d force upon her closed mouth had left her in an irreparable state. Sansa didn’t think she was capable of want. But with Jon, also Sansa did was want.

Something in her felt ashamed of that. She’d already come to terms with the fact that if Jon didn’t feel the same Sansa would have to move on, forget about it all. But Jon did want her, or at least last night she did. Sansa wasn’t so stupid to think he’d actually want a relationship with her, because while that would be amazing, Sansa had to be realistic, or else risk hurting herself. But whatever Jon was willing to give her, Sansa would gladly take. If all this were to end, if Jon lost interest, or if Sansa ever went back to the Vale, she didn’t want to go not knowing what she could have had.

Of course, while Sansa would accept Jon’s rejection, she sort of wanted it to be on more explicit terms, rather than because there were younger cities out there for her.

It was nightfall by the time they arrived at the flat in Cardiff. Jon dropped Sansa and Rickon in front of the flat while he went around back to the car park.

Rickon was exhausted, going straight to his room. They’d woken up before sunrise for a morning hike to the cliffs, so Sansa didn’t blame him. If she could, she would curl up on the couch and fall asleep that very second, but instead she was leaning against the kitchen counter, waiting for Jon to come through the front door. She was tapping her foot anxiously, drumming her fingers on the counter as she watched the door. Part of her felt insane, waiting for Jon to have a conversation he clearly wasn’t interested in having. But then again, if he didn’t want to have this conversation, maybe he shouldn’t have said any of that stuff in the car on the ride home. Sansa had too much pride to back down now. With only a few weeks left and then Melisandre’s prophecy hanging over her, Sansa didn’t have any time to lose.

There was something Myranda once told Sansa. Myranda was always so much more experienced with boys. Her father sent her to the Vale to try and avoid a scandal, but even in the remote parts of the Alps, Myranda always had a boy hanging off her arm. When Sansa was sixteen, Myranda told Sansa that if she wanted something she had to get it herself. If Sansa planned on waiting for a boy, she would be waiting an awfully long time, if Sansa wanted something she had to go out and take it herself.

That advice had never been relevant to Sansa before, but now though, with the time she had left, she owed herself her best shot at being happy, even if that happiness was fleeting.

The front door opened and Jon stepped inside. His eyes met Sansa, and for a second Sansa thought he was about to walk right back out. He must have taken so long with the car to avoid this very situation.
“We need to talk,” Sansa said, crossing her arms over her chest to hide how her hands were shaking.

Jon shut the door, walking to drop the keys on the counter, in an attempt to pass Sansa by. “It’s late, we can talk in the morning.”

Sansa scoffed, looking at the time displayed on the oven, “It’s nine o’clock. Jon, we can talk now.”

Jon was shaking his head, already walking over to his bedroom, “I’ve got work in the morning,” he said, his back turned, “We can talk about everything tomorrow.”

Sansa couldn’t wait until then. By tomorrow she’d have lost her nerve and would be too afraid to talk to Jon about any of this, accepting everything he said in the car as his formal rejection. She followed him to his room, pushing open the door that nearly closed in her face.

Jon sighed, tilting his head up as he turned to face Sansa, “We can talk—“

“We can talk right now,” Sansa set her hands on her hips, “You don’t get to say the stuff you did and then think that we aren’t going to talk about it.”

Jon shook his head, “We really don’t have to do this, Sansa.” He sighed, pulling a hand through his hair, making a mess of the curls, “Give yourself time to think things over, and really think about them.”

Sansa’s face twisted in anger, “Are you under the impression that I haven’t thought about any of this?”

Jon sighed, “Sansa—“

“Have you not thought about it?” Sansa countered taking a step forward, propelled forward by the obscene need to be proved right, “Have you not thought about our kiss since last night? You haven’t thought about how it felt to be pressed against—“
“Sansa!” Jon’s voice came out in a sharp breath, and Sansa fell silent.

Maybe that wasn’t the most prudent direction to take things in. Sansa felt her face heat up, surprised that she was even about to go there. Myranda would have been proud.

“I—“ Sansa pulled her hand through her hair and dropped it to her side. She felt so very lost, “If you think it was a mistake just tell me. I’ll understand Jon, I really will. I get it; I threw myself at you and you didn’t want to hurt my feelings. If that’s the case, just say it. If you aren’t interested in me like that, I’ll get over, but you just have to tell me.”

Her voice almost broke at the end, but Sansa forced herself to hold it together. This was not the time for her to get emotional. The only good advice Petyr ever gave Sansa was to think with her head, not her heart, and that’s exactly what she had to do now. Sansa wouldn’t ruin her relationship with Jon.

Jon looked pained, shaking his head, “It’s not that Sansa, you just—I know you don’t want to hear it, but right now you’re vulnerable. I let myself take advantage of that last night, and I’m sorry.”

Sansa blinked, she let out a shaky breath, willing herself not to break. “So you do think it was a mistake.”

“It’s not your fault, you didn’t do anything wrong,” Jon explained quickly, “I was the one who should have stopped things. After everything you’ve been through of course you were trying to find comfort.”

“Find comfort.” Sansa repeated numbly, wrapping her arms around her middle, “Right, because I stick my tongue down the throat of every man who I want to find comfort in.”

Jon closed his eyes, cringing, “I didn’t mean it like that.”

Sansa nodded her head sharply, tilting it up to keep avoiding looking at Jon’s face, “Right, of course not. I’m just so traumatized that I can’t be trusted to know what I want. Is that is Jon? I’m not allowed to want anything, and anyone who touches me is just trying to take advantage of me?” She looked Jon dead in the eyes, “So when do I get to decide what’s best for me, or is that your job now? Are you going to tell me who I’m allowed to want? You know, Petyr did the same thing.”
Jon’s jaw ticked, “I’m not Petyr.”

“I know that,” Sansa fumed, “Which is exactly why I don’t believe anything you’re telling me. You aren’t him; you wouldn’t take advantage of me.”

“You don’t know that,” Jon argued, walking across the room, and resting an arm against the wall, “You’ve been living in isolation for years Sansa, you can’t possibly know what you want. You’re still just a child.”

Sansa stepped back, for a moment before starting towards Jon, “Is that really the problem? I don’t remember my age being a problem last night, Jon.”

Jon gave a dry laugh, he stood straight and turned to face Sansa, “You’re only eighteen Sansa, I’m twenty-five. That’s not an insignificant difference.”

Sansa brow furrowed. She never saw their age difference as a problem. Her whole life Sansa had been prayed on by men in their forties compared to that a seven-year difference was downright wholesome. But this was the first point Jon served that gave her pause. Just because the age difference didn’t bother Sansa, that didn’t mean Jon felt okay with it. Unlike her, he was probably used to being with girls his own age.

“Does that really bother you?” Sansa asked, her voice taking a quiet, serious tone.

Jon pressed his lips together, “It’s something to consider. How do you think Ned would feel if I was praying on his daughter?”

And then it clicked, “That’s what you’re worried about. This isn’t even about me, it’s about you.” Sansa felt anger bubble up inside her chest, renewed by this information, “I’m so tired of being someone’s daughter. Father, Petyr—why does any of that matter? They don’t get a say in any of this, Jon. I do, and I—” her voice waivered by Sansa stood strong, “I want you. Don’t use Ned as an excuse to not want me too.”

Jon’s face twisted in frustration, as he began to grasp at straws, “I was practically raised as your brother.”

Sansa scoffed, “So you’re telling me that you see me as a sister now? Please, Jon, Arya was your
sister; I was just the girl who lived in the same house as you. No offense, but I really never thought of you as one of my brothers, and I doubt you ever thought of me as a sister. Really Jon, if you really thought the kiss was a mistake, just say that, stop making up all these excuses—"

“Fine.” Jon shouted and Sansa fell still. Her heart stopped, so this was it then, Jon had been sparing her feelings before, but now it was time for the truth. Sansa knew hearing it would break her, but it needed to said out loud. Jon took in a deep breath, “It wasn’t—it wasn’t a mistake.”

Sansa felt unsteady, she walked over, practically falling on the edge of the bed. Part of her really believed that Jon was about to turn her away, part of her really thought that she took this gamble only to lose, and with it, she’d have lost the best thing ever to happen in her life. But she’s been right, Jon did want her. This hadn't been a mistake.

“Sansa,” Jon had walked over to the bed, and was kneeling in front of Sansa now, setting one of his hands on her cheek, “Sansa, are you alright?”

Sansa closed her eyes and gave a shallow nod. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” Jon said quickly, “This isn’t what you need to be dealing with right now. After everything you’ve been through—“

Sansa interrupted Jon, leaning forward and bringing her hand up to his neck to keep them both steady, and she let their lips connect.

It wasn’t like last time. It wasn’t hot passion, it wasn’t fast and desperate. This time, it was slow. The kiss felt like drowning, a slow descent into madness. It was filled with tender touches and steady breaths. Jon’s hand trailed down from Sansa’s neck to her waist, never leaving her skin on the way down. Sansa parted her legs, making room for Jon to come in closer, wanting there not to be an inch between them. She felt Jon’s other hand find a place on her thigh, just below her skirt’s hem. It was electricity. Sansa had one hand trailing down Jon’s arm, over to his leg, as she kept her hand on Jon’s neck, dragging him closer as she started to lean back on the bed.

That’s where it ended. Jon’s hands were suddenly gone, and Sansa opened her eyes, sitting up to see that he was already standing several steps back. He wasn’t even looking at Sansa, eyes firmly trained on a space above her head.

“Did I do something wrong?”

Sansa was suddenly very aware of how completely inexperienced and inept she was at this
particular field of life. She’d never really done anything with anyone before unless you counted Petyr, which Sansa absolutely did not. Once, she kissed Harry, but that had been nearly as an unpleasant experience as kissing Petyr had been.

When she was kissing Jon though, Sansa was just going off instincts, and then possibly taking in the occasional consideration from some of the more scandalous stories Myranda shared with her. Sansa didn’t know what sort of rules there was for this. Myranda lived by the life philosophy that there were no rules, so Sansa might possibly have been under some bad advisement.

Jon shook his head, breathing out a little laugh as he put his hand on the back of his neck, still watching the ceiling.

“No, you were—you were great,” His voice came out rough, “But I think we need to slow things down.”

Sansa nodded her head, slowly bringing her knees together as she felt her entire body burn red in embarrassment. If Sansa ever saw Myranda again, she was going to tell her that she had shit advice about men. But after that, Sansa might also consider thanking her, because that had to have been the single greatest moment of Sansa’s entire life.

Sansa stood up off the bed and took a step towards the door, “Okay, I should probably let you get some rest anyway.”

Jon laughed again, “Yeah, I’ll try.”

Sansa almost cracked a smile, as she pulled open the door and leaned against its weight. She couldn’t leave, not yet, “Jon?” She let out a relieved breath when Jon finally met her eyes, “We’re going to be okay, right?”

Jon nodded his head, that teasing smile gone. “Yeah, of course, we are Sansa.”

Sansa didn’t know if he knew what she meant. Sansa didn’t even really know what she meant. Whether she was referring to the things between them after this kiss, or if the more immediate problem of Petyr and the marriage, Sansa needed to hear that things were going to be okay.

She smiled, suddenly feeling far more shy than she had been a few seconds ago. She ducked her head, walking into the lounge and shutting Jon’s door. If she were a more romantic girl she might have set her back against it and let out an infatuated sigh, or maybe bring her hand up to her lips to see if she could still feel the trace of Jon there, but that romantic girl had to be killed a long time
ago to make way for someone stronger. Whatever happened after tonight, Sansa could handle it—little birds and bloody weddings included.

Chapter End Notes

Admission of guilt: I find writing any sort of kissing/sex scenes the most difficult thing in the world. Hopefully that wasn't the vibe that came across in this chapter. We'll be getting more plotty things in the next ch. as we are nearing the end!! Thats right the end is nigh! We've entered the last third of this fic, and i plan for it to be wrapped up in 150k. Of course i've literally said the same thing about fifty other times, but hopefully i'll stick to it this time.

So we've finally had Sansa/Jon deal with most of their hang ups, though they definitely have more to come!

Please comment and kudos!! also i'm debating on how explicit this fic will be, if y'all are interested in reading something a little more graphic, or if you want to keep things PG let me know!! I haven't decided where to go with that, so any feedback will definitely be appreciated!!!
“I’ve never colored my hair before,” Gilly says as she reads a magazine, sitting on the salon chair next to Sansa.

Sansa looks at herself in the bright, lit up mirror in front of her. She’s got silver foil holding her hair up at several odd angles as the dye sets, the bright lights of the salon making her look even more tired than she felt.

“You’ve got a nice color, you don’t need to dye it,” Sansa said looking away from her reflection, and swiveling her chair in Gilly’s direction. Rickon was sitting over in the children’s waiting area, looking rather annoyed, while keeping Sammy from eating bright colored Legos. At least he’d taken to Sammy well, surprisingly well actually. Apparently, he had experience with toddlers when he was staying at a home.

Gilly shrugged indifferently, “I suppose. What made you want to make the change?”

Sansa shrugged. Honestly, she didn’t really want to color her hair from the safe reliable brown, back to red. She’d been putting it off for a while now, but with the red roots becoming so very obvious, Sansa knew that it was time to commit to being herself again, and that meant no more hiding behind Alayne Brown, but going back to Sansa Red.

“It was time.” Sansa said noncommittally, looking back over to Rickon, who was firmly out of earshot, “Hey, Gilly, can I ask you something?”

Gilly looked up from the magazine, “Yeah, of course.”

Sansa pulled at her hands anxiously. She had to ask somebody, because honestly, after last night, Sansa was feeling a little lost. By now, she was fairly certain that Myranda’s advice wasn’t going to be useful moving forward. In the moment things had been great, sure, but Sansa didn’t think that sort of advice was very sustainable. Myranda was known as a hit it and go sort of girl, which Sansa was fairly certain that she was not.

If she were back in the Vale, this was the sort of thing she could ask Mya about. Mya always gave good, practical advice. But Mya wasn’t here, and Sansa’s options for advice were extremely
“I know that Sammy’s father was…” She trailed off deciding to tackle this at a different angle, “You and Sam, you’ve, uh, slept together, haven’t you?”

Gilly’s eyebrows rose, she set the magazine down on the counter and leaned in casually, “Is there a reason you’re asking me this?”

Sansa groaned, pushing her chair so that it turned in a circle, before setting a hand on the counter to still it again. “I know I sound like an idiot.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Gilly said shaking her head, “It’s alright. Yeah, Sam and I have slept together. Why are you asking though, is there someone who your…” Gilly’s voice trailed off, leaving room for Sansa to fill in the blanks.

Sansa wanted to sink into the chair and disappear. Most of Sansa’s life had begun to feel like a long continuing string of resentment towards everything Petyr had done to her, but in this moment it clung to something with clarity. She’d lived so long absolutely dreading the thought of touch, let alone sex, that she practically had no clue about any of it. It was humiliating, being her age and feeling like an alien when it came to these things. She wasn’t even sure how to phrase the questions she wanted to ask, because while Sansa was fully aware of how sex worked, she wasn’t sure how or when one went about it when they actually liked the person they were with.

“It’s a hypothetical.” Sansa began saying, “I don’t actually plan on sleeping with anyone anytime soon.”

This was the truth. Sansa had decided that she wanted to take things slow. Part of her was still afraid that if things ever got too intimate Sansa would have some sort of twisted flashback to Petyr and the Vale and the entire experience would be ruined. Sansa didn’t want something like to happen, but she also liked to be prepared. She was a planner, she always had been.

“Well,” Gilly crossed her legs, “What do you want to know?”

Where could Sansa even start?

“What was it—when did—” Sansa chewed her lip thoughtfully, “How long had you and Sam
known each other? I mean, if that’s too personal, you don’t have to answer, but how long after the two of you got together had it been before you slept with him?”

A small smile quirked at the side of Gilly’s mouth, “We’d actually been living together for several months before anything happened. I just had Sammy, and with everything with my father... Waiting was what was best for me, and Sam didn’t have any problem with it so it worked out.”

“And when you did sleep with him,” Sansa looked down at her hands, wringing them tightly, “You didn’t think of, you know, him, did you?”

Part of Gilly sobered a little, face falling for a second before it was gone, “Honestly, in the moment, I really didn’t. That doesn’t mean that I never thought about what happened to me during sex, but when I do I just stop for a moment and regroup. Sometimes it ruins things, but most of the time it doesn’t.”

Sansa sighed and leaned back in her chair. She didn’t want anything Petyr did to her to leave any lasting effects. She wanted to forget that that part of her life never happened.

“Sage wisdom,” Sansa said somberly, a smile on her lips.

Gilly laughed and picked the magazine back up, “You know, I’m really not an expert on any of this stuff. There are probably better people to ask about it.”

Maybe, but Sansa didn’t know any. She couldn’t exactly tell Jon about any of this. If he knew that she was feeling any sort of nerves or doubts about anything they’d done he’d put an end to all of it immediately. Sansa didn’t want that to happen, she didn’t want to feel damaged. She definitely didn’t want Jon to think that she was.

I can have one normal thing, Sansa reminded herself, Petyr doesn’t get to ruin everything.

Sansa could keep a cap on all of her emotional inconsistencies. Especially now that she knew that her feelings for Jon were reciprocated. Until things with Petyr were settled, Sansa would take things slow, and once all of that was done and over with and Sansa didn’t have to live her life afraid that Petyr was going to come and take her away, she could revisit the concept of sex. Until then though, Sansa was going to move glacially.

Sansa had a ball cap slung low on her head as she and Rickon walked down the streets of Cardiff together, heading back in the direction of the police station. She wasn’t used to the red color yet. Part of Sansa really wanted to go back to the salon and get it dyed back to brown again. She felt
like the red was so obvious, like a beacon pointing out who she was, making her easier to find by anyone who might be looking.

“It looks fine,” Rickon said as they turned towards the station, going to meet up with Sam for the day.

Sansa adjusted the hat again, “I’m just not used to it yet.”

“I mean you look like a traffic cone, is that something you can ever get used to?”

Sansa shoved Rickon’s shoulder, but she had started smiling. She glanced over to Rickon and he looked pleased, maybe even smug. It made Sansa feel loads better, just knowing that Rickon was comfortable enough around her to make jokes at her expense without his typical malice included.

“Do we really got to hang out at the station?” Rickon asked as they approached the wide doors leading to the building.

Sansa sighed, “I’ve got to work with Sam about some stuff.”

“Stuff about the creep you used to live with?” Rickon asked and Sansa nodded, “And why do I have to be there for that?”

“Because,” Sansa said holding open the door for Rickon, “I don’t trust you to not get in trouble if I’m not around.”

“Really?” Rickon grumbled crossing his arms.

“Yeah, really.” Sansa said leading them down the hall towards the archival room where she and Sam usually worked, “Trust is earned, you haven’t exactly earned it yet, you know, with the whole biting people thing.”

“That was like a month ago,” Rickon muttered.
Sansa rolled her eyes, but added, “You know, we can also ask Sam about the Three Eyed Crow.”

Rickon looks up, “Yeah? Why would he know anything about that?”

“Sam’s smart, if he doesn’t know about something, he knows where to get information on it.”

Sansa felt awful. She’d nearly forgotten about the Three Eyed Crow until they arrived at the station. There were just so many other things going on that Sansa had pushed the Three Eyed Crow to the back of her head. She’d even forgotten to tell Jon about it.

*This is what happens when you’re selfish.* Sansa heard herself think, *All you think about is yourself. Bran is still out there and you just forgot about him.*

“Are we just going to stand out here?” Rickon asked as a crowd of people started passing them in the hall. Sansa shook her head, going towards the archival room door and letting them inside.

They spent several hours with Sam, up until he had to leave for classes at the University. Sam had no new information about Petyr, and Sansa tried not to let it show how frustrated that made her. There was no evidence that they could find that made Petyr culpable for Sansa’s disappearance. The only evidence that Alayne even existed was a few very grainy photographs and some articles vaguely stating Petyr had a daughter. It was nothing that Petyr couldn’t explain away or have destroyed the moment it became a problem for him.

Near the end of their time, Sansa asked Sam if he’d ever heard about something called the Three Eyed Crow. Sansa could tell Rickon had been waiting their entire visit for it to be mentioned, and when he heard the name, he wandered back over from whatever filing cabinet he’d been rifling through.

Sam shook his head, “No, I don’t think so. Is it something important?”

Sansa nodded, “I think it might help us find Bran.”

She told Sam about the note left in the tree in the groves in York, and how she believed it must have been left there after Bran and Rickon were taken into foster care. Rickon also started to explain what he’d told Sansa, about the two kids at the home they were first brought to who told Bran about the Crow, and how he thought that it was the Crow Bran left the home to go find. He also started to share more details that he hadn’t told Sansa about. Rickon mentioned how after Bran heard about the Crow he stopped talking to Rickon, becoming almost obsessed with finding it. He said that the two other kids had been a brother and a sister—and while Rickon didn’t
remember their names, he was able to supply a rough description that made Sam certain that the
kids were the same ones who disappeared from the home with Bran.

It was all such a puzzle. A mystery inside of a mystery inside of a mystery. It seemed that they
could find one piece of the puzzle, but it only ever led to five more pieces, none of which ever
seemed to fit together.

How was it that the Stark family collapsed so quickly in such a short amount of time? Sansa
wondered who was to blame for it all, if anyone. She blamed herself for it for so long—it was her
who convinced Father to stay in London a little while longer. But it couldn’t be as simple as just
blaming yourself. Sansa was one piece to the downfall, but there had to be so many others.

Still, Sansa wished that before any of this happened, before everything fell apart and her family
disappeared, Sansa wished that she’d done better by her family. She wished she could look back at
her brief years of truly being a Stark and could say that she’d done all the right things. Sansa
wished she didn’t have to regret her childhood, that she’d done something to make her Father proud
before he died. Because, although she was trying to be better now, there was so much that Sansa
felt she couldn’t make up for.

“This is all your fault!” Sansa shouted at Arya. There were tears streaming down her pink cheeks,
as she remembered Joff’s face as Nymeria clamped her teeth around his wrist. “You ruin
everything!”

“It wasn’t my fault!” Arya shouted back, little hands balling into fists, “He’s the one who pushed
Myca!”

They’d only been in London for a few days. Father had taken them to one of the parks in London to
spend the day there while he attended an event held in the same location. It started out so well.
Joffery Lannister asked Sansa if she wanted to walk around the gardens, and he led her around
with his hand in hers. Sansa couldn’t stop staring at him, her heart fluttering in her chest as she
wondered if he liked her or not. Then they heard the shouting.

Well, it wasn’t so much shouting as it was grunting. Arya was rolling on the ground with one of the
caterer’s children, locking him in some sort of chokehold she learned in her wrestling classes.

Joff had gone to break up the fight—he was so valiant, Sansa thought. Except when Arya and the
caterer’s boy were separated he started telling the boy that he shouldn’t fight a lady. Joff was so
much bigger than the other boy, and Sansa could hardly believe it when he challenged the other
boy to a fight.

Joff got one good punch to the Caterer’s boy’s stomach before Arya was coming out from behind
and hitting Joffery across the back with a fallen branch from one of the trees nearby. That’s when
Joff had reared around and tried to grab at Arya. Sansa had shouted at all of them to stop,
helplessly standing off to the side, screaming at Arya to leave Joff alone. The fight ended when
Nymeria, Arya’s dog, broke the hold on its leash and shut its mouth upon Joff’s wrist, the same one
he was about to use to hit Arya with.
When Arya got Nymeria to let go, Joffery had ran to his mother, leaving Sansa to chase after him. Arya, ran away and his somewhere in the park, taking Nymeria with her, and so when Cersei Lannister demanded that Arya’s feral dog be put down after attacking her son, both guilty parties were nowhere to be found. Cersei Lannister had settled on having Lady put down instead.

“She’s dead because of you!” Sansa cried remembering the last moments where Father took Lady back into the veterinarian clinic where the shot would be administered, “It should have been yours! Lady didn’t do anything, she’s good! She never bit anyone!”

Arya’s face turned red as she stomped her foot, “Then you shouldn’t have lied! This is your fault, if you told the truth no one had to die! Joffery attacked Myca!”

“Who cares?” Sansa sobbed, “Who cares about him? Joffery hates me and Lady is dead, and it’s all your fault! I hate you!”

Sansa couldn’t take it anymore, she stormed from their shared bedroom in the flat Father was renting in London and kept running until she was far away from Arya. Sansa hated her, she really, truly did, and after tonight, she would never ever forgive her.

Sansa blinked back the distant memory of her sister. Had that been the last thing Sansa ever told Arya? It wasn’t the last time the two of them spoke—there had been shared dinners with Father and passing comments during the day—but as Sansa thought about it, the last real conversation the two sisters had was the night after Lady was put down. Sansa’s last words to Arya were that she hated her.

And now Arya was missing, maybe something worse, maybe she really was dead. If that was true, then Sansa didn’t think that there was anything in the world that could make up for all the awful things Sansa said and never apologized for. A thousand years with Petyr couldn’t make up for Sansa failing at being a sister.

She couldn’t make that mistake ever again. Sansa would do everything she could to be a better person for Rickon and Jon. She thought about her kiss with Jon the night before—was giving in to her emotions worth the potential fallout? If something were to happen—if Jon was right and Sansa lost interest, or maybe if Jon decided that Sansa wasn’t worth the trouble, where would that leave all of them? Where would that leave Rickon?

Once already, Sansa chose romanticism over family. She couldn’t make that same mistake twice. She was a Stark—brought back to life after six years in the grave, and she would not make the same mistakes as the stupid girl who’d been buried. Sansa had to be smarter now, wiser—she had to think with her head, not her heart.

She couldn’t waste time wondering if Jon really liked her, or if she was already too traumatized to ever have sex with a man—every moment, every second Sansa had to do everything she could to make sure Rickon, and with any hope, Bran, were going to be okay.
Rickon may have joked about it, but with Mother withering away, Sansa had to be the one to take that place and look out for his wellbeing. She couldn’t let her feelings about Jon jeopardize that.

Sansa was warming up leftovers in the kitchen, Rickon in the other room playing with Ghost, when Jon came home from work. She couldn’t meet his eyes as he came through the door, Ghost rolling up from his back to greet him at the door. Sansa kept her eyes trained on the steaming food she was warming up on the stove.

*Better to end things now than let them continue.* Sansa told herself as Jon walked across the lounge over to the hall where his room sat. *At least you got to try out what it was like to be normal. Better a little than nothing at all.*

But now Sansa knew what it was like to kiss Jon—to want something and know that you could have it. It was so much worse now. *That’s what your get for a being a stupid girl. That’s what you get for not thinking.*

Jon would understand, he had too. He was too good of a person to not completely understand why Sansa wanted to end things between them right away. He’ll assume that Sansa regretted what happened last night. She’ll tell him that she’s overwhelmed, and Jon being the man that he was, will apologize and take full responsibility for the proceedings. It would hurt, but its what had to be done.

But the confrontation would have to wait, at least a few hours. Until after Rickon was asleep; that would be the best time to do it. Sansa would go to Jon’s room and—*no,* she’d do it in the lounge. Equal ground. If she went back to his room, Jon might expect that she wanted a repeat of last night, and even if he didn’t its all Sansa would be thinking about. The lounge though, that would be good, it would at least be bearable.

And how could Sansa even start it? She’d tell him that she regretted last night, and then right after she would tell him about Bran. It would divert Jon’s attention; give him something else to think about other than having him try to convince himself that he coerced Sansa into something she didn’t want. *It will work,* Sansa thought, *I’m mean, whose to say Jon won’t be relieved when he hears that I don’t want to continue things?*

“Sansa?”

She looked up from the stove to see Jon watching her from the doorway leading to the hall. His mouth was half open in thought, with a startled look about his face.

Jon closed his mouth and cleared his throat, “Your hair. You finally changed it.”

Sansa brought a hand self-consciously to the top of her hair, smoothing the tangled ends. The hairdresser had styled it after the coloring, straightening it, and making her hair more presentable than Sansa had ever achieved since leaving the Vale. It looked so nice, Sansa had decided to not pull it up in a half worn bun or ponytail as she always did. The hat she wore on the street mused it a little, but since taking that off and coming inside it had calmed down again.
Sansa shrugged her shoulder’s looking back down to the stove, taking the food off of the heat so that it wouldn’t burn. *Don’t blush, its just hair, it’s just a compliment.* “It was time. Rickon and I didn’t have anything to do in the morning so we went to the salon with Gilly.”

Jon nodded his head, looking a little out of his depth. “It looks nice.”

Sansa glanced over to Rickon who was watching the exchange with narrowed eyes. She cleared her throat, “I’ve got dinner warmed up if anyone wants any.”

That wasn’t the end of the conversation, as much as Sansa wanted it to be. If it were maybe it meant that she didn’t have a problem at all. Maybe Jon also thought that last night had been a result of faulty judgment. That would be nice—as much as knowing he regretted last night would hurt, it would mean that Sansa wouldn’t have to be the one to tell him that things had to end.

Rickon went to his room after eating dinner, Ghost padding along behind him. Jon had disappeared into his own room a while ago, probably to change out of his uniform and finish up any business from work. Alone in the kitchen, Sansa had time to clean the dishes and put away any of the unfinished food.

It was the sort of work Mother would have balked at. She’d have said that’s why they had a maid at the manor, to clean dishes and wash countertops. Of course, before marrying Father, Mother had helped run her family estate and fishing farm in the countryside. Mother had never been raised for housework, her life had always been clearly defined that the sort of chores Sansa did now, was beneath someone of her status.

That wasn’t the case for Sansa, though when she was younger she used to think the same things. Working as a maid in the hostels in Liverpool and other places had thickened her skin to this sort of work though, and she didn’t mind it so much anymore.

Sansa reached for another dirty plate, going to dip it in the sudsy sink water when she felt a hand brush against her hip.

Sansa closed her eyes, feeling Jon’s chest against her back as he drew close. He wasn’t so near that Sansa couldn’t step away, Jon’s hand barely hovered over her hip still, just having touched her to alert Sansa of his presence, and while if she leaned back her back would surely press against his chest, there was room there too now, enough that she could still turn to face him if she chose to. It was an invitation of sorts, allowing Sansa to choose to lean back into Jon’s touch if she so wished.

“You don’t have to do that,” Jon told her, reaching over her for the dish, “You made dinner, I can clean.”

Sansa closed her eyes, *why does he have to be so good?* “It’s alright, Jon. You were at work all day, I think I can handle a few dishes on my own.”
Jon sighed, he hadn’t moved away yet, and so Sansa stubbornly continued to scrub the dish, waiting for him to decide to walk away. Some distance between them would make things easier.

“It really does look nice,” Jon, said quietly, his hand now moving to touch a strand of hair that fell near Sansa’s shoulder. “They got the color exactly right.”

Sansa repressed the shiver that always accompanied Jon’s touch. She kept her voice cool, “For the amount it cost to get it done, I would hope so.”

Jon was quiet. Now, Sansa hoped, maybe he would leave. But Jon didn’t. He stepped away from Sansa just enough to turn and lean his hip against the sink. Sansa could feel him watching her still, but she pretended that he wasn’t there.

“Sansa, is everything alright?” Jon asked after a moment of hesitation, “I thought…I mean tell me what you’re thinking right now.”

He was probing for answers, trying to get what he wanted without asking for it. Maybe he was too shy to say it too plainly, to say why aren’t you reacting to my touch? But that must be what he was getting at.

Sansa glanced over to the hall where Rickon’s room was. She could see the light from under his door—he wasn’t asleep, which meant that at any minute he could come in. Sansa didn’t want to start this conversation yet, not until she knew that she and Jon would be alone.

“I’m not thinking anything,” Sansa started knowing that wouldn’t be enough, “It’s just Rickon could walk in at any moment. I don’t think we should be doing this right now.”

And that made Jon frown, his arms crossing over his chest, brows drawn together, “We aren’t doing anything wrong, you know that, right?”

Sansa tried to keep her expression cool, it was hard as with each passing word, Sansa was getting more and more frustrated. Of course, they were doing something wrong, Jon had essentially explained that to her last night, only now Sansa realized exactly why it was wrong. She was being selfish, thinking about her wants and forgetting that she had Rickon and Bran to think about.
“I don’t want to have to explain what’s going on to Rickon,” Sansa murmured, “Do you?”

Jon stepped back, “We weren’t doing anything, what would he have asked?”

Sansa set the dish down and turned, a soapy hand going to her hip, “Maybe if you talked to Rickon you would know. And besides, if we weren’t doing anything then why are we even having this conversation. I’m trying to get these dishes done, Jon.”

Jon floundered. Sansa felt bad, dragging him through this whiplash and expecting him to take it fine. She didn’t want to have this conversation now, but maybe they were going to have to.

“What has something changed?” Jon asked, “Have you changed your mind about last night?”

Sansa had her answer. It was at the tip of her tongue, a well-practiced retort. She couldn’t say it. *Lie, Sansa growled, It’s what you do best.* But she couldn’t, not to Jon, not again, and not about this.

“Ghost needs to go out,” Rickon called, walking into the lounge. He came around to the kitchen, Ghost’s blue leash in hand. He stopped when he saw Jon and Sansa. The situation wasn’t compromising, but the way Jon was staring at Sansa, still awaiting an answer, with that pinched, worried expression on his face, must have given him pause.

Sansa stepped away from the sink and walked around the counter to the lounge. Her shoes were on the floor by the sofa, and she started to slip them on. She was surprised how her distance from Jon didn’t help her breathing any easier.

“I’ll go with you,” Sansa said as she forced the heel of the shoe to fit on her foot.

Jon had previously been frozen in the kitchen, but this got him moving, bending down to clip Ghost’s leash to his collar. “I’ll go too.”

“No.” Sansa’s voice came out hard. She saw Rickon raise his eyebrows in surprise, and Jon’s face fall, a look of confused devastation. She took a breath, “We won’t be gone long,” she tried to amend, “We’re just going to go around the park.”
Rickon was looking between them again. There was a crease between his eyes, his lips pursed together in a frown. He picked up Ghost’s leash again and started for the door, “Come on, Sansa.” He said holding it open, “Let’s go.”

The air was crisp. In the streetlights, Sansa could see her breath, and even with her jacket buttoned up to the top, she was still cold. It didn’t seem to bother Rickon who was trudging on ahead, being dragged forward by Ghost. Rickon was resilient though; Sansa would bet that he could survive anything.

They were heading to the park by the flat, the one that they took Ghost on all his walks to. It wasn’t so late that there weren’t people still walking around, the sun had only set a couple hours ago. A few couples were strolling around the gravel paths of the park, leaning into each other’s weight like they belonged to the same gravity.

Sansa had been stupid to think things were so easy for someone in her situation. Love was not something deserved to a person like Sansa, she had not yet earned it. Maybe she never would, maybe her whole life would consist of making up penances for the past. Not everyone got a happy ending, why did Sansa think she would?

And Jon, he deserved someone who wasn’t so tainted. He didn’t deserve someone like Sansa, who lied and clawed her way to the surface to survive. Maybe in a different world, one where they weren’t trying to blackmail the man who’d abused Sansa for years, while also trying to search for a long lost brother, and take down the soon to be president of a fortune five hundred company, Jon and Sansa would have a chance. But in this one, Sansa was still a little too broken to expect things to be so easy.

“Jon wants me to start school,” Rickon said as they took a turn down another path.

Jon and Sansa had briefly spoken about that before Jon left for work that morning. He must have told Rickon about the plan sometime after dinner while Sansa was cleaning.

“That’s good, isn’t it?” Sansa asked, “You can meet some kids your own age.”

Rickon scowled, “Kids my age are stupid. I don’t need school, it’s just a waste of time.”

Sansa frowned, trying to keep herself cool. Mother and Father had always stressed how important education was, she didn’t like hearing Rickon disregard it.

“School is important Rickon, why would you think it’s a waste of time?”
“If I’m in school, I’m not going to be there to help you find Bran.” Rickon said stopping at Ghost went over to sniff a tree, “You need me. Besides, it’s not like you’re in school.”

“I’m eighteen, Rickon.” Sansa hesitated, trying to handle the situation carefully, “I’ve already finished most of my education. And finding Bran isn’t your responsibility, you’ve got to worry about yourself too.”

Rickon rolled his eyes, pulling Ghost’s leash so they could continue down the path, “Like you and Jon worry about yourselves? What was that about in the kitchen, anyway?”

“It was nothing,” Sansa crossed her arms, “And that’s not the point. Rickon, the reason you should go to school is so that you can do better than Jon and I. I’m not a good example of an adult, your goal isn’t to end up like me.”

Rickon paused, his steps slowing, “Are you talking about what happened before? You’ve never told me about that.”

Sansa never wanted to, “It doesn’t matter what happened before, we aren’t talking about that. You’ve got to go to school, Rickon. If people find out that you aren’t, you could be taken away from Jon and me.”

“I’m going to hate it,” Rickon was glaring at the ground, the sliver of a self-conscious boy slipping out from behind his tough exterior, “I’m not good at it. I’m already behind and I’ll just do bad and get kicked out. It always happens.”

Sansa felt the painful pull in her chest as she resisted reaching out to hug her brother, “Just go to classes once and see if you like them. Jon and I can help you with classes, and we can talk to your teachers about getting caught up. If it doesn’t end up working we can try something else.”

Rickon was quiet for a moment, before nodding his head, “If I don’t like it I’m not going to keep going.”

That wasn’t a realistic option but Sansa didn’t disagree with him. She’d done private homeschooling for all of her education, maybe if public school didn’t work out for Rickon they could try for something like that. It was more expensive, but maybe they could work something out.

Of course, if they could get Petyr out of the way, Sansa had the option of using her inheritance to pay for Rickon’s education. She hadn’t considered it before, but Mother and Father had left Sansa both the estate in York, and the bulk of the Stark fortune. So far she hadn’t tried to access any of it, but now that Sansa wasn’t legally dead she was entitled to the Stark account.
“Sansa.” Rickon held out his arm, stopping Sansa from walking forward.

They were around the outskirts of the park, away from the dwindling crowds and now all alone. The street lamp that lit the path was dim, threatening to flicker out at any moment, and it already made the path darker than it should have been. Sansa felt unease set in her stomach as she moved Rickon’s arm aside.

“What is it?” She said, reaching for Ghost’s leash. The large white dog’s ears perked up, trying to take a step forward, and pulling the leash taut. “Let’s start heading back.”

Rickon was silent, but he shook his head, eyes glued to something at the end of the path. Sansa looked forward, eyes narrowing as she tried to make out the shape in the darkness. The darkened silhouette of something stood there, watching them. Ghost began to growl.

“Come on, Rickon.” Sansa grabbed Rickon’s arm and started pulling him back. Her heart rate was picking up, as that flight or fight instinct was kicking in, school apparently did teach her something.

Rickon nodded his head, turning to head back in the direction they came. Sansa put her arm around his shoulder, blocking her brother from the view of the dark stranger behind them. It was probably just a homeless person, or maybe just someone else walking in the park, but Sansa wanted to get them far away.

While all of this was going on, Ghost was fighting at his lead. Finally, as Rickon and Sansa turned, Ghost let out a loud bark, lunging forward and breaking Sansa’s hold on the leash as the dog ran in the direction of the stranger.

“Ghost!” Sansa shouted, turning back around and trying to grab onto the leash as it flew past her.

“Ghost!” Rickon yelled, taking after the dog.

Sansa reached out to grab Rickon, but he was too fast. She shouted his name too, but her brother kept running. Sansa felt panic bubble up in her throat as Rickon started to disappear into the shadows Ghost disappeared into, the stranger he’d been after gone. Sansa shouted Rickon’s name again as she ran after him.

They were off the path, tangled into the scattered trees that lay off the trail. Sansa could hardly see, everything muted in grey and black, only lighted by the moon overhead. She couldn’t see Rickon anymore, and for a minute she walked blindly, listening for Rickon’s footsteps and only being
meant by silence. Sansa was about to call his name again when she heard Ghost’s deep bark. She took off and ran in the direction it came.

Rickon was standing, his back to Sansa, as she broke through the thicket of trees. She reached out and grabbed his shoulders, pulling him against her chest, thinking that she might start to cry.

“Come on,” Sansa breathed, pulling Rickon back, but he held his ground.

“Look.” He said staring forward towards the gnarled old tree that they stood before.

It was old and twisted and must have been a hundred years old. While it was impossible, Sansa thought it looked exactly like one of the trees that could be found in the grove in York, the sort the Stark Children claimed hosted blood sacrifices.

On the ground below the tree, Ghost was standing over a body, sprawled beneath him. He let out a thunderous bark, as his head lunged towards the neck of the person, white teeth glistening. Sansa heard a scream.

“Ghost, no!” Sansa lunged forward, but she would be too slow, as Ghost was already attacking the face of the person. Sansa still ran forward, hands reaching for Ghost’s collar to pull him off of the other person, ready to try and salvage what was left.

Except, as Sansa came closer, she didn’t hear screaming, but laughter. She froze, her heart stopping. Ghost wasn’t attacking the person beneath him, he was licking them.

Rickon ran past Sansa as she stood still in her spot. He grabbed Ghost’s collar and pulled him off of the person he hunched over, grabbing the leash and wrapping it around his hand so that he wouldn’t run again. With Ghost no longer standing over them, Sansa could just make out the appearance. Short brown hair, a long boyish face and brown eyes. Stark Brown eyes.

The person wasn’t laughing anymore. They were pushing themselves up on their elbows, face sobering as Sansa looked down at them, tensed familiarly as if waiting for an attack.

Sansa’s voice broke, “Arya?”
Next ch!
So Sansa's over thinking things, and understandably doubting her past moves with Jon. Given what she's gone through, admitting her feelings is only the first of many steps towards real happiness. I wanted to try and make her hesitancy and doubts towards sex realistic. The last time she didn't have the time to consider these things, but after given some time i think they would be major problems when it comes to trusting a person, and feeling comfortable sleeping with them.

Also, Arya!! A lot of people guessed this reveal already, but it will be explained more in the next ch. We'll explore a bit of where Arya's been for the last six years and how she found the other Starks.

I hope you guys like this chapter! Please leave comments, i love reading all of them, you guys are the best, and i've taken the feedback from the last ch, and i'll be working it in moving forward!
It had to be Arya; there wasn’t a doubt in Sansa’s mind. She looked almost exactly the same as she had six years ago—her hair was a little shorter, face a little more trim, and maybe a few inches taller than before, but other than that Arya was the same girl who disappeared in the crowds after their father was assassinated.

A beat had passed and no one had moved. Ghost was pulling at his leash, barking, and tail wagging back and forth as Rickon held him back. Arya was still on her back, pushed up and looking Sansa dead in the eyes, her whole body tensed like she was waiting for Sansa to move.

Was it possible that Arya didn’t recognize Sansa? Sansa didn’t look so different, not with her hair red again, but she couldn’t be sure that Arya knew who she was.

“Arya?” Sansa asked again, voice shaking. She took a step forward and Arya moved back.

Arya looked away from Sansa and over to Ghost and Rickon, a stern expression on her face, “Is that really them?”

This didn’t sound like Arya, it didn’t sound like someone who was reuniting with their family after six years. Arya sounded cold, unfamiliar, like a stranger.

Sansa sucked in a breath, nodding her head. “It’s Rickon and Ghost. Do you—do you remember them, Arya?”

“Do you know her?” Rickon asked, making an arch around Arya to get to Sansa’s side. He wrapped the hand that wasn’t holding onto Ghost’s leash around Sansa’s and tried to pull her further back. “She was the one who was following us last week.”

Arya knew that her family was here for over a week and she hadn’t done anything to contact them? The thought made Sansa feel sick. Sansa had planned to do the same thing when she first found Jon, but it took less than a day for her to change her mind and try to talk to him. But Arya had known for a week?

“Arya,” Sansa started quietly, trying to take a step forward again, despite Rickon trying to pull her
back, “You remember me, don’t you?”

Arya looked Sansa up and down and gave a cold laugh, she pushed herself off the ground, rolling her shoulder that took the brunt of the fall when Ghost knocked her over, “Of course I remember you, Perfect Sansa. Doesn’t look like you’re so perfect anymore.”

The words were like a dagger. They dripped with resentment and anger—worse than Rickon’s ever did because Sansa felt true intent when Arya spoke. It brought Sansa back to age ten, back when she was calling Arya a horseface and getting into fights over childish things, calling each other names, and ruining each other’s lives.

“Hey, back off,” Rickon growled taking a step forward, shoulders held tense and aggressive.

“Rickon, stop.” Sansa grabbed his arm and pulled him back. She hadn’t taken her eyes off of Arya, and Arya hadn’t taken her eyes off of her, “This is our sister.”

Rickon fell still, mouth falling open. He might not even remember Arya, or at least he wasn’t able to recognize her. He must have believed Sansa though because his defensive posture was easing away, and replaced with open confusion.

“I’m not your sister.” Arya narrowed her eyes, “I’m not anyone’s sister.”

Sansa didn’t understand—Arya couldn’t possibly still be angry with her after six years. Even so, Arya couldn’t be angry with Jon. If she could just get Arya to see him, maybe Jon would be able to fix all of this.

“Yes you are,” Sansa pleads, “Arya, Jon is here—he’s been looking for you. Come with us to our flat, he’ll want to see you.”

Arya held herself stiff, anger was gone at least, but now it was swapped with something else, “That’s not my name.”

Sansa paused, a frown creasing her face, “What? Arya—“

“That’s not my name.” Arya said slowly, teeth gritting, “I have no name.”

Sansa felt a cold grasp on her heart. She recognized this sort of speech; it’s the same sort Sansa had when she left the Vale—when she left Petyr and all his brainwashing. What had happened to Arya
during these past years, that took Sansa’s strong-willed sister and made her deny her own name?

“Then why were you following us?” Rickon was the one to ask. His voice was a demand, but Sansa could hear its shaking foundation.

Arya blinked, she looked at Rickon and took in a steady breath, “I was told to.”

It didn’t sound like a lie. It was said so steady, so easily, that it couldn’t be anything but the truth. But Sansa grew up with liars, and she thought, just maybe, Arya wasn’t telling the whole truth.

“By who?” Rickon asked, in place of where Sansa couldn’t. She was still thinking, trying to understand why Arya was acting like a stranger.

“None of your business.” Arya spat.

“You don’t need to tell us.” Sansa tried to keep her voice calm, but it was fraying, the edges unraveling and tearing apart, “Let’s just go to the flat and see Jon—“

Arya turned back to Sansa and glared, “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

Sansa was silent. What was Arya implying?

“He’d like to see you.” Sansa tried again, “He’s been trying to find you, for years. If you just talked to him—“

“Why would I do that?” Arya said it like she was challenging Sansa to come up with a convincing reason. It was frustrating and tore Sansa apart. She just wanted to be happy to see her sister again, but instead, she was playing some game Arya was at.

“Because he’s your brother.” Sansa was close to breaking, voice straining to keep calm, “Because you are Arya Stark.”

“Because if you didn’t want to,” Rickon interjected, taking a step forward and narrowing his eyes, “You would have left already.”
And Arya heard that and fell still. She looked to the ground, jaw working as she thought; she let out a low breath and looked up. There was something new in her eyes, it looked close to hope.

They don’t go back to the flat. That’s non-negotiable, and the very suggestion of it sets Arya off again. Instead, the three of them walk along the dimly lit streets to the only shop Sansa knows will be open still: the Mole’s Town Café.

It was just past midnight, and the café was empty. Sansa looked first to the counter, to see if Gilly was working, but it was that boy, Gendry at the counter.

Rickon, Arya, and Ghost were all going over to a table in the back, but Sansa held back.

“You aren’t supposed to bring dogs into the café—“ Gendry said as he sat forward on his stool to get another look at Ghost.

Sansa dismissed that, “It’s fine. Is Gilly going to be coming in later?”

“Who—“ A dim look of recognition lit up Gendry’s tired face, “Oh, hey, you used to work here. Alayne, right?”

Sansa didn’t have time for this. She leaned forward against the counter, keeping her voice low, “Yeah, sure. Can you call Gilly and ask her to get Jon to the café. It’s an emergency.”

Gendry frowned, leaning to look back at the table the Stark’s were occupying.

Sansa let out a frustrated sigh, “He’s coming to pick up the dog.”

Gendry gave a slow nod, “Okay, I’ll give her a ring.”

That at least offered Sansa some relief. If Sansa could keep Arya here long enough for Jon to show up he’d be able to fix all of this. Sansa was certain that if Arya just talked to Jon she’d be herself again, or at least something closer to it.
“Thank you,” Sansa breathed, and then continued to tell him their coffee order so that she could keep up her ruse.

Sansa went over to the table in the back the others were at as the drinks were being prepared. Arya was sitting with her back to the wall, watching Gendry who was over by the bar. Sansa took this moment to actually look at her sister in some decent light.

Arya would be sixteen by now. She was still short, and somewhat stocky, and still had a long face—but she was pretty too. Her brown hair was cut short, right above her shoulders that fell in loose waves, and she had thick brows that framed her deep brown eyes. There was a wild beauty about her, something untamed and reckless. She looked brave. But there were other things that were different about Arya. Across her knuckles, there were tattoos, strange scripted letters in a different language, which must have spelled something out. She was wearing combat boots; tucked into thick tactical looking trousers, and over her plain grey shirt was a leather jacket. Sansa stared at the largest patch on the front of the jacket. The insignia for the Faceless Men gang.

Sansa let out a deep breath as she tried to come to terms with this. So Arya was a Faceless Man? Was she also the Faceless Man that broke into Jon’s old flat, the one who stole the family photo? Did this also mean that Arya was working for Petyr? Her thoughts were broken as Gendry came over to their table carrying a tray filled with three cups of coffee. He set the tray down and started to pass them out, doing his best to not act startled when Ghost growled at his approach. Sansa was still watching Arya, and noticed the way she was staring at Gendry. Before Gendry could retreat, Arya grabbed his wrist, holding him at the table.

“What did Sansa tell you?” Arya asked, voice a cold demand.

Gendry faltered, trying to pull his arm away, but Arya held tighter, “I don’t know who Sansa is.”

Arya made a face, glancing over to Sansa, “She’s Sansa; what did she tell you?”


“Yeah,” Gendry agreed, finally pulling his arm away, “She just said you wanted coffee and that I should call someone to pick up the dog.”

Sansa shut her eyes, shoulders falling.
Arya’s jaw ticked, and she said with surprising calm, “Don’t bother calling them. Thank you.”

Gendry frowned, nodding his head, “Yeah, sure. You’ve got a strong grip, you know.” He almost sounded impressed as he rubbed his wrist as he made a retreat back to the counter.

“Trying to call Jon?” Arya asked, “Really?”

Sansa sighed, opening her eyes, “I don’t understand why you don’t want to see him. Jon was always your favorite.”

Arya didn’t try to deny it, “I have my secrets, and you have yours.”

“One of those secrets that you’re in a gang?” Rickon asked pointing a finger at the Faceless Men patches, “I thought that wasn’t something you advertised.”

“It’s not a gang.” Arya face-hardened.

Sansa almost laughed, “That’s not what I’ve heard. Is that where you’ve been for the last six years?”

Arya narrowed her eyes, “Yeah, and where have you been, Sansa?”

Sansa recoiled. Arya didn’t know about Petyr. This wasn’t a lie, it was an actual question. Arya really didn’t know where Sansa had been for the last six years, maybe she didn’t even know about the riots, or Sansa supposedly dying. If that was true, maybe it explained why Arya was being so flippant.

“Away,” Sansa replied stiffly, uncomfortable with the idea of telling Arya the truth, “Not in a gang though. I haven’t been away by choice.”

Sansa didn’t know where this was coming from. She didn’t think that she still resented Arya. That was never a feeling she felt before, but with Arya now, Sansa felt like she was eleven again.

“No, you’ve just been spending your time being rescued by Jon.” Arya mocked, “You always
wanted a knight in shining armor, didn’t you? Joffery not enough?"

“What’s your problem?” Rickon interrupted, glaring at Arya.

Sansa bristled. She didn’t need to be rescued, especially not right now by her twelve-year-old brother, “It’s fine, Rickon.”

Arya smirked, Rickon having proven her point. “Well, I’m sure you’re living your dream now. Jon’s little housewife, spending your days at the salon and walking dogs. It must be nice.”

Sansa clenched her jaw. Arya must have been watching them more than Sansa thought. Arya had seen her at the salon that day, and Sansa hadn’t even noticed. She also apparently knew that something was going on between her and Jon unless that was just a blind jab, but Sansa couldn’t tell the difference.

“You’re angry with me.” Sansa replied stiffly, “Why?”

“I’m not angry,” Arya shook her head as she denied, “I’m impressed. You got everything you ever wanted.”

Sansa laughed, the noise choking, “You think this is what I want? Arya, what sort of life have you been looking at? Do you have any idea what I’ve gone through in the last six years?”

Arya was unaffected by Sansa’s outburst. She shrugged her shoulders indifferently, “Living in a mansion? Getting whatever you wanted? Sansa, what do you think you went through? I was told about you, how you had some rich guy looking after your every whim, while I’ve been making it on my own. I wasn’t given what I got; I had to work for it, and you? You’ve just had everything handed to you. And when you got tired of that, you just ran away, and had Jon come rescue you.”

“That’s not the truth.” Sansa felt her face heat up, “Where did you hear that from?”

“Does it matter? I’m right, aren’t I? You’re using him, you always use people. Did you even look for me after I disappeared? Do you know what happened to me? I’ve had to survive on my own, while you’ve been living in some castle. What’s been your consequence?”
Sansa pushed her chair back and got up. She walked across the café, and pushed open the door, listening to the little bell on the door ring as she stepped out into the cold air. She put her back against the wall beside the door, tipping her head up as she let out a strangled breath.

*It’s not true, you asked about Arya. What else were you supposed to do? Sansa squeezed her eyes shut, You were her older sister, you should have done more.*

What had been Sansa’s consequence in all of this? She deserved one, didn’t she? That’s what Mother always taught them, there always had to be consequences. Maybe it was Catholic guilt, the belief that every wrongdoing warranted a penance. Had Sansa really suffered enough to make up for all the things she’s done?

It didn’t matter anymore, at least not at the moment. Sansa had to go back in there and try to salvage what she could out of this interaction. Arya was still her sister, she couldn’t let her just leave their lives again.

Sansa pushed open the café door. She’s still in the doorway, letting in the cold wind, frozen still in surprise when she heard the sound of arguing voices.

“You don’t know half of the truth,” Said Arya, “You’re going to defend her, even though she’s been lying to you this entire time. She left you, Rickon. Do you think she ever cared about what happened to you? Sansa only ever cares about herself.”

Sansa her heart stop. She needed Rickon to know that none of that was true. Sansa couldn’t have Rickon hate her too. But it was the truth wasn’t it? Sansa asked Petyr about her brothers, but she never bothered to question what the truth was. She knew Petyr lied, she knew that he’d never tell her the real truth about her family, but she’d believed it anyway.

“Yeah? And what about you?” Rickon snarled, “Why didn’t you ever try to find me? Why are you any better? Everyone lies to me, and everyone forgets me, but at least Sansa is trying.”

And then Rickon is walking past Sansa, on out onto the street. She meets Arya’s eyes for a second, seeing the moment of doubt in them, before the door closes and shut between them

“We can go,” Rickon said looking down the street.

Sansa shook her head, no, they couldn’t yet. “I need to talk to Arya.”

Rickon nodded, he must have understood, “She’s kind of a bitch.”
Sansa gave a wet laugh, wiping her eyes again, she’d started to cry, “Yeah, but so am I. And you shouldn’t use that language.”

Rickon rolled his eyes, toying with the end of Ghost’s leash.

Sansa walks over to him, setting her hand on his shoulder, “Thank you, Rickon. For what you said about me.”

He shrugged, not meeting her eyes, “I wouldn’t have said it if it wasn’t true. Don’t get so emotional about it.”

Sansa almost smiled, “Yeah, but still.” She hesitated, “And I’m sorry. Arya was right, I could have —I should have found you sooner. I never forgot you though, you know that, right?”

Rickon nodded his head, going over to sit on one of the benches in front of the café. Sansa looked to the door again, knowing that she had to talk to Arya now before it was too late.

Arya was sitting at the table still, a dark expression on her face as she glared into a cup of coffee. Sansa walked quietly into the room, pulling out one of the chairs and sitting down. She picked up the other coffee cup and held it in her hands, trying to find some comfort in the warm mug.

“I’m sorry.” Sansa said finally. “I should have done more when you went missing. I should have been a better sister to you. You didn’t deserve that, you didn’t deserve any of the things you’ve been through. But I can’t do anything about that anymore, so tell me what I can do to help you now.”

“I don’t need help,” Arya spoke quickly, not looking up from her cup.

Sansa sighed, struggling to get through this, “Okay, then tell me what I can do to make up for what I’ve done. I don’t want to just walk away from this Arya.”

“I’m not—“ Arya broke off. She’d looked up, her eyes meeting Sansa. For the first time that night, Sansa thought she recognized a bit of her sister there. “I’m not the same person that I was.”

“Neither am I.” Sansa said, and then she looked down and laughed because it all felt absurd, “I don’t think any of us are. God, I’ve—I don’t know what’s happened to our family, Arya. I saw
Mum in the hospital and she’s so…trapped, she’s like some sort of ghost. And Rickon, he was just some kid last time I saw him and now,” she shook her head, her thought trailing off, “And Jon. He’s the best of us. Arya, please just talk to him. I know you hate me, but if you just talk to Jon he can help you—or he can, I don’t know, give you more options.”

Arya was quiet, “I don’t hate you, you know. I used to, but I don’t anymore.”

Sansa nodded her head, “It sounded like you hated me.”

“You have everything I wanted.” Arya gave a voiceless laugh, staring into the coffee cup again, “You never even wanted it before, but now you have everything.”

“That’s not true,” Sansa shook her head, “Trust me, it’s not true.”

Arya’s lip quirked, “Well, I’m sure you wouldn’t see it that way.”

Sansa sighed, slumping back in her chair as she glanced out the window to see Rickon still sitting on the bench. It was late, and Sansa was certain that Jon must be going mad wondering what happened to them.

“Come back with us to the flat.” Sansa said, “Just stay the night, in the morning, if you want to leave no one will stop you.”

Arya mirrored Sansa’s posture, lifting a brow; “Jon’s an officer now, isn’t he? I don’t think he wants a Faceless Man in his flat.”

“No,” Sansa agreed, “But he’ll want his sister there.”

Chapter End Notes
Arya has arrived!

This was a complicated ch for me to write bc as much as i wanted a fun light hearted stark reunion we're dealing with characters who spent key parts of their developmental years away from/resenting each other. Its especially hard for Arya since she has such a cult mentality surrounding what she's been up to these past years, and how the last time she was really Arya Stark she and Sansa basically hated each other, and people tend to fall into old patterns. As for Rickon i feel like he would be too young to really remember Arya in any meaningful way, and he's going to be more loyal to sansa considering he knows her better now.

I think arya would be hesitant to accept her family after all these years apart, especially since she's been on her own so long. I definitly like arya as a character and want to explore her relationship with her siblings more, but its not going to be as easy assimilating her back into stark culture as it was for rickon.

Anyway! Next ch is a Jon pov! Should be pretty long since i've got a lot to sort out with him

As always, please comment and kudos!! you guys are amazing and thank you for sticking with this story!
Rickon and Sansa were still gone. It had been over an hour and they hadn’t returned from their walk. Jon was pacing the length of his flat, trying to convince himself that sending an officer to look for them was an extreme reaction.

They were safe. The Faceless Men had been inactive for over a week, Stannis was taking care of Cersei, and Sansa still had two and a half weeks until Petyr was going to look for her. And Ghost was with them; Jon had nothing to worry about.

He tried to distract himself, going over to his laptop and answering an email from Stannis. It was just more information about the case he was building against Cersei Lannister, and he wanted to confirm some of the details Sansa told him. Jon started typing out his email, hesitating when it came to the point where Jon had to confirm where Sansa had been taken after the riots in London. It was an essential part of the case, confirming that Cersei identified a false body as Sansa, even though Sansa had been alive and well. Stannis needed to know the truth. Lying was only going to make things more complicated, and potentially endanger the credibility of the case. This in mind, Jon made the decision of telling Stannis about Petyr, only mentioning that he’d been the one to spirit Sansa away and not going into any of the details that distinctly felt like Sansa’s choice to tell.

Jon pushed the laptop away and sat back on the sofa. He was thinking about Sansa now, and how there were less than three weeks left to find information of Petyr Baelish that could get him to leave her alone forever. It should have been an easy task, but Jon had looked at every source possible, and each time Baelish came out clean. It wasn’t possible, and Jon knew that he must have been doing something to keep all his illegalities under the table.

The clock was ticking, and as much as Jon tried not to think about it, he knew that his time with Sansa was starting to run out. There was no way she’d be going back to Baelish, Jon wouldn’t ever let that happen, but at the end of the month, Jon had to prepare for Baelish to unleash hell to get Sansa back. That was fine; Jon would fight hell for her if he had to.

But with such little time left, Jon had the feeling that Sansa was starting to worry too. At least Jon thought maybe that was why she was acting so strange in the kitchen before she left for Rickon for their walk. Another worry Jon had was that her behavior had nothing to do with Baelish at all, and Sansa had finally decided that she didn’t want Jon.

He tried to pretend that this thought didn’t scare him. He also tried to pretend that Sansa deciding Jon wasn’t worth her time anymore wouldn’t be her best option. Jon was being greedy, Sansa was young, she was just entering into this new world, and Jon was taking advantage of all of that and keeping her attention to himself. Of course, last night, Sansa made it abundantly clear that she didn’t see it that way at all. Jon had been shocked, and frankly, a little scandalized by how quickly Sansa seemed to be moving things between them. Jon hadn’t even intended for the kiss to happen, and he hardly found the will to stop himself when Sansa began laying back on the bed, her legs bent around his waist and continuing things from there.

It was too much. Jon had to stop himself from thinking about it even now, knowing that any minute Sansa and Rickon could come back to the flat.
Another hour almost passed by the time Jon met his breaking point. He went to the door, with key in hand, with the intent of walking to the park to try and find Sansa and Rickon there. He wasn’t being paranoid, just cautious, because even with most of the current threats under control, the city could still be dangerous; Jon knew that better than anyone considering his line of work.

Most of the time, Jon felt consumed by his work. For the longest time, it was all he had. Of course, through it, he met Sam, and then Gilly, and while Jon was friends with some of the other officers at the station, it wasn’t the same thing as having a family. One of the biggest problems with Jon and Ygritte’s relationship was the fact that she always said he cared more about his work than her. Even looking back after all these years, Jon couldn’t tell if that was true or not. The argument could be made that Ygritte cared more about her counter-cultural causes than she did Jon. Either way, Jon could now see that his job at the station did lead to the deterioration of their relationship.

Now it felt like the opposite was happening. Jon had never taken so much time off of work before. Since finding Sansa, he’d taken nearly two weeks off of work and moving forward he could only imagine it would add up to more. Today, he started thinking that maybe he needed to step down from his position of management and go back to more flexible hours like he had before his promotion. He’d do it if it weren’t for the pay cut that would come with that. They couldn’t afford something like that yet, even if Sansa did start working at the café again.

Jon was on the bottom floor of the flat, heading towards the door that would lead out into the street, when the door swung open and Rickon came in, out from the cold, Ghost pulling on his leash in front of him.

Rickon’s face was red from the frosty wind, that knit cap Jon lent him hanging low on his head. He looked up at Jon and let out a breath.

“You gotta get outside,” Rickon said with a hint of irritation.

Jon's face fell in a frown, “Is everything alright? Where’s Sansa?” But even as Jon asked, he was already walking the rest of the way to the door.

Jon stepped out onto the street, a strong gust of wind flew past him, as he hunched his shoulders and started pulling on the zipper of his jacket. He looked around, trying to see where Sansa was. Then Jon heard Sansa’s voice pulled high in an argument, and he turned his head to see her with her standing near the end of the street, her back to him.

Jon started towards her, walking slightly faster than necessary in order to see what was wrong. It couldn’t have been anything too urgent, or else Rickon would have come back out with him instead of taking Ghost back up to the flat, and while Sansa’s voice was taking that near endearing shrill sort of quality it got when she was frustrated, it also didn’t sound afraid. Jon couldn’t see around Sansa’s shoulders to see whom she was arguing with.

Even so, Jon felt himself set a defensive posture as he came up behind Sansa, who was still ignorant of his presence, unable to hear his approach over the wind and her own voice.

“Stop being so difficult,” Sansa’s voice carried past Jon, “It’s going to be fine—“
Jon brought his hand over to her hip, setting his hand there for a second to alert her of his company as he looked down to see whom she was with. When he touched her, Sansa jumped, looking over her shoulder to look at him, but for once, Jon didn’t even notice.

The last time Jon had seen Arya was the night before she left with Ned Stark for London. She’d been upset about leaving. Bran was at the hospital, still in a coma since his fall from one of the windows at the manor, and Arya had gotten in a fight with father about how she wouldn’t be able to continue her training at her wrestling club when they moved. Things at the manor were tense, and Jon was doing everything he could to stay out of the way as he got ready for military training for the next week.

But Jon still went to Arya’s room; bringing with him the gift he’d gotten made for her weeks before. Looking back, Jon couldn’t believe he had a pair of brass knuckles made for a nine-year-old, but Jon remembered how much Arya wanted them after she’d seen the pair Robb bought for himself. It was a going away gift, one that Jon hoped would help Arya come to terms with the fact that she wouldn’t be able to continue her wrestling training or the boxing classes she wanted to start up before Ned got the London job offer.

Arya didn’t look the same anymore. Jon remembered her as a scrappy looking nine years old, but she certainly wasn’t that now. She was certainly still scrappy, but time had changed Arya. She was tattooed, roughly chopped hair and dirt under her nails. In a way, it reminded Jon of what Sansa looked like when she first came to Jon, but Arya didn’t look lost, she looked like a different person.

And Arya was looking at him, her wide brown eyes staring like he was some sort of ghost.

“Arya?” Jon stepped forward, for a moment he thought that he was wrong, because Arya barely reacted to her name, but then she was nodding her head and she was moving towards him, reaching out as Jon went to hold her in a hug.

Jon never felt like a brother to any of his siblings, not really, except for Arya. She was always his little sister, and he always felt like a big brother with her. Jon pulled away to get another look at her, to really see how much she’d changed.

“I’ve been looking for you for years,” Jon said as he took a step back, aware of how Arya had tensed up, “How—where have you been?”

Arya and Sansa shared a look. Sansa had stepped away, but now she was moving closer again, going over to stand by Arya.

“Let’s go inside the flat, Jon,” Sansa said carefully, “We can discuss everything there.”
Jon looks between them faintly aware that he was being kept in the dark about something, and that
dimmed this reunion somehow. Still, Jon had been trying to find Arya for years, ever since he
heard about her arrest in Cardiff years ago, and it would take more than some passing uneasiness to
ruin it completely.

Arya nods her head at Sansa’s suggestion and starts ahead of them, towards the building’s door.
Jon stares after her, and only starts walking when Sansa settles beside him.

“Where did you find her?” Sansa’s only been in Cardiff for a month and she’d already managed to
get more of the family together than Jon had in six years. It looks to have taken a toll on her. Sansa
looks exhausted, and her eyes were a little bloodshot like she’d been crying not long ago.

Sansa grimaced, “She found us, actually.”

“I can’t believe it,” Jon said, “I’ve been looking for her for five years and here she is.”

“Jon, there’s something you need to know first,” Sansa said, setting her hand on Jon’s arm and
slowing their pace. Jon hadn’t looked away from Arya yet, but now he does, looking down to see
the frustrated focus on Sansa’s face, “She’s not the same, Jon. Don’t push her, okay, Jon?”

Jon gives a slow nod of his head, “I won’t,” Jon says, not completely sure what he was agreeing to.
He wants to ask more, but they’ve reached where Arya is waiting by the door and Jon knows
enough to think that this is the sort of conversation Arya shouldn’t be present for.

Jon enters the code into the door and holds it open for Sansa and Arya. Sansa goes in first, but Arya
waits beside Jon and only moves when Jon goes in first.

“You were talking about me?” Arya asks quietly.

Jon wasn’t going to lie to her, “I wanted to know how Sansa found you.”

Arya lets out an amused breath, “Sansa couldn’t find her way out of a paper bag, let alone find
me.”

Jon frowned. Arya and Sansa’s relationship had always been tense, but Jon hadn’t imagined this
level of hostility.

When they get into the flat, Rickon is already inside, sitting on the sofa with Ghost. Jon wants to be
angry with him for not warning Jon about Arya before. Sansa walks over to the sofa and takes a seat beside Rickon, tucking her legs underneath her while she reaches over to pet Ghost between the ears.

With them together it was easy to see the familial resemblance. With Sansa’s hair red again, the reddish tinge of Rickon’s hair came out more. They both had the Tully look of their mother, with that hair, and their blue eyes. Even the freckles that dotted their skin looked the same. But Arya, like Jon, looked like strangers near them.

Arya is still standing near the door, arms crossed as she watches Rickon and Sansa on the sofa. Jon thought Rickon looked rough before, but Arya was worse. Her knuckles were inked with a dark script, and climbing up from her neck was the start of another tattoo Jon couldn’t make out. If Catlyn Stark could see her daughter now, she’d have a heart attack. Jon walks up to her, her hands buried in his pockets.

“All right, I’m fine.” Jon asked her.

Arya looks away from the sofa, “I’m fine.”

Arya brushed past Jon on the way to the lounge. She goes over to sit on the armchair, even so, Jon can see that Arya has started staring at him. Jon tries to remember how shell-shocked Sansa was when she found him. This might be like that. Jon still had no idea where Arya had been for the last six years.

“I’m going to take Rickon to his room,” Sansa says after of few tense moments. That was probably for the best, Jon had no idea what Arya could say next and it might be best if Rickon wasn’t around to hear it. Still, Jon thought Rickon might put up a fight at being taken out of the formula completely, but when Sansa says this, he gets up, pulling Ghost with him, and heading over to the hall. Despite all his efforts at saying he doesn’t need a parent, Rickon had started to listen to Sansa fairly well.

“You can take my room for the night, Arya,” Sansa says as she follows Rickon out of the lounge, “Jon why don’t you show it to her?”

And Jon understands what Sansa is trying to do. If Arya was going to open up to any of them, it was realistically going to be Jon. Out of all the Stark children, it had always been Arya whom Jon was closest too, who he most saw as family. Sansa must have known that Arya’s hostility was directed mostly at herself, which is why she would want to get out of the way if it came to a confrontation.

Jon pushes himself off of the wall and walks over to Arya, just as she was moving off the chair. She followed him down the hall, over to Sansa’s room. Jon had never been in there before, he meant to help Sansa move in furniture, but she’d gotten that done with Brienne and Gilly while Jon
was at work one day.

It was sparsely decorated, which made sense since Sansa didn’t have any real possessions. The bed was made, with a knit blanket draped over the foot of the bed, the dresser was bare, save for a jumper that was folded atop it like Sansa considered wearing it that day and then changed her mind, forgetting to place back inside the dresser.

“Doesn’t look like how I imagined it.” Arya said as she stepped further into the room. “It doesn’t look anything like her room back at Winterfell.”

The name for the Stark family home made Jon smile, “We haven’t had much time to get more stuff for the flat.”

Sansa hadn’t wanted anything from her old room back in York; Jon thought she wanted a new start, but the more realistic answer was that she was trying to leave the past behind.

Arya hummed, walking around Sansa’s room before going to settle at the edge of the bed, “We? You and Sansa must have gotten close.”

Jon heard the edge to Arya’s voice and he shrugged his shoulders. “She’s been missing for six years, I thought she was dead.”

Arya sighed, “Not dead, just living in a mansion.”

“What?” Jon took a step forward, “how do you know about that?”

For the first time since Arya arrived, Jon’s eyes drifted down to her jacket where it was covered in patches. Jon’s eye got caught on the Faceless Man seal and he fell still.

Arya gave a bitter laugh, “What, she didn’t tell you about that part? You know that she’s supposed to be married, right?”

Jon shook his head, trying to understand the information coming at him, “You know about Petyr Baelish?”

Arya was caught off guard, “You know about him?”
“He’s the man who took Sansa,” Jon explained stiffly, wondering what Petyr had to do with Arya, “How do you know about him, Arya—has he spoken to you, has he hurt—“

“Hurt me?” Arya almost laughed, “Do you honestly think he could? He contracted the Faceless Men to try and get his fiancé back. That’s why I’m here. I didn’t know it was going to be Sansa.”

“That’s why the Faceless Men broke into my flat.” Jon thought out loud, trying to understand the full implications of Arya’s statement. So Sansa was right, the Faceless Men really only were around because of her.

Arya’s mouth took a hard line, her hand ghosting over to her jacket pocket before going back to her side, “That wouldn’t have happened if Sansa hadn’t run away.”

Jon balked, “Arya, Sansa was kidnapped. She’d been held against her will for years. She didn’t run away, she escaped.”

Arya rolled her eyes, “Escaped from a mansion where some rich man was paying for everything she ever wanted. I wouldn’t call what happened to her suffering.”

“And what happened to you,” Jon asked suddenly sensing where the root of this was coming from, “Was that suffering?”

Arya was quiet, she wasn’t meeting Jon’s eyes, instead letting them wander around the room, her tattooed hands balled up into fists by her side. So Jon had been right, this is where her resentment of Sansa was coming from. Jon moved from his place in the room and went over to sit by Arya on the bed. She didn’t look up when he sat down, but she didn’t move away either.

“What happened to you, Arya?” Jon asked quietly, “Where have you been for the past six years?”

“I’ve survived.” Arya said sharply, “I’m not some victim like Sansa.”

This wasn’t the place to argue so Jon just nodded his head. He knew enough about the Faceless Men to know what a ruthless organization they were. They had their hands in things like human trafficking, drug smurrings, and assassinations. Arya was only sixteen, how much of that could
she have been involved in? Jon always thought that if any of his siblings could survive, it was Arya. She’s always been resilient, tough, independent, but she was still just a child, and she couldn’t walk away from this life unscathed.

