The Night's Queen

by CommaSplice

Summary

Graduate student Sansa Stark reaches a turning point in her relationship with Margaery Tyrell and crosses the path of Professor Roose Bolton. Intrigued by one another and seemingly ideally suited, their lives become increasingly intertwined. But Sansa is struggling with the remnants of a troubled past and Roose is not what he seems. As he draws her deeper and deeper into his life, she soon begins to wonder if she can ever turn back.
Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.

--Mary Oliver *Thirst*

Notes

This is neither a shippy* nor a fluffy story. If you’re expecting it to be either (or in fact to
be like the majority of my other stories here), you may want to back away right now. While
there are some humorous moments in this, don't let the first few chapters fool you, it's the darkest thing I've ever written for this fandom.

I have tagged this to the best of my ability and I’ve tried to be inclusive because a lot of the things I’ve written here could be triggering. It is in the Sansa/Margaery tag because their relationship is as important, if not more so, than the Sansa/Roose relationship in this story.

Sansa is nearly 26 when this starts. I have messed around quite a bit with character ages. While I have attempted to be as canon compliant with the characters as much as possible, a modern setting would change who these characters are to a certain extent. Ben Bones is pretty much an original character. I liked his name and I needed him to be a certain way. It’s an AU. I get to do stuff like that :)

*When I first started writing this fic and told people about it, I was usually met with at best raised eyebrows or at worst, horror. A lot of people see “ship” as meaning this is a couple that is MEANT TO BE. That when you put characters together in a story that you are advocating that they spend eternity together and have babies and kittens and that you think these people’s relationship is going to be filled with fluff and happiness. I assure you all that I am fully aware that Roose Bolton is a nasty piece of work.

So when I say this is not a "shippy fic," I’m telling you that it doesn’t mean that I am advocating that this pairing is a healthy one or a desirable one. Instead the relationships are explorations of putting these characters together in particular circumstances and that it’s going to be pretty damn dark.

See the end of the work for more notes
Night Gathers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Forty-five Years Ago

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His first memory was of sitting in his mother’s lap. She pointed with her finger to the pictures and then the words underneath and he followed along. Whenever Roose thought of his mother (and as the years passed he did so less and less), he saw her reading.

“Cat,” he pronounced.

“Good boy.” She flicked her nail against another picture and then showed him the letters below.

“Dog.” Roose’s father had many of these. They lived in one of the other buildings on the property. He bred them and sold them. “What is bred, Mama?”

His mother turned the page. “You know what bread is, Roose. You had a sandwich for lunch.”

“Bread is made from dogs?”

She shook her head. “Bread is made out of flour, yeast, water, and salt. We don’t eat dogs. We don’t hurt dogs.”

“Father said—”

“Your father does many things, but he doesn’t eat dogs either. This one?”

Roose looked. “Elephant.”

His mother sounded out the letters for him.

“Ben said Father bred dogs.”

His mother’s face cleared and she smiled. “Oh, so that’s what you meant. Go and bring me the pencil and paper.” She carefully wrote out BREAD and BRED. “The first is what we eat. The second,” she paused. “Your father picks two dogs and brings them together so that they will have puppies that he can sell. That is breeding. Bred is the past tense of to breed.”

Roose had more questions. Some his mother answered easily. Others she hesitated over.

His father came in then. “He’s getting too old to crawl on your lap, Alys.”

“We were reading. Roose wants to know why you breed the dogs the way you do.”

The frown turned into a smile. His father held out his hand. “It’s good you’re taking an interest. I was going to the kennels now. Come along and I will try to explain it.”

“He’s four,” his mother said sharply.

“Four is old enough to begin.”
By the time Sansa came back with the groceries, Margaery was already ensconced on the sofa with
a book on supply-side economics. “How did your exam go?”

Margaery made the thumbs-up sign and kept her head buried.

Knowing that it would be a bad idea to interrupt, Sansa put everything away and started dinner.
Once she had the casserole prepared, she put it in the oven and returned to the living room. She
pulled out a library book and started reading.

“You’re reading for pleasure?”

“Yes.” Sansa usually had a paperback book for bus rides, but lately if it didn’t relate to her degree,
she just didn’t have the time. She’d been so pressed that she hadn’t even knit anything in weeks.
But unlike Margaery, she was done for the Third Semester and she desperately needed something
mindless and fun.

Margaery reached over and took the book out of Sansa’s hands. “Reluctant Mistress?” She flipped
to the back cover. ‘When Wynafred answered the ad for a private secretary, she had no idea what
the job truly required—’”

Sansa grabbed at the paperback, but Margaery was too fast for her.

“‘Wynafred’s exquisitely shaped bosom heaved as Griff brought his mouth down on her neck. ‘Oh,
Griff, we shouldn’t, she moaned. His manhood pressed against her making her wild with desire. He
tore her dress from her should—”’

Sansa was successful this time. She ripped the book out of Margaery’s hands so hard that she
tumbled off the sofa and fell flat on her back.

“Oh my gods, are you okay?”

Sansa started laughing. “I’m fine.”

“If you wanted to read aloud, you could have just said so.”

Sansa stayed where she was on the floor. She leafed through the book. “‘He tore the dress from her
shoulders exposing the creamy white flesh and her rosy nipples—’”

“Wouldn’t she be wearing a bra?” Margaery pointed to the cover. “If her tits are that big, I think
she’d need one.”

“Probably.” Sansa considered. “And I’m not sure how easy it would be to rip a thick woolen dress
unless it was along the seams, but I didn’t borrow this for its realism.”

“Oh, sorry.” Margaery abandoned her economics textbook and leaned over the edge of the sofa
looking down at Sansa. “Do continue.”

“Where was I?” Sansa picked up the book again. “Oh, yeah, Griff is ripping off Wynafred’s best
dress. ‘She writhed in ecstasy at his touch. As he buried his massive hands in her abundant golden
locks, he slid his fingers up her skirt. Wynafred—’”
Margaery frowned. “He has three hands?”

Sansa read back. “Apparently so. Oh.” She glanced up from the book. “If I am interpreting the euphemisms correctly, he has one hell of a cock.”

“Well, as long as he’s got that.”

“Wynafred seems quite happy with it. Although from what I read while I was on the bus, she’s also drawn to the senior partner, Jon, who is offering her marriage.”

Margaery dismissed the senior partner out of hand. “He either has a mad wife in the attic or there’s no chemistry.”

“It’s the wrong kind of a bodice ripper for a crazy wife. Griff’s the one who’s caught in a loveless marriage with an heiress,” Sansa stopped and snickered. She read on, “the exotic and unattainable Arianne.’ He must have attained her at some point because they have a five-year-old son.”

“So no chemistry,” Margaery concluded.

“Yeah, he’s quite well-endowed too, but he must not be very good in the sack because she can’t say no to Griff.” Sansa was enjoying herself. Of late, these moments had been scarce. Their coursework required most of their time and attention. Margaery’s internship had proved quite involved and Sansa’s teaching took more out of her than she had expected. It was going to get worse before it got better, but she pushed that thought away.

“And Arianne?”

Sansa consulted *Reluctant Mistress* again. “Arianne sounds pretty hot actually. She’s got a thing going on with the au pair and oh, she likes Wynafred too. ‘Wynafred looked with dismay at the spreading red wine stain on her best blouse’—this girl has terrible luck with her clothes —‘Arianne’s fingers made quick work of the buttons. The servants would attend to the stain, she promised her husband’s private secretary. Wynafred found it hard to breathe as she stared into the liquid blackness of Arianne’s eyes. An entirely unfamiliar ache began—’”

“What? Don’t stop there.”

“Shit. Griff comes in.”

“I suppose it’s too much to hope for a threesome.”

Sansa shook her head. “Not in this type of story.” She tossed it onto the coffee table. “Ariane will die in a tragic car accident or possibly at the hands of Jon. Wynafred will marry Griff and go to her grave not knowing she could have had really hot sex with his first wife.”

“That seems a shame—and we’ll never know what they could have had either.”

Sansa looked up at Margaery. “We could reinterpret the narrative ourselves.”

“Role play it you mean?” Margaery twisted her lips into a playful expression. “We could.” Then she shook her head. “I still have my exam tomorrow morning.” She sat up. “I need to go back to studying.”

“I shall study the original text so that when you’re free we can do justice to the unexplored dynamic of mistress of the house and feisty employee.”
Margaery reached for her textbook. “How did your meeting with your advisor go?”

“It was good. She thinks I need to take a history class, though.”

Margaery made a sympathetic face.

“It’s my fault. If I hadn’t avoided history during undergrad, I wouldn’t be in this boat, but we went through the catalog and there’s a class on the Age of Heroes that might work and happens to fit with my schedule. Leo is taking it too. I just need to get the professor’s permission.” Sansa picked up the novel.

“You’re going to want to play Arianne, aren’t you?”

“I haven’t decided.” She gave Margaery a deliberately cool look. “Wynafred might have a dark side.”

* * *

Some of Roose Bolton’s colleagues were generous with their time when it came to their students at King’s University. They shared their home and cell phone numbers. They had open door policies. They took appointments. Roose did not follow their example. He held office hours once a week for three hours. As far as he was concerned, this was more than adequate.

He generally allotted five minutes per student. Occasionally it took longer. More often than not, it took less. He knew he had a reputation for being a difficult professor. He didn’t care. One could get away with a great deal when one was internationally renowned.

It was 4:25. Five more minutes and then he would shut his door no matter how long the line. He didn’t look up when he sensed the girl standing in the threshold. He continued to write.

“Dr. Bolton?”

“Come in.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw long legs. She stayed standing. Half of them dared to sit without being invited to do so. “Yes?” He didn’t bother to take his eyes from his papers.

“I would like to take HIS 632.”

“There are still seats available,” he said in a disinterested voice.

“I’m not a history student. I was told I’d need your permission to take the course.”

Now he looked at her. She was in her mid-twenties, he thought. She wore her ginger hair in a long braid down her back. Her blue eyes met his with equanimity. “Are you non-matriculated?”

“I’m a graduate student in the Literature Department.”

Roose didn’t bother to keep his expression neutral. He didn’t have the highest opinion of literary criticism.

“I’m researching some of the northern legends from the Age of Heroes, and I thought it would be helpful to get some historical context.”

This was unexpected. She had the look of a southerner. Most of them knew nothing about the north. “Which legends?”

“I’m specifically interested in the ones from the Nightfort: ‘Brave Danny Flint,’ ‘The Rat Cook,’
‘The Night’s King,’ and—”

“The woman ‘with skin as white as the moon and eyes like blue stars,’” he said with a small smile. Roose had never quite understood the description of the Night’s Queen’s eyes, but looking at the girl’s exceptionally bright, blue ones, he wondered if this creature’s might not come close to them.

“Yes.”

He did not usually go out of his way to accommodate special requests. “Well, Ms—”

“Stark, Sansa Stark.”

Roose set his pen down. “Are you any relation to Eddard Stark?” Even if she wasn’t, clearly she was a northerner after all.

“He’s my father.”

He didn’t recall meeting her. He gestured her to the chair next to his desk. “How is Ned? I haven’t seen him since the last WHA meeting.”

She sat. “He’s fine. I’ll tell him you asked after him the next time I talk to him,” she offered politely.

He registered the marked lack of enthusiasm when she spoke of her father. “I don’t allow students to audit my courses,” he warned.

“I would want to take it for the credits, Dr. Bolton.”

“You don’t presume; I like that.” He waited. “Do you have a form?”

The girl took a folder out of her bag, opened it up, and found the paper.

He took it, glanced over it, and signed it for her. Her handwriting was exceptionally legible.

“Is it possible for me to get a copy of the syllabus?”

“Classes don’t start for two weeks.”

“I like to be prepared.”

Roose was amused. “Do you?” Most students claimed they did. They typically began the semester with the best of intentions and then promptly lapsed into their old habits. “Once you’re registered, you’ll have access to the course management system. Everything is already uploaded. I shall see you at the start of the semester, Ms Stark.”

She stood and thanked him again.

He remembered Ned’s hellions racing around the halls of Stormlands College. He hadn’t met this one. He would have remembered such a courteous young woman.

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Sansa sat in the second bedroom (the one that was ostensibly hers) trying to read ahead for her courses while hiding out from Margaery’s family. She liked Margaery’s mother, she always had, but Olenna Tyrell was another story. In any case, nobody wanted Sansa out there in the living room. She certainly didn’t want to be out there either. Sansa hated this pretense. There were men
and women in space, and yet Margaery still couldn’t, or rather wouldn’t, come out of the closet. Sansa knew it was complicated. She certainly couldn’t fault Margaery for that—her own life was like the fabled Meereenese Knot—but this situation was demoralizing.

After an interminable amount of time, there was the sound of a door closing and she registered quiet. She closed her books and stepped into the living room. “Please tell me they’re gone?”

Olenna Tyrell turned around. “Yes, thank goodness. I don’t know why Margaery made such a fuss. It’s perfectly natural that her mother should want to take her shopping.”

“Mrs. Tyrell.” Sansa’s mouth felt dry. “I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just I left one of my notebooks in here and I didn’t want to disturb—”

The old lady’s smile had entirely too many teeth to it. “Do sit down, child. It’s been so long since you and I had a chat.” She patted the sofa with a withered claw-like hand. Sansa had seen pictures of Margaery’s grandmother as a young woman. She’d once been gorgeous, but the years had not been kind to her; even with her elegant suit and shoes, she looked like the witch she was.

They had never chatted. Mrs. Tyrell interrogated her and Sansa tried to get out of these ordeals unscathed. She seldom did.

“Margaery told us you plan on getting your PhD early.”

“I’m trying to.” The funding package would run out if she went the full seven years. Her advisor thought she was mad to try for anything sooner than six, and even then that she was pushing it, but Sansa thought if she stayed focused she could manage it.

“You were roommates at boarding school, then you followed Margaery to the Westerlands, then you decided to pursue a graduate degree at the same university. It might be better if you started making plans for life without Margaery.”

It was tempting to poke holes in Mrs. Tyrell’s view of events, but she knew it would be a waste of time. “I do have plans.”

“Oh? Might one inquire as to what those are?”

Sansa had never quite understood why Margaery was so close with Mrs. Tyrell. As long as she’d known her, she’d never seen Mrs. Tyrell be anything other than a ruthless bitch. “I’ll be working on my doctorate.”

“Yes, Sansa, child, I mean after Margaery graduates.”

“Mrs. Tyrell, she’s done in a year and a half. I have three to four more years.” She saw the old woman frowning in confusion. “I still have a year left of my coursework. It’ll take me at least one if not two more after that to do all the research for my dissertation and then I’ll have to write it. When Margaery finishes, I’ll move in with another roommate or find an apartment of my own.”

“I see.” Mrs. Tyrell seemed to like this answer quite a bit.

Sansa started to get up, but Mrs. Tyrell shook her head.

“And after you graduate from university, what then?”

“I’ll go wherever I can find a posting,” Sansa said calmly.
Mrs. Tyrell clearly liked what she had heard, but she still wasn’t done with her. “We’re very fond of you, Sansa. The expense of all this schooling can’t be an easy burden for you to bear and I’m sure Margaery must draw away your focus more than you’d like.”

“We’re used to each other,” Sansa told her in a neutral voice.

“Still, Margaery should be concentrating on her future a good deal more than she has been. We’d worry much less if she had fewer distractions. It would be easier on you too. You would be able to direct your attention to your own studies. I know how much you helped her with her studying over the years.” Mrs. Tyrell opened up her green leather handbag and removed a checkbook. “Allow us to pay back—”

“I was happy to do it.” Sansa rose. “As I said earlier, I have a lot of reading to do. I’m sure you’ll be fine on your own.” She grabbed her purse and her book bag and fled the apartment.

She found a coffee house and sat there trying to read and pretending everything was all right until Margaery texted her that it was safe to return home.

“Was she horrible?”

Sansa ran the water in the kitchen sink and splashed her face with it. “She tried to buy me off. I left before she could give me a check.”

Margaery swore. “I wanted to text you, but Mother wouldn’t have it. Sansa, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. My family isn’t exactly ideal either.” Sansa turned off the faucet. “I don’t get what brought this on. I thought you said they were fine with us as long as we ended it by the time you graduated.”

Margaery leaned against the wall. “I told Daddy I wanted to spend a year working in King’s Landing. He must have told Grandmother.” She sighed. “And Loras is making noises about coming out. They’re nervous.”

“You have two other brothers who are straight. It’s who Loras is. Why is it so important that—” she broke off. They’d had this conversation before. “When were you going to tell me about staying here to work?”

“I wanted to make sure I could pull it off.”

Sansa didn’t understand what there was to pull off. Margaery was bright and smart and would probably land whatever she wanted.

“I’ll fix it and I’ll make it up to you.”

It was getting past the point of fixing. Margaery would undoubtedly swear to do whatever Mrs. Tyrell wanted and they’d go a few more months without interference, but then this cycle would begin again. She started to say something when Margaery’s phone went off.

“Shit, it’s Loras. He’s probably just seen Grandmother too.”

“I’m going to lie down. Tell him I said hi.” Sansa went into their bedroom. When she and Margaery had first fallen in love, five or six years together seemed like an eternity. Now Sansa felt like she had blinked and all their precious time had rushed by them. She couldn’t fault Margaery. She’d always been honest with her that happily ever after was never something they could have. Sansa hadn’t believed in happily ever after at the time and she certainly didn’t believe in it now.
She’d come of age in a very different genre, and no matter how much she wished it, she didn’t live in a fairy tale.

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Chapter End Notes

The problem with seasons that last for years is that it makes it very awkward when writing about fall and spring semesters of college. Assume that “First Semester” is the fall term and “Second Semester” is the spring one. And “Third Semester” would be our summer.
Daddy always read to them every night. It was Robb’s turn to pick and he asked for one of his adventure stories. Sansa didn’t really like these, but no matter what her father read, she loved this part of the evening. Mummy was good at it too, but she had her hands full with getting Bran and Rickon to bed. Most often it was their father who told them stories before bedtime. He even did voices for them sometimes.

It was chilly in the house and Arya was hogging the afghan. As Sansa tugged and tried to reclaim more of it, Arya howled in protest.

“Jon, go get the green blanket and share it with your sister,” Dad said. “Sansa, you know better than that; ask next time.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

She and Jon wrapped the dark green afghan around themselves tightly and listened. It always felt crowded at home, but this was the one time when she didn’t mind it. It wasn’t cramped when Daddy gathered them around and read to them; it was cozy.

Mummy came into the living room. She looked tired. Bran had not wanted to go to bed and Rickon had been fussy too. “They’re both finally down for the night.”

“I bet they won’t stay asleep,” Robb grumbled.

“As I recall, you didn’t like going to bed when you were Rickon’s age either,” Daddy told him.

Sansa loved being around Rickon. Sometimes she got to hold him. She liked the way he would look up at her with his twinkling blue eyes. He liked it when she held him too. Sansa knew he did even if Arya said he was only a baby and couldn’t possibly know who she was.

“Bedtime,” her father announced after he finished the chapter.

“But you didn’t finish,” Robb complained.

“Tomorrow night,” he promised.

Sansa and Arya trooped off to their tiny bedroom.

“I wanted to know what happens next.” Arya said sleepily as they crawled under the covers.

“It’s not so long till tomorrow night.” Sansa plumped her pillow. She reached for one of her dolls.

“You don’t understand.”

Sansa didn’t think this was fair. “I do so. Daddy stops in the middle of my stories when it’s my turn too.”
“You pick the same books every time it’s your turn. It’s stupid.”

“It is not.” She liked it when she knew what was going to happen. She yawned. “And I do so pick other books.”

“Even when you pick a different story; it’s always the same.”

Mummy came and tucked them in. She listened as Arya repeated what she’d just said. “That’s because Sansa likes fairy tales and there are certain rules for fairy tales, just like there are rules for your books about Nymeria the Wolf Princess.”

“Rules?” Sansa’s ears pricked up. “What are the rules?”

“Oh,” Mummy said. “Like how all of them begin with ‘once upon a time.’ That’s how you know it’s a fairy tale. Or how a kiss from the handsome prince always frees the beautiful princess from danger. Like that. Now go to sleep.”

“It’s still stupid,” Arya mumbled as her eyelids started to close. “Who wants everything to be the same all the time?”

Sansa thought it felt right when it was, like just now with their mother tucking them in. She had a hard time sleeping when Mummy couldn’t do it or when she forgot. Sansa felt safe when things were the same. She wondered what the rest of the rules were. She would ask Mummy tomorrow. Sansa was always good at following the rules.

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Present Day
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At precisely 4:55, Roose walked into the seminar room. This semester the class size was larger than he preferred. He had the President’s much vaunted initiative to thank for this. The University was bursting at the seams because of an effort to increase student enrollment. Consequently he was forced to deal with more students than he wanted. He calmed himself. It didn’t matter. By then end of this session, he would have the class size at an acceptable level.

Most of the students were chattering away. A few who had taken his courses before were sitting silently, ready with their notepads and writing implements. He noticed Eddard Stark’s daughter was doing the same. He paid them no mind, strolling to the computer station. He unlocked the cabinet, brought up the syllabus and waited.

It was always difficult on the first day of class, but by the time the two hours and twenty minutes was up, they would know his rules.

It was 5:04 before they all quieted down. A straggling student ran into the room. He was a decidedly chubby young man with ill-kempt hair and a scraggly attempt at a beard.

“What is your name?”

“Samwell Tarly. I’m sorry. I was—”

“If you are late again, you lose a letter grade,” he said in a low voice. Roose never bothered to speak too loudly. By the next class, the smart ones would be sitting in the first few rows. He had their undivided attention now. He lowered the lights and went through his syllabus. Three students walked out by the time he finished. Seven to go, he thought with quiet satisfaction. “Are there any questions?”
None had any to which they were willing to admit.

He locked the cabinet and brought up the lights. A few students took this is a sign that he was finished. He let them get two feet before he began his lecture. He knew many professors let the students leave halfway or even a quarter of the way through on the first day; he had too much content to cover.

A few were glancing at each other. “No PowerPoint?” one young man muttered.

Roose never bothered with slides unless he was at a professional association meeting and even then he used them sparingly. It was for them to listen, to take notes, to learn. It was not his job to pander to them.

Someone’s phone rang.

Roose stopped and turned his even gaze on the student. She hurriedly powered it off. Unless he missed his guess, she would leave at the break and not return, sparing him the necessity of him having to look at her multiple piercings and purple hair on a twice-weekly basis. He resumed speaking. After ten minutes, he paused and directed a question about the strategic importance of Moat Cailin to a rail-thin young man in the back.

The student was flustered.

“It was in the reading,” Roose said mildly. “What is your name?”

“Leo Tyrell. I’m sorry, Dr. Bolton, I didn’t realize we were supposed to have done anything ahead of—”

Roose released the boy from his gaze. His eyes swept over the room. He ignored the raised hands. His gaze fell on Eddard Stark’s daughter, who claimed she liked to be prepared; she would do. “Ms Stark?”

She didn’t shrink from his stare. “Well, most obviously, it commanded the causeway that the armies used to travel through the Neck,” she began in a clear, even voice. As she continued, she addressed the question and displayed she grasped the subject matter fully.

Although he was surprised at her preparedness, as well as her knowledge, he was careful not to show it. He directed another question to one of the students who had taken a course with him previously. Like Ms Stark, she had been smart enough to do the reading as she too knew the answer.

Roose continued his lecture, periodically pausing to query the students. By the time they were at the halfway mark, he was confident his class size was down to the acceptable amount. He came to a stopping point. “You have ten minutes. Anyone who is late loses a letter grade.” Roose noted the Tarly boy opted not to leave his seat. Concealing his amusement, Roose strode out of the room.

Eight minutes later, he was making his way back to the classroom. He spied the Stark girl on her phone up ahead.

“No, I think he’s going to go the full time. Can you pick me up then?” she paused. “Why should I mind? He’s a good lecturer. Look, I have to go. I’ll see you at 7:20 or 7:30? All right. Pentoshi sounds fine. Get those dumplings I like?” She turned her phone off and walked ahead apparently unaware of his presence.

The number of students in the class was significantly lower when he began the second half of his
lecture. Again, he quizzed them periodically. He called on Stark’s daughter twice more. Each time she had an acceptable answer or argument. He took them right up until 7:18. “Are there any questions?”

“Do you give extra credit?”

Roose fixed Samwell Tarly in his gaze. “No, I do not.” There, he had his last drop out. When the class assembled next, he would have the number of students he wanted. “It’s the first day. I suppose I can let you leave a little early.” He enjoyed the uneasy expressions on their faces.

The majority of the students fairly ran out of the classroom.

Not Sansa Stark. She capped her pen, deposited it in her purse, neatly folded back the pages in her notebook, found a designated spot in her book bag, arranged the folder in her bag, closed it, and only then did she rise. She thanked him politely and bid him good night.

As he left the building a few minutes later, he saw her sliding into the front seat of a recent model CLS-class silver Mercedes.

The Starks were an old family, as ancient as his own, but like his family, their wealth had long since vanished. The last time Roose had seen Ned Stark in Westeros, the man had been driving a thirteen-year-old station wagon. The Mercedes must belong to one of the girl’s friends or perhaps a boyfriend. Leo Tyrell pushed through the building door and hailed the car.

Roose buttoned his overcoat and casually watched as the Mercedes reversed.

Stark’s daughter unrolled her window

“Can you two give me a ride back to my apartment?”

Roose walked along the sidewalk.

He heard someone, presumably the driver, complaining. “You’re in the opposite direction and we still have to pick up the takeout.”

“Oh, it won’t take that long, Margaery. Hop in.”

The Tyrell boy got into the back seat and the Mercedes took off.

He absorbed this: Margaery Tyrell, daughter of Mace and Alerie Tyrell, heiress to a considerable fortune. Sansa Stark had at least one wealthy friend. He tucked the information away. It was doubtful he would ever need it, but one never knew.

* * *

Sansa perused the shelves of her favorite used bookstore. The front of the store was where they kept the first editions. It smelled of old leather and secret knowledge. The owner sold historic prints and old magazines as well. Sansa enjoyed the place, but it wasn’t the reason she came here. Her favorite part of the place was in the back. Here things were not quite so pretty. The owner kept the cheaper stock in the rear of the store. Sansa first started coming to the back for the inexpensive paperback editions of classic novels, but now she came to hunt for treasure. And there was treasure here: hard-to-find books of literary criticism, pulp fiction novels, collections of strange fairy tales. There were things here she hadn’t even known existed. The books she found probably weren’t worth much monetarily, but they held deep value to her.
She was seated gingerly on a crate running her fingers over the plates of a gorgeous illustration of a
tourney from the days of Mad King Aerys and Prince Rhaegar when she heard a cough.

“Excuse me, may I get by?”

Sansa looked up. “Of course, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize I was blocking the—oh, hello, Dr. Bolton.”

He seemed as surprised as she was. “Hello.”

Sansa rose and moved the crate so he could pass.

“Thank you.”

She didn’t think Dr. Bolton wanted to talk, so she smiled pleasantly, and when he walked past her,
she sat back down with her find. He didn’t move away immediately.

“What’s that you have there?”

“Oh, this? It’s a book of medieval tales.”

“I thought you were interested in the Age of Heroes.”

She caught his note of irritation and was puzzled by it. She was interested in a lot of things. “I am.
It’s the illustrations. They’re amazing. They’re not signed, but they look like Rickard Dayne’s
work.” She stood up again and showed him. She flipped through to another picture. It was of
Florian and Jonquil.

“Very pretty,” he pronounced dismissively.

Sansa found the derision in his voice annoying, but she contented herself with a shrug. “He was
one of the last century’s most famous illustrators. I don’t know how he was able to get so much
detail into his work. He drew to scale.”

“May I?”

She handed him the book.

He closed it and looked at the spine. Then he began examining the contents. Finally he returned
the book to her and gave her a polite nod before moving away to another section in the back.

Sansa turned back to her finds. She shouldn’t take it personally; Roose Bolton was obviously not a
gregarious man. She had been in his class a month now. He was an excellent lecturer. She was
annoyed at first that he didn’t use PowerPoint or Prezi, but if you paid attention, and Sansa did, all
the content was there in his lectures. He was an engaging speaker, or at least she found him so. She
took care to do the reading ahead of time. The classmates who didn’t typically regarded his class as
a trip to one of the seven hells. He always seemed to know just who wasn’t prepared. Dr. Bolton
typically called on her at least once or twice per class, but only after several others were found
wanting.

She was a little nervous about the paper she’d handed in. She put her customary effort into the
writing of it, but according to some of the students who had taken his courses before, a B+ was a
very generous grade from him. She had a 4.0 and she wanted to keep it.

Her phone vibrated. It was Margaery demanding to know where she was. Sansa texted back,
collected her purchases, and paid for them before making her way to the café where Margaery was
meeting her. She was very pleased about her acquisitions.

* * *

Through the window, Margaery could see Sansa walking toward the café where she’d been patiently waiting. If Margaery let her, Sansa would spend every hour of the weekend in their apartment hunched over the dining room table with her books and her papers. It took most of Margaery’s wiles to get Sansa agree to leave the apartment and even then it usually meant going to places like this café where Sansa would insist on working. Aside from being tortured by the rapturous smell of freshly-baked but surely fattening cinnamon rolls, this particular establishment wasn’t so bad. Besides if it was getting Sansa out of the apartment and into the real world, it was worth it.

She wasn’t sure when Sansa had become this driven. When they met in boarding school, Sansa was studious, but she had enjoyed doing things unrelated to academics. She’d become more of a workaholic with each passing year. Certainly lately, it was a pitched battle to get her to do anything fun.

Margaery sipped her caramel macchiato. Sansa used to like those too. Now she drank her coffee black. Milk and flavorings just took up space in the cup best filled entirely by coffee, she said. Margaery didn’t mind what Sansa drank as long as she drank it with her. She had Sansa’s cup ready and waiting.

Sansa dumped her stuff on the banquette.

“We’ll have to get breakfast if we want to keep this booth. I bet it gets crowded in here,” Margaery told her, holding out a twenty.

“My turn.” Sansa ignored the money in Margaery’s hand. “Be right back.” She placed their order, returned with a smile, and slipped into the booth.

“What did you buy?”

“Eggs and toast. I thought that’s what you wanted?” Sansa removed her laptop from its case.

“No, I meant at the bookstore.” Margaery didn’t wait for a response. She opened the paper bag and inspected the titles. She pulled out a dark blue book with a spine decorated with an intricate design in gilt. “Oh, this is beautiful.” It was. Most of the literature Sansa read for her degree was grim. The legends she was researching were horrific to Margaery. These, though, were lovely.

“Isn’t it? Look at this one.” Sansa flipped to the illustration of Prince Rhaegar crowning the Queen of Love and Beauty. They looked through several more of the color plates.

“I like this.” Margaery pointed to the image of a gorgeous woman with vivid blue eyes and pale skin extending a hand to a handsome man clad all in black.

“That’s the Night’s Queen.”

Margaery brushed one of her brown curls away from her face as she tried to remember which legend she came from.

Sansa explained. “The thirteenth Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch spied a beautiful woman on top of the Wall. He fell in love with her and—”

Now she recalled. “And they turned into serial killers.” They were all such awful stories. If it
hadn’t been for the effect they seemed to have on Sansa, Margaery wouldn’t mind so much.

Sansa shrugged. She took the book back and put it away.

Margaery noticed a middle-aged man in line at the counter looking at Sansa. She thought he was in his late forties. His dark hair was receding, but he wasn’t unattractive. “I wonder what it would have been like to live back then,” Margaery commented. She opened the book of literary criticism and immediately closed it.

Sansa shrugged. “We’d both have about eight kids by the husbands our parents made us marry. Or we would have been raped or killed by invading forces during the War of the Five Kings. Or we would have been eaten by the ice zombies. Or possibly all three.”

“You’re no fun.”

“What? Ice zombies are no fun?” Sansa put everything carefully back and folded the top of the bag over.

Margaery laughed. “Sometimes I wish I was studying something more interesting than business. It’s hard to find romance in finance.”

“Order for Sansa,” a bored-sounding barista called.

“Be right back.”

Margaery watched as the man gave his money to the cashier. The man continued to stare at Sansa as she picked up their breakfasts, utensils and napkins. “You have an admirer,” Margaery told her when she returned.

“What?”

“You have an admirer,” Margaery explained. “He was looking at you earlier and when you went to get the food, he followed you with his eyes.”

Sansa casually glanced over. “Oh.” She reached for the salt and pepper. “That’s Dr. Bolton. I ran into him in the bookstore.”

“Who?”

“The man at the counter,” Margaery explained. “He was looking at you earlier and when you went to get the food, he followed you with his eyes.”

Sansa casually glanced over. “Oh.” She reached for the salt and pepper. “That’s Dr. Bolton. I ran into him in the bookstore.”

“He doesn’t look like he eats students alive.” Margaery relaxed. There were professors who disliked interacting with their students. He selected a booth of his own on the opposite side of the coffee house. He was facing them, but he removed a stack of folders and a pen. He was there to work too. “Leo swears he lives to torture him.” Now, he was staring at Sansa again.

Sansa laughed. “He is kind of formidable when he’s teaching.”

“Should I be worried?”

“About Dr. Bolton?” Sansa was startled.

“Leo said he likes you,” Margaery remarked suddenly. She tried to remember his exact words.

_When he calls on me, it’s as if every cogent thought leaves my head. He just stands there with this weird half smile on his face. He’s not sarcastic. He just, oh, I can’t explain it. It’s like we’re there to amuse him. He does it to most of us. He used to try and trip Sansa up, but she always says the right things. She’ll even argue points with him sometimes. You can see him sort of straightening up—not that he slouches—when she talks. I wish he’d call on her more often. He likes her._
Sansa made a face. “Leo is never prepared. He never does the reading. I do.”

Margaery sipped her macchiato as she considered this.

Very casually, Sansa slipped off one of her ballet flats and rubbed Margaery’s calf with her foot. “I’m not leaving you for anyone.”

“How am I supposed to concentrate on microeconomics with you doing that?” But Margaery calmed down. Sansa was hers. Some middle-aged bald guy was not going to take her away.

Sansa looked innocently at Margaery. She slid her foot up a bit higher.

“Oh my gods, stop that.”

Sansa put her shoe back on. “No one’s looking.” She turned back to her breakfast and set her fork down. “I forgot the hot sauce.”

“I’ll get it.” Margaery deliberately walked to the station nearer Dr. Bolton. He didn’t look up as she passed by. His clothes were decent for a professor and she noted the handsome leather satchel next to him. He wore no wedding ring.

Sansa meticulously buttered her toast. Then she wiped her fingers on her napkin and turned on her laptop.

Margaery told herself she had her own work to do. It was better if they did their studying together. She set the condiment in front of Sansa and took out her assignments.

They sipped and ate as they worked on their respective papers.

Margaery glanced at the clock on her laptop. They’d been there two hours. Sansa was biting her lip. Gods, she was beautiful. She’d only gotten prettier since they’d met and she was all hers. Margaery wondered if she could persuade her to go to the apartment and go back to bed. “Ten more minutes?”

“Fifteen.” Sansa clearly knew what she was thinking.

“You’re killing me.”

“Waiting is good for you,” Sansa informed her with a smirk. She returned her attention to her writing.

Margaery knew Sansa enjoyed teasing her. She liked to make her wait. Sometimes she liked to make Margaery beg. The minutes ticked by.

“We can leave now.” Sansa checked her watch. “See, it was only seven minutes.”

Margaery groaned.

They packed up their belongings and bused their tables.

She saw Dr. Bolton and Sansa exchange polite nods. Why was she so worried? Maybe he did fancy Sansa. It didn’t matter.

“You owe me,” Sansa informed Margaery as they left the coffeehouse.

“For what?”
“Those eight minutes. Don’t worry, I have some ideas how you can pay me back.” Sansa smiled mischievously.

“You’re evil, you know that, right?”

Sansa’s eyes danced mischievously.

No, Margaery thought. It was not Sansa who was hers; it was she who was Sansa’s.

* * *

Roose watched as Sansa Stark and her girlfriend, presumably Margaery Tyrell, left the coffeehouse. He was glad they were leaving. He came here precisely because it was not a student hangout. It had been irksome enough to run into the Stark girl in the bookstore although a casual query of the clerk revealed that she was a regular so he supposed it was to be expected.

Now that she was gone, he turned to her paper and scanned it. Her work was without any grammatical errors. She cited everything correctly and she wrote well. And most importantly, unlike half the students in his class, she showed signs of being an original thinker. He wasn’t fond of Eddard Stark and it would have given him pleasure to give the girl a poor grade, but her work didn’t warrant it. He gave it an A-.

As surprised as he had been to see Sansa Stark in here, he had been more startled when he had seen her running her foot up the Tyrell girl’s leg. The behavior was at odds with his assessment of her character. In his class, she was careful, methodical, and calm.