“I’ve been looking for you for years,” Jon told her, shaking his head, “How long have you known that I was in the city?”

Arya worked her jaw, reaching into her jacket pocket and taking out a crushed up piece of paper, “A while. I knew that you’ve been looking for me, I didn’t want to be found.”

Jon frowned; wishing that hearing this didn’t hurt as much as it did, “What changed your mind?”

Arya handed Jon the crumbled piece of paper and Jon unfolded it. He managed to quell his surprise at seeing the Stark family photo that he kept in his room before it was stolen in the break-in of his flat. The photo had been folded and unfolded several times until deep grooves had been worn into the photo paper. Jon understood what Arya was trying to convey to him through this, and so he went ahead and passed the picture back to her.

“I want to bring our family back together,” Jon said after a moment had passed, “That’s what Sansa and I both want to do. Whatever’s going on with you, whatever trouble you’re in, I can help you Arya.”

Arya gives another breathy laugh; she nods her head and then sits back on the bed. Jon isn’t sure if Arya believes him, but he means it. As many problems as they already have going on, they can shoulder another one.

“Tell me about the last six years,” Arya says finally, just as Jon thinks he’s about to leave, “What have I missed?”

And Jon sits back down on the foot of the bed. He feels himself relax as he starts to tell Arya about everything she wasn’t around for, about her brothers and mother, and about Sansa’s situation. Arya listens intently, face unreadable as Jon recounts everything, and after a while she even starts to comment on certain things, faintly mentioning that around the time Jon took the police job in Cardiff, Arya was first recruited for the Faceless Men.

They talked for two hours until Arya started to yawn and Jon could tell that she was struggling to keep her eyes open. Jon had her promise that they would talk more in the morning before leaving the room, turning off the lights on his way out. He went passed the lounge to his own room, feeling the exhaustion of the day way heavily on him.
When he opened his door, Jon was met with the sight of Sansa sitting on his bed. She was resting her back against the headboard, her legs tucked up to her chest, with her arms wrapped around them as she stared at something on his laptop that was beside her. Sansa looked up when she heard Jon enter and shut the laptop, pushing it away.

“Is she going to stay?”

Jon nodded his head, trying not to be jarred by the sight of Sansa sitting so familiarly on his bed, he went over to his closet to put his coat away, “For the night at least. I’m going to keep talking to her in the morning and see if I can really find out what’s going on with her.”

Sansa nodded, her expression a little lost, “She’s working for Petyr.”

That couldn’t have sat easy with Sansa, “The Faceless Men are working for Petyr. I’m going to help Arya leave them, she isn’t going anywhere.”

Sansa sighed and leaned back on the bed, letting one leg straighten out in front of her, “I want to be happy that she’s here, but I can’t stop thinking that Petyr got to her and that she’s just spying on me. That’s crazy, right? Arya never liked me, but she wouldn’t do something like that.”

Jon thought about the things Arya said about Sansa before. Jon tried to set the story straight, but Arya still might believe that Sansa was some nervous bride who ran away from the man who’d taken care of her for the past six years. Arya was unpredictable right now, Jon didn’t know how deep she was in the Faceless Man organization or what sort of contract Petyr Baelish had with them. Until he did, Jon was going to have to keep a close eye on Sansa and Arya’s interactions. He didn’t want to have to be wary of Arya, but for now, he might have to be.

“You don’t need to worry about it,” Jon said, hoping Sansa wouldn’t pry any deeper, “We’ll get everything sorted out.”

Sansa was still frowning, a far-off expression on her face. She hadn’t moved from her spot and didn’t look like she was going to any time soon. Jon took a pair of joggers and an old shirt in his hand, stepping out of the room to go change in the bathroom. When he came back, Sansa was still there.

“I’ll leave in a minute,” Sansa said with a sigh, looking as if she’d rather just stay in her spot.
Jon shook his head, “Don’t bother. I’ll take the sofa.”

Sansa shook her head, Jon noticed that she was already wearing one of his t-shirts with the Cardiff police department logo over the chest, assumingly a pair of one of the sleeping shorts with it, not that Jon could tell with the angle Sansa was sitting at. Sansa always had such an effortless beauty, it was impossible not to look at her and feel some sort of desire.

“This is your room, I’m not about to make you sleep on the sofa.” Sansa still hadn’t gotten up from her spot. She looked to be debating something with herself, before finally sighing, “Can I just sleep with you for the night? If you don’t want me to, I can go to Rickon’s room, he already said I could stay there with him—“

“Stay here,” Jon answered and Sansa fell quiet. It didn’t mean anything, they’d already shared a bed before, but with the context of the kiss the other night, this felt different.

“Alright,” Sansa said moving to pull the sheets over her, as she got more comfortable in the bed.

Jon turned to look away, going over to the door to turn off the light. In the dark, Jon could still hear Sansa moving around, but that all fell silent when Jon got into the bed on the other side.

“I’ve only got a two and a half weeks left,” Sansa said quietly after Jon had gotten his pillow beneath his head.

Jon felt his breath fall out of him, “You aren’t going back there, Sansa. Arya is going to know something that can help us.”

Beside him, Jon felt Sansa move closer, until he could feel her at his side. Jon tensed for a moment before relaxing next to her, tilting his head to make out the profile of her face in the dark shadows.

“We’re doing the right thing, aren’t we?” Sansa asked Jon, “Are we wasting time helping me when we could be focusing on helping Arya and finding Bran?”

“If you weren’t here, I think Rickon would have run away by now,” Jon shook his head, “You’re going to stay with us, Sansa. I’m not going to let you go back to Petyr.”
Sansa was quiet again, and when Jon looked, she appeared to be frowning. Jon wanted to ask what he said wrong, but he didn’t get the chance. Sansa had shut her eyes and turned so that her back was to Jon, effectively ending their conversation. Jon wasn’t ready for it to be over, he didn’t want to push Sansa, but he needed to know what she was thinking, what she was keeping from him. It was impossible to help her when Sansa was keeping things from him.

Jon opened his mouth to speak, but Sansa beat him to it, “You don’t need me, Jon. You need to know that. You don’t need me to take care of our family.”

Jon wondered how long Sansa had been thinking like this. Without Sansa, Jon didn’t know how he could have helped Rickon. He could barely look at Rickon without feeling like he was looking at himself all those years before Ned found him at the foster center. Sansa had done so much to help Rickon in such a short amount of time, and she’d done so much to help Jon. Without her, Jon would be lost.

“You are my family,” Jon told her, “Where ever you go, I’ll be there with you, as long as you want me.”

Sansa made a soft sound, as she rolled back around to face Jon. Her eyes looked cloudy as she moved closer. She pushed herself up enough to set a kiss on the side of his mouth, pulling away before Jon could escalate it anymore.

“It can’t be about us,” Sansa told him, her voice firm, “It has to be about them now.”

Jon didn’t understand what she meant, but he nodded his head and let Sansa roll back over as she moved further away from him. The distance between them was cold, and Jon closed his eyes praying for sleep.

Chapter End Notes

writing arya is hard. I'm still trying to figure out her voice and her character. I've never written someone like her so this is a new sort of challenge for me. Things are going to be picking up pace moving forward. While this fic will probably go over 150k a bit, i'm still trying to keep it in that ballpark. I want to get this fic
finished by the time my midterms start, so we'll see how that goes. Anyway, things are getting complicated between sansa and jon. She's running out of time and is reasonably trying to distance herself in case she does have to go back to the vale, while also trying to focus all her time on getting her family back together.

Next ch should be out soon!! Thanks for everyone who left comments on the last chapter, i'm so happy that i've managed to trap some new readers, and i'm glad you guys are liking where the story is going!
Please comment and kudos!!
On Monday, Rickon started his first day at Skagos Secondary School. He and Sansa woke up early in the morning to take a cab to the school where they met with the principal before Rickon could attend class.

The entire time Rickon was stewing in silence, glaring forward as they waited for the principal to call them to her office.

“Just behave,” Sansa reminded him as she tucked her hair behind her ear. She’d never been to a state school before, and as she looked around she was reminded of the television shows Mya used to tell her about that took place in halls like these.

Rickon crossed his arms, “I’m not making promises.”

Sansa rolled her eyes. She hadn’t expected Rickon to agree with her, but she did wish he would put in a little more effort in making this work. The principal’s assistant came to fetch them from the hall and she led them into the back office.

The principal’s office was decorated just as Sansa imagined it would be. The walls were an eggshell white and suffered for it. Dust collected on the lamp that lit the room and the unpolished wood of the desk made the whole atmosphere seem cheaper. The principal, at least, looked kind, sitting behind her desk with her hands folded, smiling as Rickon and Sansa entered.

“Oh, should I expect Mr. Snow to stop by later?” She asked once Sansa and Rickon were seated, the empty third chair a looming presence.

Sansa shook her head, “He wanted to come, but there was a conflict with work.”

That conflict was Arya. Arya only stayed at Jon’s flat that one night before going back to the Faceless Men. It was a point of contempt with Jon, but Sansa told him not to force anything yet. Arya wasn’t hiding from them, in fact, she was staying in plain sight. She got a job at Mole’s Town working the evening shift, just as Sansa used to, and Jon had taken to doing work their so that he could keep an eye on her.

Arya still wasn’t telling them about the contract Petyr made with the Faceless Men, which truly was the real point of stress for the rest of the Starks. It was clear that Arya might have been their
only chance at finding incriminating evidence against Petyr, but Arya wasn’t talking. If she did, Arya would be betraying the Faceless Men, which apparently would just make everything worse. Besides, according to Arya, Sansa’s dilemma wasn’t worth Arya endangering herself. And Sansa had to agree; still, Jon was trying to convince Arya to work with him to find something he could use against Petyr. There were only two weeks left until Sansa was supposed to go back to the Vale and marry Petyr.

Two weeks felt suffocating. The walls were closing in and Sansa could barely breathe. By now she thought all of this would be solved, she thought her biggest problem would be Cersei. That was not the case; as far as Sansa knew, Stannis was still building his case against Cersei Lannister, and barely ever required their assistance, only ever giving them the occasional update when prodded to do so.

“That’s too bad,” The principal said, reaching for the file laying across the desk, marked with Rickon’s name, “Now let’s get started. There are just a few things we need to go over before Rickon can join everyone in classes.”

Rickon’s criminal record meant that he’d be on academic probation while at the school. The biting case was still going on, and until that was settled he couldn’t get in any trouble at school. Sansa listened to the rules that Principal set out carefully. Rickon couldn’t fail any of his classes, he couldn’t get into any fights, he essentially had to be the model student, or else the school would recommend he go to a special education center for delinquents and Jon’s custody could be contended.

Upon hearing all of this, Rickon started to get restless. Sansa could see his nervous rustling as if he doubted his ability to keep out of trouble. She understood that apprehension, she felt it too.

Near the end of the meeting, Sansa asked about opportunities Rickon had to get caught up in his classes since he was starting near the end of the semester. The principal explained some tutoring options Rickon had while she walked them out of her office, handing Rickon his class schedule and pointing him in the direction of his first class.

“Nervous?” Sansa asked when the principal left the two of them alone in the hall, which was empty since classes had already started for the day.

Rickon shrugged, hiking his backpack higher on his shoulder, “I’ve been through this before.”

Sansa sighed and looked down the hall. Was it strange that she was the one who didn’t want to leave? She’d been with Rickon every day for the last two weeks. She felt like a protective parent dropping their child off at the first day of primary school.

“I can walk with you to your class,” Sansa said, already walking down the hall and letting him catch up, “If you want I can come by during your lunch break and we can go and eat together.”
Rickon was rolling his eyes, “You packed me a lunch this morning.”

“I know,” Sansa clasped her hands together as she looked through the windows the peered into the classrooms as they passed them by to get to Rickon’s maths class. “But you might not have anyone to sit with yet.”

Rickon paused outside his classroom, “I’ll be okay, Sansa.” He told her as he fidgeted from one foot to the other, “I can stay out of trouble for one day.”

“I know that you can,” Sansa wished she had more confidence when saying that. Half the time she and Rickon went out, Sansa still caught him trying to shoplift from shops, or getting in a fight with a pedestrian, “It’s just, first days can be rough.”

“Are you going to be okay?” Rickon asked, suddenly.

Sansa blinked, “Yeah, of course, I am.”

Rickon didn’t look convinced, and Sansa wondered how pathetic she actually looked right now that her twelve-year-old brother was pitying her, “I don’t have to go. You know, it actually takes child’s services a while to find out that you haven’t been in school—“

“You’re going to class,” Sansa shook her head and pointed to the door, “I’ll pick you up at the end of the day.”

Rickon’s mouth quirked in a smile, “Fine. I’ll see you later.”

Sansa hesitated before walking away. The extent Rickon tolerated touch was Sansa putting her hand on his shoulder occasionally. It was more for her benefit than his when she bent forward and pulled Rickon into a hug, ruffling the top of his curls. Rickon groaned, clearly barely tolerating this affection, but he still brought one hand up to set on Sansa’s back, reciprocating the hug. Sansa stepped away and resisted the urge to wipe her eyes, she wasn’t going to cry, but she felt like she wanted to.

“You’re lucky no one was around to see that,” Rickon said puffing out his chest.
Sansa rolled her eyes and waited for Rickon to walk into the classroom before looking for the school exit. Rickon would be fine; she really did trust that he would try to be good, hopefully just trying would be enough for now.

The day was strange without Rickon. Sansa’s schedule was reorganized because of it. She hadn’t anticipated how lonely things would be without him. Jon and Sam were busy with work, and Gilly was still in classes for the day, and other than them, Sansa didn’t have anyone else in her life to seek time with.

Sansa ended up taking Ghost on a walk around the park, taking a particularly long path to buy time before eventually ending up outside of Mole’s Town, sitting on the street side tables, and pulling out Jon’s laptop that she brought with her in a tote bag. Jon had left it with her so that Sansa could get some more research done while he was at the station.

The day after Arya found them, Sansa told Jon about Bran. He didn’t seem to find any of her information as a breakthrough like she did, but of course, he’d been trying to find Bran for years already, and he told her that every lead he found always ended up leading to a dead end. Still, Sansa was pursuing this Three Eyed Crow. It had to mean something, and while Jon might have thought it was just gibberish, Sansa was still going to cling to it as her only lead.

While the air was chilly, the sun was out, casting warm light across the street. Sansa took off her scarf and hat, tucking them away in her bag as she started to go over the research Sam sent over to her during the weekend. She saw that Jon had gotten another email from Stannis, but resisted opening it for now. Jon was handling most of the interactions with Stannis, blessedly. The man scared Sansa somewhat, though that possibly had more to do with his relationship with Melisandre than anything else.

*On the day of your wedding, you will spit up blood.*

“What are you doing here?”

Sansa looked up from the computer screen and was met with Arya’s scowling face. Every time Sansa saw her, she felt the wind get knocked from her chest. It was so unfamiliar—Arya was less like a sibling and more like a menacing force reminding Sansa of all her past mistakes. Seeing Arya was like stepping in the past and being met with every insecurity Sansa ever had, and she hated that. It shouldn’t have felt so horrible to see your sister again, and yet Sansa dreaded and avoided every interaction with Arya so far.

“Nothing, what are you doing here? I thought you worked at night?”

“I’m picking up some extra hours,” Arya lifted a brow, pulling out the seat across from Sansa and sitting down, “Jon needs help with money. You know, things don’t just pay for themselves.”
Sansa’s mouth fell in a firm line. She knew what the real cost of money was—for months Sansa had been living off every pence she could scrape up. She wanted to tell Arya that—tell her about every long night she spent cleaning up bathrooms at hostels, or every odd job she could get hired for while she was on the run, but every time Sansa tried to say it, she was met with the reality that it probably wasn’t going to be good enough for Arya.

“I know that. I have worked before.” Sansa closed the laptop and crossed her arms. Arya’s tattoos were on full display, scrawling down her neck and disappearing under her apron. She looked like she was more likely to scare away customers than get them to stop by.

“Have you?” Arya frowned, “Laying on your back doesn’t count as work.”

Sansa wanted to lunge across the table, but she managed to stay still, her hands gripping the metal bottom of the chair. It seemed that Arya was still under the impression that Sansa’s time in the Vale was much more transactionary than it had actually been. Out of everything Arya said that’s what always bothered Sansa the most, the idea that she’d been whoring herself out to Petyr in exchange for food and lodging. The thought made her sick, but that was probably because it was closer to the truth than Sansa was comfortable with.

“Shouldn’t you be helping the other customers?” Sansa asked thinly.

Arya looked around. The café wasn’t busy, and the people who were there had already been served, “Where’s Rickon?”

Sansa relaxed a little, at least this was a pace she could follow, “He started school today.”

“Oh? That must be nice for you, you don’t have to pretend to be mummy all day.”

“I’m not trying to replace Mother,” Sansa’s face fell back into a scowl.

“Just practicing for the future?” Arya asked.

Sansa let out a deep breath. She wished that Arya didn’t have to make everything so difficult. It felt like that Arya hadn’t progressed in the six years that they’d been apart, every time she spoke Sansa
felt eleven again and Arya was nine.

Sansa forced herself to relax—to not be so defensive since that couldn’t be helping anything. “Is there something you needed from me Arya, or do you just enjoy making me upset?”

Arya’s mouth thinned, she crossed her arms, leaning forward to rest her elbows on the table, “I’m just telling you the truth.”

Sansa didn’t want to have this fight. She didn’t want to debate what was true or false with Arya. She certainly didn’t want to do it when the point in question was Sansa’s own life, with Arya arguing on the side of Petyr.

“Fine,” Sansa finally said, letting the word out in an exhausted breath, shoulders hanging loose. Arya blinked when Sansa admitted this point, apparently expecting to be met with more resistance. “Fine, Arya. I did run away from Petyr’s proposal, I did go to Jon for help. If those are the facts we’re looking at then they are all true. Petyr did take care of me financially for several years, and no I never tried to leave him until he proposed. Is this what you want to hear?”

Arya blinked; jaw working as she sat back in her chair. Sansa expected to see some satisfied smirk on her sister’s face, the cat that caught the canary. Instead, Arya looked hesitant.

“So it all really is true?” Arya asked and Sansa didn’t have the strength to argue for herself anymore.

“Sure,” Sansa shrugged her shoulders and sat back, “Is that what you needed to hear? Can we be done with this third degree?”

Arya didn’t have an answer. Her face was blank as she tried to work this new information into her narrative. “They say you ran away with him. That you let him touch you.”

Sansa repressed the sensation to vomit. She wanted to shrink away into nothing and disappear. How could the Faceless Men have known that? Is that what Petyr told them when he contracted them to find her? That they were in love? That Sansa came away with him willingly? Wasn’t that the exact same narrative Petyr spoon fed Sansa for years, forcing it down her throat until she gagged up the perfect words to please him.
“I let him do as much as an eleven-year-old child lets a grown adult do anything.” The words came out cold, the voice of a dead girl.

Arya narrowed her eyes, “You didn’t stay eleven forever. You never fought back?”

Sansa choked on the truth now. How much of this had Arya told Jon? Sansa had tried to keep all of this away from him, afraid that he’d think the exact same things about her that Arya was saying now. Why did it take the marriage proposal to leave, when so much worse had already happened?

“I never even considered it.” If Sansa was capable, she would have been crying, instead, she continued to answer in that cold robotic voice, recounting the life of someone who never really existed. All of that had happened to Alayne Stone, Sansa had been dead throughout it all, “I didn’t think there was another option.”

Arya pursed her lips and shook her head, “I’d never let that happen to me. Anyone who tries to touch me, I’ll cut off their hand.”

“Good.” Sansa’s voice was thick, the sincerity cold and raw. She hadn’t realized how relieved she would have been to hear Arya say that—to know that the things that happened to her would never happen to her sister. “I don’t want it to ever happen to you, Arya.”

And Arya was still. That snide, superior look that had been on her face was gone, left bear. Her mouth was open, but no words had come out. She was ready for a fight, but there wasn’t any to be found. Sansa wondered what sort of culture Arya grew up in where every word had to slit the throat, where sincerity left a person in shock.

Arya cleared her throat and looked away, “Well, you don’t have to worry about that.”

Sansa really hoped that she didn’t. There were already so many other things to worry about, Sansa couldn’t imagine adding something like that to her very long list.

Sansa reached for the laptop and opened it up again. Arya had leaned under the table to pet Ghost, and so Sansa went back to the email Sam had sent her about Bran. A few minutes later Arya left to help a new customer who went inside the café, and by the time she came back to Sansa’s table, Sansa had finished the email and was writing notes down on a pad of paper she brought with her.

“What’s that?” Arya asked, leaning over her shoulder to look at the paper.
Sansa still felt a prick of distrust towards Arya. She already knew that Arya might have been passing information about her to the Faceless Men, and then sharing that with Petyr. The last thing Sansa wanted was for Petyr to get any information on Bran that he could use to further extort Sansa.

“Just something I’m working on,” Sansa moved the paper closer to her, blocking it from Arya’s view.

Arya frowned, going back over to sit at the chair across from Sansa, “What’s the Three Eyed Crow?”

The name was written at the top of Sansa’s paper, underlined thickly in pen. Sansa glanced down at it before setting the paper on her lap, “Nothing so far, why? Have you ever heard of it?”

Arya shrugged, “Might have. Is this about Bran? Jon told me you were trying to find him.”

Sansa wanted to curse Jon for that. He didn’t agree with Sansa that they needed to be careful about what they said around Arya. He was so happy to just have Arya back in his life that he’d thrown caution to the wind. Part of Sansa envied how close they already were as if no time between them had passed. Sansa came with him once when he came to the café to work while Arya was on shift, but left halfway through when she realized what an isolated force she was around the two of them. They always had the bond of being the black sheep of the family, and Sansa had been the one to help make them that way.

“I’m trying to,” Sansa conceded, “Jon doesn’t think there’s anything to it. This is probably nothing.”

Arya was still frowning, face twisting as she thought, “Have you ever heard of the name Bloodraven?”

The name sent a chill down Sansa’s spine and she shook her head, “No, should I have?”

Arya grimaces, as if this was the sort of sensitive information that she wasn’t supposed to share with Sansa, “No, you wouldn’t have heard of him. It’s just a name I’ve heard; Bloodraven was a gangster back in the day who had connections with parliament before we were born—way before we were born. He’s a bit of a legend in my community.”
The community of criminals, Sansa thought uneasily, “What does that have to do with the Three Eyed Crow?”

“That’s just another name for him,” Arya told her. “At least I think it is, I’ve only heard it in connection once. The real question is what does that have to do with Bran?”

Sansa lifted her pad of paper back on the table, suddenly forgetting her caution in turn for opportunity. “I found the name written on a piece of paper on that tree Bran used to climb—you remember the one that he used to hide in? It was way up there, and Rickon says that he only ever heard Bran say the name the Three Eyed Crow after they were in the foster system. Bran was already in a wheelchair by then, and they weren’t even being fostered near the manor, he must have gone back to the manor to put the note there, and someone else had to have climbed the tree to get it in its spot.”

Arya made a face, “Why would Bran have known about Bloodraven?”

“He probably didn’t,” Sansa, explained quickly, “Rickon, said he thought the Three Eyed Crow was some made up person—like a story foster kids made up. He said that Bran left to go find him.”

Arya sat back, spreading her legs out under the table, “That doesn’t make sense.”

None of it made sense, Sansa was getting used to that theme in her life. With Arya’s new information, Sansa’s lead had both expanded, while also becoming more convoluted. Sansa knew that foster situation could be rough, but did that really lead to Bran going on some scavenger hunt for a legendary crime boss?

At least Sansa was finally getting some more information. She and Rickon had gone through everything he could remember about that first foster home and the two kids who left with Bran, and it hadn’t led them anywhere. Now Sansa had a new trail to follow.

“What else do you know about this Bloodraven?” Sansa asked, writing the name down on her paper so that she wouldn’t forget it.

“Not much,” Arya admitted, rubbing the back of her neck. More customers were starting to come into the café and Sansa knew that Arya didn’t have long before she would have to go help them, “I mean, everyone knew about Bloodraven, but it’s not like he was a Faceless Man or something. I don’t even know what his real name was—it’s more of a legend than anything else.”
Sansa could work with legends; at least it was a jumping off point. “Can we talk about this later? You could stop by the flat after work or—“

“I’ve got things to do after this.” Arya said uneasily and Sansa knew it must have had to do with the Faceless Men, “I’ll talk to Jon about it when he comes by tonight.”

Sansa’s face fell a little. For a minute there it felt like Arya and Sansa were actually connecting, but of course, Arya would rather talk to Jon about all of this instead of Sansa. Sansa would just have to stop by Jon’s office and catch him up on everything she learned, maybe give him her notes so that he’d understand what Arya was saying. I didn’t really matter who got the information, as long as they had it.

“Yeah, okay.” Sansa nodded her head, trying not to let her disappointment show, “I’ll let him know. Everything is good between you to?”

Arya pushed out of her chair to go back inside to help the customers, “Jon was never the one I had problems with.”

And then Arya was gone. Sansa slumps back in her chair, Ghost, stirring from his nap, beside her. She reached down to untie his lead from the stem of the table, before forcing herself out of her chair to start the walk back to the flat.

There were still a few more hours left before Sansa had to pick Rickon up from school and so after dropping Ghost off, Sansa started heading for the station to see if Jon was in. If he was she could go ahead and tell him about Bran and Bloodraven, and if not Sansa could just leave the notes with Brienne who could hand them off to him later.

Sansa was struck with the feeling of deep boredom and loneliness. Up until then, everything felt so very fast paced and urgent, and now things were finally starting to fall into place for the Starks. Rickon was in school, Jon had returned to work, Arya was back, and the one thing Sansa had been dedicating her time to, finding Bran, was apparently being delegated to Jon and Arya. Of course, Sansa still had to find out how to get out of her marriage to Petyr, but whenever she thought about that now, Sansa was struck with a deep suffocating dread.

You will be in a wedding soaked in red. Melissandre’s words haunted Sansa. Sansa didn’t believe in fate, but as the end of the month approached and no new information had been found out about Petyr, Sansa started to wonder if there really was a way out of the marriage.

I’d rather die than go back to him, Sansa told herself, I will die if I have to go back there. The thought of Petyr’s hands touching Sansa’s skin made her physically sick. The idea that he’d take possession of the Stark ancestral home made Sansa want to drop dead, but those were the realities that she was facing.
“Hello,” Sansa came up to Officer Flower’s desk at the front of the station, “Is Jon in?”

Officer Flowers recognized Sansa from all the times she’d come to visit Jon in the station. Luckily, he didn’t seem to recognize her from before she was Sansa, back during from the first time Sansa came to the station when she was still Alayne, both when she was just hoping to catch sight of Jon and then her subsequent arrest.

If any of the officers at the station remembered that, they’d all been kind enough not to mention it to Sansa’s face.

“Yeah, he’s back in his office,” Officer Flowers pointed in the direction of the offices and let Sansa pass through the rows of desks to get back there.

As familiar as Sansa was with the station, she still knocked on Jon’s office door, waiting for him to call her in before opening the door and walking inside. The blinds to his window were closed, but Sansa could hear the quiet movement on the other side.

Jon and Sansa hadn’t spoken much since the night Arya came back and they shared the bed. He’d been coming home to the flat late enough that Sansa was usually asleep when he got back from the café, and when they did talk it was always centered on their siblings. And that had been exactly what Sansa asked for, but each interaction still left her hollow.

This is what it means to be selfless. This is hardly suffering compared to what the others have been through. How much effort does it really take to not want?

“Sansa, I didn’t think you were going to stop by.” Jon coughed around his cup of coffee as Sansa went to the seat across from his desk.

“I should have called,” Sansa agreed, reaching into her tote bag for the notepad, before pausing and looking up, “Are you busy? I can come back, I figured that you’d be having a lunch break around now and we could talk.”

Jon shook his head, sitting his mug down, “Talk about what?”

There was an edge of anxiety to his voice, and Sansa tried to keep her own voice easy. Did he think she was here to talk about them? Sansa had staunchly avoided such subjects for the very purpose that it would only distract them from what was important. In two weeks, if by some miracle Sansa doesn’t have to go back to the Vale, maybe they could talk about themselves then, but until that moment their conversations had to circle around Rickon, Arya and Bran.
“I saw Arya at Mole’s Town,” Sansa explained as she put the notepad in front of Jon, “She’s working extra hours now, apparently. Anyway, we were talking and she said she recognized the name the Three Eyed Crow.”

“Sansa—“ Jon’s voice was strained.

“This is something, Jon,” Sansa pushed the notes closer to him, “Just read what I wrote. Arya thinks that the Three Eyed Crow has connections to some gangster named Bloodraven.”

Jon shook his head, “I’ve never heard that name before.”

“Me either, but Arya has. She’ll explain it to you tonight, but please, just go over the notes before you see her. I think this is going to lead us somewhere.”

Sansa wasn’t about to get into an argument with Jon about the validity of her claims. She still barely understood why he wasn’t taking the Three Eyed Crow stuff seriously, as he’d ended their previous conversation by saying that it was all just foster kid imaginings, as if that was a decent explanation for it all.

“Have you found out anything new about Baelish?”

Sansa’s shoulders stiffened, this was another problem that Jon had with Sansa’s Three Eyed Crow research. He thought it was taking away from Sansa’s time when she was supposed to be getting more information on Petyr. She couldn’t explain to him how doing research on Petyr only made her feel sick, and how Sansa just knew that it wasn’t going to lead anywhere. Petyr was too good at this game, that much was clear. If there was dirt on him, they weren’t going to find it so easily.

“Not yet—“

“Sansa—“

“I’ve been looking,” Sansa lied sharply, her voice going shrill, “There isn’t anything out there, Jon. We’ve looking everywhere—there is no criminal record, nothing that could link him to the Faceless Men, or any crime syndicates, and Arya is still refusing to help me in any way when it comes to him, so she either doesn’t know anything, or she just wants me to go back there—“
“Arya doesn’t want that,” Jon sighed.

Sansa felt rigid, of course, Jon was going to take this moment to defend Arya. “Doesn’t she? Arya still thinks that I—” Sansa shook her head and stood up, picking her bag off of the floor, she wasn’t about to get into all of the things Arya believed and their varying viability, “You know, it doesn’t matter. I’ve got to pick up Rickon soon, I should go.”

Jon was standing up from behind his desk, “It’s only 1, Sansa. Why are you trying to leave, what did I say?”

“You didn’t say anything.” Sansa turned towards him stiffly, “Jon, you’re just being yourself. You see the best in people, and that’s great, but…” Sansa shook her head and looked away, sighing, “You should stop talking to Arya about me. It’s not exactly your place to tell her about my past, and its not helping anything.”

If anything, every time Jon tried to defend Sansa, Arya just dug her heels in deeper to her views. If she hadn’t told Jon about what Petyr had done to her, she was going to soon, especially if Jon kept jumping to Sansa’s defense around her.

“She’s your sister,” Jon said, “If she knew the truth, she’d want to help you.”

Sansa shook her head, “I don’t think that’s true, Jon. Arya believes what she wants to believe. Let’s just let her do that. I’m fine with it, and I don’t think we need her to get information on Petyr.”

“You just said all our other leads dried up,” Jon was walking around the desk towards her, “Arya is our best shot at helping you. Why are you so resistant to getting her help, what is this about?”

“It’s not about anything, Jon,” Sansa gritted out, “I get that you’re trying to help, but maybe we should leave the Petyr research to me from now on. If you really want, I’ll ask Arya about him, but you should leave it alone.”

“I’d do that,” Jon’s voice was picking up, “But, Sansa, you don’t spend anytime researching Baelish anymore. One of us has to actually prioritize helping you.”
“It’s not your business.” Sansa reiterated coldly, emotions frayed, “These are my problems, I’ll handle them.”

Jon started, “They aren’t just your problems, Sansa. When Petyr threatens you, he’s threatening all of us.”

“Yeah, well not all of us are going to have to marry him,” Sansa tossed her arms in frustration, “Not all of us had to live with him for the past six years. I did—this effects me more than it does anyone else, so why don’t you let me decide to handle it, Jon.”

“You aren’t handling it.” Jon growled, standing right in front of Sansa, her back against the wrinkled blinds of the window. She stood tall, not backing down as Jon came at her, “You’re running from it. You’re giving up, and I’m not going to. Sansa, I’m not going to let him touch you —“

Sansa fell cold. Her heart was beating in her chest like a drum, the blood rushing to her ears. At the word touch her mind fell out of place, fear and paranoia taking over. Had Arya told him what Sansa let Petyr do to her?

“He never touched me,” Sansa took a step forward, pushing Jon back, “He never—God, Jon, why can’t you just leave things alone? What has Arya told you?”

“Nothing,” Jon put his hands up and took a step back, as Sansa was the one coming on him now, “She just keeps saying all the lies the Faceless Men told her. I don’t believe any of them, Sansa, but that’s why we need to talk to her—so that she can know the truth.”

“Just stop talking about me.” Sansa spat, the sound of her heart louder than anything else in the room, her head growing light as everything started to fall, “I don’t care if she knows the truth, just stop talking about me. She doesn’t know anything, she’s just lying—she doesn’t understand, she just keeps believing everything Petyr said, she doesn’t understand what it was like, she doesn’t understand that I didn’t have a choice—she doesn’t understand any of it, I didn’t know better, I didn’t know that I could stop him, I didn’t—“

And then Jon was wrapping his arms around Sansa’s waist and bringing her against his chest as the breath fell out of her. Sansa kept talking, sobbing really, unintelligibly into Jon’s shirt, falling against him as he held her up.

Eventually, Sansa’s breath started to even out again, and reality struck her. If Jon didn’t know the truth before, he must have now. Sansa couldn’t explain to him how she’d let Petyr touch her—
molest her—for years, but it took that stupid marriage proposal to get her to run. Sansa couldn’t explain how until that moment she never thought she was truly trapped—until Petyr proposed Sansa always told herself that one day she’d get to leave the Vale, that Petyr would have to let her go because that’s what daughters did—they left. But a wife, they could never leave, and while Sansa could endure hell for a little while, she wouldn’t survive it forever. But saying these things to Jon would take down every defense, every wall Sansa had built to protect herself. They were her last shelter, and this was the sort of shelter that only belonged to her.

“Sansa—“

Sansa shook her head, her face still pressed against Jon’s shoulder, “I don’t want to talk about it.” She pushed off him and wiped her stray tears, trying to gain composure, “I’ll tell you anything Jon, but never ask me about this.”

Jon had gone pale, but he nodded his head, “Okay. I’ll stop talking to Arya about you if that’s what you want.”

There wasn’t much of a point to it anymore, but Sansa still felt relieved. Even if Jon did know the extent of what Petyr had done to Sansa, he didn’t need it narrated to him via Arya.

“I need to go,” Sansa looked back at the door, wondering if Sam was done with classes for the day so that he could go over the new information about the Three Eyed Crow with Sansa. She needed something to take what had just happened out of her mind. Sansa couldn’t help but feel that now that the truth was out there, Jon was going to look at Sansa and see the sort of damage that he could never touch. That’s for the best too, Sansa reminded herself, It’s what you wanted. But she hadn’t wanted it like this. This was the exact thing Sansa had been trying to avoid.

Even now, Jon was looking at Sansa with those pitying eyes, like she was a broken doll who’s arm had just come off. The mask of humanity had been ripped from Sansa’s face, revealing the sort of damage that sent men running—all the broken cracks on her skin were on full display revealing the gaping nothingness underneath. Sansa didn’t want to be broken, but Petyr had taken so many pieces of her, locking them away in his collection, that Sansa was never going to be whole, and it was always just a matter of time before Jon found out.

Sansa turned around reaching for the door, she propped it open, and before she could take a step back to the hall, Jon spoke.

“You don’t have to talk to me about it,” Jon said, going over to take the door from Sansa and stand between her and the hall, “But you should know that it doesn’t change anything for me. You’re still Sansa Stark, and you’re still the strongest person I know.”
Sansa wasn’t going to cry again, Both those things can’t be true. Sansa Stark was never strong—she was dead during the worst parts, and I don’t think she’ll survive them if it happens again. Jon didn’t understand what he was saying, or how it tore at Sansa’s insides to hear. It changed everything, at least for her it did. Even if Jon still saw her the same, Sansa couldn’t pretend that she did too.

“Okay, Jon,” Sansa tried to smile as she took a step back, “I’ll see you later. Uh—don’t forget to read the notes I wrote, okay?”

Jon nodded and Sansa turned away before he could say anything else. She left the station quickly, waiting until she was on the street until she broke. After a moment of indulging her weakness, Sansa straightened her back and took a deep breath. Jon was right, Sansa was running, but she couldn’t do that for much longer, time was running out.

Chapter End Notes

The end is nigh!! As you can see, we've officially got a end mark for the fic, at 40ch. This means that from now on chapters are going to be extra long so that we can reach the goal!

Alot happens in this chapter, or at least it felt that way for me. Rickon is going to school because truancy can only last so long, and things with Arya and Sansa are still tense. For me, i imagine that Arya never got the chance to really accept and move on from her childhood, since so much of her childhood was stolen from her. i mean she's been in a gang since she was ten so that has to be rough. Also, i imagine her being a bit like "i'm not like those kind of girls" kind of gal, and she looks at sansa's past and just sees weakness since arya can't imagine ever letting herself end up in a situation like that. But, arya is slowly starting to see that she might not be right about all of that, but she is stubborn so i doubt this is something she'll admit.

Jon and Sansa have been icy since she essentially broke them up, and now she's being fatalistic since she feels like she confirmed her sexual assault that Jon pretty much already knew about. Obvi this is a rough thing to go through, and sansa rather run from it than deal with the unpleasantness when she has so little time left with her fam. Also i'm throwing some booklore in their for Bran. i've tried to follow this fic with the books more than the show, this is probably the most obvious example of it (other than alayne as a whole) we'll be getting a little more bloodraven stuff, but we're playing it fast and loose so we'll see.
thanks for reading! I hope you guys like this ch, its extra long which is always a good thing! I can't believe i've already got 700+ kudos its so crazy, and after i reached the 300 mark i kind of thought that was going to be it, but this is insane! I'm so blown away by the support this fic has gotten, and everytime i get a new reader is blows my mind! Thank you so much! Next ch should be out before friday!
Also the songs, I Try by Macy Gray and Hurricane by Jaime Scott are amazing and I listened to them on repeat while writing this
The boys at the furthest table were watching her. Arya watched them in her profile, pressing her tongue against the back of her teeth, as she finished wiping down the table in front of her. She could hear them whispering, she could hear the subtle chimes of laughter. Arya squared her shoulders and tucked the dirty rag in her apron and walked up to them.

“Can I help you with something?” Her fake cheery waitress voice barely kept off her contempt and desire to strangle them.

One of them was shaking his head, “We’re good—“

The boldest of the group spoke over him. His face twisted with a stark sense of superiority and privilege, a body used to spending money that wasn’t his own, and taking part in danger that he knew he could always get away with. “Yeah, Sweetheart, what’s that ink mean?”

He pointed one of his fingers—the pointer, so easy to snap—towards the tattoo scrawling up Arya’s neck. He got close enough that Arya could almost feel the nail brush against her skin.

The tattoo was a rendering of the god of death—faceless and done in a wispy image like a wraith moving past Arya’s throat. Beneath it would have been the tattoo of the coin Arya used to get into the Faceless Men, along with it, across her rib cage, the list of names of all the people she would kill. Of course, these boys couldn’t see those, only the god of death, that’s all that ever mattered.

“What do you think it is?” Arya crossed her arms, hip moving to the side and lifted a brow, waiting to hear their response. This was a game, cat and mouse.

“I’ve seen something like that before,” The boy who’d called her sweetheart continued, “But a little thing like you couldn’t be a—“

“A Faceless Man?” Arya finished tilting her chin inquisitively, “No, of course not. What would a little thing like me do there? You certainly shouldn’t be afraid of a little thing like me.”

The other boys looked unsettled, Arya tended to have that effect, but the idiot just kept talking. He laughed, “That’s cute. You think you’re tough?”
“Do you?”

“Okay—“ Gendry came over to the table, stepping between Arya and the boys, a barrier between them, “I think that’s good. Why don’t you lads go ahead and take off for the night.”

Arya glared over Gendry’s shoulder. He was broad, clearly physically stronger and taller than Arya, but he wouldn’t have been difficult to take down if it ever came to that. She was currently considering doing so if he didn’t move out of her way soon. She hadn’t even heard his approach, too distracted by what she planned to do with the idiot.

“You can’t kick us out.” The dumb one said, “Us and the lady were just having a chat.”

“Oh, I’m no lady.” Arya tried to take a step forward but Gendry was in her way again.

“I’m counting on it.” The dumb one winked at her over Gendry's shoulder.

“Yeah, that’s enough of that.” Gendry was pulling the dumb one out of his chair by the pit of his shoulder and ushering the others out of their seats, “I’m afraid we have a strict no harassing the staff policy. You’ve got to take this somewhere else.”

The dumb one pushed himself out of Gendry’s grip and straightened his jacket, chest puffed out indignantly. He took a step back from Gendry and sized him up. Gendry wasn't much taller, but it was the muscles chorded through his arms, that were so apparent when Gendry crossed his arms like he did now that had the boy turning to leave the café on his without whatever pride he could muster. There wasn't much of it.

Arya glared at Gendry, as he watched the boys leave and go out into the night. Her face felt hot, blood still thrumming from the chance of a fight. It felt as if she'd gone too long without one. It was starting to feel like a withdrawal. “I had that under control. I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah, well it wasn’t you I was worried about.” Gendry rounds on her, a grimace on his defined features, “Maybe try not to look like you’re about to stab a customer. The boss still has you on a trial basis.”
Arya snorts and turned her head. She could see the boys retreating on the street, watching them from the big window; the dumb one was lagging behind to light a cigarette. Arya still had another four hours on her shift, and so she walked past Gendry, shoving her shoulder into his as she opened the café door and took a step out.

“Hey,” She yelled, getting the boy’s attention. He looked over and smirked, smoking cig hanging out the side of his mouth, “What’s your name?”

“Dunsen.” Was the answer, the smile still playing at his lips.

“Dunsen,” Arya repeated, tasting it on her tongue, “Nice knowing you.”

She shut the café door before he could say anything else and dusted off her hands, going over to the now empty table to clean it. She could feel Gendry staring at her from his place at the counter.

Gendry was doing his first year at Uni. He was tall and broad, with black hair and startling blue eyes. He had a strong look about him, with calloused hands. Apparently, his favorite hobby was welding, and there was always the faint smell of steel about him.

“You need something?” Arya asked as she cleaned the table. She kept her eyes on it, never looking up to where she knew Gendry was watching her. She didn't need to look, she could hear him, his every movement was very loud, easy to track.

Gendry shook his head, crossing his arms over his chest so that the muscles were even more pronounced, just like that had been when he was scaring off the dumb boy. It was a little aggravating. “Why’d you ask for that guy's name?”

“Jealous?”

Gendry scoffed, “Of what? I’m just saying, maybe you shouldn’t flirt when you’re at work.”

Arya stood straight, tucking the rag away and setting her hands on her hips, “One second ago I looked like I was about to stab him, and now I’m flirting. Women truly are amazing creatures. How do we manage it?”

Gendry didn’t look amused, but he did look bothered, which was even better. It almost made Arya smile, only because it was so fun to tease Gendry—his neck would get all red and he’d grumble under his breath and go back to his seat at the counter and pretend to sleep.
As Gendry did just that, the bell on the door rang as someone new entered the café. Arya already recognized Jon’s heavy footsteps and didn’t turn to greet him, instead taking a tray of empty cups from a nearby table that had been stacking up and taking them to the back to be washed. When she came back in the room, Jon was already at a corner table setting up his laptop as he always did.

“Took you long enough,” Arya said pulling up the chair across from Jon.

Jon had come to visit Arya every night since she took up the job at the café. Part of the reason Arya took the job was because she knew it would be an easy way to interact with Jon. He’d asked her to move into the flat with him, Rickon, and Sansa, but Arya didn’t see that as a real option. The café was a good middle ground. Safe ground. Something she could control.

“I got caught up at work.” It was nearly two in the morning.

Arya hummed, “Long work day. Didn’t feel like going home to Sansa?”

Jon nearly flinched, he didn't look up from the laptop screen. “I’m giving her some space.”

Arya rolled her eyes as she slouched back in her seat, kicking her legs out in front of her so that they knocked against Jon's. There was something going on between Jon and Sansa that made Arya sick. They had to be fucking, Arya was sure of that—and wasn’t that Sansa game? That’s how she got the rich guy to take care of her, why wouldn’t it be the same with Jon?

“Space from what?” Arya prodded a little deeper, remembering that this was still an opportunity to inform the Faceless Men.

Jon shook his head, apparently unwilling to talk about it. He pulled out a notepad from a bag, and Arya recognized Sansa’s handwriting across the yellow pages.

Jon pushed the laptop aside, “Sansa said you knew something about the Three Eyed Crow?”

Arya worked her lip between her teeth. She shouldn’t have told Sansa about that. Those were the sort of secrets that best belonged in organizations, not among the masses. But this hadn’t been about Sansa trying to run away from Baelish, this was about Bran.

“I know a little.” Arya admits, “Not much, just that I think the Three Eyed Crow is another name
“Bloodraven.”

“Bloodraven,” Jon repeats, his face creasing with a frown, “I’ve never heard of him. He’s supposed to be some crime boss?”

Arya sighed, slouching further in her chair and glancing over to Gendry, who had a cap slung low over his eyes. He wasn’t asleep, his foot was tapping along to the music going through his headphones, so at least that meant he couldn’t hear.

“Not really. It’s like a legend. He was some boss who had ties to the PM like a hundred years ago or something, I don’t know that much.” Arya pulls Sansa’s notes closer and frowns, “I don’t even know if he was a real person, it’s just a thing I’ve heard people talk about. I don’t know why Bran would be tied up with that.”

It's not like wheelchair kids were in high demand for organized crime, so unless Bran became an expert computer hacker or something of the variety there wasn’t much use for him. Especially in an organization like the Faceless Men where any perceived weakness was cut out like a dead limb.

Jon ran his hand through his hair. He looked tired, exhausted really, and Arya wondered if it was just work or if it was something else. It certainly couldn't help that he was the single provider for three people. Arya wondered if Sansa even considered that and thought about getting a job. Apparently, she could spend her afternoons sitting outside cafés, and walking dogs, was that really her idea of helping?

Jon sighed, “I figured that would be the case. As much as I want to find Bran, I think we need to put all of this on the backburner. I’ve got someone looking into the Bloodraven character, but it’s just not a priority.”

Arya wanted to laugh, but it didn’t feel funny. “Sansa’s a priority.”

Jon’s shoulders fell, “We’ve only got two—“

“She’s only got two weeks left.” Arya corrects firmly, “Before she has to actually commit to a deal that she’s already agreed to. I don’t see what the big deal is. Jon, she made a choice, maybe you should letter her actually stick to it. Life has consequences; this is hers.”

“This isn’t about consequences, Arya.” Jon responded in a frustrated voice, sitting forward in his chair, “Things are so much more complicated than that.”
Arya rolled her eyes, it didn't have to be more complicated. “And I couldn’t possibly understand. Right. Well, I guess this is around the time you tell me we need to combine forces to get Sansa out of the mess she chose to make for herself.”

“Sansa’s asked me not to ask you about Petyr anymore. So you don’t have to worry about that.”

Arya sat up and frowned, “Why would she do that?”

Jon sighed again and shook his head. Resigned and tired. “I really don’t know. So I’m not going to ask, but if you’d like to choose to pass some information my way, that would be nice.”

Why would Sansa ask Jon not to talk to Arya about Baelish? Arya didn’t understand the angle Sansa was getting at. Maybe she felt guilty and was deciding to take a step back? Or maybe there was something about the whole thing that Sansa didn’t want Jon finding out about. That must have been it—Sansa was trying to hide something.

Arya thought all of this over as Jon started to work on whatever police business he hadn’t finished at his office. A while later a few more customers came into the café and Arya went to go help them out, coming back over to Jon’s table, after, to talk to him about other things.

Usually, this is how things started. Jon would try and ask Arya about the Faceless Men and how she got involved with them, and Arya would give him some satisfying half answers. Jon had it in his head that he was going to get her out of the Faceless Men, as if that was his choice to make. Once you were in the club, you were in it for life. Arya sold her soul to the god of death, and her life belonged to him now. Of course, if that was really true, then Arya had no business talking to Jon. But Arya could rationalize that by telling herself that she was just gathering more information about Sansa to hand over to the Faceless Men. That’s what Petyr, Sansa’s fiancé wanted, information.

Jon tried his argument with Arya again, attempting to convince her into going back to his flat, where apparently they’d already set up another bed in Sansa’s room—as if sharing a room with Sansa was such a high selling point. Once Arya told him that it wasn’t going to happen, Jon packed his bag and gave her a hug. Jon did this every time, and every time it made Arya feel nine again. When Jon left to go back to his flat, Arya’s shift was up.

“He’s your brother?” Gendry asked as the next crew came to take their places.

Arya nods her head, taking a cup of coffee to go for her walk back to the flat she was staying in, “Yeah, he is.”
Gendry nodded his head as he pulled his jacket on and walked with Arya to the door, “Which direction are you going?”

Usually, Arya left a little after Gendry, but since she’d taken up a few hours at the café during the day, management had shortened her night hours by a bit. Currently, they’d started walking side by side down the dimly lit, empty street.

Arya pointed down the road, “That way.”

“Specific.” Gendry commented, wryly, “I can walk you there if you want.”

Arya made a face, “Why would I want that?”

Gendry’s neck got red again, “Alright, never mind. Just thought I’d be polite.”

“Polite, right.” She rolled her eyes and took a sip from the to-go cup, “What way do you go?”

“I live over by Roath, not too far down.” Gendry stuck his hands in his pockets, “Is this you trying to be friendly? I’m not certain it suits you.”

Arya’s lips quirked, “Isn’t small talk the bridge to friendship?”

“Small talk and rejecting chivalrous gestures,” Gendry agreed as a car drove past them, “Life long friendships, I’m sure.”

“Well,” Arya starts with a jump to her step, her voice taking a deeper quality as she started her imitation, “It’s pretty late. If you don’t feel safe walking alone, I can walk you to your flat. Just being polite—I wouldn’t want you to run into trouble.”

“Okay, come off it,” Gendry rolled his eyes, neck getting even redder.

Arya laughed, head tilting back, “Yeah, well now you know how stupid you sound.” The street split into two and Arya noticed that Gendry was keeping in the same direction, while Arya had to
turn. She wavered on the sidewalk.

“See you tomorrow?” Gendry asked as he slowed down to face Arya.

Arya nodded her head, giving a little salute, “Yeah, see ya.”

The flat Arya was staying in was in some rough neighborhood in town. She shared it with two other Faceless Men who were posted in Cardiff and she slept on an old mattress on the floor right beside a window that overlooked the noisy street and flashed a bright red neon sign from across the way.

One roommate was passed out on the sofa when Arya came in, and the other had to still be out on the town, dealing with his own business. Her stomach growled and Arya went over to the kitchenette and pulled out a bag of crisps, taking them with her over to her room, kicking open the door as she went.

The flat was used by all the Faceless Men who came to Cardiff. Arya’s room was used and smelled of blood and unwashed bodies. The mattress was stained and so were the walls, and she always wondered how many people had slept there before she was posted to Cardiff. Both her roommates were moving some drugs into the local clubs and would be circulating out soon, but Arya didn’t know how much longer she had in the city. She was meant to be watching Sansa, but if Sansa really did leave in two weeks, Arya would be called back to Spain where she’d remain until the Faceless Men had a new assignment for her.

She sat back on her bumpy mattress and opened the bag of crisps, taking a couple of bites while listening to the sirens outside her window. Every city felt the same, and the only reason Cardiff was any different was because Jon was here. And Rickon, and Sansa. Arya had known about Jon, but she’d been told that she was supposed to be watching some girl named Alayne.

Alayne was supposed to be the fiancé of some wealthy businessman in France, who’d gotten cold feet and ran from her wedding. The Faceless Men had told Arya all about her—how’d she’d been living off of Petyr for years, how Alayne was in love with him, or at least in love with the money. And how Alayne had bolted within days of the wedding. Arya was just supposed to track the girl down, but then it turned out to be Sansa and everything became complicated.

She hadn’t reported anything to the Faceless Men since Arya revealed herself. Currently, she was still gaining information, but Arya wasn’t sure what she could tell the Faceless Men without putting Jon in danger.

Of course, Jon was ready to step into the line of fire for Sansa, which just made everything so much more complicated. And Sansa…

Sansa had either used Petyr Baelish, or let herself be used by him. Arya always thought that either way it didn’t matter, Sansa still let it all happen, and it took her six years to do anything about it. The narrative was that Sansa only cared about herself—that’s why she was putting Jon through all this turmoil, that’s why she chose to leave Petyr Baelish the moment things got too real—but then why was Sansa wasting time looking for Bran when she had her two-week time limit? Why would she ask Jon to back off, when he was Sansa’s best shot at getting Arya to admit something? Why
had Sansa been so *real* when she said she hoped no one ever touched Arya? Why did Sansa care, and why hadn’t she ever done something to help herself?

Arya set the bag of crisps aside and curled up on her mattress, turning towards the wall to block out some of the red light. She’d have to report to the Faceless Men soon, Arya couldn’t keep putting it off. It’s not like she could lie about Jon’s involvement in anything—the Faceless Men knew when you lied, they knew and they would punish you for it. Arya would just have to work her way around the truth.

“What are you doing?” Arya’s roommate asked in the morning, as Arya slipped on her boots. Arya couldn’t remember the guy’s name. She’d only talked to him twice, and both times he was high. Testing the product was frowned upon, but no one had told this guy. That wouldn’t end well for him.

“I’ve got work,” Arya said, tightening her laces.

The man made a face, “Why? Aren’t you on some spy detail, or whatever. Agent Double O.”

Arya gritted her teeth, “It’s called cultivating a cover.”

“Uh-huh,” The man walked past her to the kitchenette and poured himself a bowl of cereal, “Yeah, well, good luck with that. All men must serve.”

Arya was at the door, “All men must die.”

The words were written in Sanskrit across her knuckles, *all men must serve, all men must die*. It wasn’t specifically a Faceless Man saying, but it might as well have been, they’d been the ones to introduce Arya to the idiom. She felt as if it belonged to them now.

Arya didn’t go to the café for a while, so she started her day going to Jon’s flat and waiting across the road at a shop until Rickon and Sansa came out the building’s door. They were arguing about something, but it didn’t have any bite to it. Sansa was trying to fix Rickon’s scarf and he was trying to bat her hands away while sticking a Poptart in his mouth. Sansa hailed them a cab, letting Rickon in first while she fixed her skirt.

When Arya first started watching Sansa, Sansa didn’t even look like herself. It was the sort of difference that made Arya not even question that Sansa was Alayne. She’d already been staying with Jon, but at the time Sansa’s hair had been a muddy brown, and all she wore was old jeans and t-shirts with an old denim jacket. Arya couldn’t have imagined that Alayne was the same girl who’d cried when she spilled juice on her church dresses. It was ridiculous. Lately, though, Sansa had started to look more like herself. Sansa was still wearing second-hand clothes, but they looked
Arya didn’t bother following the cab, knowing Sansa was just going to drop Rickon off at school. Instead, she went up to the flat and entered the access code into the door, letting herself inside.

Arya remembered the way to Jon’s flat from before. She used the memory to get to his floor and reaching the door after a few minutes. She looked around the empty hall before starting on picking the lock. A few seconds later the door swung open with ease.

Once inside, Arya starts to sort around. She didn’t get to do this the night she stayed with them, but now Arya had a fair amount of time to herself to snoop. Ghost looked up from his dog bed by the window and wagged his tail. Arya softened a bit at the sight and went over to scratch his belly, feeling a little empty as she thought about her own dog, Nymeria. Arya might have still had her if it hadn’t been for Sansa’s stupid crush on Joffery Lannister, and all her lies she told his parents.

But it had been Lady who died for that, not Nymeria. Arya still remembered the fight that had after Lady was put down; Sansa had said she hated Arya, but Arya had started hating Sansa a long time before that. *Arya Horseface*, Sansa used to call her; playing tricks on her to convince Arya that she was adopted and that mum and dad were going to send her back, making fun of Arya for joining the wrestling team, and for being bad at arts and music. The only person who ever liked Arya for herself was Jon. And now Jon was wrapped up in Sansa’s web—risking his life to help Sansa fix the mess she’d made.

Arya moved away from Ghost and went towards Sansa’s room. Arya had looked through this room when she spent the night, but not as extensively as she wanted to. Everything was in its perfect place, the pink and green floral quilt spread out on the bed, and the drawers all tucked closed. It was bare, but it looked like a place Sansa could live. Arya looked under the mattress and went through the drawers. There were no personal belongings, nothing that marked her place here, or even something that proved that she ever existed in France with Petyr Baelish. That was strange, given how materialistic Sansa used to be. If she’d loved Petyr, or even loved his money, it made sense that she might want to take something from that time with her, even if she was running away.

In the closet, Arya found an old, beat up backpack. She sat down on the floor as she opened that up, pulling out the contents out as she went.

An old pair of socks, a newspaper from some place in Leeds dating a couple months back, a little coin purse with some pence in there, a few loose tampons, and then a brochure from a hostel in Cardiff—the Peach. Arya stuffed the stuff back into the bag before setting it back in the closet and closing the door. Nothing useful so far. Arya went back to look around the room, trying to find a place that she would have missed. Finally, Arya’s eyes fell on the old pair of boots by the door. Arya had never seen Sansa wear them, and while they must have been second hand, they looked unworn in recent days.

Arya went to them and flipped them over, hearing the rattling sound resonate in the left shoe. She stuck her hand inside and pulled out a black, square box. Flipping it open, Arya found a ring.

She closed the box and stuffed it in her jacket pocket. Arya stood up and made her way out of the flat. Sansa would be getting back soon, and Arya had what she needed.

Gendry only worked the late night shift and so Arya was stuck with some annoying old man during the day. She didn’t talk to him, and mercifully ignored the way he glared at her tattoos and general disposition. At least things were busier during the day and Arya was constantly rushing between
patrons, getting them their coffee and then busing their tables. Things started to slow down after
the morning, and as Arya anticipated, that’s when Sansa stopped by.

It was unfair that Sansa was still so pretty. Arya stopped caring about things like looks around the
time she learned that they weren’t as useful as knowing how to throw a proper punch, but seeing
how Sansa still looked like some perfect porcelain doll bothered her anyway. Arya was still a
horseface after all.

“I thought you’d be here,” Sansa said as she sat down on one of the patio chairs, Ghost was with
her like last time. Sansa’s hair was pulled back in a high ponytail, making her cheekbones look
even more distinct; wearing a white t-shirt tucked into a floral skirt that brought out just how blue
her eyes were.

“I work here,” Arya went to pour a customer a cup of coffee before going back over to Sansa’s
table, “Do you want something?”

Sansa nodded, already pulling that notepad out of the environmentally conscious tote bag she
brought with her—it had the Cardiff PD logo across it. “I did some research on Bloodraven last
night and I thought we could go over it, maybe see if anything sounded familiar.”

Arya looked around, the crowd was essentially gone and Arya had plenty of time to not work, but
Arya needed to get at Sansa’s nerves if she wanted to get any useful information out of her. Even
so, playing along might be the best way to do that.

She pulled out a chair, “Why should I help?”

Sansa paused, hand poised over the paper, a frown creasing her lips, “Because Bran is your brother
—“

Arya shrugged, “And I haven’t seen him in years, who cares? Why are you so interested in finding
him? Since when do you care about familial relationships—you had no problem forgetting about
me and getting closer to the Lannisters.”

“Are we doing this again? Arya, I was eleven; there was only so much I could do to find you. It’s
not like I wanted to stay in London after Father was killed, they wouldn’t let me leave.”

“You could have run,” Arya, answers coolly, “I did.”
“Yeah, well, I’m not you.” Sansa’s voice went hard, “Not all of us can be as perfect as you, I guess. How you keep making every right decision every time is astounding, but that’s not me.”

Arya pressed her lips together, “I never said I made perfect decisions.”

“No,” Sansa interrupts sharply, “only that I make the wrong ones. I’m sorry, Arya if I could change everything I would, in a heartbeat. I can’t though, and that what I’m trying to fix, that’s why we need to find Bran.”

“So you can stop feeling guilty?”

Sansa lets out a sharp sound as she tries to keep a patient expression on her face. Sansa was cracking, “It’s not about me,” She told Arya, “That’s what I’m trying to say. I should feel guilty, but that’s not why I want to find Bran. I want to find him so that our family can be together again, so we can fix this whole screwed up past and move forward, together.”

Arya leaned back in her chair and hummed. She reached into her pocket and put the ring box on the table, “You’re so committed to your family that you haven’t gotten rid of this?”

Sansa became impossibly still. She was staring at the box, a look of startled fear and shock painted on her pretty features. “Where did you get that?”

“It looks expensive,” Arya continues past her, “If you pawned it, Jon probably wouldn’t have to worry about rent for a good month or two, maybe more—I’m no expert of diamonds—I don’t have many older men lining up to hand them out to me.”

Sansa swallowed down a lump in her throat and tore her eyes away from the box. “Arya, why are you on his side?”

Arya faltered, caught off guard by this new change of tone, “On Jon’s side—“

“No,” Sansa’s voice took a hard edge, “Why are you on Petyr’s? You said you didn’t hate me, so why are you constantly trying to validate your own beliefs and prove that I’m somehow using everybody for my own gain?”

“That’s not what I’m doing.” But wasn’t it? Arya felt an uncomfortable knot in her stomach—she’d done these things before, but it was always with strangers, where you manipulated information out of them and could leave the next day—there was no emotional connection.
“You’re lying,” Sansa said. *Arya wasn’t. She couldn’t have been.* She knew when she was lying and she knew when she was telling the truth—but honestly, lies and truth didn’t even feel like they mattered right now.

“Fine,” Sansa pushed herself out of the chair and reached down to untie Ghost’s leash, “Fine, Arya, I’m the liar. Every bad thing you want to believe about me is true. I’m a liar who is just using everyone to get what I want. I’m a terrible person, and I was never good enough to you. I’m sorry Arya, I’m so sorry. I’m sorry that I haven’t suffered enough to make up for wronging you—“

“I never said I want you to suffer—“ Arya was getting out of her chair too, reacting on instinct.

“Didn’t you?” Sansa gave a wet laugh, “Isn’t that what this is about? All of my consequences? Maybe I made some bad choices, but I’m trying to learn. I’m trying to do the right thing.”

“That’s fine,” Arya said, but she didn’t have any more legs to stand on. Something in Sansa had broken, but not in the way Arya was prepared for. “Just don’t drag Jon down with you.”

Sansa let out a sharp breath, “Arya, we aren’t on different sides. I don’t want to hurt Jon either.”

“Yeah, well that’s what you’re doing.” Arya crossed her arms. She heard the doubt in her own words. She was grasping at a thin excuse. “It’s what you always do, you can’t help yourself.”

Sansa nodded her head, sucking in a breath before her face went cool and unfeeling. “I’m never going to be good enough for you, am I?”

“What?” Arya took a step back.

“Me. It’s always been this way, hasn’t it? It has to be this way. We’re just children fighting over the same toy, but I’m tired of it, Arya. If this is about Jon, you can have him—I won’t take his time away from you. If this is about you thinking I need to be punished for all of the things I did years ago, then fine. But Arya, I’m done fighting with you.”

And then Sansa dragged Ghost away from the café and started down the street. Arya stared after her, feeling lost more than anything else. She looked down at the table and saw that Sansa had left
both the notebook and the ring box. Arya picked them up and set them in the large pockets of the apron before going back into the café.

The rest of the day Arya felt as if someone had set a bomb off inside her chest. The fuse was lit, but the clock was still ticking. Every time someone talked to her, it set Arya off. She stormed off from work twice before just leaving for the day and going for a walk. Arya thought about everything Sansa had said, and she just got angrier.

For a while, Arya sat outside on the curb of the street looking at the ring Sansa left behind. It didn’t have to mean anything, Arya knew that. She’d taken it to use as a trigger object in hopes of getting Sansa to admit something useful, but it hadn’t even worked. Sansa’s face looked mortified when Arya brought it up; Sansa hadn’t even pushed to find out how Arya got it. Sansa was afraid of the ring, and Arya was starting to really believe that she was afraid of Petyr Baelish too. Arya put the ring back in her pocket and pulled out the notepad from her apron. She flipped through the pages, going to the one Sansa had open that afternoon. Three full pages were filled with carefully written notes, filling the margins to the very edge. It must have taken hours to write all of this—hours Sansa could have been using to get information about Petyr out of Arya, but she hadn’t done that. She’d been researching some stupid fact Arya mentioned in hopes that maybe she could find Bran. Something like that didn’t sound like selfish Sansa, who used to call Arya Horseface and excluded her from games.

There were two Sansas. The one Arya grew up with, the one the Faceless Men told her about, and then there was the Sansa who sat across from Arya at the café, giving up everything to try and get her family again. People didn’t change—Arya knew enough of them to know that this was true, but Sansa had changed, or at least she was acting like she had. Or maybe it was that some people could change, it was just Arya who didn’t know how. The last threads of her life as a Stark had been woven out of her hate for Sansa and her love of Jon and Father. It was never something she looked complexly at, especially as a Faceless Man where they were ordered to completely cut off ties with their old life. That’s what Arya had done, its what she had to do in order to survive, but hadn’t Sansa just done the same thing?

What made Arya running away from the Starks, any different than what Sansa had done with Petyr? Hadn’t they both just abandoned their past to get through the last six years? The narrative the Faceless Men, as supplied to them by Petyr Baelish, gave Arya a different story, and one of the key pillar stones of the Faceless Men was that you didn’t question the god of death, but now, all Arya had was questions, and she was starting to find some answers too.

“You feeling alright?” Gendry asked during the late night shift.

Arya nodded, she didn’t feel like herself. She felt confused, doubtful, with the question playing in her head, who’s side was she really on? Was it the Starks, or the Faceless Men? The Faceless Men had taken care of Arya for years—they’d clothed her and fed her and given her a place to live and the training necessary to actually do something with her life. If it wasn’t for them, Arya would have ended up dead on a street somewhere, or in a situation much worse. As for the Starks—as for Sansa—Arya only had unpleasant memories of teasing and wrongful blame being set on her shoulders. Sansa said that they were children then, but that Sansa had only been eleven, but by age eleven Arya had killed her first man—being a child didn’t lessen that blow either.
“I’m fine.” Arya answered shortly, her usual jaunts missing, “Tired.”

“Yeah well, there’s some guy out on the patio asking for you.” Gendry told her from his place behind the counter, “If you’re too tired, I can take over. Tell him to leave—“

Arya had waited too long to contact the Faceless Men, they’d apparently found her instead.

“No, I’ve got it.” Arya tucked her dishrag in her apron and went towards the patio seating.

The man was sitting at the table Sansa had used that morning, his back to her. Arya recognized him though, the hold of his shoulders, his long dual colored hair—Jaqen H’ghar had been the one to first introduce Arya to the Faceless Men, he’d been the one to vouch for her, and to train her, and while Arya already had a father, Jaqen was the next closest thing.

“Lovely girl, you look unwell.” Jaqen said as Arya took the seat across from him.

Arya shrugged a shoulder, “What are you doing away from Spain? I thought Waif was my contact.”

“You are not happy to see me?” Jaqen didn’t jest; his question had a deeper motive. *Do they think I’ve defected?*

“I haven’t seen you in two years,” Arya looks to the café window where she can see Gendry watching her from the other side. She looks back to Jaqen, “Why have you chose to show up now?”

Jaqen gave a small nod of his head, apparently approving of Arya’s direction. “The Waif told me that you have been compromised.”

Waif hated Arya. It was because Arya was quick on her way of taking Waif out of her spot as Jaqen’s favorite Faceless Man, and Arya was rumored to be taking over control of the death division of the Faceless Men, a spot that Waif had wanted for years.

“Waif was wrong.” Arya wanted to say that Waif was a liar, but she wasn’t—certainly not with Jaqen. “I’m not compromised.”
“You do not miss being a wolf?” Jaqen asked, already knowing enough of the story to pull at what mattered most, “You do not miss being Arya Stark?”

“That’s not my name,” Arya said, but he must have heard the waiver in her voice because he looked displeased. Arya knew how to lie better than this, what was the trick they taught her? *When you lie, keep your focus on something else; let another sensation take control so that it does not show.* Arya toyed with the switchblade in her pocket, slipping it into her palm.

“Well,” Jaqen still did not look pleased, “What can you offer up to the god of death?”

*They’re searching into Petyr Baelish’s past. Sansa has no intentions of going back to her fiancé. Sansa has enemies in London, and she still has Petyr’s ring. They’re looking into Bloodraven, and Jon is willing to do anything to keep Sansa by his side. They want to help me, they call me sister.*

*And whose side are you on?*

“Nothing.” Arya says with an easy pull of her shoulder, “Nothing new anyway. It's more of the same. Sansa is working on Rickon’s court case, I think she’s fully aware of how much time she has left before she has to go back to France.”

Jaqen was watching Arya carefully, “This is all you have.”

Arya nodded, “I’d tell you if there was anything else. It’s the reason I haven’t been in contact, I just didn’t have any new information to give.”

“Mr. Baelish will not be pleased.”

Arya never felt any emotions towards Baelish before, but now his name set off anger in her chest, like a lighter catching flame. “Yeah, well, that makes two of us. Sansa isn’t the most interesting person to watch.”

Jaqen nodded his head, “Very well. I’ll put in the request for reassignment, by the end of the month perhaps you will have something more interesting to do.”

“God, I hope so,” Arya said as Jaqen stood up from the table. Arya remained sitting, waiting for him to go. “You plan on staying in Cardiff any longer—I hear they’ve got a vibrant art scene.”
Jaqen shook his head, “You are not the only reason I’ve come here. This is business, not pleasure.”

The junkie who shared Arya’s flat. Jaqen must have been here for him too. By the time Arya got back to the flat tonight, she’d be willing to bet that she’d never see her roommate again.

“That’s a shame. Another time, then.”

Jaqen nodded and turned down the street, leaving without a backward glance. Arya waited until the darkness engulfed him, before pulling the tip of her switchblade out of the meat of her thigh. She let out a breath at the sharp pain, she’d pushed the blade in a little deeper than she planned to, but it had worked. Arya had only been focused on concealing the pain, not her lies.

She stood up and grabbed a stack of napkins off the table and pressed them against the point of puncture, stopping the flow of blood. Hobbling back inside, Arya took a seat over by the counter.

“Christ,” Gendry was moving towards her, “Is that blood?”

“It’s fine,” Arya said loudly as Gendry grabbed the first aid kit from under the counter and came over to her, “God, can you stop being such a girl. It’s just some blood.”

Gendry glared at her, but opened the first aid kit anyway, grabbing the bottle of antiseptic. “You know when I said not to stab customers, I didn’t mean that you should stab yourself instead. How did this even happen?”

“My hand slipped,” Arya grunted as Gendry pressed a bandage against her leg, the blood was soaking through her dark trousers. He’d moved her over to a chair, and kept firm pressure on the cut, a focused expression on his bent brow as he kneeled down beside her. “Seriously, I’m fine. It’s not even that deep.”

“How can you even tell?” Gendry asked, moving the bloody bandage away to look at the cut through the tear in the trousers. “It might need stitches.”

Arya wanted to push him away, the only other person who’d ever touched Arya so gently had been Jon, but he was her brother and it felt completely different with him than it did now with Gendry. Arya had been with men before, often it was part of her work with the Faceless Men, other times it was just to quell the loneliness, but never had the other touched Arya like this—like she could break.
“It doesn’t need stitches.” Arya pushed her girlish thoughts away. She hadn’t cut herself with the switchblade deep enough to need stitches, and if she had, it wasn’t like she had to go to a hospital to get them. Arya had stitched up her first cut when she was ten and got in a fight on the street. She’d used a needle and some dental floss to do that, apparently having learned something from her mother’s embroidery lessons.

Gendry scoffed as he put some more antiseptic on the cut. “Yeah, because I trust your judgment.”

Arya glared down at him and pushed Gendry’s hands away, applied pressure to the cut herself. “It’s fine. Seriously, stop treating me like some girl.”

“You are a girl.” Gendry glared from his place on the ground.

He didn’t say it like an insult, or like a mock—for once Arya’s gender didn’t sound like a weakness waged against her. There weren’t many girls in the Faceless Men organization; they were called Faceless Men for a reason. Arya had done her fair share of going undercover in competitor’s prostitution rings, or sleeping with the enemy to get some information—it was what she and the few other women had to do to secure their place within the group. It was never what Arya wanted, but she went along with it knowing that one day she’d be in control, that she’d have the power, and that she’d be calling the shots.

Arya wasn’t some victim of her circumstances like Sansa had been, Arya was always in control, and she chose the things that happened to her, knowing all the while that she’d get out one day. And she could have, Arya was already in line for the Death Division, the portion of the Faceless Men that focused exclusively on killing and assassinations. If she gave Jaqen the information he wanted, maybe he would have promoted her on the spot.

Gendry pushed himself up and went over to the counter while Arya continued to apply pressure. The café was empty, they’d reached the lull for the night, and it was far past the time Jon usually came to visit. He must have decided sleep was more important for once; maybe he just wanted to spend the night with Sansa and Rickon.

Arya reached down to the first aid kit that was on the floor beside her chair and pulled out the stretchy white bandage, going to wrap it around her thigh and over the cut. It stung some, and Arya would have to clean it better after work. Her switchblade wasn’t exactly surgically clean, and most often Arya used it to carry out threats, or on her off hours, to pick gunk out from under her nails.

“Come on,” Gendry said coming back from around the counter, a sign in his hands, “I’m taking you home.”

“What?” Arya scoffed, watching as Gendry went over to put the Closed sign on the front of the
“No, I’m fine. Shift doesn’t end for another two hours.”

“No one’s even here,” Gendry said going over to pick up Arya’s bag from behind the counter, and then walking over to help her out of the chair. “I doubt anyone is going to care if the café is down for half an hour.”

Arya stood up on her own, using the back of the chair to balance until she got used to the pressure from her leg. The cut really wasn’t so bad, for a moment she might hobble, but in another second Arya would be walking fine. Gendry was making a big deal out of nothing.

It was infuriating, and it made Arya want to strangle him. She tolerated this sort of coddling from Jon because Jon was Jon. He was Arya’s brother, he might have been annoying, but Arya also knew that Jon respected her. When Gendry did it, Arya didn’t know what to think—whether this was some sort of attack on Arya’s ability to take care of herself, or if he genuinely wanted to help her. Were people even that good? What did he want?

“Well, we haven’t got all night,” Gendry said walking over to hold the door open for Arya.

She glared at him, but started for the door, walking slowly and trying to keep her weight off the bad leg for the time being. Gendry followed behind her, Arya’s bag hanging over one of his shoulders. He locked the door to Mole’s Town behind him, before coming up behind. She could sense his hand near the small of her back as if waiting for Arya to stumble so he could catch her.

“I’d like you to know,” Arya said as she got used to the weight on her leg and began to walk normally again, “That I’ve decided that you are officially classified as annoying.”

“It’s an honor,” Gendry grunted, moving to walk beside Arya instead of behind.

Arya glared at his profile, “Oh, I’m sure it’s the highest honor you’ve ever gotten in your life.”

That made Gendry laugh, and Arya glare all the harder. It was easy to fall into patterns with Gendry. He was the sort of boy that caught Arya off guard, that made her forget all of her training and feel young again.

“I could call your brother if you’d rather he walk you home.”
Arya shook her head. Jon would ask questions, and Arya didn’t feel like dealing with that at the moment. He was easy to lie to because Jon didn’t like to think that people lied, but Arya still didn’t want to bother with it.

“It’s fine,” She crossed her arms and they continued their walk. Arya thought of the conversation last night, “You know if you were really trying to be a gentleman, calling a cab works too.”

“I said I was chivalrous,” Gendry corrects thinly, “not rich. You said you could walk.”

“And you’re just here to escort.” Arya amends with a roll of her eyes. She wasn’t about to admit that while Gendry may have bothered her, she did enjoy talking to him.

Gendry nodded his head, “Well, it’s hard to find someone to work night shifts. Last two people on the job quit. If you end up murdered or bleeding out, we’ll just have to get someone new to replace you and that’s just going to be inconvenient for me.”

“Oh?” Arya asked, going along with the joke, “I suppose you’d have to do the work for two until they get another replacement. My murder would cause quite the inconvenience for you.”

Gendry shrugged, “Nah, I just doubt I’ll like the replacement as much as you.”

It was the first time something Gendry said made Arya blush. She shoved his shoulder and he stumbled a bit, laughing as he caught up with her again. Arya felt light, she felt her defenses crumbling, she wasn’t sure she liked it, but she wasn’t sure she wanted it to stop either.

Gendry ended up leaving her about a block away from Arya’s flat, which was fine. He didn’t need to know where she was living, and it was better if he didn’t. Still, Gendry seemed hesitant to leave Arya to walk alone in the neighborhood. Apparently, she was in a very disreputable part of town, but as it turned out, the walk had taken longer than either of them expected and Gendry had to get back to Mole’s Town before the other shift arrived and realized they were missing.

Arya wondered as she walked alone down the street, passing a few pubs that lined the way if Jaqen would be at the flat when she got there. She wondered if he was going to try and ask about Sansa some more, or maybe catch sight of the bandage around Arya’s thigh and catch up to her ruse. Even more, Arya wondered if Jaqen knew that she’d lied, and she wondered if the lie had been worth the fallout she’d face if caught. Was she going to end up like her junky roommate and disappear by the end of the night?

This sort of indecision and doubt was foreign to Arya. Life was always so black and white,
centered on the goal of adding a name to the list on her left ribcage, or crossing one out on the right. There was a peace to that as it meant that Arya’s life had a meaning that she got to control. But now with Jon, and Rickon and Sansa, Arya’s life wasn’t solely her own, there were others in the equation and if she was to truly be a Stark it meant prioritizing the pack.

If Jaqen wasn’t in the flat, Arya could at least go through Sansa’s notes and see if anything was important. Arya didn’t know how to apologize, she didn’t even know if she wanted to, but Arya was tired of fighting too. Maybe if she and her sister could settle on anything, it would be on helping their other siblings—that at least could bridge that gap between them. Father had never liked when Arya and Sansa fought—Arya had forgotten about that, forgotten how much it upset him, and how he always told Arya that Stark’s defended their own. Arya was starting to remember now, and things like that had to matter.

Arya remembered a name written on Sansa’s notepad that had stood out to her. She hadn’t thought anything of it earlier, still stewing over their fight, but as she walked alone now, Arya started to try and recall the details. The notepad was in her bag, but Arya didn’t want to pull it out—she was fairly certain though, that the thing she was trying to recall was the name of a location—what had it been, beyond the wall? Something about that phrasing stood out to Arya, she’d heard it somewhere before.

A shout took Arya out of her thoughts. She was between two pubs, the streets empty, and across from her an unlit ally way where a few large garbage bins blocked her view. There was another shout that was cut short like someone had forcefully stopped it from continuing, and then there was the sounded of a muted whisper.

Arya stood still, standing across the street from the ally where all of this was happening. The scream had been high pitched and desperate, the sort of scream made by a woman, the whispering voice that followed it was much deeper. Arya walked across the empty road to the ally, the ache in her leg forgotten.

Arya wondered if Sansa ever screamed—if she screamed and no one ever came to help. Why was it that the strong inherited the earth, and the weak paved the way? How long had Arya played by those rules?

She walked as quietly as one of the ally cats, staying low enough that she couldn’t be seen over the metal vats. Arya peered around them to see a man holding a woman against the brick wall of the ally, one hand clutched over her mouth as the other started pulling at the top button of her trousers. The woman was trying to claw at the man’s face, but to no avail—she let out another muted scream, and the woman’s wild eyes met Arya’s.

It was only so convenient that when Arya saw the profile of the man’s face, she recognized the idiot from the café the other night. It was going to be, as they say, like killing two birds with one stone.

Arya stepped into clear view of the man and the woman and cleared her throat loudly. She felt loose, comfortable. This was her safe haven; this was Arya’s place of peace. The idiot’s head swiveled to look at her—there wasn’t even panic in his eyes, he didn’t have the gall for that. His pupils were blown out from liquor, mouth hanging open lazily as he recognized Arya.

“It’s you.” He grinned, his hand falling away from the woman’s mouth, as she finally managed to push him away and start running. The woman ran behind Arya and pulled at her arm, come on the woman pleaded desperately, her eyes on the attacker.
“Go.” Arya answered calmly, “You won’t want to see this.” And the woman gave one last hesitating look before running. Arya could already hear her, dialing the police on her phone, but Arya had plenty of time. She looked at the idiot, his name on the tip of her tongue. “Do you remember me?” She asked.

The idiot nodded, looking her over slow and lazy and he swaggered towards her, stumbling a bit under his own inebriation.

“Where’s your guard dog?” he asked, followed by the imitation of a dog bark, woof, woof, and then his own drunk laughter. “Did he let his bitch out on her own?”

There are no dogs here, only wolves. Arya let the switchblade out of her pocket, flipping it open with a crack. She smiled.

Arya walked towards him, meeting the man halfway, that smile still on her lips. “I want you to remember saying that, I want you to remember what you called me.”

“A bitch?” The man laughed again, shaking his head, “I was just joking.”

“Sweetheart.” Arya corrected sharply, ignoring the jaunt of his voice. The man swayed forward, and she continued, “Little thing.”

The man’s laughter stuttered as he swayed again, his hand reaching out and grabbing Arya’s chest, pushing hard like he was trying to knock her over. He kept holding on even after Arya stayed standing, “Why’s that? You like being called names?”

Sansa had agreed that if a man ever touched her, Arya should cut off their hand. The idiot still had his hand on Arya’s chest, groping her through her jacket. And Arya did one better, she slit his throat.

The gurgling sound came first as the man fell to his knees in front of her. He clawed at his neck trying to keep the blood from spilling out as it stained his shirt and puddled on the ground. It hadn’t been there before, but now, in his eyes, there was true fear. Arya stood over him and bent, reaching down to whisper in his ear.

“I want you to know Dunsen,” Arya whispered, faintly aware of the sirens in the distance, “That
this Little Thing killed you. Arya Stark killed you.”

He made another choking gurgle, his hand reaching out only to fall as his body slumped over on the pavement.

Arya wiped the blood off of her blade, slipping it back into her pocket, as she pulled up the hood of her jacket and walked out of the ally. In the distance, she saw the sirens approaching, and when Jaqen found out about this he wasn’t going to be happy. But as Arya Stark disappeared into the night she thought: the Starks were wolves, and Arya was going to protect the pack.

Chapter End Notes

Extra long chapter as promised! Let it never be said that i don't keep my word, we've got a XL chapter and its before friday, this is my greatest accomplishment!
Anyway, we've got an Arya chapter! I've wanted to write one for her since she came onto the scene, and after the last ch, i felt like now was the best time to get her insight on the situation. I know a lot of people don't like her right now, but hopefully this helps you see her side of the situation a little better. she and sansa have gone through nearly identical situation and they've both just coped with it all in very different ways. The fact that Arya can see how similar their situations are only makes her resent Sansa more since sansa's actually gotten (mostly) out of situation, while aryas is still stuck, unsure if she can leave the world she built for herself. This doesn't excuse the stuff she said to sansa, but hopefully this explains it.

Also, Rickon/sansa interactions are my favorite thing to write ever, and so i had to drop a cameo of them in the ch.
Next ch we'll be moving forward heavily with plot, and also be getting some more jon/sansa scenes. Hope is not lost for them! Also, i have no idea what gang culture is like, and so the FM are just a mix of my assumptions and cult/assassin behaviorisms, and what i imagine a deadly organization is like.
Anyway, this is already too many notes. We'll be getting some more stannis and Cat soon (at least as cameos) and so there is that to look forward to.

Please comment and kudos! I know i suck at replying to comments, but i read all of them, and come up with responses in my head that i forget to write down! You guys are amazing for dealing with me! I hope you liked this chapter!
Jon didn’t want to push the subject, but it started to become a heavy cloud in every room Sansa entered. She wouldn’t talk to him, barely even looked at him, and at some point enough had to be enough.

Jon had left the station early that night to help make dinner, maybe see if Sansa had found out anything new about Petyr. When she saw him come through the door, she quickly retreated out of the room, leaving Jon alone with Rickon, who was working on some homework on the kitchen table. Jon gritted his jaw and went to his own room to change, coming back to the kitchen to see what they had to cook with.

He was frustrated. With less than two weeks left, Jon had to find a way to keep Sansa from Petyr Baelish permanently. If Baelish’s threats had just been made against Jon then that would have been fine, but Rickon was in danger, and now so could be Arya. This meant that Jon had to find a way to make Petyr’s threats against his family void.

Even thinking about this set Jon on edge. He wanted to hurt something, to fight someone. Jon already knew that Baelish must have hurt Sansa physically, but having Sansa all but confirm the truth just made everything so much worse. Jon couldn’t let her go back to him, not ever.

“Smells gross,” Rickon said from the kitchen table, his maths book open in front of him.

Jon let out a deep breath, trying to quell his aggravation, as he continued to mix the pot on the stove. “No one is going to force you to eat it.”

Rickon hummed indifferently, writing something on his paper before marking it out again. He’d been staring at one page of the book for some time now. Jon remembered what Sansa had told him about Rickon being worried about starting school, Jon and summed it up to Rickon trying to manipulate Sansa into giving him a free pass to not take classes until the spring, but he now wondered if Sansa was right, and Rickon really was worried about failing out of his classes.

It was difficult talking to Rickon. It was surreal for Jon; Rickon was the same age Jon was when Ned took him from the foster home to live in York. In so many ways, Rickon reminded Jon how he’d been before Ned had straightened him out. Jon had trouble articulating just how difficult it was for him to be constantly reminded of his past when he saw Rickon, and how Jon was never going to be able to raise Rickon as well as Ned had raised Jon.

“What are you working on?” Jon asked casually as he continued to add things to the pot on the stove, glancing over as Rickon scribbled something out of his paper again.
“None of your business,” Rickon grumbled, clearly more frustrated with his book than with Jon.

Jon was reminded of how Sansa had been sitting at the table with Rickon, leaning over the book, explaining it to him, before Jon showed up. Sansa was so much better with Rickon; it amazed him really, just how quickly Rickon took to her, whereas Jon could barely get through a conversation with him without one of them storming out of the room.

Jon clenched his jaw, putting the stove on simmer and stepping away. It was easier with Arya, somehow it felt like hardly any time had passed between them, it had only been a few days since Arya found them, but Jon already had a better relationship with her than he did with Rickon. And Jon knew that this worried Sansa. She was afraid of what was going to happen to Rickon if she ever wasn’t there with him, and Jon was only making that problem worse.

He went over to the kitchen table and looked down at Rickon’s paper, “You’re doing the wrong formula.”

Rickon made a hissing noise, snatching the paper out of Jon’s sight. “No one asked you. I can do this myself.”

Jon stepped back, “I’m just trying to help.”

“Help someone else then, Christ.” Rickon swore, “Go harass Sansa or something.”

Jon glanced over to Sansa’s closed bedroom door. She’d been in there for an hour; Jon couldn’t help but feel responsible for driving her away. He should have never kissed her, that could have only made everything she was going through worse. Jon knew that it was a bad idea; he knew that she was going to regret it, but he let it happen anyway.

“She says you have to get good marks on all your assignments or else they’ll switch you to a different school,” Jon said moving to sit on one of the chairs at the table. “Math was my best subject, I can help you.”

“Maybe I want to go to a different school,” Rickon glared at him, “Ever thought of that?”

Jon sighed; things didn’t have to be this hard, Jon knew that first hand, but how could he explain that to Rickon in a way his brother would understand?
“How do you think Sansa will feel if you’re taken away from us?” Jon went for a different angle.

Rickon shrugged, “I don’t give a fuck. You’ve got Arya now, one less mouth to feed if I’m gone.”

Jon leaned back in his chair and dragged his hand down his face. He was so tired of Rickon fighting him at every turn—he wasn’t sure if Rickon just didn’t know the truth, or if he was just being willfully ignorant of it. Surely, Sansa had made it very clear that Jon wasn’t going to just get rid of Rickon, so why did Rickon keep pushing that boundary?

Jon pulled Rickon’s textbook toward himself, “What are you learning right now?”

Rickon pulled the book back, “I already said, I don’t want your help.”

“Yeah, but you clearly need it.” Jon tried to keep his voice even, but it was a struggle. Jon wished he could remember what Ned had done for him to help make him civil, but that time of Jon’s life felt more like a blur than anything else. “Stop being so difficult.”

“Stop being so controlling!” Rickon countered with a shout, pushing out of his chair, “You don’t need to pretend to like me, Jon. Sansa isn’t here to see.”

With that, Rickon stormed out of the flat, the door slamming shut loudly behind him. Jon was startled, he didn't have enough experience with kids to deal with this and was completely out of his depth. He got out of his chair quickly and went to follow Rickon, glancing back to see that Sansa’s door was still closed. She shouldn’t be bothered about this, she had enough going on already. Jon turned to go out the front door in pursuit of Rickon.

Jon ended up finding him on street level, Rickon was pacing down the sidewalk, a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth. How he got a hold of that, Jon didn’t know. Jon had already taken to going through Rickon’s things to keep stuff like cartons of cigarettes and knives from the kitchen out of his hands. Each time, though, Rickon found a way around him, and Jon just hoped that child services didn’t ever stop by for an unplanned visit and find where Rickon was keeping it all.

“Christ, Rickon, where do you keep getting those?”

Rickon walked past Jon and kept down the street. The cigarette had remained unlit, and Rickon
wasn’t reaching anywhere for a lighter. Jon followed after him.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Leave me alone,” Rickon said between clenched teeth.

It was late though, and Jon didn’t plan on leaving Rickon out here alone. Jon was ready to forcefully drag Rickon back to the flat; this wasn’t a problem he could deal with right now. There were too many other things going on, and Jon just didn’t have the time or capacity to deal with one of Rickon’s tantrums.

Jon grabbed Rickon by the arm and pulled him back, “We’re going back to the flat, now.”

Rickon tried to shove Jon off of him, the cigarette falling from his mouth, “Fuck off! You can’t make me do anything!”

They were making a scene. The streets were starting to slow down, but there were still enough people walking around that Jon and Rickon’s fight might create unwanted attention. Jon dropped Rickon’s arm but didn’t back down.

What would Ned Stark even do in this situation? Had Jon ever been this bad, this difficult? Jon just remembered being grateful to finally have a home, he didn’t remember ever trying to run away.

The easiest solution would be for Jon to go back to the flat and just get Sansa to come out here. As much as Rickon might pretend that he didn’t care about her, even Jon could see that his indifference towards her was a front. If Sansa asked, Rickon would go back to the flat, no questions asked. The problem was Sansa would never ask something like that, she’d stay outside with Rickon until he’d calmed down and then they’d both go back inside together. Of course, by the time Jon got Sansa out here, Rickon would probably be gone.

“We’re going back to the flat.” Jon kept his voice firm, authoritative, talking more like he did on the job than anything else. “Stop being a brat and walk.”

Rickon narrowed his eyes, he spat at Jon’s shoes and then shouldered past him with a shove. Jon barely resisted the urge to throttle him.

“Rickon,” Jon threatened, any semblance of patience gone. Jon wasn’t as strong as Ned; he didn’t know how he was ever going to get control of Rickon. He stormed forward chasing after Rickon
who was quickly getting ahead of him. Rickon was heading towards the park where he and Sansa would walk Ghost. “Rickon stop walking. I swear, I’ll—“

But now that they were out of the street, the noise of cars and pedestrians dying down, Jon could hear Rickon’s short uneven breaths. Jon froze, standing still at the mouth of the gravel path. Rickon had slowed down, thinking he’d gotten far enough away, and Jon saw his narrow shoulders hunched forward protectively, the quiet stutter of his breath echoing in the cold air.

“Just leave me alone!” Jon shouted as he stormed out of the Stark manor and onto the grass that surrounded the ridiculously large property.

His face was hot, burning with shame as wet tears threatened to fall down his cheeks. Jon couldn’t stand being in the same room as Robb and all the others, the perfect Starks, with their perfect lives. Jon didn’t belong there, he was never going to be like them, and the sooner they realized that the sooner Jon could move on to his next home.

Ned Stark’s footsteps were just behind Jon’s though, a quiet and steady pace. He’d hung up on his telephone conference, and that just made Jon another sort of inconvenience for the family. Catelyn Stark would probably give him a lecture about that when he got back to the house—if he ever went back. The manor was in the middle of nowhere, but if Jon walked far enough he’d find a road.

“Where do you plan on going?” Mr. Stark’s voice was unnervingly even, calm and logical, and didn’t sound in the least like he was challenging Jon.

Jon was at the edge of the old woods by the property, his breath coming up short. “Why do you care?”

Mr. Stark shrugged, not at all affected by Jon’s tone or current state of dishevelment. Jon had learned in his month of living with the Starks that it took a lot to shake Ned’s nerves. “I’m just curious. It’s getting late, and it will be cold out here. If you plan on running away, I’d recommend doing so in the morning.”

Jon felt himself waiver, was he getting permission to run away? Jon wiped his eyes with the back of his sleeve and squared his shoulders, “What, would that give you time to call child services to pick me up?”

Mr. Stark shook his head, “I wouldn’t call them. I don’t think I’ll have to.”
Jon reared back, “Fuck you.” He spat, “If I want to run away, then I will.”

Mr. Stark held out an arm, pointing in the direction of the driveway, “If you plan to, you ought to head in that direction.”

Jon looked towards the gravel driveway that would lead down that dark winding path that lasted forever. It was the only way that Jon knew would lead to the main road, but it would take forever to get there. Was this Mr. Starks way of telling Jon to get out of his house, if so, it was a different technique than Jon was used to.

“You want me to go?” Jon asked looked back to Mr. Stark.

Mr. Stark shook his head and sighed. “If you want to, but if you’re going to then let me know now. If we’re walking it would be better if I changed my shoes.”

Jon looked down at Mr. Starks dress shoes, he’d just gotten back from work and hadn’t yet changed out of his suit. Jon frowned. “Why would you do that?”

“Well, you aren’t going to walk alone. You’d just get lost.”

Jon’s mouth twisted with a curse again, “Fuck off! I know where I’m going.”

And as if to prove his point, Jon stormed off in the direction of the driveway. Behind him, Mr. Stark sighed but started to follow. Jon kept going, waiting until Mr. Stark got tired of this game and went back to the house and to his perfect family. Thirty minutes passed, and then an hour. The sky was dark overhead now, and as Mr. Stark predicted the air was cold. Jon was fighting the urge to shiver, knowing that Mr. Stark was always a few steps back, watching him.

Whatever Jon had been upset about before, he’s forgotten about it. Jon was cold and tired, and while that was normal, this time, Jon wasn’t alone.

“Why aren’t you going back to the house? Why are you still out here?” Jon asked as his teeth started to chatter. The Stark’s had bought Jon new clothes, but he was stubbornly clinging to the old ones he brought with him from the last home. They were all threadbare, not really suitable for this weather up north.
Mr. Stark was looking up at the full moon over their heads, hands tucked into his pockets, “I don’t have anything better to do.”

Jon almost laughed, but he caught himself. He sobered up, taking a deep breath, “So what’s the game? Am I your charity PR stunt, or something?”

Mr. Stark shook his head, “No, I’m not quite the political animals you have me out to be.”

“Then why am I here?”

For a few seconds, Mr. Stark thought that question over. Jon hoped that he didn’t plan on waxing on philosophically about existence or some bullshit. Mr. Stark sort of seemed like the man to do that, not that Jon knew him all that well yet, but with all his suits and thoughtful stares, Jon thought he might be that type.

“Everyone needs a family, Jon. If you don’t want to be apart of mine then I can help you try and find another.”

Jon shook his head, “I don’t need a family. I don’t need anyone.”

“We all need someone.” Mr. Stark said, “A lone wolf doesn’t last long. There isn’t any strength in isolating yourself.”

“I’m not isolating myself, and I’m not some weak—“ Jon’s voice broke off. He wasn’t even sure how to finish the statement. He wasn’t weak. A weak person couldn’t survive what he had.

“There isn’t shame in being weak.” Mr. Stark paused, “There isn’t any shame in being afraid either.”

“I’m not afraid.” Jon scoffed.

Mr. Stark raised an eyebrow, “Aren’t you? I would be—starting over in this new life with people
you barely know, living in a home that’s hours away from where you spent your entire life. That would make anyone afraid and I think that sort of fear could make you act out; say things you don’t mean, hurt people you want to protect. Fear can make you do awful things sometimes.”

Jon hunched his shoulders, wrapping his arms around himself. He didn’t want to be afraid, he didn’t want Mr. Stark to be right.

Mr. Stark continued, “But fear also gives us the opportunity to be brave.”

“How do you know the difference? When you’re afraid how do you--” Jon cut himself off, not wanting to leave himself anymore vulnerable. He didn’t want to hurt anyone, he didn’t want to be afraid, but Jon wasn’t sure if he was capable of anything else. He didn’t know how to be brave. If he was going to be afraid though, he could at least try and figure it out.

Mr. Stark shrugged off his jacket and put it over Jon’s shoulders, “That’s a choice you have to make for yourself, but I don’t think you would have asked it if there wasn’t a part of you who wanted to be brave.”

Jon stood still on the winding road. He looked back towards where the Stark manor would be. He slipped his arms through the sleeves of Mr. Stark’s jacket and sighed.

“It’s real fucking cold.”

Mr. Stark chuckled and nodded his head, “Do you want to go back to the house for the night? Rethink this plan until tomorrow?”

Jon nodded his head, “Yeah, sure.”

Mr. Stark clapped his hand over Jon’s shoulder and they walked back to the manor. Jon might never be a Stark, but maybe he could still have a family.

Jon thought about his repressed memories and how Ned Stark had become a father to Jon when no
one else had ever cared about him before, no one ever took the time to see Jon as more than just a problem. Every home he went to, every church and child shelter, Jon had just been another problem to deal with. When did Jon start to see Rickon as just a problem too?

Rickon was gone, but Jon could hear his footsteps as he kept down the trail in the park. Without thinking, Jon took down the path after him.

“Go away.” Rickon’s voice was bitter and thick as it tried to keep out any emotions from the tone.

Jon kept his distance from Rickon, staying several paces back so that Rickon was always in his sight, but still allowing his brother the distance he demanded. Still, Rickon remained tense, hyper-aware of Jon’s presence. They kept walking for a while, until Rickon spoke again, stopping in his tracks and turning around.

“Leave me alone,” Rickon growled, posture aggressive, “I’m not going back to the flat with you.”

Jon nodded his head, sticking his hands in his pockets, “That’s fine. We don’t have to go back right now.”

Rickon frowned, eyes narrowing slightly before getting tense again, “You called the police to come pick me up, or Osha or something? When we get out of this park are they going to be there to take me away?”

Jon kept those feelings of failure at bay. When had Jon become the adult he used to fear and hate as a child in the foster system? He’d been so preoccupied with saving Sansa that he forgot that she wasn’t the only one he needed to worry about.

Unlike Jon, Rickon didn’t have Ned Stark or a Father to guide him along the right path; that responsibility was Jon’s now, and he’d been failing at it since Rickon came back into their lives.

“No one is going to take you away,” Jon told him, “I didn’t call anyone.”

Rickon just became more frustrated, “Then what are you still doing here?”

“I’m not going to let you walk on your own.” Jon said, hoping that somewhere out there Ned would approve, “As long as you’re at it, I’m going to be right here.”
And Rickon’s face twisted up as he turned on his heels and stomped away. And Jon kept following. Eventually, the trail to the park ended and they were on the street again. Rickon looked back over his shoulder, checking to see if Jon was still there. A stubborn frown set on Rickon’s face when he saw that Jon hadn’t gone back to the flat and was still following. Rickon turned back around, and moving fast, tried to lose Jon in the crowd of people.

Jon cursed under his breath, having to dodge past a crowd of the pub they were outside. At least his police work had taught him how to trail people well enough to not lose Rickon completely, but it was a near thing for a while. Maybe Jon had been wrong about all of this and the best move was to just leave Rickon alone until he decided to come back to the flat on his own time, of course, that was assuming that Rickon would choose to come back to the flat at all.

At some point, Jon lost all sight of Rickon. He stood on the now empty street, looking around blindly to see where Rickon could have disappeared. There were several different turns he could have taken to reach other streets or crept between alleyways, and Jon had no idea where to start. He looked down at his watch to see the time. They’d been gone for two hours now, how much longer was Jon supposed to keep at this?

How long would Ned have kept at it for Jon? Looking away from the time, Jon picked a street and went down it. After several minutes, Jon started to hear the sounds of footfall behind him. He stopped and turned around, but no one was there, just more empty pavement and the unlit shop windows, and so he turned back around and kept walking. The next time when he heard the footsteps, he kept walking, familiar enough with the quiet steps to recognize who it was.

Finally, a frustrated groan made his shadow known.

“How long do you really think you’re going to keep this up?” Rickon said from a few steps back.

Jon turned around, looking at Rickon, whose face was red from the cold and who was scowling at Jon from the other end of the street. “I don’t know, how long did you plan to keep it up?”

That didn’t make Rickon scowl any less, he started to walk towards Jon, saying, “What do you think you’re trying to do? Sansa isn’t here to be impressed, it’s not like I actually think you give a shit about me, so what are you trying to prove?”

“I’m not trying to prove anything Rickon,” Jon shook his head, realizing that Sansa had been right and Rickon really did believe that Jon hated him, “I’ve been a real arse lately.”

This made Rickon pause. He looked up at Jon skeptically as if this was all about to turn into some joke at Rickon’s expense.

“Yeah, you have.” He agreed slowly, waiting to see how this was going to turn out.
Jon nodded his head, going over to sit on a bench by the sidewalk. Rickon didn't go sit beside him, but Jon heard him step closer, hovering a little over to Jon's right with that same narrowed, distrustful look on his face. He wasn't running though, and Jon had to use this opportunity to fix what he'd broken. “I should have been a better brother to you. I've done a shit job at it so far. I thought you didn’t need my help, or I convinced myself you didn’t.”

“I don’t.” Rickon answered in a hard line, crossing his arms.

Jon’s mouth quirked, but he shook it away, “Yeah, you do. I needed help too when your Father took me in.”

Rickon’s brow furrowed as he started walking over to Jon, coming a little closer than he had before, “I don’t remember that.”

“You weren’t born yet.” Jon told him, looking up from the bench to where Rickon was standing still some steps away, “I was a lot like you actually when Ned picked me up.”

Rickon scoffed, “I doubt that.”

“Yeah?” Jon challenged, “I wasn’t always an officer, Rickon. When I was your age I spent more time fighting Ned Stark and trying to break out of the system than anything else. I thought Ned was going to send me back to Child Services about a dozen times, and if not him, then your mother.”

Rickon went over and sat at the furthest edge of the bench, taking up as little room as possible like he was getting ready to bolt at a moments notice, “Sansa said you were Father’s favorite.”

Jon laughed, “Far from it, I always thought. You know, when I first came to the manor in York, I hated all of you. Your brother Robb especially. He was the same age as me and a real golden boy. He was good at everything, everyone loved him, and I just could never measure up. Then there were the rest of you, the perfect family, god, it drove me up the wall. I knew I’d never fit in, I knew eventually they’d realize what a lost cause I was and kick me to the curb where I belonged.”

Rickon was quiet. Jon imagined that if he was right, and Rickon was any bit like him, he’d have the same fears. Finally, Rickon asked, “What changed?”
“I did. A couple months passed and I wasn’t back on the street and everything wasn’t awful. Robb, who I essentially hated from the first minute I stepped into the manor, started to become my best friend, and the rest of you weren’t so bad either.” Rickon rolled his eyes, and Jon continued, “I didn’t want to go back in the system. I wanted to have a family, and I realized that you Starks were going to be the closest I’d ever get to that. And if I wanted all of that, I couldn’t keep acting based on my fear of never being enough.”

“Just like that, you decided you weren’t a fuck up anymore?” Rickon didn’t sound convinced, tone dark and self-depreciative as he stared at his feet, a bitter smile on his lips.

No, it wasn’t that easy. Jon remembered how very hard it was to fight against his nature. How difficult it was to fight every impulse telling you to run and instead try for just another day.

“You know, Ned told me something once.” Jon told Rickon, “The only time a man can be brave is when he’s afraid. I had to make a choice about what sort of man I was going to be, and that’s not an easy thing to do. But if you’re going to be afraid, you might as well be brave too.”

Rickon was quiet again, continuing to look at the ground. Jon had forgotten Ned’s lessons for a long time. He’d been a coward for too long.

“Rickon,” Jon said, moving down the bench and closer to his brother, “I’ve been a coward lately. I ought to have told you all of this a long time ago. I get what you’re going through, I get that you’re afraid, but I’m not going anywhere, and as long as you want to be here, neither are you. I’m going to be a better brother to you from now on, but you’ve got to work with me on this. I’m out of practice at it, I’m going to fuck up, but that never means that I want you gone.”

“And if you change your mind?” Rickon asked, voice a little uneven.

“I’m not going to,” Jon promised, “You aren’t going to get left behind again, I swear.”

Rickon nodded and took a shaky breath before standing up quickly. He moved over to the sidewalk, waiting there, while Jon turned to look at him. Rickon was pushing his fisted hand against his nose, looking away like he was hoping Jon wouldn’t notice. “Alright fine, can we just head back to the flat, before you get any weepier?”

Jon laughed as Rickon took the turn down the street. He pushed himself off the bench and started to follow.
They'd been gone for hours by the time they made it back to the flat. Rickon stayed mostly quiet during the walk, looking down at his feet, a thoughtful expression on his face. Jon didn’t push for a conversation, knowing that Rickon needed some time to think things over. He knew that tonight hadn’t fixed everything for them. Rickon still had many more steps to take before he could let go everything his time in the system taught him. It would leave lifelong wounds, but Jon didn’t have to add any more to the collection. At least this was a necessary step in the right direction.

When they entered the flat, retreating out of the cold, Rickon was the first to step towards the door, taking out a pair of keys, which Jon had never given to him, to open the door. Before Jon could start wondering about when and where Rickon managed to snatch those, Sansa’s voice came through the room, loud.

“Christ,” Sansa runs towards the door as Jon and Rickon walked in, “Where have you two been?”

She looks exhausted and Jon knows that it was his fault. He opened his mouth to come up with an explanation, something that will keep Rickon’s dignity without being an outright lie.

“You went on a walk. Together?”

Jon nodded his head, sticking his hands in his pockets as he went over to the burnt food on the stove. They could always order takeout, he supposed. “Yeah, I didn’t think it would take so long. I should have told you.”

Sansa was still watching him, her lip pulled between her front teeth. Jon tried to ignore her stare—she’d barely looked at him in the past two days and Jon almost wished they could go back to that. His neck burned, wondering what she was thinking.

Rickon was bundling his books up in his arms. He was moving quickly, hoping to get out of the room before Sansa noticed his puffy eyes or ruddy cheeks, Jon bet. If Sansa thought Rickon had been crying, she’d probably start crying too, and neither of them wanted that. Rickon left the kitchen, going down the hall to his room, the door closing behind him with a thud. Sansa pounced.

“So you and Rickon went on a walk together?” She asked, raising an eyebrow, arms crossed over her chest, “That’s new.”
Jon shrugged, moving over to the lounge, “You told me to talk to him. I talked to him.”

Sansa faltered, a look of disbelief on her lips, before answering in a clipped and aggressive voice, “Really? I thought boys didn’t talk about their feelings.”

And Jon paused, taking in a deep breath. Sansa was standing there, a hand propped on her hip and the most animated Jon had seen her in days. She looked like some fiery visage; her aggravation and impatience making her look alive for the first time in days. Jon missed that look in her; he missed her Stark red hair and when her blue eyes lit with fire when she looked at him. Maybe Jon would never have needed to miss it in the first place if he hadn’t been such a coward.

Ned Stark must never have imagined this is where his advice would lead, but Jon knew that it was time to be brave. It was time to take action, it was time to choose what sort of man he was going to be.

Sansa was waiting for her answer, her eyebrow lifting impatiently as Jon walked towards her. She opened her mouth, “You know if you’d taken my advice sooner—“

And Jon kissed her. His hand fisted in her hair as he pulled her closer, his other hand slipping to the small of her back and holding tight there. He heard Sansa gasp, and he waited patiently until her body relaxed before deepening the kiss, opening his mouth against hers and slotting them together.

Jon started walking backwards towards the sofa, continuing the kiss as he did, listening to the small noises Sansa made as she followed, her hand grabbing onto his belt to keep up. Her mouth was hot against his, and her kisses in artful and clumsy, but in consumed Jon fully as he held her steady. Jon moved to sit down on the sofa, but Sansa didn’t follow. Their mouths parted with a breath, and Sansa scurried back.

“What was that?”

Jon wanted to get up and follow her to where she stood with her back against the opposite wall. Sansa’s face was flushed, lips swollen red, and looking rightfully disheveled, despite the kiss only lasting a minute or so.

As long as he was being brave and reckless, Jon wondered how much further he could fuck things up. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you too.”

Sansa stayed pressed against the wall, her eyebrows raising to her hairline, “That wasn’t talking.”
Jon cringed slightly, holding onto one of the cushions to keep himself in place, “That was unplanned. But we do need to talk.”

Sansa shook her head very quickly; face getting flushed again, “We don’t need to talk about anything. We’re fine.”

Jon breathed a humorless laugh, running a hand through his hair, “We’re really not. And I think we should talk about what just happened.”

Sansa’s eyes widened a fraction, and she pursed her lips together, shaking her head just like before, “We don’t need to talk about this either. It’s fine, we can move past it.”

“Sansa,” Jon groaned, letting his head fall back against the sofa, wishing that didn’t sound so much like a rejection. “God, we can't avoid this.”

“We most definitely can.” Sansa’s mouth set in a firm line, clearly willing to push past their kiss in the name of her own agenda. “There’s no point in talking—I mean what would we even—everything’s already settled, Jon. Why are we dredging up the past?”

“I’ve just kissed you, and I’m fairly certain you’d like if I did it again.” Jon scoffed, finally standing up from the sofa, “I’d hardly call things settled.”

Sansa crossed her arms, letting out a breath. She looked to be working through something, debating with herself on what to say, looking rather pissed to be bothered with this at all. And Jon didn’t want to piss her off, he didn’t want to bother her with something trivial when there were much heavier things going on in her life, but Jon needed to hear more than the excuse of focusing on the siblings—he needed to know how Sansa truly felt. He needed to know that if there was a chance he could have her, if there was a chance that they could be happy, that he went for it.

“Fine.” Sansa moved to sit on a chair at the kitchen table, folding her hands on her lap, “We can talk. What do you want to talk about?”

She was making things difficult. Jon wasn’t sure if she was doing it on purpose, but he feels how this had become a challenge. Sansa was cool, having composed herself in a deep calm in a way only a Stark could. It was as if she’d shut off her emotions to deal with this problem and that just pissed Jon off. He didn’t want Sansa to feel like she needed to do that around him, he didn’t want to be the reason she went cold. He didn’t want his touch to send her back into that place.
“You sound like this is a negotiation,” Jon answered thinly, walking over to the table and gripping his hands over the back of one of the chairs, “I’m just trying to make things clear.”

“It’s already clear, Jon.” Sansa bit back, the flush on her face coming back, “We’re…obsoleter. We’re focusing on Rickon and Bran.”

Jon noticed how Sansa had left out Arya, but he decided not to chase that until later. Jon, instead, focused on just how frustrating that excuse was. “But what does that mean? You clearly didn’t hate what just happened there. If you need an excuse to get me to leave you alone, you don’t need to use your brothers to do that. If you told me you didn’t want it, you know I’d never touch you again.”

Sansa’s face twisted, a breath making her body shudder, as she folded her hands in her lap. “I know you would, Jon.” She answered in a short measured voice, “But that’s not the point—“

“So you do regret it,” Jon concluded, ignoring the pang in his chest.

He moved over and sat down on one of the chairs across from her. If he had more willpower this all could have been avoided. The kiss in the lounge was only going to make things worse now. As if Sansa hadn’t had enough of men throwing themselves at her, Jon had just added his name to the list.

“No, Jon, of course, I don’t regret it.” Sansa snapped, her voice picking up, it sounded angrier than anything else, “Christ, why do you keep—I wouldn’t have kissed you back if I thought I was going to regret it. But regret isn’t the point—“

Jon sat up, his disappointment quickly replaced with frustration. If Sansa didn’t regret kissing him, then what had changed? “What is the point? You said you wanted me, I thought I made it clear that I wanted you too. Unless something’s changed, unless you changed your mind—“

“You were the one who was trying to convince me that this was going to be a mistake!” Sansa countered, pushing up from the table and walking across the room. She turned back to face him as she continues to rant, “You were the one who didn’t want it, who wanted to slow down and think things through, and I thought about it, Jon. It’s…impractical!”

“Impractical?” Jon stood up and walked over to her, suddenly the heat back in him. Stark’s were known for the cool dispositions, but Jon just felt like fire. “Practicality isn’t supposed to be the
point. Nothing good in life is ever practical. I don’t want you because it’s practical.”

“And why do you want me?” Sansa asked, voice angry and vibrant and raw. “Why? What can I give you, Jon? How can I possibly make your life any easier.”

“I don’t want easy,” Jon said, barely a step away from Sansa. Her head was tilted up, matching his gaze, stubborn eyes unblinking, as a grimace curled at her lips. “I want you.”

And Sansa laughed, a desperate tilt to her voice as she shut her eyes and looked away. Jon wondered if he made a mistake—he knew this was a gamble, but Sansa had fought for everything so far, and now it was Jon’s turn to carry on the fight.

“No, you don’t, Jon.” Sansa looked back up, eyes watery, voice sincere and broken, “You want who you think I am. The real me is so much more fucked up than that, and I don’t want to hurt you anymore. I just lead to heartache.”

“Sansa, having you break my heart would be the best thing to ever happen to me,” Jon told her, grabbing Sansa’s hand so that she wouldn’t look away. “Just tell me that you don’t want this and I’ll never mention it again.”

Jon had said something similar before; all the way back in Dover the first night they kissed. He had to say it again now; he had to give Sansa the choice to end this because it wasn’t a choice Jon could make himself.

Sansa closed her eyes and rested her head against Jon’s shoulder. She let out a tired groan, half pulled from frustration and the other exhaustion. Jon put his hand on the middle of her back, unsure what this reaction meant.

“I hate you so much,” Sansa said, but the truth wasn’t there, “Why do you have to remind me of what I can’t have?”

“Sansa you already have me,” Jon told her, his hand going to rub the space between her shoulders, but he continued, not wanting to force any of this, “You can say no. I swear I’ll never bring this up again, nothing has to change.”

Sansa gave a wet laugh, “I don’t want to say no, Jon. Of course, I want you,” She stepped back and looked up at him, red hair falling into her face. Despite her admission, Jon still felt uneasy. “Why does this all have to be so complicated?”
And Jon almost laughed too. There was an edge of absurdity to all of this. Jon relaxed slightly, the heat of the moment gone.

“It doesn’t have to be,” Jon told her, “We can let it be easy.”

Sansa pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and looked down. She was thinking and Jon had to give her the time to do that even though he was desperate to know her thoughts, desperate for this not to end in rejection again. Jon waited for some sign or response of where her opinion lay, and just when he thought it was going to end there, and that Jon had pushed too far and despite Sansa admitting that she did still want Jon, she wanted practical more, Sansa looked up.

“Easy,” Sansa reiterated firmly, “No attachments, no feelings, it starts and ends whenever we want. It doesn’t have to mean anything.”

Jon’s brow furrowed as he realized what she meant. He wasn’t one for casual relationships, and he certainly never wanted that with Sansa. Jon already had attachments, and he already had feelings, and he was willing to bet that Sansa already had them too. He didn’t know why she was insisting on ignoring them, but there was a nervous pinch to her face as she waited for his answer, as if afraid he was going to reject these terms.

Jon gave a small nod to his head, feeling uneasy, “If that’s what you want.”

Sansa let out a relieved breath, “It is.” and then she reached up and put a hand on the back of Jon’s neck and brought him down in a kiss, picking up where they’d left off.

Sansa needed an out in case she ever changed her mind, and Jon would give it to her. For now, Jon pushed past the deeper questions in his head, and let himself enjoy this while he had it.

Jon started walking them back over to the sofa like before, moving his kiss from Sansa’s lips over to her jaw, and down towards her neck. Sansa let out a small gasp, as she angled her neck to give him more room, her own hand pulling desperately at his shirt. Jon fell back onto the sofa, and this time Sansa followed, angling so that she was on top of him, her knees resting on either side of Jon’s hips. He let the control pass over to Sansa and she held her hand against his jaw and brought his lips against hers.

Jon hadn’t intended things to move this quick again. He had to take his time with Sansa and kiss her slow and deep and savoring every second of it, but Sansa appeared to have other plans. She kissed like there was a clock and time was running out, like every second was the last, and Jon was going to follow her lead.
His hand moved down her back, stopping above the curve of her back, the other staying knotted in her hair. He chased after her lips as she moved to kiss along his jaw like he’d done to her before. Jon didn’t hold back his groan as she nipped his neck, her hand trailing down his stomach and towards his belt.

“Christ, Sansa, we can take it slow,” Jon panted out, moving his hand from her hair and over towards where hers rested on his belt buckle. He tried to bring her focus away from there, recapturing the kiss from before.

Sansa indulged that for a moment before breaking away, “You don’t like it?” She asked kissing his shoulder and moving her hand a little lower.

Jon tried to swallow his groan, wrapping his hand around Sansa’s wrist and pulling it away from his trousers before she could really feel how much he liked it, and instead insisting, “We’ve got time.”

Something in Sansa’s expression flickered, the light in her eyes dimming for a moment, as she tore her eyes from Jon and started to kiss him again, all the passion focused there. Jon could keep pace with this, and so he set his hand on her cheek, savoring the sweet taste of her mouth. It was consuming, and Jon’s skin was burning hot, as he savored what he could.

Jon was so focused on Sansa that he didn’t even hear when a door opened.

“Hey, we’ve got to—What the fuck—“

“Rickon!” Sansa let out a shriek, as she and Jon simultaneously pushed each other away. Sansa, in her haste to get off of Jon’s lap, managed to get her leg caught from between the sofa cushions and fall on the carpet. She pushed herself up, in the same moment Rickon covered his eyes. “This isn’t what it looks like—“

Rickon was holding Jon’s phone in his hand, probably snagging it the same time he got the flat keys from Jon and tossed it on the sofa.

“Arya called.” He said his face red, as he refused to look at either Jon or Sansa. He looked like he was wishing he could just run out of the room, and Jon wondered in his panic, why he hadn’t yet. Finally, Rickon looked over to them, a grimace on his face, “She says she knows where Bran is.”
PSA: always make out behind locked doors.
It's been forever since I got a ch out, midterms are almost over so hopefully we'll be back on a normal schedule soon. I hope you guys like this one, jonsa is back together again!
Also I had to include my fave line from the series, "The only time a man can be brave is when he is afraid", Ned definitely didn't envision that this advice would ever lead anyone here.
Sansa’s face was still burning as she chased after Rickon down the empty street trying to catch up to his quick gate.

“Rickon let me explain,” Sansa said as she caught up a little closer.

Rickon refused to look her way, staring defiantly ahead, “I’d prefer if you didn’t. If you want to suck tongues with our brother, that’s your business.”

Sansa cringed, “He’s not our brother, Rickon. Jon is just our…”

“Brother?” Rickon asked, looking back for only a second, “I think that’s the word for it.”

Sansa nearly tripped as she dodged past the drunken partiers on the street. It was late, and Jon, Sansa, and Rickon were walking to Mole’s Town to meet up with Arya who apparently knew where Bran was. If there hadn’t been more urgent problems, Sansa would have wondered at what point did Arya decide she cared about what happened to anyone other than herself and Jon, but unfortunately, there were more pressing concerns.

“He’s a brother to you because you’ve only known him as that,” Sansa tried to explain as she caught back up with Rickon, “But he was never that to me. I didn’t grow up calling Jon brother—“

Rickon stopped in the middle of the walk, “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

Sansa skittered to a halt. Jon was a few steps ahead, having left as soon as Rickon told them that Arya called, he couldn’t hear the argument going on far behind him. She looked back to Rickon who was scowling at her, awaiting an answer still. Sansa didn’t have one.
“I—” She started unsure, feeling flustered that she had to deal with any of this, to begin with, “I knew that it was just going to complicate things.”

“So you thought you would just hide it from me? Like I’m some kid who wouldn’t understand?”

Sansa frowned, this whole situation just made her uncomfortable. She never planned for this, never considered planning for this. “I didn’t think you would want to know.”

Rickon shook his head, “You’re the one who tells me the truth, I didn’t think we hid things from each other. I asked you if something was going on with Jon and you lied to me.”

Sansa stepped back, surprised by just how hurt Rickon was, “I’m sorry—“

Rickon turned around with a growl and kept walking. Sansa scrambled to follow before she could talk to him about the subject, they were already at the café.

Jon was already inside and he looked up at the door as Sansa and Rickon came in. Rickon stomped across the floor, pulling a chair over to the table and sitting down with a loud thud. Sansa watched him helplessly. Why was it that every time Sansa tried to do something for herself, it screwed everything up? Maybe this was the universe telling her that it had been a bad idea to kiss Jon again, to start back up everything she’d very responsibly stopped. But it was too late to take things back now, and Sansa was going to have to deal with these consequences.

Sansa moved over to the table the others were at, looking at the available seats, unsure where to sit. There was a spot open next to Jon, but glancing over at Rickon, Sansa decided that it would be a bad move to sit there at the moment. Instead, she moved over a chair from another table and set it at the far end of the roundtable, where she felt equal distance from everybody.

The café was predictably empty. Mole’s Town really didn’t get enough nightlife to justify its twenty-four-hour openings, but Sansa supposed it came in handy anyway. At the counter, the boy, Gendry was asleep, hat slung low over his eyes. Arya was finishing up with one last customer, impatiently shoving their change towards them, and then ushering them out of the café. She brushed off her hands before coming over to their table.

It had been two days since Sansa and Arya’s last argument. Sansa had been fairly certain that she’d never really talk to Arya ever again, and that Arya had officially decided to cut the Starks out of her life. It upset Sansa, but what was she supposed to do about it? Arya had made it clear that she didn’t care about any of them other than Jon and that her opinions of Sansa were subterranean low. Of course, maybe those opinions weren’t completely wrong considering how very right Arya was turning out to be. Hadn’t she been afraid that Sansa was just using Jon, and wasn’t that turning out to be right?

Sansa shook her thoughts out of that specific category. Those were all things to dwell on for another time, right now Sansa had to stay sharp since apparently, Arya had found Bran.
Arya sat down at the chair beside Jon before taking something out of her apron pocket and tossing it on the table in front of her.

It was Sansa’s notepad on The Three Eyed Crow, the ones she’d been so certain she’d lost completely. She’d left it behind after storming off from Arya the last time they spoke, and Sansa sort of figured Arya just threw the notes in the bin. Instead, joining Sansa’s own looping script written in a fine point black pen, was a red scrawl of Arya’s own writing, with more notes in whatever space she could fit. Sansa reached across the table and pulled the notepad closer.

“Rickon said you found Bran,” Jon started saying as Sansa read over the notes, her brow furrowing deeply.

Arya gave a narrowed eye glance Rickon’s way, “I told him that I think I might know where Bloodraven is.”

“Same thing,” Rickon kept up his scowl and shrugged, kicking his feet up on the table, “The raven thing is the same as the Thee Eyed Crow, and that’s where Bran will be.”

“Yeah, you don’t know that.” Arya countered, standing to swipe a hand at Rickon’s boots, “Feet off, they make me clean these.”

Rickon might have stuck his tongue out at her, it was too fast to tell, but he moved his feet with a petulant glare. Sansa set the notes down, looking up and feeling lost.

“You added to my research.”

Arya didn’t meet her eyes, but she moved over to take the notepad back, “Yeah, sorry if I messed up your pretty notes, princess. You’re the one who left them behind.”

“That’s not what I mean—“ Sansa began but shut her mouth. Best not to pursue this particular trail, or else it might dissolve into a fight. Sansa was just confused, when did Arya start caring? The notes Arya wrote were nearly illegible, but there were a lot of them covering the several pages Sansa already wrote. “What did you find out?”

Arya seemed to relax at the more clinical question, going back to sit in her chair, “A lot. I was able to dig a little deeper about Bloodraven and got a lot of useless information about him.”
Jon sat forward, going over to look at the notepad, “Like where he lives? I thought you said that his legend is from a hundred years ago, isn’t he dead?”

“Probably,” Arya continues, looking between all of them and then frowning as she catches the distance between all of their chairs. She looks away, gratefully not pursuing it, else Rickon let what he saw out, and Sansa has Arya hate her even more. “But according to all the legends I heard, Bloodraven had a compound where he kept all his greatest treasures that he took over the years. Incriminating stuff too, apparently he had dirt over everyone in the parliament back in the day, and had some network of spies that he called the Raven’s Teeth.”

“Ravens don’t have teeth.” Rickon said, crossing his arms, before glancing Jon’s way, “Do they?”

“That’s not the point, idiot.” Arya glared, “The point is that Bloodraven had to keep all his stuff somewhere and have some sort of headquarters for his spy ring.”

“And you know where that is?” Jon asked setting the notepad down, he looked even more confused than Sansa felt. She knew he hadn’t actually been reading the notes she wrote, or else he might know where Arya’s hypothesis was going.

“You mean Beyond-the-wall,” Sansa said remembering the small piece of information that she and Sam were able to find out about the Three-Eyed-Crow. “That’s not a location though, that’s just a… antecedent. I didn’t think it was a real place when I wrote it down, I thought it maybe was a code name for somewhere.”

Arya leaned her elbows on the table as she leaned forward, “Yeah, sounds like it is, doesn’t it? But I recognized the name, I heard it in one of the stories someone told me about Bloodraven, and I don’t think it’s a code name. If it were it’s a dumb one, it’s too long and not specific enough, no one would use it as a code name. I think its an actual descriptor of Bloodraven’s location.”

“Beyond-the-wall,” Jon repeated the word with a frown, “Beyond what wall?”

And the table fell quiet. Apparently, Arya hadn’t made it that far in her theory. What wall could Bloodraven or the Three-Eyed Crow have used to make his headquarters?

“There’s London Wall?” Jon proposed, “If he worked with parliament, it would make sense that he’d make a headquarters there.”
Arya shook her head, “It’s sort of obvious, isn’t it? And only an idiot would keep his most important things in the same city as his enemies.”

Sansa steepled her fingers as she thought, trying to remember her history. Wasn’t there a town named Wall somewhere, but that also didn’t sound to be correct. It was Beyond the wall, not beyond wall.

“The Great Wall?” Rickon offered.

Arya turned to him, voice dripping with contempt, “You think he’s in China?”

“Alright,” Sansa interceded, “We’re brainstorming, there aren’t any bad suggestions.”

“Yeah,” Rickon said bitterly, directing this all towards Arya, “It’s not like there are a thousand walls about, and I don’t see you suggesting any. The Great Wall is like the only decent wall anyone’s ever heard of. If you’re going to leave a clue about a wall, what else is there?”

“Hadrian’s Wall.” Sansa said suddenly, looking up from the table, a smile on her face, “Could that be it? I mean, maybe that’s too obvious, but it’s quite long, and it’s near Northumberland Park, if you’re going to hide things, that would be a good place to do it, wouldn’t it?”

Arya thought about that, nodding her head slowly, “That could work.”

Jon agreed, “You could go through York to get there, it’s a little out of the way, but not impossible. I’m going to call Sam and see if he can get on the police database to see what sort of criminal activity they get up there.”

Jon stepped away from the table, already pulling out his phone that he’d confiscated from Rickon. With him gone, the activity at the table fell still. Arya wouldn’t want to pursue any other theories without Jon present, and the rest of them weren’t really on speaking terms.

Sansa felt uncomfortably aware that Rickon was still unhappy with her. While he seemed to have forgotten that a few seconds ago, he was back to glaring daggers into her back. Sansa wanted to try and talk to him again, but she could really do that with Arya watching them. And now with Arya in mind, Sansa turned to her.
“Thank you,” Sansa told her politely, “For looking into this, I know that you didn’t want to.”

Arya shrugged a shoulder, leaning back in her chair, “Bran’s my brother too, isn’t he?”

Sansa pursed her mouth, “Yes, but I thought you didn’t care about that.”

“You don’t know what I care about,” Arya answered hostilely, but as soon as she finished saying it, she looked regretful.

That made Sansa’s frown deeper, but before she could pursue it, Jon was walking back over to the table and sitting down.

“Okay, so Sam is looking into some reports.” He began saying, “But Sansa, even if you are right and this is talking about Hadrian’s Wall that still leaves a lot of ground to cover. Who knows how far that descriptor extends? I mean, Bran could be anywhere in Scotland technically and be beyond the wall, I’ve looked at missing person reports there and I never heard of any boy who met Bran’s description.”

Sansa and Arya shared a look. Were they both thinking the same thing? It sounded horrible, but would Bran be in a missing persons report if he were dead? Sansa didn’t even like thinking about it, and she’d avoided it thus far, but that reality was coming closer and closer.

“Maybe he never got picked up as a missing person,” Sansa suggested, “I mean, I was on my own for months and I police barely ever stopped me. I know I look older, but I saw a lot of children who were living on the street too, and they never got any help either.”

At saying this, Sansa felt Arya looking her way again, a frown on her face. “When were you living on the street?”

Sansa blinked and looked her way, mouth falling open as she looked at Arya’s critical glare. Apparently, Jon never told Arya about that. “Before I found Jon, I was uh, I didn’t have a place to live for a few months.”

“How many months?” Arya pressed.
Sansa frowned, “I don’t know, a few? Four or five, maybe.”

“Yeah,” Rickon interjected suddenly, “Sansa’s right. I ran away from a couple of homes, and one
time it took like a month before they caught me, and I’m actually in a system. If Bran got to
Scotland, the child services wouldn’t know to look for him there, would they?”

“I don’t know,” Jon admitted, “That’s not really the area I work in. I’ll send Osha an email and see
what she has to say.”

Osha? Araya mouthed to herself, and Sansa nearly answered the unspoken question. Sansa hadn’t
met Rickon’s social worker, but she’d heard Jon on the phone with the woman a couple of times.
She seemed capable enough, although Sansa did find it concerning that her little brother had
apparently skated by the system long enough to be on his own for a month before.

“Yeah, she’d know.” Rickon agreed, suddenly looking excited, “How far is it to Hadrian’s Wall
anyway? If we leave tonight, could we be there by the morning?”

Jon looked up, face creased with concern, “We aren’t just going to drive up to Scotland tonight.
This is just a hypothesis, we still don’t know where Bloodraven’s base is, or if Bran would even be
there.”

Rickon looked betrayed, eyes narrowing as he looked up, “Yeah, but how are we supposed to find
any of that out if we don’t go up there and look?”

Sansa could feel the tension and so she cleared her throat, “This is a good jumping off point. You
and me can do more research, Rickon. We’re going to find him.”

“When?” Rickon asked, turning to look at Sansa, “You’ve only got like a week before that old guy
is going to make you marry him. If you’re gone, who’s going to help me look for him?”

Sansa sucked in a deep breath, mouth taking a hard line. She noticed Jon sending Rickon a harsh
look, but ignored it the best she could and kept her tone neutral. “Jon and Arya are going to help
you.”

“And what about you?” Rickon asked, matching the glare Sansa had unintentionally taken up,
“You’re going to leave, right? That was another thing you lied to me about.”
“Sansa isn’t going anywhere,” Jon answered firmly, but Sansa didn’t know what to say herself.

Rickon was right. It was past midnight and that meant Sansa had eight days left before Petyr would be coming for her. It was practically her last week, and Rickon wasn’t wrong to accuse Sansa avoiding this.

Jon looked at her and frowned, “Right, Sansa?”

Sansa glanced up at him and blinked, mouth still open like a fish swallowing air. She still didn’t have an answer. His eyes were staring into hers so earnestly, awaiting his predetermined answer. This is exactly why Sansa hadn’t wanted any emotions to be added to what they’d done together, no promises of forever. Of course, explaining all of that to Jon would be…uncomfortable, and it was best to be avoided. It would be easier avoided if he’d stop looking at her like that.

Arya cleared her throat, and the eyes fell on her, “If any of us are going to find Bran, it's going to be me.”

Sansa breathed a sigh of relief at the change in topic, surprised that Arya hadn’t used this as an opportunity to tell the table that Sansa deserved to go back to Petyr.

Arya continued, “I’ve got the best resources for this. If Bloodraven was as good as everyone says, the police aren’t going to have found where his base is. I’ll go down there and connect with the Faceless Men in the area, if anyone knows about Bloodraven, it will be them. Maybe they’ll even know something about Bran.”

“You aren’t going off on your own,” Jon shook his head, suddenly forgetting all about his interrogation of Sansa, “We’ve just got you back.”

Arya made a face, “You never got me, I’m the one who came to you guys, remember? Besides, it’s not like I can take you along. The Faceless Men can smell a police from yards away. You’d only get in my way.”

But Sansa shook her head too, “Wouldn’t that be dangerous? I mean, would the Faceless Men be okay with you using their network to find Bran?”
Arya expression didn’t leave Sansa with any new answers, “Have you written a rule book for gang affairs that I don’t know about?”

“I could go with you,” Rickon said suddenly, “I could be help—“

“Absolutely not,” Sansa said at the same time Jon and Arya began to say the same.

“Fuck no,” Arya laughed, “I’m not a daycare service.”

“You’ve got school,” Jon told him, “And you aren’t getting involved in any gang business.”

Rickon floundered, face steadily growing red, “I’m the one who should be finding Bran. I know the most about him!”

“You can tell Arya what you know.” Sansa told him carefully, “It’s probably best if she does this alone anyway.”

Sansa looked over to Arya hoping she knew that Sansa didn’t mean anything by that, but it really was best if Arya handled anything to do with the Faceless Men on her own. Arya was the best equipped to deal with a gang, and she was probably the most likely of them to get anything useful out of a trip to Hadrian’s Wall and Scotland anyway.

“A few days, Sansa shuttered, In a few days I might be back in the Vale, attending my own bloody wedding.

“I don’t like this plan at all.” Jon said shaking his head, “I should go with you—“

“No way.” Arya was taking a firm line on this, and Sansa wondered how much of that was for practicality and how much of it was to protect Jon. “You need to stay here. I’ll be gone like five days max.”
Sansa nodded her head, “You should go. This is our best shot at finding Bran.” She looked over to Jon, reaching over the table to put her hand on his, “Jon, Arya can do this. She’s been taking care of herself for years, I trust her enough to know that she can take care of herself for five more days.”

This brought a look of surprise to Arya’s face, but she nodded in agreement. “So it's set. I’ll leave for Hadrian’s Wall tonight.”

The meeting between the Starks ended there. They stayed at the café talking for another hour. Rickon had moved over to a booth and was leaning across the seat, asleep, while Jon was sitting at the road table still, talking over safety tips with an exasperated Arya. Sansa moved over to the counter to where Gendry had woken up from his nap, watching Arya from his chair.

“You’re all related?” He asked as Sansa came over to lean against the counter.

She nodded, “Yes, well, not Jon technically. He was fostered with us, but we’re all family.”

Gendry lifted his eyebrows, “Big family. I was an only child.”

“There used to be more of us,” Sansa said looking the room over, a feeling of sadness taking pit in her stomach as she thought about Robb, her mother and father, and Bran. Bran had to be alive still; the family couldn’t take another blow like that. “It doesn’t feel so big anymore.”

“And Arya,” Gendry continued voice appearing to be subtle, “What’s her deal?”

Sansa frowned and turned to look at Gendry, “Excuse me?”

Gendry’s face was struck with panic, “No, I mean—“

“Sansa,” Jon called moving over to the booth Rickon was sleeping in and shaking his shoulder. Sansa walked over, sparing one last look at a floundering Gendry.

“We should probably get going,” Jon said, as Rickon blinked his eyes several times, waking up.
Sansa nodded her head, “You’re right, it’s late.” She stepped aside letting Jon and Rickon walk out in front of her, hanging behind a second, “I’ll catch up, go ahead and start walking.”

Jon hesitated, but nodded his head, as he and Rickon started walking out towards the street. Sansa hung back, going over to the table and began to help Arya collect the mugs they drank from, setting them on a tray. They worked in silence for a moment.

“Why didn’t you go with them?” Arya asked, taking the last of the mugs from Sansa.

Sansa dropped her hands uselessly at her side, “I just wanted to tell you to be careful out there.”

Arya scoffed, “Don’t worry, Jon’s already got that covered.”

Sansa tried to smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes. She followed Arya to the back of the kitchen, “I also wanted to thank you, for before, when everyone was asking me about Petyr and—“

“Don’t bother,” Arya said harshly, looking up from the sink she was setting the mugs in. Arya looked away after meeting Sansa’s startled gaze, and she frowned, “We’ve all got choices to make. Might as well not get hassled for them.”

Sansa nodded her head, “Right. Well, thanks.”

Arya was looked back at the sink, turning on the faucet and starting to rinse off the glasses. Sansa took a step towards the door, looking back one last time, but Arya was consumed with her task. Sansa wanted to say more, but she didn’t know what that would be. She turned around and headed out of the café.

Two more days pass with no news from Arya. This only really alarms Jon, but he controls it well and between the research on Bloodraven/The Three-Eyed Crow, and work he doesn’t have much time to stew on it. In truth, the next few days keep them all busy.

Sansa barely has any time of peace between the research she’s doing with Sam and going back and forth to pick Rickon up from school. She feels stretched thin, ready to snap.
Jon sighs from his desk. It’s his lunch break and Sansa stopped by to go over some new research with him regarding possible locations for Bloodraven’s base. He runs a hand through his hair and leans back in his chair.

Sansa looked up from her cup of coffee, “We can take a break—"

Jon shakes his head, “We don’t have the time. I’ve got this, a homicide investigation, and then I conference call with Stannis in an hour, there is absolutely no time for a break today.”

Sansa can’t help but realize how he conveniently left out the research he was doing about Petyr from his list, despite Sansa knowing he was working on that all of last night. She wished there was something she could do to take his mind off of all of this, but the last time she tried anything close to that, Rickon walked in on them.

“I can take care of the conference call with Stannis,” Sansa told him, setting her own file down on his desk. She didn’t like talking with Stannis, but she’d make the sacrifice if it meant Jon wouldn’t look so stressed.

Jon shook his head, “I can handle it—"

“I can do it, Jon. I don’t have to pick Rickon up for a while, I’ve got the time.”

It’s a testament to just how tired Jon was that he didn’t argue it any further, only nodding his head and passing over his phone to Sansa.

An officer comes into Jon’s office and tells him he’s needed for something and so Sansa excuses herself, promising to return the phone to Jon after the call, before leaving the station. She kills the hour walking around Cardiff, before stopping near some empty shops and taking a seat on a bench, checking the time before calling Stannis’ number.

The phone rings twice before a receptionist answers.

“This is Sansa Stark,” Sansa tells them, “I’m supposed to have a phone meeting with Mr. Baratheon.”

They receptionist transfers Sansa over and she listens to some bland piano music as she is put on
Sansa reaches into her tote bag and pulls out the list of questions Sansa was meant to ask Stannis, she’d already read them over, but she does it again as she waits.

They were just meant to touch base on Cersei and check to make sure Stannis was still on track to prosecute her. Sansa felt unpleasant about the whole thing, angry that they were taking such a clinical route to avenging their father’s death. Part of Sansa didn’t think this would work anyway. If it were up to her, they’d present Cersei with what they knew and have her sign some sort of contract promising to leave the Stark’s alone from then on. Not that that would be very satisfying either, but at least it would mean that Cersei would really leave them alone, rather than pay her way out of the law.

“Jon Snow.” Stannis’ voice came out of the phone.

Sansa cleared her throat, “It’s Sansa actually. If that’s alright.”

Stannis made a grumbling sound on the other end, “Very well. In the future can you inform mister Snow to let me know of these schedule changes in advance.”

Sansa nodded her head, feeling like an idiot because it's not like Stannis could see her, “Yes, I’ll let tell him.”

“Good, let's get on with this then.”

Stannis goes over any new updates with the case, telling Sansa that they plan on prosecuting in the next month. Sansa cringes at that, knowing that she would unlikely be available as a witness at that point. She wonders how that will affect the case, and how much her testimony their prosecution relies on. Maybe Petyr will let her go to attend court for the trial if it comes to that. By the way Stannis talks about the case, it will most likely be settled in a closed court by lawyers. He reckons that Cersei will take a plea bargain and serve a minimal sentence, not that this makes Sansa feel any better either.

“I thought we had a good case,” Sansa says over the phone, “I mean, we’ve got evidence that she conspired in killing two people, three if you count me.”

“What we have is circumstantial evidence.” Stannis tells her, “I’ve got plenty to tie to the Lannisters, but less for Cersei herself. Either way, the Lannister name will be disgraced, not that this punishment fits the crime, but there is little justice in the law.”
Sansa thinks that this must be why Stannis wasn’t a lawyer anymore. “Is there anything else we can do to bolster our case? Cersei killed my father—“

“A renegade officer killed Ned Stark, other than a money trail tying his employment to the Lannisters, nothing links him to Cersei except the words of a traumatized little girl.”

Sansa frowns, feeling her hackles rise, “And that counts for nothing? We know she did it. And she killed your brother too—“

“Alcohol and a hunting expedition gone wrong killed my brother.” Stannis sighed, “Ms. Stark I can explain circumstantial evidence to you, but I don’t think it’s getting through.”

Sansa glared, slouching in against the bench as she stared across the empty street. This wasn’t the news she wanted to hear. By the way Jon talked about the case Stannis was building, Cersei and the rest of the Lannisters were going to go to prison for years, but that apparently wasn’t true.

“It’s unfair. She’s a murderer and she’ll get a slap on the wrist. This is all her fault, and she’s not even going to get in trouble for it.”

“Fault is subjective.” Stannis answered dryly, “And if you want fair, I’d recommend looking outside the law, though I don’t think that will turn out well for you.”

Sansa closed her eyes and let out a deep breath, “I just thought all of this would be settled by now.”

Stannis hummed tonelessly, “I don’t know what would have given you the impression that it would. There are no shortcuts to justice.”

Sansa didn’t think that was true. An eye for an eye, wasn’t that biblical? Wasn’t that justice? Was her frustration making Sansa desperate for real revenge? God, she hoped not, Sansa didn’t want to become that person.

“Is there anything else Jon or I can do to help?” Sansa asked hopelessly.

“No, I have your testimonies, and I hardly think two children can help me with legal processes.”
Stannis paused, “Although, I never got the name of your source, the one who told you that Cersei Lannister wanted to kill you. If you give me their name they could be another credible witness.”

Sansa thought of the likelihood of Petyr taking the stand.

“I don’t think he would be interested in helping us with the case.” Sansa told Stannis, “He’s a private man.”

Stannis made a thoughtful sound over the phone, “Am I correct that this was the man who watched after you for the last six years?”

“That’s the one,” Sansa grimaced. To the right of her was a legal pad, Sansa pulled it near and then used the pen beside it to scribble random patterns just to give her restless body something else to focus on. “I’m not in contact with him anymore.”

“Very well, but if you want to move the case along, a name, at the very least, will help.” Stannis told her indifferently.

Sansa hesitated. With less than a week left, did it matter what anyone found out about her? The least Sansa could do is help the case by sharing Petyr’s name, its not like it could do any harm.

“Petyr Baelish.”

“Excuse me?”

“Petyr Baelish,” Sansa explained quickly, “He’s the man who kept me for the last six years and the one who told me Cersei wanted me dead. He used to work in London—“

“I know.” Stannis’ voice had an unpleasant tone, “I remember Mr. Baelish, he free-lanced for King’s Landing’s finances while my brother was in charge.”

“Oh,” Sansa hadn’t known about that, “Well, if there isn’t anything else I can help you with…”
There was a sound on the other end, two voices in argument and Sansa wondered if Stannis had forgotten that she was still on the line. As Sansa was about to hang up, Stannis voice came through the line again.

“I apologize for that interruption, Ms. Stark.” Stannis said, and Sansa strained her ear as she tried to make out the other voice talking, “We’ll have to cut the rest of this meeting short. If I have any more questions, I’ll contact Mr. Snow.”

Just as he hung up, Sansa placed the other voice. It was the short, clipped accent of Melisandre, Stannis’ mistress, as she asked to speak to Sansa on the phone. The line went dead, and Sansa was left staring at the black screen.

Sansa drops the phone off at the police station but doesn’t have the time to hand it to Jon personally. She heads to Rickon’s school straight after, hanging out by the front steps waiting for the bell to ring and the children to be released.

Things with Rickon hadn’t gotten much better in the last two days. There just hadn’t been any time for Sansa to talk to him one on one about what was going on, and as each day passed she knew it was only going to get worse. Despite all of their research and digging, there was still nothing they could pin on Petyr. According to the world, Petyr had just been a regular law abiding citizen for the past six years, and Alayne Stone was no better than a ghost. Actually, according to an obituary report Sansa saw in French newspaper during their research yesterday, Alayne really was dead. Sansa wondered whose body Petyr buried in the coffin, and what he told Mya and Myranda about how Alayne had died. She wondered what her funeral service had been like, and what everyone said about the girl who never even existed in the first place.

The article came up on the laptop while Sansa was doing research with Sam, and she’d left the room for a solid twenty minutes after reading it to collect her thoughts. That was the final nail in the coffin. Sansa being Alayne was the one thing they thought they could still prove, but Alayne was legally dead, and a body had been buried, and Sansa Stark had nothing.

The school bell wrung and Sansa stood up off the stone steps, taking a step back to make way for the sea of children. She looked for Rickon’s face in the crowd as he was always either the very first out, or the very last. Today it seemed he was the last, and as the last of the students trickled out of the school doors, Sansa climbed the steps again to go and look for him.

She found him in the hall, standing in front of a teacher who was talking to him, a stern expression on their face. Sansa held her breath, holding back a few steps and hoping that nothing serious had happened. She supposed if Rickon got in a fight or something of the sort, the school would have called Jon, and that hadn’t happened.

Rickon turned his head and saw Sansa. He grimaced.

“What was that about?” Sansa asked as Rickon parted from the teacher and walked over to her.
“Nothing,” Rickon said pulling his backpack over one shoulder, “Can we go?"

Sansa nodded and followed Rickon out of the school, “Are you in trouble—“

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Rickon answered harshly, crossing his arms, “Isn’t that what we do? Not talk about things?”

Sansa sighed, holding back her irritation. Rickon was continuing the passive-aggressive route then. They kept walking down the street.

“We talk about things that matter—“

“Do we?” Rickon asked, “I think you boning Jon is important.”

Sansa cringed, “Don’t say it like that—that’s not even the problem here and you know it.”

“Fine,” Rickon spat, “You going back to move in with some creep is important too, especially when you promised that we were all going to stay together.”

Sansa needed a nap. She hadn’t gotten any sleep in the last few days, and her tension headache from this morning was coming back. She wanted to avoid this conversation indefinitely but knew that she couldn’t. Time was out, and Sansa had to face reality.

“I can’t control what’s happening, Rickon.” Sansa told him in a stressed voice.

Rickon scoffed, “Yeah, why? What’s stopping you? Is this guy going to force you to marry him?”

Practically, Sansa thought. A gun might not be held to her head, but one was going to be held to Jon’s. “It’s not like I want to leave, Rickon. If I had a choice, I would stay.”

“You’ve got a choice,” Rickon walked ahead of her, “You’re choosing to give up.”
There wasn’t much else to say after that.

Five days left.