Roose gave himself a little shake. He had other things to do besides questioning a student’s uncharacteristic behaviors. He returned to his grading. Although he had more enjoyable tasks before him, Roose preferred to get the necessary ones out of the way first. He turned his attention toward the papers and quickly read through them. When he was done, he meticulously stowed everything in his satchel and left.

When he returned home, Roose settled in at his kitchen table and opened the bag containing his bookstore purchases. He would have preferred a less cloak and dagger method of communicating with his most recent client, but it was what the client demanded. He carefully unwrapped the book and ran his fingers along the edges until he found what he wanted. Using a knife, he slit the pages that were glued together. The name and photo of the target were unfamiliar to Roose. Not that it would have mattered. He had disposed of people known to him before. As long as their deaths wouldn’t lead to questions, he didn’t care.

Half the money had already been deposited in his numbered bank account in Braavos. There was a timer on this job. He would receive a substantial bonus if he completed it within the next two weeks. Roose thought he could do it in one.

The next book contained a two-page report about the target. Roose read it thoroughly. This would be a fairly straightforward assignment. The target lived alone, engaged in high risk behaviors, and was apparently quite careless. The client wanted the target dispatched quickly, neatly, and without fuss. It would be simple enough to accomplish. Roose hoped his next client wouldn’t care how the task was done. It had been all too long since he’d be able to enjoy his work as thoroughly as he wanted.

* * *
Chapter End Notes

Everything about Moat Cailin comes straight from the ASoIaF wiki.

Thanks to tafkar for taking the time out of her busy schedule to beta for me.
When Roose was eight, he contracted the flu. He was in school when it hit him. The nurse called his mother, who sent Harlon Bones to pick him up. His mother had no car and his father didn’t let her go places without him.

By the time Harlon helped him into the house, Roose ached all over and he had been sick two times.

His mother was reading. She looked up when they came in, but she made no move to close her book.

Roose wasn’t surprised. She didn’t like to be around him anymore.

“Should I take him upstairs, Mrs. Bolton?”

“Yes. I’ll be up in a minute.”

Harlon got him to the bathroom in time for Roose to be sick once more. “I’ll get your mother,” the old man told him.

Roose was vomiting for the fifth time when she finally came in. “I think I’m dying.” The stuff in the toilet bowl was colorless. “I don’t want to die, Mama.”

His mother rubbed his back. “You’re not dying, Roose. You’re just ill.” She stripped his stained clothes off of him after, and got him into his pajamas. She brought him ginger ale and crackers. “No, let it go flat first. It’ll be easier on your stomach.”

He had strange nightmares. Roose didn’t usually dream, but now he thrashed about violently in the bed. He woke up soaking wet, but his mother didn’t leave him, not once.

On the third day, his father said he should go to the doctor.

His father had a small list of places Roose’s mother could go without him. The doctor’s was one of these. They drove in Harlon’s truck. Roose felt very weak, but he wasn’t vomiting anymore and he looked with interest at the anatomical models in the doctor’s office.

“It’s the flu,” the doctor told his mother. “You’re doing everything exactly right, Mrs. Bolton. He needs rest and fluids.”

His mother wanted to speak with the doctor so the pretty nurse helped Roose on with his clothes and gave him a lollipop. He was too old for things like this, but he remembered what his parents told him about manners and he thanked her.

When he was back in his bedroom, he wanted to know what his mother had asked the doctor. Roose didn’t like it when people talked about him behind his back. The teachers did that at school
sometimes.

“I wanted him to write a note for you to stay out of school for the rest of the week,” she explained as she plumped his pillows. “And I had questions about the prescription he wrote you for your ear.”

“Why couldn’t I be there?”

His mother sighed. “Your father doesn’t want you coddled. The note was for him as much as the school. I want you to get better.”

“Why?” Roose understood why she wanted a note for his father. His father didn’t want him to be weak. He was a Bolton. Boltons were strong. He wondered, though, why she wanted him to recover. His mother didn’t like to spend time with him.

She stood up and went to the window. “Because you’re my son and I love you. May the gods help me, but I love you. Mothers can’t help loving their children.”

Roose thought about this.

“Is the light too much for you?” she asked.

“No. Will you read to me, Mama? I won’t tell Father.” Roose twisted himself so he could pick out something from the bookcase next to the bed for her to read. He liked books about real things. He’d read nearly everything he had already, but there was a book his aunt had given him for his name day. He hadn’t touched it yet. “This?”

She examined it. *Legends from the Nightfort. These are stories, Roose. You had the book about the Doom. Would you prefer me to get it from downstairs?”*

If she left him, she might not come back. Roose moved over so she could sit next to him. He loved her to read to him; she had such a clear, even voice and she did it so seldom now.

He found he liked these stories. “It’s too bad the Nightfort isn’t real,” he said after his mother finished a tale about the Rat Cook.

“It was real.”

Roose frowned. “People can’t turn into rats.”

She muttered something about it happening more often than he knew.

“Father said—”

“Wait here.”

He pulled the quilt up higher. The flu had spread to his chest and he had a cold. The house was freezing. Father didn’t like the thermostat set high during the day. Fuel was too expensive, he said.

His mother returned finally with a big flat book. It was one of the ones she owned. She called it an atlas. “It’s a book of maps.” She paged through it until she found a map of the north. “There.”

Roose saw the word “Nightfort” as clear as day.

“It dates back to the Age of Heroes. It was one of the outposts for the Night’s Watch.”

“Is that where Ben is?” Roose remembered Ben. He would come back when his tour of duty was
finished, Roose’s father said. Ben Bones was his. Everything in the Dreadfort was his father’s.

His mother shrugged. “The Wall is hundreds of miles long. The Nightfort is a ruin today, but it was once a real place.”

“But Father said magic and curses don’t exist.”

Very carefully she explained how legends grew from little bits of fact. Then almost to herself, she said that you didn’t need magic to curse somebody. “I need to phone your father. He’ll want to know how the doctor’s visit went.” She removed an extra blanket from his closet and spread it on the bed and tucked him in. “Try and nap.”

“Will you read to me again?”

“After lunch,” she promised.

Later, after he managed a small bowl of chicken broth, his mother read him another story. This was called “The Night’s King.” Despite his nap, Roose was tired, but he listened avidly as she told him about the thirteenth Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch.

“One night the Lord Commander spied a beautiful woman atop the Wall. She had skin as white as the moon and eyes like blue stars. He fell in love with her. When he gave her his seed,”” his mother paused, but hurriedly went on, “he gave her his soul as well.”

“Was he a farmer?”

“No.” She frowned.

“But he gave her his seed.”

She shook her head. “This is too grown up for you, Roose. You can barely keep your eyes open. I want you to sleep now.”

For the rest of the week, she read him most of the book, but she skipped over this particular story. When he was well enough, he read the story of “The Night’s King” for himself.

* * *

Present Day

* * *

Sansa tried not to appear as bored as she felt. Margaery liked going to clubs so here she was with her. Their ostensible escorts weren’t aware they were beards; Sansa had already had to move her date’s hands off her bum twice now. He was handsome enough and according to Margaery, he was a rising young executive, but he wasn’t the sharpest man she’d ever met.

“Another drink, babe?”

“Sansa, call me Sansa.” She was going to have to put her foot down with Margaery. If Margaery wanted to keep their relationship quiet, that was one thing. But either they got better escorts or they stayed home. She hated these “dates.” She hated the smoke and the noise and the tedium. “All right, same thing, please,” she told the bartender. The same thing was a club soda with lime in a rocks glass. “Oh, turn around, Willem. You have something on the back of your jacket.”

Her date obeyed and Sansa picked off an imaginary piece of lint off. The bartender winked at her. He would charge Willem for a vodka tonic and Sansa would get her club soda with lime. She
disliked the deceit, but Willem was the type to give her grief for not drinking.

“Did you get it?”

Sansa rolled her eyes and then noticed Dr. Bolton sitting in a booth on the other side of the club with a brunette woman in her late thirties; she was attractive in a faded kind of way. Sansa didn’t know why she was surprised. This was a bar that targeted professionals in their thirties and forties. He was probably closer to fifty, but he wasn’t the oldest man here, not by a long shot. “Oh, yes. You’re fine now. So tell me about your job.”

Willem obliged and she feigned interest. He went into detail about the travails about being an unappreciated stockbroker at a prominent firm.

“Drinks for everyone!”

Sansa turned in the direction of the voice.

A long-haired blond man in black leather was drunkenly weaving his way through the club. He threw down a thick wad of cash onto the bar. He leered at her. “Aren’t you a pretty little thing? I love redheads. They’re always so spirited.”

She stepped aside as he lurched toward her and made no effort to hide the disgust on her face as he stumbled into the bar. There was a limit of what she was willing to endure. Margaery was dancing with her own date, who like Willem, was decidedly handsy. Sansa caught her eye. “Excuse me,” she murmured to Willem. She headed for the ladies’ room. Two clubs and three hours was more than enough.

Sansa inspected herself in the mirror and did minor makeup repairs while she waited impatiently for Margaery. After ten minutes, she returned to the bar. There was no sign of Margaery and her date. Willem was chatting up a girl with black hair cut in an angled bob. “Where are they?” At least the drunken fool who liked spirited redheads was nowhere in sight.

“Oh, there you are, babe. They said something about going to the dance club downtown. This is—what’s your name, honey?”

She checked her phone. Sure enough there was a text from Margaery with the name of the club. “Take me home, please.”

“We’re just having a drink here, babe. Let me get you another.” He signaled to the bartender.

“No, thank you.”

“Come on, be a sport.” He leaned into her ear and whispered, “Have you ever had a threesome?”

The smell of alcohol on his breath was strong. It would take him hours before he sobered up. The best thing to do, Sansa decided sourly, was to duck out of here and make her own way home. She had enough for cab fare. “Okay,” she told him giving him a brilliant smile. “Get me another then. A double.”

Willem leered at her and then returned to the bar to order her drink.

“Be right back,” she lied. While his attention was diverted, she headed to the ladies’ room again. There was a back entrance there. She had pepper spray in her purse. She fished it out now and pushed open the door. She picked her way around the garbage and walked purposefully to the street. Winter was coming and the accompanying cold diminished the smells of the trash. She
hailed a cab and got in.

There were going to need to be some changes at home, she reflected as she texted Margaery.

* * *

Roose waited in the shadows until the Stark girl turned out of the alley onto the street. His target was squirming and struggling, but Roose maintained his grip and his hand around the man’s mouth. The target wasn’t particularly strong and Roose was able to quite easily dispatch him with the blackjack. The man fell down with a satisfying thud. After feeling for a pulse, Roose removed the man’s wallet, watch, and rings. He ripped off the gold medallion off his neck. The items disappeared into his pockets. Then he dragged the corpse into the shadows. It would be preferable if the body was not found tonight. He stepped back into the club and into the men’s room. It was mercifully empty. He removed his gloves and made a quick inspection of his person. Aside from a few strands of the man’s platinum blond hair that he picked off and flushed, nothing looked amiss. He had been longer than he would have liked, but it couldn’t be helped. On his way back, he stopped at the bar.

The bartender nodded. “Same as before?”

“Please.” Roose caught his date’s eye and smiled. She relaxed.

The bartender handed him a pre-prepared club soda.

Roose cocked an eyebrow.

“The girl it was for did a vanishing act on the loser over by the jukebox. I don’t blame her. A woman like that could have any man here. I can make you another, but it’s minutes old.” He poured a glass of red wine.

Roose glanced at the man in question. “No, it’s fine.” The Stark girl’s date was pawing at a petite woman with jet black hair.

“It’s paid for, so it’ll be $7 for the wine.”

Roose gave him $10 and returned to his alibi. She was pretty enough, he supposed, and he would enjoy having her later, but her conversation was limited. “Sorry about the wait, Jeyne.”

“What wait?” She took her wine and asked him a question about his job as a professor.

He answered her easily. He turned the discussion back on her. He preferred it this way. She prattled on about her job as a mortgage banker and her ex-husband. He made appropriate remarks at the appropriate places. After she finished her wine, she gave him a suggestive look. Good, he thought. “Shall we?”

She was more than amenable.

He drove her home. No one seemed to have found the target. He thought it likely the body would stay undiscovered until at least morning.

Her apartment was unremarkable, but then so was she.

He declined the drink she offered him and instead took her. She was willing and he passed a pleasant enough few hours with her. He had dated her twice before. He would go out with her once or twice more and then he would allow the relationship to fizzle. She had fulfilled her purpose even
before he’d had her, but one never knew how people would respond to rejection. Should he somehow be tied back to the club, he didn’t need a scorned woman telling a police officer how long he had left her waiting.

Once he was back in his car, he used the disposable phone he had purchased to contact the client. By the time he reached his home, he had divested himself of the target’s belongings. The money he kept, but the wallet and the jewelry he’d disposed of in several trash bins around the city, and by morning would be in various landfills. His weapon he carefully cleaned and put in its designated hiding place.

He showered and retired to bed with a book. This was the third time he had seen Sansa Stark unexpectedly. Fortunately, he didn’t think she’d spotted him. Roose had never been particularly partial to redheads, but there was no question Sansa Stark was a stunning young woman. She looked very different with her ginger hair worn straight down her back and clad in a short black dress that showed her legs to advantage.

He wondered what she and the Tyrell girl were playing at. From their behavior at the coffee house, he assumed they were a couple. Why then were they out with two men and why had the Tyrell girl left the Stark creature on her own with that drunken lout? Although, he reflected, Sansa Stark proved herself more than equal to her date. He had little doubt that she would prove more than equal to most men.

* * *

“You’re being overdramatic. I looked for you and I couldn’t find you,” Margaery protested, trying to ignore her hangover.

Sansa was glacial. “You just left me there with that disgusting drunk. You left me there and then you didn’t get home until 3:00.”

“I texted you!”

“Do you have any idea how much work I could have done if I’d just stayed home?”

Margaery slammed her coffee mug down. “So that’s really what’s upsetting you. Isn’t it? It’s not about me not coming home early or about my going on to another club. It’s about your stupid homework.”

“Don’t change the subject. It’s always the same. You drag me out and set me up with one of the original First Men so that you can go dancing and get drunk. You leave me on my own and you waltz on back here whenever you feel like it.”

“You spend every minute poring over those stupid books. You don’t care about me. You just want your precious As.”

Sansa grew icier by the second. “I’ve told you and told you. The more I do now, the faster I’ll get my degree. You refuse to understand that this is how it has to be for me. I need to do well. This is going to be my career.”

Not this again. Sansa never said anything directly, but the inference was clear. Her degree meant more than Margaery’s. She was doing serious work. Margaery was just getting a degree to get a more prestigious job. Margaery knew this was a specious argument. She worked just as hard as Sansa. “Right, and your fucking fairy tales are so important.”

Sansa didn’t reply. She shoved her papers into her bag, closed the laptop, and zipped it in its case.
“Where are you going?”

“The library.”

Margaery thought Sansa might as well be paying rent to the university library, she was there that much. She was working too hard, but to suggest this would be disastrous. She swallowed her anger. “Sansa, look, I didn’t mean it. How are you going to get there? The buses don’t run regularly on the weekends. Sansa, please, I’m sorry.”

Sansa walked out of the apartment.

Margaery tried calling after her, but Sansa kept walking. She watched from the window as Sansa hailed a cab. Sansa didn’t spend money recklessly. If she was willing to pay for a taxi, she was furious.

* * *

Roose watched as the graduate students and junior faculty descended on the tables of appetizers as if they were famine victims. The more senior faculty clutched small plastic glasses of cheap wine. He hung back. A few of the student presenters tried to talk to him, but he adopted a half smile and a neutral expression and they ceased.

One of his colleagues approached him and they engaged in shop talk. The man was a pompous fool, but he was rising up the academic ranks and it did not pay to antagonize such people.

“I’m getting a refill. Do you want anything?”

Roose shook his head and declined. He never drank. If he did, he certainly would not be availing himself of boxed wine.

He took his seat in the back just before the program began. For once, the coordinators had done a credible job of procuring interesting speakers. He knew two of them, solid scholars both. The other was from a different department. Of the graduate students, he knew two. One worked under him and was his reason for being here. The other was Sansa Stark.

His graduate student performed well enough. He wasn’t a brilliant student and he would never be more than a competent scholar, but he did a respectable job. Roose knew he made the boy nervous. Most of Roose’s students were usually anxious around him. He preferred it that way.

The Stark girl was the second-to-last speaker. It was an unfortunate spot. She followed a particularly engaging presenter. The audience was growing restive and Roose could see more than one eye caught by the caterers bringing out desserts and coffee.

Roose thought she presented rather well. And to his surprise, he found her thesis was interesting. As a northerner, he was familiar with the Nightfort legends. The Stark girl focused on three of the tales and pointed to common thematic elements. She had slides, but made sparing use of them. They were placeholders rather than dumping grounds for excessive text. She was practiced rather than over rehearsed. She kept their attention and held it. It also no doubt helped that she was a remarkably beautiful young woman, he thought cynically. She finished with a minute to spare and received a respectable round of applause.

He watched as she fielded questions. A Dornish man asked about “The Rat Cook” which wasn’t one of the legends she had mentioned.

“The version with which you are probably most familiar is heavily sanitized,” Sansa explained.
She related the essence of the original story and then highlighted the points successively made less gruesome with each new version. Then she brought it back to her thesis.

Roose noticed the Tyrell girl in the audience. He thought she seemed slightly bored. Whenever Sansa glanced at her, though, the Tyrell girl smiled encouragingly.

Someone wanted to know about the images on her slides.

“It’s funny you should ask about them. They illustrate the point I was just making.” Sansa brought up the first. It was a medieval woodcut. “This is from the first known printed collection of the Nightfort legends. This is the Night’s Queen with her consort. She looks distinctly inhuman. Around them you can see some of their atrocities.” Sansa advanced to the next slide. “This dates a hundred years later. While she still resembles an Other, you can see the artist, who is unknown, has made her and the Night’s King more attractive. Although this version of the story references their crimes, they’re not illustrated at all.”

The moderator held up a hand.

“Do I have time for one more slide?”

The moderator nodded and Sansa advanced a few more.

Roose hadn’t paid much attention to it during her presentation, but he did so now.

“I found this in an edition from the last century. I’ve confirmed the illustrator was Rickard Dayne.”

He leaned forward. She’d taken this from the book she’d found in the secondhand shop. It was the one he’d dismissed out of hand.

“You can see how romanticized both figures have become. The version of the story in this particular edition is no longer about the atrocities or the betrayal of mankind. It’s become a love story and the Night’s Queen now resembles a pretty storybook princess.”

Roose thought she rather resembled Sansa Stark.

* * *

Margaery sat politely through the last speaker. She was only here for Sansa. She could tell Sansa had done well. Most of the audience had leaned forward as she talked. This last person was not very good. He droned on and on.

She looked over at Dr. Bolton casually. His attention was directed toward the podium. Every time she checked, he was the picture of an interested academic.

The torment finally ended. She stayed in her seat. The majority of the audience clustered around the food, but quite a few gathered around the speakers.

Margaery noted the five people waiting to talk to Sansa and repressed a groan. They were never going to get home. She stood up and positioned herself toward the back of the room. It was quieter here.

Dr. Bolton appeared to have the same idea. He glanced at her and stood about a yard away.

Sansa finally disengaged herself. “How was I?”

“You were fabulous and you know it.” Margaery started to suggest they could leave when one of
Sansa’s literature professors signaled to her to join him. She sighed as Sansa went back.

“Fifteen minutes,” a male voice said in her ear.

Margaery turned around. Dr. Bolton was standing next to her. “I’m sorry?”

“It will be fifteen more minutes before this will break up. That’s what you’re wondering, isn’t it?” He offered her his hand. His voice was deep, sexy even. “I’m Roose Bolton.”

She took it. He had a firm handshake, but his fingers were icy cold. “Margaery Tyrell. Sansa and my cousin Leo have told me about your class.”

He smiled politely. “How do you know Ms Stark?”

“She’s my roommate. How can you tell it will be fifteen minutes?”

“It’s past nine. The food won’t hold out more than ten minutes. I give them five or so minutes more to eat it. They’ll vanish then.” He cast an eye on the table with the urns of coffee and white Styrofoam cups. “It might go as long as twenty, but I doubt it. I’ve been to enough of these things.”

She noted he was neither eating nor drinking. “Are you waiting to talk to Sansa too?”

Dr. Bolton turned and looked at her. “No.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I assumed you—”

“My graduate student was one of the speakers.” He nodded toward the young man with an ill-advised goatee and an unfortunate and ill-fitting jacket.

“He was very interesting,” she told him politely.

Again he gave her his full attention. “This must be torture for you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You’re not an academic.”

“I’m a graduate student.”

He regarded her with his pale eyes. “What are you studying, Ms Tyrell?”

“Business administration,” Margaery told him a tad defensively.

“As I said, you’re not an academic.” He smiled slightly. “It’s not a criticism. You’re pursuing a professional degree. I doubt you care very much about,” he consulted the program, “the impact of the reformulation of the Faith Militant or my student’s thesis on Bran the Builder, or even your friend’s exploration of the Nightfort legends. I have a hard time caring about much of it myself.”

Margaery realized the more this man spoke, the less she liked him. He said nothing wrong, but there was something very off about him. “I came to support Sansa.” She set Sansa’s purse on the table next to her. “You must want to speak to your graduate student. Don’t let me keep you.”

He shook his head. “He is enjoying his moment in the sun. He won’t have many of them. I prefer to wait.”

“I take it he wasn’t very good?”
Dr. Bolton wasn’t looking at her anymore. “He did well enough tonight. He studies very hard. He knows his facts. He will get his PhD and find a position somewhere. He’ll write some very dull books and he will get tenure, but he will never be much more than competent.”

“What did you think about Sansa’s presentation?”

“My field is history, not literature.”

“I’m sure you still formed an opinion about her,” she suggested shrewdly.

This brought his attention back to her for a moment, but then his eyes focused elsewhere. “Ms Stark was a good presenter. I don’t know her field well enough to tell you if her research is considered innovative or pedantic. The gentleman with her is an emeritus professor in the literature department, though. He seems excited by what she said. Who is the grey-haired woman? Do you know?”

“That’s Ellyn. Her advisor,” Margaery clarified.

“From her expression, she is pleased. Those are positive indications. Ms Stark is one of the best students in my class despite it not being her field. She writes extremely well. I suspect she will do rather better in academia than poor Grenn.”

Margaery took this prediction in.

“What did you think of it?”

“It’s not new to me,” Margaery said after a moment. “She’s talked about most of it before, but I thought she was very engaging.”

He made a noncommittal noise. “I see my graduate student is finally free. Excuse me, Ms Tyrell. I enjoyed our little chat.”

Margaery watched him walk toward the young man with the goatee. Dr. Bolton kept his same polite, genial, distant manner, but she noted his graduate student grew more uneasy with each passing second.

Precisely fifteen minutes from the point he said it would end, the audience members began to disperse. Sansa returned, her face flushed with success. Dr. Bolton was speaking with another faculty member as they walked out. They were stopped in the hallway as Sansa and Margaery walked past them to the elevator. Margaery looked back only to see Roose Bolton's gaze fixed upon Sansa.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

The text from ‘The Night’s King’ comes directly from the books. Thank you, tafkar for beta reading!
The Order of Disorder

Chapter Notes

My beta, tafkar, rocks. It is known.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * *

Twelve Years Ago

* * *

They put the scholarship girl with Margaery. She stood now in the doorway uncertainly. “Hi, I’m Sansa.”

Margaery smiled easily and introduced herself. “That’s your bed and your dresser over there.” She watched as her new roommate unpacked. Her clothes were terrible, but she was really pretty. She was tall and slender with legs that stretched on forever. “Where are you from?”

“I was born in Winterfell, but we moved around a lot because of my dad’s job. My mother’s from the Riverlands.” She pointed to the bookcase. “May I use part of that?”

Margaery didn’t have a problem with it. “Sure. What does your father do?”

“He’s a history professor.” Sansa set about ten books on the lowest shelf of the bookcase. She put the rest of her clothes away. She moved quickly and quietly. On top of the dresser she placed a framed photograph.

Margaery got up to examine it.

Sansa hesitated and then she named everyone. “Those are my parents. That’s my half brother, Jon, then Robb, me, Arya, Bran, and Rickon.”

She showed Sansa a picture of her own family. “It’s hard being away from them. We’re all very close and I really miss my brothers.”

Sansa nodded. Then she sighed. “Do you have any rules I need to know about?”

“What?”

Sansa looked at her with weary eyes. “I’m on a scholarship. I know I’m not like you. What are your rules?”

Margaery was taken aback. “I don’t have any rules. If you can just keep your half of the room tidy, we’ll get along fine.”

“Okay.” Sansa lowered her empty suitcase into her empty footlocker.

“Rhonda Fossway must have been a total bitch to you, huh?”

“It’s all right. She was upfront about it. It’s better when monsters look like monsters.”
Dr. Bolton handed back their papers quickly and efficiently at the beginning of class. Sansa turned hers over. An A- from him was evidently an excellent grade, but it wasn’t an A. From the looks of her classmates’ faces it appeared they wouldn’t have agreed with her. She wanted to read his comments, but he plunged directly into his lecture.

He didn’t call on her once. Not even after he’d gone through three students who didn’t seem to have an opinion of the Pact between the First Men and the Children of the Forest. She did, but she didn’t bother raising her hand. Dr. Bolton never picked volunteers. She didn’t know why. He seemed to treat his classes like they were his own private amusements. Sansa thought he rather liked making his students uncomfortable. He wasn’t sarcastic. He was quite pleasant really, even as he watched Leo Tyrell trip over his own words. Sansa didn’t know why Leo hadn’t dropped the class. He never did the reading and he didn’t seem to have the first clue as to how to take notes. She was at a loss as to why he was pursuing a MA in History when it came down to it.

Dr. Bolton gave them the usual ten-minute break, but Sansa chose to stay in her seat. Once he and most of the other students had left the room, she read his comments. The paper was mostly unmarked. Only at the end did he have much to say. He suggested points she should have developed further and questioned the logic of one of her arguments. They were fair remarks, she had to concede, but she strongly suspected any other professor would have given her the A. She filed away the paper and waited for everyone to return. As they did so, she heard mumblings of how harsh he was. Sansa tuned them out. By and large, he seemed a fair instructor. As long as one kept to his rules, all very clearly set out in his syllabus, he was equable in return. Still, she thought her paper worthy of a better mark.

The second half the class continued much like the first. Dr. Bolton, after a very engaging ten minutes, destroyed what was left of Leo Tyrell with nothing more than a mere “Please do continue, Mr. Tyrell” and a mild expression of polite interest. Then he repeated the process with Sam Tarly and then again with Mya Stone.

Sansa knew the answers and had opinions. His three previous students and three more scattered around the class knew the answers and had opinions. He didn’t call on any of them.

Finally he sighed and finished his lecture. With an eye on the clock, he let them leave with one minute to spare saying wryly that they might break early today. The students fairly ran out of the room.

Sansa collected her belongings and found a ladies’ room. She was on her own tonight; Margaery had gone out of town to visit with her grandmother. This meant the campus shuttle into the city and then two more bus rides, but she had done it before. The building was quiet and by the time she walked out toward the shuttle stop, there weren’t many students. The nights were getting chillier as they headed into autumn, and she thrust her hands deep into her light jacket. In her one hand, she clutched her pepper spray. She was halfway to the shuttle stop, when a dark grey sedan pulled up and the driver rolled the window down.

“Ms Stark? Do you need a ride?”

Sansa was about to reply in the negative when she saw the shuttle bus pass by. It was 7:30. It would be another half hour before another came. “Oh. I live in the city. Is that out of your way, Dr. Bolton?”
He unlocked the door in response. “Get in.”

The fact that she was freezing made her comply. “Thank you.” She set down her book bag.

Dr. Bolton waited until she fastened her seat belt. He looked at her expectantly.

She realized he wanted directions so she gave them to him. After a few minutes of silence, she made a comment about the weather.

He didn’t respond.

Sansa decided she didn’t need to make conversation. She stared out the window as he navigated the car through the suburbs and then into the city.

They were making good time until traffic slowed to a crawl.

“How is your research on the Nightfort legends coming?”

“My advisor is happy with what I’m doing.”

“But you’re not?”

Sansa wondered how he’d intuited her dissatisfaction; she thought she’d spoken neutrally enough. He was correct, though. “I’m in the wrong place geographically.”

He smiled. “You need to be in the north. I’m surprised you didn’t choose to do your degree at Winterfell.”

“I didn’t know I’d be researching the Nightfort legends when I was choosing grad schools.” They were barely moving now. “King’s has a better literature program.” She peered through the windshield. “Do you think there’s been an accident?”

He didn’t answer.

“Besides,” she continued going back to the subject of her research, “what I need is at the Citadel.”

Dr. Bolton turned to her. He seemed genuinely surprised. “Really?”

“I’ve been in contact with their archivist. They have ten linear feet of unprocessed material from a maester of the Night’s Watch who had a deep interest in the legends. I’ve come across references to his research before. He had access to things I don’t think anyone’s ever seen.” She folded her arms across her chest and shivered.

He switched on the heat for her. “You’re not much of a northerner, are you?”

“I dressed like a southerner today. I won’t make the same mistake twice.”

“The mistake is forgetting what you are.”

Sansa wasn’t sure how to respond to this.

“We live here, but we’re not of here,” he explained.

“I’ve lived most of my life outside of the north.” If anyone had asked her where home was, she wasn’t sure she could answer.
“As have I, but we are northerners. It’s in our blood.” With his right hand, he reached out and aimed the vent in her direction. “How did the Citadel end up with the Night’s Watch’s records?”

“The archivist isn’t sure. He thinks they were sent south for safe keeping when they were facing the Others. I want to go down there over the Third Semester, but I think I’m going to have promise them my first-born child to get access, though.”

Dr. Bolton looked at her. “I imagine your father’s name would open some doors.”

She didn’t reply immediately. “I’m not interested in using my father’s name to get favors.”

“No?”

This wasn’t his business, she thought. “No,” she told him in a tone meant to shut down further inquiry.

The traffic was breaking up. They drove past a tow truck only to be stopped at a red light.

“Have you been to Castle Black?”

“Not to their archives. My half brother is serving there. If I have time after the trip to Oldtown, I’ll go. Otherwise, it will have to wait till the next Intersession.”

“Why so long? Castle Black isn’t very far from Winterfell. I seem to recall your father telling me once that your family—”

“I’m not close to my family, all right?” she snapped. “Look, you can let me out up here. I can catch a bus back to my apartment.”

Dr. Bolton looked at her. “We can talk about something else,” he said mildly.

She shouldn’t have lost control like that. She murmured an apology and didn’t say anything for a few minutes. As he inched the car forward, Sansa tried again. “May I ask you something?”

“If you like.”

She had several questions she wanted to ask. Why had he only given her an A-? Why hadn’t he called on her? But she settled on something less personal to her. “Why are you here in the south?” Their conversation just now aside, he’d made more than a few remarks in his lectures that suggested he did not have the highest opinion of anything “southron.”

He seemed surprised. “The vagaries of academic positions,” he said quietly. “You’ll learn about it soon enough. Sometimes one needs to leave before one can go home again.”

“So you do want to go back north in time?”

“Oh yes.”

Sansa absorbed this.

“I didn’t call on you tonight because you knew the answers,” he said.

Now it was her turn to be startled. “What?”

“Students are not unpredictable. About this time in the semester, they get sloppy. They don’t do their reading. The next paper is not due for a month. They thought they had a breather. Now they
know otherwise. They like it when I call on you, they can relax and go back to playing with their phones or daydreaming. I don’t want them to relax. I want them alert and focused.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t give you an A because you didn’t deserve an A.”

It was uncanny how he knew what she wanted to ask him.

“Your paper was very good, much better than I expected actually.” Dr. Bolton made a left turn.

“But you held back. You wrote only what you thought was sufficient and no more.”

Sansa bit her lip.

“Right or left?”

“Left. It’s on the end of the next block on the right-hand side. This is good.”

He drove up to the curb and switched off the ignition. “Which one is yours?”

“It’s the one two houses up.”

Dr. Bolton got out and held open her door.

Sansa hadn’t expected him to do this. She suddenly wondered if he had other ideas. “Thank you, but I can—”

“I will walk you to your apartment,” he said firmly.

To her relief that was all he did. He waited until she had unlocked the front door and then told her to flick the lights from the living room once she was safely inside. She did so and watched him drive away.

* * *

Roose didn’t see her book bag until he arrived home. He debated driving back, but it was late and Sansa Stark intrigued him. He could claim he hadn’t spotted it till the morning. At the most she would only be able to email him or call his office. His landline was unlisted and he never gave out his cell phone number to students. He brought the bag into the house.

He concerned himself first with work. The target’s body had not been discovered for two-and-a-half days. The police were making inquiries but according to the newspaper reports, all signs pointed it to being a random mugging gone wrong. His client had deposited the remaining half of his fee as well as the promised bonus in his numbered account.

After his dinner, he dealt with emails. As he expected, there was one from Sansa Stark. Had she left her book bag in his car? Could he check? Her life was in that bag. She sounded frantic. Roose debated briefly about not answering till morning. He did his dishes, tackled the crossword, and finally emailed her back in the affirmative. He would be in his office from 8:00 until 1:00. She could pick it up during that time period or he would leave it with the department secretary if the time was inconvenient.

His evening tasks concluded, he slipped on a pair of disposable latex gloves and proceeded to inspect her bag. He expected a mess. Most students were slobs and most women in his experience, even the well-groomed ones, treated bags and purses as dumping grounds for the most
extraordinary objects.

Sansa’s belongings were such a miracle of order that he almost hesitated to touch anything. Roose did not want her to realize he gone through her possessions. He would need to go slowly.

She had four spiral-bound notebooks. Roose opened each in turn. The first two were for classes in her department and the third was for his course. He noted her clear, even handwriting. She was consistent in her note taking. She did not doodle. Every page related to the course and the course alone. He couldn’t vouch for the literature courses, but from her notes on his lectures, it was clear she understood the information he was trying to convey. He slipped those back exactly as he’d found them.

The fourth notebook was larger and not quite as consistent. Here was some of her work on the Nightfort legends. The more he looked through it the more he thought that she must have other notebooks or documents relating to her research as well. He scanned through her notes of her conversations with the Citadel archivist.

Finally he closed it and put it with the others. She had a paperback novel. He knew the name. It had received positive reviews, but he was unfamiliar with it. Roose confined his reading to non-fiction for the most part. Nonetheless he read the back cover; it sounded intriguing enough. He made a note of the title. Next came her folders. These contained syllabi, completed papers, drafts of papers, pdf copies of articles. Each folder was organized identically. There was also a clear plastic sheet protector with photocopied pages. Roose started to pull them out and stopped as a post-it note began to slip. He carefully slid the pages back into the sheet protector.

The notations on the papers puzzled him. He wondered briefly if it was some sort of code. He flipped it over to the other side and his face cleared when he realized it was a knitting pattern for a complicated looking shawl. Roose returned it to the bag. Next were two small zippered cases and a cloth bag. The first case held tools. He recognized scissors and plastic needles. He was unfamiliar with the rest. The second case contained her writing implements. He opened the cloth bag. From its appearance it wasn’t hard to guess it was the shawl on which she was working. He left it alone. He doubted he could put it back exactly as she’d had it.

Lastly he saw an appointment book. This was unusual. Most of his students used their electronic devices for such things. Sansa appeared to prefer pen and ink. Roose settled back with it. He read through the entries for the past three months. He found an entry for the date she’d come to get his permission to take his class. Evidently she’d spoken to the department secretary because there was a notation about making it there before 4:30. She led an ordered life, Sansa Stark did. She had a routine. He paid careful attention to her activities for the next two or three months. It might be best if his path did not cross with hers outside of class for a while. He returned everything back and removed the gloves.

He glanced at the clock. If he were a betting man, he would wager money Sansa Stark had already emailed him back giving him a definitive time she would be there to retrieve belongings. A smile played on his lips as he found and read such an email.

Roose was therefore unsurprised when he found her waiting outside his office at 7:55.

* * *

Margaery couldn’t wait for the break. Sansa’s last paper was done. Margaery’s own exams were over. They would have time to just be together. Well, some time, she amended. Margaery would be visiting with her family for a while. She would probably need to pretend to enjoy flirting with some stupid bachelor that her grandmother or parents had dug up.
She found Sansa in the living room curled up on the sofa watching an action movie.

“I needed something mindless.”

Margaery crawled up behind her and massaged Sansa’s shoulders. “My poor Sansa.”

“After this is over, do you want to go to bed?”

It was early in the afternoon. “We could go right now.”

Sansa reached behind and wrapped Margaery’s arms around her. She leaned back. “I want to see how this ends first.”

They watched explosions and car chases.