Sansa couldn’t sleep. She was running on caffeine, pure willpower, and desperation. She’d taken two showers last night to stay awake, and every time she did drift off she would have the same dream about a wedding and vomiting blood. When it wasn’t that dream, Sansa would instead start imagining the wedding night Petyr would have planned for them, and Sansa wakes up feeling like she was about to vomit.

“You’ve got to sleep,” Jon said leaning against the doorframe and looking into the lounge.

Sansa was curled up on the sofa, wearing a pair of joggers and one of Jon’s t-shirts she tied to be knotted at her waist. She liked his shirts much better than the ones she picked up at the second-hand shop—they were more worn soft and smelled like the woodsy scent that all of Jon’s clothes held. On her knees, she rested the laptop, where she was scrolling through all of the old notes about Petyr that had piled up. Sansa had reached the sort of desperation where, despite thinking she’d come to terms with the reality of marrying Petyr, panic had set in and Sansa was combing through all the research to find that one missing piece that was going to fix everything.

She reached to the ground and pulled up the thermos of black coffee and took a long sip, “I’m not tired.”

The thermos was plucked from her hand and Sansa looked to see Jon standing over her, a disapproving look on his face, and her coffee in his hand. She set the laptop aside and sat up.

“Jon, give me the coffee back.” Her tone was deadly serious.

Jon had the nerve to laugh at her, and so she sat up on her knees and reached up to take a swipe at his hand. He lifted his arm up and held the thermos up in the air. She lunged at him.

“Seriously, Sansa, this is your third cup this night.” He dodged her, holding Sansa off when she stood up and went to the tips of her toes, her hands scratching the bottom of the thermos, “It’s enough. You need to get some sleep.”

“If I wanted to sleep, I wouldn’t have had three cups of coffee,” Sansa growled, suddenly hit with a dizzy spell. She gave up on the thermos and moved back to fall down on the sofa. “I’m doing research on Petyr, isn’t that what you’ve been telling me to do all month?”
Jon’s expression sobered, and he set the thermos on the coffee table and picked up the laptop instead, closing it and then setting it over on the counter. Sansa crossed her arms and sighed, leaning back and preparing for a lecture.

One didn’t come; instead, Jon came back over to the sofa and sat down next to Sansa, close enough that his hip rested against hers.

“You’re useless without sleep.” Jon told her, taking Sansa’s hand and kissing her knuckles gently, “Trust me, one good night’s sleep and this will all be easier in the morning.”

Sansa didn’t even want to shut her eyes, knowing that if she did she’d start to nod off. “I don’t have that sort of time, Jon. There’s five days left—“

“You aren’t going anywhere,” Jon promised still holding her hand in his. Sansa hated when he said that because she knew it wasn’t true. “I’m not going to let you go anywhere.”

Sansa wouldn’t argue with him, they didn’t have time for that either. Instead, she leaned over and slotted her lips against his, taking Jon by surprise. He went with it anyway, first attempting to rest Sansa back against the sofa, but she knew that if she went horizontal she was just going to fall asleep. Instead, Sansa moved over and straddled Jon’s lap, looping an arm around Jon’s neck to keep herself steady. Jon’s lips quickly moved from Sansa’s mouth, and over onto her neck. She repressed the shudder that accompanied this, a moan escaping her lips as Jon’s tongue pressed against her pulse. She rolled her head back, eyes fluttering before they locked onto the thermos sitting unaccompanied on the coffee table. She arched her back a little, arm stretching out—

“Really?”

Sansa nearly fell back, the arm around Jon’s neck that was keeping her steady, slipping. She reached over and grabbed onto his shoulder to keep from falling.

“I’m sorry.” Sansa groaned, letting Jon stand up and snatch the thermos from the table, watching as he stomped over to the kitchen and poured the coffee into the sink. Sansa wanted to cry, “That’s not why I started kissing you, I just saw it and—“

“It’s a little insulting,” Jon said walking back over and crossing his arms, “That coffee is more distracting than me.”
An inappropriate laugh bubbled up and Sansa covered her mouth, shaking her head, “It’s not funny. I’m sorry. If it helps under regular circumstances you are much more distracting than coffee.”

She couldn’t tell if Jon was amused or not. The lack of sleep was making Sansa feel delirious. Jon reached down and pulled Sansa up by her arms, “Come on, we’re going to sleep.”

Sansa was shaking her head, “I don’t want to, Jon.”

Jon wasn’t hearing it, he walked Sansa to her room and set her down on the bed. Sansa held his arm, keeping him from walking away, “If you’re going to make me, at least stay.”

Jon heaves a sigh, but he walks over to the bed, letting Sansa move over and then laying down in the space left. The light is already off, and Sansa stays out from under the covers, hoping the cold will keep her awake. She rests her head by Jon’s shoulder listening to his steady breathing.

“You really are more distracting than coffee.”

Jon sputters a laugh and Sansa’s smile almost reaches her eyes.

“That’s good to know. I’ll have to use it in the future. You know, when you start Uni you’re going to have a lot more all-nighters—“

“Jon,” Sansa’s voice is a warning. She doesn’t want to talk like that, knowing that she’ll never get to go to University or have a career or get to spend nights staying up all night with Jon. She’ll be Petyr’s trophy wife at best, his ticket to the Stark wealth and then in a body bag after a trip down the stairs at worst.

Jon shook his head, “What would you study?”

“I don’t want to talk like this.” Sansa said, turning to lay on her side and face him.

“We’re going to beat him, Sansa.” Jon told her, “So tell me, what would you study?”
Sansa really didn’t want to play these games, but she thought about it anyway, “I don’t know, child education, like Gilly.”

“You don’t like children that much,” Jon answered, “Pick something real.”

“I don’t know,” Sansa rolled on her back and stared up at the ceiling. She knew Petyr was never going to let her go to University so this wasn’t ever something she contemplated. “Maybe business, like Father.”

“Yeah?” Jon considered that, “What about fashion merchandising, you always like fashion.”

Sansa gave a shallow laugh, “I’m good at fashion already, I don’t need to study it.” Her smiled dwindled, “No, I wouldn’t want to do that. What about…journalism?”

“Journalism,” Jon repeated, “Why that?”

Sansa shrugged, “I don’t know. There are a lot of things people don’t talk about. Corporation corruption and lost children. Everyone just ignores it or lies about it, but I could tell the truth, I could make people listen.”

“That sounds good,” Jon had a smile to his voice, “What else? Where would you work?”

They continued these questions for a while longer, until Sansa answers came further and further apart, broken apart by yawns and long gaps of silence where she struggled to keep her thoughts coherent. Eventually, Sansa fell asleep, and for a few hours, there was peace.

Four days left.

Arya had been gone for half the week without a word. Even Sansa was getting nervous now. Jon would occasionally send Arya texts with whatever research the rest of them had found, but they never got an answer. Maybe she just ran, Sansa thought to herself, Maybe it was all just an excuse to get away from the rest of us. But on the fourth day that Arya was gone, Jon got a call telling them to come to Newcastleton along the border of Scotland and England.

Sansa goes to Rickon’s school to pull him out of classes while Jon calls into work and tells them that he’ll be gone for a day or so. Rickon looks panicked when he comes out of his classroom,
expression only marginally relaxing when he sees Sansa.

“You’re still here.” It’s about the nicest thing Rickon has said to her in the past week.

Sansa nods her head, putting her hand on Rickon’s shoulder as she leads him out of the school and to the cab she took, “Arya called us. She found Bran.”

The drive takes them most of the day, and they don’t get to Newcastleton until its already night. Everyone is tense, this should be good news, but when Arya called she only stayed on the line for a minute telling them the name of the city and that they needed to get there as soon as they could. When Jon asked if he could talk to Bran, Arya hadn’t answered and hung up instead. During the drive, Jon’s phone lit up with a text. It was the address to a hospital in Newcastleton.

“It’s fine,” Sansa said, looking through the driver’s mirror and seeing Rickon’s tense expression as they passed by some streetlights, “Bran’s in a chair, they probably wanted him to go to the hospital so that they could check his legs.”

“Why couldn’t Jon talk to him on the phone then?” Rickon asked, his legs tucked up to his chest, “How much further?”

Another hour and the last one was the hardest. Jon pulled up at the emergency stop at the hospital and Sansa and Rickon got out, going inside while he parked the car. Sansa had the room number memorized and she stopped the first nurse she found and asked her to take them to it.

“I’m sorry,” The nurse said, “Visiting hours have been over for two hours—“

“He’s our brother.” Sansa demanded, nerves strained, and desperately keeping herself together, “We need to see him now.”

The nurse nodded her head slowly, going over to the computer at the nurse’s station and typing in the information Sansa gave her.

“Oh,” she said, “Yes, I see. Follow me.”

As they walk, Rickon slips his hand into Sansa’s and holds tight. It the only reflection that Rickon’s afraid, other than him grabbing her hand, his face is emotionless. Sansa wished she could
be that way, because as the nurse takes them through the hospital Sansa realizes that they’ve entered the critical care unit, and Sansa feels like she might break.

*He’s alive. Critical care means Bran has to still be alive.*

They stop in a waiting area and the nurse leaves them to go get a doctor. Sansa looks around trying to spot Arya, but the room is already so empty that Sansa has no idea how she could miss her. The only other people in the room is a nurse sitting on a chair across the room and near her two grubby looking teens. Sansa’s eyes pause on them, catching sight of their dirt covered clothes and malnourished bodies. They looked too similar to be strangers and had to be brother and sister. The girl has matted curly brown hair, and the boy is too pale with an ivy drip connected to his arm. They both look like they belong in the critical care unit and Sansa wonders why they aren’t in a hospital room being treated. Rickon had spotted them too, and he’s suddenly standing from the seat he fell back into.

“You!” He shouts from across the room, and then he’s storming past Sansa and going up to the siblings, “You’re the ones who did this!”

“Rickon!” Sansa hisses, running to catch up with him, barely grabbing Rickon’s arm and hurdling him back before he could throw himself at the girl who was standing up from her seat.

She looks at Rickon without the faintest recognition, and then, the memory set it. “Oh no.”

“You did this!” Rickon shouts, the nurse looking up from her magazine and moving to stand between the children, “This is all your fault! You’re the ones who took him away!”

“Rickon!” Sansa shouts again, as her brother breaks free and throws himself at the older girl. The nurse manages to intercept, but not before Rickon grabs a fistful of the skinny girl’s curly brown hair, “Rickon, stop!” Sansa snatches Rickon’s wrist trying to get him to let go.

The girl isn’t screaming, only gritting her teeth, trying not to get jerked around all that much. Her brother stands up from his chair, shaking a little as he does, the ivy drip swinging.

“Leave her alone, this isn’t her fault, Rickon.” The boy’s voice is calm and steady, despite everything going on.

Sansa isn’t nearly as calm, and neither is the nurse, who’s shouting for backup. “Let go of her, Rickon.” Sansa begs, and then shouting at the nurse who starts to swat Rickon’s hand, “Don’t touch him! I swear—“
Another body has joined the fray, somehow weaving between the Rickon and the nurse. Sansa barely catches the top of Arya’s head as she helps Sansa push Rickon away. He’s finally torn away from the girl, a loose clump of curly hair still in his hand. Sansa falls back to the floor, landing on her tailbone, her arms wrapped around Rickon’s middle and he falls with her. Arya is fighting for control of his hands, kneeling in front of them, as Rickon shouts.

“They’re the ones who took Bran away! They’re the ones who told Bran to leave me!”

A burly looking officer comes into the room, haphazardly taking in the sight of the scene. Both Sansa and Arya holding Rickon down, the skinny girl across the room, on her knees, clutching the side of her head, while the nurse kneels beside her and then the boy with the IV drip, regretfully looking over them all from his place by the chairs.

“Stop it, Rickon.” Sansa growls, but Rickon’s already losing his energy. Arya is barely fighting him anymore, looking just as exhausted, and soon, Rickon is collapsing against Sansa and falling still.

The burly nurse is over helping the girl on the ground, “I’m fine. It’s fine.” She tells them several times, still clutching her head as they help her back into a chair. The burly nurse comes for them next.

Sansa looks over to Arya who gives her a nod, moving to hold onto Rickon’s shoulders as Sansa stands. She comes up on shaky legs and faces the nurse, stepping in front of her siblings.

“This wasn’t his fault,” Sansa says, out of breath and face red, “You put one hand on him, and I swear, I’ll press charges against this hospital. I swear—“

Sansa’s interrupted by the sound of the hospital's doors opening and a woman in a white lab coat stepping into the room.

“Ms. Stark?”

Sansa sucks in a breath. The burly nurse looks to have backed off, seeing that Rickon doesn’t have any more fight left in him, and so Sansa steps away and goes over to the doctor.
“Hello,” Sansa holds out her hand for the doctor to shake, “I’m Ms. Stark, Bran’s sister.”

“Yes,” The doctor shakes Sansa’s hand and looks over her shoulder and Arya and Rickon who are both standing just a little behind her now. “Are you Bran’s legal guardian?”

Sansa hesitates, but nods. She was going to be if she wasn’t already, “Yes, I am. Is he all right? No one’s told us anything. Can we see Bran?”

The doctor gave a tight expression, “Why don’t you take a seat, Ms. Stark.”

Dread sets in and Sansa can only give a hollow nod, letting the doctor guide her over to a chair.

“We should wait for Jon,” Arya says quietly and so they do. Sansa can already tell that Arya knows what’s happened to Bran. She’s got a pained expression in her eyes, and the way she makes the suggestion is as if knowing that Sansa and Rickon aren’t going to want to hear this more than once.

Jon comes into the room a minute later, looking around until he sees the Starks waiting with the Doctor. He comes over and takes the seat beside Sansa.

Bran was in a coma. That’s how they found him, and apparently, he’s been in a coma for over two months. After getting an anonymous tip, the police raided an old bunker shelter from world war two and found Bran set up on a bed, with stolen hospital equipment connected to him that had been keeping him alive for the past months. The other two teens had been there with him, Meera and Jojen, and watching over them all had been an older man who was also being kept in the hospital under critical condition.

“Oh my god.” Sansa stood up from her chair and walked across the room. She made it to the trash bin before vomiting.

There had been others in the bunker too, and they were in police custody. The police suspected that all of it was part of cult activities and that Bran, Meera, and Jojen had been unwilling participants. The three of them were severally dehydrated when found, and hadn’t eaten for several days. Meera and Jojen had traces of drugs in their system, marijuana, and hallucinogens.

Both of them had been interviewed by the police, but their responses lined up with what the police considered similar with those who suffered from Stockholm syndrome and they were being kept in the hospital under the surveillance of a nurse until their parents could be located.

Sansa listened to all of this as if hearing it through a dream. It hardly seemed real, and if not for her very visceral reaction to the news, Sansa would think she really was in a dream. She held her
stomach and stepped away from the trash bin.

“If the coma is medically induced,” Jon asked the doctor, “Why can’t you just wake him up?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” The doctor explained patiently, “Bran has been in the coma too long and we don’t know what they gave him while he was in that bunker. Mixing more drugs into his blood would only end badly. If he’s going to wake up, it has to be on his own. Right now his vitals are being watched, and he’s comfortable. That’s the best we can do.”

“Can we see him?” Sansa asks as she goes back to her seat. She didn’t feel any better after vomiting, nothing could make this better.

The doctor pressed her lips together, “In the morning. Right now, you should process this new information. Do you have somewhere to stay for the night?”

They didn’t and none of them planned on leaving the hospital or Bran. The doctor asked a nurse to bring some cots into the waiting room. Not that any of them could sleep. Jon was at one side of the room on the phone with the police department in charge of this case trying to get any information he could out of them. Rickon was sitting on the floor, his back against the wall as he stared at his feet, a far off expression on his face. Sansa was curled up on a chair, lost in thought.

“How did you find him?” Sansa asked when she heard Arya sit down a few chairs down.

Arya was quiet, “I wasn’t sure if he’d be in there. I heard about the bunker and let the police handle the rest. I didn’t know it would be like this.”

Sansa nodded her head. It must have been an oversimplification of the truth if it was even close to the truth at all. That was fine though, Sansa didn’t really care how Arya found Bran, only that Bran was both here now, while also being impossible to reach.

“You should have said something over the phone.”

Arya let out a breath, “What do you say about this?”

Sansa felt the hot tears build up in her eyes. “I’m sorry you were here by yourself.”
It was so quiet for a moment, Sansa thought Arya left. She moved like a ghost, and come and went as easy as a shadow. When Arya spoke it was softer than Sansa had ever heard it.

“How do you think he’ll wake up?”

Sansa wiped away her tears, “He did the first time.” She thought about the coma Bran fell into that lasted two days after he fell from the window of the manor. But that had been two days and this was two months. Sansa knew what the likelihood of Bran waking up really was, but she wasn’t going to say it out loud.

Sansa stood up from her chair. In her pocket was the note she found in the tree in the groves. She’s brought it with her, for the stupid reason of wanting to show it to Bran and tell him how they found him. Instead, Sansa walks across the waiting room to where Meera and Jojen were sitting up on cots, far away from the Starks.

When the nurse sees Sansa approaching she moves to intercede, but the boy, Jojen, nods his head.

“It’s alright.” He tells the nurse in some calm, sage voice like he trusts that Sansa won’t throttle his skinny little neck for letting her brother get hurt.

Sansa kneels down by their caught on sets the piece of paper between them, “What is this?”

Her voice is choked, barely holding together at all, and the only reason Sansa hasn’t broken down into tears is because she’s so damn angry.

Meera hesitates, but picks up the note and reads it. She frowns and looks up, “You found this?”

“Did you leave it in the tree?” Sansa asks, knowing that it couldn’t have Bran to leave it up there.

Meera gives a small nod, “I did nearly six years ago. Bran told me too, I didn’t think it would still be there.”

“Why?” Sansa asked, “Why would Bran ask you to leave it there?”
Meera shared a look with her brother, who answered, “He wanted a way for his family to find him. It was before we found the Three Eyed Crow—“

“The Three Eyed Crow doesn’t exist.” Sansa hissed, raising the attention of the nurse who was watching her closely, “He was just some crazy old man who kept you in a bunker and hurt my brother. That’s what you found, that’s what you led Bran to.”

Jojen shook his head, “You’re upset. The Three Eyed Crow would say—“

“I don’t give a fuck about the Three-Eyed-Crow would say,” Sansa gritted between her teeth, “Why did you let him hurt Bran, you were supposed to be his friends—“

Jon was at Sansa’s side, a hand on her shoulder. She looked up, and let out a startled breath. She’d started to cry, the tears falling without Sansa ever realizing it. Jon brought her up and wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

“Take them to a different room,” Jon told the nurse who gave him a slow nod. Jon was still wearing his officers uniform and his tone didn’t leave room for disagreement.

He took Sansa back over to the other side of the room. She was shaking, and fell easily into the chair Jon put her in. Sansa shut her eyes forcing herself to take a calming breath. Jon was going over to Rickon, getting him off the floor and moving him over to lie on one of the cots. Arya was off near the vending machines getting a drink. In a few hours Sansa would see Bran and the Starks would be the closest to whole as they’d been in years, but Arya was also in a gang, and Rickon was under a criminal investigation, Sansa at the stroke of midnight had seventy-two hours left until she had to marry a man who brutalized her, and Bran was in a coma which he might never wake up from. The Starks were still as broken as they’d been before, proximity didn’t fix anything.

Chapter End Notes

For fans of depressing angst, this ones for you.
Okay, so i had several ideas of what Bran's been up to and as things turned out, i took
him down the darkest path. There's that theory about Bran becoming a sentient tree and this is my homage to that, except the tree has been excluded basically. But, disclaimer, this fic should end happy, so hold on to that.

Three more chapters left!! Its so crazy, i'm a little worried it might go over to 41, but most likely the next few chapters will be like this and alot will happen in each one. Also, i didn't feel like researching how hospitals really handle these situations. I feel like Bran has to be under observation for a while before they would let family see him, especially since the family is unverified, and a criminal investigation is going on. I also feel like Jojen and Meera should be under police supervision and have their own room at the hospital, but i wanted them to interact with the starks a little, and essentially this hospital just doesn't follow standard procedure and thats my excuse.

Anyway, thanks for reading!! Please comment and kudos! We're almost at the end!
The hospital staff wakes Sansa up as they get up to change shifts. She’s nodded off, her head resting against Jon’s shoulder as they sit beside each other in uncomfortable plastic chairs in the waiting room. Sansa blinks several times as she gets used to the light, glancing over to Jon who was scrolling through some emails on his phone. In front of them, on one of the cots, Rickon appears to be asleep. Arya is nowhere to be seen.

“I’ve called Sam,” Jon says as Sansa sits up, stretching her arms over her head, “He’ll pick up Ghost from the flat and keep him for the next few days. I’ve also got us all a hotel room near the hospital.”

Sansa nods her head, everything coming back. Bran. The coma. Sleep had provided Sansa a short refuge from all of that, but now she was in the present again and things had to be dealt with.

“Will the police want to talk to us?” Sansa asked, there was a criminal investigation going on after all.

Jon shook his head, “I’ve spoken to the department here, they’re only interested in talking to those who were in the bunker Bran was being kept in.”

It sounded so terrible to be said out loud. Part of Sansa wanted to know how it all happened, how Bran got mixed up with some cult, and what they’d done to him. The other part of Sansa didn’t want to know anything at all. It was too dreadful to think about.

She pushed herself out of her chair and bent down to shake Rickon’s shoulder. As she bent down next to him, she saw that Rickon’s eyes weren’t even closed, and while he was curled up on his side, he wasn’t even asleep.

“Did you get any rest?” Sansa asked him, feeling selfish that she managed to nod off while Rickon had been awake all night.

Rickon shrugged one shoulder and sat up. “Are they going to let us see Bran, now?”
“Yeah, I think so,” Sansa told him. She doubted visiting hours were open, it was barely six in the morning, but considering these special circumstances Sansa figured the hospital was going to have a hard time stopping the Starks if they wanted to see their brother. “Come on, get up. Do you know where Arya went?”

Jon looked up from his phone. He had dark bags under his eyes too, and they looked a little bloodshot. Next to him, there was a paper cup that smelled like coffee. “She left the room a couple minutes ago. I think she went to get some food.”

Sansa nodded and stood up. Her bones ached from sleeping in that chair, “I’ll go look for her.” She told Jon, just desperate for a chance to walk and stretch her limbs out.

It didn’t take long to find Arya. She was at the end of the hall near some vending machines, one arm braced against the glass as she leaned in to look at the options. She didn’t react when Sansa walked up to her, going towards the wall to keep out of the way of the hospital staff who were making morning rounds.

“I think we can see Bran soon,” Sansa told her as she rested her hip against the wall, “You should come back to the waiting room. I was about to go ask a nurse about it.”

Arya looks at the snack selection with a grim frown, “I can’t. I’ve got somewhere to be.”

Sansa felt some disapproval at that. What was more important than seeing Bran? Where else would Arya have to be?

“Where do you have to be? Don’t you want to see him?”

Arya puts in a coin and makes her selection, the machine whirring as it dispenses a candy bar. “I’ve already seen him.” She says after bending down to pick it up, and standing to face Sansa, “And I’ve got other things I need to take care of first.”

“Faceless Men things?” Sansa asked, her voice dipping a little lower so not to be overheard.

Arya looks around a little, but nods her head, “Yeah, that sort of stuff.”
Sansa nods her head and takes a step back. There’s more she wants to say, but with Arya, Sansa didn’t know where she stood. If this were Jon or Rickon it would be easy, but Arya still felt like a stranger at best, and an enemy at worst.

Not last night though. In that waiting room, it was as if whatever feud or feelings that had towards each other reached an armistice. But Sansa could feel that with the rising of the sun, the truce had ended.

“Do you want me to let the others know?” Sansa asked.

“Doesn’t make a difference.” Arya shrugged, “They’ll figure it out on their own eventually.”

“Right,” Sansa gave a dry laugh, looking down. Would Arya ever come back? Had this been her last act as a Stark to find Bran, and now that her familial debt had been repaid was Arya going to leave forever? A day ago, that thought wouldn’t have bothered Sansa nearly as much, but now she knew that she’d also be leaving her family. The Starks hadn’t even really come together yet, and they were already falling away.

“Well, I suppose if I don’t see you again, this is goodbye.”

Sansa took two steps away before Arya reached a handout. Sansa fell still, watching the firm look on Arya’s face as she reached into her pocket.

“Wait—” Arya pulled out a piece of folded paper, “If you’ve got the time, come to this location at one tonight.”

Sansa took the paper and unfolded it. It was Arya’s handwriting and she’d written an address. “Where’s is this?”

Arya was walking away already, and by the time Sansa looked up, Arya was gone.

Bran’s doctor was already in the waiting room when Sansa got back. The doctor was talking to Rickon and Jon over by the chairs and Sansa folded Arya’s note, stuffing it in her pocket, before quickly going to join them.
“Where’s Arya?” Jon asked as the doctor took them back towards Bran’s hospital room.

Sansa had started feeling the sick nervous tension in her stomach. She didn’t want to talk, not until she saw for herself how bad Bran really was. Those two siblings who were with him looked near to starvation—how much worse could Bran be?

“She had to leave,” Sansa told him quietly as they passed by several hospital rooms, “Something about Faceless Men business.”

Jon had a tight expression on his face but nodded. He wasn’t happy about it. Maybe Jon had hoped that Arya agreeing to help find Bran meant that she was deciding to leave the Faceless Men behind. It was naïve and optimistic and all of the best things about Jon. It was his unwavering faith in his family that had kept Sansa by his side when all she wanted to do was run, but that didn’t mean that he was always right in his faith.

And Sansa didn’t blame Arya for not wanting to see Bran like this, not when she’d been the one to find him in the state. Sansa, herself, was scared to see Bran as he was now, destroying the image of her little brother that she’d kept in her conscious all these years.

The doctor brought them into a private suite, the gentle sounds of machines beeping pricking Sansa’s awareness and reminding her of the state Bran would be in. Sansa held her breath as she stepped further into the room and saw the hospital bed Bran was lying on.

There was a sense of clarity that Sansa felt when she entered the room. The fear and anxiety she previously felt was still there, but it felt further off and had been replaced with a sense of resolute calm when she saw Bran lying, unmoving on that white hospital bed.

He was thinner now, older. His face was longer and even though he was lying down, Sansa thought he would have been tall. Bran was pale, unnaturally so, and he eyes were closed, purple veins crisscrossing under his thin skin. Slowly, Bran’s chest would rise and fall, making it the only sign that he wasn’t a corpse. He was connected to several different machines; tubes were coming out of his arms tying him to the beeping medical machines, that must have been keeping him alive. All around him were computer screens and monitors flashing data Sansa couldn’t begin to understand, but was desperate to know what it meant, if only to give her more clues about what her brother was going to.

Despite thinking all of this, Sansa could barely react when seeing Bran. She felt clinical, experiencing all of this through a state of disassociation. Perhaps this is what growing up and assuming responsibility meant. Sansa could not let herself fall apart when she was the one who needed to keep everything together.

“You can talk to him,” Bran’s Doctor told them, noticing the way the three of them were sticking towards the edges of the room, watching quietly with a sense of dread. The doctor walked closed to Bran and pointed towards one of the machines, that was connected to Bran through some electrodes stuck around his head, “This machine here is monitoring his brain activity. We don’t know how much he understands, but he knows when someone is speaking. Bran isn’t in a
vegetative state, you can think of it as if he is just sleeping.”

It was Rickon who was the bravest of them. He glanced over to the doctor as if getting permission again before he took a step away from Sansa’s side and walked over to the side of Bran’s bed. He didn’t get close enough to touch, but Rickon hovered near, watching his brother with a creased expression.

“When is he going to wake up?” Rickon asked, looking back over to the doctor.

“He could wake up at any time,” The doctor explained gently, “There’s no way for us to know when. We’ve just got to be patient.”

Sansa thought Rickon would say something snide in retaliation at the way the doctor spoke to him like a child, but Rickon just nodded his head, eyes trained on Bran again.

The doctor walked away from the Bran and over to Jon and Sansa who were still standing by the wall. She gave them a sympathetic look.

“There’s paperwork and some information the police need still,” The doctor said, “I’ll leave you with Bran alone for a while, but a nurse will come in to give that to you in a few minutes.”

“Thank you,” Jon told her, nodding his head. He looked worse for wear, voice strained as he answered.

The doctor left the room and finally, Sansa was able to step forward, doing so with all sense of hesitance. She reached her hand forward and set it by Bran’s hand, which lay prone on the bed. From what Sansa could see, Bran wasn’t bruised or scared, and other than being thin and pale, he didn’t look physically damaged. Sansa wondered how Bloodraven had managed to force Bran into this coma without leaving some sort of physical damage. Was Bran like the siblings, Meera and Jojen, and just as brainwashed into this cult that he’d undergone the coma willingly?

“Did the—“Sansa cleared the lump in her throat, turning her head to look at Jon, “Did the police tell you anything else about this when you called?”

Jon looked over to Rickon, and Sansa wondered how bad the news was that Jon was hesitating to say it with their younger brother in the room.
Jon shook his head, “Just that they found him like this. They think they’ve got the responsible parties in custody, but they don’t have much motivation regarding the motivations for all of this.”

“Jojen and Meera know.” Rickon said fiercely from his place beside Bran, “Have the police talked to them.”

Jon looked uneasy, “They’ve gotten interviewed, but they aren’t in their right minds, Rickon.”

Sansa sighed, clutching her hand to her chest, “What did they say?”

Jon didn’t answer for a while. Sansa didn’t know if she wanted the answer, not if this was the lead-up.

“They told the police that Bran needed to stretch his consciousness. They said that he needed to become the Three Eyed Crow and that’s what Bloodraven was trying to get them to do.” Jon pulled his hand down his face, “They were dehydrated and been kept in that bunker for months. It’s impossible to tell what Bloodraven’s real goal was unless he said it himself.”

“And he’s in a coma.” Sansa finished the thought. The man who’d done this to Bran couldn’t even be held responsible since he to was in a coma, and being kept in the hospital under police surveillance.

They spent the greater part of the afternoon in the hospital room with Bran. There was little talk between the three of them, what was there to say? They were all so powerless to help Bran in any way, and locked in their own frustration at the fact, that silence was the preferred alternative to screaming.

As the doctor said, a nurse did come in with paperwork for Sansa and Jon to fill out, regarding what they knew of Bran’s medical past and then a few legal papers about their visitation rights.

Sansa pulled up a chair beside Bran’s bed and worked on her own half of the paperwork from there. She filled in what she could, describing what she could remember Bran going through after the fall that left him paralyzed from the waist down and the medications he previously took and whatever else the doctors demanded. She shared a look with Jon as she tried to fill out these fields, and was met with an equally clueless expression. These weren’t things they paid attention to—they had just been children before, none of them were prepared to take on the responsibility of an adult, certainly not in a situation like this. If Sansa’s mother were still coherent she would know what to put down for Bran’s medical history.
“Mother might have kept a file with this sort of information at the home in York.” Sansa thought quietly, speaking into the silent room.

Jon nodded his head, bent over a clipboard that was resting on his lap, “We ought to look into that.”

Jon would have to look into that, Sansa corrected in her head. She wouldn’t be around long enough to help.

Rickon found the remote to the television set in the room and started to flip through channels after the first hour. He sat on the floor in front of Bran’s hospital bed with his legs stretched out in front of him. Rickon hadn’t spoken once since laying blame on Jojen and Meera. It was this quiet demeanor that spoke volumes. It was so unlike Rickon to be quiet and well behaved and it worried Sansa more than anything else.

Eventually, a police officer knocked on the open door of the hospital room, standing halfway between the doorway and the hall. He cleared his throat and Sansa was the first to look up, mouth falling open in alarm. She hadn’t prepared anything to say to the police and was unsure whether they were here to challenge her legal claim to visit Bran, or if they wanted to ask more questions about their investigation. Sansa jumped between her own defense and the limited knowledge she had regarding where Bran had been for the past six years, but Jon ended up standing from his seat and walking towards the other officer.

Jon didn’t even say anything before following the man and slipping into the hall, their voices carrying before fading out of range. Sansa was still watching the door, wondering if she was meant to join Jon and the officer when Rickon moved from his place on the floor and took the seat Jon previously was occupying.

“You can talk to him,” Sansa encouraged gently, glancing over at Bran, and reminding herself to pretend that her brother was just in a deep sleep, and not in an indefinite coma.

“I heard the doctor too,” Rickon curled his knees to his chest and glared at the wall, “Keeping the TV on accomplishes the same job, it’s not like Bran can tell the difference.”

Sansa looks up at the muted sound of a talk show playing on the television set above them. That must have been why Rickon turned it on in the first place—to provide Bran the stimulus the doctor had encouraged.

“He might recognize your voice,” Sansa said looking back to Rickon, “You spent the most time with him—maybe he’ll know—“
Rickon scoffed derisively and jerked his head to the side, “It doesn’t fucking matter. Bran’s not going to wake up, anyway. And by Sunday you’ll be gone too so who even cares.”

Sansa didn’t want to get into this, not now when the most pressing issue was supposed to be helping Rickon deal with Bran. She kept a stiff upper lip and kept her voice even, “Bran could wake up any day, you heard what the doctor said. And you, Jon and Arya, will be here when he does.”

“And what about you?” Rickon turned in his seat to send daggers Sansa’s way, face torn in betrayal with an ugly scowl, “You’re just going to leave us all?”

“It’s not even like that, Rickon, and you know it.” Keeping an even voice was a challenge now. Sansa had been dodging and dancing around this confrontation for days, she wasn’t going to have it here. “I’m not leaving by choice, but it’s going to happen. It’s something we have to deal with.”

“Why? It’s not like you’re really dealing with it?” Rickon argued, face getting red, “You’re acting like nothings going to change, but its all changed. You’ve given up—“

“No, I haven’t.” Sansa said between clenched teeth, fingers curling around the arms of the chair and she kept herself steady, “Things are so much more complicated than you think, Rickon. I’m not just giving up—“

“Yes, you are.” Rickon clambered out of his seat and faced her. His expression was ruddy, and his voice was thick, choking down all possible signs of feeling, “You’ve given up on us, you’re giving up on yourself—you’re leaving me just like mum—“

His voice cut off with a choked breathe. Rickon became glacial, face falling flat as he realized what he’d admitted. Rickon turned on his heels and practically ran from the room before Sansa could see the swell of emotions build up any bigger. She stood up from her seat and started for the door to go after him. Sansa didn’t even have the words to fix all of this, and her greatest fear became the idea that Rickon was right.

By the time she got to the hall, Rickon was nowhere in sight, and Sansa ran right into Jon’s chest as he tried to step back into the room. He grabbed her shoulders and held Sansa steady as she tried to weave around him.

“What’s going on?”
Sansa shook her head, looking around Jon and into the empty hall, “It’s Rickon.”

Jon’s hand tightened minimally, keeping Sansa in place with enough pressure to ground her. “Let him cool off. He isn’t going to leave the hospital.”

*You don’t know that,* Sansa thought, but Jon might have been right. Sansa was in no state to be reasonable at the moment, talking to Rickon right now would only lead to Sansa crying and Rickon getting more upset and their conversation going nowhere.

Sansa nodded her head and tried to compose herself as best she could. She tried to shake off the thought that going back to the Vale meant leaving her family just like her mother did. It wasn't the same. Sansa wasn't leaving by choice. She took in a deep breath and tried to compartmentalize all her scattered thoughts. Looking up at Jon helped. They were both still standing so close, and when Sansa brought her head up, Jon was staring down at her with such concern that all Sansa wanted to do now was banish it and put at least one of them at ease.

Sansa let out the breath, they didn't get the luxury of being at ease anymore. “What did that officer want?”

Jon glanced down the hall where the officer and him had been talking a few minutes ago, “He was following up on some questions I had about Bloodraven.”

Sansa nodded her head and ran her hand through her tangled hair, “Right. God, this is such a mess. Do they even know the man’s real name, or what he was doing in that bunker to begin with?”

“They don’t have anything concrete yet.” Jon answered grimly, “They’ve got no hospital records to give the man any identity other than what everyone in the bunker was calling him. It looks like whatever they were doing down there, it had been happening for years.”

Sansa’s stomach rolled with disgust, “The rest of his followers were all adults, weren’t they? Not one of them stopped him from hurting Bran.”

Jon let out a breath, “We don’t have to talk about this, Sansa. It’s not pleasant for any of us.”

Sansa certainly did want to talk about it. She wanted to scream and throw things, and do something to let out her frustration, but when she looked at Jon she saw the dark circles under his eyes and the hunch of his shoulders and she knew that, for his sake, she wouldn’t pursue it any further. At least not in words.
“The man—Bloodraven—he’s being kept here, isn’t he?”

Jon nodded, “Yeah, they've got police monitoring him.”

Sansa glanced over to Bran, unmoving on his hospital bed. “I want to see him, Jon. I need to see the man who did this to Bran.”

It was a half shock that Jon didn’t argue it at all. He and Sansa walk side by side down the halls of the hospital to the wing that Bloodraven was being kept in. Occasionally, as they walked, Sansa would feel Jon’s hand brush against hers, and as they neared the room Bloodraven was being kept in, Sansa took Jon’s hand in hers, weaving their fingers together. Jon’s grip made Sansa feel centered—stronger as if he was giving her some of his resolve to get her through the day.

There was an officer standing outside the hospital door, but Sansa and Jon didn’t have plans to actually go into the room, even if that was allowed. The glass window that peered into the room had its blinds pulled up, revealing what was inside and so they moved to stand in front of that and look.

The room was much like the one Bran was being kept in, accompanied by the same beeping machines and monitors. On the hospital bed though, lay a man who looked closer to death than sleep. His wrinkled skin was cracked and dry; body so frail that it looked like a strong gust of wind would shatter his bones. There was scar tissue over one of his closed eyes and thin lips looking grim.

“This is Bloodraven?” He didn’t look anything like Sansa pictured, at least not from the stories Arya told about him. The man on the hospital bed had to be over a hundred years old—frail and decrepit, looking all the more pathetic with the handcuff over his right wrist connecting him to the hospital bed, and the police guarding his room.

“They say he’s been in a coma about as near as long as Bran. Apparently, they entered it together in some sort of ritual.” Jon said mouth pulled down in a frown, “They don’t think he’ll ever wake up. He’s too weak now.”

Sansa looked at the old man and wondered that in choosing to be induced into the coma if Bloodraven even expected to wake from it. “I hope he does. I hope he wakes up and he has to face everything he’s done.”

Jon glanced at Sansa. This response just made him look more troubled, but Sansa couldn’t find it in herself to take it back.
“We ought to go back to Bran,” Jon said turning away from the window and taking a step away, “This isn’t helping anything.”

And being with Bran will? Sansa started feeling the same sort of frustration Rickon had felt before.

“You’ve got to make sure that none of them get away with this.” Sansa told him, “Not even those two kids. Everyone needs to be held responsible for what happened to Bran.”

“That isn’t going to fix things either, Sansa,” Jon's voice was thin—despite his appearance of exhaustion, he was irritated too. “You’re acting like Bran was forced to do this, but as far as the doctors and police can tell, he went into everything willingly. I’m not going to pursue punishing Stolkhomes victims when its pretty clear that the only man who could be held responsible is going to end up dying anyway.”

“So everyone is just going to get away with it?” Sansa felt red, “Bran is going to be in a coma for who knows how long, and absolutely nothing comes from it? What about justice?”

Jon pointed a finger at the window, “That’s our justice, Sansa. Who cares what happens to everyone else, what matters is that Bran is safe now—“

“Safe? He’s in a coma, Jon.” Sansa shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest, “Father wouldn’t stand for this. He would rest until the guilty parties were punished; until we’ve got—“

“Revenge?” Jon finished and Sansa was silent. Was it so wrong to want revenge? To get some piece of real justice over just one of the things that has tormented their family? Sansa didn’t want to think she was person who craved revenge. She knew how dark a path like that could get and hearing Jon accuse her of it sent a sick feeling to Sansa’s chest.

“Revenge isn’t going to wake Bran up—it’s not going to fix anything, Sansa.”

He sounded so sure of himself and Sansa hated it. When you were facing monsters like Sansa's, revenge didn't sound so awful, Jon just didn't understand that. Even so, what would Father say if he knew she was thinking that, if he knew she was going down a path of revenge? Sansa sunk to the floor, pressing her back against the wall as she curled her knees to her chest. She felt the pressure building up inside her, ready to blow and she was doing her best to keep it together for a few seconds more.
A moment later Jon was beside her, his arm curling around her shoulder.

“I’m so sick of losing, Jon.” Sansa’s voice was rough, used and broken.

“We’ve got Bran back,” Jon said quietly, “That’s not losing.”

Sansa scoffed and shook her head, “Bran isn’t back—he’s here, but he’s not back. Nothing is how it should be, we were supposed to all be together and be a family again, but nothing is right. Arya is ready to bolt every chance she gets and Rickon hates me, and I guess that’s fine since in two days I’m not even going to be around anymore for them.”

“Don’t say that.” Jon spoke fiercely, shaking his head, “Don’t say—“

“I’m right, though, Jon.” Sansa looked up, eyes wet with unspilled tears as she looked at Jon’s stubborn face, inches from her own, “I’m going to leave, we can’t keep pretending anymore. Petyr’s won, he always wins. We haven’t found anything near incriminating enough to leverage against him, and if I stay he’ll hurt you and Rickon, I’ve got to go back to him.”

“We’ve still got two days.” Jon responded willfully.

Sansa shook her head, “Jon, please. Can we just be honest with each other for once? It was always going to be this way.”

Jon didn’t answer, but his arm around Sansa’s shoulder tightened as he pulled her closer. She knew Jon wasn’t going to give up until the last second on the clock had run out, but this would have to be good enough for now. The truth was out there, Jon didn’t have to accept it, but he had to know it was there.

Sansa and Rickon end up going to the hotel room Jon rented for them later that evening, while Jon stays at the hospital with Bran. Rickon doesn’t even look at Sansa as they get into a cab and drive over to the hotel, and once they are in the room, Sansa escapes to the bathroom to distance herself from the chilly silence. What could Sansa say to Rickon when she knew that he was right? She was leaving him just like their mother left him, and there was no way around that truth.

Sansa packed herself and Rickon overnight bags after they got the call from Arya to come to the Newcastleton to see Bran. Sansa brings her bag into the bathroom with her and starts the shower, climbing in once the water was steaming. The first initial seconds are trial by fire, but Sansa gets used to the heat, staying under the spray and letting the water wash over her.

Back when Sansa was Alayne she used to take burning showers every night. It was the closest to
alive that Sansa felt back then—knowing that she was real, only when she was experiencing the sharp pain of the boiling shower water. Was it going to be like that again? Could Sansa survive that knowing that she could have a life outside the walls of the Vale?

She stays under the spray for too long; only climbing out once the water starts to go cold. She wrapped a towel around herself and wiped her hand across the foggy mirror. Compared to how she looked just two months before, Sansa looked like someone else completely. She wasn’t so thin as before, filling out after eating regularly so that her bones didn’t stick out so much anymore. Her skin wasn’t as sallow either, and while there were bags under her eyes from lack of sleep, they weren’t so thin and purple as before. Sansa looked down at her wrists and wondered if the bruises Petyr would leave there would look familiar after she married him, or if Sansa would consider them foreign now that she wasn’t supposed to be Alayne anymore.

More than everything else, Sansa wondered how long it would take for her to return to the ghost that she’d been before—how long would it take before Sansa Stark became a memory, and Sansa Baelish was the reality.

Feeling ill, Sansa got changed into the clothes she packed in her bag and stepped out of the bathroom, wringing her wet hair with the towel she carried with her.

“Hot water is out,” She told Rickon who was still ignoring her, sitting on the bed, flipping through the television. “You should give it an hour if you want to take a shower.”

Rickon didn’t respond and Sansa sighed. Was this how it was going to be from now on?

Sansa continued to dry her hair and walked over to the window, cracking open the blinds to look up at the dimming sky. This wasn’t how she planned her last days with Jon and Rickon. She thought that they’d be back in the flat in Cardiff, with Ghost sitting beside them as they ate cheap pizza and pretended like nothing was going to change. Maybe that had been a selfish wish for Sansa to have, but Sansa wanted a few seconds of normalcy before facing her future.

They only stay at the hotel for another few hours. Sansa takes a nap, and sometime between then and when she wakes up, Rickon takes a shower too. When she does wake up from her nap the two of them take to the streets and start walking back to the hospital silently to take over Jon’s watch and let him go to the hotel and get some rest.

Sansa brought Jon’s laptop with her to the hospital and as she sits in one of the hospital chairs she scrolls through some emails with no real intent. Looking at them only makes her feel sour, and so Sansa abandons that mission after an hour. She glances over to where Rickon is sitting on the floor one leg bent and the other stretched out as he stares at the wall. He had his backpack and schoolwork with him, but Sansa wasn’t about to push that agenda. Instead, she opens a word document and starts typing.

It had stemmed from an idea she had a week ago, but Sansa pursues it. While Sansa didn’t know anything about legal procedures, she did know that having a will in her own name was now a necessity. Petyr could take Sansa, but he couldn’t take everything else. Maybe that at least, she could find a way around. She thought about Lysa Arryn and how after she was killed Petyr got everything he wanted—Sansa wasn’t about to let that happen to her. This was a small sort of rebellion, but with such little power, it was all Sansa could muster.
She drafted the will to hand down all sources of Stark wealth to Jon in event of her death—her inheritance and the manor in York included. Next, she set up a trust for Rickon’s education, and then after some consideration, she set up a slightly decreased amount for Arya too. While Sansa was still alive she wasn’t sure how useful the will would end of being. If Petyr knew about it he’d work some way around it, but if Sansa entrusted it with someone who she could trust, in the event of her death, she might still be able to help her family.

“Excuse me,” A nurse stepped into the room and Sansa saved her document and shut the laptop. The nurse looked at her and gave a small smile, “Can I speak to you in the hall for a moment?”

Sansa nodded and stood up, setting the laptop down on the chair as she followed the nurse. They stood out in the hall—the hospital was winding down compared to how busy it had been that afternoon, but Sansa was still mindful to keep to the wall to avoid some of the bustle.

“Is everything alright?” Sansa asked the nurse.

The other woman nodded her head, but there was an unpleasant bend to her mouth, “Everything with Bran is fine, yes. But the children who came in with him…they’re asking to speak to you.”

Sansa raised her brows, “What?”

The nurse nodded her head, “You can refuse—from what I understand about the situation…” the nurse shook her head, cutting herself off. She was very young and Sansa wondered if the nurse thought she was going to get in trouble for passing this request along, “They just wanted to talk to you, and they asked me to ask you.”

Sansa gave a slow nod, thinking about her last confrontation with Jojen and Meera. Sansa had nearly lost it, practically screaming at them in the hospital waiting room, and since then she hadn’t seen them once. Sansa hadn’t wanted to see them again; at least she hadn’t thought she did.

“Can you take me to them?”

The nurse brought Sansa to a hospital room at the end of the hall. It was out of the intensive care unit, but not too far away. An officer was lounging near the room but didn’t stop the nurse from leading Sansa inside.

Jojen was laying on one of the hospital beds while his sister Meera was not far away, resting on the little shelf at the window with one leg curled to her chest and the other dangling near the
ground. When the door opened both of them looked over with twin expressions of surprise, though Jojen’s looked much more satisfied than his sister’s.

The nurse looked between them all before taking a step towards the door. “I’ll come back in in a few minutes.” She shut the door behind her.

“I’m glad you accepted our invitation,” Jojen said as he tried to sit up on the bed. The IV drip was still connected to his arm.

Sansa crossed her arms and looked around, “Why’d you want me to come here?”

Meera set her feet on the ground and stood, staying close to the window as if afraid to move too far away, “Is Bran alright?”

Sansa felt the breath leave her chest, face getting red, “Are you really asking me that question?”

Meera looked a little startled, but she had a strong look about her and didn’t back down. “The nurses don’t tell us anything.”

“That’s because you’re criminals.” Sansa took a step forward, “You’re the ones who helped that man hurt him. Why would they tell you anything?”

“It’s not like that—“ Meera said, at the same time her brother spoke.

“Bran isn’t hurt. He’s undergoing a transformation.”

A laugh fell from Sansa’s mouth, cruel and angry, “Are you delusional? He’s in a coma.”

“If those people hadn’t broken the process the transformation could have completed,” Jojen explained with the least amount of calm Sansa had ever witnessed in the boy, “Bran was supposed to be the Three-Eyed Crow, he would have woken up. I told them not to interfere with the process. You have to tell the doctors to take Bran back to woods near the wall, he’ll wake up if they take him there.”
Sansa couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She wanted to feel angry, but she couldn’t. Jon was right, these kids were too messed up to even realize the nonsense they were saying and as Sansa looked at them, thin and desperate, Sansa didn’t feel angry at them for saying all of these things: she felt pity.

This was their reality, and for years it was fed to them by a twisted old man. Sansa looked at them, Jojen’s face fierce, despite his wary body, and Meera with a determined sort of anguish and doubt painted on her expression, and all Sansa saw were lost children clutching to the hope that they weren’t wrong and that they hadn’t really just put their friend in a coma because of the commands of a delusional cult leader.

Sansa shook her head and took a step back.

“Bran is staying with his family,” She told Jojen, “He isn’t going anywhere.”

Jojen held her gaze, “Unlike you.”

Her heart skipped a beat, “What?”

“Jojen,” Meera hissed, “Shut it.”

“No,” Sansa was moving towards the bed the boy sat on, “What did that mean? What do you mean unlike me?”

Jojen tilted his chin up to keep his eyes on Sansa’s, “Bloodraven wasn’t a liar. He could see things. He told Bran about you, he said that you were away in France, he said that you were going to marry a man there.”

“Jojen, stop talking.” Meera ordered her brother fiercely, stepping between him and Sansa.

Sansa shook her head, “That’s not possible. You’re lying. Who told you about that—was it Arya?”

“I told you Bloodraven’s power is real.” Jojen told her, “If you want Bran to wake up he has to go back to the bunker—he has to go back beyond the wall.”
“You’re lying—“

The nurse stepped back into the room and walked over to them. She looked at the aggravated posture of everyone in the room, a troubled expression as she glanced towards the door like she was considering calling the officer into the room.

“I’m leaving.” Sansa announced coldly, backing away from the hospital bed.

She went into the hall feeling cold. There had to be a dozen ways Jojen came by the information about Sansa—all of them more realistic than the idea that Jojen came by it through some supernatural means, but he hadn’t been lying when he told Sansa that Bloodraven had told him about it.

*It doesn’t matter,* Sansa told herself, *He’s crazy, and it doesn’t matter how he found out about Petyr.*

Sansa spends a few more minutes pacing the halls of the hospital. Jon would be coming back from the hotel soon and Sansa could ask him about what Jojen and Meera said then, for now Sansa had to get her nerves under control before she broke. Several nurses gave Sansa funny looks as she paced down the halls, but none of them moved to stop her. It felt like all of them knew that she was the sister to the coma cult patient and that gave her immunity to all strange behaviors.

When Sansa managed to get her breathing under control, it took her a while to find Bran’s room again. She stopped at some vending machines on her way and picked up some crisps for Rickon and herself, buying time before she’d have to go back into the room and see Bran, still trapped in his coma, which apparently could be cured by supernatural means that came with visiting bomb shelters near Hadrian’s Wall, and Rickon who currently hated Sansa.

Sansa was a coward for not being sure which of them she was more afraid to face. Of course, she was a coward for a lot of things.

Finally, Sansa stepped towards Bran’s room. The door was cracked open, and so Sansa nudged it open a little further with her foot, staying quiet in hopes that Rickon might have fallen asleep on the cot a nurse brought into the room earlier.

“Ghost is insanely big,”

At first, Sansa thinks it’s the television set, but after another second Sansa’s realizes that its Rickon’s voice that’s echoed quietly throughout the room and Sansa fell still. She nearly opened her mouth to ask what Rickon was talking about before she realized that he wasn’t talking to her at all.

“He’s like as tall as I am. Jon lets him sleep in my room most nights, but he hogs the entire bed and
I usually end up sleeping on the floor. I usually sleep there anyway so it doesn’t really matter. I bet Summer and Shaggy would be even bigger. Sansa says that they were probably adopted from the shelter, but I don’t know. I guess it doesn’t really matter anymore; they wouldn’t fit in Jon’s flat anyway.” Rickon trails off and starts wringing his hands. He’s sitting on the edge of Bran’s hospital bed, his back to the door. “You got to wake up Bran. I won’t even be mad at you if you do—I don’t even care that you left me anymore, I don’t care as long as you wake up. Everyone else is leaving; you’ve got to wake up, please…”

Sansa backs out of the room. She shouldn’t be listening to this, and Sansa doesn’t know what she could possibly say to make any of this better. She’d been triaging the Starks, applying band-aids to gunshot wounds and ignoring the blood seeping around the corners. That couldn’t hold for much longer, and Sansa didn’t know how else to fix this wound.

Jon found her like that—sitting against the wall out in the hall. He didn’t say anything, just moved to sit by her like before.

“I’ve got to talk to him,” Sansa told him, context unnecessary.

“He knows you love him,” Jon said, as Sansa rested her head on his shoulder, feeling his hand run down her hair and settle around her waist, “Whatever you say will help.”

“I don’t know what I even could say,” Sansa didn’t think that there were words that could fix a situation like this. “I don’t want to be like my mother, Jon, I don’t want to leave him like she did.”

Jon went tense beside her, “This situation is nothing like that. Whatever choice you make its to protect him.”

Was it? Was Sansa protecting Rickon, or was she just protecting herself? What was the difference between Catelyn Stark hanging herself and Sansa condemning herself to an early grave in the Vale? They were both running from something, but what exactly was the monster chasing them—and how do you stand up to an unseen force?

Sansa looked up at the clock hanging above the wall across from her, as the hands chimed on the twelve. Forty-two hours left.
Okay so this chapter was supposed to be out days ago but i've had such trouble writing it. Originally it was going to be a lot longer but i've decided to break it up into 2 separate chapters instead!

Hopefully the part 2 of this one will be out soon, since i've already got some of it written.

Hope you guys enjoy! Please comment and kudos, i promise that you definitely wont have to wait another week for the next ch!
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sansa had to get out of the hospital. Between Meera and Jojen, Rickon, and Bran, Sansa was drowning in worry. She had to clear her head away from the white clinical walls of the hospital and the sound of squeaky nurses shoes on polished floors and get out onto the street. Sansa doesn’t know why that means she lies to Jon about where she’s going, but it does.

Sansa told Jon that she’s going back to the hotel for another nap—she doesn’t want to worry Jon and she doesn’t want to filter through all his questions. She doesn’t go to the hotel though, instead, Sansa pulls out the piece of paper Arya gave her and grabs the nearest cab handing the address over and sitting back waiting to see where she ends up.

The clock reads a few minutes until 1 AM, and by the time the cab pulls over, it’s already past that. Sansa hadn’t been looking out the windows during the drive—she kept her eyes closed for the duration of it, head tilted back as she settled into a sort of near sleep. When the cabbie gets her attention and Sansa opens her eyes she blinks back shock at where she is. Trust Arya to pick the sketchiest location possible.

There near the far side of town where the buildings are a little older and banged up. Neon signs light up the street corners, garbage bins are overflowing, and disreputable-looking folk stand near the corner eyeing the cars that pass them by. Sansa checks with the cabbie to make sure they’re at the right address, before getting out of the back seat and stepping onto the curb, her skin pricking in the cold air.

It’s loud out not just with shouting voices that fill the fairly busy street, but there’s the steady thrum of a bass and drum like a club was playing music nearby. Sansa turns her head to the side to see a line standing outside one unassuming building that must have been a club. Sansa looks down at the address Arya left her and wonders if it’s too late to get back into the cab and drive back to the hospital. It would be just like Arya to send Sansa to some dangerous part of town and never show up.

“Hey!”

Sansa looks up, tensing at the call. She turns her head and lets out a breath when she sees Arya walking towards her, pushing through a crowd to get over to Sansa.

“What am I doing here?” Sansa asks looking around as she steps onto the sidewalk where Arya is. Sansa zips up her jacket and wraps her arms around her middle, hyper-aware of the looks the two sisters are getting. This was exactly the sort of area Sansa used to avoid when she was on her own—she could just feel all the dangerous turns around her.

Arya is just as aware of the looks they’re getting, but they don’t seem to bother her nearly as much.
Still, she grabs Sansa’s arm and pulls her over to the shop front Arya had been waiting in front of, “I didn’t think you’d show up.”

Sansa doesn’t want to admit that she hadn’t planned on showing up at all. Arya had found Bran for them, but Sansa didn’t know if that changed anything between Arya and her at all, Sansa didn’t exactly want to spend her last hours of freedom with someone who hated her. And while Arya had said she didn’t hate Sansa, Sansa could read between the lines well enough to know that that was shit.

“What are we doing here?” Sansa repeats in place of a real answer.

“I’ve got an appointment.” Arya tells her, tilting her head up at the sign in front of the shop they’re standing at.

That doesn’t sit well with Sansa, not since she knows what sort of work Faceless Men took part in. She wonders if this is some sort of trap—if Arya was tricking her into going back to Petyr early and this had something to do with it.

But Sansa looks up at the shop sign anyway, and her brow furrows. The Drunken Daughter was lit up in neon blue and green, with photos and pictures pressed against the glass displaying inked skin and needles.

“This is a tattoo parlor?” Sansa asked as Arya started for the Drunken Daughter’s front door—Sansa quickly follows after her.

The parlor is lit dark, part of the room lit with a black light and the other light looked almost red. One wall was actually painted red, with black framed designs hanging there, and beneath it were several other large scrapbooks hosting more art near a black vinyl sofa. A large column in the center of the waiting room was half paneled in glass boasting different sorts of metal piercings, and Sansa walks past it on her way to the desk Arya is already waiting in front of.

Arya is already talking to the man standing beside the counter. He’s large and burly with about a hundred piercings, but not a tattoo in sight. Sansa tries to look unassuming as she hovers near Arya, aware of the stares she getting by the couple looking through one of the scrapbooks. She doesn’t look like someone who belongs here.

“I’ll tell Lana that you’re here.” The man says before disappearing behind a beaded curtain.

Sansa would whisper, but over the beating music she wouldn’t be heard, “Are you getting a
tattoo?"

Arya nods her head, “Yeah, what did you think we were doing here?”

Sansa didn’t know. She sort of thought Arya was meeting with some contact here, or was about to turn Sansa over to Petyr—she definitely didn’t think that Arya invited her along to watch her get a tattoo. That was the part Sansa was still hung up on—Arya couldn’t have just invited Sansa here to watch Arya get a tattoo, what was the real reason Sansa was here?

A woman came out behind the curtain. Her bleach hair was pulled in a messy bun tied back with a red bandana. Her arms were inked so that not a dot of skin was left unmarked, and her face boasted at least three different piercings.

“You’re Arya?” Lana asks Arya, who nods her head. “Alright, follow me to the back.”

Lana leads them through an arched doorway and they pass through a hanging curtain. On the other side, the lights have returned to normal—the music isn’t quite so loud either and while the walls are littered with art and paintings it doesn’t look quite as rugged as it had in the other room. Sansa trails behind Arya looking through the windows of the little offices that separate each work station.

They end up in a room near the end of the hall. Lana goes over to a workbench and sits down, placing a pair of glasses on the bridge of her nose. Arya takes a seat on the bench across from her and Sansa takes the little desk chair in the corner of the room beside out of the way from everyone.

“Do you know what you want?” Lana asks Arya.

Arya reaches into her coat and pulls out a folded sheet of paper, “I’ve got a rough idea.” She hands the paper over to Lana, “I want it on my shoulder, about this big?”

Sansa tries to lean forward to get a view of what’s on the paper Arya gave Lana, raising an eyebrow when Arya describes how big she wants the tattoo to be. Arya already had several tattoos, and she probably had more that Sansa couldn’t see. None of them were all that pretty in Sansa’s opinion—most looked unpleasant and violent, and very unlike something mother would approve of. Not that either of them were doing things that their mother would approve of.

“Yeah, I can do that.” Lana moved over to her desk and started sketching. “You want this in black?” Arya nodded, “Okay, I’m going to add some gradient and shading and give it some more dimensions. You’ve got other tattoos around it?”
Arya shrugged off her coat and rolled up her sleeve. There were several scattered tattoos on her arm, but the shoulder was bare. Lana looked at the expanse of skin like a canvas, a grin playing on her lips before she went back to her sketch, humming quietly as she drew. When she had finished she passed the paper over to Arya who looked down at it with an unreadable expression.

Arya nodded her head, “Yeah, that looks good.”

Lana looks satisfied, “Alright, I’m going to start transferring it over to a stencil and then we can get started.”

Lana took the paperback and leaves the little office, saying that she would be back in a couple of minutes.

“What are you going to get?” Sansa asks when they are left alone.

Arya grabs her original piece of paper and hands it over to Sansa silently. Sansa unfolds it and smooths out the wrinkles before really giving it a look. It was a wolf or at least the face of one, with dark fur and snarling mouth, sharp teeth gleaming white.

“A wolf,” Sansa stares at the photo, “For the Stark crest?”

Arya gives a nod of confirmation and takes the photo, “The drawing Lana made looks a little different—better. I’ve been meaning to get another one.”

Sansa settled back in her chair. “It’s nice.”

Arya snorted, and turned away from Sansa, “Please, you probably hate the idea of getting a tattoo. You’re practically radiating disapproval.”

“That’s not true,” Sansa furrowed her brow, “And why did you even ask me to come if you thought I’d disapprove?”

Arya rolled her eyes and didn’t answer. “Whatever. You can leave if you want, I’m sure you’d rather be with Jon, anyway.”
For half a second Sansa does consider getting up and leaving. She doesn’t though. For some reason Arya invited Sansa to experience this with her, Sansa wasn’t about to leave just yet, no matter how hard she was considering it.

A few minutes later Lana, the tattoo artist, came back into the room and sat back down on her bench. She brought Arya a little closer and wiped down Arya’s shoulder before transferring the sketch of the tattoo onto Arya’s shoulder, leaving an informal print of the tattoo in its wake. A second later Lana was starting up the tattoo gun, a subtle buzz filling the room.

“So can I ask why the wolf?” Lana said as she started tattooing Arya’s shoulder, angling her so that Sansa couldn’t get a good look at what was going on.

Arya looked relaxed despite the tattooing. Sansa was cringing just watching it—she’d never considered getting a tattoo before. Myranda got one during one of her summers in the Vale, after sneaking out of the mansion and going into the city to get it done with Mya one night. Petyr had ranted about it for two whole days, saying that Mryanda had ruined herself in doing it. Sansa knew that the ranting was mostly to serve as cautionary instructions to Sansa, rather than Petyr’s own opinions on tattoos, but it was unnecessary. The tattoo of a heart Myranda got on her lower back didn’t appeal to Sansa much.

“I like wolves,” Arya answered Lana indifferently, “I wanted a predator.”

Sansa almost rolls her eyes. Father didn’t talk about their house crest all that much, and while a tapestry of it hung in the halls of the manor, when Ned Stark did mention the wolf it was never to describe it as a predatory force, but rather as a singular part of a pack.

“How long does that process take?” Sansa asks, moving her chair out of its corner a little.

Lana glanced up and shrugged, “This one might take two hours, maybe more.”

Sansa nodded her head and tucks a leg up on the chair, wrapping her arm around it, “That’s a long time to be in pain.”

Lana laughed and shook her head, “It’s like a prick from a needle. It doesn’t hurt that much, besides, beauty is pain, right?”
“Depends on what you consider beauty.” Arya says tensing a little as Lana goes over her shoulder bone.

Lana nods in agreement, “True. So, Red, you got any ink?”

Sansa flushes a little at the nickname and shakes her head, but it’s Arya who really answers.

“Sansa? No, she’d never.”

Sansa frowns, “I wouldn’t say never; I just don’t think I’d ever like anything enough to tattoo it to my body forever—no offense. It’s just a big commitment, and I’ve got no problem with how I look without a tattoo, I don’t know why I would need one.”

Lana doesn’t look offended, even if Arya sort of does. “That’s fine—ink isn’t for everyone.”

Sansa holds herself a little tense, standing up from her chair and walking over to see the design coming to life on Arya’s arm. It’s beautiful—what Lana had done to Arya’s drawing really made it look so much more complex and alive. The wolf’s eyes had a glint to them, the fur around its eyes and snout lighter than the rest of it. Around the wolf’s head was an array of flowers, almost like a crown that was sprouting from the tense muscles on Arya’s arm. It was a strange choice for Arya to pick, but it made the tattoo look so much better, softer almost, but no less viscous. Despite the flowers, that wolf still looked like it wanted to tear out your throat.

Looking at it Sansa started to feel jealous. Not at the tattoo, per se, but towards Arya. Sansa would never be brave enough to put something on her skin and not ever doubt its place there—never doubt her decision to permanently alter her body. That didn’t necessarily ever feel like a bad thing, Sansa started to wonder how much longer her body was actually going to be her own.

Had her body ever been her own in the first place? For those six years in the Vale, every inch of Sansa had belonged to Petyr—her bones, her skin, even her mind had all been controlled and altered by him, every decision she made held Petyr in mind. In two days it would be like that again, and Sansa wouldn’t belong to herself ever again, and she’d have no proof that she’d ever been her own in the first place. Every once of Starkness would be wiped away, every piece of Sansa’s soul chipped at the core.

Lana wiped down the tattoo with a rag. The outline was done, but she still had to go in and finish the shading, which would take another hour. She showed Arya the tattoo in a mirror to see if there were any changes she wanted to make before they moved on, and when Arya approved she started on the shading.

“It looks good.” Sansa comments moving back over to her chair.
Arya prims slightly at that, “It better.”

Sansa rolled her eyes, “It doesn’t hurt much, right? Does it really just feel like a needle prick?”

Arya’s posture shifted slightly, a confused look on her face.

“Are you considering getting one?” Lana asks.

Sansa shrugs a shoulder, “I don’t know. Maybe?”

“Seriously,” Arya tried to lean in, but Lana holds her still, “You’d get a tattoo?”

Would Sansa? Why couldn’t she? This was still her body, for a few more hours at least. Sansa could do whatever she wanted—why couldn’t she leave one lasting mark that was all her own.

“Yeah, I think I will.” Sansa nodded her head resolutely, “Why not, right?”

Sansa looked to Arya, waiting to see if she would be the force to shoot down this momentary burst of courage. She waits to see the judgment in Arya’s eyes, or to hear the argument, but it doesn’t come.

Arya nods her head, “Yeah, you should get one. Tonight?”

It’s not like Sansa could get one some other time. Lana tells her to go to the front desk and the man at the front goes to see who’s available to work on Sansa. Her stomach is in knots the entire time. This is a bad idea, this is a bad idea. Petyr will hate it so much, he’ll be so angry. Sansa shakes her head, He’s doesn’t get to decide what I do with my body. I do.

Sansa sits down with one of the artists, another heavily tattooed woman who talks to Sansa for a few minutes about what she wants to get. Sansa, stupidly, hadn’t prepared to answer that question and sits their silently, staring at the pages of a photo album the artist sets on Sansa’s lap. She flips through a few pages of flowers and stars and hearts, and all the other soft-core art that that artist thinks would suit Sansa. None of it looks right though—none of it feels like something that would belong on Sansa’s skin.
About half way through this process, Sansa starts to rethink getting a tattoo altogether. This was just a moment of silly impulsivity anyway, but then Sansa turns the page in the album and spots the silhouetted drawing of a wolf.

It’s more delicate than the one Arya picked out—just a black outline of a wolf running across the page, but it sticks out to Sansa. She points to the photo and looks at the artist across from her.

“I want something like this.”

The artist talks to Sansa about it for a few minutes and they settle on the wolf silhouette. Unlike the one in the book, Sansa won’t have hers colored in black—she’ll have it done as a line drawing and leave the inside hollow. The artist tells Sansa that she can sketch a half moon and a little wooded forest inside the hollowed body of the woods and Sansa thinks about the groves in York and quickly agrees.

When the drawing is finished, Sansa goes back over to the room Arya is in and shows her the picture.

“What do you think? Are you okay if I get a wolf too?”

Arya takes the drawing and looks at it with the utmost focus, before handing it back to Sansa, “You should get it. It fits.”

And so Sansa goes back to her artist and tells her that this is what she wants. In the last seconds before the artist takes the tattoo to get it stenciled, Sansa changes her mind about the wolf’s position though—instead of having it running Sansa wants it baying at the moon.

By the time the tattoo is ready to be transferred onto Sansa, Arya’s tattoo is done, a bandage and some plastic wrapped around her arm. Arya and Lana find the room Sansa is in and they hang near the doorway.

“Making the big plunge,” Lana sounds satisfied, “it’s a big moment.”

Sansa’s nerves are fried, but she doesn’t doubt her choice for a second. Her artist comes over and sets the stencil down, and Sansa starts to lift up her shirt. She hadn’t wanted the tattoo anywhere obvious that she’d have to see all the time. In the end, she decided to get it on her rib cage. The tattoo wasn’t very big—smaller than the palm of Sansa’s hand, but as the artist set the stencil down on Sansa’s skin it felt massive. Sansa felt herself tense, listening to the buzz from the tattoo gun start up.
“Don’t be nervous.” Arya told her, stepping into the room and pulling up a chair beside the table Sansa was sitting on, “It’s going to look good.”

Sansa gives a stiff nod as the needle touches her skin. She tries to keep still as the process continues. It really doesn’t hurt all that much, but Sansa is a wimp when it comes to pain and she feels tears building up in her eyes. Her hand clenches against the edge of the table, and Sansa shuts her eyes tight as the needle goes over her bone. Suddenly, though, Sansa feels another hand grab hers. Sansa looks over to Arya who is stubbornly watching the needle still; Sansa doesn’t contemplate the gesture, and when the needle goes over her bone again she holds on tighter.

“Two wolves,” Lana says from the doorway, “Friendship tattoos?”

Arya shook her head, and glances over at the other artist, “No, sisters.”

Sansa’s ribs are sore as they step out onto the street. She run her hand under the bandage beneath her shirt, wondering if it will be healed by the time she goes back to the Vale. She goes to hail a cab, but Arya is wandering down the street and so Sansa goes to follow her.

“I’m glad I came.” Sansa tells her, “I don’t think I’d have ever done that if I hadn’t.”

“I can’t believe you actually got a tattoo,” Arya shook her head, “Mum would combust if she saw it.”

Sansa rolled her eyes, “I think anything I did would become obsolete the moment she saw you.”

Arya laughs, but nods her head, “Yeah, probably.” She stops walking when they stand in front of the club. Sansa could still here the thrum of music inside, but the line outside the door was gone. Sansa looks up at the sign over the building and falls still.

“This is one of Petyr’s clubs.” He had several, but Sansa never pictured him having a club in a city like this, which lacked the party seen Petyr liked to cultivate. Sansa knew the names of all of Petyr’s businesses though and there was no mistaking it.

Arya nods, “I found it when I came looking for Bran.”
Sansa shook her head, “How? I mean, those two things aren’t connected—“

“How? Someone had to leave that bunker to get food and medical supplies for all the others.” Arya answered tonelessly, still looking up at the building.

Sansa felt sick all over again, “Do you think Petyr knew about Bran—do you think he knew about all of this?”

Arya didn’t have an answer, but it was too great of a coincidence to be anything other than this. Jojen had known about Sansa and her time in the Vale—this must have been how. Petyr must have had an informant in Bloodraven’s bunker—Sansa didn’t know why or how, but that must have been it.

“You’re leaving in two days?” Arya asked and Sansa nodded numbly. “What’s he going to do to you?”

For once Arya sounded afraid. She sounded afraid for Sansa.

“I don’t know.” Sansa knew, she just wasn’t going to say any of it out loud. “It doesn’t matter.”

Arya looked away from the building and back to Sansa, “If I had known that he was responsible for hurting Bran I never would have helped him.”

“I know.” Sansa wished that she’d been enough to get Arya to stop helping Petyr, but she knew that she wasn’t and that had to be okay. “It’s not your fault.”

Arya didn’t look like she agreed, “You’ve got to go back to him, don’t you? He knows about Jon and Rickon, he’d hurt them, wouldn’t he?”

Sansa shrugged her shoulders, the bite of the cold digging into her exposed skin, “Like you said this is my responsibility, right? I’ll be fine.” She hesitated before continuing, “But you can’t disappear. Jon and Rickon, and Bran, they’re going to need you. You can’t just leave them. We’re a family, you’ve got to stay together.”
Arya nodded her head and looked to the ground, “When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives. Father told me that when we were in London, just a few days before they killed him.”

Sansa remembered Father telling her something similar and she blinks back tears, “You’ve got to stick together. Jon’s going to make everything right. We’re going to get justice for Father, you’ll be a family again.”

Arya looked up, brows pushed together, “Sansa, we’re not the ones you should worry about. You’re the lone wolf, and winter is coming.”

Sansa got back to the hospital at five AM. She blinks back heavy lashes as she makes her way to Bran’s hospital room. Visitation hours no longer apply to the Starks, and no one stops Sansa on her way.

She thinks about everything Arya told her before they parted way on that street corner. She reached a hand towards her pocket where the little box, and more interestingly, the switchblade Arya gave her was kept and she pulled her hand away, using it to push her hair back from behind her ear. Arya had told Sansa how to use it, told her the best places to plunge it into someone’s skin and Sansa was doing her very best to pretend that this wasn’t the sort of information her sixteen year old sister passed down to her. Sansa had no intentions on stabbing anyone, but Sansa kept the switchblade anyway—it was a parting gift, and it was tied with Sansa’s last memory she would have of Arya. She wouldn’t see her little sister again. Arya would be staying in Newcastle with Bran, at least until they negotiated with the hospital and police to have him moved to Cardiff, but Sansa wouldn’t be around when that happened. Walking to Bran’s hospital room, Sansa knew that she wouldn’t be around long enough to watch him wake up—it was time for her to go.

“Hey,” Sansa knocked on the open door of the hospital room, leaning in the doorway and looking in, where Jon was sitting on one of the plastic chair’s by Bran’s bed and Rickon was sleeping on the cot on the ground. Jon looked up from his laptop and looked over to the door, his face cast in the low orange light of the lamp beside him, “Can we talk for a second?”

Jon nodded his head and got up from the chair. He set the laptop on the foot of the hospital bed, and then walked over to Sansa, a frown on his face, “I thought you were spending the night at the hotel?”

Sansa’s hand ghosted over her rib cage, but she didn’t want the tattoo to distract from what she needed to tell Jon. She walked with him further into the quiet hallway, and Jon blinked as his eyes adjusted to the harsh white lights, leaning against the wall as he waited for Sansa to say something.
He was standing so close, or maybe it was Sansa who was creating the proximity. Jon was just resting against the wall, but Sansa felt like there was a gravitational force making her step closer to Jon’s warmth.

“I’ve got to go back to Cardiff.”

Jon let out a breath. Sansa could see that his expression was so resigned, so unhappy.

“Tonight?” Was all he asked.

Sansa looked past Jon’s shoulder to where Bran’s door was still left ajar. She didn’t want to leave Bran just yet—she didn’t want to leave any of them. Part of Sansa felt that if she could just wait another day, Bran would wake up and for a second Sansa could be with her family, truly united. But it wasn’t practical. Sansa basked in impracticality for too long, she had wasted too much time being impractical and waiting for the impossible to intervene and make things better. Maybe Rickon was right and Sansa had still been running—still picking the easy way out, because up until she and Arya really spoke outside of Petyr’s nightclub, Sansa had been waiting for something to save her. In real life heroes don’t exist, damsels don’t get saved, and villains win.

She nodded her head, “I’ve got to finish some things back home,” Sansa hated that she now thought of Cardiff as home—it was going to make leaving so much harder. “I’ve got to make the trip tonight, if I leave now I should be back before morning. Can you get me a train ticket to the city? I want to leave soon, if they don’t have any trains going that way right now, a cab or a bus will work too.”

“You’re going alone?” Jon was surprised. He must have known that this was it for them—that tonight Sansa was saying goodbye to her family. She hadn’t planned to leave so soon, but what was she waiting for?

“The rest of you need to be with Bran,” Sansa couldn’t meet Jon’s eyes. She tilted her head to the ground, staring at the flecks of black smudges in the white flooring. She could practically feel Jon’s disapproval radiating off of him, like he was a fire and Sansa was facing the residual heat. “Its best that I leave now, by myself. It’ll just be harder to part if I wait until the final hour.” Sansa stepped away, distancing herself from Jon, just a bit, hoping to fight off her own guilt at what she was doing. If you weren’t running before, you’re certainly doing it now. “Can you just find out about the train ticket? I need to talk to Rickon before I leave.”

Sansa refuses to even look up at Jon as she walks away from him. Even so, she can feel him staring at her as she goes, and even when Sansa turns through Bran’s doorway, it doesn’t go away. Maybe
that was just the guilt.

Rickon wasn’t lying down anymore. He was sitting up on the cot, eyes narrowed as Sansa walked into the room. There were dark circles under her brother’s eyes, that looked far too similar to bruises, but Sansa had matching ones that she knew had only come from lack of sleep. Any other time Sansa would have lectured Rickon about that, but Sansa knew that right now she’d only sound like a hypocrite, and she didn’t want her last conversation with Rickon to be like that.

This conversation had been put off for too long. If Sansa were a better person she would have gotten it done sooner so that she and Rickon could have had a happier parting.

“You’re leaving.” It was a matter of fact. Rickon’s voice was void of emotion, but his face gave away his anger—his disgust.

Sansa wasn’t going to be defensive this time. While she felt the reflex to defend herself, Sansa wasn’t going to act on it. She moved over to sit on the floor across from Rickon’s cot, lowering herself to the ground slowly and crossing her legs and holding her hands in her lap.

Sansa nodded her head, “I’ve got to get back to Cardiff tonight. There are some things I need to take care of—“

“That’s not what I meant.” Rickon’s voice was flat, “You’re leaving us for good. You’re going back to him.”

Sansa took in a painful breath. Saying it so clinically made it hurt more, but she supposed what Rickon saying was the truth after all.

“Yeah, I am. I’m sorry, Rickon, I didn’t want to—“

“Shut up.” Rickon voice rose an octave, face twisting in anger as he pushed off the cot and walked to the other side of the room. “God, just shut up! You’re just running away. I hate you!”

Sansa felt like she’d been stunned. She stayed very still—if Rickon needed to lash out then she had to let him. That didn’t mean that what he said didn’t hurt. Sansa wasn’t sure if Rickon ever told her that he hated her, even when he was at his worst. Sansa had to push through her own feelings though, she had to make this right.

“Please, Rickon.” Sansa was practically begging, voice staying steady despite her desire to just
break down and cry, part from exhaustion, and part from how painful this was. “Please just listen to me. I’m so sorry—“

“I said shut up!” Rickon, who previously had his back to Sansa, turned around to face her. It was impossible to guess if his expression was anger or pain. “Don’t say that you’re sorry. You aren’t sorry, if you were you wouldn’t leave me!”

Rickon was shouting, voice probably carrying over into the hall. He looked hostile, and Sansa knew she had to diffuse the situation before a nurse came in to see what the shouting was about. Sansa stood up, but felt incapable of making any other move forward. She didn’t know how to make this better—she didn’t think she could think clearly enough for that yet, but all she could think about was how much pain was in Rickon’s voice and how Sansa had been the one to cause all of this pain.

“I don’t want to leave you, Rickon.” Sansa was near tears, “You’re my brother, I love you. I want to be with our family, you know that I don’t want to go anywhere else.”

And Rickon’s expression changed. His posture shifted, shoulders crumbling, and where his face might have held those traces of anger, it was only desperation now.

“Then don’t.” Rickon begged, “Stay here. Me and Jon can protect you—you can’t just leave.”

Sansa couldn’t stand this. It hurt too much, “Rickon, I have to leave. This isn’t something I can be protected from.”

And Rickon shook his head, his eyes were red, bottom lip quivering, “You can’t just leave me.”

Sansa’s eyes were wet with tears, “I’m doing this for our family, Rickon. I’ve got to go—I have to leave. I don’t want to, I don’t ever want—“

And the breath left Sansa chest as Rickon came up to her before she could react and wrapped his arms around her, burying his face against her. Sansa was still for a second before she brought her hands up and held her little brother close. When he looked up, Sansa could see that Rickon was crying.

“I can’t do this without you,” Rickon's voice shook, “I can’t go to school and be good if you aren’t
Sansa almost laughed, but it was mostly just tears. She squeezed Rickon tighter, “No, you won’t. You don’t need me, Rickon. I know that you’re going to be amazing, even without me here.”

Rickon made a sobbing noise, as he pulled back.

“Don’t run.” Rickon begged.

Sansa shook her head, he didn’t understand. Sansa wasn’t running any more—not from Petyr. This was her standing still, allowing reality to finally hit her, like a great wave from the ocean knocking her to the floor. “I’m not running Rickon. This isn’t running, this is the only thing that I can do.”

“That’s not true,” Rickon’s eyes were glassy, as he took a step away, wet with tears, despite that he was only fierce, “You can fight.”

Sansa wasn’t a fighter. She wasn’t a knight, she wasn’t brave, Sansa wasn’t the savior to her story—this sort of story didn’t have one of those. The time for fighting was over, because fighting was always just meant more running, and Sansa was exhausted. There were too many sleepless nights, too many false hopes, all Sansa wanted was peace, and maybe excepting fate was the only way she could get that.

Maybe she was giving up—but giving up shouldn’t have been so painful.

“Not this time,” Sansa told him, bringing him in close for one last hug. She set her cheek on top of his curly hair and closed her eyes, “This isn’t something we can fight.”

Sansa went out into the hall a few minutes later, after finishing say goodbye to Rickon. All Sansa wanted to do now was lie down and sleep. She felt emotionally exhausted, ready to shatter as the gentlest of prods.

With her travel bag over one shoulder, Sansa made her way down to the lobby of the hospital, looking for Jon as she made the walk over. After a while, when she hadn’t spotted him, she started to feel restless. After her talk with Rickon, Sansa wanted to leave right away. The longer she waivered the more she was reconsidering her decision, and Sansa wanted to leave before that could happen.

Outside the windows of the hospital, Sansa could already see the first rays of light coming up over
the cloudy sky. This was her last full day of freedom. Sansa wasn’t sure what was going to happen tomorrow—whether Petyr was going to come to Jon’s flat in Cardiff to collect her or have someone else do the job. Sansa wanted to savor the last hours she had left, but there were things she had to get out of the way before then.

After waiting a couple of minutes in the lobby, Sansa stood up from the chair she was sitting in to go look for Jon on another floor. The tattoo on her rib felt sore—she was probably supposed to clean it, but she wouldn’t really have any time to do that until she got to Cardiff. The trip there was going to be long, and Sansa had hoped to get back before the shops opened up, but if she didn’t find Jon soon her arrival might be delayed even longer.

“There you are,” Sansa’s posture relaxed as she saw Jon coming down the hall towards her, “Did you find any train tickets leaving soon?”

Jon had his duffle bag slung over his shoulder, and appeared slightly winded as he came up to Sansa, “No, come on.”

“What?” Sansa frowned, but Jon walked right past her and towards the doors of the hospital that slid open at his approach. She followed, but shook her head, “You aren’t coming with me.”

There were standing outside, the cold air stung, but Sansa stood still, letting it hit her. Jon was starting to walk over to the car park, but he stopped and turned around after a few steps, facing Sansa.

“Yeah, I am. We’ve got two days left—you aren’t spending those without me. We’ve still got time —”

“No, we don’t.” Sansa’s voice fell flat and stubborn. She crossed her arms, “There isn’t any more time to find a loophole out of this. Its happening Jon, we’ve already talked about this. And you need to stay here with the kids.”

Jon sighed, a note of frustration in his posturing, as he walked back over to Sansa and stood in front of her. He reached towards Sansa’s arms, pulling them from her chest and then twining his hands in hers, “I’ve changed my mind. I’m not letting you go without a fight. I’m going to be at your side until the very last second.”

Sansa wanted nothing more than to fall against Jon and except everything he said. She wanted him with her—of course, she did, but Sansa also knew that someone had to stay at the hospital with Bran and Rickon.
“You can’t come, Jon,” Sansa said to him, taking a step away, but allowing to keep their hands together, if only for the small comfort it brought. “You have to stay with Rickon and Bran.”

“I’ve got it covered.” Jon was already pulling Sansa back over to the car park. He sounded so much more alive than he had when they were in the hospital, as if a spark had been lit inside him, and he was coming alive, “If things don’t work out, at most I’ll be away a day and a half. I’ve already worked it out with an officer here to watch Bran and Rickon. And if that doesn’t work, I’ve called Arya to come keep an eye on Rickon—“

“Arya?” Sansa stopped walking, “Jon, Arya’s underage, the hospital isn’t going to recognize her as a parental figure and Rickon certainly isn’t going to either. You have to stay—“

“Sansa,” Jon stepped closer, his posture determined. He dropped Sansa’s hands, but only so that he could bring his own up to hold Sansa’s cheek and look into her eyes, “I’m not going to leave you. We can either argue about this out here, or we can do it while we’re in the car driving back to Cardiff.”

Sansa leaned into his touch. Part of her wanted to continue the argument very much, and while the frosty morning air wasn’t the best atmosphere for it, Sansa knew that leaving the others at the hospital wasn’t going to work out well, even if a police officer was keeping an eye on them. But Sansa knew that there was no changing Jon’s mind now, he’d made his decision and there wasn’t anything Sansa could say right now that would change it. And maybe selfishly, Sansa knew that she couldn’t make it through the next two days by herself. She needed Jon with her, and maybe that made Sansa weak too, but it was the truth.

Sansa pulled Jon’s hand from her cheek and intertwined their fingers. This would make everything tomorrow harder—Sansa had wanted to leave their goodbye clinical. She knew that it wasn’t going to be that way anymore, it was going to be so much harder now, and Sansa hated pain, but she could endure it for a little longer if it kept that hopeful spark alive in Jon’s eyes even for another day.

“Fine.” She told him, pulling his hand as she led him towards the cars, “Let’s go.”
Stark family feelings! We finally get some real sister bonding via tattoos-- I really wanted Sansa to get a tattoo that really just marks her reclaiming her own body and making a choice that is purely selfish and reckless just bc she knows that she can, and I thought Arya would be the perfect companion for that. I also liked the idea of the sisters getting wolf tattoos together and now I kind of want all the Starks to get them.

Also, we'll get the rest of Arya and Sansa's conversation/goodbye revealed later.

Anyway, next chapter will be exclusively Jonsa! We'll finally refocus more on them and their relationship while also tying in some other loose plot threads.

Thanks for reading!! The goal is that this fic will definitely be done by the end of the month!
It was strange going back to Cardiff. As they drove, Sansa looked out the window and let her eyes trail over the shops and buildings. It all looked so familiar now, but Sansa could remember when she first got off the train in Cardiff and thought the city looked alien. Not that she’d cared about how the city looked then, all Sansa really cared about was finding Jon, and seeing if it was really him.

That felt like a lifetime ago, and as Sansa watched as the brick and cobblestone buildings pass by her window, she knew that she was a different person than the one who first came to find Jon. For one, the girl who arrived in Cardiff would have killed herself before she ever returned to Petyr Baelish.

“We’ve got to stop at the station first.” Jon said as he took a turn down a familiar street, “I’ve talked to Sam about it and we both really think that this plan could work.”

Sansa wasn’t sure when Jon found the time to talk to Sam about his new plan. It must have called Sam while Sansa was getting her tattoo with Arya, or maybe it was while Sansa was saying goodbye to Rickon, either way, Jon was inspired by the idea and spoke about it animatedly during the entire drive.

The plan, Sam and Jon had come up with, wasn’t meant to prevent Sansa from returning to the Vale. It seemed that, at the very least, Jon realized that returning was inevitable. Instead, the plan was to have Sansa go to the Vale, only when she went, she would be wearing a wire that would allow Jon and Sam to record her conversations. While wearing the wire, Sansa would get Petyr to admit to something—it really didn’t matter much what Petyr admitted, Jon told her, as long as it was incriminating. It could be admitting that he blackmailed Sansa into marriage, kidnapped her when she was a child, or that Petyr had threatened to hurt Jon and Rickon. Once Jon and Sam got the admission of guilt, they could send a police unit to the Vale and have Petyr charged with the crime he admitted to.

“It all sounds very,” Sansa tried to think of the right word. Jon was so excited about this plan that Sansa didn’t want to say it sounded unrealistic, but that’s what she was thinking, “Mission Impossible.”

Jon made a face, “The spy movie? These are the same techniques undercover officers use out in the field. It’s not some fictionalized tactic; it works. I thought it sounded far-fetched when Sam first suggested it, but I’ve thought it through and this could really work, Sansa.”
Would it? Sansa was inclined to say no. She knew Petyr too well to think that he could be tricked so easily. Something would go horribly wrong with the whole plan and Sansa would suffer for it. Still, Sansa knew she still had to try, and at the very least she could hear Jon out.

“Isn’t this sort of evidence inadmissible in court? It’s not like the police department is sanctioning this—it’s just you and Sam. Besides, the police here don’t have any jurisdiction in France, they might not even arrest Petyr.”

Jon sighed, mostly just to vocalize his frustration, “It’s not hard evidence, but any confession is better than none. It’s the best chance we’ve got at putting Bealish away.”

“I know that it is,” Sansa grumbled as she tilted her head back to the window. Jon was parking the car near the station and across the street, a little ways down, Sansa could see Mole’s Town Café. This might have been the very spot where Jon had been when Sansa first saw him through Mole’s Town windows all those months ago. Her chest hurt thinking about that, and Sansa tried not to let her voice show her current vulnerability. “It’s just this is the eleventh hour. I didn’t exactly plan to spend it in the police station.”

“It’ll only be a minute.” Jon said pushing open his door and getting out, “We’ve just got to get the wire from Sam and then we can go.”

Of course, it turned out to be longer than a minute. Sansa was waiting in Jon’s office as he dealt with all the police business that had built up over the past two days. She watched him through the window as he spoke to the other officers. Jon would be okay once Sansa left. She could see it in his posture—Jon was strong, he was commanding, he was resilient, and Sansa leaving wouldn’t break him. It might break her though.

It was her own fault for falling for Jon, to begin with. Wanting things never led to anything good, and Sansa wanted Jon—she really truly wanted him. He was so good and so strong, and so impossibly handsome. More importantly, though, Jon was kind to Sansa. She felt pathetic thinking that this is what drew her to him the most, but it really was Jon’s kindness that made Sansa love him the most. And she hated to use the word love—she’d used it before in reference to Jon, but it felt different now knowing that she would really have to leave him.

Sansa reached for her travel bag that was at her feet. She’d put the switchblade Arya gave her in there, burying beneath her folded clothes, with it was the other item Arya had given Sansa before they parted ways—it was the little black ring box.

Sansa had almost forgotten that Arya still had it. Arya must have been carrying it around for a week, but now it was back in Sansa’s possession and she could hardly stand to look at it.

“Sorry about that,” Jon finally came back to his office.
His voice startled Sansa and she jumped, quickly covering the ring and switchblade up in her bag and zipping it shut before Jon could come around and see what she was looking at.

Behind Jon, Sam was walking into the officer carrying a cardboard box under his arm. He set it down on Jon’s desk and went to shut the blinds on the office window.

“Everything alright?” Jon asked Sansa as he moved closer to her.

Sansa gave a sharp nod, “Yeah, I’m good. So, Sam what’s in the box?”

It was recording gear. Sam pulled out about a dozen different devices. Apparently, Jon had only told him that they were going through with the wire plan a few minutes ago and he hadn’t gotten the device ready yet, and it was somewhere amongst the pile of knotted wires of old police gear kept in storage.

“I’m in charge of the department, I can hardly steal from myself.” Jon mused indifferently. Sansa could read between the lines of his tone though. He knew that what they were doing could get him in trouble—Sansa could tell this by the way Jon wouldn’t meet her eyes when he spoke.

Sansa wanted to end this whole plan right then and there. She wasn’t so destructive to want to ruin Jon on her descent into hell. There was a firm set to Jon’s jaw, though, that said that there wasn’t anything Sansa could say that would change his mind about the wire plan.

Sam made an unsatisfied sound, “I think this might be the wrong box. There was another one in inventory—I’ll go check.”

Sam got up and left the office and Sansa glanced back at the clock on the wall. It was already the mid-afternoon. She grimaced and turned back to Jon.

“Hey, do you think you two can handle this on your own? I still have to take care of some other things.”
Jon looked up from a stack of paper on his desk. He had to go through some police reports, and was focusing on that while Sam and Sansa were working on untangling wires. He frowned and started to get up.

“I can go with you—“

Sansa shook her head and put a hand out to stop him, “No, I can do this on my own. Why don’t we meet up at the flat in a couple of hours and you can run through how to use the wire with me then.” Sansa pushed back her chair and stood up, taking her bag with her, “Can I take the laptop with me?”

Jon nodded and handed it over from its place on the corner of his desk and Sansa slipped it into her bag. Jon had that reserved, confused look on his face like he was trying to decide how much he needed to interfere with Sansa’s decision making. She’d given him a pass so far, but if he tried to push and follow her along for the rest of the day, Sansa might explode. She was glad Jon had come with her to Cardiff, but Sansa still had to sort some things out, and she didn’t want Jon to be there when she did.

“At five?” Jon asked looked at the clock.

That was two and a half hours. That would be plenty of time for Sansa to get everything done. She nodded her head and went around the desk to kiss Jon’s cheek, “I’ll see you then.”

Sansa made her way to Mole’s Town first and sat out on the patio and opened Jon’s laptop, signing onto the café’s Wi-Fi. She looked through the saved documents on the computer until she found the one she made at the hospital the other night. It was her will—Sansa opened it and started finishing some final details and additions that she needed to make before going to Jon’s email and sending the document to Stannis Baratheon.

She waited another second after it was sent to think about what she was doing. Did Sansa really think that Petyr was going to kill her like he’d done to Lysa Arryn? No, maybe he wouldn’t. Of course, there was a chance that it would happen, especially if Sansa displeased him. More likely though Petyr would keep Sansa alive; coerce her, by threatening her family, into behaving and then use up the Stark resources—desecrate her family home—and defile Sansa’s humanity until the day she died a natural death. Sansa thought about the switchblade in her bag, about the sharp edges of the blade and her red wedding, and that that the most likely solution to this all, maybe the most practical and the most merciful, was for Sansa to let her will be enacted sooner rather than later, even if it was by her own choice.

Sansa wouldn’t continue to think about this now. It was dark, she knew that it was, and honestly, it wasn’t ideal either. Sansa didn’t want to die, she didn’t want to kill herself, but she wouldn’t let her families’ lives be constantly threatened either. There was an easy solution to this all—Sansa just wasn’t sure if she was desperate enough to take it just yet. For now, the will was just a
There were very few pay phones in the city, but Sansa managed to find one after walking around for a while. She slipped a few coins into the slot and dialed Stannis Baratheon’s officer, letting the line ring twice before it got picked up.

“I’d like to speak to Stannis Baratheon, please.” Sansa told the receptionist, “It’s Sansa Stark.”

They put her through.

“Ms. Stark, this is an unexpected call.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” Sansa started by saying, “Mr. Baratheon, I’ve sent you a copy of a document from Jon’s email. I know that you used to be a lawyer—I don’t know if you’re still certified, or… well I don’t even know if I need a lawyer for this, but—“

“Mr. Stark, I’m a very busy man,” Stannis’ voice dragged impatiently, “As this is an unplanned call, I would prefer you get to the point of it already.”

Sansa shut her eyes and rested her head against the phone booth. She felt all over the place right now, maybe that had to do with her rapidly ticking clock, or the fact that she was organizing the authentication of her own will at age eighteen, either way, she found it difficult to vocalize her words. She took a deep breath and tried to do better.

“Right. Mr. Baratheon, I’ve sent you a copy of a will I’ve drawn up for myself. It has to do with the inheritance my parents left me and who I want it to go to in the event of my death. I was hoping that you could read it over, as a lawyer.”

Stannis made a noise of acknowledgment, it sounded as if his interest was piqued. “One moment,” he said and Sansa could hear him typing on his keyboard, a moment later Stannis cleared his throat, “I’d like you to inform Mr. Snow and yourself that typically my legal services are not free. That being said, I do have the document you sent in front of me.”

Sansa relaxed slightly, “Thank you. I wasn’t sure who to go to for something like this—I know my father trusted you—“
"I doubt I had Ned Stark’s trust," Stannis interrupted, "What I was mutual respect."

"Right," Sansa grimaced, "Respect. Mr. Baratheon, I know that this is last minute, but the issue is rather urgent. I was hoping you could read the will and make sure that there wasn’t any way someone could argue against it. I’d like my inheritance to go to Jon and my siblings in the event of my death—not to anyone else, not even if I was married or had children or anything like that."

"This is highly unusual." Stannis said, and Sansa could hear the frown in his voice, "Is there any reason that an eighteen-year-old girl would feel the need to have her will notarized urgently in the event of her marriage?"

"If it's all the same, I’d rather not explain," Sansa said uneasily, "If everything in the will looks alright, could you tell me what the next steps are to getting it recognized officially as a legal document."

Stannis Baratheon was quiet on the other end of the line, and this time Sansa didn’t think it was because he was opening his email. "Ms. Stark I’ll have to ask you to explain your situation if you want my legal advice."

Sansa cringed, nearly flinching at the stern tone. This was the first time in a long time that Sansa felt as if she was being chastised by an actual parent. "It’s nothing. Its just a precaution."

"Do you plan on getting married? While I didn’t know Ned Stark well, I feel as if I owe him enough to tell you that I doubt he’d approve of any sort of union between a man and his eighteen-year-old daughter. If my own daughter was in this situation I certainly wouldn’t approve."

Sansa didn’t need anyone to remind her of that. This whole conversation had turned into an exercise in humiliation.

"Mr. Baratheon it’s nothing like that."

"The will is just precautionary. After everything that’s happened to my family, I’ve learned that it’s best to err on the side of caution. That’s all this will is."

"Very well," Mr. Baratheon sounded barely convinced, but it was enough. "I’ll give the document a quick read over and then send any correction of the document over by the end of the hour. The next steps you will need to take with this is having the document signed in your hand with two
witnesses present. They’ll also need to sign the document—these witnesses can’t benefit from the will at all, either, so the witnesses can’t be your family members.”

Sansa nodded, “I understand, thank you.” She hesitated slightly before continuing, the words stuck in the back of her throat, like chewing gum, “Mr. Baratheon, I was wondering if I could ask for one last thing. The freelance employee in your office, Melisandre, is there any way I could speak to her?”

Another pause, “May I ask why?”

Sansa wasn’t sure how to explain why without sounding insane. “It’s about something she told me when I was at your office. If she isn’t there—“

“She is. I’ll have my assistant transfer the call over. This was a very time-consuming conversation Ms. Stark. We’ll be in touch soon.” With that the line went dead, only to be picked up a few seconds later by a shrill ring.

Sansa waited as the call was transferred, briefly wondering how much more time she had before Jon would be expecting her back at the flat. Sansa couldn’t dwell on this too long, because the line clicked and a clipped accent answered the phone.

“Sansa Stark.” Melisandre said, and Sansa felt a chill go past her skin, “I was wondering when you would call.”

Sansa fidgeted from one foot to the other. She tried not to feel panicked when Melisandre said this—it was just intuition, not any proof that she could really see the future. Not that it made any real difference; Sansa was still coming to her for insight on what was about to come.

“I was hoping that I could ask you some questions.” Sansa said, “I want to know if you know anything else about what’s about to happen to me.”

Melisandre hums, the noise sharp and chilling, “I don’t have the answers you want.”

Sansa shook her head, “That’s fine. I just want answers. You said I was going to choke on blood or a bird at my wedding. What did that mean? Is someone…Am I going to die?”
“I am only given visions, not explanations. I can only tell you what I saw, you have to decide what it means.”

Sansa let out a growl of frustration. The only reason Sansa was even afraid that Petyr was going to kill her was because of Melisandre’s prophecy. Sansa just wanted a real answer about what it meant.

“So that’s it? You haven’t seen anything else?”

“No, I’ve seen something else.” The answer came after a long pause. It was said with chilling clarity; Melisandre’s voice chiming like a bell, deep and foreboding.

Sansa gave a sharp breath, “What was it?”

“Broken skin,” Melisandre said, her voice sounded far off, carrying a dreamy quality as if spoken by someone who wasn’t even awake. “Sliced at the seams, and string spooling out. Porcelain cracking. A little bird in the jaws of a beast.”

“Little bird?” Sansa closed her eyes and focused on that last piece, “That’s Petyr, isn’t it? His company logo is a bird.”

“I don’t know,” Melisandre’s voice sounded strained, exhausted, “Sansa Stark whatever is about to happen to you, you need to be careful. You are in danger.”

The line clicked, dead. Sansa pulled the phone away from her ear and stared down at it. *I know I’m in danger, I don’t need to be reminded.*

Hanging up the phone Sansa pushed a few more coins into the slot and dialed one last number.

Gilly met Sansa in front of the art department building at the University. Sansa had never been on the campus before, and she tried her best not to think about how, in a better world, she could be like all the other students going to classes.

Classes had ended for Gilly several hours ago, but this was the best place for them to meet. Gilly came with little Sammy, and went over and gave Sansa a hug when she saw her.
“How’s your brother, Bran?” She asked when she pulled away.

“More of the same,” Sansa told her, “The doctors say he’s in stable condition, but they still don’t know when he’ll wake up.”

“I’m so sorry,” Gilly told her, truly meaning it, “Its so awful.”

It was, but there wasn’t anything to be done about it now. Sansa had come to terms that she’d never get to see Bran awake again. Maybe Petyr might let her visit him if he ever did come out of his coma, but Sansa wasn’t about to bank her hope in that.

“We should get inside,” Sansa said, running her hands together to fight off the cold, “Will Gendry still be here?”

Gilly nodded and lifted Sammy up onto her hip, “I found his number on the employee call roll. He told me that he’d still be here.”

It was rather late in the day, nearly five thirty. Sansa was already going to be late getting to the flat to see Jon, but Stannis had taken a little longer than he said he would when sending the revised will over. Sansa still had to sign it with two witnesses, and Gilly and Gendry were the only two she knew who wouldn’t tell anyone else she knew about it. Sansa would have asked Sam to do it instead of Gendry, but she knew that Sam would just end up telling Jon, and if Jon knew that Sansa was considering the fact that she might die in the Vale, he would go ballistic. Sansa was just trying to avoid that.

Sansa knew that Gendry went to the same University as Sam and Gilly, but she hadn’t known what he studied there. Gilly leads Sansa through the art building, passing by dozens of different sort of studio rooms, and Sansa wished they could slow down a little so that she could spend more time seeing what was going on inside each of them. Gilly told Sansa that Gendry studied sculpture, but that’s all she knew about it.

They ended up in a large studio with high vaulted ceilings and cement flooring. The studio was empty save for the sound of a blowtorch. Sansa and Gilly shared a look, and Gilly clutched Sammy closer to her chest. They followed the sound across the studio and saw Gendry standing at a workstation, a pair of headphone in his ears and protective glasses over his eyes. He held the welding torch in his hand, working in front of a large twisting piece of metal that stood near his workstation.

The sculpture was still being worked on, but Sansa thought it looked like two people holding hands and frozen in mid-run—it was abstract, of course, but Sansa thought it was nice.
“Gendry?” Gilly shouted, trying to get his attention over the music coming out of his headphones, and the welding torch, which was shooting sparks at them.

Gendry looked up, and the torch shut off. He set it aside on the work table and pulled one of the headphones from his ear. “Sorry, I didn’t hear you guys come in. Do you have the paper, or whatever that we need to sign?”

Sansa nodded. She’d printed it out at the library at the university that she stopped at before meeting with Gilly. Stannis had an extra paragraph included in his email, and Sansa barely skimmed the first line before choosing to look over it later when she would have more time to focus on what it said.

Sansa pulled the printed will out of her bag and brought it over to Gendry’s work table.

“Do you have a pen?” Sansa asked, realizing that she hadn’t brought one.

“Yeah, give me a second. There’s one at Lommy’s station.” Gendry said as he pulled off his welding gloves, and then got up to and cross the room over to another table.

“This is your will?” Gilly asked, stepping close to Sansa and pulling the paper close to her to read.

Sansa grimaced, “I just want to be prepared.”

Gendry came back over carrying a pen. He handed it over to Sansa, who bent over and signed the will on the line Stannis had placed at the bottom. There was a space for two other signatures and so Sansa passed the pen over to Gilly and stepped away, giving her room to sign and then Gendry signed next.

“That’s all we’ve got to do?” Gendry asked placing the pen beside the paper, “Seems rather simplistic, doesn’t it? Maybe I should make my own will.”

Sansa picked up the paper, “Thanks for doing this, Gendry.”

“Yeah, sure.” Gendry shrugged indifferently. He didn’t really know what was going on, and Sansa was surprised that he hadn’t asked more questions about it. Gendry rubbed the back of his neck, “So does this mean that your vacation is over?”
Sansa felt herself go stiff, “What?” she asked in a cold voice.

Gendry’s face went red, “Arya told me that she was going out of town for some family vacation—that’s why she hasn’t been at work, isn’t it? The replacement the boss got at the café is pretty annoying, I was just wondering when she was coming back.”

“Oh.” Sansa felt herself flush. She felt like an idiot for assuming that Gendry knew something about her going back to the Vale. “Right. I don’t know. I think Arya will be coming back soon, there is some stuff going on with our brother and she’s with him right now.”

“Oh, the officer?”

Sansa shook her head, “No, Jon is in town with me.”

“Right,” Gendry nodded, “The uh little one then. Everything alright with him?”

Sansa glanced over to Gilly. This was the most Gendry had ever spoken to Sansa, and she was fairly certain that his interest in her family extended as far as his interest in Arya did. “No, Rickon’s fine. It’s my other brother—look Gendry, thank you for signing this. I’m sure when Arya gets back into town she’ll stop by to see you.”

She set her hand on his shoulder and gave a soft smile before going with Gilly back to the hall. “They’ve got another brother?” she heard Gendry mutter behind her.

In the hall, Sansa and Gilly went over to the copier in the reception hall and went to print another copy of the will.

“I don’t want Jon to know about this,” Sansa told Gilly as they waited for the document to print, “It probably isn’t even necessary, it’s just going to worry him.”

Gilly frowned, and set Sammy down so that he could look at the glass case full of sculptures beside them, “I won’t tell Sam if that’s what you’re saying, but I don’t think you’d be doing all of this if you didn’t think your will was going to come into use.”
Sansa let out a sigh, she wanted to sit on the floor and just melt into the tiles. “I don’t know, Gilly. Sam told you about the marriage, didn’t he?”

Gilly nodded, “He explained the situation. He said that he and Jon thought they might have come up with a way to get you out of it?”

“Maybe,” Sansa shook her head, “They want to put a wire on me and have Petyr admit to kidnapping more, or extorting me, or something. I really don’t think its going to work, but Jon is really excited about it.”

“It might work,” Gilly said, edging optimistically, “You’ve got to give it a shot, right?”

Sansa nodded. She grabbed the copy of the will and folded it, sticking it into the bottom of her bag. She grabbed the original copy and held it out to Gilly, “I want you to hold onto this. If anything ever does happen to me I need you to get a copy of it to this address,” She pulled out a copy of Stannis’ business cards that she took when they visited his office all those weeks ago, “And then give another copy to Jon. They’ll know what to do from there.”

Gilly took the paper from Sansa gingerly. She looked up at Sansa with glassy eyes, she took a step and gave Sansa a hug. Sansa blinked back her surprise and slowly brought her hands up to hug Gilly back.

“Things are going to work out, alright?” Gilly said, voice sounding a little wobbly. “Nothing going to happen to you. Jon and Sam are going to figure things out.”

Sansa gave a wet laugh and pulled away. She wiped away the stray tear in her eye, “I really don’t think this is a situation, anymore, that anyone could get me out of.”

“Then you’re going to figure it out on your own,” Gilly told her fiercely, “Things aren’t going to end like this Sansa. People like them don’t get to win.”

Maybe they didn’t always win. Gilly was able to get out and start a better life away from her abuser, but Sansa didn’t think her story was going to end that way. Gilly had Sam to get her out of her life, but once Sansa was back in the Vale, she wasn’t going to have anyone.

Sansa stepped away from the copier, shrugging her bag over her shoulder as she glanced down the
hall. She felt it in her soul—her minutes ticking by, freedom slipping away.

Sansa looked back at Gilly, “I guess we’ll find out.”

She was late getting to the flat. Sansa jogged up the steps in the stairwell to their floor, not bothering with the elevator. Standing still didn’t feel like an option right now, Sansa was too restless—maybe anxious more than anything, because since leaving Gilly at the university Sansa hadn’t stopped thinking about if her fate was inevitable, and she really was going to attend some bloody wedding like Melisandre said.

Everything felt predetermined so far. Sansa was just going through the motions to get where she was going to end up. It was like a meteor about to strike the earth, how do you avoid something like that?

Sansa had a copy of the flat’s key in her bag and she slipped it into the lock and pushed the door open. She was out of breath from climbing three flights of stairs; face already red from the cold and now panting like she’d just ran a marathon. When she enters, the flat is silent, and Sansa wonders if there was any possible way that she actually beat Jon in getting there. But no, Sansa glances towards the kitchen where Jon is leaning against the countertop staring down at a torn envelope and the contents inside.

When he hears the door open Jon looks up, but it isn’t accompanied by his usual greeting. There’s a somber look on his face—mouth in a flat line, brows drawn together, and jaw clenched. It’s slowly changing from somber to pissed.

Sansa sets her bag down by the door, “Sorry, I know I’m late.” She runs her hand through her hair to push her bangs from her face, and then takes a few steps towards the kitchen and Jon. “I was with Gilly...”

Sansa lets her voice trail off because Jon has still barely reacted to anything she’s said. Edging around the countertop, Sansa waivers a few steps away from him, trying to get a read on his emotions. Jon is staring at the counter again—at the letter in front of him.

“What is that?”

Jon’s face twitches like he was about to laugh, but nothing about how he looks makes Sansa think that anything is funny. Jon looks up from the letter, a bitter edge to his voice when he speaks, “He sent a plane ticket.”
The letter is pushed away, as Jon turns his back to Sansa. He carves his hand through his hair as he paces across the room as if he needed to physically distance himself from the letter. Sansa reaches across the counter and pulls the letter closer, frowning as she reads the handwritten note that accompanied the plane ticket.

She can hear Jon in the background as he stalks across the living room—he’s talking, but Sansa isn’t listening. The letter was from Petyr. Of course, it was, Sansa knew that Petyr was going to do something to let her know that her time was up, though she hadn’t ever considered that being a letter.

The handwriting didn’t look like Petyr’s so it must have been written by one of his assistants. It was vague, offering no specific details, except for the last line, where he writes that everyone is so excited to have Sansa back where she belongs. There is no signature at the bottom of the letter—no evidence that it was even from Petyr, and that in a way is just a taunt, like Petyr knows that there is no way that Sansa could pin any sort of blame on him, or accuse him of any crime.

Tucked in the envelope with the letter is a single printed plane ticket for tomorrow afternoon. It’s for a flight from Cardiff International Airport to Grenoble, France, set to take off at one-thirty PM.

So I’ve got less time than I thought. Sansa thinks to herself, setting the letter and the plane ticket back into the torn envelope. She feels strangely calm about the whole thing—disembodied almost. This was fate, this was inevitable, and still, Sansa looked at Jon and she knew that she had to fight the inevitable, even if it was just for a few more hours.

“It’s okay, Jon,” Sansa says as she moves over to the lounge, and sits down on the sofa. Jon was still pacing, face torn in frustration.

“He’s trying to intimidate you.” Jon was saying as he paced, “He thinks he can just bully us into—you’ve got until the end of the day tomorrow, that was part of the deal.”

You make a deal with the devil, do you really expect him to keep his word? “It doesn’t matter, Jon. We knew that something like this was going to happen.”

“It does matter,” Jon insists heatedly, stopping to rest a hand against the wall, “Every second matters. You sound like you’ve given up.”

Sansa groans and falls back sideways on the sofa, her mouth half buried against the polyester cushions, “God, you sound like Rickon.” Sansa pushes herself up on one arm, a tired and resigned look on her face, “There’s a difference between giving up and facing reality, Jon. I know that you want to be hopeful and think that in the eleventh hour some giant piece of evidence is going to fall in our laps and give us something to convict Petyr with, but that’s not going to happen. We’ve got our plan—the wire. You said it yourself, it could work, and the sooner I get to Petyr and get him to admit to something the sooner I can get out of there.”
Jon grimaced; he crossed his arms over his chest and watched Sansa like he was expecting her to retract some part of her statement. He was dressed in the same jean trousers that he’d worn on the drive back from Newcastle, but he’d changed out of the button-down shirt he’d worn, and into one of the old police t-shirts that Sansa always liked to steal. The shirt stretched over the tense muscles in his arms, molding to his wide shoulder that were risen to their haunches. Despite the obvious waves of annoyance radiating off of him, some of which were directed at Sansa, Sansa couldn’t stop herself from staring at him.

It was the knowledge that these were the last few hours she’d have with him. Sansa was taking it in stride—the eerie calm she felt was allowing her to take her time and capture every memory she could of this life—the life where Sansa Stark was free. It wasn’t going to last much longer, and when Sansa did leave for the Vale all she would have left were the memories of how things could have been. Of course, Sansa thought bitterly that none of this could have happened if it weren’t for Petyr.

If Sansa had never been taken from the riots of London all those years ago—if her father had never been assassinated during his speech—Sansa never would have known Jon like this. They’d have grown up and then grown even further apart. Sansa would have kept her nose up in the air, and probably ended up dating some guy who was equally as horrible as Joffery Baratheon, and ended up equally horrible herself. Maybe she’d have seen Jon at Christmas dinners when the whole family got together, but even then, would Sansa have even spared him a second thought? Every awful event in Sansa’s life had only ever brought her closer to Jon—not just that. Maybe every awful event brought Sansa closer to being a real person, not just the artificial London socialite that she used to dream of being. Had she controlled her own path, what sort of person would Sansa have ended up being? Sansa often felt weak now, but the girl she was before would have shattered by now.

Sansa wondered if everything that had happened had made all those years with Petyr worth it. She looked up at Jon and wondered if he knew that she’d go through it all again if it meant that she’d get to know him.

“You’re staring.” Jon said, pushing himself off the wall, his disapproving expression still glued to his face.

“So are you.” Sansa countered bracing her hands on the sofa cushions on either side of her.

She was feeling brave—no, Sansa was feeling reckless. It was like when she got the tattoo—Sansa knew that she only had so much time left where she’d get to make her own choices and she didn’t want to waste them talking about Petyr.

Jon gave her an unimpressed look, but it felt like a front when she saw it. It wasn’t just teasing, no, underneath Jon’s anger and frustration there was something else too, something he was trying not to let Sansa see.

Sansa opens her mouth, but Jon ends up speaking first, “We should go over how to use the wire.” Jon walks over to the kitchen again, rubbing the back of his neck that looked a suspicious shade of
red, “You won’t be able to wear it on the plane—the metal detectors would pick it up. You’ll have to tape it on once you’ve landed.”

Sansa wrinkles her nose and deflates a little. Jon’s back is to her, as he goes through a box on the countertop, pulling out a little rectangular box with a long wire attached, which had a cylindrical end, which must have been the listening device. It was much less sleek than Sansa imagined—bulkier really and far more conspicuous than she pictured it being.

Jon came over to the sofa and sat down on the other side, holding out the wire for Sansa to take, “You’re going to tape this to your chest. You’ve got a baggier shirt than that, right?”

Sansa glanced down at her chest and the cream jumper she was wearing. It was thick knit, but form fitting—the preferable fashion for the cold. “Is there something wrong with my jumper?”

Jon gave a breathy laugh and shook his head, “You’ll see the outline of the wire under it.” Sansa rolled her eyes, leaning back on the sofa and Jon started to glare again, “Sansa you’ve got to take this seriously.”

“I am,” She shot back, that restlessness from before was back—that along with her nerves was making Sansa snap. “I know that you’d see the wire under my jumper, it was a joke.”

“Can you not joke about this?” Jon asked, irritation edging in his voice, “This is our only shot, it needs to be done right. You’ll need to have the wire laying flat and the microphone should be near the collar of your shirt—“

Sansa was fairly certain that she was the one who would be screwed if their plan went wrong. Jon was acting like this was some sort of police sting, maybe that was his way of depersonalizing it so that he could think clearly, but it was just serving to aggravate Sansa more. Sansa did not want to spend her last hours like this.

She pushed the wire aside and gave Jon a steady look. Her hand was on top of his, he’d been holding the wire that she pushed aside and he hadn’t let go. “Is this really something we have to do right now? I’ve only got a few more hours left, Jon. I don’t want to spend it talking about wires and microphones.”

Under her hand, Sansa could feel Jon tense. He opened his mouth and then shut it, a conflicted expression working its way on his face. “What do you want to talk about?”
There was a loaded question. There was a time for lies, there was a time for patience, that time was not tonight. Sansa was about to be married to a man who’d abused her for six years tomorrow, and she would not let him taint any more firsts. Sansa looked up from under her lashes—if any part of her felt timid or afraid, she was pretending that that part of her didn’t exist. Sansa had to take what she could with the time she had left—tomorrow she would be responsible, she’d be selfless, and sacrificial. Tonight Sansa deserved to be selfish.

“I don’t want to talk at all.”

Sansa could feel her heartbeat speeding up. Knowing that Jon actually liked her, that he had kissed her, and that he’d fight for her, and then this was two entirely different things. Sansa was very much aware of how much rejection would sting. There was always an excuse—there were always a million excuses, and Sansa didn’t even need Jon to say them, she knew all of them by heart. For some reason, that wasn’t stopping her.

“When is the right time?” Sansa wanted to scream. She was leaving tomorrow, and if Jon was honest with himself, he knew that Sansa probably wasn’t coming back. This was the only time for this.

Sansa had one leg folded on the sofa, and Jon reached out and touched her ankle with a feather touch. He grimaced.

“We can go over how to use the wire in the morning.” He consented, his voice careful, almost pitying. “The plan is going to work—you don’t need to…panic, you aren’t going to be in France for more than a day. Why don’t we just watch a movie or something, yeah?”

Panic? Was that what Jon thought Sansa was doing? Since when did panic translate into failed attempts at seduction? Sansa pulled away from Jon, setting both feet firmly on the ground and in reality and standing up, face turned away. Was she really that pathetic and undesirable that Jon was going to turn her down before they’d even done anything?

Sansa stood up and kept her face turned away so that Jon couldn’t see how red it was. “Sure. I’m going to take a shower—you can just get the movie started.”

Sansa stooped down to pick her bag up on her way to the bathroom, desperately trying to get out of
eyesight. She leaned against the bathroom door once it was shut, cringing internally.

Watch a movie? It was such a bizarrely normal suggestion and it just felt so out of place in Sansa’s reality. Worse, it was just Jon’s attempt to get Sansa to cool down because apparently, she was slipping into sex driven hysterics.

Leaning against the bathroom sink, Sansa looked up at her reflection. She wasn’t this pathetic, but she was desperate. Maybe Jon’s wire plan would work, but there was a good chance that it wouldn’t, and if that happened it meant that Sansa was going to actually have to marry Petyr, and Sansa was more than certain that Petyr was going to enforce all marital activities. If he touched her—Sansa felt her stomach roll—if Petyr touched her again, if he got to claim any more of her than he already had Sansa would choke herself.

She turned the sink on and splashed some cool water on her face. Sansa reached for a towel and dried her skin, taking in some deep breaths. Maybe this was panic—maybe this was her last ditch effort to actually choose what happened to her body, and maybe it wasn’t fair to use Jon in that way, but Christ, what alternatives did Sansa have? It’s not like she didn’t want it, she did, she had since Jon and her first kiss. Sansa wanted all that Jon would give her—this wasn’t going to be a mistake, nothing with Jon was a mistake.

But Jon had shut her down. If he wasn’t interested…if he wasn’t interested then Sansa would just find someone else between now and tomorrow afternoon who was willing to sleep with her because Petyr absolutely was not going to get to claim this piece of her.

Sansa stood up straight and stared at herself in the mirror one last time. She still had agency of her own choices, for a little while longer. She wasn’t about to waste that time angling over the fact that the boy she liked had rejected her—more than that, Sansa wasn’t about to end tonight without giving herself a real shot at getting what she wanted.

Jon wasn’t in the lounge room anymore. His bedroom door was cracked open and so Sansa walked over to it, pushing the door a little wider. There were still several boxes that hadn’t been unpacked since they moved from Jon’s old flat to this one. Most of the boxes were being kept in Jon’s room—the box with the DVDs was apparently one of them.

Jon was crouched on the ground, rummaging through one of the cardboard boxes when Sansa entered. He hadn’t heard her yet and so Sansa took a moment to take a deep breath. Her hands were shaking and so she closed them into fists. The worst that could happen was that Jon could say no, but Sansa actual had to tell him what he was saying no to before that could happen.

Was she supposed to be this nervous? Was that normal? Sansa wished she paid more attention to Mya and Myranda when they talked about their own first times, but it had seemed so silly then. Before there hadn’t been a person on earth who Sansa would want to sleep with.

Jon looked up, turning his head to see Sansa standing in the doorway. He frowned, standing up. “You didn’t take a shower.”

Sansa didn’t know what to say. She’d been feeling reckless before, but now it was solely just nerves. It was stupid; looking at Jon, Sansa already knew that he liked her, that he wanted her,
Sansa wasn’t going to let her fear get in her way.

She crossed the room in four long steps, bringing her hand up to catch around Jon’s neck and pull him down in a purposeful kiss. His hand came down to the small of her back, the other setting itself on the place where her jaw met her neck and kept her steady. He was keeping some distance between them, allowing the kiss to hold in some formal distant place.

Usually, Sansa could get herself to relax into the kiss, but she couldn’t this time. She tilted her head up and opened her mouth, biting Jon’s bottom lip as she tried to get him to lose some of his restraint.

Jon let Sansa control the kiss, following her lead as she deepened the kiss, his hand synching on the back of her jumper, curling over the cotton as his teeth pulled her swollen bottom lip. Sansa dragged her hand down Jon’s chest, feeling the ridges of his muscles and the way his breath stuttered under her hand. There was sort of power to this, Sansa thought. She knew from prior experience that Jon liked this—liked kissing, liked Sansa’s touch. She kept dragging her hand down, letting it go past his belt to the steadily stiffening tent in his pants.

“Sansa.” Jon’s voice broke off disapprovingly, as he pushed her back, his hands coming up to Sansa’s shoulders keeping her at arms length.

Sansa let out a shallow breath and grimaced, “Jon.”

Jon glared, looking like a responsible officer again, and not at all like the boy who’d been kissing her seconds ago, “You don’t want to do this right now—“

“You don’t know what I want.” Sansa held onto his arms, trying to draw him closer, and she desperately tried to convince him, “Jon, I’m not a child. How many times do I have to tell you that I want you—that I want this.”

“You aren’t thinking clearly. You aren’t in the right mind to be making these sort of decision.”

Sansa took a step back and pushed Jon’s arms away, “Fuck you, Jon. I think I’ve proven that I can make plenty of important decisions under duress. In case you forgot, I’ve been making all sorts of decisions on my own for years and I haven’t needed you to make any of them for me at any point.”

Jon shut his eyes, “That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what do you mean?” Sansa crossed her arms over her chest, “If you aren’t comfortable with this then just say that. But if you aren’t then you should know that I’m going to find someone else
Jon opened his eyes and laughed, “What?”

Sansa nodded. “There’s about a ninety percent chance that I’m going to get married tomorrow, and even if your plan does work, we don’t know if it’s going to work in time for me to avoid all the things marriage entails. I’m not going to let my first time having sex be with Petyr, I swear Jon, I’m not. If that means that I’ve got to go down to the nearest pub and see who’d rather go home with me then that’s what I’ll do.”

Jon’s face hardened as he took a step forward, “No you’re not.”

“You can’t stop me.” Sansa pushed back, “It’s my decision to make.”

“Yeah well, I’m not going to let you make a decision that’s so stupid.”

Sansa laughed and tossed up a hand, “Wow, Jon, I totally forgot where I asked for your input. Look, if you don’t want to have…sleep with me—“

Jon scoffed, shaking his head, as he set a hand on his neck, “You can’t even say it. Sansa, you’re rushing into things—“

“Damn it, Jon,” Sansa growled, “I want you to fuck me, is that what you need to hear?”

Sansa saw the way Jon sucked in a breath when she spoke. It didn’t matter, he wasn’t wavering. He was too damn stubborn, but Sansa was realizing that she was too. If he was trying to call her bluff, he was about to be surprised by how serious Sansa was.

Sansa was tense, shoulders squared like she was about to get into a fight or something. She took a step back and forced herself to relax. Shouting wasn’t getting anyone anywhere.

“I understand if you wouldn’t want to sleep with me,” Sansa tells him, the fire in her voice completely put out, “This situation is so weird—“
“It’s not that,” Jon interrupts her. He cringes, pulling his hand down his face, “It’s not that I don’t want to, Christ, Sansa I do, but it shouldn’t be like this when you’re only doing it so that Baelish doesn’t have to be your first. It shouldn’t be like that, I don’t want it to be like that for you.”

Sansa gave a starved laugh, “Well I’ve hardly got the time to arrange for a more romantic situation. It’s sex, Jon, it could honestly be horrible and I’d still prefer it to anything else that I’d get.”

Jon didn’t smile, “It’s not supposed to be like this. When you’re doing it because you feel pressured into it because of some time clock. I don’t want to sleep with you if you’re only doing it because I’m not Petyr Baelish. Something like this should be with someone who you really want to be with, it should be, I don’t know, special.”

“I don’t want special,” Sansa said, “I want you, Jon. If I didn’t I wouldn’t be in here, I’d be on the street looking for someone who was less likely to give me a lecture. And It’s not just because I’m leaving tomorrow, or it is, but not in the way you think. This is what I want Jon, you’re the only person I’ve ever wanted, and when I’m gone and when I’m with Petyr, I’m not going to think about him, I’m going to think about you and how you’re the only man who’s ever made me feel something.”

Jon shut his eyes. Sansa could see the conflict on his face—fighting his propriety against everything else. He wanted her too, she could see it in every shaky breath he took when she was speaking, and every lingering glance he ever gave her. She just hoped that wanting was enough, because right now that’s all she had.

Jon gave a self-depreciating laugh and glanced down, “I’m trying to be a gentlemen.”

Sansa let out a sharp laugh at her own expense, “I really don’t have the time for gentlemen. I’ve met plenty of them and I’d rather just have you.”

Jon looked up, brown eyes boring into Sansa with a fierce intensity. His tongue swiped against his bottom lip and he nodded, fidgeting like he was experiencing the same nervous energy as Sansa. Something about that made her relax, if Jon felt afraid to then Sansa didn’t feel so bad about her own fears.

This wasn’t anything like Sansa imagined. Not that she ever really imagined it before, but that had sort of been the point. Sansa had hoped to just throw herself at Jon and let everything happen before she could over process it. Part of her was terrified that she’d just think about Petyr the entire time, and another part of her was terrified that it would be as awful as Sansa imagined it would be when she was younger. Then, the last part of her was very much aware that she wasn’t about to sleep with just anyone. This was Jon—Jon who’d she known her entire life, who was the one person who made her feel safe, who knew every awful thing about Sansa and still wanted her.
Knowing that made her less afraid, it made her brave.

She kissed him first, resisting the urge to jump right into it, and instead took it slow. Jon held her around the waist as he stepped towards the bed.

“Tell me to stop.” He told her in a quiet deep voice as the back of his legs hit the bed. His lips were moving against the side of Sansa’s neck, as she bent her head to give him more access, only barely registering his words. “Whenever you want, just tell me to stop.”

Sansa melted under his touch. Every worry and fear was just falling away with each passing second. She didn’t know how to describe the feeling, she’d never felt it before—she felt calm, she felt safe, she felt like electricity was burning right under her skin, and every time Jon touched her it lit up.

Sansa reached for Jon’s shoulders, pushing his jacket off, or at least trying to while Jon kept his mouth pressed against Sansa’s neck. She felt his teeth scraping against her skin, slowly leaving red marks there. She should tell him to stop—tomorrow she would see Petyr and he would see the evidence of this night, maybe that’s why Jon was leaving the bites there, or maybe he just wasn’t thinking that far ahead, either way, Sansa was enjoying the feeling too much to push his away.

Still, Sansa felt passive in this—she wanted to feel and taste Jon just as he was feeling and tasting her—and so Sansa turned her head to the side, and recaptured Jon lips in hers, pushing him back enough so that he fell down on the bed, the arm around Sansa’s waist bringing her down with him. As Jon had done to her, Sansa kissed her way down Jon’s neck, letting her teeth scrape against his collarbone, as she finally managed to push his jacket off. She dragged her hands down his bare arms, feeling the curve of the muscle there and the way it flexed as he pulled her closer. Beneath her, she heard Jon groan as she sucked another kiss to his chest. His hands were still ghosting over her skin, but another than the stray kisses, Jon had done little to advance this, rather he let Sansa take control of the situation, as if waiting for her to make every move and advance.

Sansa pulled away, sitting back on Jon’s lap. She looked into his eyes, “You don’t have to be careful with me. I want this.”

Jon’s face faltered, as if he hadn’t even realized how very he’d been stalling the situation. He nodded and slipped his hand around Sansa’s waist and dragged her closer in a kiss. True to Sansa’s request, this kiss was not nearly as careful as the last. It felt real, and heated.

Jon brought one hand down to Sansa’s waist, slipping his fingers beneath her shift and playing with the hem. He was hesitating, and so Sansa moved to reassure him, moving to lift her jumper up and over her head. It was tossed to the ground, somewhere out of view. Sansa felt the prick of the cold air settle over her exposed flesh, as if hyper aware of how bare she felt compared to Jon. She would have said something, but every thought faded as Jon put a firm around Sansa’s back and stood up from the bed, carrying her with him.

The kiss never broke, as Sansa wrapped her legs around Jon’s waist, keep a secured arm around his neck as he turned them around, and moved to lay Sansa back on the bed. She let out a breath, when they finally parted, her hair fanning out around her. Sansa watched as Jon pulled his own shirt off, moving down to continue their kiss. Sansa held one hand against his arm to steady herself, and let
the other move down to the button of her jeans, wiggling a little as she tried to get them over her hips.

Jon must have felt the action, because he was pulling away to help her, laughing at the back of his throat, as Sansa’s ankle got caught around the pants leg. He stood up and pulled at one end, as Sansa tried to get her foot free.

“Don’t laugh!” Sansa scolded him, wondering if she should feel self conscious, when all she could really do was smile.

Jon shook his head, that mirthful expression still glued to his face. They finally freed Sansa from the jeans and Jon balled them up and tossed them in the same direction of their shirts. He looked back at Sansa, the intense features of his face changing as he looked down at where she lay in the darkened room, on his bed.

It wasn’t so much the feeling of being self-conscious, as it was the feeling of being hyper aware. The cold air was playing at Sansa’s skin, sending goosebumps across her arms as she lay, wearing very little, on Jon’s bed. It was certainly not an image she ever let herself imagine. She wanted Jon to kiss her again, to make her feel lost in his touch, so lost that she didn’t think about every insecurity she could muster. But Jon was still standing at the edge of the bed, looking down at her with a soft, nearly reverent expression on his face.

“What?” Sansa asked, pushing herself up on the bed. She wished she could just look into his head and see what he was thinking—it would be so much easier that way.

Jon shook his head, “It’s nothing. You just look beautiful.”

Sansa flushed, averting her eyes from Jon’s gaze. “You’re being a gentlemen again.” Sansa reminded him, rather than just saying that he shouldn’t say such sweet things to her.

Jon gave another quiet laugh, but he got the message. He stepped forward, moving between Sansa’s legs and grabbed his chin in his calloused hand and kissed her.

She moved back on the bed, her legs parting to let Jon fit above her. Sansa arched into Jon’s touch as he brought his hand over her skin, moaning breathily as Jon kissed his way down her chest to Sansa’s stomach. Her breath stuttered as she felt his breath against her inner thigh. Sansa’s head fell back against the bed as she felt his tongue brush against her skin their, teasing her.

“Is this okay?” She heard Jon ask, his hand resting against the hem of her panties.
Sansa didn’t have words. She’d forgotten them all. She nodded, and made a noise that she thought sounded like yes. She felt Jon’s mouth work against her skin, as he dragged her panties down. She thanked every higher power out there that she wasn’t totally clueless about what was going on—at least this was another thing Myranda often bragged about when she talked to Sansa and Mya.

“You don’t have to—” Sansa told him in a breathless voice. Her voice morphed into a moan as she felt Jon’s tongue against her.

Sansa can’t stop the roll of her hips, or her startling breaths as Jon continues to move his mouth against her. She feels him bring a steadying hand up against her hip, as if to hold her still. She wonders how long this will last—how long she’ll last if Jon keeps this up. Had he done this with every girl he’d been with? He was certainly skilled enough for that to be the case.

Sansa clutched the bed sheets, as she moaned out Jon’s name. His hand tightened on her hip, his fingers digging into her flesh there. It was too much, and Sansa felt feverish. Before it became too much, Jon broke away, and Sansa met him halfway as she dragged him forward in a kiss.

She reached down to pull at Jon’s jeans, and for once, Jon did not stop her, and instead reached down to help her pull them off so that he was just as bare as she was. Sansa could feel his hard length against her side. Sansa dragged him into another kiss as Jon moved between Sansa’s open legs.

“Jon.” Sansa gasped as Jon moved his mouth against her breasts and neck. She felt absolutely feverish and desperate to have Jon inside her. “Jon, please just fuck me already.”

Jon made a noise that could have been a gasp or could have been a moan. He met Sansa’s lips again, and pushed himself up to look down at her as she lay sprawled beneath him. “You’re certain?”

Sansa nodded, despite her desperation and blissed state, she sobered, “Are you?”

Jon’s lip quirked into a near smile, and Sansa relaxed. She met him in the kiss, melting into his touch just like before. She could feel him against her, his warm touch setting Sansa alight. She felt like electricity, her entire body burning like fire as Jon pushed himself inside her. She moaned out his name, clutching his shoulder, her nails digging into his skin. Sansa didn’t feel afraid, she felt infinite.

Later, as they lay facing each other in Jon’s bed, flushed with heat and sweat, chests rising and falling in uneven lengths, Jon trailed his hand down Sansa’s side.
“A wolf?” He asked, a frown creasing his brow, the serious look alien on his flushed face with his hair sticking to his sweaty forehead.

Sansa glanced down at the tattoo. It still looked fresh, the bandage was gone but it still felt raw. “A Stark.”

Sansa brought her hand down to where Jon’s was resting against her ribs, tracing the lines of the tattoo. Wolves and Starks, they were one in the same, weren’t they? Arya had called it a predator, but Sansa had never felt dangerous. But she was a Stark, and that was one of two things Petyr couldn’t take away. Jon was the other.

The morning came faster than Sansa ever imagined it would. She hadn’t slept, instead, spending her last few hours laying in the bed next to Jon and trying not to think. Thinking was the enemy—it only made her afraid, and Sansa wanted to, instead, savor the last remaining moments of truly feeling safe, or feeling herself.

They didn’t talk about what happened. It was better that way—to leave it as some immortalized moment of the past, and not ruin by asking themselves what it meant or how they felt. That would have just ruined it and wasted precious time.

Sansa sat on a chair at the kitchen table as Jon explained how she would set the wire up. He spent too much time testing Sansa on what he’d told her, asking her to set the wire up and disengage it until she could do it with her eyes closed. She didn’t see why so much time had to be spent quizzing her on how to flip an on switch or how to tape a cable under your clothes, but she tolerated, only because the other option was arguing and Sansa didn’t want to do that either.

“I want you to give this to Rickon,” Sansa handed Jon three sealed envelopes, “And then one to Bran and Arya. I’ve put their names on the back—you don’t have to do it right away, just whenever you feel is best.”

Jon frowned looking down at the envelopes in his hand. There was an hour until Sansa had to leave for the airport to make her flight, but she wanted to get all of this out of the way now.

“You wrote them letters?”

Sansa nodded, “Just in case,” she said quickly upon seeing Jon’s worried expression, “I know that we’re hoping I’ll be back in a few days, but if something goes wrong…anyway, we can’t be certain
how long I’ll be gone. The letters are just a safety measure.”

A safety measure was the wrong word. What Sansa wanted to say was that it was a way to make sure that her siblings wouldn’t forget about her, a way for them to know all the things that she could never say aloud. They’d been written last night, an hour before Jon woke up. Sansa had left another for Jon, stuck in the pocket of one of his coats that was stuck in the closet. She didn’t want to just hand him his own, Sansa didn’t think he’d wait long enough to read it.

“They won’t need them,” Jon told her, but put the envelopes in a drawer in the kitchen anyway, somewhere they could be kept safe and out of the way, “This is going to work.”

Sansa nodded her head, “I know.”

She wanted to believe Jon, she really did. Maybe he was right. It was a plan, a good one maybe, but it felt so impossible that Sansa was going to get out of this that she was afraid to put too much stock in any sort of hope. Still, Sansa looked around the flat, at the closest thing to home that she’d experienced in a long time, and she wanted Jon to be right. Maybe there was some small bit of hope left.

Jon drove them to the airport. To his benefit, he tried very hard not to seem bothered, to not appear as anxious as Sansa felt. Jon was never much of a talker, but he hadn’t shut his mouth since they got in the car. He tried to get Sansa into the conversation too, but she was feeling sick to join. She nodded along to Jon’s train of thought, but kept her mouth shut. It was better to listen anyone, Sansa wanted to remember the sound of Jon’s voice. She turned her head to watch as he spoke, occasionally lifting one hand from the wheel to gesture. His eyes stayed on the road, as they drove, allowing Sansa one of those rare opportunities to observe him unheeded.

She wished she could take a picture—Sansa had thought the same thing last night as she rolled off of Jon, both of them flushed and out of breath, trapped in some moment of blissful calm. It had nothing to do with what either of them was saying, or whatever had just happened seconds ago, and everything to do with all the unspoken things floating between them. It was the feeling of belonging, of caring, of love. If Sansa could just take a photo, or just trap that feeling in a bottle, she could live off of it for a decade.

They arrived at the airport an hour before the flight was going to take off. They walked into the airport together, stopping at the security line, moving off to the side so to not get in the way. This is where they were going to have to part ways, they both knew it.

“You don’t have to—“

Sansa shook her head, stopping Jon before he could even consider the thought. “Your plan is going to work.” She promised him, reaching over to lace her fingers through his, their joined hand hanging between them, “It’s going to. No more than two days, right?”
Jon nodded, a grimace marring his face. “It will. But, Sansa, even if it doesn’t, I’m going to get you out of there. I’m not letting you disappear again; this family doesn’t exist without you.”

“We don’t have to worry about that,” Sansa told him gently, not wanting to even imagine Jon going after Petyr in any capacity, “Things are going to work out exactly how they’re supposed to.”

Before the words were even out of her mouth, Sansa was reminded that this was something her mother used to tell her and her siblings. It had something to do with Gods guiding hand and the predetermined reality or something of the sort. It was supposed to be comforting, but if her mother’s saying was true, than Catelyn Stark was always meant to hang herself from the ceiling beams of her room, and Ned Stark was always supposed to be shot, Robb was always meant to be killed in action, and Sansa was always meant to end up back in Petyr’s cage. Nothing about be powerless in a predetermined world was comforting.

Jon must not have remembered Catelyn Stark’s saying, because he gave a soft smile—something meant to be comforting, but really just looked sad—and squeezed Sansa’s hand in his. Sansa turned her head towards the rapidly lengthening check in line and then back to Jon. She wanted to stretch this moment out forever—savor it to make up for all the other moments she took for granted, all the years she wasted hiding in the Vale, believing that she could never get out, and if she did no one would ever want her.

“Sansa—“ Jon started to say, his head tilted to the side, and voice strangely heavy. His voice was dripping with sincerity and unsaid words.

“Don’t.” Sansa ordered shaking her head, “I swear Jon, you can’t say anything that will make me cry. Two days, alright? This isn’t goodbye.”

Jon gave a breathy laugh and nodded his head, face still tilted to the ground, “Christ, I wish I felt as brave as you do. Not that I’m afraid that this isn’t going to work—but I just can’t stand to see you go.”

Sansa’s breath was shaky. She wasn’t brave, she was fucking terrified. She felt like a liar and a coward for about a thousand reasons, and she was so very afraid. But right now, Jon needed Sansa to be brave—Sansa needed herself to be brave, because if she wasn’t, Sansa wasn’t sure she could take those steps on the plane—she wasn’t sure if she could stay alive long enough to get Jon’s plan to even work. Arya had said it herself, Sansa was a lone wolf and winter was upon them.

“As soon as you get off the plane, go to the restroom and tape the wire on,” Jon told her fiercely, as he took a step forward and dragged Sansa closer, “Turn it on right away. I’ll be with you the entire
time. As soon as we get Petyr’s confession I’ll have a police team at his door.”

Sansa nodded. She wrapped her arms around Jon’s back. She closed her eyes and set her face against his chest, breathing in the scent of his shirt and clinging even closer. Sansa didn’t want Jon with her when she was in the Vale—she didn’t want him anywhere near that place. She could already feel the darkness, the cold, seeping into her chest as she stepped away. Jon’s eyes looked a little bloodshot, and Sansa was terrified that he’d started crying. He hadn’t, not yet, at least.

“Tell Rickon that I love him,” Sansa said, very aware of her own choking voice, “And Bran too when he wakes up. He’s going to wake up, okay? You’re going to keep the family together; you’ve got to get custody of him too. And Arya, tell her that I love her too, and that I’m sorry that I wasn’t a better sister before.”

“You can tell them yourself,” Jon’s voice took an edge of insistency and desperation, “This isn’t goodbye, you’ll be back with us in a few days.”

Sansa nodded. She was still clutching Jon’s hand, nail’s digging into his skin, as if she was afraid he’d be torn away from her. “I know, I know. But just promise me, Jon. You can’t ever give up on them.”

“I’m not going to.” Jon insisted, “I’m not going to give up on you either.”

“Two days.” Sansa said under her breath, like a mantra, forcing herself to believe that it was true. She took a deep breath and stepped forward, throwing her arms around Jon in one last hug. He caught her around the waist and held her close. Sansa drew in a shaky breath and whispered into Jon’s ear, “I love you. I don’t remember if I said that, but I do. Whatever happens in the Vale… Jon, you’re the best thing to ever happen to me. Everything that’s happened has been worth it because of you.”

Jon took in a trembling breath, his arms tightening around Sansa’s waist, “You’re coming back.” His voice a quiet plead, and another dagger in Sansa’s heart, “This isn’t over.”

Sansa nodded, and pulled away. She wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket, and reached down to pick her bag up from the floor. They’d spent too much time saying goodbye, Sansa was going to miss her flight.

With her bag secured over her shoulder, Sansa let go of Jon’s hand. She tried to give him a reassuring smile as she stepped away, hoping to convince him that she wasn’t as terrified as she really felt.
“Two days.” Sansa repeated to him, brushing some hair from her face, as she stepped closer to the security line.

Jon nodded, “I’ll be with you the entire time.”

Her stomach dropped at that. Sansa was afraid of what she’d face her demons in the Vale. She was afraid of Melisandre’s prophecy of the bloody wedding, and she was afraid that their plan wasn’t going to work at all—most of all she was afraid that Jon would have to hear every awful thing every step of the way.

It hurt to turn away and walk towards the security check line. Where had that strange, calm bravery that Sansa felt last night go? Sansa wanted that now, she wanted to numb her reality, to experience the next few hours as a dream, rather than as a nightmare. Sansa reached the end of the line, the black queue rope sectioning her off from the rest of the airport. The line moved fast, and soon, one of the TSA agents was checking Sansa’s ticket and waving her forward.

Sansa wanted to look behind her, spare one last glance to Jon. Would he still be there waiting on the other side of the rope, or had he already left for the car? It would be better to leave that as a mystery, and Sansa took a step towards the security check.

“Wait!”

Sansa’s head spun to look at Jon walk across the airport towards the queue rope that Sansa was standing behind. A frown was on her face, as she opened her mouth to speak.

Jon grabbed Sansa’s neck with one hand, the other reaching over the queue to wrap around her waist. Sansa felt herself relax into the kiss, she closed her eyes and clutched Jon’s shirt to keep him close. It had been years since Sansa ever thought to pray, but maybe if she prayed hard enough now, this moment wouldn’t have to end. It did though and Jon pulled away, his hands still keeping Sansa close as he rested his head against Sansa’s.

“I love you too.” Jon told her, “I should have—I love you too.”

Sansa sucked in a deep breath and put her hand on Jon’s cheek as she kissed the side of his mouth, before laying another kiss to his stubbly cheek. There were a thousand things Sansa wanted to say—she just didn’t know the words for any of them.

There was a line already forming behind Sansa, and the TSA agent who’d approved Sansa’s ticket cleared her throat loudly. Sansa stepped away and so did Jon. They must have looked like stupid, young fools—holding up the busy queue of all these adults with their normal lives and worries. They were living in reality, Sansa had to step away and join them there.
“Two days.” Sansa repeated and Jon nodded. She hoped it wasn’t a lie, she really fucking hoped it wasn’t a lie.

Sansa went through the security check in a daze. It must have taken a while, but it felt like seconds before Sansa was going over to the end of the conveyer belt to collect her bag from the scanner, and reaching for her shoes to slip them back on. If it was only two days, Sansa could survive that.

As Sansa went to grab her bag, she was blocked from it as someone stepped in front of her. Sansa almost ran into their back, and went to apologize, when she saw over their shoulder, the hand of the stranger reaching out and grabbing her bag before Sansa could get to it.

“Excuse me,” Sansa said stepping around them and blocking them from moving forward with her bag, “I think you’ve confused your luggage with mine—“

Her words died in her throat when she glanced up at the stranger, and so the emotionless and firm expression on their cold face. The stranger was a huge and hulking man, and Sansa was certain that he hadn’t confused his luggage with Sansa’s army green beat up backpack.

“Sansa Stark?” The man asked and Sansa nodded without any thought.

“You work for Petyr?”

Sansa didn’t need an answer, and the man didn’t give her one. Reality hit Sansa like a brick wall.

“Your flight is about to board.” The man was still holding Sansa’s bag, and he didn’t look like he’d let it go anytime soon. “We need to leave now.”

Sansa swallowed down the lump in her throat and nodded. She didn’t recognize this man from the Vale, and unlike the few security guards the Vale had, this man didn’t have a French accent. He must have been an outside hire; someone specifically brought in to make sure Sansa didn’t try to run again.

She was scared. She’d been scared the entire time, but it was, if possible, worse now. They hadn’t planned for this, and Sansa hadn’t expected Petyr to send anyone for Sansa until she was in France.

Sansa hadn’t meant to, but she looked over her shoulder and sought Jon out on the other side of the security check point. It took a second to find him way on the other side. He was watching her still, his face morphed into a picture of confusion and concern as his eyes dragged over Sansa and the man holding her bag—the bag with the police wire hidden inside.
The man cleared his throat, his hand reaching down and grabbing Sansa around her arm. “You need to start walking.”

Sansa didn’t look away from Jon until the man dragged her around the corner, and Jon was out of sight. She blinked back tears, fought down the pain in her soul, and pulled her arm free.

“I can walk on my own.” Sansa told the man—the security guard, really—and held her head high, hands shaking.

Each step brought Sansa further away from Jon, and closer to Petyr. With each step, Sansa felt a little more numb, a little more cold, and a little closer to winter. *When the snow falls, and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.* Sansa was willing to sacrifice herself for her pack. The scared girl named Alayne, who’d run away from the Vale in the dead of night wasn’t returning their today. Sansa Stark was made of stronger stuff than that—she was a wolf still and she could be brave too. She had to be.