“This is nice,” Sansa told her. “I’ve missed relaxing like this.”

Margaery forbore pointing out it was Sansa who never wanted to just enjoy each other’s company. “Me too,” she contented herself with saying.

The phone rang. Sansa reached for it. “It’s Leo.” She passed it back to Margaery. “I really do want to go to bed after this. I need to show you much how much I appreciate you putting up with me.”

Margaery’s breath quickened. “I won’t be long.” She answered the phone, “Hi Leo.”

Sansa muted the volume on the television.

“Do you want to do something tonight?”

“I’d love to, Leo, but I’m afraid that Sansa and I have plans.”

Sansa sat up. She turned so that she was on her knees on the sofa facing her.

“Oh, come on. She’s just going to want to start her reading for next semester.”

Margaery didn’t even want to put the suggestion in Sansa’s head.

Work appeared to be the furthest thing from Sansa’s mind. Sansa slipped a hand up Margaery’s skirt, trailing her fingers along the inside of Margaery’s thigh.

“No, we have plans. We could do something tomorrow maybe.”

Sansa tugged on the waistband of Margaery’s panties.

She looked like the heroine of one of her legends, but Sansa could be a total minx. Margaery arched her buttocks enough to allow Sansa to slide her panties off.

Leo grumbled about how his GPA was going to be a mess after this semester.

“It can’t be that bad, Leo.” She bit down on her lip as Sansa expertly slid her finger upwards.

“If I get a B- from Dr. Bolton, I’ll consider myself lucky.”

Margaery glanced at Sansa. Sansa had a small smile on her lips, a look of concentration, and mischievous eyes as she moved her finger in and out. Margaery was wet between her legs now. She could feel sweat pooling on her lower back. “I’m sure it’s not going to be that bad, Leo.”
“You’ve been talking to Sansa. She thinks he’s such a good professor.”

“Does she?”

Sansa looked up, but she didn’t stop.

Margaery suppressed a moan. “I should go Leo. I’ll call you tomorrow.” She threw the phone down on the coffee table. “You are evil.”

The smile on Sansa’s lips deepened. “I told you, I wanted to show you my appreciation. What was that about me?”

“Leo was complaining about Dr. Bolton. He says you like him.”

“I don’t think Dr. Bolton is the sort of man people like. He’s kind of cold.”

Margaery thrust forward.

Sansa withdrew her finger and her hands.

“Why are you stopping?”

Sansa unmuted the volume and turned back to the movie.

“Oh my gods, you’re not serious.”

Sansa smirked even more. “It’s almost over.”

Margaery decided to even the score. She reached over to unbutton Sansa’s jeans.

Sansa slapped her hands. “No. I told you I wanted to show my appreciation. You’re wearing too many clothes. Why don’t you go take them off and get into bed? I’ll be there as soon as this is done.”

She didn’t move immediately. “Ten minutes?”

Sansa turned and kissed Margaery with thoroughness. “Go and get ready for me.”

Margaery obeyed. She was naked and waiting when Sansa came in seven minutes later.

Sansa stripped off her clothes. “See, was that so bad? It was only seven minutes.” She climbed into the bed. She pulled out the vibrator from the night stand.

“Don’t tell me, you’re going to have me make up those three minutes somehow.”

“Oh, yes.”

* * *

It was kind of weird, Sansa thought. For the first part of the semester in Dr. Bolton’s class, she’d seen him all over town. Then for the second half of it, aside from class time, it was if he didn’t exist. Not that she was looking to run into him, but she’d become used to seeing him in the background. When he wasn’t there, it felt strange, like something was out of place.

She was outside his office again waiting at the end of a long line of students. According to the university portal, she had her A, but she wanted her last paper back. She glanced at her watch. It
was taking longer than five minutes per student. Finally it was her turn and it was 4:29.

“Unless whatever you want can be handled in a minute, you’ll have to come back next week.”

“I just wanted my paper, Dr. Bolton.”

He looked up then. “Ms Stark. Please, sit.” He rose and shut his door.

Sansa sat.

Dr. Bolton removed his reading glasses. “You did very well. I don’t give out A’s very often.”

She had been told this by several of his former students. “I found the course very useful. Thank you for letting me take it in the first place.”

He picked up a large folder on his desk and thumbed through the contents until he found her paper.

“When do you go to Oldtown?”

She was surprised he remembered. “At the start of the Third Semester.” The archivist had been hedging about giving her access, but then suddenly he had become remarkably reasonable. She could see anything she liked if she came within a certain time frame. Margaery was irritated because the dates conflicted with the holiday trip they were planning, but they could go to Pentos anytime. The Citadel opened its doors but seldom.

“I may see you there then.” He put the folder back on the desk. “I’ve been asked to teach a seminar.” He looked at her expectantly.

She rose. “Thanks again, Dr. Bolton.”

“Roose.”

Sansa paused.

“Ordinarily, I don’t allow students to address me by my first name, but you’re not in this department, and you’re done with my course. We’ll be colleagues soon enough. Call me Roose.”

She wondered if he was about to ask her out and she dreaded having to turn him down, but no, he was putting his reading glasses back on and reaching for his notes. “Thank you. I’d like that.”

“If I don’t see you around or at the Citadel, good luck with your research, Sansa.”

She offered him her hand. When he took it, seemingly amused by her courtesy, she repressed a shiver. His fingers were like ice. Coldhands, she thought as she took the stairwell down. Then she corrected herself, no, Coldhands wasn’t quite right. Another figure from her northern fairy tales presented itself. It too didn’t exactly fit, but it somehow seemed more appropriate: The Night’s King.

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Chapter End Notes

The chapter title is a from a quote by William Saroyan. I don't really know the context,
but I liked it so much I decided to use it here.
Roose received his paper back from the teaching assistant. “See me” was written neatly across the top. He inspected the rest of it. On the last page, there was an A and then again the words “See me” again with the initials “J.A.” beneath it. He frowned and tried to focus on the professor’s lecture. He had been very careful not to attract any attention. The last time he had excited suspicion had been his sophomore year in high school. The school had made him see its psychologist. After the whipping from Father, Roose had done his level best to appear to be an ordinary person unworthy of notice.

The advantage of university, Roose had been finding, was that as it was so significantly larger, it was that much easier to hide his uniqueness—until now.

During the break, he scanned through the paper. Had he unwittingly shared some opinion that had awoken some suspicion on the part of the professor? He couldn’t see anything, but it was possible something had slipped out.

The professor smiled at him when Roose approached after class. “I have office hours today. Do you have some time at 2:00?”

Why would he be smiling if Roose had written something disturbing?

Professor Arryn greeted him warmly when he arrived at his office. “You’re probably wondering why I wanted to see you.”

“Yes.”

“I looked you up in our files.”

Roose tried not to show any fear.

“What is your major?”

“I’m pre-law,” Roose said in a puzzled voice as he wondered what his major could matter.

Professor Arryn shook his head. “Well, you write very well, but . . .” He leaned forward. “Have you thought about a career as an academic?”

Roose felt the tension leave his body. Clearly he wasn’t in trouble. He hadn’t been detected. He didn’t understand what the professor wanted of him, but whatever it was, it wasn’t to report him.

He listened intently as the professor made his case. This was the second class Roose had taken with him. He thought Roose displayed an unusual grasp on the facts for one so young. He wrote well. He’d taken multiple electives in the history department. His grades were excellent. His take on his papers was fresh and original. He had an analytical mind. “You’re not an emotional writer,” the professor told him with approval.
This was the first time anyone besides his father had considered a lack of emotion a positive character trait in Roose. “My father wants me to become a lawyer.” There was money in the law.

“What do you want?”

“What does your job entail and what would I need to do if I pursued this?” Roose hesitated before asking his next question. “What sort of money is there in it?”

“You would need to go to graduate school,” Professor Arryn explained. “As for money, it varies. I’m afraid it doesn’t pay nearly as well as the law. It’s enough to raise a family on and to live in moderate comfort.” He explained what being a professor involved and then detailed some of the advantages and disadvantages. “It took me fifteen years before I was able to return to the Vale. One goes where the positions are.”

Roose did not know if he cared for the idea of living away from the north for so long.

“I can tell this is a new idea to you. Think about it.”

“My father will pay for law school. I don’t know if he would finance graduate school.”

The professor nodded. “There are scholarships and teaching assistantships that come with tuition waivers or stipends. It can be done if you want it badly enough.”

“I will consider it,” Roose promised. He stood up and politely thanked Professor Arryn for taking an interest in him. He paused at the door. “I am very interested in the Age of Heroes.”

“That would be an excellent specialty. Most everyone wants to research the Industrial Age or the Post-Targaryen era.”

Roose returned to his dorm room full of thought. His father would not approve. The family needed money. He would become a lawyer, Father had decreed. It would be useful. There would be money. There would be power. Father said it was on him to restore the fortunes of the family.

The law courses Roose had taken were interesting in an abstract fashion, but he did not like the idea of making it his career. This new notion appealed to him, and it was frustrating to realize that there was a profession in which he could excel, but which he would not be able to pursue.

He wished he had gone to university in a larger city. He had wanted to go to Winterfell, but the tuition had been too high. So here he was in Gulltown, which had two industries: the university and the ports. Although it was bigger than the Dreadfort, it was not so large that he could easily escape notice. There were usually eyes everywhere. He had been very careful, but he could feel his urges returning.

It was Friday, though. There would be a great deal of activity in the city tonight. Ships came in. People drank far more than they should. They were often careless. They were less aware of him. If he was going to sate his appetites, this was the time to do it.

Roose slept for a few hours and then opted to go out.

He found a victim quite easily. The man had been drinking and it was the work of a moment to drag him into the shadows. He felt the usual thrill as the victim struggled. Roose slipped the knife in and out, enjoying the intense satisfaction as his prey went limp and then gradually grew cold.

When it was over, he dropped the body. He was about to leave when a voice stopped him.
“Who do you work for?”

Roose saw the barrel of the gun. He couldn’t see its owner.

“You have three seconds. Who do you work for? One . . . two . . . three—”

“I don’t work for anyone.” There was a dryness in his throat and he wasn’t certain what to think.

“This is my territory, college boy. Mine. You just cost me ten grand. Who hired you?”

Roose heard the click of the safety sliding off. “I won’t say anything to your . . . employer?” he hazarded. This man was definitely not someone from the authorities then. “I didn’t know he was yours. No one hired me.”

“All right, let’s try this again. Why did you kill him?”

“I wanted to,” Roose said simply. Roose thought of what it was costing his father to send him to university. The man with the gun said he was getting $10,000 for this job. $10,000 for work that was intensely pleasurable to do. “I won’t try and claim the money.”

“Well, college boy, the problem here is that my client wanted him shot and you just knifed him to death.”

Roose looked at the corpse. “Would your client mind if he was shot and knifed?”

The man with the gun stepped out of the shadows. He appeared to be a little older than Father. He looked at Roose for a very long moment. “No, I don’t suppose they would.” He aimed the gun at the corpse and shot it three times in the heart.

The shots weren’t loud. Roose knew something about guns; he went hunting with his father often enough, but he had never used one on a human before. “Is that a silencer?”

“Yes.” The man pointed the gun back at Roose. “Good, you wore gloves. Bend down and take his wallet. Empty out the cash and toss the wallet back by the dumpster. Get the watch too and the wedding ring, but don’t toss them. Right, now drag the body back a bit farther.”

Roose obeyed.

“You can have the cash. In a moment, you’ll give me the rest. Don’t give me that look, college boy. This needs to look like a mugging or a gang fight and it can’t come back to me. I can’t have his watch or his ring showing up at a pawn shop.”

Roose pocketed the cash. He wondered how much there was. There were a lot of bills.

The man unscrewed the silencer. The gun disappeared into his side pocket. He held out his hand for the watch and the wedding band. “Are you hungry? I can never eat before a job and I’m always starving after.”

Feeling like he was in a dream, Roose followed the man out of the alley. They found an all-night diner twelve blocks away. By the end of the evening, Roose had a solution to his career dilemma.

* * *

Present Day

* * *

“Why are you being so stubborn?”
Sansa looked up from her papers. “I have reading to do. Look, I agreed to leave the apartment. We’re here.”

“We’re in a coffee house,” Margaery hissed. “Eating a grilled cheese is not my idea of going out.”

Sansa set down her pen. “I have forty-five papers to grade. I have to plan my next two lectures. I have reading to do. I told you on Monday that this was going to be a busy week for me.” She would have preferred to have stayed in the apartment. Here there were too many distractions. Ordinarily she found the ambient noise reassuring. Today the clinking of the silverware and china, the chatter of the diners, even the periodic hissing of steam as the baristas made cappuccinos—all were getting on her nerves.

Margaery rolled her eyes. “You’re ahead. You always are. Sansa, you need a break. You need some fun.”

“Standing around trying to fend off one of the First Men in a noisy, smoky nightclub is not my idea of fun.” If they went out now, they wouldn’t be back till 2:00 AM at the earliest. Tomorrow would be shot and she would lose at least a day’s work.

“He’s got very good manners, I promise.”

“They all do until they’ve had one or two drinks and suddenly they’re all hands.”

“He’s a rising young attorney. Garlan says he’ll make partner before he’s thirty.”

Sansa tried to count to ten. “If I wanted a boyfriend, I would have a boyfriend. Look, I don’t mind if you go by yourself.”

Margaery gave her a long look. “Fine, I will. Don’t wait up for me.”

“Margaery—” It was too late. She stormed out so fast she nearly knocked over an elderly couple. Sansa heard the tires of Margaery’s car screech. Great. Now she was going to be pissy for at least the rest of the weekend. Sansa stared at the mountain of work in front of her. She supposed she could go home to try to placate Margaery. But if she stayed another hour, it would mean she could get something done. If she then went back, even if she had to go to the club to make amends, at least there would be one thing off the list.

The place was filling up. She would need to order more than a cup of soup if she wanted to keep her spot. She grabbed her purse and shoved her laptop in its case and stood in line, keeping her eyes on the booth.

“Hello, Sansa.”

She turned around. “Dr. Bolton.”

“Roose,” he corrected mildly. He cast an eye over the tables and booths.

Sansa nodded.

“It’s far too busy here,” he said frowning.

She noticed his satchel. “I have a booth if you want to share it.”

“That’s very kind of you, Sansa, but I came to work.”

Shit, he thought she was hitting on him. “So did I.” She pointed to where all her papers were spread
He considered her. “Thank you. I will take you up on the offer.”

She placed her order. She was opening her wallet when she heard him telling the cashier that it was on him. “You don’t have to do that.”

Roose waved her protests away. “Go and sit. I have this.”

Sansa thanked him and went back to the booth. She ordered her papers so he would have half the table. He joined her shortly after with their food. She nibbled at her sandwich while she graded LIT 201 assignments. He immersed himself in his own work. Periodically she felt him glancing at her, but whenever she looked up, his own eyes were focused on his papers or on his laptop. It felt awkward at first, but gradually she fell into the rhythm of marking and forgot about him.

About twenty minutes later, her phone vibrated. Margaery. She made a face. “Would you watch my stuff, Roose? I have to take this.”

He nodded.

Sansa stepped outside. “Hi.”

“I overreacted. I’m sorry.”

She didn’t respond immediately.

“Are you there?”

“Yes. I’m sorry too. I don’t like it when we fight.” Sansa eyed the booth. Roose had not stopped marking since she’d stepped out here.

“It’s just . . . Sansa, you’re always working. You never have time for me anymore and it’s not good for . . . This isn’t just about me. You know it’s not.”

She heard the longing in Margaery’s voice. It frustrated her, though. Did Margaery think that she enjoyed always being buried? Sansa would love to while away the days having fun, but fun wasn’t going to get her a doctorate or pay her bills. “All right, perhaps I’m working too hard. But I don’t like going out to the clubs. It’s not like I’m with you when we go. I’m with some idiot who thinks buying me a drink entitles him to put his hands all over me.”

Margaery was silent.

“The last three times we’ve gone out, I had to make my own way home. You left me twice to go to another place.” She saw Roose reaching for his water. He looked around and frowned until he saw her through the window.

“Where are you? I can hear traffic.”

“I’m still at the coffee house. I’m standing outside.”

“If we go out tonight, I promise, I won’t abandon you. Please?”

Sansa bit her lip. Roose was still watching her. He smiled slightly and returned to his work. “How about a compromise? If you let me stay home and work tonight, you can have 100% of me tomorrow.”
“100% meaning the entire day and night?”

“From dawn till midnight.” Margaery would be hung over. She wouldn’t want to do anything until at least 11:00. Sansa would be able to get another half day in on her own research if not more.

“Meaning if I want us to just watch a movie or have some downtime together, you won’t complain?”

“I won’t complain,” Sansa assured her.

“Okay, it’s a deal. Go back to your soggy grilled cheese and your medieval romances. I won’t be late tonight. I promise.”

Sansa laughed. She hung up and went back inside. She ignored Roose’s gaze and dove in to the papers. Finally, when those were done, she meticulously entered the grades in the course management system, filed the hard copies away, and started working on her lectures.

“I’m going to buy another bottle of water, would you care for anything else?”

“No, thank you.” Sansa checked her outline; she thought it would work. She would need to run through it. She could probably do it tonight at home. Early for Margaery was 2:00. The second lecture would be easier. She had the last instructor’s outline and slides. Sansa wanted to modify it, but the bones were there. It wouldn’t be too difficult to make it her own. She stacked the printouts of the PowerPoint slides and began making notations.

“I’m surprised,” Roose commented.

Sansa looked up. He was still marking papers.

“PowerPoint?”

“LIT 201,” she said sighing.

“You present very well. You have no need to rely on a crutch.”

Sansa didn’t consider PowerPoint a crutch, but she appreciated the compliment. “These are my predecessor’s slides.”

He appeared to consider this an acceptable answer because he returned to his grading.

By the time she had a satisfactory outline, it was 11:00 and they were closing up.

“Would you like a ride home?”

Seeing as how the last bus had probably come and gone, she felt she had no choice but to accept. They stepped out onto the street and walked toward his car. They were nearly there when she noticed three guys watching them. She was about to say something when she realized Roose was aware of their presence as well.

“Hi, there,” the thinnest of the young men greeted them.

Sansa didn’t like the way his eyes were darting everywhere. His pupils were dilated and his movements frenetic. Despite the cold, he had on a t-shirt and no jacket. His arms were covered with scabs and some of his teeth were rotted. She saw the other two come nearer.

Roose stopped short. He held his arm out in front of her forcing her to stop as well.
“Cold night.” The second man stepped closer. He had wild red hair and a scraggly beard. Like the others, his clothes were none too clean, and there was something slightly manic about him.

“When I say ‘now,’ go over to the doorway on the right and stay there,” Roose murmured. He handed her his satchel without taking his eyes off of the men.

She was about to object, but there was something in his voice that made her nod even if he couldn’t see it.

“Now,” Roose told her quietly.

Sansa swallowed and darted into the spot to which he’d directed her. She tried not to think about the irreplaceable research in her book bag and all the documents on her laptop. Everything was backed up on the USB drive, but it too was in her laptop case. Not that any of this would matter if they were attacked. She dug in her pocket and found her pepper spray.

The third guy stepped out of the group and approached Roose. Unlike his friends, he didn’t seem to be high. He glanced toward where she was huddling and then he focused on Roose.

Roose said nothing. Sansa could sort of see his face. The ever-present mildness was gone; his expression was hard, cold, and very unpleasant. There was an unspoken exchange between him and the third man.

It seemed like hours, but it couldn’t have been more than twenty seconds.

“We thought you were somebody else,” the third guy said slowly. “Our mistake.”

His friends hesitated.

The wiry guy objected. “Tom, we can take—”

The third man held up a hand. “Steffon, shut it.” He was uneasy, Sansa realized. She could hear it in his voice and because he was under a street lamp, she saw it in his eyes. “Night,” the third guy said. “Come on.” He turned around and gestured to his friends.

And then they were gone.

Roose watched them retreat into the darkness. After another seeming eternity, he signaled to Sansa and unlocked his car.

As they drove away, she started to shake. “That could have been really bad,” she managed when they were paused at a red light.

He looked at her. “No.” The light turned green. “How do you like teaching?”

“What?” She was startled at how casual he suddenly sounded. “We were nearly mugged.”

Roose pulled the car into a parking lot and considered her. “You’re quite safe.”

Sansa didn’t feel safe.

“Wait here.” He went into the convenience store.

She could see him through the lighted windows. He was purchasing something. She felt like she needed a stiff drink. She watched him smile pleasantly at the cashier as if there was nothing wrong, and then he returned to the car. She took the bottled water he offered her.
Roose locked the doors. “Drink.” He put the key in the ignition, but he didn’t turn it. “You were never in any danger, Sansa.” He glanced at the pepper spray she was still clutching. “A wise precaution, but you may put it away now.”

She put the pepper spray back in her pocket and swallowed some water. “They were high.”

“Two of them were, yes. The one who was a threat was not. It doesn’t matter now.”

“Shouldn’t we go to the police?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Why?”

“They tried to mug us.”

He didn’t reply for a moment. Finally he turned to her. “They did nothing with which the police could charge them. They greeted us. They discussed something amongst themselves, and then they wished us good night. They left. Those are not criminal offenses. At the most, the police might drive through the area, but I suspect those three thugs are long gone by now.”

Sansa supposed he had a point.

He started the car. “You never answered me about teaching. Do you enjoy it?”

Although she found it odd, she forced herself to answer. As he drove through the streets of the city, making casual conversation with her, she relaxed a little.

The apartment was dark when he drove up. He parked the car under a streetlight. As he had before, he escorted her to the door.

She wished the apartment wasn’t empty. She wished Margaery was home.

“Would you like me to make certain you’re alone?”

Feeling a first-class coward, Sansa nodded.

He took the keys from her and quickly inspected the apartment. “All clear.” He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment before saying good night.

She locked and bolted the door behind him. There was no longer any question of her continuing to work on her dissertation or anything else. She was a mass of nerves. Sansa slipped into the bedroom. The shades were open. She went to draw them when she saw Roose still sitting in his car, staring up at the house. His eyes shifted to where she was standing. Sansa shivered, but she stared right back at him.

* * *

Roose was pleasantly surprised to see Sansa Stark walking toward him across campus. He came to the university on weekends to write. He imagined she must do the same. “Sansa.”

“Hi.” She seemed agitated, distracted even.

“Are you all right?”

She hesitated. “Those guys, the ones who tried to mug us,” she began.

Roose waited politely.
“They’re all dead. Someone knifed them to death. I read it in the paper.”

His eyes flickered. “Yes, I saw the articles. They were drug users. I expect their addictions had something to do with it,” he said in a deliberately disinterested voice.

Sansa bit her lip. “I guess you’re right.” She adjusted the strap of her bag and started to turn away.

This could be problematic. He glanced around; there wasn’t anyone in sight. “Do you have a moment?”

She assented.

He moved over to a corner of the building where they were sheltered from the wind. “What happened that night is hardly worth . . .” He shook his head.

“If you weren’t worried, you wouldn’t have made me move away. I saw your face. We could have been robbed or killed.”

Roose held up a hand. “I think you are exaggerating the danger.” He could hardly tell her why she had been safe, but this wasn’t the primary concern at the moment. “Did you tell anyone what happened?”

“No.”

“I didn’t either. Some addicts met their sudden but hardly unexpected ends; stories like those litter the news. It’s nothing to do with us.” He looked at her with a kindly expression.

Sansa took a breath.

“We shouldn’t waste our attention or time on filth like them.” He straightened up. “Are you coming or going?”

She pointed to the shuttle stop. “I came to use the library, but then I read the article and—”

Roose was perplexed. “Sansa, why are you so upset about the deaths of three drug addicts? Westeros is better off without them.”

She seemed to be processing this.

He spent the next ten minutes reassuring her. Roose couldn’t tell if she was upset about the murders or because of the attempted mugging, but he persisted. He reiterated his thesis: these men filled their bodies with addictive substances. Their ends were inevitable. This was not something with which she should be concerned. By the end of their conversation, he thought Sansa was calmer.

“It’s just weird. The way all three of them died one after the other,” she said finally.

Roose nodded. “It is odd, yes, but I expect stranger things have been happened.” He had enjoyed hunting them down one by one. He’d taken his time with them too. The police had not looked too closely into their deaths; Roose had known they wouldn’t.

“This is going to sound horrible, but my first reaction when I read the article about the skinny one was relief.”

He made a short laugh. “Now, that, Sansa, is an entirely natural response. “
“It won’t be that much longer now.”

Margaery swallowed her irritation. She knew exactly what Sansa meant.

“We should discuss it,” Sansa insisted.

“Will talking about it make it happen any more slowly?”

Sansa propped herself on her elbow. “We have less than six months until you graduate and I’m going to be gone for three of those.”

“I still don’t see why you couldn’t put off going to Oldtown.”

“Margaery, you can deflect as much as you want. It doesn’t change the fact that once you graduate, all of this has to end. You’ve said so since day one. I would rather it ended on our terms.”

“What if I went to Oldtown with you?” Margaery thought this was a perfectly viable solution.

Sansa sat up. “All right, suppose you came. This still ends in less than six months and I still think we should discuss it.”

“It would be nine months then, because I could defer graduating another semester.”

“What about your parents and your grandmother?” Sansa pointed out in a very calm voice.

They would have fits. Grandmother would be livid.

“It won’t work, Margaery. You can hide your head in the sand all you want, but in less than half a year, they’re going to expect for you to go to work for them; to marry their version of Mr. Right; and for me to move on with my life and out of yours.”

“Why do you always have to be so damned practical?” It came out more acidly than she meant it to.

“Because this is how it is. You’re the one who told me this was how it was going to be when we first got involved.”

Margaery stared at the ceiling. “It doesn’t have to end, you know. As long as we’re discreet, we could—”

“No.” Sansa swung her legs over the edge of the bed. “That’s not good enough for me. I put up with your flirting with other guys. I even put up with them making out with you. But I am not about to be your bit on the side while you get married and raise children.” Her voice was cold. “And don’t think I don’t know about what you were doing the other night when you stayed out till all hours.”

“Sansa—” She pushed herself into a sitting position. “I had too much to drink. It was just a bit of fun. He didn’t mean anything.” And then Margaery saw Sansa’s face. What Sansa had assumed was not what Margaery had just admitted to doing.

“I see.” Sansa pulled out clothes from the dresser. “So as long as it’s meaningless sex, you won’t care what I do then either.”

She was out the door before Margaery could stop her.
Thanks as usual to tafkar for beta reading.
“Your grandmother doesn’t like me,” Sansa said when they were alone that night. “Maybe I should go home. I can figure out some way to— ” She didn’t know what she could do other than endure, but she didn’t want to impose or stay where she wasn’t welcome.

“It’s fine. It’s just she’s a snob,” Margaery told her sleepily. “I’m her favorite and she wants all these things for me.”

“Like what?”

Margaery propped her head on her hand. “Well, I’m supposed to go to university. That’s why she backed off about you. Even Father doesn’t have enough money to get me in some place with my GPA unless I keep it up from here on in. I’ll have a career and marry somebody who’s wealthy and powerful and have at least two children.”

“Is that going to be a problem?”

“Other than the university part, probably not,” Margaery told her. “She’s already got a list of candidates.”

“No, I mean since you like girls.”

Margaery sat bolt upright and turned on the lights.

Sansa blushed. “I’ve seen how you look at Sylva. I thought you were an item.”

“I’m bisexual,” Margaery admitted finally. She seemed surprised that Sansa had figured it out.

“I won’t tell anyone.”

“No, it’s all right. They wouldn’t care. I can have my fun. The rule is that I can’t get caught. I’m surprised you figured it out. I didn’t think you were so experienced.” She looked at Sansa closely.

“Are you a virgin?”

Sansa rolled onto her back. “No.” It felt strange confiding in anyone, but Margaery had saved her by inviting her here.

“You sly minx. You never want to go to the dances. I thought—is your boyfriend back in the Stormlands?”

“No. Would you turn the light off please?”

Margaery complied. “Well, who is he then?”

“I don’t have a boyfriend.”
“A girlfriend?” She thought for a moment. “You and Dany?”

“We’ve fooled around a little, but she’s just experimenting. It’s not serious. I’m like you, I guess. I’m bisexual too.” She paused before continuing, “I don’t want it getting out about it or about me not being a virgin, all right?” As far as she could tell, Margaery wasn’t a gossip, but it wouldn’t hurt to make it clear that she didn’t want this to be public knowledge.

Margaery assured her she wouldn’t say anything. “Does your family know?”

Sansa snorted. “They don’t know anything about me. If they did I wouldn’t be here with you right now.”

“Would they have a problem with it?”

“No,” Sansa said a little sadly. “They wouldn’t.”

* * *

Present Day

* * *

Grandmother cast an eye around the apartment. “Where is your ever-present roommate?”

“Gone for three months,” Margaery replied hoping this would be enough to keep her from pursuing the topic any further. She set down a teacup and saucer for her grandmother.

“To?”

“She found some records in the Citadel’s archives. She went to study them. She won’t be back till just before the start of the next semester.”

Both her mother and her grandmother brightened up considerably.

Margaery braced herself for the inevitable discussion of her future. Before she and Sansa had become lovers, she had loved these talks. Now she dreaded them.

“Loras told me you were seeing Lancel Lannister.” Mother stirred her tea.

“We went out a few times.”

“He would do,” Grandmother opined. “But his cousin would be more suitable.”

Jaime Lannister was forty. If no woman had managed to get him to the altar thus far, Margaery doubted she would have any better luck.

“Well?”

“He took me out twice and he never called me back.” Why should she want Lancel when she had Sansa?

Her grandmother sipped her tea and then set it down. “What about Renly Baratheon?”

“Renly isn’t interested in women.” Grandmother knew damn well he was with Loras.

“And?” Grandmother smiled brightly. “Well?”

“We’ve gone out several times,” Margaery admitted.
Her mother relaxed.

Grandmother did not. “Margaery, I am aware you date men quite often. You seem to be very good at going out with them two or three times and then letting these relationships fizzle.”

“I can’t help it if they aren’t interested in me.”

“Alerie, I left my sweater in the car. Would you be a dear and go and get it for me?”

“Yes, of course, Olenna.”

As soon as her mother was out of the apartment, her grandmother turned to Margaery. “You’ve had your fun. We haven’t begrudged you a minute of it, but now it’s time for you to settle down and marry. You can still enjoy yourself as long as you do so with discretion. Take advantage of your ‘roommate’s’ absence, select a suitor, and bring him to heel.”

“Yes, Grandmother.” It was really the only thing she could say.

“You have a duty to your family. The time for cavorting between the sheets with Sansa Stark is over.”

* * *

Roose did not like the Reach any more than he liked King’s Landing. He supposed it was better than Dorne, where he had once suffered for two years in his first academic posting, but he would be very glad when he was finally able to return to the north where he belonged. He did enjoy watching Sansa Stark, however. She was just as much a fish out of water as he was. The climate was warm and sunny, but like him, she preferred to keep to the library or to quiet spots where she could read and work uninterrupted.

Only twice so far had he let her see him. The first time he’d been with a colleague and they’d kept their exchange to a brief nod and smile. And now. He was at a restaurant with a blonde he’d selected for his evening entertainment. His experience with Ramsay’s mother had taught him to be very careful with the women he pursued, but he’d run into this one two days ago and he judged the risk to himself would be minimal. She was here on a vacation. She would be leaving in a week or so. He could enjoy her and then move on quite easily.

Sansa was with the Tyrell girl. Evidently, all was not well in their relationship. The Tyrell girl was upset about something and Sansa appeared to be angry. As Margaery Tyrell got up and went to the back of the restaurant, presumably to the ladies’ room, Sansa recognized him and for a moment their gazes locked.

“Do you know her?”

Roose turned back to his date. “She’s from King’s University. She took a class of mine.”

“Pretty girl.”

He caught the jealousy in her voice. “Hmm? I suppose. Tell me, how did you find living in Astapor?” He didn’t particularly care, but he was used to feigning interest.

His date prattled on.

Roose kept his eyes fixed on her.
“You’re a very good listener.”

Each of his wives had told him so. He smiled automatically. It never ceased to amaze him how quickly women would open their legs for him if he simply let them talk and if he appeared to care about their petty little lives.

His date’s phone vibrated. “Excuse me. I have to take this.”

Roose nodded. He leaned back in the booth. The Tyrell girl returned to Sansa. Whatever their disagreement was, it continued.

“I’ll be right back,” his date promised.

“Of course.” Roose took a few bites of his overpriced, over-spiced food and then contented himself with water. His date was remonstrating with whoever was on the other end of the line. She glanced at him apologetically.

When she returned, she was very unhappy. “I’m sorry, Roose. I have to go.”

“Nothing wrong, I hope?”

“It’s a work problem. Apparently, there’s no one else but me to handle it.”

“These things happen. Call me when it’s settled. Perhaps we could go out another night?”

She kissed him on the cheek and promised to try.

A few minutes after his date made her departure, he saw Margaery Tyrell fling money on the table and storm out. Sansa’s face was pale with anger.

Roose signaled for the check, assured the waiter everything had been fine, and paid. He watched as Sansa composed herself. When she rose, he did as well. “Are you all right?” he asked as they made their way out of the restaurant.

“I’m fine,” she snapped. After a moment, she collected herself. “I’m sorry. That was rude of me.”

She fell in next to him as they walked along the street. “What about you?”

“Hmm?”

“Your date left too.”

Roose looked at her. He found it interesting that in the midst something upsetting, she had managed to notice his situation. “Some work-related emergency, she claimed.”

“Claimed?” Sansa repeated.

“She could have been lying.”

Sansa stopped short. “Don’t you mind?”

“Not particularly.” Roose shrugged.

“You cared enough to take her to the most expensive restaurant in town, although I don’t know why. The food was horrible.”

“It was, wasn’t it?” It had been a profitable year. His needs were simple. An occasional evening
out at an expensive night spot was not beyond his means. He reflected that Sansa’s income was probably barely above poverty level. Living with a Tyrell hadn’t changed her perspective.

“I wanted to go this little place I found, but no, Margaery insisted we come here.”

Roose glanced at his watch. It was still quite early. “Would we need a reservation?”

“What?”

“I barely touched my dinner. Are you hungry?”

She gave him a long searching look. “All right,” she said slowly.

The restaurant she took him to was small, quiet, and unassuming. Roose wasn’t an epicure by any means, but the smells coming from the place were not unappetizing. They were seated quickly. He was surprised when she chose club soda over wine.

“I don’t drink much,” Sansa told him when he questioned her.

“I don’t drink at all. It dulls the senses.”

“You don’t drink coffee or tea either, I noticed.”

Roose lifted his eyes from the menu.

Sansa sipped her club soda. “I’ve seen you at the café by the Thieves’ Market. You always get the same thing: poached eggs, toast, marmalade, and a bottle of water.”

He stared at her.

“I debated saying hello, but you seem to prefer your solitude. Am I right about you not drinking caffeinated beverages?”

“Yes,” he said shortly. He would need to be more careful. If an untrained slip of a girl could learn about his routines so easily, so could a more formidable opponent. Roose suddenly wanted to make her feel uncomfortable. “I’ve seen you as well.” He listed a few of the place he knew she frequented, and commented on her habits.

“So I guess that makes us even.” Sansa closed her menu. “I’d like the duck and the new potatoes, please.”

Roose was about to say something when the waiter came and took their orders. “What happened with your girlfriend?” he asked after the waiter had left.

“Now how do you know she’s my girlfriend?” She smiled slyly at him.

He realized then that she knew they were playing a game. Perhaps she’d known all along.

“Oh, right, the coffee house. You were watching us that morning.”

Roose was now thoroughly amused. “Yes. And generally, a friend does not take a friend of the same gender to an expensive romantic restaurant.”

“You saw us with guys that night, though. Did it throw you off?”

“What?”
“It was about five or six months ago. I can’t remember the name of that stupid club, but it was
down by the Bay. You were there with a date yourself. I think she was a brunette, about thirty-
five? She wore a red dress. I know you saw me because I caught you frowning at me.”

His smile became fixed. She’d seen him the night he’d disposed of a target. “You seemed
uninterested in your escort,” he said finally.

“He was a self-absorbed drunk.”

“Then why were you with him?”

She fiddled with the glass. “Margaery picked him.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

“She’s closeted. She likes to go out to clubs. She likes dancing. But unless it’s with a group of girls,
she finds us dates.”

Roose took this in. “Isn’t that unusual these days? I would have thought . . .”

Sansa’s expression told him volumes. “Her family doesn’t really care what she does now while
she’s at university as long as she’s discreet about it. After she gets her MBA, they expect that she
will marry Mr. Right and produce her 2.5 children.”

“Do they know about you?”