Chapter End Notes

Wow sex scenes are hard to write. Literally this ch would have been out two days ago if it wasn't for that scene. I couldn't quite figure out how to write Sansa's desperation to just not risk having Petyr be her first experience with sex, while also making it clear that she'd want to sleep with Jon regardless, while also having Jon want to sleep with her, as he simultaneously tries not to take advantage of her, or just be the guy she slept with be she didn't want to sleep with Petyr. It was alot of things to balance, and hopefully it didn't completely suck? It is not my finest piece of literature, but it'll do. Anyway, things are going to be heating up in a less sexy sense moving forward! We've got three chapters left and who knows whats going to happen. next chapter we're back in the vale! I can't believe this fic is almost 200k. When i started it wasn't supposed to be more than 30k, but it just got away from me. I really am excited for this fic to be over, and finally reach its conclusion!

Thanks for reading! Its so cool that people have stuck with the fic this long, and that i'm still getting some new readers! Not to get sappy, but I started this fic thinking that i'd, at best, get maybe 100 kudos for it, and i still cant believe how many people actually like it. This is the first fic i've ever written, and had no idea what i was coming into. Everyone has been so amazing, and have really kept me inspired to keep writing, even during times where i really just wanted to abandon this. Honestly, you
guys are totally amazing!!

Okay, sappiness over. I hope you guys like this chapter! Next one should hopefully be out this weekend!
Sansa stood on the cobblestone path, which led up to the steps to the large oak doors of the Vale mansion. Her bag was taken from her hands by one of the security guards who picked Sansa up at the airport. As he walked past Sansa to get to the front door, the guard's shoulder knocked in Sansa like she wasn't even there. She wished that was the case.

There were security cameras posted near the main entrance and along the gate of the Vale. Those were new, and Sansa wonders how long did it take Petyr to install those in after she ran away, or if it was a recent addition in preparation for Sansa’s return. The guards were certainly new, and Sansa could spot at least two of them hovering near, as if ready to catch her if she decided to try and make a run for it. Sansa wonders what Petyr told them, or if they didn’t care that they were here to help hold Sansa hostage.

A cold rush of wind blows past Sansa and she tries to swallow down the lump in her throat. Ice coats the steps in front of her, and crystalizes on the branches of the fir trees surrounding the property. Every inch of the Vale looked deadly—an ice palace, a glass cage.

The double oak doors to the Vale were massive and heavy. Whenever they opened, they would groan, crying out as they were forced from each others grasp. They were only ever opened for events that Petyr hosted at the Vale, everyone else knew to take the less theatric side entrance into the mansion. If she were thinking a little clearer, a little less afraid, and a little less numb, Sansa would have told the security detail to take her around the gardens towards one of those side entrances, but instead, she stayed still, looking up at her prison.

When she was brought here at age eleven, Sansa thought it looked magical. It had looked whimsical, with its spires and exaggerated, gothic architecture, like something out of a story book. Looking at it now, Sansa could only see the dark corners and shadows that built this home. She could only see the locks on the doors and the cameras on the fence, and the men milling around who would stop her if she tried to leave.

Sansa’s breath caught as the oak doors creaked. She felt sick—Sansa thought Petyr would have already been standing at the front of the property to greet her when she arrived, but apparently, he wanted a grander entrance than that. Sansa took a step back, body tensing as if preparing for an attack. Sansa had considered so very many things on the flight here, and none of them were what she would say when she saw Petyr again.

The door was hardly even cracked open when a body weaved out from behind it. There was a giant smile spread across the girl’s pale, frost chapped face as she ran towards Sansa.

“You’re back!” She said, her arms looping around Sansa’s neck as she pulled her into a hug.

Sansa breath was forced from her lungs, and she held onto the girl’s shoulder to keep from slipping on the ice.
“Oh, Mya,” Sansa breathed, catching the other girl around the waist as they both rocked back on the icy ground trying to regain balance, neither considering breaking apart.

Mya finally pulled away when she noticed Sansa shaking a little from what could be presumed to be from the cold. Mya brushed her short black hair from her eyes, stepping back just enough to get a good look at Sansa, “I can’t believe you’re really here! They said you were coming back, but I wasn’t sure…” her voice trailed off as she glanced behind Sansa to the security guard, whose name she briefly recalled being Mr. Payne. He was hovering behind her some distance, watching. Mya’s worked her jaw, zipping her jacket up to keep out the cold. She continued talking, but the tone of her voice had changed, becoming more subdued, “Is that all you brought?” She turned her chin up at the guard, “Could you bring that inside for us?”

Mya looped her arm around Sansa’s and dragged her towards the backside of the mansion, towards where the garden path began. Sansa looked back at her bag and Mr. Payne who was watching after her as Mya dragged her away.

Sansa had managed to get the wire on during the flight before Mr. Payne grabbed her bag getting her bag, by feigning her period and the need for a tampon. He’d handed her bag over without question after that, and Sansa had taped the wire to her chest from inside the airplane’s lavatory. Sansa wasn’t sure if there would be time to put it on once the plane landed, and she didn’t think the security guard would have let her go to the restroom alone at the busy airport anyway. The wire’s radio wasn’t on yet though, Sansa hadn’t had time to reach under her jacket and move the switch, yet, since her security guard had been glued to her side since they landed.

Sansa needed to escape to an empty room and turn the wire on, she needed to find Petyr and get him to admit to anything incriminating as soon as possible. Sansa looked at Mya, who had that determined stubborn look stuck to her face already, as she dragged the two of them further and further away from Sansa’s goals.

“Oh,” Sansa tried to pull her arm away, “I better let Petyr know that I’m here first.”

Sansa crinkled her nose when she said his name. It was strange to call him Petyr now that she was in the Vale again. In all her years living there, Sansa wasn’t sure if she ever called him anything other than Father. Now, she wondered how much Mya actually knew about what was going on. Mya had yet to use Sansa’s name, and Sansa didn’t know if that was because Mya didn’t know that Sansa wasn’t actually Alayne, or if she just wasn’t sure what to call Sansa after realizing their friendship had been built on a false identity for so many years.

Mya shook her head, holding onto Sansa’s arm tighter, “Mr. Baelish is in meetings all afternoon. We’ve got plenty of time—” she stopped talking when she noticed Mr. Payne following behind them. Mya dropped Sansa’s arm and turned around to face him, “Excuse me, can I help you?”
“Mr. Baelish has asked us to keep an eye on Ms. Stark.” Mr. Payne told the two girls, looking between their sober expressions. He looked agitated, but elaborated, “She’s not meant to leave our sight.”

Mya’s expression was unreadable. “Why is that?” She asked, “Sansa isn’t some sort of prisoner, is she?”

It was so close to the truth that Sansa wanted to shout out in agreement. She felt a flicker of hope. Maybe Mya hadn’t bought whatever lie Petyr told, maybe she knew that something was horribly wrong.

Mr. Payne betrayed no emotions, speaking in a mechanical voice, “Mr. Baelish is worried about Ms. Stark’s safety, as we explained to her earlier.”

Mr. Payne had explained that to Sansa after she demanded why he was with her while on the plane. The security detail was put into place to make sure Sansa wasn’t threatened again. That was the lie Petyr was going with. Apparently, when Sansa left for a vacation from the Vale, she experienced several threats while she was on her own, which made the security detail a necessary precaution. It was implied that Sansa was meant to agree with this cover story, though she could hardly stomach the notion that it was the world outside the Vale that she was supposed to fear.

“The stalker?” Mya raised an eyebrow, adding new details to Sansa’s lie that she hadn’t been told about, “I thought he was arrested?”

“This is a necessary precaution,” the guard answered, without really saying anything, “You both may continue your walk. I assure you that we’ll not get in the way.”

“I doubt that,” Mya muttered, grabbing Sansa’s arm again and dragging her at a harsh pace towards the grass.

Beneath their feet, ice crystals snapped. The ground was polished in the ice, and when the branches of the trees swayed in the cold wind, they sang like bells. Sansa looked around, wondering if things were really as different as they looked, or if Sansa’s memories were failing her. The gate that surrounded the property looked taller, the corners of the gardens looked darker, and it felt as if a thousand eyes were watching Sansa’s every step.

Mya led them both to a stone bench that wound along the rose garden. Sansa thought they would stop to sit, but instead, Mya walked past it, going back into the grass where they walked along the fir trees.
“So your name is Sansa.” Mya’s tone was blunt, almost angry.

Sansa nodded. She didn’t know how much she could say. Mr. Payne was out of view, though she would bet that he was still in earshot, waiting for Sansa to screw up so that he could go back to Petyr and get her in trouble. Petyr had said that if Sansa tried to resist the marriage in any way, or if she tried to tell people the truth, he’d hurt Jon and Rickon.

Sansa had to be careful about what she said to Mya—maybe Sansa couldn’t trust her either. That was a scary thought, but it was probably right. Sansa couldn’t trust Mya. Everyone in the Vale was loyal to Petyr Baelish, and Mya was no exception. Sansa couldn’t believe that in her six years in the Vale, Mya never knew that Petyr had a very un-fatherly affection towards Alayne. Mya hadn’t done anything to help Sansa then, why would now be any different?

Sansa slowly nodded her head, letting go of Mya’s arm to wrap her arms around herself, “I am. I’m sorry I had to lie to you for so long.”

Mya was watching her, with an unchanged sober expression. “Mr. Baelish said that it was his idea for you to lie. He said that there were people in the government who wanted you dead. I guess you didn’t have any choice but to lie.”

It was a good excuse, a believable one. It had taken Sansa six years to realize that it wasn’t true.

Mya continued when Sansa didn’t say anything to her claim. “I guess that explains a lot. I always thought it was strange that you never left the Vale, but if there were some government assassins after you it makes more sense. Mr. Baelish said it was a stalker who was after you while you were on that vacation, but it was the government killers, right?”

Sansa nodded her head. She was shivering in the cold, unable to look up from her feet. She didn’t know what to even say. Lying to Mya had been easy when Sansa convinced herself that all her lies were true. Now Sansa was just listening to the same narrative she would have bought a couple months ago, and it hurt to hear it from someone who Sansa thought cared about her.

“Crazy.” Mya put her hands on her hips and glanced around the trees around them. She was looking for something, expression turning stern. “I wish you could have told me the truth.”

So did Sansa.
“I know, I’m sorry.” Sansa tried to sound sincere, “I really wanted to tell you. It was hard to lie.”

Lying had been the easy part, Sansa wanted to say, telling the truth is what’s hard.

“Well,” despite that fact Sansa and Mya were both standing still; they both heard the sound of ice crunching underfoot. Mya grimaced. “I’ll forgive you eventually. As long as you don’t pick Myranda to be the maid of honor over me.”

Sansa looked up sharply, face falling open as she stared at Mya. “You know?”

Sansa hadn’t put the wedding ring on yet. It was in the pocket of her jacket, but she was waiting to slip it on until she saw Petyr. There was no reason for it to be on now, other than to serve as a bitter reminder to Sansa’s fate.

“Of course I know.” Mya shrugged, sticking her hands in her pockets, “Well, Myranda heard it first, but she was supposed to keep it a secret. But, you know Myranda’s never kept a secret in her life and so she told me. I mean most people know now anyway. Why, was it supposed to be a secret?”

Sansa wasn’t sure what to say? Mya had to know that the security detail was listening, but the end of her question had practically been an accusation, and Sansa didn’t know what that meant. What was Mya getting at? What did she know? Sansa looked at her friend’s face and tried to figure out the intentions of her words, but it just came back blank.

“No, of course not,” Sansa started walking towards the side entrance to the mansion, listening as Mya followed behind her. With the security detail spying on them, and Mya still being untrustworthy at best, Sansa had to try and sell the marriage lie. “I just wasn’t sure how much everyone knew. It’s unexpected isn’t it? I was afraid you’d try and talk me out of it.”

“Well, the age difference is a bit much.” Mya responded as she walked by Sansa’s side, “And the fact that we all thought Mr. Baelish was your father doesn’t help. I’ve had a month to get used to it, I guess I can’t talk you out of it.”

Sansa pressed her chapped lips together, “Right. It’s cold out, why don’t we go inside? I’m pretty tired from the flight, maybe we can get some coffee from the kitchen and sit and talk inside?”
Mya nodded her head and pushed open the side entrance into the mansion. She held it open and let Sansa step inside first, “Since when do you drink coffee?”

The side door shut as Mya followed Sansa inside, closing with a bang. Sansa was already walking forward, but Mya grabbed Sansa’s arm and pulled her back to the dark alcove where the side door was located. Sansa opened her mouth but stopped when she realized that the security detail, and Mr. Payne, hadn’t followed them inside. Mya had locked them out.

“It’s true?” Mya asked quickly, voice a low whisper. “You never said you were going on vacation, and you left in the middle of the night? There was damage on the far gate right after you left—we want for a walk over there that morning, and Myranda said that it was where she snuck out when she got that tattoo. I thought maybe—”

There was a bang on the side door and both girls jumped. Mya and Sansa stared at each other and Sansa opened her mouth, but no words came out. Could she trust Mya?

“Why would I have run?” Sansa asked quickly, another bang on the door as the security detail tried to get it open. Sansa reached over to hold it shut, angling herself against it and pushing against it with all of her weight, as she waited for Mya’s answer.

“I don’t…” Mya, for the first time, looked lost as if Sansa had just given her a riddle, something impossible to answer. “I don’t know. Cold feet before the wedding? That’s what Myranda thought. You ran and then it just turned into a vacation? Is that what it was?”

Sansa stepped away from the door and it swung open. She moved aside to let Mr. Payne push himself inside. It had been stupid to think that maybe someone had figured out the truth, Sansa had forgotten how stupid it was to have hope here.

“Sorry, the door jams sometimes.” Sansa told the guard coldly as she stepped away and walked towards the kitchen.

Things only got worse. Petyr was still in his meeting, and so Sansa was waiting in the kitchen until then. Mya was with her still, but any hope of conversation between them had vanished. It didn’t help that Mr. Payne was skulking in the doorway, watching them with sharp narrow eyes. Sansa looked down at the mug of coffee in her hands, wondering when she would get a second to slip away and turn the wire on.
“Myranda is in the city,” Mya spoke indifferently, stirring her own drink with a metal spoon, “We didn’t know that you’d be getting back today.”

Sansa shrugged one shoulder. Her feelings towards Mya had turned cold. It shouldn’t have made her so angry and so bitter that Mya hadn’t been able to see the truth about Petyr, her family had been working in the Vale for years and Petyr kept them in his service even after Lysa Arryn died. In a way, Petyr had saved Mya’s family by keeping the property of the Vale running, there was no reason that Mya would ever feel any suspicion towards Petyr’s intentions.

Mya sighed, her foot kicking against the leg of the kitchen table in a rhythmic tempo as time continued to pass so slow. A smile crept on her face, “You know, Harry made a complete fool of himself as the clubs polo match last month. You would have loved it—completely fell off the horse and landed on his arse.”

Hearing that Harry Hardyng had made a fool of himself would have been the highlight of Sansa’s life if she’d heard this story before she left the Vale. Hearing it now, Sansa almost felt the muscle memory of a smile. It didn’t make it though; Sansa was feeling too anxious and too bitter to really convey any sort of emotion besides agitation. Maybe it was just her nerves that were making her feel this way. It was probably that; Sansa would rather feel angry than afraid.

Sansa pushed her coffee mug away, “I need to use the restroom.”

She got up from her chair and walked around the kitchen table, stopping in the doorway, which Mr. Payne was standing in front of. He had his arms crossed over his chest, and glared down at Sansa with emotionless eyes. Sansa tried to match his stubborn gaze, but as she looked up at him, Sansa’s eyes caught on the logo patched onto his black jacket. A frown marred her features as she looked at the red stitching—

“Well, are you going to let her go?” Mya asked as she turned in her chair to watch them.

Mr. Payne cleared his throat and stepped aside. Sansa averted her eyes from the logo on the jacket and went down the hall, her train of thought lost. The mansion was uncharacteristically empty, which at least worked in Sansa’s favor for the time being. She still saw at least three other security guards standing around the halls, as she passed by. She looked at their jackets now and noticed that they all had the same red logo stitched to the shoulder above their breast. A uniform then.

Sansa found the small bathroom, tucked into the corner of the first floor foyer and stepped inside. She closed the door, locking it, and then rested her back against it as she reached under her shirt and found the little black box connected to the police wire. She blindly searched for the switch on the side, engaging it when her finger ghosted over the indent. Sansa lifted up her shirt to see that the dim red light was glowing on the side of the black box, meaning that the wire was live. She wondered if Jon was listening now—if he was already with Sam in the flat, awaiting the sound of the electrical click that told them Sansa had made it to the Vale in one piece and that their plan was
Sansa pulled her shirt down and stepped towards the mirror in front of her and went to fix her appearance. She could feel the cool press of the wires microphone against her collar, hidden under her jumper. It felt so obvious and bulky to her, but in the mirror, nothing looked amiss. The plan would work. Things would be okay. Quietly, Sansa tilted her head down to speak into the microphone.

“I’m alright,” She whispered.

Sansa was supposed to have turned the wire on hours ago, she hoped that Jon was listening now and knew that everything was okay. She re-adjusted her shirt one last time before unlocking the bathroom door and stepping out.

“Sansa?”

She’d barely taken two steps out of the bathroom, the jolt of hearing her name called making her pause. She looked up to try and find the voice, tucking her arms around her waist as she walked towards where the call came from. Sansa didn’t recognize the voice, though it was distorted as it echoed through the hall, bouncing off the walls and high ceilings. It might have been Mya, but Sansa just couldn’t tell.

Walking towards the direction of the sound, Sansa glanced around the hall. It was terrifying how familiar everything was. She wanted to reject the childhood that took place in these halls, pretend that it never even happened, but as she walked, Sansa could practically see her younger self running down these halls and despite everything, being happy.

“You’ve got to be faster!” Mya laughed, as she sprinted down the carpeted hallway. She glanced to make sure that Sansa was still following, “Come on, he’s going to catch us.”

“I’m coming!” Sansa huffed, panting as she tried to keep up. She was having a hard time keeping track of Mya as she turned down the complicated twists and turns of the mansion. Everything here was so confusing, and Sansa still wasn’t familiar with any of it.

Mya wanted to play hide-and-seek, she told Sansa that it was the best game to play because the Vale had so many good places to hide. Sansa didn’t even want to play games, she barely knew Mya, and all Sansa wanted to do was stay in her bedroom and wait for Petyr to get back from work. She wanted to ask if there had been any news about her Mum, and if Sansa was finally going to get to call her like Petyr promised she would. Sansa wanted to tell Mum that she was okay—she wanted to ask if Arya was back home yet, or if Robb and the little boys were okay. Sansa didn’t want to play stupid kid games with Mya, the stable hand’s daughter, who smelled like hay and
donkeys.

Sansa slowed down as she glanced up at one of the giant paintings hanging on the walls. It was new, Sansa could tell because she could still smell the paint. It was of Lysa Arryn, who made Sansa call her Aunt Lysa, and of Petyr—they were standing next to each other, wearing their wedding clothes. Little Robin was in between them, smiling. The artist had captured just how sickly and small Robin was, even depicting the heavy bags under his eyes. While he was smiling in the painting, it looked more like he was about to burst into tears, and Sansa found that fitting.

“Alayne!” Mya hissed as she turned into an alcove, she stuck her head out to get Sansa’s attention, waving her over, “Alayne!”

Right. Sansa—Alayne looked up. She always had trouble answering to the right name. Alayne ran over to the alcove Mya was waiting in, and let the older girl pull her in, covering the space with a giant hanging tapestry in front of it. The little alcove went dark, the cold stonewalls caging them in.

Alayne could hear her breath echoing off the walls, her shoulder brushing against Mya’s.

“This is stupid.” Alayne whispered and Mya hit her arm.

“Shut-up, we’re going to get caught.”

Alayne blinked as her eyes started to adjust to the darkness. She felt herself shrink back when she realized how very creepy this little alcove actually was, there were cobwebs hanging all around, swooping under head. Alayne didn’t want to be here, she wanted to be back home—her real home.

“I don’t even want to play—“

“Shut up!” Mya hissed again, watching as Alayne shrank back. Mya pursed her lips, and crossed her arms, “Look, you can’t just stay in your room forever. You’ve been there for two weeks already. I’ve got no one else to play with but Robin and he’s just a little kid. You’re the first girl to ever come to the Vale, and we’re going to be friends.”

“I don’t want friends.” Alayne wanted her family.

“Well, I do. Now shut up, or else he’ll find us.”
They both fell quiet. Alayne wanted to push Mya out of her way and march down the hall back to her room, but when she was there, Alayne was all alone, at least right now someone else as with her.

“So you hear that?” Mya whispered, pressing her ear against the tapestry. Alayne did, it was footsteps, “Come on!” Mya squealed, grabbing Alayne’s hand and pulling her from the alcove and into the hall as they sprinted blindly through the mansion. At some point through it all, Alayne started to smile.

“Sansa!”

Sansa felt the breath leave her lungs as Robin flung himself at her. Sansa managed to catch him around his middle as she tried to adjust her jumper, which had been pulled down over her shoulder. Robin kept holding on, babbling the entire time.

“They told me you were back! I’ve been looking for you, I’m so glad you’re back.” Robin beamed as he pulled back, ever so slightly, to look up at Sansa’s face.

Sansa tried to wriggle free, panicked as she felt the medical tape that was keeping the wire in place, snag against the thick woven stitching. She put on a smile, as she attempts to adjust it without catching Robin’s attention.

“It’s so good to see you, Robin.” Sansa fixed the neck of her jumper, “Shouldn’t you be in classes?”

Robin made a face, “This is more important. Come on, I want to show you my room—I’ve had it redecorated—“ as he pulled Sansa forward by her sleeve, the jumper slipped down again, revealing the black top of the microphone, “What’s that?”

Sansa pulled her arm away and fixed the collar again. She could feel the blood rushing to her ears, as she put the jumper back in place so that the wire was completely covered again, “It’s nothing, Robin. Why don’t you show me your room? I really want to see that.”

“No, wait—“ Robin was reaching for the collar of the jumper, trying to see the wire, “I want to see what that was.”
“It’s nothing, Robin.” Sansa stepped back, batting away Robin’s hand. God, everything was going wrong and Sansa had only just gotten here. “Stop being a brat. Leave it alone.” Robin’s hands fell to his sides, his bottom lip quivering. Sansa panicked, “No, Robin—It’s alright. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to shout. It’s okay—why don’t you show me your new room—“

“You yelled at me.” Robin was blinking back big tears in his eyes, “You tried to hit me!”

“No, I didn’t.” Sansa shook her head, “I was just trying to get your hands away—Robin it was an accident, I didn’t even touch you.”

Robin shook his head, “I’m telling!”

“Robin!” Sansa lunged forward as he ran towards the stairs, “Robin, no I’m sorry. Please don’t!”

She ran after Robin and grabbed his wrist before he could make it to the second step of the marble staircase. Sansa held him in the place, moving so that they were at eye level. Robin tried avoiding her gaze, but Sansa was adamant, “Robin, Robin—look at me. I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean to yell. Don’t tell on me, please? It was an accident. It will never happen again, so lets just keep it to ourselves, okay? It can be a secret, just between us.”

Robin was still dodging her eyes, but he nodded his head, lip still quivering. “Fine. Let me go.”

Sansa did and took a step back. “You won’t tell?”

Robin glared at the floor, “I won’t tell.”

“Won’t tell what?”

Sansa’s heart flew to her throat. She spun around, but it was only Mya, sauntering up the hall and staring between Robin and Sansa. There was a creased brow.

“We heard shouting.” Mya explained, “Your bald shadow wanted to come check, but I said I could
Thank god that she had. Sansa just imagined how horrible things would have gotten if it was Mr. Payne who found Sansa in this situation.

“It’s nothing,” Sansa responded quickly, glancing at Robin, “Right?”

Robin nodded. He still wouldn’t look at either of them, but there was an angry curl to his lips, telling Sansa that she hadn't been forgiven, “I’m going to my room.”

He didn’t even ask if Sansa wanted to come with him, instead, Robin turned to run up the stairs and disappear around the corner. Sansa had to trust that Robin would keep his mouth shut. She could trust him—Robin was more loyal to Sansa than to anyone else in the Vale, even Petyr. That couldn’t have changed in the months Sansa was gone.

Mya let out a low whistle, and moved to stand beside Sansa, “That was intense. Don’t worry about it, though. Robin’s been a bit mental since you left for your holiday.”

That didn’t make Sansa feel any better. “Is Petyr still in his meeting?”

Mya grimaced, “I imagine that if he wasn’t, he’d have sent for you by now. You must be excited to see him, you’ve only asked for him about ten times.”

Mya sounded skeptical, and Sansa wondered why that was. Had Petyr asked her to try and find out if Sansa would tell everyone the truth in order to try and escape?

“Shouldn’t I be? I haven’t seen him in months.”

“Right.” Mya’s voice was nearly as flat as Sansa’s, “We should go back to the kitchens—“

Sansa shook her head and went for the stairs. She was thinking about Robin still. While she thought she could trust him to keep everything he saw to himself, Sansa wanted to be with him just to be sure that he wouldn’t let anything slip.
“I should be with Robin.”

“He’s in class, Alay—Sansa. Give him some space, he’ll warm up to you again if you just give it time.” Mya was urging Sansa back, tone a little more urgent than before.

Sansa glanced down towards Mya to see what had brought that on. Mya wasn’t looking at Sansa anymore, and Sansa followed her gaze towards the end of the hall, where Mr. Payne was walking towards them. Sansa took a deep breath and stepped away from the stairs and moved near Mya, her shoulder brushing against hers. Maybe Mya didn’t understand what was going on, but she seemed to distrust Mr. Payne and the security guards just as much as Sansa did.

“Right, the kitchens.” Sansa felt a heavy sort of stress burrow in her chest, she hesitated, changing her mind at Mr. Payne got closer. “Why don’t we go for a walk instead?”

Mya nodded and opened her mouth, but Mr. Payne spoke first.

“Ms. Stark, Petyr is ready to see you now.”

Sansa’s body contracted. She felt like a frog who’d just been tossed into a pot of boiling water, and she was desperately trying to hide her desire to react.

This was good news, at least Sansa could speak to Petyr before Robin had time to get to him. That didn’t keep Sansa from feeling like she needed to vomit.

“Oh, good.” Sansa took a stiff step forward towards the direction of the entrance Petyr always came in through hoping to meet him before he came inside.

Mya shook her head and stopped Sansa with a gentle arm to her shoulder, “No, he’s in his office today. He’s been working from home since you left.”

Of course, he was. Sansa glanced up the staircase and nodded her head. Mr. Payne was already walking towards her like he planned on escorting her to Petyr’s office to make sure she didn’t jump out a window on her way there. Sansa was certainly considering it as a viable option.

The wire was burning Sansa’s chest. She should take it off, she couldn’t risk Robin telling Petyr about it right now. If she took it off now, Sansa could hide it and then put it on later once she knew
there was no reason to be afraid that Robin would tell anyone what he saw.

“I should change first,” Sansa began saying looking down at her rumpled jumper, “I’ve been on a plane all day, I smell like an airport—“

“Mr. Baelish has asked to see you now.” Mr. Payne repeated and grabbed Sansa’s forearm before leading her up the stairs.

Sansa panicked, wondering if she should fight Mr. Payne or try to buy herself some more time. As she considered these options, she glanced back and saw the confused expression on Mya’s face as she stood at the bottom of the stairs, eyes glued on the harsh hold Mr. Payne had on Sansa’s arm.

“You don’t have to drag her,” Mya hesitated as if she was unsure if she should step in and push him off. “Why can’t Sansa clean up first? There isn’t any rush.”

Mr. Payne ignored Mya, but Sansa looked back over her shoulder and held Mya’s gaze. Maybe Mya could tell how very afraid Sansa was in this moment. Maybe despite what Mya was led to believe, she was connecting all the dots that didn’t make any sense, and seeing exactly why Sansa would be afraid right now.

Mr. Payne pulled Sansa up the last step, and she looked away from Mya. Her heart was beating so loud that it was the only thing Sansa could hear. As they walked, she counted the doors as remembering how many were left until they reached Petyr’s home office.

“I need to use the restroom.” Sansa insisted, voice a hollow echo in her own ears.

Mr. Payne grunted, “You’ll see Mr. Bealish first.”

His insistence just made Sansa more afraid. She wanted to rip the wire off and toss it into one of the decorative vases that lined their path if only she could get away from Mr. Payne first.

“I don’t feel well.” Sansa licked her chapped, dried lips and tried to pull away from her guard, “I feel sick. I need to use the restroom—I think I’m going to vomit.”

Sansa thought that maybe she could convince him to let her go. At least now she was telling the truth, surely if she vomited on Mr. Payne’s shoes it would buy her enough time to get herself alone
and hide the wire before it was seen.

If Sansa had more time, maybe her pleas would have worked, but they were standing in front of office door now. Sansa tried to hear noise on the other side—if she heard Robin’s voice inside there she would run. If she caught Mr. Payne off guard, Sansa might have been able to break his hold on her arm and make it to the other side of the hall and lock herself in one of the rooms. The wooden door was too thick though, and Sansa heard nothing.

Mr. Payne knocked, and a voice called to them from the other side. He twisted the knob and Sansa held her breath. She could trust Robin enough to stay quiet—couldn’t she? Robin had only seen the microphone, he wouldn’t have even known what it was—Sansa didn’t have to be afraid.

The door swung open and Sansa saw Petyr kneeling on the ground, his hand on Robin’s shoulder. They both looked up when the door opened, Robin was pulling at his hands, staring at the ground, but Petyr stared directly at Sansa, a disappointed expression on his face.

“Sansa,” Petyr stood up, his hand still on Robin’s shoulder, “I was hoping this would be a happier reunion, but Robin has informed me that you shouted at him.”

Sansa took in a deep breath and nodded her head. Maybe that’s all Robin told him; she stepped inside the room. “Yes, I’m sorry, Robin. He stretched the neck of my jumper, and I was worried that he’d ruin the shape. I didn’t mean to yell.”

Petyr gave a tight smile, and Sansa couldn’t read what it meant. It made her feel sick, though, and Sansa knew that he could hear the omissions in her voice.

“See, Robin. I told you that Sansa didn’t mean to shout. Why don’t you run off and find your tutor. You’re meant to be in classes, aren’t you?” Petyr gave Robin’s shoulder a gentle push.

Sansa wanted to reach out and grab Robin’s shoulder as he moved past her, “Oh, no, Robin doesn’t have to go. I’ve missed him so much—“

“Sansa.” Petyr’s voice was flat and Sansa was mute.

She felt herself shrink as she looked down at the ground, feeling Petyr’s eyes trained on her. Robin hesitated, serving one last guilty look Sansa’s way before running from the office. The door closed behind him. Sansa flinched.

“We were all very excited to have you back home, Sansa.” Petyr was standing in front of his desk, arms crossed as he watched Sansa critically. “I hoped you would be excited to be back, as well.”
“I am.” Sansa promised, the words jumping out her throat, as she glanced towards Mr. Payne. She had to keep up the lies and pretenses in front of the guest—though Sansa was so afraid in this moment, that even if Mr. Payne wasn’t there, Sansa would probably rabble off any pretty lie Petyr wanted her to say if it meant that she wouldn’t get in trouble. She felt utterly powerless.

“Sansa, there is no need to lie.” Petyr was disappointed, hurt, “Not to me, especially. So why don’t you tell me the truth.”

Sansa’s hands were shaking. She had to be brave—as brave as she was with Jon—she had to be brave if she wanted to get back to her family. She balled up her shaking hands into fists and looked up. “I am telling you the truth, Petyr. I am excited to be back home. What would I be lying about?”

Petyr pressed his lips thin and nodded his head, resigned. “Very well,” he spoke, voice dripping with displeasure, “I didn’t want it to be this way—I hoped that you respected me enough to tell me the truth. Sansa, I’ll have to ask you to remove your jumper.”

Sansa stepped back, unconsciously moving towards the door. Her back hit Mr. Payne’s chest, and he held her shoulders, keeping her in place. Sansa tried to move away, but she couldn’t.

“You can’t be serious, Petyr?” Sansa laughed, all of her panic coming back. “Why would you ask me to do that?”

“Sansa, please, don’t insult me any further with these lies.” Petyr told her, “Robin told me that you were trying to hide something. I’m sure its nothing, but let’s get this unpleasantness out of the way now.”

Sansa shook her head, “I’m not taking off my top. That’s an insane request. Robin pulled my shirt down to my bra, that’s what I was trying to hide.”

“Then there is nothing to be worried about.” Petyr leaned against his desk, relaxed, despite his harsh tone. “I want to trust your word, Sansa. I really do, but I need you to do what I say if that’s going to happen. Now, do I need to ask you again?”

Sansa looked around, feeling caged in by the office walls. She looked back at Mr. Payne who had taken a step back from her but was still guarding the door. Did Petyr expect her to remove her top with him in the room too? If Sansa wasn’t so terrified that Petyr was about to see the police wire,
she’d be drowning in humiliation.

Petyr cleared his throat again, looking at Mr. Payne too, “Sansa do I need to ask again?”

Sansa moved away from them both so that her back was to one of the bookcases. Was there any sort of protest she could make that would actually work? Given more time Sansa was sure she could think of one, but there was no time. Her mind was blank, raging with just blind panic with absolutely no coherent thoughts other than run.

Petyr gave a disappointed sigh, “Mr. Payne, if you wouldn’t mind helping Sansa with her task—”

“No.” Sansa’s voice was unflinching, despite the panic clawing at her throat. She tried to control the rapid rise and fall of her chest as she tore her eyes away from Mr. Payne and looked at Petyr again, “I’ll do it myself.”

“Very good.” Petyr’s face was impassive, watching her and waiting.

Sansa grabbed the bottom of her jumper and took another shaky breath. She moved her hands away to push off her jacket, buying a little more time as she folded it and set it on the chair near her. Sansa wondered if Jon was listening—she hoped not. Sansa reached for the bottom of the jumper and pulled it off with one swift motion, face heating as she felt eyes trained on the wire, snaking up her chest.

Petyr clicked his tongue, “This is very disappointing.”

Sansa grimaced. With nothing left to hide, Sansa didn’t feel so afraid. She reached for the tape holding the wire in place and started pulling it off.

“So what does this mean?” Sansa asked words burned with bitter frustration, “What are you going to do?”

Petyr looked taken aback from her tone and moved from his desk, and over to where Sansa was, near the bookshelf. He didn’t come close enough to touch, but it was still too close. Sansa pulled off the last piece of tape that was keeping the microphone in place and then wound the wire around her hand before tossing the entire thing on the chair beside her.
“What am I going to do?” Petyr repeated, blinking back surprise, “Sansa, I’m shocked. I truly thought your word meant more than this.”

“My word?” Sansa felt taken aback by the direction this was going.

Petyr nodded, “You promised me that there weren't going to be any of these games. I gave you your brothers, I let you stay with them, and then you do this?” Petyr reached down to the chair and picked up the wire, “What did you think this would accomplish?”

Sansa felt indignant anger swelling in her chest. She was being talked down to, chided like she was a child again, like she'd missed her curfew or some other trivial thing. Petyr was not her father, he did not get feign disappointment at Sansa's lack of honor. She opened her mouth to answer exactly why she wouldn’t have just returned to Petyr defenseless, but then she saw that Petyr’s attention had turned elsewhere. Petyr's brow was creased as he looked at Sansa’s bare stomach and chest. She brought her hand unconsciously over the wolf on her ribcage as if she needed to protect it, but that wasn’t what Petyr looked so severely at. She followed his gaze to the top of her breast, right where her bra pushed over her skin, and where a dark bruise bloomed.

Petyr blinked and looked away, his eyes bearing down on her. “Would you like to explain this?”

Sansa looked at the bruise one last time, at a loss for words. She hadn’t even noticed it before, but she knew that it must have come from last night, and Jon. Sansa looked up, glancing towards the door again, and Mr. Payne, who was also staring at her. She could have sworn he looked pleased with this development.

Petyr cleared his throat, a bitter laugh frozen on his lips, he held up the police wire. “Was Jon Snow listening?”

Sansa fortified herself and nodded. He could find out the truth easily, she wasn't going to lie. “Yes.”

He dropped his hand and gave a pointed look at Sansa’s love bite, “Am I to presume that he is also responsible for that mark on your chest?”

“Yes.” Sansa watched the anger pass over Petyr’s features as he heard her answer. It should have frightened her just as much as everything else in the Vale did, but it didn’t. Sansa didn’t feel afraid
—she was glad that he was angry.

“I’m very disappointed in you Sansa.”

“Are you?” Sansa felt a thrill pass through her as she saw the flicker of anger pass over Petyr’s face.

“I’m very disappointed,” Petyr began, his voice tightly controlled to the point of nearly breaking, “That you would degrade yourself in this way, as an engaged woman, and let this man touch you —”

“Rather than let you degrade me?” Sansa asked blinking.

Petyr narrowed his eyes, “As you fiancé—“

“And father.” Sansa spoke without thinking, feeling the spark of defiance light up inside her. She almost smiled, feeling a morbid pleasure at hearing the truth, “Or just Alayne’s father, and Sansa’s husband. That’s awfully complicated—I always forget who exactly you want me to be, it’s hard to keep track. Am I Alayne today, or Sansa—neither I suppose. You don’t really want me to be anyone, being isn’t exactly my purpose is it?”

“You’re deflecting.” Petyr’s voice was flat, his hand curling over the wire, as if he wanted to crush it. “What did he do to you?”

He hadn’t guessed? Sansa wondered if Petyr was suffering from some blind hope that all Sansa let Jon do was suck that mark onto her chest. She wondered why it was so important that he knew that truth—she wondered if she wasn’t as valuable of a possession if someone else had played with her first.

Sansa lowered her voice, leaning in conspiratorially, “Are you asking if I let Jon fuck me?”

With reckless, vindictive satisfaction, Sansa watched as Petyr’s anger finally manifested. She wanted to smile.
“You will not use that sort of language,” Petyr growled, “Have some self-respect.”

“The sort of self-respect that a grown man who molests children has?” Sansa asks looking up and matching Petyr’s eyes with an impassive tilt of her head, “That sort of self-respect, Petyr?”

She didn't expect him to hit her. Sansa felt the hard box of the wire bash against the side of her head, as Petyr swung his hand at her. Sansa was knocked over, more from surprise than anything else. She landed half on the chair beside her, grabbing it to keep from slamming her head on the floor. It might as well have though, Sansa’s head was ringing, and everything felt fuzzy.

Petyr had never hit Sansa before. Never—she never thought he would. Sansa brought a hand up to the side of her face, feeling the space where the wire box had nicked a cut on her temple.

Petyr let out a deep breath and fixed his jacket. He was standing above Sansa, watching as she pulled her hand away from her temple and looked at the flecks of blood that clung to her fingertips. Sansa stared at the blood in confusion, as if the situation still hadn’t fully registered. She glanced away to the box and wire that had caused the nick. It had fallen from Petyr’s hand after he hit her, and now lay a few feet from her on the wooden floor.

“I didn’t want to do that,” Petyr sounded out of breath, running a hand over his slicked hair, “You left me no choice, Sansa. I can’t be as lax as I previously was, you clearly need a stronger hand controlling you.”

A stronger hand? Sansa wondered what that meant for her now—how much worse could things really get?

Sansa was still on the floor, listening with fuzzy ears. She felt like a doll, not even really conscious or in control. She felt like a puppet—like a bunch of separate pieces held together by wooden joints, controlled by a set of strings that were slowly being tied back in place, synched by every word Petyr spoke.

She wanted to fight those hands that were tying her strings in place—to fight like she had before, but was fighting back going to bring her this? Another open hand, another closed fist? As Sansa’s vision started to clear, her eyes stayed trained on the wire lying on the floor in front of her. She thought she could see the glint of her blood on the corner of the black box from where it hit her temple. How many times could she be knocked down before she learned to stop getting up? Sansa blinked back the blurry shapes in her vision, cringing as she felt a blaring pressure in her head. Would it only take one swing to keep Sansa down? As she stared at the blood on the box, Sansa realized that it wasn’t blood at all. It was the dim red light on the receiver—Petyr hadn’t turned the wire off—it was still on.

“Or else I’ll run again?” Sansa asked, as she pushed herself up, bracing her hand on the armchair beside her, “And then you’ll have to send your goons to drag me back? Or will you just decide that you’re tired of me and have me killed.”
“Have you forgotten the deal we made completely?” Petyr asked, “I’d never hurt you Sansa—“

Sansa’s head begged to differ.

“But if you run again, I can’t say the same about your brother, Rickon.” Petyr continued. “You aren’t so selfish to put him in danger just because you can’t be faithful to your husband.”

“You’d send someone to hurt Rickon,” Sansa clarified, trying to get Petyr to admit to this in clearer terms for the wire recording them. “And Jon too; wouldn’t you, Petyr? You’re threatening them so that I have to stay here and marry you.”

Petyr shook his head, “I hate these terms you put things in. I never want to force you into anything.”

Sansa pushed herself up on her feet, resting a hand against the bookshelf to keep from swaying. She glared at Petyr, blood trickling down her brow to her cheek. “You forced me to come here. You said that if I didn’t, you’d send the Faceless Men after Jon and Rickon.”

“I don’t see it that way at all,” Petyr explained, his voice taking a sympathetic tone. He shrugged off his jacket and moved to place it over Sansa’s shoulder. She tensed as he lay his hand on her, but he took his time, setting the jacket securely over her shoulders. “They can’t protect you, Sansa. Jon can’t protect you. I can. You’re like a dove, Sansa, so innocent and good. The world will take advantage of that, it will hurt you—I can protect you like no other person could. You’re safe here.”

Sansa remembered the innocent naive little girl Petyr was describing—the dove. Its who she let herself be when she was Alayne—the impassive little girl who never fought back. That girl was gone, and Sansa choked on the memory. Petyr had killed that girl, Sansa wouldn’t be next.

“A cage,” Sansa moved away from Petyr’s touch; the blood that had fallen down her cheek painted her lips, “You’re describing a cage.”

Petyr gave a disappointed sigh, “You’ll see things differently soon. I’ll forgive this little misstep. Consider it a wedding gift. Jon and Rickon won’t be punished for your doubt in me, at least they won’t as long as this doesn’t happen again. You won’t do anything to upset me again, will you? There is no reason that I’ll have to hurt them as long as you behave.” Petyr reached out and touched the bump on Sansa’s temple, moving his hand to cradle her cheek, “You’ll be happy here.”
Sansa dodged his touch and growled. She licked her lips and spat at Petyr’s feet. “Petyr there is no need to lie,” she said recalling what he told her when she came into the office, “Caged animals are never happy. And I’m not a dove.”

No—Sansa moved past Petyr and grabbed the wire from the ground. She walked to the trash bin beside Petyr’s desk, and with her back to him and Mr. Payne, Sansa clicked off the switch, turning the wire off. What Jon got from this conversation would have to be enough. She tossed the dead wire into the bin.—I’m a wolf.

Chapter End Notes

This took way longer to write than i expected, but its finally done. Two more chapters left!!
We're almost at the end, get hyped!
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

mentions of suicide/self harm

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been three days. Sansa waited three days, but the French police never came. The wedding was tomorrow, and Sansa was out of time.

She knew that there was a good chance that nothing would have come from the wire, but Sansa had still hoped. She didn’t have any of that anymore. Sansa was sitting by the window, staring out to the long driveway of the Vale and waiting for police lights to come up over the tree line, but nothing ever came. If they were ever going to come, they were running out of time, and Sansa started to wonder if it even mattered anymore. She stopped waiting for them that morning.

“Shouldn’t you be more excited?” Mya asked, frowning as she watched Sansa look at the white dress hanging on the back of the closet door.

“It’s called being nervous.” Myranda was lounging on Sansa’s bed, looking at the dress critically. “It’s rather plain—maybe there’s still time for alterations. What about crystals, or feathers?”

The three girls were in Sansa’s room looking at the wedding items that had arrived that morning. There was the dress, off-white with a sweetheart neckline and tapered waist that led to a silky skirt. There was also the veil and shoes that arrived with the dress. Sansa had never seen any of this before, she hadn’t asked anyone when the wedding would be, and hadn’t known it was tomorrow until that morning when Myranda arrived with the dress.

Myranda was very much the same since Sansa left. She’d taken to Sansa not being Alayne with surprising ease, that made Sansa wonder if Myranda knew who she was all along, or at least doubted that she was ever Alayne, to begin with.

The girls weren’t alone in the room. One of the security guards was also there, watching them from beside the door. Along with him, a seamstress was also in the bedroom.

“We can make some alterations.” The seamstress said, moving towards the dress.

Sansa shook her head, “No, it’s fine. Everything is fine. Is there anything else you need me for?”
The seamstress shook her head and so Sansa moved across the room, going for the door.

“Where are you going?” Myranda asked, the bed squeaking as she climbed off of it. “You haven’t even tried it on.”

Sansa pulled open the bedroom door and walked out, pretending she hadn’t caught what Myranda said. She needed some space—not that she’d gotten any in the past few days. Sansa just wanted to be alone.

She passed down the hall, avoiding the stares of the security guards who lined them every few doors. Sansa hated meeting their cold stares—how the overlooked the large purple bruise on the side of her face with such ease. They were meant to be protecting her, and yet they all must have known that it was Petyr who gave her the dark bruise, and not one of them cared. Of course, they weren’t really protecting her, that was just the lie. The guards were here keep her from running.

Somehow, Sansa ended up outside. She could hear the guard trailing behind her, but she pretended not to notice. She sucked in a lungful of frigid air, letting it cool her burning body. The Vale had turned into a furnace, and inside it, Sansa felt like she was going to be burnt alive.

“Sansa! Slow down!”

Sansa hedged her shoulders as she heard Mya’s voice. She slowed down her pace, turning to watch as Mya jogged forward from the mansion and onto the frozen grass to meet Sansa.

“Why did you just walk out like that?” Mya asked, glancing towards the security guard near them and grimacing. “Are they just going to follow you around everywhere until you’re a thousand or something?”

Sansa glanced at the guard wondering the same thing. “What do you want, Mya?”

Mya hesitated, caught between answers. “I don’t want anything. Why are you in such an awful mood?”

“I’m not.” Sansa argued. “I just want to be left alone for one minute, why doesn’t anyone understand that? I just want to walk by myself.” And to prove her point, Sansa started walking.
It didn’t take long to hear the footsteps behind her—one pair for the guard, and another for Mya. Sansa didn’t look back, crossing her arms and trudging forward.

“Hey, slow down,” Mya grunted as she tried to match Sansa’s speed. “Your legs are longer than mine, I can’t go so fast.”

“I don’t want to talk right now.” Sansa told her, as they passed over the gardens towards the older parts of the property where the old stables used to be.

Sansa was too worried to talk. It wasn’t just the wedding tomorrow that worried her though, Sansa was also terrified that the reason that no one had shown up to get her out of the Vale yet was because Petyr had lied and he really had done something to Jon. She felt paranoid for thinking it, but when had Petyr ever told the truth? Sansa shouldn’t have taunted him about Jon as much as she had. Maybe Petyr had Jon killed as some sort of revenge move—and that was an unspeakable thought.

“You never want to talk.” Mya grumbled, “You haven’t talked to me at all. Is there a reason that you’re angry with me, right now?”

“I’m not angry at anyone.” Sansa spun around to tell her, as they stood in the shadows of the old stables.

Mya frowned, “Than what is it? Is this about the wedding? You could talk to Mr. Baelish and tell him you want to put it off for a while. Everyone would understand if you did.”

There was no way Petyr would ever agree to push the wedding back. Sansa was surprised it had taken him this long to plan it, to begin with.

Sansa shook her head, “It’s not cold feet, Mya.”

“Then what is it?” She pushed, eyes tracking Sansa’s bruised temple, “You’re keeping secrets, you never used to do that.”

Sansa laughed, thinking how ironic that statement was since Mya hadn’t even known Sansa’s real name until three days ago. “I fairly certain I kept a very big secret from you for six years.”
Mya crossed her arms, “That was different. That was to protect yourself.” She paused, still staring at the bruise, “Is it the same now?”

Sansa pressed her lips together and looked over Mya’s shoulder to the guard standing not far away. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Where have you been the last two months?” Mya asked suddenly.

“Why does it matter? I traveled, that’s all.”

“But where have you really been. No one ever said. Were you still in France, or did you go somewhere else? Were you alone the entire time? Were the guards with you then too, because if they were you’d think you’d be less uncomfortable around them.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.” Sansa answered tensely. Sansa couldn’t trust Mya with anything.

“Can you tell me something? What about the government people who are after you, can you tell me about them.”

“Mya.” Sansa warned.

“Fine, then how’d you get that bruise?” Mya pressed.

Sansa shook her head, at least this was a question that she knew how to answer, “I told you, I fell into a door—“

“How did you really get it?”

Sansa didn’t speak. She looked at the guard who’d only gotten closer to them and the old stable. “I fell.”
“You’re not so clumsy as to fall.” Mya said, “I’ve known you for six years and I don’t think I’ve ever seen you fall once.”

Sansa worked the words in her mouth, unsure if she could say them out loud. The guard was close enough to hear them both now, and Sansa knew he was listening.

Was there even a point to lying to Mya? The security guards knew the truth about Sansa’s situation and none of them cared, why would it be any different with Mya? No one was going to take Sansa side here—she was all alone. No one dared turn against Petyr.

“I used to get bruises all the time,” Sansa said venomously, recalling her bruised wrists that always used to appear after Petyr visited her. No one had questioned those either. “Maybe I didn’t fall. Maybe I just bumped into a doorway or cabinet again. I don’t recall you ever having a problem with those explanations before.”

Now it was Mya turn to be at a loss for words. Sansa could tell she was trying to connect what Sansa had just told her, but it wasn’t aligned with any narrative Mya could have dreamed up. Sansa didn’t need an answer, she didn’t wait for one either.

Sansa turned on her heels and started marching back to the mansion, feeling a small flame of vindication. Nothing would come from it though, nothing ever did.

It was a bitter punishment, that Sansa best escape from reality was spending time with Robin. Unlike everyone else in the Vale, Robin never asked Sansa questions about herself. Also, unlike everywhere else in the Vale, the security guards tended to stay back in the hall, instead of coming into Robin’s playroom. Sansa had a feeling that Robin annoyed them all, and so when Sansa was in here with Robin, she didn’t have to worry about the security guards staring down at her. This made Robin ideal company.

Sansa was sitting on the sofa in Robin’s playroom, watching as he worked on a coloring book while a movie played in the background. It was hard to imagine that she used to enjoy spending time with Robin. Robin wasn’t much younger than Rickon, but they may as well have been a completely different species. The two boys were nothing alike, and Sansa found herself missing Rickon all the more when she was with Robin.

“You aren’t talking.” Robin said, not looking up from his coloring book.

Sansa blinked and looked up at him, “I’m watching the film. Isn’t that why we have it on?”

“That’s background noise.” Robin stood up to turn the volume on the projector down some more, before going back to the little table he was coloring at. “You’re supposed to be talking to me.”
Sansa tried to quell her irritation. “I’m not a performing monkey, Robin. I’m not here to entertain you.”

Robin looked up and frowned, “Yes you are.”

“No,” Sansa got up from the sofa, and moved to kneel in front of him, “I’m not.”

“You aren’t being very nice.” Robin bristled, setting his colored pencils down to prove a point.

“Maybe if you wanted me to be nice, you shouldn’t have told on me to Petyr.”

It was juvenile. So totally completely juvenile, but Sansa said it anyway and enjoyed how a look of guilt passed Robin by after she said it.

Satisfied, Sansa stood up and walked over to the projector and turned the volume up again, and then went to sit back down. She tried to occupy her mind back with the stupid cartoon. Maybe if she could focus on it then she wouldn’t have to worry about everything else going on.

Sansa tried to tell herself that Jon had to be okay—the more likely reason no one had come to the Vale to get her out was because the confession she got from Petyr wasn’t enough. That was the reality Sansa had to come to terms to, and that’s what she was trying to do now.

“I wouldn’t have told if you hadn’t shouted at me.” Robin said timidly from his table. Sansa narrowed her eyes and looked at him, she opened her mouth to speak, but Robin continued, “I didn’t think you’d get in trouble. You never used to get in trouble. You were Father’s favorite.”

“He’s not my father.” Sansa reminded Robin coldly, “My father is dead.”

Robin cowed and looked back down at his table. He worked in silence for a while and then said, “My mum is dead too. I thought that’s why Petyr took care of us. We both have dead mums.”

Sansa thought about her own mother—the real one, not the fake one Petyr invented for her when she was supposed to be Alayne. Maybe Petyr would let Sansa visit Catlyn again after all of this was over—her mother was the one relative she had who Petyr didn’t have to be afraid of.
“That’s Alayne, Robin.” Sansa told him dully, “Alayne’s mum was dead. Mine’s not.”

“I liked when you were Alayne better.” Robin told her, “You were nicer to me then. When you become my new mum, are you still going to be so mean?”

Sansa looked up and glared, “I’m not going to be your new mother.”

“Yes, you are.” Robin argued, “Petyr’s my dad, and when you marry him, you’ll be my mum. That’s what he told me.”

Sansa almost felt pity for Robin in that moment. She’d forgotten that he’d been brainwashed by Petyr just as Sansa had been growing up—the only difference was Robin was still a child, and he’d probably never know what sort of creature Petyr really was. In a way, Robin was a victim in all of this too. Petyr had killed Robin’s mother, and then took the inheritance that would have been Robin’s and given it to himself.

Sansa got up and moved back over to Robin’s table and kneeled back down in front of him. She watched how Robin, shrunk back like he expected Sansa to say something biting again, looking at her with an edge of distrust. Was this how Sansa used to be when she was young and still believed that Petyr had saved her from the world instead of hiding her from it?

“Robin,” Sansa put her hand on his shoulder to keep his attention, “First rule: Petyr always lies.”

Robin made a face and stepped back, “That’s not true. Father never lies to me.”

Sansa sat back, “He lied about me being away on holiday, didn’t he? That’s why the police came to the mansion after I left, remember? Everyone thought I was kidnapped, so did Petyr, but then a few days later he told you that I was on a vacation. That was a lie.”

“That’s different.” Robin insisted.

Sansa shook her head, “He lied about putting your blanket in the attic. Remember? I helped you look for it there and it wasn’t anywhere, but then Mya found it in the bin a few days later.” Robin started looking down, shoulders hunched defensively. Sansa couldn’t tell if anything she had said was going to sway Robin to her side, she moved her hand away and asked, “Are you going to tell Petyr that I told you that he was a liar?”
Robin looked at her and hesitated. A voice cleared its throat behind Sansa and she turned to see Myranda leaning in the doorway, Mya standing a little behind her.

“What’s going on here?” Myranda asked.

“Nothing.” Robin answered quickly to Myranda before looking back at Sansa, “It’s a secret. I’m not going to tell anyone.”

Sansa hoped that was true. She wanted it to be, because as angry as Robin had made her in these past few days, he was still important to Sansa. In another world, Sansa would have ended up just like Robin, and for some reason, it was important to Sansa that he didn’t stay that way.

“Well, fine I don’t want to know your dinky little secret anyway.” Myranda waved Sansa forward, “Come on, you’ve got to try on your dress. The seamstress has to make sure it fits before she can leave—you’ve literally taken forever, come on, let's go.”

Sansa glared at Myranda as she stood up and walked across the room to the door. She looked back to Robin who was watching her with a terse expression—she really hoped that Robin could be more than Petyr’s puppet one day.

“Wait, Sansa can’t go.” Robin said standing up, “She’s playing with me.”

Myranda sighed and turned back around, “Robin, Sansa has more important things to do than watch you colour.”

Robin shook his head, “But—“

“How about I play with you instead.” Mya volunteered, suddenly, weaving past Myranda and Sansa to get into the playroom. It was a surprising offer consider Mya never really enjoyed keeping Robin company—Mya wasn’t ever good with kids, especially kids like Robin. “What are you coloring? You got another book I can use?” Mya asked sitting beside Robin and getting his attention.

“That works,” Myranda shrugged and pulled Sansa forward, “Come on. This seamstress is a real bitch, I want to get her out of here already.”
They ended up back in Sansa’s bedroom. It was the same room she’d grown up in, and Sansa didn’t feel like she belonged there anymore. She’d thought about this before, especially in the past few days when she had to sleep in the room alone. During those nights, Sansa wished she could be anywhere else.

Sansa hadn’t been able to stand the thought of sleeping on the bed again. Every time she went to lay down on it, Sansa thought about Petyr and all the nights she returned to it after he got her drunk off the wine he kept in his office, her stomach heavy and sick, or worse, the nights he snuck into this room to touch her.

Sansa ended up moving the blanket down to the floor beside the bed and trying to sleep there instead, but she couldn’t fall asleep either way. Sansa would peer under the bed towards the door and watch the shadows that danced beneath it like she was waiting for something. She could hear the guards walking around outside it, the shadows of their feet passing under the doorway every few minutes. Each night, Sansa got up and moved her desk chair and braced it under the door handle so no one could get inside. She would then walk to the closet that was across the room and wrap her blanket around her shoulders and fall asleep in there. She felt like a child doing it—like a coward, but it was the closest thing Sansa could get to safety in that room. Sansa spent all night wishing that Jon was with her, and then thanking every higher power that he wasn’t—that he didn’t have to see her like this.

“Does it fit?” Myranda asked from the other side of the bathroom door.

Sansa adjusted the dress. It was a little loose around the waist, and her chest didn’t quite fill it out. In the year that she’d been gone, Sansa had lost a lot of weight, mostly from her time living on the street when she couldn’t really afford food. Sansa gained a good amount back while living with Jon—their biweekly take-in and Jon’s penchant to order pizza instead of making dinner had aided with that—but Sansa hadn’t gained enough to be back at the weight she was before she ran away.

Sansa opened the bathroom door and stepped out, “It’s a little big. I don’t think it really needs to be altered though, I’ll only be wearing it for an hour anyway.”

The seamstress came over and started pinning the dress, silently make marks where she would have to take it in. Myranda hummed critically from the bed.

“It’s not completely awful. It’s still a little boring though, are you sure you don’t want her to add something more to it—What about lace? You could make it backless and then put in a lace panel. That would be nice.”

Sansa made a face, and the seamstress shook her head, her wrinkled face pursing, as she said in a German accent. “There isn’t enough time for that.”
Myranda rolled her eyes and mimicked the seamstress who had her back to her. Sansa attempted to smile—but when it didn’t reach her eyes; Myranda frowned.

“The ring is nice,” Myranda commented.

Sansa lifted a shoulder, “I guess.” The seamstress stepped away, and Sansa moved to slip the dress down her waist, and stepped out of it, reaching for her robe that was hanging off the back of the dresser chair.

“Whoa, hello.” Myranda grabbed Sansa’s hand before she could tie the robe closed, “Why didn’t you tell me that you got a tattoo while you were gone.”

Sansa glanced down at where Mryanda was inspecting the inked wolf, “Oh, right. I forgot. I got it a few days ago.”

Myranda stepped back and lifted a brow, “I can’t believe prissy Alayne actually got a tattoo.”

Sansa shrugged, uncomfortable with the attention. She tied the robe. “Prissy Alayne never existed.”

“Yeah, but still.” Myranda followed Sansa to the bathroom where Sansa was grabbing her jeans and shirt. The door was half shut, with Myranda and Sansa inside; something in Myranda sobered as Sansa got dressed, “I mean, you said you got it a few days ago. Doesn’t Petyr hate tattoos? Why would you get one so close to the wedding?”

Sansa looked up as she tugged her jeans on, “I didn’t get it for Petyr.”

“Yeah, but you’re marrying him.” Myranda prodded, but her suspicion had quelled when Sansa didn’t react accordingly, “Whatever. You know, Mya is right, you don’t seem very excited for the wedding.”

Sansa shrugged again, pulling her jumper over her head, “I don’t know what you want me to say.”
Myranda gave a dry laugh and sobering as she watched Sansa like she was trying to get a read on her. “Are you serious.”

Sansa lifted her arms and pressed her lips together in a thin line, voiceless. Sansa shut her eyes and pulled her hand through her hair. She felt too exhausted to lie, but Myranda was still watching her with that critical glare and so Sansa had to.

“I’m super excited.” Sansa told her unconvincingly, “It’s just stressful. A lot is going on.”

Myranda stayed still as Sansa walked past her and out of the restroom, back into the bedroom where the seamstress was sealing the dress in a clear travel carrier to be taken to alterations. Sansa glanced at the clock on the bed. It was getting late, and Sansa would have to be getting ready for her dinner with Petyr and Robin soon. The three of them had private dinners every night since Sansa was back, well they were private save for the security guards who stayed in the room, as a silent intimidator to keep Sansa behaving. Not that Sansa had to have the security guards there to keep her in line. Petyr had more than proved that he could physically keep Sansa from misbehaving when he left the dark bruise on the side of her face.

“I need to get ready for dinner,” Sansa said turning to Myranda.

Myranda arched a brow, “Are you telling me to leave?”

Sansa sighed. The seamstress had slipped from the room, getting replaced by the security guard. Myranda was waiting for Sansa’s answer and she wasn’t going anywhere without an argument. The least she could do was be useful then, “Can you pick me out a dress for dinner. You’re so much better at that sort of stuff.”

Flattery worked wonders on Myranda, who gave a satisfied smile and turned to go to Sansa closet, opening the door and stepping inside.

“Why is there a blanket on the floor?” Myranda muttered as she moved clothes down the closet rack, glancing back at Sansa as she contemplated her choices. Her eyes ended up wandering over to the security guard at the door, “Hey, handsome, which is better?”

Myranda pulled two dresses out of the closet and held them up for the guard to pick from. He didn’t make a movement that acknowledged that Myranda had spoken at all. Sansa coughed, and pointed towards the second dress, a modest, long-sleeved black sweater dress, “I like that one.”
Myranda made a face, and tossed it at Sansa, “You know, when Mya told me you had a security detail I was kind of picturing it would be more like the Bodyguard, that movie with Whitney Houston. Hey, Tall, Dark, and Serious, you’ve ever heard of that one?”

The security guard stared forward, unmoving. Myranda snapped her fingers, moving over to wave a hand in front of the man’s eyes. Sansa held the dress to her chest and let the ghost of a grin quirk on her mouth. She knew that Myranda was doing this on purpose, trying to get Sansa to laugh. As self-centered and bombastic as Myranda appeared, she always was a good friend. Sansa wished that meant more nowadays.

“You know,” Myranda put her hands on her hips, turning to Sansa, “I think I need to have my father talk to Petyr about his choices in personal security. I swear, I’ve gone to ten different events with these guys working details, and I haven’t gotten one of them to sleep with me. I’d be insulted if I wasn’t convinced that these guys are eunuchs.”

“Eunuchs?” Sansa laughed, glancing at the emotionless guard and trying to grasp the micro-expressions on his face that proved he was listening.

“It’s when—“

“I know what a eunuch is,” Sansa went to the restroom and changed into the dress Myranda picked out. She stepped out and smoothed the skirt. She glanced at the guard again, and said in a low voice to Myranda, “You do know they’ve got ears, right?”

Myranda shrugged, “When he proves that I’ll stop talking shit.” She looked over her shoulder and lifted her brow at the guard, “You hear that, boy? You’ve got months of this to deal with; you say one thing to me and we can end the suffering now.” When the guard made no sort of acknowledgment Myranda looked back at Sansa, “Do you think I should write it down for him?”

Sansa laughed again and shook her head. Myranda was smiling now too. She moved to lean against Sansa’s bed, there was a satisfying tilt to her head now, that looked far too similar to pride.

“Knew I could do it.”

“Do what?” Sansa asked, fighting her grin.
Myranda quirked her lips, “Make you smile. Not one of those bullshit smiles, a real one. It only took me all day, but I am nothing but determined and hilarious.”

Sansa’s smile dampened a little as she sat down on her desk chair, “I smile.”

“No,” Myranda shook her head, “You really don’t. But you never really did, not even before.”

Sansa shook her head, “That’s not true. You and Mya always made me smile. I was happy.”

Myranda had a resigned look to her face, as she lifted her shoulder and dropped them, “Smiled, yes. But like I said, it was bullshit. As for happy, I can only remember about three times where I actually thought you were happy.”

“What?” Sansa made a face and shook her head again.

That couldn’t be true—Sansa always seemed happy when she was with Mya and Myranda. Even when Sansa was miserable, and all she wanted was to go back to England and be with her mum and brothers, Sansa still pretended to be happy. If she didn’t pretend, Petyr would take Sansa to the side and ask her what was wrong, and Sansa hated when he did that.

“Oh come on,” Myranda countered, “You know what I’m talking about. I swear, I told Mya you had chronic depression or something about a dozen times. When you went missing I had money that you tossed yourself in the lake.”

Sansa hunched her shoulders self-consciously. Myranda guess wasn’t wildly off base. After Petyr proposed, Sansa had planned on running, but she knew that if that didn’t work out she’d end up doing something very similar to what Myranda had suggested. Hearing it out loud though, Sansa could only think of her mother now, and how Catelyn Stark hadn’t even managed to escape this world in death.

Sansa was about to say this when she focused on something else Myranda said.

“Went missing?” Sansa asked carefully.
Myranda frowned, “Well, no one knew you went on holiday. We all thought you went missing—well, actually, Mya thought that you’d run—” Myranda paused and glanced to the guard in the room. She shut her mouth and rethought her words, “Petyr thought you were kidnapped. Some police came to the property and everything.” Myranda frowned again as she thought this over, apparently forgetting the guard, “Actually, how did you manage that? Why didn’t Petyr know that you left for holiday—“

Sansa, out of the corner of her eye, saw the guard tense. She cleared her throat, “It’s complicated. What were you saying about making me smile?”

“Right.” Myranda was still frowning ever so slightly, but Sansa had successfully pivoted the conversation, “Anyway, you’re always so fake happy that me and Mya made this game where we’d try to get you to get a genuine smile. Do you remember when I spat in Harry’s drink after he totally blew you off during the Christmas party? Totally part of the game—I mean spitting in his drink was reward enough, but you also laughed so hard that champagne came out of your nose.”

“I never knew about that,” Sansa said wondering how long this game between Mya and Myranda was going on. Sansa always thought she was so sneaky when she pretended to be happy—that she was so clever for having convinced everyone. The entire time, though, Sansa’s best friends were jumping through elaborate hoops to make her genuinely happy.

Myranda shrugged like it was no big deal, “Well, we had to do something to keep you from slitting your wrists. Also, when you consider who to pick for the maid of honor, keep in mind that I totally beat Mya every single time.”

Sansa’s next smile wasn’t so real. At least there was no more worry about Sansa slitting her wrists. Petyr had all the sharp objects removed from Sansa's room already as if he also thought that her killing herself was a real concern.

“Right,” Sansa said remembering the wedding tomorrow.

Myranda dimmed a little when she saw the smile and glanced over to the clock. “Looks like its time for your dinner.”

Sansa turned her head and stared at the clock, “Looks like it.”
Sansa sat across from Petyr at the dinner table. She held her fork in her hand and played with the food on her plate, moving it around as she tried to find the appetite to eat. Occasionally Petyr would speak and Sansa would make all the proper markers that she was listening.

Tonight was different. Robin was shoveling food into his mouth, barely leaving room to breathe, which was unusual, but what really stood out was how little Petyr had said the whole evening. The room was filled with silence, save for when Robin’s hand slipped and his metal steak knife clattered off the table and fell to the floor.

“Sorry,” Robin whispered, going to the ground to pick it up, and cleaning it with his napkin, “I’ve finished eating, can I be excused?”

Petyr looked up from his steepled fingers and nodded. Robin quickly fled the room. Sansa looked at her own plate, which she hadn’t touched yet and sighed. Usually, Sansa wouldn’t be excused until Petyr finished eating, but he’d barely touched his plate too.

“Hunger strike?” Petyr asked, looking at Sansa’s plate.

Sansa shrugged a shoulder, “I don’t have much of an appetite.”

“It’s very rude to not eat the meal someone prepared for you. I didn’t think I raised you to be so spoiled.”

Sansa had a lot of things she could have said to that. For one, Petyr hadn’t really eaten anything either. Instead, though, Sansa said the first thing to come to mind.

“You didn’t raise me.”

“Didn’t I?” Petyr questioned, “That’s a rather ungrateful thing to say to the man who clothed and fed you for six years.”

Sansa gave a dry stare, “Do you want me to thank you?”

“I want you to start acting like the girl who I took in all those years ago.”
Sansa tried to control the anger she felt. She took a breath in and looked around at the guards around them. There were three in the room, which felt excessive, but Petyr liked a show of strength—it probably made him feel powerful.

“The girl you took in all those years ago,” Sansa said rigidly, “Was a child.”

“And you’re not a child anymore.” Petyr agreed.

Sansa wanted to laugh, “No, I’m not.”

“I’m glad you realize that,” Petyr said sitting back in his seat, “I don’t think it would be too much, then, for me to ask you to act your own age.”

“Excuse me?”

“Eat your dinner.” Petyr answered coldly, “Stopping acting like a petulant brat. You very well know that when I said I want you to act like the girl I took in, I meant the one who didn’t fight me when I was doing things for her own good.”

Sansa balked at Petyr, “I’m not fighting you. I’m here, aren’t I? I came back to the Vale, I tried on that stupid wedding dress, I’ve come to every single one of these dinners. What more do you want?”

Petyr’s expression did not change. “Eat your dinner, Sansa.”

Sansa’s lip curled. She wrapped her fist around her fork and stabbed the vegetables on her plate if only to keep from throwing the utensil at Petyr’s head.

“I got a call from the police today,” Petyr said indifferently when Sansa started to eat. She froze, and Petyr continued. “They heard a troubling rumor from a police station in Cardiff, something about incriminating audio of me. I assured them that there was nothing to worried about.”
Sansa set her fork down and braced her hands on the table, feeling the world start to shake, “That’s good, then.”

“It is.” Petyr agreed, “Though, it is quite unfortunate that this call even had to take place. You know, Sansa, reputation is everything. I can’t very well have a police officer spreading slander about my character, and if I recall, Jon Snow works in Cardiff, doesn’t he?”

Sansa shook her head, “Jon doesn’t have anything to do—“

“No, of course not,” Petyr relaxed and gave Sansa and saccharine smile, “You’re so eager to protect him now. You should have been more worried about protecting him before. I find this whole business unpleasant, I really do, but I just can’t have Jon Snow going around spreading these salacious stories.”

“You can’t—“ Sansa shook her head, she could barely breath, “You can’t hurt him, Petyr. He’ll stop, I can tell Jon to stop, he’ll listen to me. I want to stay here, I want to stay with you.”

Petyr smiled, tilting his head, “Why, this is a different tone than you had before.”

Sansa nodded, “You don’t have to worry about Jon—“

“No, I don’t.” Petyr agreed and waved one of the guards forward. The guard stepped towards the table and said something to Petyr that Sansa couldn’t make out. Petyr smiled.

“What did he say?” Sansa asked, looking at the guard and pushing her chair back.

“Calm down, Sansa.” Petyr replied evenly, “He was just informing me that I was correct and that Jon Snow isn’t going to be an issue anymore.”

Sansa stood up, “What does that mean?”

Petyr shrugged, “It doesn’t—“
“What did you do to Jon?” Sansa felt herself shake as she shouted the question across the table, her hand going over to the cutlery on the table and clasping onto the steak knife. “You promised not to hurt him. What did you fucking—”

Sansa had the knife in hand and was storming around the table, her vision narrowed down on Petyr who sat unflinchingly waiting for her. Sansa never made it though, one of the guards grabbed Sansa, holding her wrist so that the knife clattered to the ground.

“What did you do to him, Petyr?” Sansa screamed as the guard tried to hold Sansa still. “Answer me! If you did anything to Jon, I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” Petyr stood up from his chair and crossed the dining room to stand in front of Sansa, where the guard was clasping her hands behind her back and twisting her arm so that she collapsed on her knees. Petyr looked at the steak knife on the floor and kicked it away with the toe of his shoe, “This is pathetic, really, Sansa. Did you plan on holding a knife to my neck until I told you that Jon Snow is fine?”

Sansa growled, still fighting the guard’s hands, and trying to look past her own tears. “If you did anything to him—” Sansa couldn’t even finish the sentence.

Petyr set a hand on Sansa’s shoulder and took a knee beside her, “I’m not a monster, Sansa. Do you think I would kill your lover on the night before our wedding? Do you think so little of me?”

Sansa could hardly see through her tears. She spat, “Yes.”

Petyr sighed and stood up, dusting his trousers. “Take Sansa back to her room.”

Sansa fought the man behind her as he dragged her back to her feet. Sansa broke free from his grasp and lunged away, knocking into the empty dining room chairs, as she tried to evade the hands coming at her. The man ended up grabbing a handful of Sansa’s hair, twisting it until Sansa couldn’t move without feeling like her hair was about to be ripped from her scalp.

One of the other guards had come to help the other control, Sansa. She tried to push that one away, her hand catching against the shoulder of their jacket.

“This is ridiculous.” Petyr said impatiently from his seat on the head of the table, where he’d begun to eat his meal, “Just pick her up and carry her. And Sansa, try to remember that while Jon Snow may be safe now, he doesn’t have to stay that way—especially if you continue to act like a
Sansa shrieked as she was lifted and thrown over the guard's shoulder, like a sack of flour. She thought he was going to drop her and Sansa's skull would crack on the stone floor of the room, and so she grabbed his shoulder to steady herself. Her finger tightened around the patch on his jacket, the sensation familiar, reminding Sansa of the last time a security guard had carried her anywhere. That memory brought on a new sort of panic.

“Stop,” Sansa said trying to get free, “I can walk—I don’t need to be carried.”

The arm around her waist tightened and the guard started walking. Sansa blinked back the memories of the shooting, of how Sansa had been pulled away from her father, how she’d been thrown over a shoulder, just like this.

“Wait,” Petyr said with some resignation in his voice. Maybe he realized how absurd it was to have Sansa carried through the mansion like some ragdoll. He walked around to the guard’s back so that he could address Sansa, “This will not happen tomorrow.”

Sansa nodded her head, fighting back the terror that was tearing her up inside. She’d never felt like she was so vividly back in London. Sansa felt trapped, and powerless, she felt like her world was falling apart again—the sound of the bullet echoed in her ears. The memory had opened some new sort of trauma in her, and it burned.

“I won’t—I won’t fight you, I swear.” Sansa stuttered, wriggling in the guard’s arms, “Tell him to let me go, Petyr. Please.”

Petyr looked at Sansa pityingly, “You will start behaving.”

“I will, I’ll be good.” Sansa promised, feeling as if she couldn’t breath anymore, “Tell him to let me go, please.”

Petyr stepped back and nodded. “Put her down.”

And the guard did. Sansa’s legs gave out from under her and she crumbled on the ground. She wrapped her arms around herself as she tried to stop shaking and hyperventilating. It had been six years since Sansa had even really imagined the day Ned Stark was shot—now Sansa couldn’t
escape the memory.

A guard held out his hand for Sansa and she took it. As he pulled her to her feet, Sansa looked at his jacket, and the patch, which she’d nearly torn from the seams. Sansa couldn’t move.

“It hurts me to see you in pain,” Petyr told her, unaware that he was met with deaf ears. “Everything I’ve done has been to protect you. I want you to know that, Sansa.”

The patch, Sansa had seen it before. It was the same patch that the officers at Father’s speech had on their uniforms the days he was killed. But they hadn’t been officers, none of them had been, Sansa must have forgotten that after all these years. Just like the Lannister security guard who’d shot Ned Stark, all the other guards at the speech had been privately employed. Of course, the guard who shot Ned Stark had never actually been hired by the Lannisters. Sansa remembered what Stannis Baratheon had said about Petyr, he said that Petyr was the one who controlled the company’s finances at King’s Landing; he was the one who controlled the Lannister’s finances.

Sansa looked up and stared at Petyr as she was pulled from the dining room. Cersei Lannister had never ordered that security guard to kill Ned Stark. Petyr was the one who controlled the money; he was the one who always hired the same security team. Petyr Baelish had been the one to kill Sansa’s father.

Sansa wondered if she was in shock as she sat curled up on the floor of her bedroom. She stared at the wall in front of her, trying to remember everything she could about the day her father was shot, and trying to figure out if Petyr really could have been the one to order the hit.

It made sense—Petyr would have hired the security guards that day, and while it could have been a coincidence that the security guards here in the Vale were from the same company as the security who were at Ned Stark’s speech the day he was shot. It didn’t feel like a coincidence though, and Sansa wasn’t sure if she believed coincidences were possible anymore.

Why though? Why would Petyr want Ned Stark dead, what could he have gained from that? It couldn’t have all just been to get Sansa, there had to be more to it.

Sansa blinked, realizing that she might have just spent the last six years of her life living with her Father’s killer. She realized that tomorrow, she would have to marry her father’s killer.

There was a shout from somewhere in the mansion and Sansa heard the footsteps of the guard move away from her door. Sansa wanted to scream to, but she didn’t think anyone would come for her.

The door creaked and Sansa sucked in a breath and looked up. The room was so dark that Sansa couldn’t really see anything, but she heard footsteps moving towards her. Sansa blinked back tears, wondering if it was Petyr coming to sneak into her bed like he’d done when she was younger. Just like all those nights, Sansa felt paralyzed.

Someone kneeled in front of Sansa, and she shut her eyes.
“Sansa,” they whispered, “Look at me, we don’t have much time.”

Sansa opened her eyes, and looked up, “Mya? How did you—“

“The guards are with Robin,” she explained, “We don’t have a lot of time. You have to tell me what’s going on.”

“What?” Sansa shook her head, and wiped her eyes with her sleeve, “What do you mean—“

“Sansa,” Mya said urgently, concern drowning her features, “Robin told me that you got in trouble with Petyr and then when you left his office you had that bruise. He gave it to you, didn’t he.”

Sansa needed to say no. Jon’s life had already been threatened once today, Sansa couldn’t screw up and let it be threatened again. Her lack of answer was enough for Mya though.

Sansa said in a feeble voice, “I can’t marry him, Mya.”

“You weren’t ever on holiday, were you?” Mya sounded like she was in shock too. She sat back beside Sansa and stared at the floor, “You really did run away.”

Sansa heaved in a deep breath and grabbed Mya’s hand. Sansa couldn’t marry Petyr tomorrow. She just couldn’t. There wasn’t any more time to wait for help, and Jon wasn’t going to come to rescue her anymore.

“I can’t marry him, Mya.” Sansa’s voice broke, “I can’t—I won’t.”

Mya was still staring at the ground, but she nodded her head, “Okay,” she said and then, shaking off her shock, she said more strongly, “Okay.” Mya tried to stand up, look at the window, “We can’t use the doors, they’ve got a guard at every single one of those. We can take the window and then sprint to the stables. We’ll take my father’s truck to town—“

“I can’t leave,” Sansa said pulling Mya back down, feeling panic at the very thought.
Sansa shook her head, “No, Mya. Petyr is threatening my family, that’s how he’s keeping me here. I can’t leave or else he’ll hurt them. That’s why I never said anything—if Petyr thinks I’m trying to back out of the marriage he’ll kill them.”

Mya sucked in a breath. Her eyes were wide, frightened. She nodded head slowly though as she saw just how serious Sansa was, and moved to sit back down. “Okay, we won’t run. How are you going to get out of marrying him then? We could go to the police—“

“No,” Sansa told her, thinking of how useless the police had been when Jon told them about Petyr before, “That won’t work either.”

“If we don’t go to them, Sansa, then what can we do?” Mya asked.

Sansa knew what they could do. She knew what she had to do. A wedding soaked in blood. Sansa wouldn’t get married—she’d rather die before she married herself to Petyr, before she let the man who terrorized her family touch her again.

“I need a knife.” Sansa told Mya, voice detached from reality. Sansa wondered if she was any braver than her mother, she wondered if this had anything to do with bravery at all. It all just felt like desperation now.

Chapter End Notes

okay, so as i’ve been writing the ending to this fic, i realized that i need one more chapter to be added on, this is that addition. Also two chapters in one day!! A lot happens here--including one of the bigger reveals that i hope makes sense. I tried to hint at Petyr being the one to have Ned killed for a little while, but i was going for subtle so i hope it still worked. Anyway, basically, LF was in charge of all the finances for king's landing, as stannis previously mentioned, and so an extent he'd also control Lannister finances since those are tied to the company. While on paper it says that the
security guard who killed Ned was employed by the Lannisters, it would have been LF to be the one to hire him.
We've also got Mya hesitantly joining Sansa's side at the end of the chapter, and possibly Robin? Mya is no dumby, and I totally feel like she's a ride or die sort of friend.

Also, as for the development that the police didn't bother with Jon's tip about Petyr and the audio recording, we well be getting more of that in the next chapter! Pretty much, the next chapter will take place from three povs, that will explain what the other starks have been up to since Sansa left the hospital/the starklings. Last chapter will definitly be in Sansa's pov though!
“Stop that.” Arya glanced up from her magazine to glare at Rickon who’d been tossing a rubber ball at the wall for the last twenty minutes. Every time he tossed it, the ball made two rubbery thumping noises as it hit the wall, the floor, and then landed back in Rickon’s palm. It was fucking annoying, maybe even more annoying that the loud chewing noise Rickon made as he popped his third stick of gum into his mouth, which at the very least meant he had to stop humming the tune of auto insurance commercials, which is what he’d been doing consistently for the past two hours, only being interrupted as he popped bubbles with the gum.

It was really fucking annoying, especially when Arya was trying to not cause a scene, and have the officer hovering nearby recognize her from when he took part of the police unit who raided the bunker Bran had been kept in, Arya hovering near that whole scene.

Rickon looked up, mouth hanging open dumbly, “What?”

“Stop bouncing the rubber fucking ball, or I’ll shove it down your throat. Got it?”

Rickon sneered, but tucked the rubber ball back into his backpack. It had five days since Jon and Sansa left for Cardiff, and after day one, Arya already hated that she agreed to watch Rickon. She wasn’t some babysitter, and she didn’t even know Rickon—he may have been her little brother due to some unfortunate happenstance of biology, but truthfully, Rickon was already beating Sansa out for least favorite sibling. Jon was at the top of the favorite sibling list, of course. Bran came in second, but that was only because he hadn’t talked yet.

“You’re kind of a bitch,” Rickon told her, “You know that?”

“The last person to call me a bitch had their throat slit,” Arya raised an eyebrow slowly, “You want to be next?”

Rickon narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms over his puffed up chest. “You can’t threaten me.”

“Why not? Jon doesn’t care, and Sansa isn’t around to stop me.”
For a second Arya was caught off guard when Rickon came at her. Faceless Men training aside, Arya really hadn’t been ready for the swing Rickon took at her. Of course, that second was short-lived, and in the next, Arya had one hand pulling Rickon’s arm behind his back and the other at his throat keeping him still. She could have kept pulling his arm and have it dislodge from the socket, or she could press down on his throat and choke him out, but Arya remembers that she needs to keep her grip loose so to not do either of those things. Rickon may have been annoying, but Jon would be pissed if he got back and realized two of his brothers were now being hospitalized.

“Calm down,” Arya told him, as Rickon struggled against her, “It was a joke. Do you really want to have that officer come in here to separate us, just cause you can’t take a joke?”

Rickon growled and Arya loosened her grip enough to let him break the hold. He rubbed his wrist, red from Arya’s grip and went to the other side of Bran’s room, over beside the bed and glared at Arya from there.

“Don’t joke about that. Sansa really is leaving—not all of us want her gone so that they can have Jon to themselves.”

Arya’s mouth twitched as she flexed her fingers. Okay, so she shouldn’t have made the joke, sure. But Rickon was still wrong. Arya wasn’t even sure if she wanted Sansa gone anymore—actually Arya was sure. Sansa was annoying and whiny, and a solid contender for the last place sibling, but the last place Arya wanted Sansa was back with Petyr Baelish. She was certain of that now—she should have been certain of it a long time ago.

“Sorry,” Arya spat bitterly, “I forgot about your delicate emotions.”

Rickon glare, if possible, intensified, “What are you even doing here? I don’t need a babysitter.”

Arya almost laughs. Mostly, because her suspicion just got confirmed; no one, not even Rickon could possibly be that annoying unless it was on purpose.

“Yeah?” Arya glanced to the door of the room to see the officer wondering down the hall just far enough to safely be out of earshot, “You’d like that, right? If I was gone all you would have to worry about is sneaking away from Officer Donuts over there and then what? You’d hitchhike all the way to France and rescue Sansa yourself?”

“Shut up!” Rickon’s face flushed, “You don’t know shit. I wasn’t planning on doing any of that.”
“Really? Is that why you keep looking at the clock? You’re timing his smoke breaks, aren’t you?”

Rickon’s face got even redder, “Shut up.”

It was almost impressive. Arya sort of figured Rickon was going to be the dumb one in the family, and maybe he was, but timing the smoke breaks was clever; Arya could give him that. And trying to annoy her into leaving with the chewing gum, the auto commercial humming, and rubber ball had honestly almost worked. The flaw in the plan was how short-sighted it was—Rickon wasn’t going to make it France, let alone out of the country, and even if he could, there wasn’t anything he could do to take her away from Petyr.

Arya knew that well enough herself—Sansa was committed to marrying Petyr Baelish now, if only to protect the rest of the Starks. Looking at Rickon though, Arya wondered if the plan was stupid, or if it was just desperate.

“Look, it wasn’t a half bad plan, I’ll give you that.” Arya settled back on her chair and shrugged, “Not a great plan, of course, considering it pretty much leaves you dry the second you make it out of the hospital.”

“I would have figured something out,” Rickon grimaces, shoulders set stubbornly, “At least I’m trying to help our family.”

“We aren’t a family,” Arya deadpanned. They hadn’t been a family since Ned Stark was shot, “We’re a collection of people who share similar DNA, and that’s about where the familiarity ends.”

Rickon scoffed, “Then what are you even doing here? You keep saying you don’t care about any of us, so why don’t you just leave? Or why don’t you just let me leave?”

Arya didn’t have an answer. Why wasn’t she just letting Rickon leave? “Maybe if you have a better plan, I’d let you. Right now though it sort of sucks, maybe you should spend less time whining and more time thinking about how you could even help Sansa if you did get out of here. Other than just begging her to come back home.”

“What, like you’ve got a better idea?” Rickon snarled, face heating up, “Jon and Sansa have tried everything else. I just want to help.”

“You can’t help,” Arya told him, “And you definitely aren’t going to help by being an idiot.”
“Like I said,” Rickon sneered, “Think of a better idea.”

Arya huffed and rolled her eyes. It’s not like Jon and Sansa needed Arya’s help—but Rickon was still glaring at Arya like he expected her to come up with the golden ticket of plans, and it was getting on her nerves.

“Right, you can’t—“

“Fine.” Arya uncrossed her legs and slammed her feet on the tile. “I’ll prove it to you.”

Arya dragged Rickon out of Bran’s room, smiling at the officer as they passed by him. He was the second one to watch them, the first switching out after the second day when it was discovered that Jon planned on staying in Cardiff a little while longer. His plan was only supposed to last at most three days, but it had been extended for reasons Arya didn’t completely know yet. The only time Jon had called her was to say that he’d be gone for a little while longer. He had sounded tense on the phone, but told her that everything was going to be alright, and then he’d hung up. That was two days ago.

“Where are you two going?” He asked, stopping them.

Arya glanced up in mock surprise, “Oh, we were just going to go to the nurses station to see if they have any more pudding. Do you want us to get you any?”

The officer shook his head, moving back over to the chair he’d set up outside the hospital room door and let them pass. Arya lead Rickon to the nurse’s station, that was a few halls down. It was currently abandoned, but Arya had expected it to be that way. In the past few days of practically living in the hospital she had learned the timing of the staff.

“Okay, keep guard.” Arya told him, pushing up the divider and stepping into the station. She went over to one of the chairs and took a seat, moving in front of the hospital computer and opening a new internet tab.

“What are you doing?” Rickon hissed as he looked around.
Arya glanced up and frowned, “I said keep guard.”

Rickon sneered but pulled away to stand in front of the station and look down the empty halls. Arya quickly opened up the email server Jon used and typed in his user name and password. She was only doing this to prove a point. Arya had gone through Jon’s email about a dozen times, he didn’t know, of course, but that was sort of the point. Jon emailed his friend Sam with updates about their investigation every time something important happened. Arya could just read the emails to Rickon and prove to him that there was nothing he and Arya could do to help Sansa at this point, since there were no new developments or angles in this little investigation.

“See, nothing new—“ Arya frowned when she saw that a new email had just come in. It was from Stannis Baratheon—and while Jon had emailed him before, he hadn’t lately. Arya clicked on the email and started to scan it.

“What?” Rickon asked moving towards Arya and leaning over the divider to try and see the computer screen, “What is that?”

Arya clicked the attached document and paused. It was a will—Sansa’s will. She closed the document before Rickon could see and shook her head.

“Nothing, it's just an email from Stannis Baratheon.”

“Him?” Rickon made a face, “What does he want?”

Arya shrugged, reading the email he sent again, nothing from it stuck out to Arya as important. At least nothing, but the will. Why would Sansa make one? The idea coming to mind made Arya feel sick.

“Nothing,” Arya pushed out of the chair and walked away from the nurse's station, “Give me a minute, I’ve got to make a call.”

Arya wound around to another hallway and dialed Jon’s number on her phone. Sansa would have been back in France for two days now. At this point, Jon could tell Arya if the plan about the police wiretapping had worked.

The phone buzzed for a minute before Jon picked up.
“What’s the news?” Arya asked without preamble.

“Is everything alright over there?” Jon asked quickly, sounding out of breath. He knew that he should have been back by now—too much time had passed. It was why Rickon was so worried, and why seeing that Sansa had made a will, was actually becoming a cause for concern.

“We’re fine,” Arya answered sharply, “What’s going on there? Has Sansa gotten him to admit to anything yet?”

Jon made a frustrated sound on the other end, “It’s complicated—according to the local police in France the recording we got isn’t compelling enough to warrant a raid. Shit—we’re working on it. Sam is talking to Interpol, we’re going to get a warrant; we just need another day…”

Jon didn’t sound convincing, he sounded terrified. He knew that Sansa was running out of time too. Arya wondered if he also knew about the will, but she doubted it. If Jon did know about it, Sansa never would have gone to France, to begin with. Sansa might not have another day, not if she was as stupid as Arya was worried she was, and Sansa planned on making that will a necessity herself.

Maybe Rickon was right, maybe they did have to do something. If Sansa’s life was in actual danger, it was time for Arya to take advantage of some resources she never wanted to open up.

“Yeah, okay.” Arya told Jon, “Stay on that. Keep me updated.”

Jon let out a relieved sigh, “You and Rickon and Bran are alright, right? You’ve been going back to the hotel I got you at night, aren’t you?”

They hadn’t. Mostly because Rickon refused to. That was probably just because he’d been trying to annoy Arya into going back to the hotel on her own and leaving him at the hospital so that he could run away, but Jon didn’t need to know that the two of them had been driving the nursing staff insane by sleeping on the hospital floor for the last three days.

“Yeah, we’re all good.” Arya said, “Look, I’ve got to go. Keep me updated.”

She hung up the phone before she could get Jon’s response. Arya took in a breath before walking back over to the empty nurse’s station and finding Rickon. He was sitting in front of the computer, trying to get back on the email Arya had signed off of.

“Want to go on a road trip?”
Rickon blinked, and looked up, “What?”

“Come on.” Arya started down the hall without him, listening as he quickly got up out of his chair and chased her down. She didn’t stop until she was back in Bran’s room and then she shut the door. “Pack your bag.”

“Wait, are we going to Cardiff?” Rickon asked as he picked his backpack up off the floor and started to throw his things inside, “We’re doing my plan?”

“Absolutely not.” Arya said, shouldering her own bag and walking over to Bran’s bed. She didn’t want to leave him, not when it meant he would be by himself. It was stupid, Arya knew that. Bran wasn’t even conscious, it’s not like he could tell if people were in the room, but after what Arya had seen happen to him, she didn’t want to leave him alone.

“We’ll be back soon.” Arya said stepping away from the bed, wondering who she was really addressing.

Rickon nodded his head “Okay, sure. What about the officer though? How are we going to get rid of him?”

Arya had nearly forgotten about him, but that was okay, she already knew how to get him out of the way. She dropped her bag by the door and told Rickon to stay with Bran. Arya went back out into the hall and went to find the police officer.

“Hey,” Arya said leaning against the wall that officer was standing against, “This must be a pretty boring night for you, right?”

The officer looked down and gave a tense smile. He was young, younger than Jon even, probably the same age as Gendry. That just made things easier.

“It’s not so bad.” The officer told her, “I’m usually just kept at a desk, so this is loads more interesting than that.”

Arya bristled at her family being called interesting, but it didn’t show. She laughed. “I’m sure. I’m
surprised they don’t have you out in the field though, you seem so rugged.”

The officer laughed, cheeks going red. He shook his head, “No, no, not me.”

“Oh,” Arya frowned and sighed, “I’m just so exhausted, aren’t you?”

The officer nodded and relaxed a little more, his shoulder brushing Arya’s, “Completely, it’s alright though. I’m trained for this sort of thing. You can go to sleep if you want. I’ll make sure no one bothers you or your brothers.”

Arya held her hand to her chest and cooed gratefully, “Really? All I’ve wanted is some sleep, I’m just so anxious, you know?”

He nodded, “No, definitely. You should get some rest. I’ll be standing outside the door the entire time. You’ve got nothing to be anxious about.”

“Thank you so much,” Arya told him, glancing down at the empty coffee cup in his hand. She reached for it, “Here, let me go grab you some more coffee first. Why don’t you go wait over by those chairs, I’ll be right back.”

She didn’t wait for his response before taking the cup and going to the coffee bar in the waiting rooms. Arya filled the paper cup with coffee and set it aside. She reached into her jacket and pulled out a prescription pill bottle. She poured a couple of bills up on the counter and crushed them into a powder. Arya preferred not to work with roofies, but certain situations made it a necessity. She swept the crushed pills into the coffee and then stirred the drink until everything had dissolved. Satisfied, Arya carried the cup back to the officer who was waiting in one of the chairs that was in the hall.

“Here you go.” Arya handed him the drink, watching as he took a sip, “Wow, I don’t know how you can drink that black. I guess I’m just a wimp, I can only drink coffee when its drowning in sugar and cream.”

The officer shrugged, in false modesty and took an even bigger drink as if to prove his masculinity through caffeine consumption, “Hey, well I don’t know any girls who drink black coffee, so don’t feel too bad.”
Arya smiled sweetly, “I’ll try not to. It’s not too hot, is it?”

“No, it’s perfect,” The officer took another sip, “You don’t want to drink it cold.”

“Oh, definitely.” Arya agreed, “You should drink it up then. Wouldn’t want it to go cold.”

The officer tilted the cup back and downed the rest of the drink. He smacked his lips, bristling at the bitter taste that hid the salty flavor of the roofies, “That was just what I needed. Do you mind getting me another?”

Arya took the cup and smiled, “Yeah, no problem!”

She walked down the hall and turned the corner. Arya tossed the cup in the bin and waited until a few more minutes passed. She rolled her shoulders and walked back down the hall, lifting a brow at the officer who was slumped over in his chair.

Arya knocked on Bran’s door, and Rickon peaked his head out.

“Did you get rid of him?”

Arya nodded and reached inside to grab her back, “Yep, let’s get moving.”

They walked down the hall, passing the unconscious officer on their way.

“Did you kill him?” Rickon asked waving his hand in front of the officer’s face to see if he was really asleep.

“No, idiot. I drugged him.” Arya pulled him forward by the arm, “Stop screwing around, let’s go.”

They wandered around the car park for a few minutes until Arya found a car that looked right. They were lucky that his was an old town, and the car park didn’t have security cameras anywhere. Arya went to the hood of the car and broke off the antenna.
“What are you doing?” Rickon hissed looking around.

“What does it look like?” Arya asked, jimmying the antenna between the car and its door.

“Looks like you’re stealing a car.” Rickon whispered like someone was out here listening, “Jon is going to be so pissed.”

Arya got the door open and got inside. She leaned towards the passenger door and unlocked it, waving for Rickon to get in while she went to start the car, reaching under the wheel and moving a panel to expose some wires.

The passenger door opened and Rickon hopped inside, setting his bag at his feet. “This is so cool,” he said to himself, watching Arya hotwire their stolen vehicle. The engine roared to life and Arya sat up.

“Jon never gets to know that you saw me do that.” Arya told him turning on the headlights and driving them out of the car park.

This felt like a bad idea for a number of reasons. Arya tried to rationalize bringing her twelve year old brother to meet with a mob boss, but it was a stretch. The drive to the city took three hours, during which Rickon fell asleep in his seat. When they arrived outside the warehouse Arya considered leaving him in the car and going in alone. It wasn’t smart to come here without back up, but its not like Rickon even constituted as that anyway.

Rickon stirred, his eyes blinking as he looked out the window, “Are we there?”

Arya nodded and frowned. The Brotherhood without Banners weren’t exactly on good terms with any Faceless Men. Arya never planned on ever using the contact she had at the Brotherhood, but after seeing the will Sansa made, Arya didn’t think she had a choice anymore. She couldn’t go to the Faceless Men for help on this, so Arya was going to her next available resource.

“Stay in the car.” Arya told him as she leaned an arm against the hood of the car, looking down at Rickon who was unfastening his seat belt.

Rickon kicked his door open, “No way. How do I know that you aren’t just going to do something to screw Sansa over even more? I’m going with you.”
Arya gritted her teeth, “I’m not screwing anyone over,” she walked around the car stopping Rickon from taking a step towards the warehouse, “You don’t even know where we are. Trust me when I tell you that you don’t want to know.”

Rickon made a face and pushed Arya’s arm away. He was stubborn and an idiot, and if he went to meet with the Brotherhood with Arya he was just going to get them both killed. Even standing outside the warehouse, Arya was getting nervous, knowing that their argument was being watched. She could feel the hidden eyes on her, probably wondering who she was, maybe even assuming her allegiance to the Faceless Men and readying for some sort of turf war.

Not that the Faceless Men cared what the Brotherhood without Banners was about—the Faceless Men were above that sort of thing. The Brotherhood was a common street gang in comparison, with not nearly as deep of a history or expansive of a base than the majority of the underground organizations.

“I’m going with you.” Rickon told her, crossing his arms and waiting for Arya to get out of his way, “If we’re here to help Sansa, then I’m going in there.”

Arya wondered how much trouble it would really end up being for her to wrap her arm around Rickon’s throat and hold down until he lost consciousness. She could put him in the boot of the car and keep him there until she finished with the Brotherhood. He’d be all right—no long-term damage, and its not like there would be any love loss in it. Arya considered it, but then she thought about the eyes watching her, and what could happen to Rickon if Arya left him unconscious in the car, defenseless against people who would very much like to get leverage over a Faceless Man. Rickon wouldn’t even be able to fight back if they came for him.

“Fine.” Arya said, taking a step to the side. When Rickon walked forward, a look of surprise on his face, as if he hadn’t expected Arya to concede so easily. Arya put a hand on his chest before he could take another step. She leaned in and warned him, “But I do all the talking. You say one word and I’ll do to you what I did to that officer at the hospital. Got it? You don’t talk to anyone; you don’t look at anyone.”

“But—“

“No.” Arya told him in a low voice, “No arguments. If you’re going in there, that’s how this works.”

Rickon grimaced, but gave a stiff nod. Arya moved her hand away and started walking to the side entrance of the warehouse, listening to Rickon’s footsteps fall behind her.
She felt exposed, passing under one of the streetlights that lit up the desolate lot outside the building. Arya had her knife strapped to her leg, hidden in her boot, and then another in one of the hidden pockets of her jacket, but it wasn’t the lack of defense that made her feel this way. Arya hadn’t worked as a free agent, outside the Faceless Men since she was ten years old. Even when she got the information about Blood Raven, Arya had been working within the organization, telling her contacts that she was working on an assignment, but this time, Arya had no such excuses. Arya was here as a Stark, not a Faceless Man.

“Can I at least know where we are?” Rickon asked quietly, as he came to Arya’s side.

They were nearly the same height. Rickon’s curly red hair, and pale freckled skin reminded Arya more of Sansa than—more of the Tully’s than it did Stark men. It had been the same with Robb though, hadn’t it? Arya could barely remember her oldest brother, but she thought that Rickon looked a lot like Robb had in the photo Arya stole from Jon’s room.

Arya pushed away the thoughts—the familiarity. “We’re at a warehouse.”

“No shit.” Rickon grumbled, burrowing into his oversized jacket to keep out the cold. He was nervous, Arya thought. Not knowing where they were probably only made the nerves worse.

“You’ve heard of the Brotherhood without Banners?” Arya asked as they neared the side entrance, wondering if their conversation was overheard.

Rickon nodded. He held himself a little more alert now. “I’ve heard of them. One of the boys at a home told me that he bought a gun from a Brotherhood guy once. He was full of shit, though. Is that who we’re meeting with?” Arya nodded and Rickon frowned, “Why though? You’re already in a gang, why would we meet with a different one?”

Arya couldn’t exactly explain to Rickon how very bad it would be for her to be seen asking another Faceless Man to help her with a personal project. It was bad enough that she’d done so already to help Bran, but at least that had been under the guise of looking for Bloodraven. This would be different.

“No more talking.” Arya ordered suddenly.

They were at the metal door at the side of the warehouse. Rickon heard the hissing tone of her voice, and shut his mouth. Apparently, he also knew enough about the Brotherhood without
Banners know that they weren’t someone to mess around with. Arya didn’t find them particularly dangerous to herself, but she was glad Rickon did. Arya leaned over to knock on the door.

A slat on the door was pushed open, letting out a grating creak as it did. Arya couldn’t see who was on the other side, only look into the black triangle the opened slat made. It was all a little theatrical, Arya thought, even for the Brotherhood. Of course, this wasn’t their main branch, only one of the warehouses that this unit of the gang held headquarters at. The Brotherhood was fairly knew, only gaining traction around the same time Arya was brought to London as a child. They started out as some anarchic

“We aren’t open for business.” A voice on the other side said.

Arya held back the annoyed expression she wanted to make. Was she really supposed to be under the illusion that she really was at a mechanic’s shop like the broken sign over the side of the warehouse advertised? Perhaps if it weren’t for the lack of upkeep or the rather unwelcoming greeting, it would be more believable, but as it was, Arya wasn’t impressed. Of course, she didn’t expect much from the Brotherhood, this was still disappointing though.

“I’m here to see Ned.” Arya told the door with a slant to her words.

“Sorry, sweetheart. I don’t know—“

Arya slammed her fist against the door, listening to the metal creak. Beside her, Rickon jumped, and the man behind the door fell silent. “Cut the shit,” Arya told him, “I know this is the Brotherhood. I’m here for business. Now get Ned, so that I don’t have to kick down this door and ruin both our nights.”

The silence that followed pleased Arya. Faceless Men were meant to be anonymous, and certainly, the Brotherhood without Banners wouldn’t know who Arya was. They didn’t have the sort of power or connections for that knowledge, but she hoped this man had seen the tattoos on her neck as assumed as much. Arya didn’t have time to convince these men to take her seriously. She’d rather work on reputation than have to make an example to convince them.

Minutes passed. Beside her, Rickon was fidgeting. His hands were buried in his pockets and he was looking around, watching his back as if waiting for someone to come up behind them and throw a burlap sack over his head.

“Calm down.” Arya told him lowly, unsure if someone was still on the other side listening in.
Rickon jumped again, eyes wide like a deer. “I am calm.”

“Good.” Arya told him, mocking his high-pitched tone. Rickon glared and Arya turned back to the door, “As long as you do what I say, there isn’t going to be trouble.”

Arya would have told him that the Brotherhood without Banners wasn’t a threat to them. If it did come to a physical attack, Arya would win, even if outnumbered, but Arya couldn’t account for Rickon. Arya may have been able to take care of herself, but could he? She looked at the fading bruises on his cheek, and then the others on his knuckles. How many of those fights had he actually won? Rickon talked a big game, but Arya didn’t know him well enough to know if he could actually follow through. Rickon was tall, but he was scrawny, and still just twelve. It's not like he could win in a fight against a grown man.

“I’m not worried,” Rickon told her.

Arya rolled her eyes, “Just shut up.”

The metal door creaked. Rickon braced, stepping behind Arya as the metal door swung towards them. Arya lifted a brow as she saw the sight standing in the open doorway. Her lip quirked up minutely, as the look of recognition fell across the boy’s face. He looked the same, but Arya doubted she did. The last time he saw her, Arya was called Arry and had been living on the streets in some city on the outskirts of London.

“Arya?” He asked taking a step forward, his pale eyebrows that framed his deep blue eyes knitting together. “Arya Stark?”

Arya wrinkled her nose. She’d preferred to handle this more anonymously, but Edric Dayne recognized who Arya was when she was pretending to be an orphan boy on the streets, and he knew who she was now. Like Arya, he’d been in London during the assassination of Ned Stark, and they’d met before the world went to complete shit.

Edric joined the Brotherhood before the assassination, soon after the two of them met during some brunch Arya’s father had taken Sansa and her to. After the assassination, when Arya ran away and was begging on the streets he recognized her from that brunch and got the Brotherhood member who he was with to take Arya with them. Arya thought that they were going to bring Arya to the military base Jon was training at, but they really ended up trying to bring Arya back to her family home in York.

Arya hadn’t wanted that—if she couldn’t go to Jon, then Arya wanted to go back to London and avenge her Father. To go back to London and kill the Lannister’s who had been the reason Father had to stay in London for so long, and who had been so horrible. She thought that the Brotherhood
could do that. Back then she saw their organization and thought they were so powerful—she thought that their anarchic message meant that they’d want to take down the establishment too. The Brotherhood had smaller ambitions though, more self-serving ones that were hidden under the guise of true anarchy, and they laughed at Arya’s offer to join their ranks, telling her that she needed to go back home to her mum and brothers.

They brought Arya as far as Nottingham before she ended up running away, hiding away in the back of some shipment truck called Clegane Pet Supplies. The back of the truck smelled like dog food, and Arya stayed hidden there in the dark for three days before the driver pulled over and found her. She managed to convince him to take her with him on his shipment route—well the rest of the story didn’t matter. The point was, Arya didn’t have completely friendly feelings to the Brotherhood without Banners, but she knew that they’d have a headquarters not far from the Scottish border, and under short notice, they were the best chance Arya had at getting information fast.

“Ned,” Arya greeted him, “It’s been a while.”

Edric—Ned Dayne gave a slow nod, still staring at Arya like she was a ghost. “Christ, we all thought you were dead. Here come inside, it's freezing.”

Ned waved Arya and Rickon inside, closing the warehouse door behind them.

“I’m not really here to catch up,” Arya told him stepping inside. She blinked several times to get used to the light. It was a small operation that the Brotherhood was running here. Arya could see where they were loading a truck filled with hidden firearms in one corner of the open floor plan, the rest of the floor was keeping up the guise of a mechanic shop. What Arya was looking for was the main office, and she saw that in a booth above the shop floor. “I’m here on business.”

“Business?” Ned repeated, glancing over to Rickon for the first time, and giving him a harder look, “Who’s this?”

Rickon opened his mouth, but Arya spoke before he could make a sound. She did so while glaring at Rickon, “No one.”

She didn’t need Ned knowing that Rickon was a Stark too. She may not have thought the Brotherhood was a threat, but she didn’t want Rickon to even be a bleep on their radar. Of course, if Rickon tried to talk again, that would be a lot harder.

“Right.” Ned looked between them and nodded. He then looked at Arya again and caught the
tattoos crawling up her skin. “Yeah, alright. Let’s go talk business then.”

Ned Dayne took Arya and Rickon up to the office that overlooked the floor. As they walked, Arya noticed the eyes trailing after them. They must have thought that Arya was some outside contractor the Brotherhood was working with. What they thought of Rickon though, Arya couldn’t guess. Rickon was just as aware of the stares, and he had puffed out his chest, holding his shoulder’s squared as he walked past them, as if expecting a fight. Arya wanted to tell him to cut it out, but that wouldn’t exactly serve their purposes well.

“Thoros isn’t here,” Ned told her as they walked. He’d gotten a lot taller since they last met, of course, Ned had been about thirteen back then. He had to be about twenty now, and he’d grown into his boyish features, and his pale blonde hair and nearly violet eyes didn’t look quite so ridiculous on him anymore. “He’s in Manchester working on——“

Ned stopped himself abruptly as if for the first time considering that maybe he shouldn’t just tell Arya every little detail about the Brotherhood’s mechanisms. That was probably the smartest thing he’d done since Arya arrived, though if Arya really cared about knowing what the Brotherhood was doing, she could find out fairly easily herself.

Arya picked up where Ned had stopped, “I don’t care about Thoros. What about Beric?”

“Beric? Haven’t you heard?” Arya shook his head and Ned looked surprised. Ned glanced at the floor, climbing the steps to the office, and told her stiffly, “He died a couple years back. Thoros is running things now. He’s got Lem in charge around here though, so if you got business you’ll be handling it with him.”

Arya had been in Spain up until she got the assignment to track Sansa. It didn’t shock her that she hadn’t heard about Beric dying, but it still caught her off guard. She heard the stiff way Ned explained his death to her. Ned had been working as a student intern with Beric before Beric started the brotherhood. Ned himself was an orphan as far as Arya knew. She wondered how Ned had taken Beric’s death and the change in leadership when it happened.

Arya tried to distance herself from the memories. She hadn’t had to think about these things in years, and she was unskilled at not being distracted by the trains of thoughts that accompanied that. Arya focused on what was most important and that was Lem. She remembered Lem, he’d been the one who was with Ned when they found Arya living on the street. He’d do just as well as anyone else at serving Arya’s purposes.

Ned knocked on the office door before opening it up and walking inside. Arya and Rickon followed him inside. Lem was standing over a table, looking at some sort of blueprint spread across it. He looked exactly as he had when Arya first saw him, complete with the big beard and
the yellow jacket spread across his brawny shoulders. When he looked up from the blueprint, Arya smiled. The bridge of his nose was crooked; Arya had been the one to make it that way.

“What’s this shit about?” Lem asked Ned in a gruff voice, as he folded the blueprint from view, “Who the fuck told you to bring strangers here?”

“It’s Arya Stark,” Ned explained, as Lem’s face went blank, “Back from the grave.”

Arya wanted to roll her eyes at the drama of that, “You do remember me, don’t you Lem?”

Lem broke into a laugh, “Well, shit. You’ve grown up, haven’t you? What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Business,” Ned answered uneasily, wondering over to the table and leaning against it. Maybe Ned did recognize some of Arya’s tattoos and knew that she was part of some other gang. Maybe he didn’t think she was a Faceless Man, Arya doubted that if he assumed that he’d never have let her into the warehouse.

“What sort of business?” Lem asked, his posture changing to at this news.

Arya was suddenly missing the warm tone of his welcome. She didn’t like to think she was really friends with any member of the Brotherhood. The one time she tried to join their ranks they had laughed at her, but looking at Lem’s broken nose, Arya was reminded of their first meeting and how she punched him in the face when they first tried to tell her that they were taking her home and she was reminded of the times she thought that she could be happy if the Brotherhood took her in.

Arya glanced at the covered blueprints and then moved across the room to lean back against the glass window at the far side of the room. Rickon hesitated at the door, before slowly following her, standing at some distance away, but mirroring her casual stance and crossed arms, glaring indifferently at Lem and Ned. Arya almost wished she had knocked him out and kept him in the boot of the car.

“I need information.” Arya told them finally, “Information about Petyr Baelish.”

“Petyr Baelish?” Lem repeated, lifting a bushy brow, he shook his head, “Why the fuck would you want information on him?”
Arya wasn’t sure what to read into that accusation. Was Lem still picturing Arya as the wily street urchin he found seven years ago and couldn’t imagine her wanting to know about anyone from the criminal underground, or did he just not know anything incriminating about Baelish, to begin with.

Arya shrugged indifferently. She didn’t want anyone from the Brotherhood knowing how much she needed this information.

“Doesn’t matter why,” Arya said, “Do you know anything or not?”

Lem gave a dry laugh, watching Arya carefully. He pulled up a chair on the table and sat down, “It’s good to see you again, Arya, but you don’t need to be getting involved in these sorts of things. Information ain’t free, especially if you want to know more about Petyr Baelish than what you can read online.”

“I know what the price is.” Arya moved over to the table and pulled out a chair on the other side and sat down, leaning her elbows on the table, “I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t. I need incriminating evidence against Baelish.”

Lem and Ned shared a look. Ned looked uncomfortable and gave a low shake of his head. Lem cleared his throat and looked back to Arya, “I’ve got information on Baelish, so you’re in luck. He’s not the man you want on your bad side—and the Brotherhood certainly doesn’t want him there either. Arya, you aren’t going to be able to afford the price…”

“I will,” Arya told him calmly. Arya didn’t come here thinking that she would get information for free. “And what do you have to be afraid of Baelish for? I thought you were counter establishment?”

Lem didn’t look amused. He glanced over to Ned, “Pull up the file. Have it printed and bring me it to me.” Ned hesitated but obeyed, leaving the room quietly. Lem looked back to Arya, “How do you plan on paying?”

Arya squared her shoulders, shifting in the seat, “A favor.”

Lem laughed, “A favor? That’s cute, Arya, but I knew you when you were nine. I’m not interested in any favor—“
“That’s not what I’m talking about.” Arya answered, glancing over to Rickon to see the look of alarm on his face.

Lem followed her stare, “I’m not interested in him either. You might get a Gold Cloak to cut a deal…”

“No way!” Rickon yelled, face going red, “Arya, I am not—“

“God, shut up!” Arya hissed at him, before looking back at Lem, “I’m not planning on paying through sex. I meant a favor—the sort of favor only a Faceless Man can get you.”

Ned took this opportunity to walk back into the room. When he heard what Arya had said, he almost dropped the stack of papers in his hands.

“What?” Ned said, “You’re not—“

Arya pulled down the collar of her shirt so that Ned and Lem could see the Faceless Man tattoo that crawled up her neck.

She moved her hand, setting them on the table, “One favor.” She told them, “that the Brotherhood can call in at any time. So do we have a deal?”

Arya and Rickon left the Brotherhood without Banner’s warehouse in silence. Rickon was holding the file of information that Ned had gotten them, his face getting increasingly tenser. Arya was trying not to think what getting that file might have cost her. If the Faceless Men—if Jaqen ever found out that she made a deal with a rival gang, even one as so low on the totem pole as the Brotherhood, she’d be fucked.

They got in the car, and Arya started the engine. The sun was starting to rise up over the trees. Hopefully what was in the file was incriminating enough that Jon could take it to the police and have Petyr arrested. If it wasn’t—well, Arya had a backup plan if it wasn’t.

“Shit.” Rickon said lowly as Arya started to back out of the car park.
“What?” She looked over, wondering if it was something he’d read in the file.

Rickon held up the Arya’s cell phone, which she’d left in the car before. There were several notifications lighting up the screen, including five missed calls.

“It’s Jon,” Rickon told her as Arya snatched the phone from him.

“Shit.” Arya muttered, wondering if the officer she drug finally woke up. Maybe the nurses just noticed that Arya and Rickon were missing and gave Jon a call. Arya pressed Jon’s number and put the phone to her ear listening to it ring. She could feel herself tense up for the inevitable pick up. Was it wrong that Arya hoped that Jon had only called so many times because of some crisis other than Rickon and her going missing?

“Just hang up.” Rickon told her, while the line rang. He was clutching the file to his chest, eyes wide. “We can make it back to the hospital before he does. He doesn’t have to know.”

“Arya?” The line buzzed to life, tense and worried.

“Hey—“

“Where the hell are you two?” Jon growled, “I’ve got officers at the hotel and they say you aren’t there. What’s going on?”

“We’re fine,” Arya grumbled as she held the phone between her ear and shoulder as she started the car towards the road. “We just stepped out for a walk.”

Rickon pulled at Arya’s jacket, as she got on the highway, “Arya.”

She shook him off, as Jon’s voice shouted, “Bullshit. I told you to stay out of trouble, and stay with the officer at the hospital. What did you do to him—a nurse found him unconscious—“

“Christ, he’ll be fine.” Arya muttered, shoving Rickon’s hand away as he tugged at her jacket
“What are you talking about,” Jon asked suddenly, “Is everything okay?”

“Arya!” Rickon said forcefully, holding a page of the file up for her, nearly blocking her view of the road. The car swerved, as Arya tried to turn on the headlights to see what was actually going on, avoiding the ditch on the side of the road.

She smacked the file down, “Are you trying to make us crash? What the fuck?”

“Arya? Where are you?” Jon demanded over the phone, voice taking an edge of panic.

“Arya, it’s about Mum.” Rickon told her, turning in his seat to hold the page out again, “Petyr Baelish is the one paying for her medical care.”

Arya felt the words sink in slowly. She didn’t understand what Rickon meant at first. Arya hadn’t known what happened to Catelyn Stark when the actually hanging occurred. It took nearly a year for the news to reach her and by then Arya was already with the Faceless Men. Arya knew that her mother was practically comatose. She knew that she was being taken care of in some hospital in York. Arya always figured that it was being paid for through the Stark estate.

The phone dropped from Arya’s shoulder and onto her lap. She glanced at Rickon. “What does that mean?”

Rickon just looked confused. “I don’t know. That’s something though, right? Why would he be paying for Mum—he didn’t know her, right? Here, it says that Petyr Baelish is paying for hospital care and medication. That must be expensive, why would he do that?”

Arya didn’t know. She hung on the word medication. “What medication is she taking?”

Arya tried to think what her mother’s condition would entail. Surely there would be some sort of medicine involved, but Arya didn’t know what.

Rickon squinted his eyes, reading the file in the dark light of the car, “There’s a couple. Klonopin,
methodone, rohypnol…”

Those are all sedatives.

“What else does the file say? Stuff about his past—relationships or something.” Arya asked.

Rickon grimaced as he kept reading, “Did you know he was married before?”

Arya did, “Yeah, Rickon. I don’t need his biography—“

“She died.” Rickon told her, a frown knitted on his face as he kept reading, “She fell down some staircase.”

Arya didn’t care about that. She was looking for something that might have mentioned their mother, not some random socialite.

“He was married to Lysa Erryn.”

“I don’t care about that, Rickon—“

“That’s our aunt.”

Arya fell silent. That wasn’t true. Father’s only sister was Lyanna, and she died before Arya was even born.

Arya shook her head, “Our aunt was named Lyanna.”

Rickon was shaking his head, “Not, Dad’s sister, Mum’s. Lysa was her sister—they weren’t close, I don’t even remember her talking about her. But when they were looking for someone to take custody of me and Bran after Mum hung herself they told us they were going to send us to Aunt Lysa, but when they tried to contact her, she was dead.”
That couldn’t be true. Arya would have known if she had another aunt—Sansa would have known and said something at some point since she was living in their supposed aunt’s house. Even Jon must have known…But if they hadn’t, if Catelyn Stark was estranged with her sister, or maybe there was bad blood between them, maybe none of them ever would have known. If it was true, then what did it mean about Petyr Baelish?

It wasn’t a coincidence that he’d been paying for Catelyn Stark’s hospital expenses for the best seven years. It wasn’t a coincidence that he’d kept Sansa hidden away, pretending to be his child that entire time. It wasn’t a coincidence that he was married to their mother’s sister who none of them had even known about—and it wasn’t a coincidence that she had died only days after the marriage, leaving Petyr Baelish with her wealth, her home, and her niece, without anyone to stop him from doing whatever he wanted with all of those things.

It wasn’t a coincidence that when Petyr Baelish married Sansa Stark the same cycle that took place seven years ago would be starting again. Maybe Sansa wasn’t stupid enough to kill herself, maybe she was smart enough to know that someone might just do it for her.

“Shut up.” Arya ordered Rickon, as she started to make a U-turn in the middle of the road.

“But—“

“Shut up!” Arya reached for the phone in her lap and heard Jon yelling on the other end.

“What’s going on? Arya answer me, I’m calling a police unit—“

“Jon, where are you? Are you in Cardiff still?” Arya asked, swerving as she merged into a different lane, heading towards the nearest airport. Several cars honked at them as Arya started speeding through traffic. Rickon gripped the sides of the car to keep upright, a look of panic on his face.

“No, I’m heading back to the hospital…what’s going on?”

“Go to the nearest airport, get a flight to Grenoble.” Arya told him, as she took an exit to the international airport in their direction. “Me and Rickon are going to meet you there.”

Arya could hear Jon’s car screech as he made a sharp turn, “What’s going on, Arya?”

“Sansa’s in trouble. Real trouble. We’re getting her out of there.”
Arya knew that she was going to have to call in another favor. She knew that there was too good of a chance that she wasn’t going to make it to Sansa in time. If Arya couldn’t, then she knew who needed to, and she knew what they needed to do.

The Faceless Men didn’t kill people they knew. A Faceless Man never ordered a kill of their own. Those were the rules—those were the most sacred rules. But the Faceless Men were killers—and the only ones who Arya knew who could actually kill Petyr Baelish before Petyr Baelish killed Sansa.

Arya thought about every way things could go wrong. She thought of how utterly fucked she would be if Jaqen ever found out. Arya thought about how she didn’t know if Sansa would do the same thing for her. Arya had once said that she didn’t hate Sansa, but was that true—even if it wasn’t, did Arya love her enough to risk her own life for her? Did Sansa love Arya enough that she would ever have done the same?

“Sansa is your sister. You may be as different as the sun and the moon, but the same blood flows through both your hearts. You need her, as she needs you.”

The words were Ned Stark’s. Arya remembered them as if hearing them spoken through the fog and darkness, clear like a bell in the absent air. It didn’t matter if Sansa would do the same, she didn’t have to, that wasn’t the point. They were Starks, they were a pack, and Sansa was Arya’s family.

“Call me when you’re at the airport,” Arya told Jon as she hung up the phone, reaching to dial another number. She heard it ring twice, before the static picked up, telling Arya that someone was listening on the other end. She pulled up to the curb of the airport and gestured for Rickon to grab his bag and get out. Arya followed after him, slinging her backpack over her shoulder and moving towards the sliding door of the airport terminal, “I’m ordering a hit. Send a unit to Grenoble. Kill Petyr Baelish.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay so this chapter took me forever to write. I literally rewrote it three times, changing the entire plot of it with each rewrite. Originally i wanted Rickon and Arya to go to see Cat at the hospital, and then meet up with Jon there, but as i was writing i realized that i wasn't going to be able to make that work with the structure and where i needed the story to go. This chapter was also supposed to feature a pov from rickon and jon also, but that also didn't work due to it already getting to be like twenty pages of just aryas.
anyway, i’ve been super busy so i’m so sorry i haven't answered any comments! The semester is almost over and i am dying. Luckily i’ve got the last chapter almost finished so that will be out by saturday!!! (if not earlier)
As for the Stark's not knowing that they have another aunt--this seems hard to believe, but i'm actually taking it from personal experience where i literally didn't know i had another uncle for pretty much my entire life before i found him on facebook. So yes, estranged family relatives are definitely a thing, and considering Lysa and Cat were pretty distant after Robert's rebellion, i don't find it too hard to believe that they just wouldn't have been in contact or even tell their kids about the other if things ended badly, which in this case, they did (due to Petyr drama, assumably) The real question is if Lysa knew who Sansa was when she first came to the Vale, which will in fact remain a mystery.

this chapter was a sort of prequel/teaser to the next fic i’m going to write, which will actually be about Arya and what she'll be up to a year after this fic takes place. In it i'll tie up some loose ends that won't be completed in this fic, such as the Lannister/Baratheon/Stark court case, and other things that i can't give away without spoiling the ending of this fic. Anyway, i can say that it will be Arya/Gendry, and will definitely not be any longer than 50k because i need a break from long fics for at least a year. it will mainly have to do with Arya dealing with the consequences of the decisions she made in this chapter.

Anyway, thank you for reading!! Please comment and kudos!!
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was not a well-thought plan. If she had more time, Sansa could have come up with something more eloquent. As it was though, Sansa had mere hours before the morning when the wedding would take place, and there simply was no time for eloquence.

This was to say, when Mr. Payne came into Sansa’s bedroom the morning of her wedding, when she did not answer to the knock on her door, he found her in a pool of her own blood.

“I didn’t mean to!” Sansa was clutching her arm to her chest, leaving a red sweeping stain across her nightgown and the white sheets of her bed.

The cut was deep and it stung like ice. It started in the center of Sansa’s forearm and was drawn up to her elbow. She felt lightheaded, and Sansa wondered if she perhaps, had cut too deep.

Mr. Payne, for half a second, looked shocked. The half-second passed and he was at the bed, reaching for the bed sheets and wrapping them around Sansa’s arm as she cried in pain, as his hand pressed down on the cut. He reached for his radio and called for help.

“What did you do?” He asks in a gruff, angry voice as they hear the sound of heavy footfall running to Sansa’s room, as another guard answers Mr. Payne’s call.

Sansa blinks back wet tears and shakes her head, blood gushed from the wound, staining her skin, “I didn’t mean to! My arm slipped!”

Mr. Payne follows Sansa’s unfocused eyes to the bent chunk of metal that stemmed from her rot iron bed. It was an antique and the curling design of the headboard appeared to have been broken off, blood coating the hollow metal, as if Sansa had stretched her arms upon waking up, and gotten her limb stuck in the metal curls, only to pull her arm free and rip it open on the sharp broken edge.

If Mr. Payne had more time to consider this scenario, perhaps he would have found it to be difficult to believe, but he, like Sansa, did not have time for such eloquent collection of thoughts, and so he reached down for his radio again and called for a car to be pulled up to take Sansa to a hospital. If Mr. Payne had more time he might have noticed the handle of the knife sticking out from the back corner of the mattress. Though, with the blood staining both their hands and Sansa’s fluttering eyes as she started to lose consciousness, Mr. Payne did not notice the hidden knife at all.

The car was obsolete. Instead, an ambulance came and took Sansa to the nearest hospital. She
faded in and out of consciousness during the drive down the mountain the Vale sat on to the city below. She noticed her two security guards in the ambulance with her, one of which was Mr. Payne. She noticed the two EMTs who were looking her over, trying to stop the bleeding from her arm and set up and IV for a blood transfusion. Sansa didn’t notice much else, and her head lulled to the side and waited.

“I know that you aren’t this stupid.” Father told Alayne as they stood in the empty kitchen.

Alayne looked around, fidgeting from foot to foot, “I didn’t know that I was supposed to lie.”

Myranda and Alayne had been talking over dinner when Myranda mentioned something about the British army, and one of the regiments that had been attacked in a bombing. Alayne had thought about Robb who died while serving, then she thought about Jon who was enlisted in the regiment Myranda mentioned. Her heart had contracted and she asked if anyone who died in the attack. Myranda tilted her head to the side and asked why Alayne would have cared and Alayne had answered that she had family who was serving.

“I am your only family, Alayne.” Father had told her, grabbing Alayne’s chin and tilting it up so that she had to look him in the eyes. “That is not a lie. There is no other family, no brothers, or sister, or fostered whelps. You only have me—we only have each other. Do you understand?”

Alayne nodded, wishing she could tear her chin away from Father’s hold and curl in on herself. Father didn’t lie to Alayne, he told her that he would never lie. Alayne’s family was dead, but what about the other girl—the dead girl. Did she have anyone else?

“Good.” Father moved his hand and brought it up to stroke Alayne’s dark hair, “Now how about a little test? Why is it that Myranda Royce shouldn’t think that you have anyone but me”

“I don’t know.”

Father sighed, but he didn’t sound angry, “I suppose I shall rephrase it then.” He leaned down against the edge of the kitchen table and reached for a knife that rested beside an orange. Father grabbed them both and held them in his hand as he started slicing the fruit. He looked thoughtful, “Tell me, Alayne—which is more dangerous, the dagger brandished by an enemy, or the hidden one pressed against your back by someone you’ve never seen?”
“The hidden dagger,” Alayne answered, realizing what Father was telling her.

“There’s a clever girl.” Father smiled, handing Alayne half of the orange he had cut, she took it and held it in her hand as Father set the knife aside, “I forget that you are still a child. You still have the naïve sense of trust—of goodness. I’ll teach you otherwise soon—I’ll teach you that not everyone is so good and that you will have to be twice as clever as everyone else if you want to survive.”

“Survive?” Alayne repeated. She thought about the dead girl, and how she hadn’t been clever enough to survive—was Alayne any smarter?

Father nodded, “Don’t be afraid. I will teach you, and until you learn, I will be by your side.”

Alayne wondered if that was supposed to make her feel less alone—less afraid. It didn’t, and she wondered when being with Father stopped making Alayne feel safe. She wondered if she had ever felt safe with him. Alayne also wondered if she was as trusting and good as Father made her out to be. In her year since arriving in the Vale, Alayne had learned that she didn’t even trust her own shadow. It lied too; it made things that were light dark, and things that were small big. Everything lies. Maybe even Father.

The wedding was delayed. Sansa tried not to smile as she looked at the clock hanging on the wall of her hospital room, where a doctor was stitching up her arm and saw that the ceremony was meant to take place an hour ago. No one else was pleased with the delay, least of all being Petyr.

He arrived at the hospital twenty minutes after Sansa was admitted.

“She’s lost quite a bit of blood.” The young doctor told Petyr as he looked over Sansa’s chart, “We’ve given her an antibiotic, which should prevent any infection, but what she really needs is bed rest.”

Petyr fumed when he heard this. “How much bed rest?” he asked stiffly.

The doctor glanced over at where Sansa was lying on the hospital bed, her head tilted down onto a pillow. He pursed his lips. “Well it all depends on how she’s feeling. I’d say at least a day, maybe more. We don’t want her moving around too much either, as she might tear her stitches. It’s rather an unfortunate place to be cut. She’s lucky it wasn’t any deeper or else she’d have hit an artery.”
Sansa looked down at her arm that was lying beside her. The stitches were ugly things that synched her skin together. It looked a little red, and it ached.

“IT hurts.” Sansa lifted her head up to tell the room. “It aches. Is it supposed to do that?”

The doctor sighed and moved over to her bed to get a look. Sansa kept her eyes on Petyr who was glaring, narrowing his gaze on Sansa as if trying to catch her in a lie. He always knew when Sansa was lying, always, and he knew that she wasn’t lying about the pain. That must have frustrated him, to know that something was going on—that Sansa was doing something, and not being able to find out what. Petyr should never have told Sansa that she was a bad liar, he should never have taught her how to be a good one.

The doctor examined the stitches and stepped away, “I’ll write you a prescription for some medication. That should ease the pain. Though I really do recommend bed rest, it’s the best thing for you right now.”

Sansa nodded her head obediently, wondering how much bed rest she would realistically be getting. Maybe she did cut too deep, but Sansa had to make sure that she would end up at a hospital. If the cut had been too shallow then it could have been handled in the Vale, or at some clinic on the outskirts of town. A deep cut though, a real bloody one, ensured an actual hospital, someplace that would have taken up plenty of time.

They had to wait another hour for the pills and only then could they leave. Sansa was given a single dose of the pain medication before Petyr handed the bottle to one of the security guards when the doctor left the room.

“Take these back to the mansion. Lock them in the cabinet with all the others.”

Sansa watched as the guard took the pill bottle and grabbed his key ring from his pocket as he went to go to the car outside. There were several keys on the ring, and Sansa wondered which would belong to the medicine cabinet that Petyr spoke of.

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” Sansa told Petyr as they got into his private car. Petyr wasn’t the driver, he never drove. Instead, he moved to the backseat to sit beside Sansa who was curled towards the window, holding her arm and the white gauze that was covering the stitches.

“No?” Petyr asked, “How did it happen then?”
The truth? Sansa had gotten a sharp steak knife from Mya early in the morning at five-thirty AM, when Mya came into the room carrying Sansa’s altered wedding dress. The knife was hidden in the folds of the dress, and Mya left the room quickly. The wedding would take place that morning at nine. Mya took the knife from the garment bag and set it near Sansa’s head as she pretended to sleep, and then left the room to tell the guard at the door to wake Sansa up at six to get ready for the wedding.

When the door closed, Sansa grabbed the knife and started cutting the loose joint on the headboard of the bed. It was easy to break—Sansa had picked the specific joint purposefully because she knew that it was wobbly, rusted and ready to break off at any moment; it just needed an extra push.

The iron edge that Sansa had cut through wasn’t actually sharp enough to do any harm. It was too dull to make anything more than a scratch, so Sansa held the kitchen knife in one hand and cut a line down her arm. She held her pillow between her teeth to keep from crying out as she sliced. There was a knock on the door and Sansa knew her time was up. She held her bloody arm against her chest, as she quickly stuffed the knife between the corner of the mattress she was closest too. A second later Mr. Payne walked into the room and Sansa started to cry.

“I slipped.” Sansa explained looking up at Petyr earnestly, “One of the joints on the bed must have broken while I slept…I don’t know, I’d woken up and stretched my arms and one of them was caught…I pulled, I didn’t think—“

Petyr snarled as he leaned back in his seat, turning away from Sansa completely. He was very angry then, he planned for them to be married already—two of the security guards were already on route to the Chateaux they were meant to honeymoon at—Sansa had ruined his plans.

“I’m sorry,” Sansa looked down, “I didn’t—I told you that I was going to be good. I meant it; I wouldn’t have done anything to delay the marriage. I’ve learned.”

“Have you?” Petyr gritted between his teeth, as he grabbed his phone and begun to type, “I’ll have to let everyone know that the wedding will be postponed until tonight. Do you realize the inconvenience you’ve caused?”

“I’m sorry.” Sansa repeated helplessly.

“You’re sorry?” Petyr mocked bitterly, having no sympathy for her at the moment. He continued to type away on his phone, as if he didn’t even realize he was speaking out loud, “I’ve forgotten what a stupid girl you were.”

Sansa turned her head towards the window. Petyr was right; Sansa was a stupid girl, but she was learning.
Mya and Myranda were waiting in Sansa’s room when Mr. Payne ushered her inside, moving her towards her bed. They’d both heard that the wedding had been moved to that night. Myranda looked alarmed by the news; Mya looked relieved.

“A nighttime wedding?” Myranda said as lay on the foot of the bed while Sansa was trying to rest. Mr. Payne stayed in the room this time to insure that Sansa didn’t get up, or do anything to disrupt the stitches on her arm. “The photos will be awful. Well, at least it will hide the bandage, maybe the bruises too. How did you get even more of those anyway?”

Sansa glanced at her bruised arms. She could feel where the security guards had wrestled her to the ground last night, leaving blue and green marks from her wrists to her shoulders. Those still hurt too and Sansa almost wished she actually swallowed the pain medication the doctor gave her instead of hiding the pill under her tongue until she could discreetly spit it out while everyone was arranging a car to take Sansa and Petyr back to the Vale.

“I fell.”

Myranda made a face, “Honestly, all these guards around you and not one of them could keep you from tripping down a staircase?” She looked over her shoulder to the one skulking nearby, “You know, every bruise Sansa gets should come with a pay decrease. You’re shit at your job.”

That at least was true, but Sansa reasoned that probably had something to do with her security guards being meant for less security and meant more for keeping Sansa captive. It didn’t matter how battered the object they were meant to guard became, as long as it stayed in sight.

“And where’s Mya?” Myranda sighed moving away from Sansa to lean against the vanity, “She’s supposed to be helping to get you ready. The only good thing about the wedding being delayed is that I can actually do something about the giant bruise on your face.”

Where was Mya? Sansa had an idea, but it was impossible to know for sure. Mya had removed the knife that was under Sansa’s mattress and moved it back to the kitchen while everyone else was at the hospital; she even sharpened the point on the broken metal frame to something that could believably cut skin. After she saw that Sansa was back in her room she left the room—Sansa didn’t necessarily expect her to come back.
“What’s that?” Sansa asked when she heard something like shrieking echoing faintly in the distance.

Myranda looked up and made a face, “It’s Robin again. He did this last night too. It kept me up for an hour.” She sighed and looked at Mr. Payne who was hulking by the door, “Sansa is supposed to be getting rest. Can you have one of your fellow goons calm the brat down so she can get some sleep?”

Mr. Payne glared at Myranda, but spoke into his radio to get someone to check on Robin. The screaming did not stop, even after twenty-minutes. They heard the sound of things being thrown and the shout of one of the guards who must have been trying to quiet Robin down.

Calming Robin down though, when he fell into one of these fits, was no easy task. It was worse the first few years after Lysa Erryn died. Petyr hadn’t ever tolerated Robin’s fits very well. When they started to get worse, Petyr had taken Robin to a doctor and had a sedative prescribed to the young boy. Even then, those barely helped, and Robin hated them. Sansa was the only one who ever was able to get Robin to take his medication and calm him down other than the doctor who used to visit the Vale on a nearly weekly basis.

Mr. Payne barked another order into the radio, but the screaming didn’t stop.

“He needs his medication.” Sansa explained to him, “Tell them to get him his medication from the medicine cabinet.”

Mr. Payne listened, probably because the screaming was starting to bother him too, making him even tenser and even angrier. “What’s the name of the medication?”

Sansa paused, mouth falling open as she glanced at Myranda, “Do you remember the name?”

Myranda made a face, “Why would I know?”

Sansa shook her head and moved past it, “It’s an orange bottle—a prescription bottle…”

Mr. Payne told the man on the radio who must have been looking through the medicine cabinet for what Sansa was describing. As he spoke, Mr. Payne became more frustrated. There were too many prescription bottles that were orange, they couldn’t find the one Sansa was trying to describe, and Robin was wailing even louder.
“Christ, my eardrums.” Myranda put her hands over her ears, “Sansa, just go down and get the bottle yourself. This is ridiculous.”

Sansa looked to Mr. Payne to see if he’d let her out of bed. He nodded and Sansa got up.

The three of them went down to the medicine cabinet that was located in the kitchen. One of the security guards already had it unlocked and was rifling through it.

“Let me,” Sansa said stepping forward to go through the cabinet, squaring her shoulders as she bent her head looking for the right prescription bottle. “Here it is!”

“Sansa ought to give it to Robin,” Myranda told the guards as they started to move towards Robin’s playroom where the screaming was coming from.

The guards didn’t disagree, in fact, they barely stepped into the playroom as Sansa moved toward Robin. He was screaming, face nearly purple as he lay on the ground kicking his arms and legs. Mya was beside him trying to calm him down, but every time she got too close he’d just scream louder and try to throw something at her. When Mya saw Sansa she stepped aside.

“Robin, it’s me,” Sansa told him, approaching slowly as she started to uncap the bottle. She kneeled beside him and put a hand on his back, “It’s okay, I’ve got something that—“

Robin lashed his fist out and it connected with Sansa’s wrist. She cringed as she felt her stitches strain, but she was mostly distracted by the prescription bottle that flew from her hand, sending a spray of white pills across the playroom.

“Robin!” Sansa gasped as she tried to collect the pills. One of the guards stepped into the room to help, but Mya waved them away.

“I’ve got them.” Mya explained and then looked at Sansa, “Just get him to quiet down.”

Sansa nodded, grabbing one pill from the floor and holding it between her fingers as she tried to grab Robin’s face. She forced the pill between his teeth, and let him hold onto her legs as he continued muted screams, hitting her with closed fists that she barely felt. He kept this up for another minute or so before quieting down and slumping forward in exhaustion.
“He needs to sleep,” Sansa explained as one of the guards moved Robin away from her, carrying him to his bedroom across the hall.

Mya looked up from the ground where she was still collecting the scattered pills, the prescription bottle tucked in her hand and Sansa stood up.

She held her hurt arm pathetically. Mr. Payne grabbed her shoulder and started leading her back to her bedroom. When they came back to the room, Sansa glanced at the clock beside her bed. It was noon, and there were eight more hours until the wedding. Sansa hoped there was enough time.

An hour later Mya came into the room. Mr. Payne had traded watches with the younger security guard who Myranda had teased the day before. He tensed when he saw Myranda following after Mya. Myranda grinned.

“You remember!” She sounded elated as she stood in front of the guard, setting her hands on her hips, “Do you remember our little deal too?”

As Myranda was talking to the guard, Mya moved over to Sansa’s bed and set a makeup bag down beside her. She looked a little stiff, as if trying too hard to appear unassuming. Sansa wished she could just tell her to relax, but that wasn’t exactly possible with the guard in the room, even if Myranda was distracting him.

“We should try and cover the bruises,” Mya told her opening the makeup bag and setting out some products on the bed. As she did, Mya slipped one blush pallet beneath the bed covers beside Sansa’s hip, before moving to pick up concealer and a brush. A few minutes later Myranda came over to help.

Sansa hesitated before asking, “Is Robin asleep?”

Mya’s hands stilled, but she quickly recovered and nodded her head, “He is. He fell asleep in about thirty minutes after you gave him his medication.”

Thirty minutes? At least that meant it was fast-acting, though Robin was a little boy, and the medication Sansa had given him was meant for someone a little bigger. She hoped that the single pill hadn’t been too much—she didn’t think it would be, the doctor had only given Sansa the medication to deal with the pain.

“That’s good,” Sansa replied, flinching as Mya tried to cover her bruised temple. “Did someone tell Petyr that Robin had another episode?”
Myranda snorted, “I think he would have heard it.”

Sansa nodded, looking worried, “He needs to call for Robin to see his doctor again. Two episodes in twenty-four hours…”

“Well, I think this is as good as it’s going to get,” Myranda looked critically as the makeup that tried to cover Sansa’s bruises. “I guess you might as well tell Petyr yourself. There isn’t much more we can do in the beauty department at this point anyway.”

Sansa nodded and got up, slipping the blush pallet into her pocket as she did. She went over to the door where the guard blocked Sansa’s path and Myranda sighed.

“Oh come on.” Myranda argued, “She’s going across the hall to see her fiancé to talk about her sickly soon to be stepson. What danger could she possibly find?”

Maybe it was because he was afraid that if he didn’t, Myranda would continue to yell at him, but the guard stepped to the side and let Sansa through. She held in her desperate sigh of relief as she walked, aware that she was being watched even then.

The guard had followed Sansa and was at her back as she went towards Petyr’s office door. She glanced back at him, as he took position at the wall across from the office. Sansa opened the door and stepped inside.

Petyr wasn’t inside. He wouldn’t have been, Sansa knew that Petyr was downstairs meeting with Myranda’s father as they finalized some business plan. It wouldn’t take long until the guard remembered that, and so while Sansa had a few minutes alone, she sprang into action.

She found the wine decanter on Petyr’s desk. There was a glass half poured that told Sansa that he wasn’t done drinking for the day. That wasn’t shocking, Petyr always drank when he was angry and frustrated, and he always drank his best wine that he kept tucked away in his office.

He used to take Sansa in here and give her a glass, telling her to drink until she felt dizzy and sick, and until Petyr was smiling. He told her that she was lucky to get to drink such fine wine and that she would feel so much better after she finished her glass. That worked remarkably well when Sansa was twelve, but as she got older she learned to take smaller and smaller sips, and instead would spend the hours Petyr kept her in here, watching him get inebriated on his own wine, while she prayed for escape.

The first night Petyr touched Sansa had been three months after he brought her to the Vale and called her Alayne. He’d taken her to this office and pulled out that crystal wine decanter, pouring a glass and pushing it towards her.
Sansa stared at the glass decanter and felt the uncontrollable urge to grab it and throw it at the nearest wall. Instead, she moved to the desk and kneeled on the ground, and pulled out the blush pallet she had snuck into her pocket. She opened it up and poured the contents out onto the desk.

It was a miracle that the plan had even worked. Truly the whole thing had been woven together with guess work and assumptions, and Sansa’s prayers that she knew what she was doing. A lot of faith went into it as well. Sansa hoped that she could trust Mya, but as for Myranda and Robin, she was less sure.

“Trust me,” Mya had told her minutes before she had to leave Sansa’s room the night before after Sansa had requested the knife, “You aren’t alone. We’re your friends.”

Petyr had spent so many years telling Sansa that she couldn’t trust anybody but him that she never dreamed that Mya and Myranda and even Robin would ever believe her—that they would ever help her.

Mya told Sansa that Robin would throw his fit on the hour. She’d be with him to help coordinate it—to help promote the chaos. All Sansa needed to do was wait. When the screaming began, it was Myranda’s job to convince Mr. Payne that Sansa should get the medication for him downstairs. Sansa didn’t know how much of the truth Myranda knew—not all of it, and not nearly as much as Mya, that was certain. Mya told Sansa that she’d tell Myranda enough to make sure she’d go along with the plan, and warily, Sansa needed to trust that.

When Sansa went to get Robin’s medication, she grabbed the prescription bottle of sedatives that the doctor prescribed to her that morning. Sansa knew Petyr would have them locked away in the medicine cabinet—he always locked medicine away in there, insisting that wild girls like Myranda would steal prescriptions and abuse them if he didn’t. Looking back, Sansa wondered if Petyr was just afraid that Sansa would swallow a handful of pills to escape this place, and kill herself, just like her mother had done. Sansa was hardly a useful toy if she were dead.

Mya told Sansa that Robin would participate in the plan. Apparently, when Sansa left the two of them in the playroom the other day, they talked. Robin expressed his guilt about telling on Sansa, and Mya had pieced together from his story that Petyr was the one who gave Sansa the bruise on her cheek, explaining how Robin said that the side of Sansa’s face was red after she left the office and that there had been so much shouting. Mya asked about the secret Robin and Sansa had also shared—she told Sansa that Robin hadn’t wanted to tell, but when Mya told him that Sansa was in trouble he cracked.

“I didn’t think he was going to tell,” Mya explained quickly, her voice low as every moment the two girls were terrified that the bedroom door would open and they would be caught. They were curled on the ground together, whispering treachery, and for the first time, Mya felt the same fear Sansa had lived with for over seven years. “I told him I wanted to help you, and he still said he wasn’t going to tell. I finally told him that I thought that you were in danger—that Mr. Baelish
might be the reason and then he told me about the yelling coming from Mr. Baelish’s office after he told on you. Robin said he hid in one of the linen closets beside the office...he wanted to talk to you after you left the office—it doesn’t matter. The point is, Robin heard shouting, he heard something fall over, and then when you came out of the room your face was red and you had blood on your cheek. He wasn’t going to say anything about it; I don’t think he really understood what happened. But when I told him that you were in danger it must have made sense. He told me that you said that Petyr always lies.”

Sansa’s breath caught. The idea that Robin knew that Petyr had hurt Sansa had a special place of dread in her chest, even after all this time. Sansa had worked so hard to protect Robin from seeing any of that—she didn’t want Robin ever thinking it was okay. She didn’t want Robin to see how Sansa always let Petyr get away with every touch, every cruel, manipulative word, every dirty whisper, and every innocent kiss. Sansa didn’t want Robin to be like her—if someone ever hit him, Sansa would want Robin to hit back.

Mya was watching Sansa for her reaction, as if needing the confirmation that everything she was saying was true. Sansa didn’t know what to say. She was thinking about what Robin must have thought happened in Petyr’s office. She was thinking about every other strange occurrence Robin must have seen before and then decided to overlook because it didn’t make sense for their father to do those sorts of things to a child. Sansa always thought she hid it well, but how many other times had Robin hid in a linen closet and seen something that was supposed to stay hidden?

When Mya told Robin that he could help Sansa, he jumped at the chance. Just as he had the night before, when he threw a fit that allowed the guard at Sansa’s door to investigate the noise that allowed Mya to sneak into the bedroom, Robin through a fit to distract the guards around the mansion.

Everyone was preparing for the wedding in the other wing of the mansion—including Petyr, which only left Sansa, Mya, and Myranda and then the guards to deal with Robin’s episode. It left Sansa as the only person who could identify Robin’s medication, and when she went to give it to him, Robin made sure to slap the bottle from Sansa’s hand and scatter the pills and the bottle everywhere.