“Sort of. She’s very close with her youngest brother. He’s gay. Not bisexual, gay, very gay. I don’t
know how their family plan for him to marry Ms. Right is going to work out, but anyhow, he
knows. I’m pretty sure her grandmother does too. She’s very shrewd. I don’t think a lot gets by her.
No one else has said anything. Ostensibly we’re roommates.”

Roose thought he saw the difficulty. “How close to her degree is she?”

“She has one more semester left.” Sansa sipped her drink. “We’ve gone out a few times with her
brother and his boyfriend, which is fine. Everyone knows the score. When it works out, I don’t
mind so much. When it doesn’t, I have to keep some disgusting stock broker or lawyer from
putting his hands on my bum and from sticking his tongue down my throat.”

“You’re not interested in men then.”

She blushed slightly. “I’ve had boyfriends. I just don’t like the men she picks out.”

“Perhaps that’s why she chooses them.”

Sansa looked at him startled. “I never thought about it like that.”

“And tonight?”

“It’s complicated. There was some—we were supposed to go to Pentos for a trip, but this was the
only time the archivist would let me at the Nightfort papers. She came down to see me. I tried to
tell her about my research, but—she doesn’t understand academia. Her degree . . .”

Roose nodded. “She wants to play and she doesn’t understand you’re here to work.” He’d had
trouble with Bethany and then with Walda on a similar score.

“Sort of. Margaery is really smart and she works hard, but it’s not like what we do.” Sansa started
to say something more and then she stopped.

Their food came and for a few moments they concentrated on their meals.

“So what about you?”

Roose waited politely.

“Are you divorced or married?”

“You’ve seen me twice now with dates. Surely that should answer your question.”

“Not necessarily.”

He gave a short laugh. He liked how she was playing this game. “I’m a widower.”

“Kids?”

“I had two sons.” He cut into his steak neatly. “Both dead.”

She dropped her fork and stared at him. “Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“Why?”

Sansa’s eyes widened.

“Why are you sorry?” he repeated mildly.

“It’s what you’re supposed to say when someone tells you their children are dead.”

Roose considered her. “Each of my wives died as well,” he told her calmly. For the first time tonight she was uncertain of him.

“How many times have you been married?” she managed.

Two points to him for disconcerting her and one to her for her recovery, he thought. “Three.”

Her blue eyes widened again.

They ate in silence for a few moments.

“That takes care of my next question, I guess.”

“You’re wondering if I have ever been with a man.”

Sansa nearly choked.

“Yes, although I prefer women.”

She set her fork down and openly gaped at him. “How do you keep doing that? It’s like you always know what I’m going to ask.”

Roose was quite pleased his earlier date had not worked out. “I have been studying you.” He watched her to see what her reaction would be.

Sansa didn’t say anything immediately. Now she was the one who asked it. “Why?”
“Because you intrigue me,” he said simply. “How long is the Tyrell girl here?”

“She leaves tomorrow afternoon.”

“Good.”

They spent the rest of the meal eating in silence. He walked her back to her apartment. They were a block away when he made his decision. “Make up with her tonight, but don’t allow her to stay on if she offers.”

Sansa stopped abruptly. “You’re telling me what to do with my girlfriend?”

“I like you, Sansa. I think you like me. I believe we could enjoy each other quite a bit while we’re stuck in this southron hell hole, and unlike your little friend, I understand the importance of the research you’re doing. You wouldn’t have to worry I would keep you from your work.” He watched as her eyes flickered. He thought the idea appealed to her. “I’ll see you the day after tomorrow. 7:00 at the café in the Thieves’ Market. We’ll make our plans then.”

He left her at her door looking slightly stunned.

* * *

Sansa almost turned back two times. She was twenty-six, but she felt like she might as well be sixteen. If she understood him correctly, and she was sure she had, he was proposing a very adult sort of arrangement. Her relationship with Margaery was already complicated. She was here to work, after all. And he was more than a little disturbing. He seemed to know how disconcerting he was and he obviously took pleasure in keeping her off balance. And then she thought about what Margaery had done. If Margaery could have flings, why couldn’t she?

Even at 7:00 there were people in the café. He waited for her at his usual table in the back. She noticed he liked to be out of the way, probably because he preferred to observe others rather than be observed.

When she approached, he removed his reading glasses and folded his newspaper.

“I ordered for you,” he informed her.

“How could you be certain I was going to come?” she demanded.

Roose’s eyes glittered at her like two diamonds. “I have a good view of the street from here.”

Shit. He’d seen her hesitation and near retreat then.

“There’s no need to be nervous, Sansa.”

She collected herself. “I’m not nervous. I’m embarrassed. There’s a difference.”

He laughed.

A server came up and deposited their food. He returned with coffee for her. “Anything else?”

“Hot sauce for the lady.”

How long had he been watching her? She’d been doing the same thing, but this was . . . no, she wasn’t going to do this. She would have her breakfast and tell him what he wanted to do was not her speed.
“Do you like Dornish food?” he asked as she doused her eggs.

Sansa shuddered involuntarily. “No.” Only Robb and Dad cared for it. She assumed they still did. It was years now since she’d seen any of them.

He pointed to the bottle of hot sauce.

“Just on my scrambled eggs,” she said. “What about you?”

“T spent two years in Dorne.”

It was an oblique statement and it didn’t answer her question. His expression was the same mild one he wore most of the time. “You were happy to leave and you don’t care for spicy food,” Sansa concluded.

Roose slit the yolks of his poached eggs. “Yes and yes, but we’re not here to discuss our food preferences. The Tyrell girl has gone back to King’s Landing?”

“Yes.” Sansa decided she needed to be direct. “The reason I hesitated about coming here is because I have some concerns.” She had a lot of concerns, actually.

He waited politely.

“I’ve never done anything like this before, had an affair, I mean. You’re a professor. I’m a student. We’re both connected with the same university. I’m seeing someone else.” She peered into the jam pot on the table and decided against it. “And I’m not very experienced with men.” It wasn’t exactly untrue.

Roose pushed the butter toward her. “Other than what you’ve observed and what I’ve told you, what have you heard about me, personally?”

She realized he knew she’d asked around. No, he’d intuited she’d asked. “Not very much.”

“I understand the value of discretion, Sansa. We’re a long way from the university in a large city. If we keep to ourselves and amuse ourselves quietly, no one need know.” He ate a forkful of egg. “My apartment isn’t near the university. We’ll use it rather than yours.”

Sansa found herself thinking she would rather he come to her, and then she realized she wanted this to happen after all.

“I imagine your neighbors have already seen you with the Tyrell girl.”

She spread butter on her toast as she tried to think.

“As for your inexperience, I believe I would rather enjoy teaching you.”

Sansa looked up at him. There was an intensity in his eyes that made her want to shiver. She didn’t though.

“We can see how it goes and determine if we should continue from there.”

“Margaery . . .”

“It would be best to be preemptive. You’ll tell her you’ve run into me and that we’ve spoken a few times. Tell her we’re researching similar things; it’s not a lie. The excuse will work for anyone else who should see us together, actually. I doubt the thought of you being in my bed will cross her
pretty, empty little head.”

She heard no malice in his voice, just casual dismissal of Margaery.

“I understand about needing,” he paused evidently searching for a word, “... amusement, Sansa. Why do you think I was with that stupid woman the other night? You have your arrangement in King’s Landing. I have no interest in ruining it for you. We’re simply two individuals forced to work in an unpleasant environment looking for a way to make it more palatable.”

* * *

Loras peered at the prints on the wall. “Which?”

Margaery cradled her drink. She was glad she’d invited him over. She loved all her brothers, but she had always been closest to Loras. “It’s the woodcut on the left. Brave Danny Flint.”

He looked puzzled. “From the Disney movie? Why would you fight about her?”

“I didn’t display enough interest.” She stared into the depths of her glass.

“I thought it was trite myself,” Loras commented. “Plucky tomboy runs away to have adventures. Meets ‘the man of her dreams’ and they go off to have adventures together.”

“That’s the top most layer of the story,” Margaery said before she drank. She tried to remember what Sansa had told her. “Brave Danny Flint ran off to join the Night’s Watch disguised as a boy.”

Loras scrunched his face. “I don’t remember the part about the Night’s Watch. I thought she—”

“They changed it. That’s the whole point. These stories that we know today have been altered over the centuries.” Margaery poured more wine into her glass. “Sansa’s focused on some other thing for her dissertation. Anyhow, she found a corroborating account of a version dating back to the War of the Five Kings and I guess there are fragments of the verses in the Archives. In this one, when they found out who Danny Flint was, they raped and murdered her.” She took a swallow. “And then her ghost roamed the Nightfort.”

“Cheery,” Loras pronounced.

“It is, comparatively. They’re all such gruesome, horrible stories. There’s not a happy ending to be found among them. Every layer she peels back is worse than the ones before. The stories get progressively darker until you’re left with a rotten, putrid core.”

Loras was frowning. “You didn’t tell her that I hope?”

“Of course not,” Margaery protested. “I just... she went on and on about it, verse after verse right after we’d made love. She was excited by what she’d found.”

“I thought Sansa was researching the Romantic poets.”

Margaery ran her finger around the rim of her glass. “She was obsessed with them when she was a sophomore. They gave way to the Realists for a very brief period. Then she became interested in the early novelists—those weren’t terribly pretty stories either. It’s been fairy tales since her the second half of her junior year.”

Loras sipped his wine. “I can see why this wouldn’t make for pleasant post-coital conversation, but why do you care what she studies?”
“She’s wearing herself out with the research,” Margaery said finally. “And a lot of the subject matter is . . . ‘The Rat Cook’ is one thing. ‘Brave Danny Flint’ . . .”

“Oh.” He got it. Margaery could tell. “I should have—”

“No, it’s not something most people would ordinarily consider. The deeper she goes . . . it’s not taking her to good places. She says she knows her limits, but Loras, she doesn’t take care of herself. If I let her, she’d start at 6:00 AM and go till 1:00 AM. She hasn’t had an episode in two years, but I remember the last one. It was when she was cramming for finals.”

Loras set his glass down. “What did she say when you told her this?”

Margaery twisted her lips. “I haven’t. You don’t know how she gets when I try to get her to slow down. If I say it’s because she’s overdoing it . . .”

“Is that the only reason?”

“We don’t have a lot of time left. I want to spend as much of it with her as possible. Is that so very bad?”

“What are you not telling me?”

Margaery hesitated. Loras knew her better than anyone else. She took a deep breath. “I did something stupid,” she began.

* * *

Although Roose’s apartment was larger and more comfortable than her little studio, it utterly lacked personality. It was also impeccably clean. Perhaps that explained the almost sterile quality to the air. He took her bag from her and disappeared toward what she presumed was the bedroom.

The only evidence of anything personal were a few crates of books that were neatly stacked on their sides. Sansa bent over and examined the titles. He’d talked about his research over dinner. She presumed these were essential texts he’d brought with him. One of her father’s books caught her eye. Sansa moved quickly to the next crate. When there were no more books left to examine, she looked around. Roose was staring at her.

“Come here, Sansa.” He held out a hand.

Shit, he wasn’t going to waste any time. She gave him hers and allowed him to lead her into the bedroom.

The reality of what she was about to do started to hit her. She looked down and realized she was shaking. She tried to stop herself and she couldn’t.

Roose seemed taken aback. “Are you a virgin?”

“No,” she managed.

“You have been with a man?”

Sansa forced herself to be still. “Yes.”

“You have had sexual intercourse?”

“I have an understanding of the term, Roose. This was a bad idea. I’m sorry. I should never have
agreed to this. It’s not fair to you.”

“You expressed interest and willingness earlier.”

“My experiences were not . . .” She didn’t want to have this discussion with him.

“Enjoyable?” Roose seemed partly irritated and partly puzzled.

Sansa wanted to be anywhere but here. “You could say that,” she muttered. “It’s not you. Look, I’m not ready for this. I thought I was, but I’m not.”

He made no move to step aside. He seemed to be thinking. “Sit down.”

“Roose, I’m not—it’s not you. It wouldn’t matter—”

“I won’t touch you. I just think we should talk.”

She sat gingerly on the edge of the bed.

“May I?” he gestured to a spot next to her.

Sansa had the sense that if she answered in the negative, he would respect her wishes. She nodded.

“You told me you were bisexual.” It wasn’t an accusation. It was more of a question. He sat beside her. “I received the impression you found me attractive.”

“I am.” She stared down at her hands. “I’ve had sex with guys. I’ve enjoyed it.” When she was on top and in control, she thought. Sansa doubted he was the type of man who would want to cede it to her. “I am attracted to you. It has nothing to do with you.”

Again, he furrowed his brow.

She didn’t say anything. She returned her gaze to her fingers.

“Sansa, look at me.” He waited until she complied. “Suppose . . . suppose we go slowly. We won’t do anything you aren’t ready for. If you want me to stop, tell me and I will.”

She considered this. “Could we go back into the living room?”

“Of course.”

She felt better when they were on his sofa.

Roose considered her. “Tell me if you enjoy what I’m doing to you or if you dislike it. All right?”

“All right.”

“May I kiss you?”

“Yes.”

He brought his lips to hers. He was gentle. The kiss deepened. He pulled away and looked a question at her.

Sansa leaned in and kissed him back. This might be all right. As long as he didn’t rush her, it might be fine.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you to tafkar for being an amazing beta!
Mildly Diverting Games

Chapter Notes

There is smut in this. I hope it is hot, but it may also be disturbing—it is meant to be so. Read at your peril.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * *

Fourteen Years Ago

* * *

Arya tore off the wrapping paper of her present. It was a doll. Sansa got one too. Arya saw the flash of disappointment in Sansa’s eyes, but she did a much better job of hiding it than Arya.

They said thank you to Mum’s friend. Sansa said it without being prompted.

Mr. Baelish smiled at both of them. He smiled at the boys too. “I can’t believe you have five children, Cat.”

“I have trouble believing it too sometimes.”

“And I cannot get over how much Sansa looks like you.”

Arya was used to the way grownups made a big deal out of Sansa. Sansa was well-behaved. She was smart. She followed the rules. Grownups loved her because of those things.

The other kids liked Sansa too. She was pretty. She always knew the right things to say or do. Nobody laughed at Sansa. Nobody called her goofy or dorky. She had lots of friends. Everyone was always telling Arya how lucky she was to have a sister like Sansa.

What people didn’t know about Sansa was that she lost her temper all the time. Sansa hated it when things got messed up. She hated sharing a room with Arya. When she got mad, she said things to Arya. She called her names. She pulled her hair and punched. She could be just as rough and tough as the rest of the Starks.

“All right,” their father told them finally. “You can go and play, but be back in time for supper.”

All of them except for Sansa tore out of the house. Sansa walked decorously until she was out of sight of the grownups and then she ran too.

That night when they getting ready for bed, Arya tossed her doll into the corner. She saw Sansa smooth her doll’s skirts and put it carefully on the dresser.

“You told Dad you were too old for dolls.”

“I am. But this isn’t that kind of a doll. It’s for decoration. It’s not for playing with.”

Arya rolled her eyes. “I can’t believe he fought with Uncle Brandon over Mum. Uncle Brandon must have wiped the floor with him.”
“You wouldn’t understand. You’re too young. He was in love with her and with Aunt Lysa too.”

Arya yawned. By the time she woke up the next morning, she had forgotten all about Mr. Baelish.

* * *

Present Day

* * *

Sansa let herself into her studio apartment. From the window she could see Roose on the street below looking up at her. She flicked the lights and watched him walk away. It had been a bonafide date.

As dates went, it had been a good one. They’d gone to another out-of-the-way restaurant she found and then to a movie. Other than putting his arm around her—an act for which he’d asked permission—he’d kept his hands to himself. Then he’d taken her back to his apartment where they’d talked and then made out. And when she’d started to get uncomfortable, he immediately stopped and brought her home. Roose assured her they would wait until she was ready.

It was refreshing not to have to negotiate everything. Outright begging would have been required to get Margaery to go to a documentary about archaeological finds at the site of Valyria. As far as she knew, Roose didn’t have any deep interest in either archaeology or Valyria, but he had been willing to see it. They’d had a good discussion about it too. His comments were intelligent and he had listened to her; she liked that. Margaery was very smart, but she wasn’t an intellectual and if it wasn’t of interest to her, she was never very invested.

Sansa kicked off her shoes, turned her phone back on, and listened to the message Margaery had left. Margaery still wanted to go to Pentos—could they maybe take just a four-day trip? She would email the potential dates to her. Sansa sighed, but she looked at the email. She didn’t know how much clearer she could be. She only had so long with the materials in the Archives. There was a goldmine of information in the boxes, but nothing was organized as yet, and it meant she spent long hours every day sifting through it all. Things she thought weren’t important were starting to take on new significance the deeper she went. A trip to Pentos smack in the middle of the work week was not feasible. She’d explained all of this to Margaery at least three times.

Sansa took a deep breath and called her. They chatted about inconsequential things until she couldn’t put it off any longer. “I can’t go to Pentos. I’m really sorry, but I don’t have the time.”

There was a long pause.

“You still haven’t forgiven me.” Margaery’s voice was flat.

“It has nothing to do with that.” Perhaps it did, but it wasn’t the only reason. “I told you how this works. The archivist can only give me so long with the papers.”

“It didn’t mean anything, Sansa. I had too much to drink and—”

And she’d let some horny investment banker fuck her, Sansa finished silently. “Was that the only time?”

This time the pause told her everything she needed to know. “Sansa—”

“I shouldn’t have brought this up.” Sansa was too tired to have this conversation again. “I cannot go to Pentos. I have too much to do here.”

“If I hadn’t been a complete idiot would your answer be different?”
“No.” But she wouldn’t have been spending what little free time she had in the company of Roose and contemplating an affair with him either.

* * *

Roose left the water untouched. His contact had urged him to take this meeting; the Spider was not someone to be taken lightly. The liquid in the glass was no doubt fine, but he hadn’t survived so long in this business by being careless.

The man who would only identify himself as Varys drank from his own glass. “My superiors are curious about why you are here.”

“Are they?”

“Yes. Might one inquire as to your reasons?”

“I was invited to teach for the semester.” Roose put his hands on the table. “And the Citadel’s library has material I need for my research.”

Varys absorbed this. “And are those your only motivations?”

The Spider knew. There was no point in lying or delaying. “I will be making a short trip to Braavos at some point for . . . personal banking matters.”

Varys nodded. “A short trip?”

“Two days. Perhaps three.”

“Two would be better.”

Roose shrugged. “If it weren’t for the flight schedule, it would only be one.”

“And is that all?”

“There is a woman I am pursuing. She wishes to be caught so I imagine I will find my free time filled with enjoying her.” He hoped he would be. Three dates in and Sansa was still tense whenever he touched her, but matters were progressing and he had some ideas for tonight.

“Ah, the red-haired young lady.”

This place was worse than Dorne. “Yes,” Roose acknowledged mildly.

Varys leaned back. “And you will be leaving when?”

“At the end of the semester.” Roose pushed the water away.

Varys gestured and a servant vanished with the glass. “Forgive me, one must take precautions. It’s poisoned, of course. Would you care for something else?”

“No.” Roose smiled faintly. “Would it reassure your superiors to know I will not be taking on any extra work while I am in the Reach?”

“It would. Are you making such assurances?”

“Yes.”
“Then I think our business is concluded.”

He rose.

“It would not be prudent, Dr. Bolton, to tarry too long in these parts. Teach your class, do your research, enjoy your lady, and then leave.”

“I will.”

* * *

When they returned to his apartment after dinner, Roose considered her. “Would you like to play a game?”

Sansa’s eyebrows shot up. “Like cards?”

Roose gave her a half smile. “Something much more enjoyable than cards, Sansa,” he promised.

It didn’t sound much different from what they’d been doing, she thought. He would ask permission for anything he did to her. If she told him no or didn’t like it, he would stop. The only change she could discern was that he wanted to go into the bedroom straight off. She took a deep breath and assented.

He began the way he had been, by asking if he could kiss her.

As with the other occasions, she was struck at how practiced he was. Why she was surprised was beyond her; he’d been married three times. He was older. Margaery said older guys were sometimes a lot better in the sack. They’d talked at one point about finding a man to share, but they liked being with each other so much, they’d decided it wasn’t worth the bother.

Roose moved his mouth so it hovered over her ear. “May I kiss your neck?”

“Yes.” They’d done this too. Sansa arched it so he would have better access.

“Do you like this?” he murmured.

“Yes,” she told him softly. He knew what he was doing. He pushed her hair out of the way. He began alternating his attentions between her lips and her neck. She positioned her arms around him. She hadn’t thought she’d enjoy the passivity of this given her history, but it was oddly arousing.

Roose bent down over her again.

Sansa moaned as he discovered a particularly sensitive spot on her clavicle. “There, oh my gods, oh, I like that.”

He looked up at her, the corners of his mouth quirking upwards. “Unusual, but useful to know,” he pronounced. “You said you had boyfriends before,” he murmured as he came up and nibbled on her ear.

“Yes.”

“What did you do with them?”

“This sort of thing. You’re much better at it than any of them ever were.” There was no need to mention—no, she wasn’t even going to think about him.
Roose laughed. “I should hope so.” Now his mouth was on hers again.

“Roose,” she murmured when he had come up for air.

“Yes?”

“Will you kiss my clavicle again?”

He didn’t reply, but he obliged her. Then he began to make a study of her. There wasn’t an inch of her neck or her shoulders that he left unexamined.

Sansa liked what he was doing to her although there was a slightly clinical feel to the experience.

He brought his hands so that they hovered around her breasts. “May I?”

She hesitated for the briefest of moments. Would he really stop if she said no? He was waiting for her assent. Yes, he would stop. She nodded.

As he began to fondle her, the ache between her legs deepened. He unzipped the back of her dress. She let him pull it off her. She felt distinctly vulnerable clad as she was in only her underthings.

He ran his hands over her skin, testing, and probing. “Tell me what you like,” he commanded.

She shivered. “I like that, right there.”

He caressed the spot, pressing harder. Then he returned to his examination.

Sansa grew more vocal.

He reached under her and undid her brassiere. “Gods, you’re beautiful.” Roose gently pushed onto her back and began his explorations in earnest. He used his hands and then he used his mouth.

The sensation was amazing. “Oh my gods, that. Don’t stop. Why are you stopping?”

He shifted position and began to kiss the underside of her other breast.

She arched her body toward him.

He paused. “Does the Tyrell girl do that to you?”

Sansa quivered. She would really rather not talk about Margaery let alone think about her right now. “Please, do it again. “

“Has she done this?” He put his mouth over one of her nipples and sucked at it.

“Oh my gods.”

Roose turned his attentions to the other one. “Would you like me to stop?” he asked after.

“No,” she breathed.

He came up and kissed her mouth again.

She fumbled with the buttons on his shirt and pushed it off of him. She ran her fingers over his arms. He was in surprisingly good shape, actually. He had firm taut muscles. She could feel him hardening, but when she reached down, Roose pushed her onto her back again. He used his hands
“Shit. That. Do that again.”

He stroked her belly. “I don’t like women who swear.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind,” she murmured.

“Good.” He brought his finger up to her lips again and let her suck it. He slipped a finger from his other hand underneath the waistband of her panties. “May I?”

“I don’t . . . not yet, please.” She needed to keep some control. She waited to see what he would do. When he moved his fingers back up to her breasts, she was half relieved and half disappointed.

“Tell me what the Tyrell girl does to you.”

“Kiss them again, please.”

Instead he lowered his hands down her legs. He deftly unsnapped each of the garters. He moved off of the bed and knelt down on the floor “Give me your right leg.”

She put her foot in his hand.

He removed her shoe and her stocking. He repeated the process with the left. He made a lengthy study of her calves. For one moment, she thought every pleasure center was located on the hollow of her right knee.

“Don’t you want me to do anything to you?”

“I’m not finished with you yet.” Again his hand reached down to her panties. “May I?”

“No.” She couldn’t think why she was refusing him. She wanted him, almost as much as she’d ever wanted Margaery.

Roose caressed her sides.

His phone began buzzing.

“Go ahead if you have to take it.” It felt like she was an instrument he was learning to play. It would give her a moment or two to regain control if he answered his phone.

Roose had other ideas. He picked it up. “Hello.” With his free hand he caressed the underside of her breasts again.

She stifled a moan.

“I enjoyed our dinner the other night as well. Was your emergency easily handled?” He brought his fingers over her mouth and smiled as she sucked at them. “I’m afraid I’m going to be busy for the next few days.” He swept his eyes over her body. “Very busy. It can’t be helped. No, I’ve found something very precious and I need time to explore it properly.”

Sansa swallowed a laugh.

“If I’m ever in Astapor, would it be all right if I called you? Good. Have a safe journey home.” He hung up.
“Was that the woman from the other night?”

“Yes.”

“Take them off,” Sansa said suddenly.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes. I don’t want to have sex yet, but you can touch me down there.”

Roose smiled. “The same rules apply. Tell me what you like and what you don’t. I will stop if you tell me to.” He slipped off his shoes and socks. Then he removed his trousers and laid them over a chair.

“Could you take off your watch too? The metal is kind of cold.”

“Yes.” He switched the lamp on the nightstand. “That’s better. I want to see you.” He slid her panties off of her. “May I?”

Sansa closed her eyes. “Yes.” She felt his finger slide between her legs. She shivered.

“I imagine the Tyrell girl has done this to you.”

“Yes.”

He explored with the same careful attention as he had paid to her breasts and her neck. “What is she like?”

Sansa didn’t want to talk about Margaery. “You’ve met her.”

“Yes. I mean as a lover.”

“Why are you so interested in what Margaery has done to me?” She gasped as he quite expertly fingered her.

He stopped. “Tell me.”

“That’s not fair.”

Roose gazed at her mildly. “No, it’s not,” he admitted. “Tell me.”

“She doesn’t torture me like this,” Sansa managed.

He began moving his finger again. “Keep talking and I’ll keep going.”

“She’s not as good as you are with your hands.” It was an exaggeration, but she didn’t want him to stop. “To be honest, I like doing things to her more.”

“You’ve gone down on her?”

“Yes. And fingered her. She likes that a lot.” Sansa arched her body as he hit a sensitive spot.

“You like being in control,” Roose told her. “I do too.”

“I can tell. Oh my gods, there. There.” Speech left her as he began to bring her to climax. She thrust herself against his fingers. He took them away.
“Why are you stopping?”

“Call her.”

“What?” Sansa propped herself up on her elbows. Her breath was ragged.

Roose opened her bag and removed her phone. “I want you to call her.”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

Sansa stared at him.

He found Margaery’s number and hit the icon to begin dialing. He waited until Margaery answered, then he handed Sansa back the phone.

Was he serious?

“Sansa? I’m so glad you called.”

“Hi, Margaery, I . . . just wanted to hear your voice.”

Roose spread her legs apart and began to use his mouth on her.

Sansa struggled to maintain control. Margaery seemed to be oblivious to Sansa’s distraction. She chatted away quite happily about the things she’d been doing, the people she’d been seeing, the clothes she’d bought, all the while Roose was licking and nipping at her. This was insane. With her spare hand Sansa clutched at his head. He pulled away and looked up at her. Gods, his eyes. He wasn’t human. He waited till she regained some control and then he began in earnest. It thrilled her to realize he had just been playing with her.

“I shouldn’t keep you,” Sansa managed.

But Margaery wasn’t finished, and neither was Roose. He would bring her to the edge and then back away again. Over and over as Margaery prattled away.

“Grandmother is on the other line. I have to go. I’ll call you tomorrow?”

“Okay.” When she heard the dial tone, Sansa hung up.

Roose then took her right over the edge. In the brief moments of clarity, Sansa wondered where he had learned to be such an expert lover. She thrashed and moaned in ecstasy. He was going to ask her if he was better than Margaery and she would be able to truthfully say yes. “That was perverse,” she told him when he was lying next to her after it was over.

“You enjoyed it.”

She was half horrified and half titillated to realize she had. “You don’t play fair.”

Roose propped himself up on an elbow. “No, I don’t.”

Sansa sat up on her knees. “Take those off,” she ordered, tugging at his boxer shorts. “I want you inside me.”

“Even though I don’t play fair?”
“Because you don’t play fair.”

* * *

Roose was well pleased with his plaything. Four weeks into the affair and their attraction had only grown stronger. He could not imagine a better companion than Sansa Stark. During the day, she worked on her research as diligently as he did on his. She was an interesting conversationalist at dinner or when they explored the city. And in his bed, she was delightfully wanton.

He was still weaning her from her affection for the Tyrell girl, but he had to admit her experience there made her particularly well suited to pleasure him. And Sansa took instruction very well. She was on her knees to him now, his cock in her mouth, licking and sucking like she was born to do nothing else. He had her red hair in his hands. He tugged and she obediently rose and straddled him. He entered her. This went like clockwork. She knew exactly what to do and how to do it. She clutched and moaned with abandon and they came together.

Roose let her rest for a few moments. They continued to play little games and his favorite was next. He took particular pleasure in making Sansa call her own plaything while he went down on her. This was now a nightly ritual for them; Sansa was beginning to enjoy it as much as he did, even if she still made token protests. It had started for him as a harmless way to enjoy humiliating Sansa. Now it was the way in which they humiliated the Tyrell girl together. She had no idea and it made it all the more amusing.

He reached for Sansa’s phone.

“Roose, I—”

He thought she would be willing to dial, but it had become part of their ritual for him to do it. He waited until he heard the Tyrell girl’s honeyed tones and then he handed the phone to Sansa.

Roose began slowly. He could practically bring Sansa to orgasm just by playing with her breasts, but he enjoyed drawing this out.

“Hi, Margaery.”

Roose dropped kisses down Sansa’s sternum, caressing as he moved further down.

“What?” Sansa jerked away from him. “When?”

This wasn’t part of their game. He gave Sansa a questioning look and read panic in her eyes. He returned to the bed.

“Margaery, this isn’t the best time. I only have so long with the Archives. If you come down here, I won’t be able to see much of you. I want to see you too, but the timing is just . . . For how long? Three days?”

Roose relaxed. It would be a useful exercise for Sansa to be out of his bed for a short time. Three days would teach her she needed him, but would not be so long that she’d learn to do without him. He nodded his assent.

“All right. So next Thursday to Saturday?”

Even better. He could make the trip to Braavos and deal with his banking.

Sansa looked at him.
Roose nodded again.

“Okay, email me your flight times and I’ll meet you at the airport.” Sansa hung up. “Roose, I’m sorry. She booked everything. She said she wanted it to be a surprise.”

He realized she was upset. “Sweetling—”

She froze. “Sansa,” she corrected. “You are not to call me anything other than Sansa.”

“Are you giving me orders, sweet—?”

“Yes.” Sansa pushed him on his back and climbed on top of him. “Sansa. You may not call me anything else.”

Roose found himself smiling. She was an imperious creature even naked and crawling on him like a whore. “Sansa,” he agreed. “But you are sweet.”

“Are you upset about Margaery?”

“What do you think?” It was another of their little games. He kept his face expressionless and she attempted to read him.

“No,” she said slowly. “You’re not. Why aren’t you though?”

He caressed the undersides of her breasts with his thumbs. “It will be good for you and I have to go to Braavos.”

“Good for me how?”

He put his hands around her waist and guided her off of him and onto her back.

“She’ll want to have sex with me,” Sansa warned. “She’s very persistent. I won’t be able to stop her.”

“You aren’t to stop her,” Roose said mildly. “You are to let her worship you.” He spread her legs apart. “And you are to pleasure her as often as she requires it.”

“Why?”

“Because I want you to miss me.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Big thank yous to my uh, smut consultants(?): [YellowDelaney](#), [Miss_M](#), [Vana](#), and of course to [tafkar](#) who beta read as well.
* * *

**Eleven Years Ago**

* * *

Arya groaned as Rickon kept on asking why Sansa had to go away to school. “I don’t know.”

Rickon raced into Sansa’s room with Arya following after him. She was packing her things very calmly. “I don’t want you to go,” he whined.

“I have to.” Sansa seemed very quiet. “It’s a great opportunity.” She swallowed.

Arya had heard a lot about this “great opportunity.” Mum and Dad hadn’t been thrilled about it at first, but then there had been lots of conversations she’d overheard as to how great it would be for Sansa. Dad conceded that the level of education Sansa would be getting was too good to pass up. Arya translated that to mean more homework and her initial envy at all the attention Sansa was getting diminished rapidly.

Mum was concerned that Sansa didn’t seem to have as many friends as she used to. It worried Mum how Sansa spent so much time alone. She never had friends over anymore. Now Sansa would be immersed with lots of other girls. The experience might take her out of herself, whatever that meant.

“I’m going to miss you,” Rickon whimpered.

Sansa got down to Rickon’s eye level. “I’m going to miss you too.” She hugged him and then to Arya’s utter shock, she got up and hugged her as well. “Keep him safe. You keep safe. Don’t—” she stopped.

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t trust too easily.” Sansa zipped her suitcase shut. She looked around the room.

“Aren’t you taking those?” Arya pointed to the dolls on the dresser.

Sansa shook her head. “No.”

Arya noticed most of Sansa’s favorite things were still in their usual places. All her books were right where they always were. Sansa was very careful about her books. While she was gone, Arya was going to move into this room, and Bran was going into Arya’s. “I’ll try not to mess up your stuff,” Arya said. It felt strange to realize Sansa wasn’t going to be around every day anymore. As much as they quarreled, Arya did love her.

“It’s all yours. Throw it out, burn it. I don’t want any of it.”

“But—”

Sansa wheeled her suitcase to the door. “Rickon, go downstairs and wait for me, okay? I want to say something to Arya.” She waited until he trundled away. “I meant it, you keep him safe. Robb’s
big enough to defend himself. Bran is too weird for . . . for anyone to mess with. Just watch out for Rickon and yourself and no matter what, don’t trust people. That’s how you get hurt.”

* * *

Present Day
* * *

Margaery knew the Reach well and she wanted to show Sansa all her favorite haunts.

Half of them were places she’d already seen with Roose and the other half weren’t terribly interesting. Sansa feigned ignorance and enjoyment.

Sansa didn’t remember Margaery being this annoying. It should have helped that Margaery had apologized up and down for her fooling around. She had drunk too much. It was all over, she promised. She swore this was the end of those incidents; she would cut back on the drinking too. It was not the first time they’d had this discussion, but Sansa didn’t like how guilty she felt now. Sansa didn’t know if she would have felt so uncomfortable if it had just been the affair, but Roose’s game with the phone—a game she’d played quite willingly—nagged at her conscience.

She was irked when Margaery asked perfunctory polite questions about her research and then dropped the subject. She knew it wasn’t really her speed, but she’d helped Margaery study for exams. She’d proofread her papers. Surely it wasn’t too much for Margaery to pretend to care about this really exciting find that was going to make such a huge difference to her career?

“That's great, Sansa,” was all Margaery said when Sansa told her at length about what she'd uncovered about the original Night’s King. Sansa knew they were disturbing tales, but did Margaery really have to squirm quite so much when she talked about them? Roose never flinched. If anything he encouraged her to talk to him about the things she was discovering.

Twice she tried to bring up what was going to happen when Margaery graduated. It frustrated her that it was never even on the table for Margaery to stand up to her family and stick it out with her. Plenty of people were gay or bisexual. The Tyrells were the second richest family in the country. Surely they had enough money. When it came down to it, Margaery had her own money. Her brothers and parents adored her. They would stand by her if she came out. But if If it wasn’t a possibility, and Sansa had always known it wasn’t, then Sansa wanted their relationship to end on their own terms.

Margaery didn’t want to discuss it.

Each afternoon, Sansa opted for the easiest option: she suggested they go back to the apartment early and they made love. Even that was problematic.

Margaery was nothing if not enthusiastic, but it wasn’t the same. Sansa had to tell her what to do. Roose knew. Even when Sansa thought she wanted something else, Roose knew what she needed. It was as if he’d awakened strange dark appetites in her that only he understood and only he could sate.

“When did you get to be so bossy in bed?” Margaery asked, laughing.

“I’ve always been bossy in bed,” Sansa retorted. “And you like it.”

“Maybe I do.”

“Stop talking so much.” She reached down for Margaery’s hands and guided them to her breasts. “Stroke them there, both of them.”
There. That was what she needed.

“Thank you.”

“For what? There. Kiss me there.”

Margaery obeyed. “Like this?”

“Yes. Harder.” He’d called her twice. She’d called him several times. Their phone conversations were odd things. Who was she kidding? Their relationship was an odd thing. “That! Don’t stop.” Finally, Margaery concentrated and Sansa began to thrust her body with abandon.

When it was over, Margaery crawled back up on the bed.

Sansa pushed her onto her back. “Why were you thanking me?”

“For taking off time from your research to be with me,” Margaery told her.

Sansa looked down at her girlfriend and smiled. She studied her body. Margaery was beautiful and she was hers. For at least one more semester, she was hers. Sansa kissed her lightly on the lips.

“That’s nice,” Margaery murmured when Sansa stopped.

It was, but it wasn’t enough anymore and the realization made her sad.

* * *

The driver of the car opened the door for Roose. It was the same nondescript café where he’d first had his audience with Varys. He wondered what this was about. He’d played by their rules. He’d even taken a red eye so as to restrict his visit to Braavos to a day and a half.

He waited politely. He would be very glad when he could leave this southron city. King’s Landing was beginning to seem a paradise in comparison.

“You are wondering why we are meeting again so soon.”

“Yes.”

“The woman you have been enjoying,” Varys hesitated. “I’m afraid I have some bad news.”

Roose waited. He’d spoken to Sansa an hour earlier. If something had happened to her, the Spider had caused it.

The man passed him an envelope.

Roose kept his hands on the table.

Varys opened it and spread the contents in front of Roose.

The pictures were of Sansa and Margaery Tyrell. They were harmless. Sansa had evidently taken the Tyrell girl sightseeing. The Tyrell girl was still clearly besotted with Sansa.

“You are not surprised.”

“No. You are now about to tell me they have been intimate.”
“Yes.” Varys was frowning.

“It is of no importance.”

Varys leaned forward. “No, it’s not. One can see this is the case. One wonders why.”

“Why is it of importance to you?”

“We were concerned that you might cause harm to the other young woman. She is of a very prominent family.”

Roose shrugged. “She leaves tomorrow morning. I told my . . . lady she might enjoy herself in my absence.”

“Forgive me, but our sources suggest you are not usually so liberal with your . . .”

“With the things that are mine?” Roose suggested.

“Yes.”

“Perhaps your sources are wrong.” He pushed his chair away from the table. “Unless there was something else?”

Varys hesitated. “There is one other matter.”

“Yes?”

“We have had some interest in removing your lady.”

Roose stared at him with unblinking eyes. “Have you?”

“I believe there are parties who feel that she is a distraction to her guest, that she might be keeping her from the future they wish for her.” Varys turned the pictures toward him. “She is quite beautiful.”

The Tyrells. “Has a contract been made?”

“Whispers only, so far.”

Roose considered. “I believe I told you I came here partly in pursuit of this woman?” He waited for Varys to nod. “I mean to keep on with her and I do not like to share.”

“And yet you already have, Dr. Bolton.”

“Give a child enough sweets at one time and she’ll soon be sick of them.”

“Ah, I take your meaning.” Varys grew thoughtful. “This is not a service we normally provide, but there may be some interest in speeding up the process of—” He broke off. “Would you be interested? I believe the sum would be sizable.”

Roose smiled faintly. “Is this something that has been suggested?”

“No,” Varys admitted. He stacked the photos and slid them back into their envelope. “One endeavors to be useful to one’s superiors. Inquiries could be made.”

He wasn’t a gigolo. And even if he was, it would be unwise to accept money for such a service.
With the fee would come demands and expectations that might prove irksome to fill. “The lady will cease to be a distraction to anyone but me very soon.”

“Then I think our business is concluded, Dr. Bolton.”

He would need to separate Sansa from the Tyrell girl quickly. It was doable. If her phone calls with him were anything to go by, Sansa was counting the hours till she put her on a plane.

* * *

Sansa stared at Margaery, who kept speaking.

“Don’t you see? It’s perfect. You marry Loras. I’ll marry Renly. My family will get off my back and we can still be together. Loras and Renly can be together.”

And they would be locked into a lifetime of lies and deceit. “I doubt your family is going to think I’m rich enough for your brother.”

Margaery placed her makeup case in her luggage. “Leave it to me. I can talk Grandmother around. If she’s on board everyone will accept it.”

“Loras works in the Reach.”

“So?”

“I have two more years before I’m done with my dissertation. My advisor thinks I have a future, but I’ll have to go where there are openings.”

Margaery shrugged. “Sansa, Loras has money. He’ll have a lot more after Grandmother dies. You won’t have to work.”

“I like my work. I know you don’t understand it, but—”

“I’m sure you could find something. The Citadel—”

“—has a shit literature program. If I have to get a job here for a few years while I make my name, that’s one thing, but I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in Oldtown even if there was a position.” The appeal of the city had waned. She’d been here almost two months.

“There are other colleges.”

“Community colleges.”

“So?”

Sansa handed Margaery a pair of heels she’d forgotten. “I wouldn’t be able to teach the subjects I want to. It would be semester after semester of book reports and position papers on the death penalty.”

“So you love your career more than you love me.”

Sansa didn’t say anything. She needed her independence no matter what. She knew damn well it was a mistake to depend upon people. That was how you got hurt.

“I love you, Sansa. Forgive me for wanting a future with you in it.”
“We went into this relationship knowing it would have to end at some point. You were the one who persuaded me to accept it then. If you would just stand—”

Margaery zipped her suitcase shut. “—So you’re just fine with walking away? I’ll graduate and you’ll be thrilled since you’ll be able to work eighteen hours a day and fuck whoever it is you’ve been fucking here.”

“What?”

“I’m not stupid, Sansa. Who is she? Or he?”

“Margaery, I don’t want to do this.”

“Of course you don’t. You were fine with me coming out here because you could fuck me, but now you’re done, and you just want to put me back on a plane so you can go back to your disgusting fairy tales and your lover.”

“I haven’t touched any of my work while you’ve been here. Not once. I’ve been available to you the whole time. We’ve gone wherever you wanted to go and done whatever you wanted to do.”

Margaery yanked her suitcase into an upright position. “You’re different now. You’ve changed. You’re different when we talk. You don’t like to do the same things you used to. Your attitudes are different. And you’re certainly different in bed. I’m not dumb. I may not be able to discourse on the rhyming schemes of Valyrian poetry, but I know when someone’s been cheating on me, and you have. So this is what’s going to happen. You do whatever you need to do here, but when you come back to King’s Landing, you’re going to do whatever you need to do to return back to being my Sansa.”

“And if I don’t?” Sansa asked evenly.

“Then you can find somewhere else to live.”

* * *

Roose unlocked the passenger door for Sansa. “Her flight left?”

“I watched her get on it and waited till it took off.”

“Good.” He navigated the car away from the airport. “She was difficult?” Their last phone conversation was brief. Sansa had been subdued.

Sansa stared out the passenger window. “Not till the end. Can we go for a drive some place in the country? I’m sick of the city. Every time I turn around there are dozens of little children staring at me with their creepy *Children of the Corn* eyes.”

Varys’ spies, he thought. “I believe it’s mostly fields and farm land.”

“I don’t care.”

He obligingly pointed the car away from the metropolitan center and drove into the outskirts of town. Soon they were in a rural area.

“There.” She pointed to a sign for a scenic overlook.

The overlook wasn’t particularly scenic, but the place was deserted. At a minimum they would have privacy.
Sansa peered down into the valley below them. After a moment, she shrugged and sat on an outcropping of rock, hugging her knees to her chest.

Roose sat next to her.

She began to talk then. Sansa had missed him. The sex had been unsatisfactory. She was now behind on her work and the last few hours had been very unpleasant. She took a deep breath and then she related her last conversation with the Tyrell girl.

“How did you answer her accusations?”

“I didn’t.” Sansa turned her head to face him. “Don’t worry. Your name never came up once.”

He reached out and caressed her cheek with his thumb. He wasn’t concerned. “I appreciate your discretion.”

“I’ve been with her for six years and I’ve known her for ten. I’ve never seen her like that.”

“How bad did it get?”

“When we were in the rental car she repeated what she said about throwing me out. She told me I could go eat ramen three times a day and see how I liked it.”

Roose laughed.

“It’s not funny. I am not a gold digger and I’m not a whore. I didn’t become involved with her because of her money. I never touched one copper star of it. She was always trying to give me things and I refused them all.” Sansa stared toward the valley again.

“Do you regret our affair?”

She turned to him and gave him a puzzled look. “Did I say I did?”

“It has indirectly resulted in the potential destruction a relationship of six years,” he pointed out.

“This has been coming for a while. Not the affair, the ending of the relationship. And no, I don’t regret it. The funny thing is how we’ve reversed our positions. When we started out, I was anxious and unsure and she was the calm, practical one. Now . . .” she threw her hands up.

“Can you afford to live on your own?”

“What?”

Roose adjusted his body so that he faced her more easily. “You are at a crossroads. You can either accept her ultimatum or you end it with her.”

“I have my stipend. I have some savings. I’m careful with my money.” Sansa thought a bit. “I’d have to find something further out. I can’t afford to live near campus. As long as it’s on a bus line, it would be all right. Yes, I can move out. That’s what you want me to do, isn’t it?” she asked shrewdly.

He knew he needed to go carefully here. “What I want isn’t the issue.” It needn’t be. Everything he wanted marched together with what she wanted quite evenly.

“What happens to us after this semester?”
“I have grown quite fond of you, Sansa,” he said truthfully.

“But?” she prompted.

“We can continue on as we have been, but we will need to be considerably more discreet in King’s Landing.”

“And since I don’t own a car and because I share my apartment with my girlfriend, being discreet is a problem.”

He gave her a sad smile.

“I won’t be able to afford a car even if I move out,” she warned.

“That needn’t be an obstacle, especially if you are living away from the university.” He patted his lap. “Come here.”

She obeyed wrapping her legs and arms around him.

“Do you know how to drive?” He put his arms around her as well. He was tempted to take her right here and now, but several cars had passed in the time they’d been talking.

“Yes, but I can either afford a car or live alone. Not both and I don’t want a roommate.”

Roose nodded. This would work out well, he thought. “I was merely curious. If you’re living alone, I can certainly come to you. How much longer for what you need to do in the archives?”

“A solid week, I think. Why?”

“We could go back early. My seminar is done.” He saw her beginning to object. “Say in another two weeks. Then we’ll return to King’s Landing. You can stay with me. You’ll have a month to find an apartment.”

“Are you sure about me staying with you? You haven’t seen me in one of my moods.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Something to look forward to?”

“I don’t know about that.” Sansa smiled, but quickly turned serious. “I’m a workaholic. When I’m in the zone, I won’t stop for anyone or anything. If people try to make me, it’s not pretty.”

“We’re alike in that regard. I’m not worried about our getting along, Sansa. I have been married three times; I’m accustomed to living with another person. Our habits are not dissimilar. As long as you are settled before the semester starts, it will serve as a solution.”

“Where do you live?”

He gave her the general area. There was no point in telling her the address. The road was unmarked and his house was the only property on it. “Why?”

“I told you I don’t have a car. How would I get into the city to look at apartments?”

“I’ll drop you off wherever you like in the morning on my way into the university and pick you up in the late afternoon on my way back to the house. I think that would be the best arrangement while you stay with me. The campus will be virtually empty. You can work uninterrupted.” Roose took care not to leave things lying around his house, but he wasn’t about to give her free reign of the place either.
“All right.” Sansa started to pull away, but he held her fast. “Here? Five cars have passed by since we sat down.”

Roose frowned. “I only heard four.”

“One of those super quiet hybrids drove by. I don’t know if we should risk it.”

“We won’t. But I like you on my lap.”

“Roose?”

“Mmm?”

“Have I changed so much?” She was clearly bothered by the Tyrell girl’s accusations.

“People grow apart,” he said with a shrug. Sansa was becoming increasingly satisfactory to him; that was all he cared about. “Or they stop growing. Like your little friend.”

“She said I was different in bed.”

Roose kissed her neck.

“It’s changing me somehow. Being with you, I mean.” She smiled as he nipped at her clavicle. “Don’t start anything you can’t finish,” she warned.

He would start anything he pleased, he thought in amusement. He unbuttoned the second button of her blouse. He liked the idea of teasing her here and making her drive back unsated. The thought of making her wait was an appealing one.

Sansa slapped his hands away. “When Margaery gave me the ultimatum, she said she wanted me to do whatever I had to in order to turn back into her Sansa. I’m not sure I could do that even if I wanted to and it frightens me.”

“Ah, but you are my Sansa now,” he informed her.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to tafkar for her usual expert help with this chapter.
Margaery’s parents and brothers took to Sansa. Garlan commented on how quiet she’d been on the drive south, but he thought along with everyone else that she was a lovely, polite girl.

Grandmother was not so easily charmed. She asked Sansa a great many questions, direct and indirect.

Sansa answered all of them, but with each query she grew paler and more timid.

“Well,” Grandmother pronounced after she’d allowed Sansa to escape for a walk, “it’s a pity she doesn’t have two copper stars to rub together. Whatever money the Starks have left belongs to Brandon Stark. Otherwise she might have done for Loras.”

“She’s not even sixteen,” Mother said horrified.

Olenna Tyrell fixed her daughter-in-law with a look and waited for her to leave as well. When she was alone with Margaery, she turned to her. “She’s a sweet child, but you would do better to cultivate friendships with girls who will travel in the same circles as you.”

“I have lots of friends, Grandmother. She’s been helping me with my schoolwork.”

Grandmother smiled then. “Oh, well, that’s all right then.”

She was used to her grandmother being blunt, but for the first time in her life the callousness of it disturbed her.

“Sansa? It’s Margaery, please call me back. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it. I was angry and I said things—look, just call me back. We can work this out.” She hung up and sighed.

Loras came in and handed her a cup of coffee. “She still hasn’t returned your calls?”

“No.”

“So you fought about her working too hard and then what happened—” he stopped. “That’s not what you fought about it, is it?”

She could deceive most people, but Loras wasn’t one of them. Out it all came. Margaery talked till there was no more to say. He winced when she got to the part about giving Sansa an ultimatum. “I didn’t mean it—you have to know I wouldn’t have thrown her out—I’ve apologized on her voicemail, but she won’t call me back. I’ve emailed. I’ve texted. I don’t know what to do.”
He ran a hand through his dark brown curly hair. “Do you really think Sansa’s been having an affair?”

“I know she was or is.”

He considered her. “Is it—was it a revenge fuck on her part? To get back at you for your own slip? Or is it something more?”

“I don’t know.” She kept her eyes focused on the cream she was stirring into her coffee. “I was drunk. Sansa deliberately went out and slept with someone.”

Loras hesitated before responding. “You’re begging her to forgive you, but from what you just said, you haven’t forgiven her and . . .”

“What?”

“It doesn’t sound like you know what you want.”

“I want Sansa.”

He set his coffee mug down. “Then what were you doing having sex with someone else?”

* * *

Roose’s house was different from what Sansa expected. Unlike the apartment in Oldtown, there was evidence of his personality here. He favored heavy, solid furniture and masculine décor. There were strange, dark prints framed on his walls. Some of them she recognized as being images of historical battles, others were harder to identify.

“Is that a flaying?” she asked about one engraving in the upstairs hallway.

“Yes.” He offered no comment or apology. If she asked questions, he answered them, but he did not volunteer information.

Roose was a considerate host. He cleared out space for her in his closet and in his dresser. He even set aside half the medicine cabinet for her. She took care not to overstep her bounds. She only used the rooms he brought her to. Although Roose said nothing to the contrary, Sansa got the casual impression he did not want to leave her alone in his house. The first indication was on the second day after their return.

She was ensconced with her reading in the kitchen when she felt him watching her.

“Have you ever used a pistol?”

Her irritation at being interrupted turned to bemusement. “No, why?”

“I do target practice on Sunday mornings.”

She didn’t know why she was surprised. He was a northerner. She’d seen handguns and rifles around his house. Most northerners were comfortable and conversant with firearms. “Okay. When will you be back?”

Roose looked at her expectantly.

Sansa then realized he wanted her to come along. “I don’t know anything about guns.”
And the next thing she knew she was in the woods behind his house with him wearing something he called hearing protection aids and shooting at cans and bottles. He was expert. Sansa watched as he shot target after target. She wondered how long he was going to make her stay out here with him. As nice as it was to be standing in the crisp autumn air standing among the sweet-smelling pines, she had so much to do. The materials the Citadel Archives had were taking her in different directions than she’d anticipated. It meant she had a lot more background research to do. Sansa had set up three appointments to see apartments tomorrow. And they were all in different quarters of the city so she’d be stuck on buses most of the day.

After he’d shot—and hit—at everything he’d aimed at, he strode out and set up more targets. “Your turn,” he told her pleasantly when he walked back.

Sansa was dubious. She stared at the pistol he offered her.

“Here.” He showed her how to load the gun; he gave her instructions as to her stance; and then standing with his arms around her shoulders, he helped her aim.

To her astonishment, she found she rather liked the experience. She missed everything at first, but he watched and advised and then she hit some of the larger objects.

“You have a natural eye,” he told her.

Sansa rather doubted it, but she shot at things till he told her they’d done enough for the day. They were not finished, though. Back at the house, Roose took her into the basement and showed her how to clean a gun. Her father had taught the boys how to do things like this. Arya had begged to learn. She may have done so. Sansa couldn’t remember. Jon and Robb sometimes took pity on her. Sansa had never been interested.

He led her back upstairs. “I have errands. I can leave you at a restaurant in town where you can do your reading or you may accompany me.”

She opted for the latter. At the supermarket, she tried to pay for half the groceries, but the look he gave her was so fierce she was almost frightened. After that she contented herself with offering to push carts or helping to carry his purchases to the car.

Back at the house, he suggested this might be a good time for her to read. Roose offered the living room as the place best suited for it. Sansa preferred working at tables, but it was his house and she was his guest, so she agreed and tried to get comfortable. He moved about doing whatever it was he needed to do.

Periodically she felt him checking up on her. It wasn’t like with Margaery where she was trying to guilt Sansa into paying attention to her or trying to distract her out of some misguided sense of fun. No, she intuited, he was making sure she was where she should be.

It was awkward for her to read and take notes on the sofa. The chair was worse. It was clearly his chair. Finally she couldn’t bear it any longer. She sat on the floor, her legs under his coffee table and she took her notes that way.

“Sansa?”

She looked up.

“Sansa?” There was displeasure in his voice. Mild displeasure—Roose never seemed to get angry.
Because she wasn’t where she was supposed to be, Sansa thought. It was irritating. Did he think she was going to steal from him or poke around in his belongings? But then she calmed down. He was letting her stay here with him when she had few other options. Despite their affair, they didn’t know each other terribly well.

“Sansa?”

He probably couldn’t see her because the sofa was obscuring his view. “Down here.”

Roose came into the room. “What are you doing?”

“Reading.” The coffee table was a heavy thing. She was being careful not to scratch it.

“On the floor?”

She explained about liking a surface.

Roose shook his head at her. He smileingly held out a hand and helped her to her feet. “You may use the kitchen.”

It was better after that. Roose finished his household chores and he settled in at the kitchen table as well. First he drafted his syllabi, then he worked at his own research, and after he had completed everything else, he did the crossword—in ink.

She noticed it was getting dark. She had been working for five straight hours. Margaery would never have stood for that. Sansa finished marking up the last article and stopped. She was putting everything away when she realized Roose wasn’t in the room. There was no evidence he had ever been at the table. He must have put his work away as well. She found him in the living room, in his chair, reading the newspaper.

Roose smiled at the sight of her. “Done?”

“For tonight.” She stretched.

“I’ll get dinner then.”

“May I help?”

He folded his paper. “If you like.”

They worked side by side in the kitchen. It wasn’t a complicated meal. She had noticed in Oldtown he favored plain things, simple cuts of meat and a few vegetables. They ate quietly. She asked him about his upcoming classes and he answered her amiably. He inquired after one of the books she had. The discussion was pleasant and impersonal. If it wasn’t for her knowledge that they’d been engaging in torrid sex for nearly three months, she would have sworn they were on a first date.

After dinner, she helped him wash up.

It was early still. She followed him into the living room where he built a fire. He turned on a small television to watch the news. She was about to curl up on the sofa when he pulled her onto his lap. There was something perverse about the way he fondled her, with his attention focused on the latest crisis in Sothoryos, but she liked it. She always liked whatever he did to her. She was wet already just from him playing with her breasts. Finally the broadcast was over. Roose pushed her off him and powered the television down.

“Take off your clothes.”
She obeyed without hesitation. They’d done this in Oldtown. Sansa pulled out the band from her ponytail and shook her hair out so it fell down her back.

Roose positioned her over an armchair, unbuckled his belt, pulled down his trousers, and fucked her from behind.

She bit down on her lip.

“It’s not like the apartment in Oldtown. I don’t have any neighbors, Sansa. You may be as vocal as you wish.”

She needed no more encouragement.

* * *

Roose knew he shouldn’t have been surprised when Sansa found an apartment so quickly. She was not a procrastinator. When he picked her up at the bus stop on the third weekday, she was triumphant.

“Could we stop at a hardware store on the way back?”

“For?”

“I found an apartment. I want to buy a tape measure.”

“You may borrow mine.” He looked at her. She was elated. “Tell me about it.”

Sansa was happy to oblige him. The apartment met all her criteria: it was on a bus line; it was in a quiet part of town not populated by many students; it was affordable. The place had, she told him, very good bones. “Do you want to see it? The landlady said I could come back to measure tomorrow afternoon.”

“Does she live on the premises?”

“It’s a carriage house apartment.”

He would have preferred her to find some place in an anonymous complex where the tenants kept to themselves. A nosy landlady was a disadvantage and the neighbors would undoubtedly pay much closer attention to any comings and goings.

“You’ll like her,” Sansa told him while they were stopped at a red light. Her eyes were dancing with amusement.

Roose doubted it. He liked few people. Most he merely tolerated. “Why are you laughing?”

“You’ll see.”

The next afternoon he followed Sansa’s directions when he went to pick her up. There were a few shops and restaurants nearby. It was the sort of quiet neighborhood whose large homes had probably been once populated by the upper middle class of King’s Landing. Some of the houses had gone to seed, but more than a few were being renovated. He eyed the house in question; it’s condition fell somewhere in the middle. The main entrance was under what appeared to be a recently-repaired porte-cochère.

He maneuvered the car up the driveway. There was a considerable amount of shrubbery and a number of very old, very tall trees. The carriage house was opposite the main structure. The place
would be obscured from the street and at least it wasn’t attached to the house. A newly-painted staircase on the exterior of the building led to the apartment.

He climbed the stairs and knocked.

“It needs to be scrubbed down and I’ll have to paint, but try and see past that, okay?” Sansa asked before she would let him in.

Roose was not particularly impressed. It was large and sunny and there were built-in bookshelves and cupboards throughout most of the main room. He assumed those features had swayed her. The kitchen area occupied a corner of the living space. Other than comparatively new apartment-sized appliances, it was unremarkable. There was a tiny hallway off of which lay a full bath and a smallish bedroom. There were hardwood floors throughout, but they were scratched and in dire need of sanding. The walls were dingy. Cobwebs hung from every corner.

“I know what I’m doing, Roose.” Sansa handed him the tape measure. “It’s mine as of next week. I’ve worked it out with Mrs. Hornwood. Come on, I have to give her back her keys.”

“Have you signed a lease yet?”

“Tomorrow.”

He had tonight to make her see sense. It was not worth getting angry over. Few things were. This was a lesson he had learned decades ago. Sansa was a rational woman. He would point out the problems and she would realize he knew best.

Sansa led him to the back door of the main house. As she approached, a dog began to bark loudly. Roose reminded himself she didn’t yet know what to look for in a dwelling.

She was smiling at him mischievously. “Mrs. Hornwood?” Sansa called loudly. “I have the keys!”

An old woman hobbled to the door. “Who is it?”

It was then Roose noticed the white cane. He looked at the dog and then at the dark glasses the woman wore.

“I HAVE THE KEYS!” Sansa shouted.

He saw the hearing aid in her ear. Clearly it was ineffective.

Sansa spoke very loudly but clearly and she introduced him as her friend, but gave no names. The old woman asked for none. She returned the keys and they took their leave of her.

“I told you,” Sansa said quite smugly.

Roose reversed out of the driveway. “There are other factors to consider.”

“It’s dusty, not filthy. I checked for bugs and found no sign of them. The water pressure is very good. She said the electrical and plumbing were redone about five years ago. I’ve lived in crappy apartments before, Roose. I can recognize a good place when I see one. I know what I’m doing. Her son will be there tomorrow to make sure everything is okay with the lease. And then it’s all mine.”

“You have three and a half weeks to make it habitable and to move in,” he pointed out. “During which time you told me you also need to plan for the sections you’re teaching and to work on the
Sansa nodded. “I have a lot to do. I’ve started making lists.”

He left it alone until they reached the house. Throughout dinner and the evening he tried to sway her. It was the first sign he’d seen of her stubbornness. She wasadamant.

Over the next week and a half he reluctantly began to admit Sansa was right. It astonished him how thorough she was. She spent two solid days cleaning.

He expected she meant to rope him into assisting her. To his surprise, Sansa asked little of him. During the second week, when Roose returned to pick her up, he found her sitting on the floor of her tiny front hallway. The floors were now gleaming.

“I got a friend from the Literature Department to drive me to Home Depot. We rented the equipment,” she told him.

“Who is this friend?”

“Harrold. He’s a slam poet and he does performance art, but he has access to a pickup truck.”

Roose was amused despite himself. “He was willing to refinish floors for you. Should I be worried?”

“I refinished the floors.” She shrugged at his surprise. “We did it a bunch of times growing up. Every time Dad got a new posting, we always ended up in a fixer-upper. I needed Harrold to help me get the equipment up the stairs and with a few other things, but I did the bulk of it myself. I sent him out for coffee and stuff so he’d be out of the way. And no, you don’t have to be worried. In the first place I like being with you more than is good for me. In the second place, he is not remotely my type, and in the third, he was helping me because he hates Margaery.”

“Why?”

Sansa curled her lip. “She made fun of his poetry. I don’t think he would have minded so much if it she hadn’t done it in front of the critic.” She turned to him with a smirk. “It is really terrible stuff.”

She spent a few days in the library working on her classes and then she began painting.

Roose found himself letting her use some of the equipment and leftover paint he had. He watched as she perused the selection of returned paints for acceptable colors at Home Depot. She informed him it was much cheaper than buying unmixed paint. She was a neat worker and when he picked her up, there was rarely a drop on her.

It became increasingly clear to him that Sansa very much did know what she was doing.

One evening Sansa asked him if they might have supper somewhere in town. She would pay for it, she assured him.

He was not about to let her do such a thing, but he took her out to a quiet diner she’d found. Afterwards, she instructed him to drive around the streets of the neighborhood.

“There. Stop.”

He was startled and then horrified when he learned why she wanted him to do this.

She leapt out of the car and examined a table next to someone’s trash bins. She fiddled with her
phone and turned on a flashlight app. She shone it around the item. “Help me stand it up? No, we need to put it on the sidewalk. I want to see if it’s level.” She had an app for that too.

“Sansa . . .”

“Roose, you have to learn to trust me.”

He reluctantly allowed her to repeat this performance twice more and then consented to drop off the table, two chairs, and a small chest of drawers at the apartment.

“I’ll paint them. I’d like to refinish the table, but there’s no time,” she told him as they drove back to the house.

“Did you learn to do all this with Ned?”

Sansa hesitated.

Roose had observed she seldom mentioned her family. He was in truth pleased she wasn’t close to them. It made their relationship simpler.

“Mum,” she said finally. “Some of it I picked up on my own. I told you, I’ve lived in some dumpy places.”

Later when he had pulled her to him after their coupling, her phone vibrated.

Roose reached over and handed it to her.

Sansa rolled onto her back and stared up at the number. “Fuck. It’s Margaery.”

* * *

Her days at Roose’s were passing like some kind of dream for Sansa. Aside from a few hiccups at the beginning, they got on remarkably well. As he’d predicted, they had similar habits. She’d never been with anyone: friend, family, or lover who didn’t try and stop her from working as hard as she did. Roose didn’t care; he had his own tasks to complete. He was even tidier than she was. The sex was fantastic. It was as if they’d always been together.

Roose had been doubtful about the apartment, but finally he was coming around. Sansa was glad she’d asserted herself. She would need to do a little more of that if they were going to stay together. She was willing to be guided by him in bed, but when it came to her life, there wasn’t anyone alive who was going to keep her doing from what she wanted.

The trouble now was Margaery. Sansa listened to the three most recent messages on her voicemail. They were plaintive. Margaery was sorry. She missed Sansa desperately. They’d been so happy together before. Couldn’t they be happy again?

For Sansa the answer was no. They were at a crossroads. Margaery and she wanted different things. The most she could hope for—no, the most Margaery would give her—were three more months, three more, increasingly miserable months in which Margaery would ignore the inevitable; complain about her focusing on her studies; and finally try to persuade her to accept some furtive arrangement while Margaery would traipse off into her picture-perfect life with the requisite wealthy husband and doting children.

She let the calls go directly to voicemail. The messages grew angry. Then they turned apologetic again and they did not stop.
It did not escape Sansa’s notice how Roose’s jaw tightened ever so slightly every time Margaery called. He usually said nothing, but the last two times it happened he had made subtle little digs about Margaery. Not that he’d ever referred to her by her name. If he didn’t refer to her as ‘the Tyrell girl,’ he called her ‘your empty-headed little idiot’ or ‘your pretty little plaything.’ He had once even called her a ‘southron whore.’ Sansa took exception to this characterization and he backed off, but it was making things uncomfortable between them.

“You’ll have to end it with her soon,” he told her one night in bed.

Did he think she didn’t understand that? Sansa sighed. “Roose, I still need to move my furniture and my things out. She can be really pissy when she’s angry.” All of her books were still in the apartment. All of her possessions were there. “I don’t want any drama. I want everything out first. She’s gone for the weekend. I think I can have everything out of there by Sunday. When she’s comes back that evening, I’ll tell her.”

“Have you been talking to her?”

Sansa noted how he stilled his fingers. “She always goes. Same time, every year. It’s her grandmother’s name day. I’ve lined up some friends to help me move.”

He began fondling her again. “Why didn’t you ask me?”

“Because I thought you wanted us to be discreet.”

“Will Harrold the Slam Poet be helping?”

“He has the truck.” Sansa guided his hand up to her breasts. “There’s no one who is a threat to you. I’ve done favors for these guys. They owe me. They’ll move me. I will buy them beer and pizza and then they’ll go home.”

Roose’s voice became very flat. “Favors?”

“I helped Pip pick out a present for his girlfriend. I proofread Sam’s paper for Dr. Umber. I helped paint Edd’s living room two semesters ago. Harrold hates Margaery—more than you do.”

“I don’t hate the Tyrell girl.”

Perhaps hate was the wrong word. He didn’t think Margaery was worthy of his notice or of her time. “I can call and tell them I don’t need them. But I would need your help then. My old apartment is in student central. Leo lives across the street now. He moved there last semester. He will not be in the Reach wishing Margaery’s vicious bitch of a grandmother a happy name day. He will probably, in fact, be directly on the phone to Margaery the moment he sees me. I can get in there to pack unobserved, but the moment we start moving furniture out, he’ll know. There will be a higher chance of drama.” She could see him thinking. “It’s up to you.”

Roose wasn’t happy, but he seemed persuaded. “Are these boys going to go away once you’re moved?”

“I have been discouraging men most of my adult life. I know how to make a man leave me alone, Roose.” She had learned—the hard way.

“Do you?”

Good, he sounded himself again, calm, mild, amused.
Roose smiled. “Could you make me leave you alone, I wonder?”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to tafkar and alors-factor for their help with the gun stuff. And to tafkar for beta reading this monster and being very patient with me.

I know I have a few non-US readers, so I feel I should explain a couple of things. In the United States, there are regions where gun-ownership, hunting, and target practice are quite common. When I was trying to imagine what modern-day Westeros would be like, I decided that the North would be one of those regions. It’s rougher, less densely populated, and seems like a place that would have a hunting culture. Sansa has family in the north, even if she’s currently estranged from them. She would be familiar with that culture to a certain extent.

And of course, we all know that Roose does target practice for other reasons . . .
Roose followed Ben Bones around the village public library as Ben selected books for Mother. Roose failed to understand why he couldn’t do this task. Ben’s father, Harlon, had just scooped up piles of things. Now that he was dead and Ben was back, Ben once again went to the library for her. Father, who seldom paid much if any attention to Roose’s mother, deferred to her wishes about this.

Ben did have some sort of a method. He tried to explain it to Roose after Roose pressed him. “Sometimes Missus has special requests that she called in. I get those first. Then I look at the new books.” He picked out one title. “Missus likes this lady.” He handed another to him. “She reads everything by this man too.”

Roose examined the titles. They were novels. The first was set in Dorne and according to the back cover, was a “delightful comedy of manners.” Manners were limits imposed on him by society. They were necessary, but he had never found them delightful. He was starting to find some of them humorous, though, in a darkly ironical fashion. The other book was a courtroom drama about a class action lawsuit.

“Then I go over here,” Ben was saying. “Missus likes books about gardening. No, she read those already, Mr. Roose. Those too.”

Roose silently watched as Ben picked through the books and added two more to the pile. He repeated the process in most of the subject areas of the library. Roose paused in front of the psychology section.

“Missus has read every one of them,” Ben said quietly. “I only get them now if there’s anything new.”

Later that evening, Mother stared at him when Roose told her again that he wanted to take this duty over. “Why?”

“I am your son. He is our scarcely literate handyman.”

“Ben went to high school. I assure you he can read.”

Father came into the room.

Roose repeated his request.

“It’s up to you, Alyss.” Father opened up the newspaper.

“Ben knows what I like.” She picked up one of the books on flowers.

Roose could feel his temper rising. “How can you reward him? He was disloyal. Father owns him. He told him he was to come back after his tour was over. Ben didn’t obey him.”
Father lowered the newspaper. “Alys.”

She left them without a word.

“It is not your concern what Ben does or doesn’t do. It is mine. This isn’t about the books, is it? It’s because I told you to stay away from his wife.”

Roose kept his eyes on his father’s. If Ben belonged to them, then surely his pretty red-haired wife did too.

“I need him. Harlon was getting too old. Their family has served ours for generations. We need them. If Ben had stayed away or if I’d let you rape his wife, I would have lost him. We do not foul our own nest. When we have these urges, we look outside to sate them.”

“He should have asked permission before he married her.”

“Again, it is my concern, not yours. When I die, and that will not be for a good many years, it will be your problem. Everything in the Dreadfort is mine, Roose. Even you. Stay away from his wife.”

Roose swallowed. “Why can’t I pick out Mother’s books?”

Father stared at him in the same way Mother had. “It is a job for a servant, not my son. You’ll be going to university soon. Are you going to come home from Gulltown every week to fetch her reading material? Besides,” he paused. “Everyone has a breaking point. Your mother obeys me unflinchingly in all things. But her books are very important to her. She wants Ben to get them for her. If I took her books away or interfered . . . she would leave me.”

“How? She depends on you for everything.” Roose couldn’t remember when he’d first realized this, but it was true. His mother had no money of her own, no transportation, and no friends. Everyone on her side of the family was dead and gone. Even if she tried, Father could and would find her.

“One can leave someone without ever going from the room.”

Roose thought about this. “Ben’s wife is like Mother’s books.”

“Now you understand.” Father raised the newspaper.

Roose thought he did.

“And stay away from redheads,” Father cautioned from behind the paper. “They’re always trouble.”

* * *

Present Day

* * *

Roose always slept very lightly. The moment he heard the noises, he woke. He reached over, but Sansa was not in the bed. The bathroom door was closed. She must be in there, he concluded. He was about to go back to sleep when he heard sounds from the downstairs.

He reached into the nightstand on his side and removed the .38. It was the work of a moment to check the ammunition. He crept down the backstairs silently. The intruder was an amateur. He could see the ambient light from the living room. He moved carefully, making sure to avoid the floorboards that creaked.
Sansa screamed when she saw him.

Roose lowered the pistol. “What are you doing?”

“What are in the seven hells are you doing?”

“I thought you were an intruder. Why aren’t you upstairs in bed?”

Sansa took a deep breath and then returned to ripping through her purse and her book bag. “I’m looking for a tampon. I got my period earlier than I expected. I found one, but it isn’t going to be enough to get me through the rest of the night.”

He could drive to the nearest convenience store, he supposed. Or perhaps there might be something upstairs. “How long do they last?”

“Uh, I—”

“No, is there an expiration date on them?”

Sansa’s face cleared. “Not that I know of.”

“Come with me.” He didn’t wait. He heard her sigh, but she followed him. He went into the bedroom at the end of the hall and flipped on the lights.

“What is this room?”

Roose ignored her question. The boxes were all labeled and he paused for a moment. His first wife’s menses had stopped quite quickly from the radiation and the chemotherapy; she’d died soon after. There might be something among Bethany’s things, but her sister had thrown out of most of what she considered to be extraneous items. He undid a box of Walda’s possessions. He removed several layers before he found what he was looking for. ‘Will these suffice until tomorrow?”

“Yes. Who’s ‘Walda?’”

He began repacking. “My third wife.”

“I don’t suppose she had any pads?”

Roose allowed Sansa to look.

“Those, please.”

He removed the package and handed it to her.

“What is this room?” she asked again.

“I use it for storage.” He closed the box.