In the chaos, the guards had left collecting the pills to Mya while Sansa tried to wrangle Robin. When Mya finished collecting the pills, she slipped them in her pocket and replaced the contents of the prescription bottle with Advil, which she’d already hidden beneath the sofa in the playroom. She handed the prescription bottle of Advil to a guard once Robin was put away, and set the sedative pills into an empty blush compact, only to slip it to Sansa while Mya and Myranda helped Sansa with her makeup.

Now, in the office, Sansa reached for a paperweight on Petyr’s desk and crushed the pills under it until they were a fine white powder. She then grabbed the wine decanter and dusted the powdered sedatives inside it, swirling the red wine around as the powder dissolved.

Sansa wondered if this would be enough. She’d never done something like this before—and the plan hinged on Petyr finishing the decanter full of wine by tonight.

Sansa tilted the decanter to her mouth and tasted the wine inside, wetting her lips only barely. It tasted a little unusual, a little more bitter than it was meant to, but nothing so awful. Perhaps Petyr already had enough to drink that he wouldn’t notice. Sansa swirled the wine around again to make
sure none of the powder settled at the bottom of the glass, before moving to make sure everything still looked undisturbed on Petyr’s desk, as if it had no one had ever entered. Sansa began to stand just as the door creaked open.

“He isn’t here,” Sansa told the guard as he stepped into the office. She walked away from the desk and towards the door. “I’ll have to tell him later. Can we go back to my room? I’m not feeling well.”

Sansa waits. She doesn’t know what she’s waiting for, perhaps for the sound of ambulance sirens or a shout of panic when someone discovers Petyr’s unconscious body, but that never happens. Sansa feels as if she’s waiting for Jon again, looking out over the woods that surround the Vale and waiting to see someone come and rescue her, for something to stop this wedding. That never comes, and as the hour of the wedding grows closer, Sansa feels more afraid.

She puts on her wedding dress at Myranda’s prompting. There is a guard in the room and so the girls must keep up appearances. They all sense it though—this macabre plan has failed. The wedding is going to happen.

_He must not have drunk the wine_, Sansa thinks stupidly as she slips her dress on in the bathroom, and then steps out to let Mya fix her hair. Sansa suddenly wishes that she hadn’t wasted those pills on Petyr, Sansa should have saved them for herself.

“We could wait,” Mya says nervously glancing at the door, “I mean, if you’re tired still…I could explain it to everyone…”

Sansa shakes her head, looking towards the vanity in front of her. Staring at her loose tendrils of red hair that were pulled up into an elegant knot on her head, Sansa can’t help but think that she looks like her mother. Sansa can’t help but think that maybe her mother had the best solution to all of this. No one could hurt Jon and Rickon and the others if Sansa was dead—no one could hurt her either.

Looking back at that morning, Sansa thinks that she should have cut her wrists a little deeper. She stands up abruptly, feeling a wave of dizziness make her sway as she holds the vanity to keep upright.

“Sansa—” Mya begins saying, but Sansa shakes her head.

There would be no wedding tonight. Melisandre wasn’t going to be right. Petyr didn’t get to win—men like him didn’t get to win. If Sansa was some prize—if she was the key to the Stark fortune, or every one of Petyr’s fantasies then she was never going to let him get it. Sansa wasn’t an object,
she wasn’t the stupid little girl who died in London, she wasn’t Alayne Stone, she was a wolf and she’d rather die than be his.

“I need to speak to Petyr.” Sansa turns to tell the guard, fully ready to shove past him if he refused. Sansa had always known that she wouldn’t make it out of here. She wasn’t afraid, but Sansa wanted the truth before she ended all of this. Sansa needed to hear Petyr say that he killed her father; she needed him to admit it.

The guard took Sansa downstairs to one of the sitting rooms on the first floor. Petyr was standing inside, looking into a gold reflective stenciling that hung on the wall as he fixed his cufflinks. He turned when he heard Sansa enter, movements languid as if barely acknowledging her presence.

“It’s bad luck for the groom to see his bride before the ceremony,” Petyr says as he steps away from the stenciling and turns to Sansa, a grin plays at his lips. He was apparently in a much better mood than before, “I suppose I can’t complain about the sight though.”

Petyr takes a step towards her and sets his hand on Sansa’s chin, the other placed on her neck, as he tilts her head up at him. Sansa feels the fight leave her, and she looks up. She hates the sight; she hates how pleased Petyr looks. It’s like he knows he’s won.

Sansa feels her hands fist at her sides as she desperately tries to control her breathe. She wonders how she’ll be able to do it. If she has to kill herself, then how? Once they are married, will Petyr start permitting her to have razors again, or perhaps she’ll have access to the medicine cabinet finally. Maybe Sansa will have to do what her mother had done and hang herself from the rafters with a white bed sheet.

“You look so much like your mother,” Petyr mused, brushing a stray strand of hair from Sansa’s face, tucking it behind her ear. “I would have married her once—I could truly have been your father is she agreed to it. It was Cat’s greatest mistake. I could have protected her, I could have made her happy.”

Sansa wonders if that’s why Petyr had Father killed. Maybe it never had anything to do with Sansa at all. Maybe with Ned Stark out of the way, Petyr thought he could have a second chance at marrying Catelyn. Maybe part of the reason Mother tried to kill herself was to escape Petyr too. Would Sansa be more successful than her? Did Sansa want to be?

The question turned Sansa’s stomach. She doesn’t want to die. She doesn’t want to lose.

“You have nothing to say?” Petyr asked, letting his hands trail down Sansa’s neck to her bare shoulders.
What was there to say? Petyr had won, hadn’t he? He won the game, just like he always said he would. Maybe Sansa was just a stupid girl who never learned. Maybe Petyr was right.

Petyr tilted his head and Sansa averted her gaze, looking towards the marble tiling. She couldn’t stand to look into his eyes, to look at his smug, proud face, as he spoke about Sansa’s mother and marriage.

“You didn’t lie. I like this new obedient Sansa. I didn’t know what I was going to do with you before—you behaved like some sort of untrained dog. But I’ve taught you to heel now, haven’t I?”

_Not a dog_, Sansa let the thought—the memory—echo in her head, _a wolf_.

Petyr chuckled, and shook his head, “The next time you act out I’ll have to get a muzzle for you, won’t I? I don’t think that will be the case anymore. You’ve made it so difficult to love you in the past, though I believe it will be easier now that you’ve learned your place.”

Sansa bristled. The words tumbled from her mouth before she could think. “You don’t love me.”

“I do,” Petyr assured her, unperturbed by how lifeless Sansa appeared, how the last threads of fight fizzled from her being. Perhaps Petyr preferred Sansa this way—like Catelyn Stark, who Petyr once loved so dearly, Sansa too had become a lifeless puppet for him to control. How long would it be until Sansa escaped just like her mother? “It’s because I love you that I’ve done so much to protect you. You were always so troubled, so innocent. Everything I’ve done is for you. You needed someone to take care of you, rescue you, Sansa. I did that for you. I don’t expect a thank you, but I do expect you to behave.”

And as he leaned down to kiss Sansa’s cheek, Sansa thought that this couldn’t be the end. Sansa had not survived this long to be brought to heel at Petyr’s feet. Gilly told Sansa that people like Petyr didn’t get to win, but who was going to stop them?

Sansa nodded her head numbly, and Petyr gave a satisfied smile. He walked past her towards that golden reflection once again to fix his suit one last time before they would step out and let the wedding begin.

_You needed someone to rescue you_, Petyr’s words echoed in her ears, and Sansa thought that he was right. Sansa had prayed for a hero to come save her every night since Ned Stark died. And then, when one never did, Sansa stopped believing in heroes. Then she found Jon, and she thought he could be her hero, but at the end of the day, he couldn’t save her either. Maybe heroes didn’t exist, maybe no one would ever come to save Sansa, but Sansa wasn’t looking for a hero anymore, and she didn’t need one.
Sansa didn’t want to be rescued. She wanted to win.

It is perhaps then, that Sansa looks at the grand piano at the far corner of the room where Petyr's jacket lay folded. Besides the jacket was a long-stemmed white crystal glass, the traces of red wine still left along the rim and besides it was a familiar decanter. It's contents were nearly empty.

For the first time since she stepped into the room, Sansa noticed the slow movements Petyr made, the slight lilt to his speech, and the way sweat glistened off his skin. Petyr reached for the collar of his shirt and loosened it just enough as if breathing was becoming difficult. He cleared his throat. The drugs, they were working.

Sansa moved towards the piano and grabbed the wine glass from the shiny black top. She poured the rest of the wine left in the decanter into the glass and then walked back over to Petyr.

“Here,” Sansa held the glass out to him, “For your throat.”

Petyr took the glass and swallowed down a decent portion of the wine. He made a face at the flavor, perhaps tasting the gritty remnants of the crushed pills that had not fully dissolved. Sansa had no idea how the medication was supposed to react in a person’s body when they had unknowingly taken it with so much with alcohol. She hoped that it would make Petyr fall into some sort of sleep or coma, just like her brother Bran had fallen into, but watching the sweat drip from Petyr’s brow, and the strained way he held himself tall made her wonder what other reactions the sedatives might bring.

Sansa took a step back and watched the bobbing of Petyr's throat as he coughed. Bringing the glass to his lips again, he drank a little more.

“Are you feeling well?” Sansa asked quietly.

Petyr tried to clear his throat, irritation edging in his voice as he coughed again; “I’ll feel better when this is over with. I’ve waited for this day since you were a girl—you can’t imagine the trouble it has put me through.”

Sansa dug her nails into her palms, wondering how much longer she could wait out the drugs. Whatever they were doing to him, Sansa hoped the full effect would take soon. “That must have been very inconvenient for you.”

“You are so important, Sansa.” Petyr told her setting the half-full wine glass down on the table beside him, “You have no idea the lengths I’d have gone to have you.”
Petyr coughed again, reaching for the handkerchief on the table beside him, adjusting the collar of his shirt once more.

Sansa waited a beat. Petyr’s words had reignited the burning question in Sansa’s mind that needed to be answered, “Did you kill him?”

Petyr face twisted and he shook his head, “I’ve already told you, Jon Snow and Rickon won’t be touched as long as you—"

“Not them.” Sansa interrupted, wishing that she wasn’t so afraid of the answer she already knew, “My father—did you kill my dad?”

Petyr blinked, turning to face Sansa. He tilted his head, “Ned Stark? Of course not, Sansa. You know that your father was killed in an assassination. Wasn’t it some rogue guard—"

“Don’t lie.” Sansa set her shoulders, determined to hear the truth, “Don’t lie. I know that you’re the one who hired the security detail who was there that day. They’re the same guards you’ve got here—I remember.”

Petyr shook his head, voice taking a stern edge as he realized that this argument may cause a delay to the wedding if Sansa continued down this path. “You’re confused—"

“No, I’m not.” Sansa wondered how this would end. Petyr couldn’t possibly admit to ordering the assassination, and even if he did, it wouldn’t change anything. “I know you did it, I don’t need you to admit it.”

Petyr sighed, the noise throaty and painful to Sansa's ears, and that must have agitated him even more. When he spoke, threat dripped from his lips, body poised in frustration as he reached to loosen his tie. “Then what exactly do you need? Are you using these ridiculous accusations to buy yourself time? I thought we had this straightened out yesterday. You said you’d be a good girl, remember? You know what happens when you aren’t.”

Sansa nodded her head, she felt cold. She felt like ice. “I remember.”
“Good,” Petyr moved to grab his suit jacket, pulling it over his shoulders with some sluggish effort. He fell into a fit of coughs, the sweat on his skin visible. “Do your best to keep remembering. I can’t continue to make excuses for you, Sansa. This behavior—these accusations, they will not continue. It’s foolish—they are the notions of a stupid little girl, and that is not who I raised you to be, now is it?”

Sansa watched as Petyr reached for the wine glass again, making an unpleasant face as he tried to clear his throat and drink. “No, it’s not.”

Who was the girl Petyr raised Sansa to be? He’d tried to groom her to be his perfect wife—his pretty doll, his caged bird, his muzzled wolf. Petyr taught Sansa how to survive, never how to live. Most importantly though, Petyr taught Sansa what it meant to be afraid. She lived her whole life looking for the stranger who would hold a knife to her back that she forgot to look at the enemy in front of her. It was Petyr’s turn to feel the cold tip of a dagger against his spine. It was Petyr’s turn to be afraid.

Petyr reached forward and grabbed Sansa’s chin and force her to look up at him. She blinked languidly, seeing up close just how clammy his skin had become, feeling the way his fingers shook as they held her face still. “In time, you’ll love me too. You’ll thank me for everything I’ve done for you.”

Sansa nodded and Petyr moved down to kiss her lips, the touch chaste and sickening, and Sansa took it all unmoving. When he stepped back, he coughed into his hand, reaching for the handkerchief he’d left on the table beside him. Sansa’s eyes wandered over to the glass of wine, the red still pooling at the bottom. Staring at it as she remembered how heavy the glass had felt in her hand when she sat in Petyr’s office as a child. How heavy that wine felt on her tongue when she’d try to down the bitter drink in hopes that doing so might mean she would get to leave soon. She remembered what Petyr had told her then, she hoped that he remembered too.

“Drink,” Sansa encouraged watching as he lifted the glass, “You’ll feel better soon.”

And Petyr drank, taking the glass away from Sansa’s hand and trying to swallow the remaining liquid. He tore the glass from his lips away as he fell into a fit of coughs, grabbing the table beside him for balance as he tried to cover his mouth. His skin was turning a dark shade of pink, he was sweating bullets. If he wasn’t so determined for the wedding to take place in the next few minutes, he might have gone to the hospital, but as Petyr said, he’d been waiting years for this day—he was too determined to quit now.

“Did you ever think I’d resist?” Sansa asked—she felt numb, detached, watching as the last of the wine was drained from the glass.
Petryr looked up, trying to speak amongst his coughing, spine still bent as he held the lip of the table in an attempt to steady himself. He might not have even heard her, might not have even cared.

“Go get me some water.” Petyr ordered her, his hand clutching his throat as he struggled to get the words out.

Sansa took a step forward. There was fire in her veins. She moved blindly, thoughtlessly, and vengefully. Sansa repeated, “Did you ever think I’d resist? When I was a child and you would come into my room, did you ever think I would resist—did you ever think I would try to fight you off? Would you have even stopped if I had? Every night I was so scared that you’d come into my room—I was terrified of the night…of you. Did you ever think about that?”

Petyr had tears in his bloodshot eyes that had nothing to do with the words Sansa said. He spoke tightly, like a noose was tied around his neck and he was trying to catch his breath and stops that strangled hold but it would not let up. “What are you even saying—get me water. Get me something to clear my throat—“

“You should have,” Sansa told him slowly, stalking forward like some sort of creature from a child’s nightmare. Sansa had thought she needed a hero to save her; all she ever really needed though was a monster bigger than the one who came into her bedroom every night. Sansa could be that creature now. Sansa didn’t need to save herself; she just had to kill him. “Because you’re right Petyr. You didn’t raise a stupid little girl.”

Petyr’s brow knit together as he doubled over in another fit of coughs. He was trying to shake his head, trying to dismiss her words with a shakey jolt from his hand. “Get me help.” He told her at last, as he fought for breath, “Get me something to drink—I can’t…I can’t breath.”

Sansa grabbed the wine glass from where it sat, abandoned, and pushed it towards him. It was empty, little white pieces of film stuck to the rim, leaving the evidence of the drug behind. Petyr stared at the glass, eyes narrowing, blinking slowly as he turned to look up.

“Are you scared now?” Sansa asked, a calm chill overtaking her body, making her feel as if she was not even the one speaking. She was watching all of this happen from somewhere far away, and it made her feel deadly.

Petyr coughed and this time there was blood. He took a step away, his mouth open as if he was about to shout for help. Sansa moved towards him, slapping her hand over his mouth before any
noise came out. She felt his body tremble, felt another wave shake his body as he wretched. There was a sound like a strangled choke, and blood leaked between Sansa's fingertips, and spilled onto her dress.

Sansa grip did not waiver at the sight. One hand pressed firmly over his mouth, the other gripping the back of his neck, Sansa held tight as Petyr struggled against her. He tried to shout again, but all that came out was a muffled bloody moan. Then he tried to claw at Sansa’s face, he pulled at her hair, yanking the red strands free and wrapped them around his finger as he tried to force her to drop her hold. When that didn’t work, Petyr moved one of his hands to Sansa’s arm and dug his claws into her stitches, tearing them apart and letting blood splatter them both. Sansa only held on tighter, falling to the floor when Petyr’s legs collapsed under him, her knees hitting the marble hard. At the impact, Sansa's hand slipped just enough for Petyr to choke out a cry.

“Help—“ He started to shout, only for his voice to be overtaken by a spew of blood as he vomited. It splattered across the floor, spraying Sansa as she lay on the marble beside him. Petyr’s cries turned into mangled coughs and groans. He tried to crawl away from Sansa, true fear burning his eyes. I am his monster.

Petyr tried to scream, but all that came out was a choked moan as more blood and bile spilled from his mouth. His body fidgeting as he slowly tried to claw at the slick tile. Petyr was wriggling on the ground, a worm baking in the sun, as he desperately tried to call for help, but no noise came out except for the sound of his feeble gags. Blood soaked the floor, staining Sansa’s wedding dress red. The cries became silent, his movements slowed.

Sansa held her bleeding arm to her chest as she pushed herself up onto her knees. Her body swayed, dizzy and weak, but she did not fall back down. Sansa wiped her face, feeling the blood spread across her skin as she stared down at Petyr, watching the slow rise and fall of his chest as it constricted one last time.

“Oh, thank you Petyr,” Sansa told him as she pulled herself up to her feet. Exhaustion set into Sansa’s bones as she looked down at the carnage around her, a calm overtaking her body. Sansa licked her lips, tasting copper on her tongue, “For every lesson that you taught me.”

Standing above him, Sansa took in the sight of the thick blood that painted the white marble floor red. It dripped from her dress, from her skin, and it spread all around. In the center of the carnage was the pale, limp body of Petyr Baelish. Sansa’s monsters were dead, she thought as she took a step away. Sansa wasn’t going to die here with them.

Sansa Stark did not spare Petyr Baelish a last glance as she turned from the room, pushed open the door, and ran.

Sansa sprinted down the stone halls. Everyone was in the grand foyer for the wedding ceremony and so Sansa ran towards the kitchens instead. She didn’t feel like she could breathe, stuck in some pseudo-reality that couldn’t possibly have existed. Petyr was dead, but what did that mean for Sansa?

She kicked off her heels as she ran, skidding on the cold stone as she made a sharp turn to the little alcove that led to the gardens outside. With a heavy push that made her cut arm burn, Sansa opened
the door, the cold night air hitting her as she leapt onto the icy ground outside and ran forward. It wasn’t thought or logic that told her to keep running, and it wasn’t fear either. Sansa knew how the story of the vengeful bride would end. That wasn’t her ending.

It didn’t take long until Sansa heard shouting. She couldn’t tell if they were shouting at her, or if the noise came from the mansion from where Petyr’s body could have been discovered. Sansa didn’t stop to find out which it was. She tore through the garden, running over thorny rose beds and frozen grass to the tree line and the fence beyond.

There was no clear thought in Sansa’s mind. She didn’t know where she planned to go, or what she was doing. She barely understood what she’d done to Petyr. Sansa never thought—she’d been desperate, but Sansa didn’t think she’d actually be able to kill him. But she had, and as Sansa ran towards the fence, she could taste what real freedom must have felt like. It didn’t matter how long it lasted, these few seconds were worth whatever would happen to her next.

Sansa ran into the fence, her hands gripping the uneven stones as she began to climb, just like she’d done so many months before. When she made it to the top, the barbed wire tore into her dress and skin, tearing at it all as she swung to the other side and fell. Sansa had braced for the impact, but it still hurt hitting the snow that was packed and melted into a dense pile of ice. Pushing herself up, Sansa stumbled back onto her feet. The shouting was getting louder. The guards must have seen on the security cameras around the property that she’d gotten out. Sansa broke into a run again.

By the time exhaustion hit, Sansa was way passed out of breath. Her body burned from running, while her skin had gone numb from the cold, chest aching. Sansa didn’t know where she was when she finally slowed down. Somewhere in the middle of the woods, somewhere where ice and snow covering the ground. It didn’t really matter where the location was or how far she'd gotten from the Vale. Sansa knew that she wasn’t going to get far enough for a real escape. She never planned to. Sansa had thought the guards would arrest her as soon as she killed Petyr—getting these few minutes of freedom was the best ending for herself that Sansa could imagine. Wherever she found herself now, the shouting had stopped, and so Sansa moved to sit down against an ice-covered tree, collapsing as she tried to lower herself to the ground.

Sansa didn’t know how much of the blood that was covering was her own and how much was Petyr’s. She trembled from the cold, of the chill that laced through her chest as the blood around her slowly froze. Laying her head against the tree, Sansa took in a shallow, steady breathe and shut her eyes. There was no next step to her plan; this was it. Sansa began to smile and then it turned into a fitful laugh. Tears fell down her cheeks and clung like ice to her skin. Sansa Stark was free, she was really truly free for the first time in seven years, and there was no one left to be afraid of. Sansa may have been half-mad at this point, slowly freezing in the middle of the woods, but she wasn’t afraid anymore—the ghosts were dead, the monsters vanquished, and now Sansa was the thing that they feared, she was the wolf stalking these woods—the hunter, not the hunted.

Sansa embraced the cold, knowing that she’d done everything she could have to protect her family. Petyr wouldn’t hurt them anymore; he wouldn’t hurt anyone ever again.

As Sansa closed her eyes, the winter soaking into her bones, she hoped that she’d get to see Father again. Sansa hoped she could see Robb—wherever she went after the cold overtook her body, Sansa hoped that they would be there too. Death would be okay if it meant that Sansa could see Robb again—that she could tell him that she kept the promise she made at his grave and that she protected their family.

As her body went numb, and breathing became difficult, Sansa felt at peace. She could hear someone calling her name; she could feel the sun shining outside her frost covered eyelids. Sansa
blinked, heavy eyes and saw Robb, just as she hoped. He was leaning over her, saying something. He looked just as he had when they were young. Robb turned his head and looked away from Sansa and shouted something—Sansa wondered if she would get to see Father again too. Sansa never got to see who Robb had called. She fell into the cold; she did not think she would wake up again. Sansa shut her eyes for the last time and felt herself slip away.

When Sansa Stark opened her eyes she didn’t feel afraid. There was a strong grip on her hand, squeezing it almost too tight and something was making it hard for Sansa to breath. She tilted her head to the side, noticing the oxygen mask over her face fogging up, and a monitor connected to her arm beeping too loudly. Sansa saw Jon slouched in a hospital chair pulled up beside her bed, sleeping. She traced the strong line of his arm to where his hand was holding hers, laying on the edge of the bed like a lifeline connecting the two of them.

Sansa wondered how she got here, she wondered if any of it was real. None of it felt real—it felt like a dream. Sansa’s head felt all light and her eyes heavy. There was a ringing in her head and her fingers and toes burned, like they were being held against a fire. Her mouth felt like cotton, and the lights were too bright. And as Sansa looked at Jon she thought that none of this could be real. It had to be a dream. But it didn’t matter—Sansa felt safe.

“You’re awake.” Someone at the doorway said.

Sansa blinked past cloudy vision and made out Arya’s shape as she stood in the brightly lit doorway, looking more like a shadow than a girl. The shadow didn’t stay there long, because Arya had turned out of the room, her voice carrying over as she shouted for something. Sansa felt her eyelids droop, and she let them lay shut and fell out of consciousness.

It took another day until Sansa woke up again. The doctors said that she was suffering from shock, several infections, and hypothermia. They never said anything about Petyr.

Sansa had been found in the woods about two miles outside the property of the Vale. From what Sansa gathered, Jon and the others had gone to the Vale to try and stop the wedding, but when Jon made it to the gate, he saw sirens and an ambulance already swarming the doors of the mansion. It was Mya who told him that Sansa was missing. With Mya’s help, Jon, Rickon, and Arya spent two hours searching the woods with flashlights, shouting Sansa’s name. It was Rickon who found her, half frozen and practically unconscious.

When the police did come to Sansa’s room, she was informed that she was not a suspect in the investigation. They came to interview her, but it hadn’t lasted very long. There wasn’t much Sansa had to say—feigning exhaustion to cover up for her own confusion. She didn’t want to mention the sedatives she put into Petyr’s wine, in fear that this revelation would make her a suspect. Jon showed them the audio recording of what Petyr had said to her when the interview was coming to a close, but it didn’t appear to influence their decision. It seemed that Arya had something to do with
that, as she stayed in the room while the officers informed Sansa that she wouldn’t be investigated any further.

“What did you do?” Sansa asked when the officers left. Jon had stepped out of the room with them, and through the window in her room, Sansa could see him shaking their hands.

Arya shrugged, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Sansa wondered if she’d ever get a better explanation than that. She had put enough pieces together in her next few days at the hospital in Grenoble to realize that what had happened to Petyr had to do with more than just the drugs Sansa put into his wine. Arya had answers, but it appeared that Sansa wasn’t going to get them just yet.

“You’ve barely looked at me since I got back,” Sansa said after spending a week in the Grenoble hospital.

Jon glanced up from the chair he was sitting in and met the stare Sansa was leveling his way. It was just the two of them right now. It was the first time it had just been the two of them since Sansa left for France. Usually, Rickon or Arya was in the room too, or one of the nurses or Sansa’s doctor. But right now it was only them, and Sansa wanted nothing more than to have things go back to how they were before—no, not how they were before, because before Sansa spent every day terrified of the ghosts who lived in her head, but now those were gone. Sansa wanted things to be better than they were before.

Jon grimaced and got up from the hospital chair to move over to Sansa’s side. One hand was set by her waist, the other lingered near Jon’s side as he looked at Sansa as she sat with her back against the plastic headboard of the bed.

Jon finally brought his hand up, letting it hover over the fading bruise on Sansa’s temple, “I should have been there sooner. I should have kept my promise.”

Sansa grabbed Jon’s hand before it could touch her molten skin, and wove her fingers through his. She pulled him closer, but Jon still hesitated before meeting her eyes. She didn’t know what to say to him, she didn’t know how to ease his pain—his guilt.

“I’m glad you didn’t.” Sansa finally told him, and Jon’s face twisted in confusion, mouth opening to protest and Sansa spoke first, “I’m glad you never had to meet him.”
Jon ducked his head and gave a quiet humorless laugh. “God, Sansa, don’t think about me. Can’t you just be a little more selfish?”

Something about that was ironic. All Sansa ever felt was selfish around Jon. All Sansa had ever been was selfish—but looking back, Sansa thought that if she had never been selfish she never would have found herself at this moment, she never would have been free of Petyr, and she never would have had the chance to pull Jon’s arm so that he ducked down to kiss Sansa’s lips. She drew her hand to his cheek and let the kiss linger, only drawing apart when Sansa started feeling short of breath again.

She shifted in the hospital bed, moving towards the end and making room for Jon to lay down beside her. Sansa caught the teasing role of Jon’s eyes as he moved to sit beside her, and she counted it as a victory. Jon had been so awfully guilt-ridden and sullen since Sansa was brought to the hospital. It was good to see that half curved smile on his lips again. It was good to know that she was the reason for it.

“The police want to interview you again. They’re moving Petyr to the trauma ward, they’ll need another statement.”

Sansa wrinkled her nose distastefully. She didn’t want to think about Petyr ever again—or what was left of him. He wasn’t dead, but it was near enough. The doctors said that he was in a vegetative state. Apparently, the sedatives and alcohol weren’t the only drugs in his system as the time of Sansa’s escape. That seemed impossible though, Petyr didn’t take drugs, other than the occasional indulgence of wine. Whatever had been in his system though had resulted in his vocal cords being fried, apparently burned as if by acid, along with his digestive tract. Petyr would never speak again, he’d never live outside a hospital unit, he’d never have any power over anyone. It was fitting, and sometimes Sansa wondered if it was more just of a punishment than death would have been.

But Sansa didn’t want to talk about Petyr. She didn’t want to talk about the police either, or any other practical important thing. Sansa wanted to feel like everything awful was far away, like that darkness could never touch her again.

“All of that,” Sansa told Jon as she moved to set her head on his shoulder, she looked at their joint hands that rested between them and let herself relax and remember that they were both safe—that they could be impractical again. “Tell me about something else—tell me about something good.”

Jon scoffed, “Something good?” He repeated, a teasing lilt to his tone.

Sansa knocked her shoulder into his, “I’m trying to be positive. So shut up, and tell me something happy. What’s the happiest moment you’ve ever experienced?”
For a while, Jon didn’t say anything. Sansa wondered if he was still too morose to play her game. She tilted her chin up to look at Jon’s face to try and tell what he was thinking, but when she looked up she could see the small smile playing at his lips.

“What?” Sansa asked, sitting up a little more.

“It’s nothing.” Jon told her dismissively, “You’ll think its stupid.”

Sansa shook her head; “You have to tell me now. You can’t say something like that and not tell me.”

Jon sighed. He was playing with Sansa’s hand, running the pads of his fingers of her palm and wrist, before he wove their hands back together. The lilting smile was still there. “It was when I was thirteen.”

“Oh?” Sansa encouraged, trying to recall the time he was speaking of.

Jon nodded, “I’d been living with your family for a year already. Robb had the footie team he was part of, and one of the kids pulled out before a game and they needed an alternate. I subbed in for him and played the game, and afterward, Ned took us all out for ice cream to celebrate the win.”

Sansa felt a smile tug on her lips, “Yeah, I remember that. Mum and I made that poster and were cheering in the stands. I don’t think I even knew what was really going on, but everyone was so excited. Dad was so proud of both of you. I remember that after you and Robb won it was the first time I ever saw you really smile. I thought you looked so much better that way.”

“After the game, when one of the parents asked who’s child I was, Ned told them that I was his son. It was the first time I ever thought that Ned was really going to keep me around.” Sansa squeezed Jon’s hand and moved a little closer to his side. She felt Jon relax beside her, as he leaned back against the bed. He moved his arm to wrap it around Sansa’s shoulder, pulling her close to his chest. “I thought that was the happiest moment of my life.”

Sansa looked up, quirking her brow, “Wait, you mean that it wasn’t?” Jon shook his head, and Sansa scoffed. “Well, then what was?”

“About two months ago I was in my office at the police station when I heard some screaming
happening over in the booking station.” Jon started to say, as Sansa tried to remember just what Jon was recalling, “I went over and saw some girl pointing a finger at my officer and demanding to know what she was being arrested for.”

Sansa looked down, realizing just what Jon was talking about. She barely remembered that day when officer Thorne had arrested her for sleeping on the sidewalk. That had been the first day she and Jon spoke to each other in nearly seven years.

Tilting her head up again, Sansa saw Jon searching her face for a reaction. The gentle smile was on his face, he looked like he was mapping Sansa’s face like it was something he needed to remember. Sansa thought that he must have brought up the story to make her smile—or maybe to remind her of how far they had come since that day.

Sansa set her head back on Jon’s shoulder. “I’m ready to go home, Jon. I want all of us to go home.”

And so they did. They arranged for Sansa’s last interview with the police that morning, and then by the evening, they were boarding a plane to Scotland. It wasn’t strictly home, but as Sansa was learning, home was less of a place than it was the people you were with.

It was that first night in Scotland that Sansa was always going to remember. They were spending the night in Bran’s hospital room. It had been their first stop after getting off the plane and they’d already been there for hours.

Rickon was sitting at the end of Bran’s hospital bed, begrudgingly working on some homework that had built up over the last week and a half. Jon was in his chair, beside the bed, filling out some medical paperwork and going over a police file that was in his lap. Sansa sat beside him in another chair that was pulled up beside him, occasionally she would go over to help Rickon with some of his homework, but after a while, Sansa had moved to rest back in the chair, letting her foot overlap Jon’s, listening to Bran’s gentle breathing as he lay in his hospital bed, finally free of the respirator they previously had him on. The doctors said that Bran was making progress, even though he had yet to awake. They said that there was increased brain activity—they were hopeful he would awake soon. Sansa was hopeful too. A few minutes later, the hospital room door cracked up and Arya came into the room, carrying a cup of coffee and leaning against the doorframe.

Arya hadn’t come over on the same flight as Jon, Rickon and Sansa had. Sansa thought that it had meant that Arya was planning on staying in France, or at least parting ways from the rest of them. Across the room, Sansa and Arya’s eyes met, but Arya ducked her head to avoid the gaze for much longer and took a quiet sip of her coffee.

“What happens now?” Rickon asked looking up from his homework and looking around the room.

What did happen next? Sansa hadn’t even considered the future beyond that night. Sansa was still part of an investigation into Petyr’s vegetative condition. Bran was still in a coma, well as be a part of a criminal cult investigation. Arya was still in a gang, and Sansa had no clue if she’d be going
back to Cardiff with the rest of them after all of this. Rickon’s adoption was still pending, and he had to pass all of his classes if he was going to stay with her and Jon. And then there were about a thousand other problems having to do with legal procedures and finances that Sansa couldn’t even begin to think about.

The question was practical, but Sansa didn’t think that the Stark’s lived in a world of practicalities any longer. At least, for a moment, they were suspended from that actuality, held still in a place that felt far away from reality and the world that had brought them here. It felt like they were finally allowed to hope, and that maybe that hope would lead somewhere good.

Jon looked up from his paperwork and their eyes met. She wondered if he was thinking the same thing.

“We’ll figure it out.” He addressed them all but hadn’t looked away from Sansa.

Arya snorted, taking a sip of coffee, “That’s awfully optimistic. Is that your way of saying you don’t know what’s going to happen?”

Jon tossed his pen at Arya and she ducked her head to dodge it. They were both smiling though and Sansa thought that maybe things would turn out okay after all. At least in this moment, they were. This was the first time in over seven years that all the Starks were alive in the same room. In this moment, Sansa realized that things really were going to be okay.

“Hey look,” Rickon jumped off the bed and went to the window that faced the car park. “It’s snowing.”

Across the room Sansa nodded and watched as the other Starks gathered to the window to watch the flurries fall and cover the car park. Sansa stood up to join them, resting her hand on Bran’s as she looked forward at the snow covered lot. “Winter is here.”

Chapter End Notes
okay so this chapter should have been out 2 days ago, but my computer deleted the original draft and i had to rewrite. Anyway, here it is!! I always knew that i didn't want LF to actually die, but rather be trapped in his own body, powerless like he had made so many other people. I also knew that i wanted Sansa to take all the scheming and manipulation that she had been taught and use it against petyr is the big showdown, and that ended up taking shape in an overcomplicated plot that relied a lot on luck and desperation and teamwork. Its not explicit, but it is implied that a faceless man also ended up drugging petyr which is why his reaction to what sansa thought was her sedatives was so extreme.

Also, i just want to make it clear that some of the dialogue in this chapter (and throughout the fic) is just straight up from asoiaf, such as LF dagger flashback conversation. I'm sure a lot of people already noticed this, but for non book readers i wanted to make it clear that i am not that skilled at coming up with dialogue and we've got grrm to thank for that genius.

also, in the future if i write an accompanying fic for this one, i will leave an update on this work.

Anyway, there are about a billion things i want to say about this chapter, but i can't think of any right now. Thank you so much for everyone who's stuck with this fic, i seriously cannot believe that its at the end. i've never written and completed such a long piece of writing in my life--this is actually the longest thing i've ever written, and if it wasn't for all the people who commented on every chapter i'd never have finished it. Seriously you guys are the best people ever, and this fic would not exist without you!!
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

This is just a few notes of what I imagine happened after the events of No String on Me

Chapter Notes

Okay so while I originally planned on one day to writing a sequel, life keeps getting in
the way and so, for now, I'm just going to throw in some few additional notes of what
happens to the Starks after the events of the first fic so that everything can feel a little
more wrapped up for those who want more closure.

I was motivated to do this after a recent comment on the fic by Jiya, who is super
sweet and amazing. Btw I'm sorry for not replying to any comments in the past few
months, I definitely still read them, but I've just been trying to distance myself from the
fic and focus on school

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Anniversary of Sansa Stark’s rebirth (a year later)

1. The Starks move into Winterfell:

There was a thump in the room over and Sansa could hear Rickon cursing through the thin
adjoining walls. She looked up from her box and glanced over at Jon who was trying to screw in
the pieces of Arya’s new bed they had ordered online, the former one that had taken up this room
having been too small for her now. He was laying on his side on the dark polished wooden floor,
dark curls falling in his face as he tried to angle his head to look at where the screw was supposed
to go in. When he heard the thump coming from Rickon’s room on the other side he looked up too.

“This is the right move,” Sansa asked suddenly, a feeling a doubt washing over her. “Coming back
here? I know Rickon didn’t want to—maybe we should have just tried to find a bigger flat in the
city—"

Jon pushed himself up from the floor, setting his tools on the bed and walking over to Sansa. She
watched him approach with a wary expression, allowing him to take the box from her hands and set
it down on the floor beside them.
“This is the right move.” He told her grabbing one of Sansa’s hands in his and pulling her in for a hug.

Sansa allowed this, letting his face press against his shoulder, relaxing into his embrace without ever really surrendering her own thoughts, “What about your job? Or Sam and Gilly, or Rickon’s schooling—”

“I’ve gotten offers from a station in York,” Jon reminded her, his arms circling her waist and squeezing a little tighter, a silent plea for her to relax. “And the schools here are plenty good for Rickon, and Sam and Gilly both said that moving was our best option. Why are you so worried about this now? You’re the one who brought up moving in the first place.”

Sansa had and she reminded herself that it was still their best choice. The hospital nearby had the best treatment available for Bran who woke up from his coma shortly after he’d been moved from the hospital in Scotland to the one in York, and in York, Sansa and the others could be close to their mother, who was just starting to heal from having been taken off the medication that had kept her so heavily sedated for so many years. Not that Catelyn Stark would ever fully recover, but when Sansa and Arya had visited her last time, Catelyn had reached out to try and grab Arya’s hand, and Sansa swore that, while her mother may never speak, she would remember her children again.

Moving back to the Stark manor was also the best financial option for Jon and Sansa. While Stannis was continuing his legal help pro bono, Sansa still had to try and find the funds to support Bran’s medical costs and the fees required for the permanent adoption of both him and Rickon. An apartment in the city just wasn’t practical, especially when that apartment had to fit five, sometimes six, different people and one very big dog. The manor was already Sansa’s by right, and it cost nothing to live there, except for the utility bills, which weren’t very high, to begin with. It was certainly cheaper than continuing to live in Cardiff.

Sansa could have dipped into her substantial inheritance to pay for both rent, and the medical and legal fees that were stacking up, but that didn’t feel like a good idea. She wanted to save the bulk of the inheritance for her sibling’s futures or any emergencies that might come up along the way. For now, despite a great deal of hesitance, the Stark Manor was the best place to live.

“It’s the right decision.” Sansa sighed, as she pushed Jon back so that she could move to pick up the box from the floor again. “I just hate it. I mean, Arya hardly visits, and Bran is still in the hospital —“

“For now.”
“For now,” Sansa agreed, “But now it’s just you, me, and Rickon in this great big house full of awful memories. I mean Rickon saw mother hang herself here. Is it really wise to bring him back to this place?”

“He hasn’t said anything about it.” Jon offered, rubbing the back of his neck, voice uncertain.

Sansa leveled a glare in his direction, “Do you expect him to? Jon, maybe this is the practical decision, but is it the wise one?”

“You sound like your father.”

Sansa didn’t think that was possible. She was no Eddard Stark, sometimes she didn’t even feel like a Stark at all. Her therapist had told her she needed to learn to accept both her past and her present as being part of her identity, but Sansa hardly knew how to do that when both pieces felt like the conflicted so much.

More so, the therapist insisted that Sansa had to forgive herself for the past and learn that she was worthy of forgiveness, and the guilt she felt about not taking action sooner didn’t mean she was to blame for what happened to her. It was those sort of thoughts that made Sansa feel even worse, being confronted by her own insecurities and fear and the knowledge that while Sansa could accept her past, she hardly knew how to forgive herself for letting herself suffer for so many years without ever taking action.

She remembered how much she hated that stupid court-ordered therapist. Going to the required sessions meant Sansa wasn’t charged with jail time for Petyr’s murder, but it also meant reliving all of her awful past and having to analyze it. Jon was so encouraging about her going to the sessions while they were still in Cardiff, even offering to drive her to all twelve of them and waiting in the waiting room the entire time, but Sansa hated having him there. She much rather go alone, and when that didn’t feel possible, she had Gilly and little Sammy go with her. She was glad that she didn’t have to continue attending sessions in York, even though she still felt like everytime Jon mentioned something like Father, or her time before they re-met in Cardiff a year ago, it was barb against her alleged recovery.

Sansa didn’t bristle at Jon’s comment. She was too composed to slip up like that again, “Well, I suppose one of us ought to.”

“I always thought Robb had a good impression of him.”

A ghost of a smile graced Sansa’s lips at the memory of their oldest brother imitating Ned Stark
when they were all up past their bedtimes, sitting on the floor of one of their rooms and laughing in
the dark, trying to stay quiet as to not get caught. The memory was both enhanced by the reminder
that Arya’s room, the one they currently stood in, had once held those secret meetings of the
Starks, and then tainted by the knowledge that Robb’s bones were at peace in the cemetery over
the hill.

“Robb was good at everything.” Sansa told Jon pointedly. It was true, Robb really had been the
golden boy. She hoped the subtle reminder didn’t dim Jon’s optimism at all. She knew that, as a
child, Jon had often struggled to live up to Robb. It wasn’t something she remembered happening
growing up too, but Jon had revealed the insecurity to her a few months ago when they were first
considering moving into the manor.

“Well, naturally,” Jon replied easily, moving back towards Sansa and grabbing the box from her
again. She rolled her eyes, but allowed it, pretending she didn’t enjoy the way his nose nuzzled into
the side of her neck, as she tilted it to the side to allow access. She felt his lips ghost over the shell
of her ear and she shut her eyes and shuddered. “You were quite perfect as well.”

Sansa gave a dead laugh, “Hardly.” her breath hitched when Jon placed a kiss on her neck. His
arms had gone to rest on her hips and he was walking them backwards towards the bed. “You’re
playing a dangerous game Jon Snow.”

“I don’t consider you a game.” Was Jon’s quick answer, and if it wasn’t for the way his voice had
dropped and the way the words were breathed across her neck by the light touch of his lips she
might have teased him for the romantic nature of the claim. Though with all the elements at play,
as well as the way his hands were holding her hips steady, Sansa just tried her best not to get lost in
it all.

“I know you’re trying to distract me from talking us out of moving again,” Sansa warned him, her
hands going up to hang around his neck. It was much harder to keep her voice steady when he
continued to lay gentle kisses to her neck and collarbone. “It won’t work. I’ll continue to doubt the
decision for at least another month.”

“Just a month?” Jon asked, voice raised as if slightly amused. His teeth scraped against her skin.

“Less if you keep that up.”

She could feel Jon smiling now, and that always made everything so much better. Sansa really let
herself relax now, backing up so that she could feel the back of her knees hit the bed and finally
turning her head up so that she could really kiss Jon now. His smile was still there when their lips
met. Jon kept a hand on her as he lowered the back on the bed.

There was a creak, as the bed first shifted when Sansa sat down, feeling more occupied with lacing her hands in Jon’s hair then the shift of the mattress. The creak was followed by a crack.

“Fuck—” Was the only thing Sansa heard before the feet of the bed shifted to the side and the mattress fell from the frame and Jon and Sansa with it.

Jon tried to catch himself so that he didn’t crush Sansa entirely as the bed broke, it didn’t make much of a difference, as Sansa was still pinned half under his weight. The look of surprised shock held still on her face for a moment longer before her grin broke through and she started laughing. A moment later, Jon joined.

“I thought you finished screwing the pieces in!” Sansa accused, slapping her hand against one of his shoulders as she continued to laugh.

“I’d forgotten about it.” John rolled off Sansa, laying on his back beside her on the mattress. “I blame you for that.”

Sansa pushed herself up on her elbows and was about to make a biting reply, when she heard the door of the room open. She looked towards the doorway to see Rickon stomping in.

“What was that?” Rickon said, behind him Ghost bound into the room, tongue hanging out the side of his mouth. Rickon got a good look at Jon and Sansa on the bed before his face morphed into disgust. “Are you serious?”

Jon and Sansa shared a startled look before the laughter started again. Neither of them considered how awful this situation would look if they were caught. Somehow instead of the situation becoming mortifying, it was just funny. The bed dipped again as Ghost jumped up on top of them, wagging his tail and trying to lick Jon’s face. It just made everything feel even funnier.

“Don’t laugh!” Rickon yelled at them, indignant. Sansa could barely see him through the tears in her eyes. “That’s Arya’s bed, you freaks! You’re both staying away from my room, I told you I wanted a lock! What part of this is funny—wait until Arya hears about this—"

And Sansa thought, amid Jon and her laughter, and Rickon’s shouting, and Ghost coming to lick the tears in her eyes that perhaps living in Stark Manor would not be so bad. Perhaps they could
learn to replace all the bad memories with something good.

2. First Day of School:

“If I hate it you’ll come pick me up,” Rickon said as he stared up at the stone steps to the school. He fidgeted with the collar of his uniform, and glanced towards Sansa, a look of insecurity in his eyes, “Won’t you?”

Sansa nodded. Getting Rickon into the private school in York had been difficult with his record, but it had been the school Jon and Robb had graduated from and given the unique circumstances, and a recommendation letter from Mr. Davos, Sansa managed to get Rickon a spot in the year 8 class.

“Of course.” Sansa tried to sound confident and pretend that there was no chance that Rickon would need her to pick him up, but this was uncharted territory for both of them. Rickon had done well during the last semester of his schooling in Cardiff, not getting in a single fight and passing all his classes, but that was in an environment he was comfortable in. This was all totally new. Sansa handed Rickon his backpack that she’d slung over her shoulder and turned to face him. He’d grown a little taller in the past year and was getting dangerously close to the same height as her. “You’re going to do great Rickon. Your teachers all said that you got great marks last semester—you’re just as smart as the kids here.”

Smarter probably. Rickon had been at least a year behind the other students at the start of the last term, given his spotty academic record, but in the course of his year living with Jon and Sansa and actually attending classes, he’d gotten to the top of his class. Sansa even pinned the report card he received from his teachers on the fridge back in the manor. She was a little proud, and even when Rickon tore the report down and tossed it in the bin, she could tell by the soft smile on his face that he was proud too.

Rickon shrugged a shoulder and looked away, “What about you?”

“Me?” Sansa bristled uncomfortably in the change of subject. She was trying to pretend that today also wasn’t her first day of classes at the local university. She was hoping that if she forgot she would feel less nervous about all of it. “I’ll be fine.”

“You know, if you end up hating it too you can still just pick me up,” Rickon told her easily, “We’ll skip together. We don’t need to tell Jon either.”
Sansa rolled her eyes and ruffled Rickon’s hair as he tried to swat her hand away, “I’ve already told you, you don’t need to lie to him about this stuff, and we aren’t skipping.”

“Fine.” Rickon sighed, looking back at the school. A few students were starting to show up, even though Sansa had dropped Rickon off an hour early so that she could make it to her first class on time, “If I hate it I’m still calling you. I didn’t want to go to this prissy school in the first place.”

“It’s not prissy, its posh. There is a difference.”

Rickon snorted, “Hardly.”

“And Jon and Robb both went here,” Sansa continued, “Its what Mum and Dad would have wanted. Just give it a chance. If you hate it there’s still time to enroll you somewhere else.”

“Yeah?” Rickon asked, “What if everyone here’s a prick.”

Sansa made a face, “Don’t say that. You haven’t even met them yet. Just give it a day, you might even make some friends.”

Rickon nodded his head, a solemn, pessimistic look on his face. “After school can we go see Bran?”

“Of course.” Sansa told him. She’d already made plans to do just that. While Bran was awake from his coma, he still had a lot of recovery to go before he could live with them in the manor. Jon was having a contractor come in to convert Father’s office on the first floor into a bedroom for him, and Bran still only had partial brain function, something the doctors were optimistic would improve, but needed to be monitored until that point.

Maybe today Rickon would even join Sansa in visiting their mother, though she was doubtful that he’d be up to it after classes. Rickon had stubbornly refused to see Catelyn Stark in the hospital, even when her room was just a floor down from Bran’s in the building. It frustrated Sansa but she wouldn’t push. She understood that Rickon’s relationship with their mother was more complicated than it was for the others.

Rickon relaxed a little at that and finally looked ready to go into the building, “Pick me up at three?” He asked as he took a step forward.
“I’ll be here,” Sansa told him, she quickly grabbed his arm and pulled him into a loose hug before he could get away, “I know you’re going to do great.”

Rickon pushed her away, face slightly flushed, as he looked around to see if any of the other kids were watching, “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Just be here at three.”

Sansa grinned and waved him off. At the top of the steps, before he entered the school, he turned around to give her a little wave, before ducking in through the door. Sansa stayed out in the car park for a little longer before finally getting into the car and driving to her university.

It was lunch when Sansa finally got a break in her schedule. She went over to the university gardens to sit down on a bench with her packed lunch and go over her schedule one last time, making a list of the books she’d need to buy and the homework assignments she already had.

Her first three classes had been overwhelming. Sansa hadn’t attended real schooling in nearly five years, and the homeschooling Baelish had supplied felt wholly unsuitable for what she was learning now. Sansa’s only reprieve was that no one at the university, except a few professors, knew who she was. Sansa didn’t want her classmates to know her as the daughter of the wealthy, assassinated businessman, who was pursuing a lawsuit against the PM’s daughter, or the kidnapped girl, turned murderous that some of the tabloids had covered last winter. Leaving Cardiff had also meant leaving the press that had followed them behind. It meant starting over. Sansa just hoped she was ready for that.

“Shouldn’t you be in class?”

Sansa’s head jerked up suddenly as she looked across the courtyard to see Arya approaching. She felt herself relax, “Jon said you were still in Spain.”

Arya shrugged and went to sit across from Sansa on the bench. She grabbed half of Sansa’s sandwich and took a bite, “I was. I got back this morning.”

“Everything went well?” Sansa kept her tone measured so that it came across as neutral. She couldn’t tell Arya how worried she’d been when she heard Arya had been ordered to go back to the Faceless Men headquarters. They’d all been afraid, except for Arya herself who rarely showed any emotion but contempt.

Arya nodded as she ate, “Good enough. I’ve told them that I’d like to be permanently relocated to York. We’ll see how long that lasts, but I’ve got a place in the city.”
“Jon and I fixed up your room at the manor,” Sansa told her casually, “You don’t need to pay for a flat, you can just stay with us.”

Arya shrugged again, as if that wasn’t something she was ready to consider and Sansa knew she couldn’t force it. Jon had tried to when Arya first said she was considering moving to York, and that ended in a big fight where neither of them spoke to each other for two weeks. Arya needed her space, the Starks would have to learn to respect that.

“What are you studying then?” Arya asked, and it was surprising that she chose to change the subject overtaking a more confrontational route. It was Sansa’s way of knowing that Arya was really trying to be part of the family again.

“I’m not sure.” Sansa told her looking down at her list of books, “I thought maybe journalism, but then with everything that happened last winter, I don’t know if I could bare dealing with another reporter in my life. Maybe psychology, I don’t know.”

“Enjoyed your shrink that much then?”

Sansa wrinkled her nose, sometimes she had to remember that not everything Arya said was meant to be a barb. By the look on Arya’s face it seemed she regretted the comment altogether and so Sansa moved past it.

“Rickon and I were planning to visit Bran after classes.” Sansa offered, “You want to come?”

Arya looked up, taking one last bite of the sandwich, “Sure,” her tone was indifferent, but Sansa knew that Arya had gone to see Bran herself several times before she was ordered back to Spain, “I guess I can swing that.”

Arya met up with Sansa after her last class and together they drove to pick up Rickon from his school.

“I remember this place.” Arya said as the drove up to the car park.

Sansa nodded, “Jon and Robb used to go here. We probably came for football matches and the sort.” Sometimes Sansa wondered if Arya’s memory of the past was even worse than hers.
Arya nodded like that all made sense, and the brief look of uncertainty on her face was replaced with hardened indifference.

“Let’s go get the brat then.”

Rickon was already waiting at the steps of the school when Sansa and Arya walked up. He looked at Sansa and smiled, then saw Arya and it turned into a scowl.

“Who invited her?”

Sansa rolled her eyes and threw her arm around her brother’s shoulder as they walked back to the car. Sansa knew that Rickon and Arya didn’t hate each other as much as they pretended. In fact, Sansa knew that Arya had been just as proud when she heard how well Rickon had done in school last term, even if she teased Rickon for it later on.

“How was class?” Sansa said as they drove to the hospital.

Rickon made a noncommittal sound, “Not complete shit, I guess. I’ll probably go back tomorrow.”

Sansa smiled. It felt like a victory.

At the hospital, Sansa stood by the door talking to a nurse while Rickon sat beside Bran’s bed telling him about the last week and Arya sat on the edge of the windowsill looking on.

“He will talk eventually though,” Sansa asked the nurse for the second time, “With time it will improve?”

Bran had only said one word since waking up and that was ‘summer’. It had been the name of his dog when he was a child, and his favorite season, but short of that it had no meaning for Sansa or the others. It felt just as much of a mystery as Bran’s past with Bloodraven and his cult had been, and the fact that it was the only word Bran ever spoke made everything worse.

“He’s only been out of the coma for three months,” The nurse reminded Sansa, who nodded dutifully, “His recovery has been amazing, you need to remember that. His brain function is almost
Sansa reminded herself what a miracle it all was. It made her wonder if it would have been better to move Bran to the hospital in York sooner—or at least to have moved him over Scottish lines. *Beyond the wall,* echoed in Sansa’s head bitterly. She remembered the note from Jojen Reed she received a week after Bran woke up. In it he thanked her for having moved Bran over the wall, allowing him to wake. Sansa had to remind herself that his waking upon being moved over the border of Hadrian’s Wall had been a mere coincidence.

“Give him his time,” The nurse told Sansa, “He’ll talk eventually. He just has to be ready.”

Sansa nodded and thanked the nurse before going to sit beside Rickon, who was talking about how Jon was considering Rickon getting a dog if he did well in classes again this semester. She smiled at Bran, “The nurse said we’ll be able to take you home soon.”

Bran smiled at this, but it was a shell of his former self, and not a real smile at all. Still, it was better than when he laid on his bed lifeless in the coma, and so Sansa tried not to let it affect her negatively.

“Is Jon coming?” Rickon asked, tilting his head up to look at Sansa.

She shook her head, “Can’t. He’s meeting with Stannis this afternoon.”

Rickon wrinkled his nose, “Sucks for him.”

“Oh shut up, Rickon,” Arya called over from the window, “We all know you’re just upset cause Stannis said he doesn’t want you around his daughter anymore.”

What Arya said was true. Last spring Sansa and Rickon had gone to stay with Stannis for a month to help work on the case against the Lannisters and during that time they had stayed in his house where Rickon met Stannis’ daughter, Shireen.

Shireen had been a nice girl, a little quiet, with a big mottled scar going across one side of her face. Sansa had been afraid Rickon would do something awful, like tease her because of it, but instead Rickon had seen it and told her it was the coolest thing he’d ever saw, and after that, it seemed the two of them started some tenuous friendship, one Stannis didn’t approve of. Rickon spent hours
that spring in the library with Shireen, resolutely denying any sort of crush, and complaining to Sansa about how dusty and gross the library was, all the while refusing to spend the afternoon with Sansa instead. He said that the only reason he bothered hanging out with Shireen was because he knew it pissed Stannis off, but Sansa could see the truth. She saw the way Rickon would watch Shireen at dinner, and how he always rose to her defense when Mrs. Baratheon said something snide to her daughter, he even searched the house’s gardens all night to find Patchface, Shireen’s mangy cat, when Shireen thought she lost it.

Rickon’s face flamed red, “You shut up!” he shouted back, crossing his arms. Arya and him started to bicker and Sansa shook her head. She’d talk to Stannis about having Shireen and Rickon visit during Rickon’s next break. Maybe after they won the court case Stannis wouldn’t be so opposed to the idea.

Bran tapped his hand on the table and they all looked towards him. While the others had been fighting, Bran had gone and scrawled something on the little whiteboard the hospital staff had gotten for him to help him communicate. While Bran’s writing skills hadn’t returned to him, it seemed he’d been well equipped at drawing. Sansa didn’t remember drawing being something Bran had been good at before, but now it seemed like he’d become some sort of artist. It only added to the mystery of what Bran had been doing during his time of being missing.

Bran held up the whiteboard and Sansa spat out a laugh, quickly covering her mouth with her hand. Arya was laughing too when she saw it, pointing a finger at Rickon as she did. The drawing was done quick, more like stick figures than any of Bran’s more complicated work. It was of a boy holding out a bouquet of flowers and a girl with her arms crossed and her back to him. It was clearly meant to be a drawing of Rickon’s unrequited crush to Shireen.

“Hey!” Rickon shouted, snatching the whiteboard and scrubbing off the drawing, “You’re supposed to be on my side, Bran! You’re worse than Arya!” he then turned his attention to Arya all together, “At least I’m not dating a prissy art student!”

Arya’s face went white, before going red, “I’m not dating Gendry!”

“Oh, of course not,” Sansa snorted, moving to pull up a chair beside the bed.

“I’m not!” Arya repeated hotly, “I haven’t seen him in weeks!”

Sansa wanted to roll her eyes. Perhaps Arya hadn’t seen him in weeks, but during the drive from the university to Rickon’s school, Sansa had seen Arya’s phone go off several times, all with texts from Gendry, which she always replied to right away. Perhaps they weren’t dating—Sansa wouldn’t even be surprised to hear that Arya didn’t want to date him at all, but she certainly cared
about him, and that alone was an oddity for Arya, and one that warranted teasing. It was what families did, and as the last remaining Stark children sat in the hospital room, throwing barbs and jokes at each other, Sansa was reminded that they were, in fact, a family.

3. Battles Won

Sansa had just gotten off the phone with Mya when she noticed Jon watching from the other side of the room. She pressed her lips together and turned her back to him, looking back to the passage in her textbook she’d been reading before Mya had called, pretending not to notice that Jon was still watching her.

“Mya invited us to dinner,” Sansa finally said after a long pause.

Mya’s family had moved into the Vale, following Petyr’s permanent hospitalization. It was theirs to watch over until Robin came of age, and until then they controlled it and its income, as well as watching over Robin too. Sansa tried to visit Robin a least every other month, she’d go more often if she could stand it, but whenever she returned to the Vale or saw Robin she was reminded of everything from before, and it left her feeling like a ghost for days after.

“All of us, I mean.” Sansa clarified when Jon didn’t respond, “You, me, Rickon, and Arya. Bran too, but I don’t think we could take him.”

Jon had a complicated expression on his face, crossed between anger and frustrated and indifference. He turned his back to Sansa and went back to whatever casework he was doing on his laptop.

“I’m sure Rickon will go with you. Arya, I think, went to Cardiff for the week.” Jon purposely didn’t mention himself.

Sansa’s shoulders drooped. It had been this way since things with Petyr had been squared away, maybe even before then. While Jon was grateful for the help Mya, Myranda, and Robin played in getting Sansa away from Petyr in the end, he still very much blamed them for everything that happened before, and Sansa’s benevolence towards them only ever made him frustrated.

“I’d like it if you came, Jon.” Sansa told him, turning in her chair to watch the muscles in his back tense as he listened. She knew this was a losing battle, but she couldn’t stop herself from
continuing. “I know you don’t understand it, but they’re my friends. They’re all I had for years.”

It must have come about in some of those court-ordered therapy sessions Sansa went through. She used to think she’d been completely alone during her years in the Vale, but Petyr had really only ever made her think it was that way so that she only ever thought she had him to rely on. In truth, Sansa had friends and allies the entire time, she’d just been too distrustful and afraid to ever reach out to them. Maybe Mya and Myranda should have picked up on what Sansa had been going through, but in the end, Sansa also had the choice during those years to ask for help and she never had. Sansa couldn’t blame them for the past, only be grateful for when she did ask for help, they’d done so unflinchingly. She owed her life to them, and her sanity. Without them, all those years in the Vale would have been so much worse.

“I get that.” Jon pushed his laptop away and turned towards Sansa. They had the full distance of the room between them, and yet Sansa could feel his frustration all the way over in the chair she sat in, “I’m grateful for that, but that doesn’t mean I have to like them, or think that them ignoring the obvious for years—“

“It only seems obvious to you because you knew the truth the entire time.” Sansa said stubbornly, “Remember how long it took you to realize that I wasn’t Alayne?”

Jon flinched, but he was quick to fight back, “Days, it took me days. They had years and they were with you the entire time. You can’t convince me that Baelish was that good of a liar that they never would have suspected.”

“I was that good of a liar.” Sansa pointed to herself, getting out of her chair, “I never told them anything, Jon, and if they ever did suspect something I would have made up some lie to get them to drop it. I’m just as much to blame—“

“You were the victim.” Jon was standing now too, voice echoing in the room. Sansa was glad Rickon had gone with Osha for the day to be with Bran. She didn’t want him to overhear another one of her and Jon’s rows. “You were just a child!”

“So were they!” Sansa shot back, pulling a hand through her hair, “Christ, Jon, we were all just children. You can’t blame them for what Petyr did to me. And I’m not even asking you to like them, I just want you to be there with me. I don’t get why that’s so impossible for you to grasp.”

Jon set his hand on the back of a chair and took a deep breath. She knew that this fight probably would never have happened if it wasn’t for Jon’s current stress in adjusting to his new job. Along with working at the station in York, Jon had started looking into working private security for a politician who was planning on doing some campaign work in the area in the coming months, who had contacted Jon about being the head of security for them. Daenerys Targaryen was running for
PM for the next term, and Jon now had the choice of working for the family who’d once been entangled with the Stark’s long ago. Taking the job would mean the return of media scrutiny for the family, since Jon, raised by Ned Stark, would be working for the daughter of the man who’d run away with Ned’s sister, breaking her engagement with Robert Baratheon, while also working for the granddaughter of one of the worst PM’s in modern British history.

“I’m not having this argument with you right now.” Jon reached to the table and slammed his laptop shut. He tucked it under his arm as he walked across the room to the door.

Sansa huffed, wanting to follow after him, but instead shouted, “God, Jon, do you have to be so bloody stubborn? If anyone deserves to be angry its me—don’t just pretend not to hear me, you bloody—“

Sansa’s voice cut off when she saw Jon turn the corner towards the stairs, disappearing from view. She let out a string of quiet curses under her breath, a habit she blamed Rickon for. She fell back in her chair and violently reopened her textbook and tried to focus on her reading. She re-read the same line three times before shutting the book again and crossing her arms.

She and Jon didn’t fight often, most of the time they were too busy sorting out their family’s problems to get into any real fight, but occasionally, usually when Sansa’s past was brought up, they would get into rather heated arguments. Usually, it was over something non-consequential, like Jon pouring Sansa a glass of wine at dinner, even though she’d told him twice that she never drank wine and him getting frustrated because she wouldn’t explain why that was. Other fights were over bigger issues, like when Sansa decided she wouldn’t continue therapy after the court ordered sessions finished, or when she told Jon she wouldn’t pursue further criminal charges against Petyr. Those topics were stemmed from issues Jon would never be able to understand and Sansa didn’t know how to explain.

She didn’t want to attend therapy sessions when they required her to think about all the awful things from her past and make her remember all the other awful things she tried so hard to forget. She didn’t want to further prosecute Petyr because he was in a permanently vegetative state, unable to ever hurt Sansa or anyone else ever again. Reopening the case would mean the press hearing more about what happened to Sansa, and for the reporters to start dogging them again, and for Jon and Rickon’s names to be in the press, as well as every detail of Sansa’s past that she wanted to keep hidden. She wanted the past to be the past and the future to be the future, and she wanted any trace of Petyr to be far, far away. More than that, she wanted Jon to understand that while she wasn’t willing to talk about Petyr anymore, she still owed Mya and Myranda her friendship, and Sansa couldn’t stop seeing Robin as family, especially knowing that he was their cousin.

In the evening, Rickon returned with Osha from the hospital and Sansa invited Osha to have dinner with them. Maybe Rickon’s case worker could tell how much Sansa was hoping the woman would say no so that Sansa could continue to spend the evening focusing on her anger at Jon, or maybe Osha just had better things to do, either way she declined the offer for dinner and Sansa and Rickon ate take in alone at the kitchen table.
“Where’s Jon and Arya?” Rickon asked over a slice of pizza.

“Arya is at her flat tonight and tomorrow I think she’ll be visiting Gendry, and Jon had to finish some work up at the office.”

Jon had left the manor an hour after their fight, not saying where he was going. Sansa didn’t know where he was, but she didn’t need Rickon knowing that. Rickon hummed skeptically but didn’t push.

Sansa set her piece of pizza down, “Mya invited us over for dinner tomorrow. Want to come with me?”

Rickon made a face, “Do I have to? Robin is such a—“

“He’s your cousin.” Sansa said sternly, interrupting whatever insult was about to be levied against him. Part of Sansa still saw Robin as a little brother and felt the protective urge to defend him.

“He acts like a little kid still. He made me watch cartoons with him last time for like three hours while he colored. Isn’t he supposed to be like my age?”

Sansa waved off the question, “He’s still your cousin. We’ll just go for a few hours, maybe Mya will let you ride the horses this time.”

“Oh gee,” Rickon muttered sarcastically, “Will she really?”

“You don’t have to, but when we see Stannis this summer, I bet Shireen would be impressed if you could keep up with her while riding. I’ve heard she’s pretty good at it.”

Rickon sat up. “We’re going to see Shireen?”

Sansa nodded, hiding her smile as she took another bite of pizza, “The case against the Lannister’s is going to trial in June. Stannis is will want me there to testify and so we’ll be staying with all of them in his flat in London. I mean, if you want. It’ll probably be boring.”
Rickon shook his head, he cleared his throat, trying to look indifferent, as if embarrassed about his outburst before, “I guess I’ll go too. Or whatever.”

This lifted Sansa’s mood just enough to make her forget about being angry at Jon, not enough though, to keep that mood throughout the night.

When they finished dinner and Rickon went up to his room to work on homework, Sansa continued to sit in the lounge, waiting to hear Jon’s car drive up the driveway. She waited until midnight, her textbook on her lap as she tried to read. Eventually, she set the book down and curled up on the sofa, her head tilted back on a pillow as she continued to wait.

She thought about her and Jon’s fight. It wasn’t the worst fight they’d ever had, in fact, it was relatively tame compared to the one where Sansa told Jon she wasn’t going to pursue legal actions against Petyr. That had been the worst fight of them all, and Jon hadn’t spoken to Sansa for two days following it. It was how Jon dealt with his frustration and worked through issues. Sansa didn’t like it, but she wasn’t going to push it either.

Still, even when they had awful fights, Jon always came home at the end of them, and even when he wasn’t speaking to Sansa, he’d still set a kiss on her forehead before retreating to one of the rooms in the manor to be alone.

Sansa must have drifted off to sleep because she didn’t hear Jon’s car drive up, only she awoke when she heard footsteps come into the lounge.

For a moment Sansa thought that it might have been Rickon or Arya coming into the room, but she felt a calloused hand against her cheek, and she knew that it was Jon. Sansa blinked open her eyes and pushed herself up as Jon set a kiss to her cheek.

“Get some sleep in the room,” Jon told her quietly, holding Sansa’s hand to help her stand. Sansa started to get up, a feeling of relief in her chest, before Jon continued, “I’ll take the sofa.”

Sansa’s shoulders drooped and she sat back on the sofa, “It’s fine, Jon. We aren’t fighting, I want you with me.” Sansa held Jon’s hand tight so he couldn’t pull away from her. Sometimes she forgot that Jon needed to be reminded how much she liked him, and how after their fights she wasn’t going to change her mind about that fact. “You don’t have to go with me to Mya’s, I shouldn’t have tried to push you to.”

Jon was shaking his head, but he went down to sit down next to Sansa on the sofa, “You’re doing it again.”

Sansa still felt cloudy from her nap, and didn’t know what Jon meant, “Doing what?”
Jon gave a humorless chuckle, “Tolerating me.”

“Jon,” Sansa sighed, threading their hands together, “I’m so tired, can you just accept my apology so we can go to sleep?”

Jon shook his head, “That’s not—You don’t need to apologize Sansa, I was the one being an arse. You ought to be pissed at me.”

“Well, I more evolved than that.” Sansa rubbed her eyes, feeling that it might be a while before she went back to sleep. “I’m not going to hold a grudge over something stupid. We barely got into a fight, and we’ve both been stressed with work and school, and Bran, and preparing for the trial,” Sansa shook her head, “I’m not going to hold it against you if you aren’t ready to forgive my friends just yet. Honestly, half the time I don’t know if I forgive them.”

Jon looked at Sansa, that confused look back on his face, but more careful this time, like he wasn’t willing to risk another argument, “Why is it you insist on seeing them then?”

Sansa shrugged, tucking her legs up on the sofa and leaning against Jon’s shoulder. She was looking out across the room, towards the window where she could see the hill the graveyard lay over, “Because I know that its not their fault. I know who to blame and its not them; and maybe I’m angry that they didn’t realize things on their own, but when I did tell them they trusted me and they saved me.” Sansa tilted her head up at Jon and saw him watching her face, “You know that I’ve never blamed you either.”

“I could have tried to find you.” Jon insisted, and even a year later Jon still had that guilt hanging around his neck.

“And I could have called the police, or told Mya about Petyr sooner, or ran away years before her proposed. You thought I was dead Jon, and Mya and them thought I was his daughter. I’m the only one of us who doesn’t have an excuse, and if I can forgive myself, then so can you.”

And there was something about saying that out loud that took a weight off Sansa’s shoulders. She hadn’t meant to say it like that or even thought about what she was saying until it was spoken out loud, but when it was, Sansa felt herself return to her therapist’s office. The feeling was brief and then it went away and Sansa relaxed again. She hadn’t realized what a relief it would be to know that personal forgiveness was possible.
“It’s no one’s fault but Petyr,” Sansa said, at last, bringing an arm to wrap around her waist, “If you’re going to blame someone, blame him.”

Jon was quiet, but after a while she felt him nod, his arms coming to wrap around her. Sansa leaned into his touch and relaxed against him.

“I hate fighting with you.” She murmured, closing her eyes. The room was dim and Jon was warm and Sansa really was very tired still. “Especially about this.”

“I’m sorry I keep making you think about it.” Jon’s voice was quiet, as he spoke into her hair, as if there was someone else in the room who he didn’t want to overhear. It made everything feel more intimate and comforting.

Sansa shrugged, lifting the hand Jon had around her waist and kissing his knuckles. She’d like to say that she thought about Petyr even without one of these fights. It seemed every decision Sansa made was informed by that past, following her like a ghost. Some battles could not be won, and maybe forgetting was one of them.

“Not your fault. I’m just glad you came back to me.”

Jon’s lips raised in a gentle smile, as he moved a hand to Sansa’s hip, signaling her to get up, “Come on, let’s get to bed.”

“In a minute,” Sansa told him drowsily, she could feel Jon relaxing too, easing back against the sofa, “Let’s just stay here for a bit.”

And they both must have fallen asleep after that because the next time Sansa opened her eyes, she was blinking back rays from the sun that streamed through the open window in the lounge.

Jon was still well asleep, his chest pressed against Sansa’s back, keeping an arm looped around Sansa’s waist so she didn’t fall off the sofa during sleep. Sansa pushed a strand of red hair from her face, and it tangled in her fingers as she tried to move it away. She held it in front of her in the sunlight, watching the red catch in the soft morning light. Sometimes when Sansa saw it she didn’t recognize herself at first, and she felt like she must be a visitor in someone else’s body, in someone else’s life. Sometimes in the morning, she would awake just like this, pressed against Jon, listening
to him murmur a greeting in her ear and laying kisses to her neck and she would think that she was stuck in a dream, and that when she awoke her hair would be brown, and her name would be Alayne.

She felt Jon shift against her and Sansa let her hair fall from her fingers as she looked out the window to the hill. Above her, the floorboards creaked as Rickon woke up, and Ghosts footsteps padded through the halls of the manor. Further off the front door opened, and Sansa could hear Arya shout from the entry hall that she brought coffee. Sansa took in a breath and felt herself wake. And Sansa knew that while not every battle could be won, the war had been, and that's all that really mattered.

Chapter End Notes

post this--Bran does end up moving in with the starks, he gets his voice back in time for summer, when the court case against the lannister's goes to trial and Bran testifies against Cersei using informatin against her that he learned while with Bloodraven. Bran then goes on to finish his schooling, and reconnect with Jojen and meera, who've undergone therapy, who he still considers friends. Bran starts a relationship with Jojen, much to everyone's displeasure.

Rickon ends up staying in school, getting top marks and while he plans to enroll in the military when he gets older, Jon and sansa convince him to take an intership up with Stannis when he turns eighteen and during it, he and shireen finally start dating. Rickon then goes onto law school, and moves into a flat in the city with shireen, while she pursues a teaching and literature degree.

Arya ends up relocating to Cardiff for a year, while she pays back the favor she owes the Brotherhood, which she accomplishes with Gendry's help. Gendry then urges her to give up the Faceless Men, which she eventually does. Arya moves back to York and stays part time in the manor, while working shady jobs. Another year later, Gendry graduates from art school and moves to York to be with her--Arya eventually starts teaching self defense classes, and does freelance work for the police department in regards to their organized crime units.

Sansa continues to go to school, and gets a degree in psychology and buisness and starts working for the company Ned previously owned. She goes back to therapy six months after the events of this ch, and keeps with it for several years. She and Jon continue to live in the manor until Rickon moves out, and then they get a flat together in outside of London. When Sansa graduates from grad school Jon proposes. Jon continues to work as an officer in York, until Daenarys Targ, gets elected PM, he then starts working for her security team, going back and forth from York to London during Sansa's years in graduate school. He gets permanent spot in Dany's team and Sansa moves to London with him. Jon had been planning on proposing for months, but its when all the Starks get together in London to celebrate Sansa finishing grad school that he asks her to marry him.
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