“You kept your dead wife’s Tampax.”

Roose turned to her. He started to speak, but she was shaking her head.

“Sorry, you probably don’t want to talk about this. Thanks for these.”

They walked back to his bedroom. Sansa disappeared into the bathroom. He deposited the .38 back into the nightstand. He waited until she got back into the bed and then as was their custom, he
pulled her to him and drew the covers over them.

“You’ve never asked me about my wives,” he murmured.

“It isn’t any of my business.”

Roose stroked her hair. “Shall I tell you about them?”

“Right now?” Sansa took his arm and wrapped it around her stomach.

“No, another time might be better,” he admitted.

“You don’t have to,” Sansa murmured and then yawned. “I know this isn’t a permanent relationship.”

Roose felt an odd pang. Although he’d never articulated it to her, Sansa clearly knew as well as he that there was a timer on their affair. He found the thought almost as disturbing as the realization that he was growing fonder of Sansa than was wise.

* * *

Margaery had reached the limits of King’s Landing when her phone rang.

“It’s Sansa.”

Without regard for the car, herself, or the traffic in the right hand lane, she swerved over to the shoulder. “Why haven’t you called me? I’ve left dozens of messages.”

Sansa’s voice was calm. “Yes, I know.”

“Please, I am so sorry. I was just so angry. I said things I shouldn’t have.”

“I don’t want to do this on the phone. Are you on your way back?”

“I’m about twenty minutes away from the apartment. Where are you?”

“I’ll meet you there.” Sansa hung up.

Margaery merged back on the highway. The phone rang again. It was Leo. Leo could wait. She needed to clear all this up with Sansa first. She hit the accelerator.

When she let herself into the apartment, Sansa was sitting on the sofa, fiddling with her phone.

“I am so glad you’re back. I missed you so much, Sansa. I promise, I will make—” Margaery looked around. “What—” All of Sansa’s books were gone. The few pieces of furniture that were Sansa’s were gone.

Sansa stood. She slipped her phone into her purse. “There’s a check for my share of the taxes on the dining room table. I couldn’t find the utility bills so I guessed at the amounts. If I’m under, you can email me and let me know by how much; I’ll make up the difference. If I’m over, I don’t care.”

Margaery stumbled into the second bedroom they only ever used if her relatives were visiting. It was empty. She came back to the living room.

Sansa was in the same spot.
“You’re leaving me?”

“You told me I needed to find another place to live. I have.”

“How can you do this to me?”

“You gave me an ultimatum,” Sansa told her coldly. “You said I needed to leave.”

“We can work this out. I’m sorry I ever accused you of cheating on me. I know you wouldn’t do that to me. I was upset. You know how I get.”

Sansa picked up her purse. “I left the keys on the dining room table next to the checks. If I forgot anything, email me. Don’t phone.”

She watched incredulously as Sansa made her way to the door. “Where are you—tell me where you’re going.”

Sansa looked back. “Why?”

Margaery tried to think. “What if mail comes for you?”

“I put the change of address forms through three weeks ago. Everything should be coming to my apartment now. Is there anything else?”

Margaery felt her knees buckling. “You’ve been back in town for three weeks?”

“Four.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

Sansa shook her head. “You don’t get to do this to me. You gave me an ultimatum. You told me I needed to leave. I left. Go and marry your rising young executive from a good family. We’re done. I’m done.”

* * *

By Sansa’s request, Roose stayed away while she settled into her apartment. Sansa preferred it this way. These were her belongings and for the first time, she had a safe place that would truly be hers. Judging by his house, he had good taste, but Sansa didn’t want to have to consult with anyone on where things should go or how they should be organized.

Sansa had taken his advice about Mrs. Hornwood’s seeing-eye dog. He showed her how to approach the animal and how to get the dog to know her scent.

“He won’t bark as much and if you should have an intruder, you’ll have warning.”

“You were really good with him,” Sansa commented they walked away from Mrs. Hornwood’s where she’d dropped off her rent check. “Do you like dogs?”

“No.”

“But how did you—”

Roose opened the passenger door for her. “My father bred them.”

She hadn’t asked any more questions. There was something about his tone that didn’t invite her to
pursue the topic.

This sort of a relationship was new territory for Sansa. In some ways it was very restful. She respected his boundaries. Roose respected hers. He didn’t ask her about her childhood or her family and it made everything so much simpler. He had helped her out enormously by letting her stay with him and by giving her rides into town, but it was an affair and it would be a mistake to see it as anything else.

It was better without him here helping. Roose disliked mess. Sansa hated it too, but in the rush to get her stuff out of the apartment, she hadn’t been able to pack properly. It was going to become more chaotic before it improved and she wasn’t quite comfortable with anyone going through her things in the time it took to sort everything out—especially when so many of them were from her life with Margaery.

It was all well and good for Sansa to make a dramatic exit out of their relationship, but try as she might she couldn’t quite banish Margaery from her thoughts. Every time she unpacked a box there were memories staring back at her.

She couldn’t just replace every possession that reminded her of Margaery. Even with all of her economies, this move was going to strain her finances to their limits. The obviously sentimental mementos, she packed away. Everything else she would just have to live with.

As Sansa was getting the kitchen area in order, her phone rang. She glanced at the number and bit her lip. She waited until the voicemail icon lit up, and then, hating herself for doing it, she played and listened to the message. It was one of the begging ones. These were the messages that made her cringe. The angry ones she could ignore or even resent. Every time Sansa listened to one of the desperate messages, she thought of Roose’s game with the phone. It had been perverse and she’d gotten off on it and it had been wrong. She should not have played it with him. She knew this. It had been cruel. Margaery didn’t deserve cruelty.

The automated prompt asked her what to do with the message and as with all the others, she opted to save it.

Roose had already picked up on this habit. He had a similar phone to hers. He had noticed the number she selected after each of the messages. He made the observation, but it was a comment and not a question.

Sansa was grateful he left it alone. She could not have told him why when she didn’t know the answer herself.

* * *

Roose allowed Sansa to give him the grand tour.

“Well?”

“You were right. It is a very a handsome apartment now.” He would enjoy spending the occasional evening here with her.

She kissed him then. “Did you bring your tools?” she asked after she pulled away.

“Yes. Show me what you want.”

Sansa directed him to the windows. “The bamboo blinds are for the living room. The mini blinds are for the bedroom.” She had curtain rods too. She had already marked where she wanted them
He mounted the window coverings easily enough. She handed him screws and the brackets without being prompted.

Sansa threaded the drapes onto the curtain rods.

“Those look expensive. Did you scrounge them as well?”

“I made them.” She handed the rod up to him. “I found the fabric on a clearance table. I had to pay full price for the material for the linings, though.” Sansa sounded bitter.

Roose slid it into place. He didn’t know why he was surprised. She had a sewing machine. It was still set up in the corner of the room. She had already proved in a dozen different ways she was handy.

“That’s perfect.”

They repeated the process until the windows were all covered. Next came her pictures. Most of these were prints. He recognized one or two from the presentation she’d given at King’s. The last gave him pause. Handsomely matted in a plain silver frame was a sheet of what appeared to be someone’s rather messily written algebra homework. It had been a long time since he’d been required to solve for x, but as he examined it, the answers to most of the problems seemed to be incorrect.

“That one goes here.”

“What is it?”

“It’s too hard to explain,” she told him after a moment. “Right over my desk, please.”

After he hung it, his eye was caught by the objects resting on the shelf above her desk. “I thought you said you’d never gone hunting.”

“I haven’t.”

Roose pointed to the knife propped against the back of the shelf. It was flanked somewhat incongruously by a tattered paperback copy of Legends from the Nightfort and a child’s teddy bear much worn and torn.

“It’s a sort of a keepsake,” Sansa said finally. “So are the bear and the book. Are you hungry?”

After one of their usual quiet dinners, she took him by the hand and led him into the bedroom.

“And what shall I do to my lady tonight?”

Sansa shook her head. “I told you, you aren’t to call me anything but Sansa.”

Roose watched bemused as she deftly unbuttoned his shirt. “Why don’t—”

Again she shook her head. “No.” She pushed it off his shoulders and reached for his belt buckle. “I want to undress you.” When he started to speak, she put a finger to his lips. “Do as I say.” With her other hand, she unzipped the fly of his trousers and slid her hand down them until she was grasping his cock.

He did not care for being ordered about. He started to pull her hand away.
“Roose, I couldn’t have done any of this without you. I want to please you.”

He relented.

She made short work of his clothes. “Would you get in the bed?”

He would take her in a moment. It was harmless to humor her. He watched as she undressed.

“No, I want you on your back,” Sansa ordered. “At least to start.” She climbed on top of him. “Roose?”

“Yes?” Her eyes were so blue, he thought.

“Would you mind if I tied your hands to the bed?”

He sat up.

“I take it that’s a no.”

“A very definite no,” he said coldly.

Sansa pouted.

Roose decided he had indulged her enough. “Come here.”

“No.” She looked at him a moment. “All right, I won’t tie you down. I want you to grip the headboard with your hands. You aren’t to take them away.”

He felt himself becoming angry. He rolled her onto her back. “You do not give me orders.”

Sansa stared at him unafraid. “You’ve given me orders.”

“That’s different.”

“How?” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’ve let you do things to me I didn’t think I would like. You owe me the same courtesy. Ten minutes,” she bargained. “If you don’t like it after ten minutes, I’ll stop and you can have me any way you like.”

Roose would have her on all fours and he would leave here with her begging him to fuck her. “Five,” he countered.

“All right.” Sansa rolled with him so she was on top. She positioned his hands and arms as she wanted them.

“The clock started two minutes ago.”

“I like a challenge.” Sansa smiled at him. “And no, it didn’t. It starts now. There. If you move them, I’ll have to punish you.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

“Stop talking.” Sansa ran her hands down his chest. “No, I take that back.” She lowered herself so her mouth was positioned over his cock. “You may talk, as long as you don’t expect me to answer.” She set herself to pleasuring him.

Roose felt his cock stiffen almost immediately. He’d taught her too well. Sansa was as expert as
any whore at fellating him.

She paused.

He reached down to tug.

Sansa came up. “You took your hands off the headboard.” She ran a finger down the length of his cock. “I warned you.”

“And how are you possibly going to punish me?”

“Five more minutes,” Sansa told him. Her blue eyes danced with delight. “You owe me five more minutes. Grab the headboard again.” She bent down over him again.

“Now,” he managed. He’d never ejaculated in her mouth and he didn’t care to do so now. Seven hells she wasn’t stopping. He couldn’t think why he wasn’t wrestling control from her except that this felt strangely right. “Sansa. Now. Please.”

She positioned herself on him and began to ride him the way he’d taught her. Except now she was stopping and starting and stopping again.

“Sansa.”

“Don’t let go of the headboard or I’ll have to stop for good,” she breathed.

He realized she would too. Gods, she was beautiful. No, he corrected. She was a goddess herself with her copper hair swaying as she rode him, her milk white skin and those beautiful blue eyes. Thought left him as she brought him to climax.

His breath was ragged. He felt her tugging at his fingers.

“You may let go now.” Sansa positioned his one hand at his side. She looked at the other arm and moved it so it was around her. She snuggled against him. “It would have been better if you let me tie you down. Next time maybe?”

Roose laughed. “You are incorrigible.”

“You liked it.”

“I did,” he confessed. “You’re not quite human, you know.”

“What am I?” Sansa stroked his arm.

“A woman ‘with skin as white as the moon and eyes like blue stars.’”

Sansa twisted out of his embrace. “You’re comparing me to the Night’s Queen?”

“I am.” Roose smiled at her. “It’s a compliment. You are beautiful enough to make any man give you his soul.”

She considered the idea. “It’s not quite right, though. It’s me who’s given you my soul, not the other way around.” She brought her fingers to his lips. “Suck them.”

“No.”
“I like it when you make me do it,” she wheedled.

He kissed them. “You will have to be content with that, Your Grace.”

“Sansa,” she corrected.

“Your Grace is the proper title for a monarch.”

Sansa considered. “All right.”

“What’s next?” He would need some time before he could take her again, but he enjoyed pleasuring her. “What would my queen have me do to her?”

“Worship me.”

So he did.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to my fabulous beta, tafkar
Borrowed Time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Five Years Ago

* * *

From the moment she walked in the door, Margaery could tell Sansa was still keyed up.

“Well?” Sansa demanded.

Margaery wondered if Sansa had even sat down once since she’d left for her meeting with Eddard Stark. She put her bag on the chair. “Your father agreed to your conditions.”

Sansa visibly relaxed. “All of them?”

“He will only call you if it’s something major like a death or a health crisis.”

“I don’t care if anyone gets sick,” Sansa told her bluntly.

“What if Rickon was in the hospital? Or Arya or Jon? He said he would only call if it was serious.”

Sansa reconsidered. “I guess that’s all right. He’ll keep Mum away? And Robb?”

Margaery led Sansa to the sofa. “Yes. They won’t contact you. You have to calm down, Sansa. This isn’t good for you.”

“Don’t tell me what’s good for me,” Sansa snapped.

When Sansa got like this, it was so hard to know what to do or to say. “Your father said he’ll respect your wishes.” He had said a lot more. Both he and Sansa’s mother regretted not believing in Sansa. They wanted a reconciliation, but they would stay away if that was what she wanted. Margaery took a deep breath and recounted this. As she did so, she saw Sansa’s face getting paler and tighter by the second.

“I don’t fucking care what they want.”

“He put it out there. I’m just relaying the information.” Margaery didn’t think much of Eddard and Catelyn Stark. If they had paid any attention to what was going on with Sansa at all at the time . . . she forced herself to focus on Sansa. Thinking about the past wasn’t going to help her.

Sansa’s hostility decreased, but she was still visibly upset.

Margaery took a deep breath. “I didn’t answer for you because I knew that wasn’t my place and I didn’t want to keep it from you.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just—” Her voice started to crack.

“Come here.” Margaery took her in her arms. “I’m not going to let anyone hurt you.”

“Promise me?”
“I promise.”

* * *

Present Day

* * *

Sansa took the .45 from Roose. “It’s heavier.”

“Yes. The recoil will be more pronounced. When you shoot, you’ll have to brace yourself.”

She liked their weekly shooting lessons. Under his tutelage, she’d become much better. She was still nowhere near being the marksman he was, but she hit most of the targets he set her.

“An associate of mine owns a firing range. I want you to practice there twice a week. I’ll take you Tuesdays and Thursdays after I pick you up.”

“Won’t I need a license?”

“No. Aim for that can.”

She nodded and shot where he indicated. She would have fallen if he hadn’t been there to catch her. “Shit. I know, I know. I shouldn’t swear.”

“Try again. Aim for the same target.”

This time she didn’t sway, but she didn’t hit it either. “It’s too heavy,” she complained.

Roose looked at her critically and made some suggestions about her stance.

“May I switch back to the .22?”

“No. Again.”

She hit the target on the third try. Her accuracy got worse on the fourth and fifth attempts. “It’s hurting my arms, Roose.”

He took the pistol from her. “Come with me.”

She followed as he walked out to the targets.

Roose pointed out the differences in impact. He told her about the advantages and disadvantages to each weapon they’d used today.

Sansa absorbed what he said. She doubted she would ever have the need to put into practice the things he taught her, but she liked being out here with him and she’d come to enjoy shooting. If he wanted to take her to a proper range, that might be fun too. It would certainly be warmer; the air was no longer crisp—it was unequivocally cold. She buried her gloved hands into her jacket pockets. “I don’t mind, you know,” she said as they walked back to the house.

“Mind what?”

“Getting a license. I don’t want to get your friend in trouble.”

“No,” Roose told her shortly. “You don’t need a license to shoot at a range. I don’t want you going there by yourself, though. You’re to go only with me and it would be best if you didn’t tell anyone.”
She frowned. It sounded like it was illegal to her if he didn’t want her to discuss it and to only go there with him. “Then why can’t I talk about it?”

“It’s not against the law.” Roose unlocked the back door. “It’s a matter of discretion.”

Sansa supposed he had a point. She didn’t look like the type to go in for guns and target practice. If she said anything, people would be intrigued. She really didn’t want this relationship to become public knowledge.

When they cleaned the weapons and put them away in his gun safe, Roose wiped his hands. He pushed up her shirt sleeves and felt her upper arms.

“What are you doing?”

“You’re not strong enough.” He smoothed her sleeves back down.

“I don’t like sports,” Sansa told him as they went up the stairs.

Roose didn’t reply. He powered up his laptop and perused something silently.

“I thought we were going grocery shopping.”

“This will do.” He angled the computer so she could see it. “The athletic facilities at the university are free to students.”

“I told you I don’t like sports.”

“It has nothing to do with sports, Sansa. I want you to start working out. You can begin slowly, three times a week for an hour at a time.”

She stared at him openmouthed. “I don’t have the time to—”

“They seem to have a wide range of hours they’re open.” Roose took off his reading glasses. “After we get back from our errands, I’ll show you what I want you to do when you’re there.”

“I don’t have any workout clothes.”

“We will stop somewhere today to remedy the situation.”

Sansa thought of all the work she had to do. Now she would be out five hours a week easily, wasting time shooting guns and running on treadmills.

“It will improve your mental agility,” he commented as he shut down the laptop. “You’ll find you sleep more soundly too.”

“I have a lot going on. This is going to take—”

“—This is not a request, Sansa.”

Sansa started to balk.

Roose picked up his car keys. “You’ll do it because I want you to.”

* * *

Tywin gutted and scaled the fish while his brother built the fire.
“Why don’t we do this more often?” Kevan wanted to know as they speared the fish and cooked them over the flames. “Surely we’re at the point in our lives where we can slow down. We could come out here a few more times a year. You’ve worked hard and you’ve restored our family’s fortunes ten times over. You deserve a reward.”

It was tempting to tell Kevan yes. He enjoyed this annual outing with his brother. He never forgot who he was, but he didn’t have to be nearly so guarded with Kevan as he did with everyone else. “It’s all for naught if Jaime doesn’t marry.”

“Did you bring the salt?”

“Yes, it’s in the pack.” Tywin tossed it to him. “I heard Lancel is seeing Margaery Tyrell.”

Kevan rooted around and removed the small container of salt and the bottles of water. “He was seeing her. He gave me some excuse when I questioned him about it.”

“Is Cersei still—” he didn’t want to finish the question.

“No.” Kevan handed him a bottle of water. “He’s taken up religion.”

Tywin raised an eyebrow.

“He’ll get over it. He wants answers to the big questions.” Kevan snorted. “You aren’t the only one with children who won’t conform.”

“The Tyrell girl’s grandmother paid me a call,” Tywin told him casually. He began to eat. “She wondered whether Jaime might like her granddaughter.”

“I don’t think Lancel would mind if that’s what you’re asking.”

Tywin salted the fish. “Would you mind?”

Kevan shook his head. “I am not you. I have enough. If Lancel would settle down with anyone halfway nor—available and uncomplicated, I would be ecstatic. If you think they can make a match of it, I’m happy for you. Do you know the girl?”

“By sight,” Tywin responded. “What did you make of her?”

“She’s charming, bright, easygoing.” Kevan finished his fish. “I’m not certain how much depth there is to her.”

Tywin didn’t require depth in a daughter-in-law. He wanted someone who would be a suitable wife to his son and heir and a good mother to his grandchildren. “I’ll arrange it then.”

“How do you propose to go about doing that?”

“I’ll tell Jaime to ask her out and Olenna Tyrell will tell her granddaughter to accept. The girl will do the rest. From what Olenna told me, her granddaughter has a firm grasp on what her duty to her family is. I wish I could say the same for my children.”

* * *

Roose patiently waited for Sansa in the faculty parking lot of the Student Athletic Center. He ignored the dirty looks from the students circling in search of a space. He’d texted Sansa that he would meet her here. It went counter to his instincts to wait for her in such an open area, but he didn’t care for the idea of her crossing the campus as dusk deepened into night. She assured him
she was used to walking most places on her own in far worse conditions, but Roose knew full well that even an inexperienced thug with an IQ in the double digits could incapacitate her with ease.

He was beginning to think he should text her again when she startled him by rapping on the window on the passenger side.

Sansa slid onto the seat gracefully and deposited her purse and bags at her feet. “Sorry, I’m late. It took longer than I thought it would.”

“I didn't see you come out of the main entrance,” Roose commented. As he pulled out, a student swooped in, evidently willing to risk a $50 fine in exchange for better geographic proximity to her class.

“I came from the library.” Sansa adjusted her seat belt. "I misjudged how much time it would take to get all the way over here.”

Roose waited until he was at a light to glance at her. Other than seeming tired, there were no signs that Sansa had worked out.

“How was your day?”

“Unremarkable.” As the light turned green, he wondered if she had gone earlier in the day. It was possible. “You should have let me know where you were going to be. If I had known you’d already been to the gym, I would have picked you up at the library.”

“I never went to the gym,” Sansa informed him calmly.

Roose got into the left hand lane. “It’s best to stick to a schedule, Sansa. You’ll lose the ground you’ve gained by skipping a day.”

“Since I’ve never gone, I don’t think that’s going to be a problem.”

He gave her a sharp glance. “You agreed to do as I asked—to be guided by me.”

“You didn’t ask me to do anything.”

“Sansa—”

“—I had other things to do today.” She was staring out the window.

The traffic was thick as professors and students alike were trying to get off campus. He came to yet another stoplight. “We discussed this.”

“You told me you wanted me to start working out. You didn’t ask me anything. There was no discussion.”

Roose realized Sansa was as irritated with him as he was with her.

Behind him a driver honked his horn.

“The light’s green.”

He focused his attention on driving until they were clear of the campus. He had miscalculated somewhere and said something to upset her, but he had no idea what. Roose thought over the conversation, knitting his brow as he did so. He pulled the car to the side of the road. “You like target practice. I know you do.”
“I never said I didn’t. I like it a lot. What does that have to do with anything?”

“If you have upper arm strength, it will be easier for you to use a heavier weapon.”

Sansa’s annoyance shifted into confusion. “The .45 is too heavy for me. Is it that important that I can use one? I don’t even have a license for a gun.”

“You should be able to defend yourself.”

“I have pepper spray.”

“And if someone wrested it from you? Or came up from behind?”

“What does that have to do with—” Some of the hostility was gone from her voice. “Margaery always said men never get the subtleties. I guess she was right.”

Roose decided to ignore the reference to the Tyrell girl. “I fail to see why my suggesting that you—”

Her mouth had a stubborn set to it. “That’s not the issue.”

He tried again. “You told me just last week that you weren’t getting much exercise because I was driving you back and forth.”

Sansa turned so that she was facing him. “You really don’t get this, do you?”

Roose frowned.

“You didn’t suggest or discuss anything with me. You decided that I needed to start working out and you told me I was going to. That’s the problem.”

“So this is about how I said it, rather than what I said?” he hazarded. Sansa was splitting semantic hairs, but it seemed to be of importance to her. “I’m sorry,” he said very earnestly, the way he’d done on occasion with each of his wives. An apology, Mother had once told him, covered even more sins than good manners.

“No, you’re not.”

It always shook him the way she could read him.

“I don’t like people telling me what to do.”

“I’m sorry for the miscommunication,” he amended. “I want you to be able to defend yourself. Improving your muscle tone will help. I should have been more careful in how I articulated that . . . wish.”

There was a pause. “I think I can find the time to go a couple of times a week,” Sansa offered finally.

It was an acceptable compromise.

“I know this is just an affair, Roose, but part of the reason I’m even with you is I like that you treat me with consideration. Don’t mess that up, okay?” Her tone was pleasant, reasonable even, but if the reason behind her initial obstinacy had baffled him, he fully understood her underlying meaning now. She was perfectly prepared to walk away.
It was an affair, but Roose knew it was changing into something entirely different, and he had no desire to see it end anytime soon.

* * *

Margaery was hard pressed to decide who was more miserable: Jaime Lannister or she. Despite their seemingly careless chatter, every few moments their masks would crack. The effort behind his wit was too strained; she was smiling far too much. If they could barely survive a fifteen-minute car ride, she was at a loss to know how they could possibly survive marriage.

The restaurant he’d chosen was in an out-of-the-way spot. “Father suggested it. I hope it’s all right. He said they have a good wine list and impeccable service.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Margaery said easily. It was the sort of place Sansa liked: quiet and unassuming. Margaery had never heard of the restaurant. That would have appealed to Sansa as well; she was always one for discovering hidden treasures.

Jaime brightened up when he saw the wine list. He had just sent the sommelier away after an earnest conversation, when Margaery saw them. It was as if by merely thinking of Sansa, she’d conjured her presence up.

“Oh, I should have asked if you liked reds. They have a—”

“Fuck.”

Jaime Lannister stared at her. “I can order something else—”

“I don’t care about the wine.” Margaery raised her menu to conceal her face.

“What are—”

“The tall girl with the long ginger hair and the black dress,” Margaery directed. “She’s with a man in his fifties, receding hairline, nasty smirk on his face, do you see them?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what they’re doing and don’t let either of them see you looking at them.”

Jaime blinked. He pretended to be perusing his menu too. “They’re just talking. I think. Oh.”

“What?”

“The redhead took her shoe off. She’s running her foot along the side of his leg. Is she a prostitute?”

Margaery shot him a glare.

“Sorry. Now he’s signaling to the waiter. He seems to be in a hurry. She hasn’t stopped with her foot so I can’t say that I blame him. He’s taking money out of his wallet. Her foot is back in her shoe and they’re getting up to go. Now he’s got his hand on the small of her back and they’re leaving. I can’t see any more without turning around.”

Margaery could. She watched as Roose Bolton led Sansa out of the restaurant. “That bitch.”

“Were you and he together at some point? I’m surprised; he doesn’t seem like your type.”
“I would rather fuck an entire Dothraki army and every one of their horses than let that man touch a hair on my head.” He was unlocking the passenger door for Sansa now. The car drove away.

Jaime put down his menu. “Margaery Tyrell, I must say, you are not what I expected.”

Grandmother was going to kill her.

“So if he’s not someone you used to date—oh. Oh.” He saw the waiter approaching and shook his head. “You’re gay.”

“Bisexual. What about you?”

“What?”

“You’re eminently eligible,” Margaery said sourly. “You’ve never been married and you’re over forty.”

“Do all men have to marry?”

She studied her menu for a moment. “No, but it’s very unusual for someone in your position and with your looks not to.” He was a handsome man. Age was starting to make some inroads, but he had startling green eyes and most of his blond hair was intact.

“I’m quite straight, but . . .” he seemed to come to a decision. “I’m involved with a woman I can’t marry. The situation is very complicated. My father doesn’t know, nor would he understand. I take it your family doesn’t, er . . . know about you? Or will they only tolerate one gay child per family? Loras is probably gay enough for several families.”

“They understand. I’m still supposed to get married to someone suitable.” She closed her menu. “Filet mignon, rare and don’t talk about Loras like that. He’s my brother and I love him.”

Jaime had the grace to look abashed. He signaled to the waiter. After he’d gone, Jaime nodded toward the table where Roose and Sansa had been. “So, may I ask, what is the story?”

“We lived together. We told everyone we were just roommates. She’s a graduate student. She’s obsessed with her studies. She never stops working. You don’t know what’s like to live with someone so driven.”

“Sadly, I do.”

His father, she realized. The stories about how Tywin Lannister rebuilt his family’s wealth were common knowledge. “We were doing fine. We were happy.” She stopped herself. “All right, we were having some problems, but we would have gotten past them—or could have.” Perhaps that was overly optimistic of her, but Margaery thought if they had really tried, they could have worked it out. “Then she went out of town to work on some materials she found in an archive. She was gone for months. I came to visit her twice. The first time we quarreled, but we made up. When I came down the second time, she was different.”

“Different how?”

Margaery wasn’t sure how to explain it. Fortunately, the sommelier appeared with their wine. By the time the ritual was over, she had the words.

“Go on.”
“She was more . . . When I first met Sansa, she was afraid of her own shadow. She’d gotten better and more confident, but this was like I was with a different person. She was very cold, almost clinical about everything. And she wasn’t the same in—I just knew. I knew she’d met someone else.” Margaery stopped. “We had a huge fight and we both said things that—”

“—you couldn’t take back?”

“Yes. I wanted to make up with her. I thought she would forgive me. I went out of town to my grandmother’s. When I came back, she had moved her stuff out and it was like she wasn’t Sansa anymore. It was like she’d been taken over by this cold, icy, inhuman thing. He did that to her. He changed her.”

Jaime set his wine down. “The man with the smirk?”

“He’s a professor at the university. She took one class with him. I should have known. I saw him looking at her more than once. She said I was imagining things. When she was in Oldtown, she mentioned she’d run into him. I didn’t think about it at the time. He was the one. He has to be. He was the one she was fucking.”

“It seems an odd pairing.”

“What do you mean?” Margaery sipped her wine.

“Well, I realize I only saw them from across the restaurant, but she looks like a beautiful young woman.”

“She is.”

Jaime poured more into both their glasses. “He’s got to be twice her age and he didn’t seem to be particularly good looking.”

“He’s not.” Margaery swallowed some more wine. “He’s not unattractive,” she allowed. “He has a great voice, but you’re right. She’s way out of his league.” She looked down at the glass almost in surprise. “This is very good.”

“Thank you. One of the few things I can do well is select wine. So what is she doing with him?”

Margaery’s face darkened. She remembered how demanding Sansa had been the last time they’d been together. Sansa had asked, no, commanded her to touch her in such very specific ways. Margaery imagined Sansa was doing quite a lot with Roose Bolton.

“How many dates should we go on?” Jaime asked, snapping her out of her thoughts.

She was puzzled.

“Before we call it off, I mean. Five? It would be long enough for us to say we tried. I can tell Father you made fun of him. You can tell your family I wanted to do unspeakable things to you.”

She laughed in spite of herself.

“They may not fall for it, of course,” he said gloomily.

“How old would you say he is?”

“Father is sixty-four.”
“No, Roose Bolton.” She saw him looking confused. “The man who is fucking my girlfriend.”

“Forty-five? Fifty?”

Margaery frowned. “I don’t know anything about him. He doesn’t wear a wedding ring.”

Their food arrived.

“I could try and find out,” Jaime offered. “Father has investigators. I could ask one of them to discreetly get me some information. It would have to be very basic or Father will hear about it. And I don’t think either of us wants Father to look too closely at us.”

“It would give us something to talk about on the next date,” Margaery said bitterly. And maybe just maybe, it might give her a way to get back Sansa.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Again thank yous to tafkar, alors-factor, and to Mr. Alors for their help with the gun stuff. And to tafkar for beta reading this beast.

From what I have found in my research and from what my firearms’ consultants tell me, it is indeed perfectly legal to use guns at a shooting range in the United States (or at least in many parts of the US) without the benefit of a license, but Sansa isn’t wrong to question why he doesn’t want her discussing this with other people.
Thirty-eight Years Ago

The children’s librarian was willing to help Roose, but she didn’t seem to know how. “These are fairy tales,” she told him kindly.

“But there is a Night’s Watch,” Roose insisted. He was nearly twelve. They were learning about the history of the Wall and the Night’s Watch in school. Afterward, Roose had gone up and mentioned the story of “The Night’s King.” He repeated what his mother said about how legends were created. Even though the teacher didn’t like him, he suggested Roose go to the library to learn more.

“Well, yes. We have some books about the Wall if you’d like to—”

“Do you have any books about the thirteenth Lord Commander then?” Roose had read the story of “The Night’s King” over and over.

The librarian went with him to the card catalog. Pulling a pencil that was stuck in her curly brown hair, she jotted down numbers and found him books about the history of the Wall.

They weren’t what he wanted. He found himself getting angry and then he calmed himself. Father said he had to learn to keep his temper, at least in public.

“It’s possible the authors may write about the thirteenth Lord Commander in these even if the books aren’t entirely about him,” she explained. “I’ve seen you in here with your . . .”

“He works for us,” Roose said. He could see Harlon in the adult section randomly picking out books for Mother. “We come every week.”

Her face cleared. “Then I will work on your question for you. If I can find anything about this Lord Commander, I will have it for you the next time. It would help if I knew his name.”

“They struck his name off,” Roose said tightly. Father said he must be patient and he must be polite when he was with other people in public. “Thank you.”

To his surprise, he found he liked the histories she’d selected for him. But there were only one or two tiny mentions of the Nightfort, nothing that mattered. When he came back the next week, the librarian with the brown curls wasn’t there. The clerk at the main desk found someone else for him.

“What was it she was helping you with?” This woman was much older, older than either of his parents, but her brisk manner made him more hopeful.

Again Roose explained what he wanted. “I don’t think she understood when I said his name was struck off.”

The older librarian sighed. “She is from the Reach. She wouldn’t know about the Nightfort.”
What’s your name?”

When he told her, her expression grew unreadable, but she went into the back and returned a few
moments later with a few more books the southerner had set aside for him.

“She left these for you. I’ll see what else I can find.”

There wasn’t anything close to what he wanted in these. They were books about the Wall and they
were written for little children.

The older librarian, who was at least a northerner, came up to the table with three books. “These
are from the adult section. Will your father mind if you borrow them?”

Roose shook his head. His father read the paper and dog-breeding magazines. As long as Roose did
his lessons, stayed out of what his father considered to be trouble, and obeyed, his father didn’t care
what Roose read or did.

“This is a history about the Night’s Watch. There is a section on the Lord Commanders from the
Age of Heroes. It may be a bit over your head. Do you have a dictionary?”

His mother did. She wouldn’t mind if he used it. He nodded.

“This is about the Age of Heroes in general. There is a small part dealing with the Nightfort. I
think you will definitely require the dictionary for it.” She set down the last book.

Roose silently read the title: *Tales for Winter*.

“This contains an earlier version of the story in your book. Its version of ‘The Night’s King’ is
longer.” She hesitated. “It is definitely darker. I am going to have Harlon check this one out on
your mother’s card.” She held up a hand when Roose started to protest. “This is how it has to be. I
don’t want your fa—it is policy.’

He knew she wasn’t being entirely truthful, but she was probably afraid of his father. He would get
the book from Harlon once they were in the truck.

“We’re just a branch library,” she told him. “I’ll see if my colleagues at the central location have
some suggestions. I am here every Saturday. I usually work there.” She pointed to the reference
desk for the adult part of the library. “I am not sure what you want exists. You may have to grow
up to become a historian to write about the thirteenth Lord Commander.”

“It’s not him I care about,” Roose said as he thumbed through *Tales for Winter*. “It’s her.” He
flicked his nail against the illustration of the Night’s Queen.

* * *

Present Day

* * *

Roose brought their food and beverages to the booth.

“What is this?” Sansa asked, frowning as she looked at the coffee. “This must be someone else’s.”

“No, it’s yours.”

“I wanted an extra-large.”

He put his hand on hers as she started to get up. “You are entirely too dependent on caffeine.”
“I never claimed to be otherwise. I’m in grad school. It goes with the territory. We’re in a coffee house, for gods’ sakes.”

Roose smiled patiently at her. “It is only one size down from what you usually have. If I can’t persuade you to give up coffee, would you at least try and drink less of it?”

Sansa was stony-faced.

He shrugged. “I’ll buy you another if you insist.”

“I do.”

He sighed and took it back. Sansa was focused on her laptop. “I’m afraid I mixed up the order. Don’t worry, I’ll pay for this. Dispose of it, please. An extra-large, half decaffeinated.”

The cashier remembered him. “You ordered a regular before.”

Roose leaned in conspiratorially. “I wonder. My friend isn’t supposed to have so much caffeine, but she’s an addict. Would it be possible for you not . . .” he let his voice trail off.

“Not a problem at all.”

Roose took the coffee back to Sansa. She was quite reasonable about most things. She enjoyed target practice with him. Going to the firing range twice a week was something she was very willing to do. She had fought him on improving her physical strength and stamina, but she was finally coming around. On the subject of caffeine she was adamant. Sansa didn’t care if it was a crutch. She didn’t care if it was unhealthy or that it clouded her senses. She wanted her coffee and she was determined to have it.

“Thank you,” Sansa said absently as she notated PowerPoint slides.

“You’ve taught the class once already. Surely you have no need to rely on what the previous instructor did.” Seeing the question on her face, he indicated the slides. “LIT 201?”

“No.”

Roose uncapped his pen and put on his reading glasses. He’d expressed his opinion on this subject more than a few times. She knew how he felt about it.

Sansa kept on with her notes. “I sat in on a lecture. The instructor spoke too quickly,” she explained. “I took notes but my handwriting was a mess and I missed things. I want to redo them, while it’s fresh in my mind.”

His face cleared.

“I do listen to you, you know.” Sansa commented as she wrote. “I understand why you don’t approve of presentation software, but I’m in a very different position from you. I am using Prezi for the LIT 201 class. I have football players in there, along with students who really don’t belong in university. It’s not like a proper literature class. Half of them don’t even know how to take notes. What I’m supposed to teach them is very basic stuff. It’s nowhere at the level at which you lecture. I don’t want a father. I have a father. He’s not much of one, but I don’t need another.” She kept her eyes on her paper.

Roose listened intently. Sansa mentioned her family even less now than she had at the beginning of their relationship. It startled him to hear her denigrate Eddard Stark, whose reputation as a family
man was nearly sacrosanct.

“I do like you teaching me things, but I don’t want that to be the only dynamic we enjoy.”

“Am I too overbearing?”

“About coffee, definitely.” Her lips twitched. “I could do without you reminding me about going to the gym. And I think if you never criticize presentation software to me again it will be too soon. Otherwise, no.”

Roose smiled.

“What about me?” she asked.

“We did come here to work,” he reminded her.

Sansa lifted her eyes to his. “This relationship is more than just sex, right? I thought that was all it was at first, but it’s not anymore.”

“No, it’s not,” he admitted.

“Margaery and I never talked anything out. We just went along until one of us pissed the other off and then there would be a fight. We’d make up and we’d just do the same thing over and over again. I don’t want that to happen to us.” She put her pen on the table. “So what about me?”

He didn’t want to have this conversation here in public.

“We’re pretty much the only people in here,” she pointed out.

“I’m quite happy with you,” he said finally.

Sansa arched an eyebrow. “But?”

“I have few complaints aside from that,” he nodded to the coffee. “I enjoy you far more than I’ve ever enjoyed any woman.”

“Even your wives?”

Roose smiled. “I wondered when you’d ask me about them. Yes, far more than any of them. Why are you so incurious about me?”

“I’m not. It’s just . . . you’re a very private man. I wanted to respect that. The last time you brought it up it was the middle of the night and it was just very strange.”

Again he glanced around the coffee shop.

“No, not here,” she said. “Tonight, tell me about them tonight.”

* * *

Sansa stared at the pictures in the albums. He hadn’t compiled these, she intuited. Certainly the last one, which had been assembled by a scrapbooking fiend, was not his creation either.

They sat on the sofa. He had his arm around her. He let her turn the pages. She asked questions and he answered them. When she was silent, he nibbled on her ear or neck or caressed her. He didn’t seem to find this at all odd. Sansa asked him why not.
“You’re here. They’re dead.”

“Which is why this is weird. We’re talking about them and you’re making out with me.”

“I didn’t love any of them,” he murmured before kissing her neck.

She returned to the first album. His first wife was pretty in a washed-out sort of way. “Why did you marry her then?”

“Her company was tolerable. She had a comfortable income from her job. She was an acceptable enough lover.”

The coldness of his answer startled her. “Why didn’t you wait till you found someone you loved?”

“My fellow students were all pairing off. I don’t like to occasion comment.”

Sansa examined a picture of him with his bride. They were both smiling for the camera. This was the one who’d died very young of cancer after a year and a half. He’d related this quite dispassionately. His only comment about her death was that it allowed him several years of solitude afterward.

Their wedding looked like it had been very simple. “Who are these people?”

Roose stopped fondling her long enough to look. “I don’t remember their names,” he said pointing to the two women in teal blue. “He was a fellow student who stood up for me.” Roose turned a page. “That’s my mother and my father’s sister. The others aren’t important.”

His mother was dressed impeccably, but her expression was impossible to read. Her dark hair was beginning to turn grey, but her blue eyes were vivid and Sansa thought she’d probably once been quite lovely. His aunt could have been any generic old lady, but Sansa could see a definite resemblance between her and Roose. “Are they still alive?”

“My aunt lives in White Harbor although she’s quite elderly. My mother is dead.”

Sansa paged through a few more leaves in the album. At least half of them were blank. She set it aside and picked up the next one.

Bethany was a beauty. He’d been married to her the longest.

“Which one or ones did you have your sons with?”

He reached down and flipped through the pages. “Domeric.” He pointed to a handsome little boy with a kind face. “He was our only child. Bethany had trouble carrying to term.”

“Was that what killed her?”

“No, she died from pneumonia,” he told her shortly.

Sansa turned another page. “Wait a minute. I know her.” She pointed to a woman with brown hair and sharp eyes. “I’ve seen her picture before.” She tried to remember. “There was a photo of her in a blue dress with Uncle Brandon in an album at home.”

Roose laughed. “That is Barbrey Dustin, Bethany’s sister. She and your uncle had a torrid affair when they were young.” He kissed her ear. “Although, I rather doubt if it was as torrid as ours is. She doesn’t care much for your father and she loathes your mother.”
Sansa didn’t want to talk about her parents. “You’re close to her?”

“I used to sleep with her on occasion,” he said quite casually. He turned two more pages. “I had her by that tree that day.”

It was a picture of a group of people at a picnic. Roose wasn’t in the photo. He wasn’t in most of these images, but perhaps he was the one taking the snaps. He pointed out the individuals. His aunt sat on a lawn chair. Domeric stood next to her. Behind, Bethany stood between her brother-in-law and her sister.

“You didn’t love Bethany.” It was a statement, not a question. Clearly he couldn’t have or he wouldn’t have fucked her sister against a tree at a family picnic while his wife was around. Not to mention Barbrey’s husband.

“I was fond of her, but no. I didn’t love her sister either. They were both very convenient women.”

It was a weird way to describe someone, Sansa thought.

Roose seemed to sense it. “Society doesn’t like people to be without partners. Everyone had a friend or a relative they wanted me to meet. I realized I was better off marrying again. Bethany seemed the most tolerable of the candidates. She was very quiet. She never used to make a sound when I took her. Neither did my first wife.”

Sansa wondered if that was why he encouraged her to be so vocal when they had sex.

“She generally did as I wished and we got on quite well. Barbrey—” Roose smiled to himself before continuing, “—she was very different from her sister, but we always understood each other.”

The people in the pictures were older now. Domeric looked to be about sixteen or seventeen. Next to him was another boy of approximately the same age. He had kind of a crazed expression. “Who is he?”

“Ramsay.” Roose set the album down on the table. He put his hands around her waist and lifted her on his lap. “Much better. You may pick it up again.”

“Who is Ramsay?”

“My bastard.”

Sansa looked at the other photos. Ramsay was present in all of them. For the first time she caught an expression on Bethany’s face that wasn’t just a faded smile. In two of the next photos, Bethany was staring at Ramsay with fear and resentment.

“What happened to your sons?”

“Domeric ostensibly died of food poisoning,” he remarked flatly. When she turned to face him, he went on, “There was no proof, but Ramsay killed him.”

Sansa pulled away and sat back on the sofa. “What?”

“He was trouble from the moment I got him on his mother. He utterly lacked self-restraint.”

It was the closest Roose had come to displaying any real kind of emotion since they’d started this discussion. Sansa listened as he went on describing Ramsay.

The boy was cunning, but he didn’t think. He was impulsive. He was sloppy. He was a fool in
many ways. Roose turned the page. Domeric was no longer present in the photos. Bethany seemed
to be disappearing into herself and Barbrey was angry. Roose talked about Domeric again. He
calmed himself as he did so. Domeric had been a bright, intelligent boy. He was fond of horses. He
loved to read. He was planning on studying music at a conservatory. “He was no match for
Ramsay. I warned him about getting too close. Neither of my sons ever listened to me.”

“What happened to Ramsay?”

Roose closed the second album and picked up the third. “If you won’t sit on my lap, lean against
me at least.”

Sansa crawled back onto him. “Better?” She’d told him she didn’t need or want another father, but
she had to admit she enjoyed this dynamic too.

“Much.” He reached around her and flipped it open like he was showing her a storybook. “Walda
loved pink,” he told her in a wry voice.

Walda was very plump, but she was pretty and she seemed to have a sweet face.

“I married her for her money,” Roose commented. “I was oddly fond of her, although for rather
different reasons. She was very amusing,” he said finally. “I have no idea what she saw when she
looked at me, but the girl was besotted.”

Sansa could see it in the photos.

“She was very enthusiastic in bed too.”

“Was she better than me?” It was a silly thing to ask, but somehow Sansa didn’t like the idea that
his wife had been a better lover than she was.

Roose laughed. “No.”

Sansa relaxed.

“She was, well, just look at these.” He pointed to the stickers of hearts and flowers.

“And she was with you?” If her photos and scrapbooking elements were anything to go by, Walda
was very fluffy. Roose was cold, lean, and hard.

Again, he laughed. “Walda was a romantic, I suppose. She was far from stupid, but she persisted in
wearing rose-colored glasses. She would have loved your pretty Rickard Dayne illustrations.”

“And been appalled by the woodcuts?”

“She would not have understood them. She was quite determined to see me as her handsome prince
and our life like a Disney fairytale. I came home from a conference and found she’d painted half
the house pink.”

“How pink?” It had taken weeks of wheedling to get him to accept the coffeemaker she’d put in his
kitchen.

Roose pointed to one of the decals; it was the color of Pepto-Bismol. “It was impossible to do
anything about it.”

Sansa looked at him cynically. “I was in your class. I know you can make students quake in fear on
command.”
“I tried,” he admitted. “Walda refused to see it. She never saw me for who I was. She was uneasy about Ramsay, justly so.” As he turned the pages, it struck Sansa that he was agitated again.

Roose was in many of these pictures. He seemed mostly bemused by Walda. Ramsay clearly loathed his stepmother, though. There was naked, unabashed hatred in his crazy eyes. “How did she die?”

He closed the album and placed it on top of the others. “A car accident, but it was Ramsay. She was pregnant, which was why he did it, of course.”

“I’m—” Sansa broke off. She’d been about to say she was sorry, but Roose would just ask her why again. “I don’t understand. Why would her being pregnant matter?”

“He wanted to be my only child. Walda wasn’t the only romantic in the house. He had some bizarre delusion about me and his mother. He told one of his... companions... that I was bewitched by her beauty. Raise your arms. There.” He removed her top. “His mother was two steps up from a whore. I had her one night outside a restaurant. I was younger and had not yet learned to be more careful about my amusements. I was at Stormlands then.” Roose reached behind and unhooked her bra. “She showed up in the parking lot one day as I was going to my car. She had him in a stroller and she demanded child support. I should have run her over and the boy with her.”

Sansa knew she should be horrified. He spoke as if he were describing an unfortunate conflict of five hundred years ago as he dandled her half naked upon his knees. “And Ramsay?”

“He was shot dead by the police. He was involved in some scheme that went wrong.” Again there was a note of disgust in his voice.

“Why do you have your wives’ belongings in the room upstairs still?” Clearly, he wasn’t a sentimental man.

“I was at Sunspear for my first marriage. I had been interviewing elsewhere. I got the position at Stormlands very soon after her death. I would have thrown everything out, but some colleagues and their wives insisted on helping me pack. Her possessions went with me. They were in the attic for years. Barbrey took most of Bethany’s things, but she boxed the rest up. They were meant for charity.”

“You give to charity?” Sansa couldn’t keep the cynicism out of her voice. Roose didn’t look at all the type.

Roose ran his fingers over her cheek. “The tax deduction is very useful. The boxes never made it. The movers made a mistake and they ended up here. I have no useable attic.”

“Walda didn’t object?”

“Walda was concerned for my twice-broken heart,” Roose told her. “I simply haven’t gotten around to dealing with the boxes.” He stroked her hair. “Does it bother you that I still have them?”

“Not anymore.”

“I have some time tomorrow. I’ll start on them then.”

“You don’t have to do anything on my account.” Not now, she thought. Not now that she realized he thought his wives like necessary accessories society had made him wear on his arm. She wondered what he felt for her. Was she some favorite toy he had not yet tired of? Was she something more?
Roose undid the top button of her jeans.

Or was she some doll he liked to undress?

“I want you to feel comfortable here. It is a small enough thing for me to do.”

“No, you don’t have to.”

“I was taught not to feel things very deeply. Not,” he commented as he slid the zipper down, “that I ever did. But I have grown very attached to you, Sansa.”

He meant that, Sansa saw with relief. She could tell, just like she could tell when he wasn’t being entirely truthful.

“You’re very different from anyone I’ve ever known. Sometimes I have a hard time believing you’re real.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

I took the idea of Roose having an affair with Barbrey while married to Bethany from the headcanon and fics of sternflammenden who was kind enough to allow me to borrow it. My characterization is sketchier and different than hers, but I wanted to give credit where credit is due. Also, you should read her stories!

As always I owe my beta, tafkar, a tremendous thank you.
Forty-five Years Ago

One minute the puppy was playful and alive, the next it was still and dead. Roose took the kitchen knife he had stolen and cut deeper into its stomach. It was still warm although even that was cooling.

“Roose? Didn’t you hear me calling? It’s time for supper and you know how your father—”

He looked up at her. “I wanted to see what it looks like inside, Mama.”

She didn’t seem to know what to say and her face was nearly as white as the snow.

Roose pointed out the things he’d found in the puppy. “Why does it go cold?”

“Put that poor animal down. We’re going to wait here for your father.”

Roose’s hands were red. He was cold now too. He put his mittens back on. The blood was staining them. “Why are you crying, Mama?”

“I knit those for you,” she said sadly. She swallowed and rubbed her eyes.

Now he understood. He wasn’t supposed to damage his clothes. Father was always very clear about this. Things cost money and they needed to be careful with their money.

When his father found them, he was already furious.

His mother pointed to Roose and to the dog and then she walked into the house.

After a spanking and a lecture that Roose remembered for the rest of his life, he went to his room. He wasn’t to have supper and he would be going without an allowance until the puppy was paid for. He listened for the sounds of an argument, but if his parents were talking, they were being very
quiet. He had toys, but he seldom played with them. He preferred to read. He practiced his letters and numbers the way he did every night, and then he selected the books he wanted his mother to read to him.

He was hungry, but he didn’t dare do anything about it. He waited. His mother didn’t come. This must be part of the punishment too, he thought. The puppy belonged to Father, but he had ruined his mittens. This was why he had to wait for her.

It was dark outside when his father opened the door. “Why aren’t you asleep?”

Roose explained about waiting for his mother.

His father scowled and left him.

Finally his mother came up. She didn’t say anything. She ran his bath. The water turned pink when Roose got in it.

She picked up his clothes. The blood on them wasn’t red anymore. It was a sort of brown.

Roose asked her why this happened. When she didn’t respond, he thought she was upset because his clothes were now ruined too. Father had said a lot about the money Roose cost him. “I’m sorry, Mama.”

“Why?”

Roose didn’t understand.

“Why are you sorry? I need to know why.”

He carefully repeated what Father told him. He had been careless. Carelessness cost. His father said it cost in more ways than just money. He remembered her reaction to the mittens. He said he was sorry for destroying them. Father said he worked hard so that Roose would have the things a Bolton should. Mama must have worked hard too. Roose didn’t quite understand any of this, but he went over everything his father had said he had done wrong.

His mother didn’t respond, but she made him wash two more times. She helped him brush his teeth and then she got him into his pajamas.

Roose clambered into the bed and handed her a book.

“Your father says you’re too big for me to read to you anymore. Go to sleep, Roose.”

* * *

Present Day

* * *

Poking around estate sales was not Roose’s favorite thing to do. It hadn’t been Margaery’s either. Roose, however, was more than willing to go with her if that was what she wanted and Sansa liked that about him.

He went through the main rooms with her, looking at the furniture and the antiques. Then they temporarily parted ways, Roose to the basement to hunt for tools and Sansa upstairs to look for linens and vintage clothes. She found a cutwork tablecloth and matching napkins. It was late on the second day and she was able to haggle to get a better price.
When she didn’t see Roose waiting for her outside, she went in search of him. She found him still in the basement in front of some built-in shelves, his head bent over a dusty leather-bound history book. “It’s a first edition,” he told her quietly when she came up to him.

“Are you sure? They’re usually pretty good about spotting that stuff.” Sansa looked at the other titles in the book case. They appeared to be exclusively of the Reader’s Digest variety.

Roose was quite sure. “It made me think of you.” He flipped through the pages to a color plate of a red-haired wildling woman loosing arrows at a member of the Night’s Watch. “‘Kissed by fire,’ indeed,” he murmured pointing to the caption. “That’s how you looked this morning.”

“When you dragged me out of a nice warm bed into the freezing woods?”

“The weather is unseasonably warm,” he pointed out. “We had the windows down in the car.”

“Now it’s unseasonably warm. It wasn’t this morning.” The girl in the illustration had a pissed-off expression. “Wrong weapon and I did not look nearly that angry.”

He chuckled. “It’s worth a few hundred.”

She shushed him. “Don’t let them hear. Just pay the $2.50.”

They returned to his house. Sansa worked for a bit and then after supper, they settled in the living room, she with her knitting and he with his newspaper. She loved how in sync they were. She’d had that with Margaery for the first year or so before other things had bled into their lives.

“What are you making?” Roose inquired, interrupting her reverie.

“Socks.” She held up the completed one. “I’m almost done with its mate. I figured I would need something warm if you’re going to keep making me shoot in the woods during winter.”

He smiled.

Sansa was about to ask if he might build a fire, when he rose and did it automatically.

“Why so many needles?” he asked pointing to the five double points.

“Because I’m knitting in the round. That’s what you do for hats, socks, mittens, gloves. They’re more to hold the shape, though. I only ever knit with two needles.” She showed him.

He returned to his chair and the paper, but he watched her hands with fascination.

“How long do we have?” Sansa asked abruptly.

“I’d like to go up to bed at 11:00.”

“No, I mean how long do we have.”

Roose didn’t say anything.

“I just want to know. Once I graduate—” She’d have to go where she could find a posting and she doubted King’s would have one.

“—I’ve been thinking about that too,” he confessed. “It may be premature to make plans.” Roose folded the paper and set it down.
Margaery would have told her not to worry about it too.

“I mean to move on from King’s.”

“When?” This was new information.

“That’s just it. If this works out, we might be able to move together.”

Sansa stopped knitting and looked at him. “Oh.”

“I don’t want this to end.”

Sansa didn’t trust herself to speak without becoming emotional. He would put his life on hold for her. He was willing to build a future with her. He was waiting for a response. She exhaled. “So we can go on like this until I’m closer to being done?”

“Yes. And then we can make our plans.” Roose gave himself a little shake. “I prefer certainties too, but for now, we could just . . . enjoy each other?”

“I would like that.”

After over ten years of alternating between relentlessly pursuing goals and trying to outrun time, it would be unbelievably relaxing to just take it day by day.

* * *

Margaery smiled brilliantly at Tywin Lannister and his daughter. Both of them were staring at her like she was some creature from outer space. “Jaime is here, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” Tywin allowed. He turned to one of his grandchildren. “Go and find your uncle.”

A chubby teenager with the requisite Lannister golden hair obeyed. The rubber soles of his shoes stuck slightly against the surface of the polished marbled floors, but he persevered and he headed into the recesses of the house.

“Please come in, Ms Tyrell.”

“Do call me Margaery.”

“Very well.”

Margaery sat and chattered away. She ignored Cersei Baratheon’s icy glare.

Jaime came in with merciful quickness.

“I was hoping to steal you away for a little while,” Margaery lied. She’d gotten three panicked texts, begging her to rescue him in exchange for information about Roose Bolton. “Tomorrow won’t work for our date, I’m afraid.”

“This is our weekly family dinner, Ms Tyrell,” Cersei commented in a voice dripping with acid.

Margaery knew Tywin Lannister looked at her and saw Tyrell money. She pouted prettily. “Oh, I am so sorry. I didn’t know.” She turned to Jaime. “I have a lot of conflicts for the next week and I know you said you were going out of town . . .”

“I think we can spare Jaime,” Tywin said quickly.
It was a piece of cake after that.

“‘You’re very good,” Jaime told her as they drove away.

“PhD in Charm and Shrewdness courtesy of Olenna Tyrell,” Margaery commented. "Your sister hates me.”

“Cersei doesn’t like many people. Where are we going?”

“On a picnic.”

“A what?”

“A picnic. It’s very romantic. My grandmother will think my choice very wise and your father will think things are moving along.”

Jaime zipped up his jacket. “It’s barely 60F. And I doubt my father has ever been on a picnic.”

“Tell him it involves lying on a blanket with a pretty girl. He’ll understand then. Are you always this much of a wimp?”

He took umbrage to this criticism.

Margaery paid no attention. It was at least five degrees warmer than Jaime claimed. She had been trying to think of a way where they could talk unobserved and unheard. Restaurants were too iffy. All it took was the wrong pair of prying eyes or open ears and it was the end.

She made him carry everything. It was the benefit of being with a man. She directed him to a sunny spot on a hill. After she got everything set up, he stopped whining.

“This is very nice actually.”

“Sansa never wanted to go with me. She said sitting on the ground was stupid.” Margaery opened containers. She handed Jaime the wine and the corkscrew. “I hope this is all right. The wine merchant raved about it.”

He was impressed. “This is more than all right. It’s actually better than what they’ll be having at Father’s.”

“Just so we don’t get carried away, remember why you’re here.”

“Oh, right. Roose Bolton.” Jaime unzipped his jacket and unfolded some papers. “There’s not much. The investigator I wanted to use is on an assignment in the Riverlands. She’s a pain, but once she gets going, Brienne doesn’t stop. The one I ended up with is nowhere near as good.”

Margaery did her best not to grab at the papers.

“All right, he’s fifty as of a few months ago. He hails from the Dreadfort, which if I remember from my history is the ancestral home to House Bolton. Here’s a list of his degrees. All very impressive, I’m sure. And here’s a list of his academic appointments. Our boy has moved all over Westeros.”

“That’s normal for academics.”

Jaime uncorked the wine. “I don’t suppose you brought a wine aerator, did you?”
She did in fact have one. The man at the shop had insisted it was an essential purchase for such a wine and this type of occasion.

He took it out of the packaging. “Normal how?”

“Sansa explained it to me. A lot of them move around. They go where the jobs are. Usually they have a final destination in mind and sometimes they have to take appointments in the opposite direction while they build up their standing and credentials. What else?”

“He’s a widower three times over.”

“Three?”

“First wife died of cervical cancer. No children. His second wife died of complications from pneumonia. The third was killed in a car accident.”

Margaery thought. “Any kids?”

“This is where it gets interesting. Here.”

She read the pages. “This is all about his son, not him.” All it told her was that Roose Bolton had sired one very nasty piece of work. “What else do you have?”

“Lists of his publications and presentations.”

“Your so-called investigator probably just printed off his cv off the King’s University website.”

“I told you it would be basic information.”

“Shit.”

“I know this might be an obvious suggestion, but have you tried talking to this girl?”

Margaery folded the pages over. She handed him a plate and silverware. “Sansa won’t speak to me. I’ve tried a number of times. The only time she answered was when I left her a voicemail about her student loan check coming to the apartment. She made me mail it addressed to her care of the literature department. Sansa won’t even tell me where her apartment is.” Margaery had asked around. The people who knew weren’t telling.

“Is she worth it?”

Margaery spooned some pasta salad onto her plate.

“You told me she was unfaithful to you. She won’t have anything to do with you. This Roose Bolton isn’t particularly handsome. Perhaps it’s just a sign she has terrible taste and appalling judgment.”

“I love Sansa. I hate what he’s turned her into.”

“You don’t know that’s his fault,” Jaime pointed out.

“I’ve known Sansa for ten years and I’ve lived with her for six of those. I helped her through some really horrible things and then in the space of three-to-six months she’s changed into something totally different. Nothing about this feels right.”

Jaime listened. “What are these?” he asked as he pointed to the sandwiches.
“Ham and gruyère; roast beef and goat cheese; I think that’s something with eggplant and tomatoes.”

He poured them both wine. “Roast beef and some of that salad too, please,” Jaime directed. “If I thought Brienne was going to be finished—I don’t dare go back to the investigator, but I think I can find out where this girl is living.”

“How?”

“I can follow her.” He seemed excited by the idea of playing private detective.

“Sansa doesn’t have a car. She takes the bus.”

“Then I shall follow the bus. I’ll need a photo of her, though. There are probably lots of redheads around the campus and one sighting across a dimly lit restaurant might not be enough to go on.”

Margaery would have preferred the sure and certain proof that Roose Bolton was a nutcase and a rat bastard, something, anything that she could show to Sansa and use to shake her back to normalcy. It would be good to know where she was, though. Maybe even just being able to see her would be enough.

They ate in silence for a while.

“What about your girlfriend? Does she know about me?”

“She knows I’m dating you. I haven’t told her we’re pretending.”

“Why not?”

Jaime sighed. “It’s complicated. Everything with her is always complicated.”

Margaery held out her glass. “More wine, please.”

“What happens if you get Sansa back? Will your family accept it?”

“No. I had a plan, but it blew up in my face.” She told him about Loras and Renly. He had the grace not to laugh. “I don’t know what I was thinking. I could never have sold it to Grandmother. Even though Sansa’s a Stark, there’s no money.”

Jaime sat up. “As in the House Stark?”

“Direct line of descent from Bran the Builder,” Margaery told him.

“Robert is best friends with Ned Stark. Any relation?”

“Her father.”

“He doesn’t like me, but I could introduce you. He’s not like Father. He would find you charming.”

Margaery crumpled up her napkin. “I know Eddard Stark already, thank you very much. He’s useless.”

“Robert thinks the sun shines out of his arse. Best friend he ever had, he roars. They’re closer than brothers, he says.”

“No, even if I thought he could help, Sansa would murder me. I mean that literally. She would kill
After Roose finished with his class, he returned to his office to find three messages from Sansa on his office phone. When he checked his cell, there were five from her. Her manner on each grew progressively more panicked, but they were lacking in any kind of detail. Each was a variation on the last: please call me; I need you. Sansa answered on the first ring.

“Someone’s been following me.”

“What?”

She was upset. “I wasn’t sure at first. I thought I was just imagining things. I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t call the work number. I couldn’t reach you and—”

Roose closed his office door. “It’s all right. Tell me what happened.”

Sansa took a deep breath. “I took the bus that goes into the suburbs yesterday so I could buy groceries and go to Target. I noticed a red Jaguar when I got off. I don’t usually pay much attention to cars.”

But a luxury vehicle such as a Jaguar would be out of place in a suburban strip plaza and Sansa was far too observant not to take notice of something out of the ordinary, he thought. “Go on.”

“I saw it was there when I went back out to the stop, but I assumed the owner must be shopping. But when I got my transfer, it was there again.”

“Where did you get the transfer?”

“At the downtown bus station,” she answered. “It’s the quickest way back.”

There were a number of office buildings in that location. Some of them were home to prestigious business concerns. It was possible someone in one of those offices would own a red Jaguar and possible they might have stopped in a shopping plaza, but it wasn’t very probable.

“I took the subway across town and caught another bus back to my apartment.”

“Did you see the car again?”

“Not last night. I would have called you, but I thought maybe I was overthinking it and I knew I was going to see you tonight.”

She’d left him eight messages today. “Keep going.”

Sansa was calmer now. “I went into the library this morning and I saw it on campus. He was definitely following me.”

“He?”

“Blond hair, fair skin. I couldn’t make out more than that.” Again she took a breath. “I cut across the tunnel and came out at the shuttle stop at the far end of campus. I didn’t see him, so I got on. I had just gotten on the main bus, and I saw the car again out the window.” She’d repeated her trick of taking a circuitous route back via the subway.

“Where are you now?”
This was the work of a rank amateur. No professional worth his salt would use such a noticeable vehicle, but it didn’t preclude it being someone who wanted to harm her. “Are you sure it’s a Jaguar?”

“Yes, I recognized the emblem.”

“Do you know the model?”

“No, I don’t know very much about cars, but I have the license plate number.”

“Give it to me,” Roose ordered. Sansa obeyed. “He doesn’t seem to know where you live or you’d be seeing the car outside your house too.”

She took another breath.

“I want you to stay in the apartment. Keep away from the windows. Do not open the door to anyone but me.”

“When will you be here?”

Roose considered. “I am going to check something out first. I will call you as soon as I have.”

“All right.”

He hung up the phone. He took out the cell he used only for his other work and placed a call. He simply read the plate number into the phone.

“Thirty minutes,” the anonymous voice on the other end told him.

Roose thought about it while he waited. It could be the inept work of some smitten rich boy or more likely someone interested in frightening or hurting a pretty girl. He wondered briefly about the Tyrell girl, but Sansa knew the girl and her family. She would have recognized the driver and the car. He was supposed to have office hours today. Those could be canceled. He had a meeting in an hour. It would be more difficult to get out of, but it could be managed if necessary.

The phone rang. He picked it up.

“Jaime Lannister. Do you need the address?”

“Give it to me. Everything you have.” He listened. When the voice on the other end finished, there was a pause. “Thank you.” He hung up.

This was curious. Jaime Lannister was a rich man, but Roose had never heard of him having a predilection for preying on university coeds. The Lannisters were ruthless enough to be capable of dispatching their enemies, but they were more likely to hire someone like him than they were to send the scion of the family off to do their dirty work. Sansa had never once mentioned this man in particular or the Lannisters in general to him. He would need to discuss it with her.

Using his normal cell phone, he rang Sansa again. “I don’t think you have any immediate cause for concern.”

“You know someone who can run license plate numbers,” she deduced. “Who is it?”

“We’ll talk about it tonight. I still want you to stay inside.” He repeated his instructions about the
windows and not opening the door. “I’ll pick up some dinner for us. No target practice tonight.”

“Roose, I know I’m probably being silly, but I’m terrified.”

“Don’t be. I take care of what’s mine.”

* * *

Sansa did as Roose instructed. She felt distinctly vulnerable as she got off the bus at her regular stop and walked home. She sensed rather than saw the red Jaguar. When she stopped at the stoplight, she looked both ways. The car was right there. She didn’t see Roose, but he’d warned her she wouldn’t.

If only it was lighter out. What if Roose was wrong and this man did want to hurt her? She tried to walk at her normal speed. Roose said it was important for her not to do anything out of the ordinary. Sansa turned up her street and up the back entrance to the carriage house. Here, Roose said, she was to walk even more slowly. He said the driver needed to get out of the car. Once she heard the car door slam, and she was out of view, he wanted her to get up her stairs and inside as fast as possible.

The door slammed.

Sansa heard the footsteps. She slowed down. One more turn and she’d be out of sight. And then she ran. Only when she was in the apartment with the door locked, did she breathe. She clutched the gun he’d lent her.

Ten minutes later, she heard Roose. “It’s me, Sansa. All clear.”

Sansa let him in.

Roose took a laptop out of its case and set it up on the table. “Give the .38 to me.”

She returned the gun to him with shaking hands.

He removed the magazine. “You’re safe now. Pour yourself a glass of water. I need you to be calm.”

A glass of water was not going to calm her.

Roose placed the gun in his satchel and put his arms on her shoulders. “You are safe with me.”

Sansa took a deep breath. “Okay.” She believed him. He wasn’t going to let anything hurt her.

He sat down and turned his attention to the computer.

“That isn’t your laptop,” she said abruptly.

“It’s loaded with the software I require.”

Sansa sat next to him. She watched as he opened a program. There was a map. He zoomed in.

“Now what?”

“We wait and see where your stalker goes.”

“What if he just goes somewhere else?”
Roose shrugged. “He won’t. He’s been following you for three days. He was anxious to find out where you live. Now he has his answer. He’s an amateur. He’ll go to the individual who set him on you.”

“Why are you so certain he doesn’t want to harm me?”

“He had the opportunity to try to hurt you just now. Instead, he took off the moment he had your address and went to his car. Someone other than he wants to know where you live.”

She absorbed this. “He could just phone,”

“I doubt it. Are you certain you’ve never dealt with Jaime Lannister?”

“Positive. I met his sister once, but it was when I was a kid. She’s married to my father’s best friend. I know I’ve never met Jaime Lannister. Margaery went out a couple of times with his cousin, Lancel, but I never met him either.”

“When was this?”

“When I was in Oldtown. She said he was weedy and had sweaty hands. I think she only dated him twice.” She watched as the blinking cursor that must represent Jaime Lannister’s car moved through the streets of the city. “What if he had tried to hurt me?”

Roose turned to face her. “I would have killed him,” he replied calmly.

She half wanted to relax and half wanted to freeze. “How do you know how to do this stuff? This special software and getting someone to run the plates, I mean?”

He gave her an enigmatic smile, but said nothing.

Sansa felt uneasy. She was about to ask another question, when she realized the cursor had stopped. “Can you zoom in?”

“Yes.” Roose hit the icon twice so now the street names were visible. The cursor had definitely stopped moving. It wasn’t at a light or a stop sign. The car was parked.

They both saw it at the same time.

Roose leaned forward. “I should have known.”

“Why would Margaery have Jaime Lannister follow me?”

“You refused to give her your address.” Roose closed the software program and shut down the computer. He stood up.

“Yes, but why go to him?”

He put the laptop in the case. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I ended everything very definitively with her.” Sansa didn’t know how much more definitive she could have been. She’d all but threatened to sue Margaery for harassment if she so much as contacted her one more time.

Roose shrugged. “I want you to let me handle this from now on.”

“Handle it how?”
“Did you pack your bags like I instructed?”

She nodded. He’d told he thought it advisable for her to stay with him for the next few days.

“Get them and any work you want to take with you.”

They drove in silence to his house.

She should have felt safer once they were inside, but she felt worse. How did he know how to do these things? She’d initially not thought much about his interest in guns. He was from the north. People hunted in the north. But he knew so much about so many different types of guns and ammunition. She’d copied the license plate number intent on giving it to the police. You couldn’t just look up the information. You had to know someone. Sansa supposed it was possible he had a friend in the DMV, but he’d gotten the name in less than an hour. Besides, Roose didn’t seem to have friends. Why would he just happen to have this mysterious laptop with this special software? There were places you could probably buy this stuff, but he not only had it on hand already, he knew exactly what to do in this bizarre situation.

Roose disappeared with his satchel and the laptop.

Sansa stayed in the kitchen. She didn’t want to know in which room of the house he kept them. If she knew, she’d be tempted to snoop and she instinctively knew she didn’t want answers to all these questions.

Roose came back. “Would you make me a sandwich? It doesn’t matter what kind. There are lunch bags below the sink. Then make yourself some dinner.”

“You’re going out.”

“Yes.”

He took her suitcase upstairs.

Sansa moved automatically. She assembled ingredients and wrapped a sandwich for him. There was fruit. She selected an apple and put in the bag along with napkins. Water, he would want water.

Dinner, he said she should eat. She stared into the refrigerator and finally decided on scrambled eggs.

Roose came down as she was plating them. He was wearing different clothes. There was nothing noteworthy about them. Sansa wondered if that was perhaps that was the point. He had a black briefcase she’d never seen him with before.

He opened the refrigerator and took out the hot sauce for her. “Is that mine?” He pointed to the lunch bag and the bottle of water.

“Yes.”

“I may be some time. You will be safe here. While I’m gone, you are not to answer any phone unless you recognize my number. You are not to open the door to anyone but me.” He eyed her computer. “Stay off of it tonight. No email. No chat. Use nothing to communicate with anyone but me. Is that clear?”

Sansa nodded.
His grey eyes were very cold.

The last time she’d seen Roose look like that had been the night the three addicts had nearly mugged them.

“Promise me, Sansa.”

“I promise, Roose.” Sansa swallowed. “What are you going to do?”

He kissed her hard.

Sansa locked the door after him and sank onto the kitchen floor, hugging her knees to herself. What in the seven hells had she just unleashed on Margaery?

* * *

Chapter End Notes

You can thank MotherofFirkins for the mention of Brienne.

For non-US readers, DMV stands for “Department of Motor Vehicles.” This is a state-run government office that issues driving licenses, car and other vehicle registrations, and so on.

Thank you tafkar for beta reading and especially for the info on wine, guns, and luxury sports cars. Three topics about which I know very little!
Fear Is for Winter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Twenty-two Years Ago

* * *

His mother fingered the dark blue paisley shawl. “It’s very beautiful. Thank you, Roose.” She kissed him on the cheek.

“It isn’t necessary to have the heat so low anymore.” He adjusted the dial on the thermostat.

“Your father—”

“—is dead. I am here now. The new furnace is much more energy efficient. You may have it as high as you like.” Roose put his hand to the windows and felt the drafts. He would have Ben get estimates for replacing the windows. “I am getting married,” he told his mother almost absently. “She is from Seagard, but she works in Dorne.”

His mother stopped tidying the wrapping paper. “When?”

“In three months. Would you like to come to the wedding? It will be in Sunspear. She has no family left.”

“Yes, I would like to go,” she said carefully. “Tell me about her.”

Roose shrugged. “She is a few inches shorter than me, slender, dark hair, blue eyes. She is quiet. She works in a claims adjustment department for an insurance agency.” He noted how faded and worn the drapes had become. “I am going to let her keep her job. The extra income will be useful. After we have children, she’ll stay at home.”

“Do you . . . do you like her?”

He realized his mother wished to know if he felt anything for her. “I like her as much as I like anyone,” he said. “I thought I should marry. Most of my peers are pairing off. I was getting tired of people trying to set me up on dates. I confess, there is one thing . . . she isn’t nearly as clever as you are, Mother.”

“You haven’t told her about yourself, have you?”

He shook his head.

“Don’t.”

“Do you have any advice for me?”

His mother refolded the shawl into the box. “Are you asking me because you think it is what I want to hear or because you want to hear what I have to say?”

“The latter.” Despite her indifference to him, his mother always gave him excellent guidance on matters such as these.
“Tell her how pretty she is even when you’re no longer interested in her. Listen to her. Take her advice now and then. Buy her things like this periodically. Be courteous to her. Do not hurt her. And no matter what, do not tell her the truth about yourself.”

“Father never did those things with you.” It was a statement and not a question.

His mother laughed bitterly. “It would not have mattered if he had. Being clever is not always a good thing.”

* * *

Present Day

* * *

A dog barked incessantly. Margaery could see it in the window of the main house as she walked up the exterior staircase to Sansa’s apartment.

Margaery knocked on the door. After Jaime had given her the address, she’s done nothing for two days. It had been tempting to drive over there immediately, but she needed to think. Now that she could confront Sansa, she wanted to be very clear in her head about what she would say. She couldn’t get angry or upset. It wouldn’t work.

The door opened and Margaery stared into the silvery eyes of Roose Bolton. She backed away.

“Careful, it would be unfortunate if you were to fall and hurt yourself.” He reached out and took her hand, pulling her away from the railing.

His fingers were like ice. She wrenched her hand free. “I’m fine. Is Sansa here?”

He stepped aside and gestured for her to enter.

Margaery cursed herself for not making sure he was in class or at his office. “I don’t know if you remember me, Dr. Bolton. I’m Margaery Tyrell.” She flashed him one of her brilliant smiles.

“Where is Sansa?”

He closed the door behind her and clicked the lock. “I know who you are,” he told her pleasantly.

She looked around the apartment. “This is beautiful.” It was. It also looked like it was far more than Sansa could possibly afford. Was he paying for this?

“Sansa did most of it herself,” he told her. “I had my doubts when she found the place, but she is very resourceful.” He smiled at her. “Would you like to see the rest of it?”

“I really want to see Sansa.”

“Of course, you do, but I’m afraid she’s not here.”

She should treat this like a social situation. She should not show fear. “When will Sansa be back, Dr. Bolton?”

“Roose,” he offered. “Given the circumstances, I think you may address me by my first name.”

“Thank you.” Margaery forced herself to smile. “When will Sansa be back?”

Again he didn’t answer. “I don’t believe Sansa would mind if I gave you the grand tour.”

Reluctantly she let him show her the apartment. He was very congenial as pointed out the features
and told her about Sansa’s efforts at bringing it to its present condition. Margaery wasn’t surprised. Sansa had always been very good at homemaking. “When did she have time for all of this? She never stops working.”

Roose opened the bedroom door. “After you threw her out, Sansa decided to leave Oldtown a month early. She divided her time between fixing this place up and her studies.”

His purely conversational tone almost made her miss his actual words. “I don’t know what Sansa told you, but I didn’t throw her out. We had a misunderstanding.”

He stared at her with his pale eyes a moment before reverting to his habitual pleasant expression. “Sansa’s work again,” he said gesturing to the drapes. “She did all the floors too.”

Margaery nodded. Her eyes caught the pair of men’s dress shoes under the bed, the silver cufflinks on the dresser, the heavy book about medieval military campaigns on the other nightstand.

He led her back into the living room and gestured to a chair.

She sat uneasily. “When do you expect Sansa?”

Roose took a seat opposite and looked at her.

“I should go. If you would tell Sansa I stopped by.”

“But you went to such a lot of trouble to find her address, even though she expressly told you she didn’t want you to have it.”

“That’s really none of your business.”

Roose’s eyes glittered. “If I haven’t already made it clear, Sansa and I are involved. Therefore, anything concerning her is my business. I take it very seriously when her safety is at risk.”

“How is my coming to see her threatening her safety?”

“You might think about how you obtained this address.”

Jaime.

“Sansa didn’t know what your boyfriend’s intentions were. She spotted him almost immediately. She spent a day and a half trying to elude him and she was very upset.” He corrected himself. “Sansa is still very upset.”

Shit. Given what had happened the last time, Sansa must have been terrified. Margaery cursed herself for not thinking this through. “I never meant to scare Sansa. He volunteered to try and find out where she lives. I just wanted to talk to her. I still want to talk to her. Please, if you could just tell Sansa that. I’ll meet her anywhere she likes.”

Roose looked at her as if she was a fly he couldn’t quite be concerned with squashing.

Margaery stood up. She wrapped her fingers around the strap of her handbag and started for the door.

“Do you remember those phone calls Sansa made to you while she was in Oldtown?”

She turned around.
“It was one of our games. I would dial your number and give Sansa the phone. Then while you chattered away about your empty, pretty, little life, I would do my best to make Sansa gasp or scream with delight, any little sound that would make you know she was no longer yours. She has such a responsive body. I thought I would win quite easily. I’ve brought her to orgasm just by suckling her nipples. She always won, though. Sansa is remarkably self-controlled.”

Margaery stared at his pleasant mask of a face. She saw the slight smile playing about his lips and she knew what it was to truly hate someone.

“Sansa hasn’t been yours for some time. I would have been willing to allow her to continue to enjoy you, you know. It would have meant forestalling my own pleasure, but I would have permitted it. Instead you made the mistake of throwing her out.”

“I did not throw her out.”

“You gave Sansa an ultimatum.” Still he sat there smirking at her. “Sansa didn’t want you to visit at all. I had to persuade her to consent to it.”

No, this wasn’t true. Once she’d gotten used to the idea, Sansa had been happy to see her. They had made love almost the entire time.

“It meant an interruption to her work at the archives. It meant not being with me.”

Margaery knew she needed to leave, but it felt like her feet were glued to the floor.

“Sansa phoned me three times the first day and I believe, four times the second. You didn’t know how to please her properly. She had to tell you how to do everything. She missed me. She hated having to justify the research she was doing. Your little impromptu visit was causing her to fall behind.”

“She works too much,” Margaery said bluntly. “If you haven’t seen it yet, you will soon. I don’t care what Sansa told you or how many times you fucked her; I know things about her that you will never ever know.”

“Do you?” The smile became broader.

Margaery wanted to slap him.

“We’re not done. Sit down,” he said.

She managed to move then. She took another step toward the door.

“‘To my darling Margaery on her twenty-third name day, I am so glad you are in my life. Many happy returns, Your loving Sansa. P.S. Don’t think this means I’ve forgotten about the seven minutes you still owe me. I’ll collect them tonight.’”

Margaery froze. The card was in her bedroom. It was in a box in her lingerie chest.

“Sansa and I have played that game as well. She can be quite . . . imperious, don’t you think?”

She turned around. He was openly grinning at her. “You’ve been in my apartment.”

“Sit down.”

“Like hell.”
“I promised Sansa I wouldn’t hurt you. Don’t make me break my word to her. Sit.” She sat. He leaned forward. “That’s much better. Before you get your hopes up, her concern was for me, that I might get caught. But I’m very good at what I do. I’ve been in your apartment three times over the past two days. No one saw me once.”

The police. She would get through this and then she would phone the police.

“Your nightgown was quite fetching, by the way, the blue one with the lace over your breasts. You fill it out very well.”

She couldn’t trust herself to speak. He’d been in her room while she was there, watching her?

He widened his eyes with amusement. “Tonight when you go to bed, I want you to think about me watching you. I want you to think about how it would have been the work of a few minutes for me to rape or kill you, or both.”

“You’re sick. Sansa can’t possibly know how much of a freak you are.”

Roose went on as if she hadn’t spoken, “And then I want you to think about how your bumbling fool of a boyfriend terrified Sansa.” The smile on his face was gone now.

“Jaime drove about the streets of King’s Landing in broad daylight. He didn’t break into her apartment and go through her lingerie like some pervert.”

“From this moment on, you are no longer to communicate with Sansa in any fashion.”

“Is that a threat?”

He sighed. “Sansa said you’re very bright, but I can’t quite see it. That was an order. A threat would be if I said I would cut your creamy white throat from ear to ear should you disobey me.”

He stood up. “This has been very amusing, but I have other things to do.”

Margaery made it to her feet. Her hand was on the doorknob when his voice stopped her.

“Contacting the police would be inadvisable. They will find no trace of my presence in your apartment.”

“You might think about who you’re talking to. I’m not one of your scared little students.”

Roose was at the door then. “No, you’re the stalker of your former girlfriend. You’ve left dozens of angry messages on her voicemail. You’ve emailed her incessantly. You persuaded someone to follow her in the hopes of obtaining a physical address she told you she did not want you to have. You caused her mental anguish.” He continued to speak in a mild, disinterested voice. “I wonder what your family would say if they knew how obsessed with Sansa you’ve become.” He placed his fingers on the hand she had on the doorknob.

Do not show fear, she counseled herself. “I wonder what the university would say about you fucking one of your own students.”

He laughed. “Sansa is well over the age of consent and there’s no university policy prohibiting it. She took one course from me. I didn’t begin a relationship with her until six months after. But try it, if you like. I’d rather enjoy destroying you.” He turned the knob. “It would be best for you if we did not speak again.”

* * *
Roose found Sansa in the living room. She was knitting. Like most of her projects it appeared to be quite complicated.

She looked up at him.

He saw the concern in her blue eyes. “Everything went smoothly. She won’t bother you anymore.”

She pushed up the sleeves of the oversized man’s sweatshirt she was wearing. The logo for Winterfell’s football team was faded. She wore it a great deal although her reasons for doing so mystified Roose. Sansa told him unequivocally and on more than one occasion that she loathed all sports.

“Did a boyfriend give that to you?” he demanded suddenly.

“No.”

“You are with me now.”

“Arya gave it to me.” Sansa seemed bewildered at his indignation. “She didn’t know—Arya’s a little goofy,” she explained.

Roose relaxed. Arya was her sister. From what Sansa said, she was an unconventional girl.

“Is Margaery . . . did you do anything to her?”

“I promised you I wouldn’t hurt her.” It puzzled him how Sansa could be so concerned for someone who had posed a threat to her, but she’d been adamant. The first night he’d returned from his surveillance, he found her waiting up for him worried out of her wits. Although Sansa had not articulated it to him, Roose finally concluded she must be worried about his safety. The Tyrells were a prominent family and Margaery was their darling.

“Did you hurt her?”

“I left her alive and unharmed,” Roose reassured her. “She may go to the police, but I doubt it. If she does, you know what you’re to do.” Roose thought he had gotten through to the Tyrell whore, but if she proved obstinate, he had drilled Sansa in how they would proceed.

Sansa nodded. She focused on her knitting and frowned.

“Trust me on this.” He hated what this had done to her, what it was doing to them.

“I dropped a stitch.”

“Oh.”

She spread the knitting on the coffee table, holding it in place. “Roose, in my bag, there’s a blue zippered case. Would you open it? I need a crochet hook. It’s about five inches long, very skinny, with a small hook on the end.”

He set his briefcase down and hunted for the instrument. Twice he held up objects and twice she shook her head.

“It’s like those, but thinner. That’s the one. Thanks.”

Roose observed her. He was intrigued as she used the hook to find the stitch and wove it in and out using intricate motions. “What is it going to be?”
“A cardigan. Top down.”

“For yourself?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve never knit me anything.”

Sansa laughed. “And I’m not going to.”

Roose sat and watched her. “What are you doing now?”

“Tinking. Hang on.” She worked for a short while. “Knit spelled backwards. It means unknitting. When you drop a stitch, you can pick it up across a few rows, unless the stitch fell too far, then it’ll look off. I should really rip the whole thing back, but it’ll be hours of lost work if I do, so I’ll unknit a couple of rows stitch by stitch.”

“Why won’t you knit me something?”

“Do you wear hats? I suppose I could knit a hat for you.”

“What about a sweater?”

She laughed again. “And risk the curse?” She had all her stitches on the needle now.

“The curse?”

She reversed something on a small plastic counter and bent over her work again. “Supposedly if you knit a sweater for a man you’re dating, the relationship will fall apart.”

Roose smiled. She seemed like herself for the first time in a week and a half. “It would take more than a sweater to make me lose interest in you.”

“I’m still not risking it. Are you hungry? I marinated the chicken and fixed up a salad. It’s in the fridge. If you give me a few minutes, I can finish dinner.”

He stood up. “Let me change first, and then I’ll do the rest.”

“Roose?”

He waited. He wondered if she would ask about his other work. He wondered if he would tell her.

Sansa looked at him. “How badly did you leave her?”

“I didn’t touch a hair on her head.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“She was shaken, but she understands now she’s to leave you alone. That’s what’s important.”

Sansa nodded and bent down over her work again.

Yes, he thought, he would tell her. He would tell Sansa everything.

* * *

Margaery pointed to the lingerie chest. “It’s in the fourth drawer down below some Spanx.” She
watched in annoyance as Jaime and Tyrion Lannister raised eyebrows. “Shapewear,” she qualified. When they still looked blank, she rolled her eyes. “Like a girdle, okay? Could we get back to the fact that this creep has been in my bedroom?”

“Could Sansa have told him about it?”

“Jaime, does it strike you likely that Sansa would have told her boyfriend the exact inscription she wrote on a four-year-old name day card for her last lover or that he would remember it?” Tyrion asked.

“We have established he’s not normal, little brother. But it does seem a bit improbable, I suppose.”

Margaery shivered. Roose Bolton had been in her apartment. He’d touched her things. He’d stood in here watching her sleep. She’d called Jaime in a panic after her encounter with him. Tyrion was here because Jaime said he was very shrewd and he might have some ideas.

“Can you show us the nightgown?” Tyrion inquired.

She held it up. “This should be proof enough. It’s not something he could guess I would have. It’s vintage.”

“Did Sansa ever see you in it?”

“She bought it for me. Why? What does that matter?”

Tyrion sighed. “He could claim Sansa told him about it and he wove the detail in so you would stop bothering her.”

“Why aren’t we calling the police?” Jaime demanded.

Tyrion shushed him. “How many voicemails have you left?”

Margaery was honest. “I don’t know. I called her a bunch of times after our fight last semester. This semester . . .”

“Can you check your placed calls on your phone? What about the emails? The texts?”

“Yes.”

They sat in the living room while Tyrion read the emails and Margaery counted phone calls and texts. The number was startling. Could she have left so many calls?

Tyrion passed the laptop to Jaime. He took the phone and read the texts.

They weren’t saying anything. They read the messages and exchanged silent glances with each other.

“This is insane,” Margaery said finally. “I was with Sansa for six years and I knew her for four before that. It’s natural I would want to speak to her.”

“Did she ask you not to contact her by phone or in person?”

“Yes, but—”

“Would she go along with his plan to frame you as some obsessed stalker?” Jaime asked. “Could he be bluffing?”
Margaery started to shake her head and then she stopped. “I don’t know. I don’t think he was lying about Sansa being upset. It never occurred to me that she would have spotted you. It should have.” Sansa was always observant. “He’s changed her. I don’t know,” she repeated. “Should I delete these?”

“I think you should talk to a lawyer first, preferably as soon as possible,” Tyrion advised. He handed her the phone back. “For now, it’s probably best if neither of you have any contact with her at all. Or him. If you see them somewhere, walk away. Do not engage.”

“I don’t think you should stay here.” Jaime shut her laptop down. “You can crash at my place.”

She wasn’t sure that was wise. The plan had been for them to have five dates and then go their separate ways. Jaime said Tyrion knew the truth, so she said so now.

“If he wasn’t bluffing, if this moves into her accusing you of being a stalker, it might be better if the two of you were seen to be involved.”

“How?” Jaime asked.

“The two of you are in love with each other. Margaery is concerned with the well-being of her ex-long-term girlfriend. Margaery feels guilty about how the relationship ended. She would also like closure. More importantly, Sansa is now involved with a much older man and is exhibiting atypical behavior. Margaery confesses all to her boyfriend, Jaime. Jaime volunteers to locate an address for her, and because he’s remarkably stupid, Jaime follows Sansa all over town in his highly recognizable luxury car.” Tyrion rolled his eyes. “You should have just hired someone to do this.”

Jaime muttered something.

Margaery had to admit it wasn’t a bad spin.

“And now?”

“And now, you realized to your horror how you’ve upset Sansa, so you’re going to stay away from her,” Tyrion finished.

“Fine. I’ll talk to a lawyer tomorrow. This still doesn’t solve the problem.”

Tyrion reached for his drink. “It’s out of your hands.”

Margaery couldn’t leave Sansa in the clutches of that freak show. She glanced at Jaime. He was listening to his brother, nodding. “Neither of you understand. He sat right across from me.” She pointed to where Tyrion was. “With that irritating smirk of his and told me about fucking my girlfriend while she was on the phone to me. It was some game he made her play. He’s sick. Sansa would never have willingly done anything like that to me.”

“Unless she approaches you, it doesn’t sound like there’s much you can do,” Jaime told her.

Tyrion furrowed his brow. “What about her family? I can’t imagine they’re thrilled about her dating a man twice her age with three marriages to his name.”

“They’re not an option.”

“Why not? I’ve met them. Granted they didn’t like me much, but they seemed like decent people.”
Margaery shook her head. “Seemed like is the operative phrase. Sansa hasn’t spoken to her mother in over seven years. She talked to her father about a year ago. He called to tell her about her grandfather’s death. It was a five-minute conversation. She would never listen to them in any case.”

The three of them drank some more.

“What about her brothers? It’s a large family, right? Does she stay in contact with any of them?”

“She exchanges emails a few times a year with her half-brother and I think once a month with her youngest brother, but he’s like . . . seventeen? They talk on the phone on occasion.” Margaery sat up. “There is her sister. They don’t see each other much because Arya is always traveling, but she sided with Sansa when everything happened.”

“When you two got involved?”

Margaery debated telling them, but Sansa would kill her if she did. “No. It was before. In any case, we’ve never been out about our relationship, although I’m sure Arya knows. She’s very sharp.” She drained her drink and set her glass down. “But I have no idea how to contact her.” Sansa would occasionally say things every couple of months about Arya, and Margaery had met her a few times over the years, but that was the extent of it.

Tyrion took out a notepad and a small gold pen. “Tell me what you know about her, A-R-Y-A?”

“Yes. She’s not married, at least not that I know of.” Margaery found a box of photos and dug around. “Here you are,” she said handing him a snapshot. There weren’t many of Arya, but she’d come to see Sansa once or twice over the years. Margaery ran through what she knew of Arya which was little. “She could be anywhere. The last I heard of her, she’d gone backpacking beyond the Wall. If it sounds crazy, dangerous, and uncomfortable, Arya does it. Sansa said Arya was heading to Braavos again afterwards, but I don’t really know. She would send her postcards occasionally.”

“She sounds like Uncle Gerion,” Tyrion commented. “I don’t suppose you have any of the postcards still.”

Margaery shook her head.

“All right, I’ll see if I can find anything out about this sister. Why don’t you go pack?”

He and Jaime exchanged looks again.

Margaery rose.

“I think you’d better plan on a long stay,” Jaime said with a sigh.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to tafkar.

The choice not to give Sansa a POV segment was quite deliberate. We'll be in her
thoughts a lot more in future chapters. Also, I thought it was obvious, but from your comments I'm guessing it's not, but Roose is something of an unreliable narrator and his perspective is often very skewed.
Arya loved having her own room. It was tiny, but it was hers. Sansa’s was pink. She had everything just so. Arya couldn’t see the point in wasting time worrying that the quilt was perfectly lined up with the dust ruffle. There was too much out there to do.

She was coming in one afternoon when she heard Sansa crying. She poked her head in the bedroom.

“Go away.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Sansa hissed through tears. “Go away.”

Arya shrugged and went off to get changed. When she came down to dinner, Uncle Petyr was there with Aunt Lysa and Robin.

“How’s my girl?”

Arya suffered a kiss on the cheek from him and from her aunt. She accepted the present politely enough. The only one who ever seemed to like what the Baelishs gave them was Sansa.

“No Sansa tonight?” Petyr inquired after a few minutes.

“Arya, go get your sister.”

Arya groaned, but obeyed. The door to Sansa’s room was open. At first Arya thought she wasn’t there, but then she spotted her sister on the floor in the corner. Sansa was hugging her knees to her chest and rocking herself. “Uncle Petyr is asking for you.”

Sansa swallowed. “I’ll be right down,” she said softly.

“I wish they weren’t here,” Arya commented. “They gave me a teddy bear. Can you believe it? I’m almost twelve.”

“I wish they weren’t here either,” Sansa said in a near whisper. “Give me a few minutes, okay?”

“Sure.” Arya hesitated.

“Go away.”

When Sansa came down later, she sat between Uncle Petyr and Aunt Lysa and smiled prettily. Other than picking at her food, she was her usual perfect little self.
Sansa finished her explanation.

Ellyn, her advisor, stared at her in dismay. “You need to call the police.”

“It’s handled. I’m sorry I got so far behind. I’ll catch up, I promise.” Roose told her she needed to lay the groundwork in case Margaery proved difficult. It had been weeks, though, and Margaery had stopped. To set her up like this felt wrong. But when Sansa balked, Roose had calmly pointed out that she wasn’t lying, not about any of it.

The older woman shut the door. “Sansa, I’m not worried about the work. You’re not a slacker. I’m worried about you. The type of person you’re describing . . . she sounds like she’s obsessed.”

Sansa listened attentively. She appeared to consider everything Ellyn was saying. “I need to think about it,” she said finally.

She didn’t like doing this. Margaery had been there for her when she’d needed someone.

“And after a six-year relationship, the girl chooses to repay you with hounding and harassment. She had you followed. You’ve been a mass of nerves ever since.”

“Roose—”

He went on as if she hadn’t spoken, “I think I got through to her, but if the slut is stupid enough to persist, this is what must be done.”

“Stalkers aren’t just the province of the movies.”

She nodded.

Finally finished with her advisor, Sansa grabbed her belongings and started down the hall. One of the department secretaries stopped her.

“There’s a girl who was asking for you.”

Shit, Roose was right. He was always right. She should never have doubted him.

“Wait here, she left a message for you.” The secretary ducked into the department office and rummaged around her desk. She came back and handed Sansa a sheet from a yellow legal pad. It had been torn off, folded in half, and stapled shut.

Not Margaery then. Sansa looked at her name scrawled in thick black pencil across the top. Not Margaery, Arya. She opened it and read. In typical Arya fashion, there was one line: Student Union. Can stay till 4. Meet me?

Sansa checked her watch. She still had time if she hurried.

Even in the bustling Student Union it was impossible not to spot Arya. She saw her sitting at a table in the corner sipping a Coke. Next to her was a full backpack like something a hiker would use, complete with a bedroll. Arya looked a few years older and a lot prettier from when she’d seen her last, even with the layer of grime and the terrible haircut.

“Sansa!”

They hugged.
“Damn, I’m getting you all dirty.”

“I don’t care about that.” Sansa sat down. “How long are you here for? You’re not leaving tonight, are you? Your note said you’d only be here till 4:00.”

Arya finished her Coke. “I’ll need to leave soon if I want a spot at the hostel, but I thought I would stick around for a few weeks or maybe a month.”

“You can stay with me if you don’t mind the sofa,” Sansa assured her automatically. Roose. She hadn’t thought about him. No, it would be okay. Arya could stay with her. They were all adults. Arya would understand about Sansa having a boyfriend sleeping over. When it was the weekend, she could just let her stay in the apartment.

“That would be great.”

Her phone went off. She didn’t even need to look at the number; Roose would be leaving to pick her up. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

She answered it and found a quiet spot about twenty feet away. “There’s been a change of plans.”

“Oh?”

“My sister is here.” She felt the silence. “I’d like you to meet her, but we can take the bus if you don’t want to.”

“No, I’d be happy to meet her. I take it she’s with you now?”

Sansa told him where they were.

“The bookstore parking lot. Ten minutes.”

Sansa walked back to Arya. “I’m seeing someone. He’s going to pick us up. We usually eat in. Is that okay?”

Arya nodded. “Sure, whatever you want to do. Is this a serious someone?”

In more ways than one, Sansa thought. “Yes. He’s older. He’s a professor here, not in my department,” she hastened to explain.

“Margaery?”

Sansa’s voice turned to iron. “Is not in the picture anymore.”

“Got it. So tell me about this guy.”

Sansa shook her head. “You’ll meet him in a few minutes. Are you finished?”

Arya was, so Sansa led her to the bookstore parking lot. They didn’t have to wait long. Roose drove up almost right away. He got out of the car when he saw Arya’s backpack and unlocked the trunk for her. Sansa performed introductions. She couldn’t tell what either Roose or Arya thought of the other even though he was very pleasant and polite, and Arya was outgoing.

“Wow, this place looks great,” Arya commented when she saw the apartment. “Of course, I’ve been sleeping on the ground so my judgment is probably off.” She gave Sansa an impish grin. “Where can I put this?” She lifted her backpack easily.
Sansa directed her to a corner.

Roose locked the door behind them. He set his briefcase down in the usual spot.

Arya knelt on the floor and removed some clothes. “This is probably all kinds of rude, but could I possibly take a shower?” She smiled at them ruefully.

“Sure.” Sansa purposely didn’t look at Roose. She found Arya some towels.

When she came back, Roose was at the counter chopping vegetables. “She’s very different from you.”

“Yes,” Sansa admitted. “Do you mind her being here?”

“Do you want her here?”

Sansa did. It had been so long since she’d seen Arya.

“Then I don’t mind.”

Dinner went better than she thought it would. Roose asked Arya a few questions about her travels and Arya answered easily. She had gone on a large number of hair-raising adventures, but her manner suggested she thought them ordinary enough. She was still Arya and she still had done her share of goofy things. Roose seemed genuinely intrigued by her anecdotes.

They moved into the living area. Roose sat next to Sansa.

“Did I meet you before?” Arya asked. “I did, didn’t I? Dad took me in to work with him once and I met you, right?”

“That would have been at Stormlands. You would have been very young, though.” Roose put his arm around Sansa.

“I thought so. So how long have you two been together?”

“We met about a year ago. We’ve been seeing each other for a little over seven months,” he told her.

Arya nodded.

He turned the talk to King’s Landing. What did Arya want to do while she was here?

“Laundry,” Arya said very seriously. “Is there a Laundromat around here?”

Roose blinked.

Sansa laughed. “I think Roose was asking if you wanted to see anything in particular in the city.”

“Just you.” Arya set her soda on the coaster. “I’d like to spend some time catching up and I need to buy a cell phone.”

“What’s wrong with the one you have now?”

“I lost it in the Smoking Sea,” Arya told her.

She hadn’t changed. “Let me guess, you were trying to take a picture and your fingers slipped?”
“Maybe,” Arya said with a grin.

Roose was taken aback again, but he started chuckling.

“And you couldn’t buy another cell phone?” It was likely it had not occurred to Arya as a possibility.

“That’s why I want to get one while I’m here. I have to get my hiking boots repaired, and I really do need to do laundry.”

“I have a washer and dryer. They’re in the hallway. Tomorrow you can do as much laundry as you want.”

“Are you done with university, Arya?”

“Oh, yeah. A couple of years now,” she told him.

“All this travel must be very expensive.”

Arya shrugged. “There are ways to do it on the cheap.” She gestured to the backpack. “I pick up jobs sometimes. It’s easier in Essos actually than it is here.”

“What sort of jobs?”

Sansa recognized the note in his voice. He was being perfectly congenial. She thought he was enjoying himself well enough. He didn’t trust Arya, though. He was assessing her. Was she predator or prey? Most people, Roose explained to Sansa, were prey. One needed to learn the difference. It was one of their new games. When they were out on errands or at restaurants, they looked at the people around and categorized them.

“Don’t tell her too much,” Roose murmured in her ear after they had quietly made love. It was late. The light from the main room was out. Arya was probably dead to the world. She had barely been able to keep her eyes open long enough for Sansa to make up the sofa for her.

“Roose.”

He continued to whisper. “Enjoy her company. Assist her with her errands. We can even bring her to the house for the weekend if you like, but don’t tell her too much. We’ll speak more about it tomorrow.”

She hesitated.

He stroked her hair. “Predator or prey?”

“She’s my sister.”

“Everyone who isn’t us is one of the two. Which is she?”

“She’s Arya.”

* * *

Roose stepped out of the bedroom to find Arya poring over a large map on the table. “Where is Sansa?”

“She went out to buy croissants and coffee,” Arya told him. “She said to tell you she was going to
the good place so she might be a while. And Sansa said to tell you she knows the stuff in the bag is really decaf.” The corners of her mouth quirked upwards.

Roose chuckled. “Your sister is very hard to fool.”

“Do you try to deceive her a lot?”

“Only when it comes to caffeine,” Roose said quite truthfully. “Are scrambled eggs all right?”

“Sure.” Arya folded the map. “Do you need any help?”

He shook his head. “Considering what your next destination will be?” Arya had been here two weeks. Two-to-four weeks, Sansa said. He liked Arya Stark. He knew Sansa was enjoying her company, but Roose would be relieved when she was gone.

“I think I’m going to stay here for a while.”

“Oh?”

“Not here here. I’ll find my own place,” she assured him. “But I’ve already been all over the world and I’m enjoying not being on the move.”

“And yet you are looking at a map.”

Arya stowed the object in question in her backpack. She stripped the sofa of its pillows and sheets and folded the blanket neatly. “Sansa said she wants to visit Castle Black later this year. I was thinking I could go with her. I haven’t seen Jon in a while.”

“It wouldn’t be a vacation, you realize. Sansa would be engaged in her research.”

“Sure.” Arya carried the sheets and pillowcases to the hallway. She folded back the screen and loaded up the washer. “Is she working too much?”

“Why do you ask?” Roose inquired casually.

Arya brought the screen back so that it concealed the washer and returned to the kitchen. “Because you would know if it’s too much or if it’s the right amount. Sansa always studied a lot when we were kids, but now she seems to sit down at 8:30 and go all the way through to 7:00. Is that normal, Roose?”

“It’s more than average, but it’s not unheard of in doctoral students. She takes her teaching seriously. There is considerable preparation involved. And she wishes to finish her dissertation earlier than expected.” He was in truth somewhat troubled at just how hard Sansa was working, but that was his concern, not her sister’s.

“Okay.” Arya got out plates and silverware and set the table.

Roose removed the hot sauce and put it out. He watched Arya fiddling with the napkins till they were perfectly even. “From what Sansa told me about you, I got the impression you were not always so particular.”

“Oh, I was a slob. But I spent ten weeks working in a hotel restaurant in Qarth with an OCD maître d’,” Arya explained. “Some of it stuck with me. Also, I found it helps to be able to find your stuff fast when the temperature is -40F and you’re trying to set up your camp. So now I’m a reformed slob. Mum doesn’t believe it when she sees me either.”
“You communicate with Ned and Catelyn then.”

Arya gave him a sharp look. “Yes. I try and call or email once a month. Email has been hard in the places where I’ve been, but I phoned a week ago. Don’t worry. I didn’t say anything about Sansa.”

He still didn’t know what the cause of their estrangement was. He had asked once or twice; Sansa remained adamant in her refusal to discuss it. “Thank you.” He considered her. “Does our relationship bother you?” It didn’t matter if it did, but he didn’t want anyone upsetting Sansa.

“You’re a lot older than she is, but she seems happy with you.” Arya took out butter and jam. “It looks like you treat her properly, so you’re already head and shoulders above the other people she’s been involved with.”

Roose froze in the act of turning on the burner. He knew there had been boyfriends and once Sansa had mentioned a previous girlfriend, but from her manner, he’d assumed the Tyrell girl was her only significant relationship before him.

“And I like you better than Margaery,” Arya volunteered.

“You know about her then.”

“Oh, yeah. They never told me, but I’m not stupid.”

Roose agreed silently with Arya’s self-assessment. “You didn’t care for her?”

Arya shrugged. “She’s very pretty and she’s very . . . artificial. Everything is wonderful and she loves everyone until something doesn’t go her way and then, bam.” She slapped the table to make her point. “It’s a southron thing; they mask everything in charm and manners.”

Roose lit the burner and melted the butter in the pan. Deceit was common enough in most people regardless of geography, but he knew what she meant; one generally knew where one was with most northerners.

“She was good to Sansa when Sansa needed someone. I didn’t think we could rely on her, but Margaery proved me wrong. But I still don’t like her.”

“She is out of the picture now,” Roose commented with satisfaction. He was intrigued by these references to troubles in the past. He was about to pursue them when Sansa returned with the croissants and her beloved caffeine. He started the eggs while Sansa set about making her coffee. He turned around to see Arya’s grey eyes focused on him and Sansa.

Predator.

* * *

They were waiting for Arya to arrive. Margaery had come straight from work. She was practically living at Jaime’s now. Every time she went back to her apartment she felt Roose Bolton. She’d spent a fortune dry cleaning every outfit she owned. She’d directed the cleaning woman to scour every inch of the place, but she still felt him there.

They were well past their five-date limit. Grandmother was thrilled with her progress. Any family objections to her staying in King’s Landing to work had vanished. She was going to the Lannister weekly dinners now. And when Tywin Lannister learned she was staying at Jaime’s, he very nearly smiled.
She and Jaime were talking very seriously about keeping up with the pretense long term.

The door to the conference room opened.

“What’s this?”

Margaery switched on a smile.

“Father,” Jaime managed.

Tywin looked at the three of them.

“Jaime and Margaery are considering taking a trip to Essos,” Tyrion lied smoothly.

Margaery’s smile grew strained as Tyrion wove a fiction about how they were supposedly interested in seeing the real side of Essos and how a cross-cultural expert he had found had agreed to make some suggestions about things they might need to consider. If he wasn’t careful, they would end up in some horrific part of the continent eating bugs.

“Are you out of your—” Tywin seemed to recognize denigrating his son in front of the heiress he wanted him to marry was perhaps not the shrewdest thing he could do. “I’m surprised, Margaery. I would not have thought this the sort of trip in which you would have an interest.”

“It’s not,” Margaery said. “Jaime has some very romantic ideas about Essos. I’m hoping this exercise will persuade him I’m right. I don’t think I would care for eating honeyed locusts.”

“I should hope not.” Tywin glared at Jaime for a moment, apparently silently commanding him to listen to her and not be a damned fool.

“Sorry, I’m late. I had a hard time—” Arya came into the room. She locked eyes with Margaery.

Margaery realized Arya had not been expecting to see her.

Tywin was looking Arya up and down. “You are the cross-cultural expert?”

Arya was wearing jeans, hiking boots, and a t-shirt. She could not have less looked less like an expert of anything if she tried.

“It’s after hours, Father. Ms Stark is doing us a favor. I’ve explained you’re here to tell my brother and his girlfriend about the authentic side of Essos.”

“And what are your qualifications?”

They were never going to get out of this room without this falling to pieces.

After a moment, Arya shrugged and started talking. She knew most of the languages spoken in Essos, although she freely admitted her Ghiscari was very basic. She rattled off the number of times she’d been to each of the Free Cities and the things she’d done there. She brought up an ill-fated trip across the Red Waste, but that was the result of poor planning on the part of the organizers. Besides, it wasn’t like there was much to see in the Red Waste except endless miles of desert. Tyrion mentioned food and she went into detail about that too. There appeared to be very few things Arya hadn’t tried or done.

By the time she was finished, Margaery was fairly certain no one in the room would want to go to the real Essos anytime soon.
“Do you have a card?” Tywin wanted to know.

Arya didn’t.

“It’s of no matter. I might have a job for you. Tyrion, send me Ms Stark’s contact information in the morning.”

Arya looked blankly at him even as he strode out of the room. “Okay, what in the seven hells is going on?” Arya demanded. “Why is Margaery here?”

“I’m worried about Sansa.”

“She’s the friend you told me about?”

It took another twenty minutes of explanations and apologies to get Arya to agree to stay and talk to them.

“I don’t know about what he’s like with her when they’re at his house, but there’s nothing weird about how Roose treats her at the apartment.” Arya eyed the bottles of water on the side table. “Can I have one of those?” On receiving an affirmative, she went on, “They seem really happy together. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear they’d been together for years.”

Margaery shook her head. It couldn’t be true. Sansa was different. “Abused women often fool outsiders.”

“He’s not hitting her if that’s what you mean. I walked in on her in the bath by accident when I thought I was alone in the apartment. I didn’t see any bruises.”

“There are other kinds of abuse,” Jaime commented.

Arya was doubtful. “Roose defers to her a lot.”

“How?” Margaery demanded.

“If Sansa wants to go somewhere or do something, he’ll go along with it. The only thing I’ve seen them argue about is how much coffee she drinks.”

Margaery turned to Tyrion. “Did you tell her about what he did to me?”

“Well, no. I thought it was best we—”

She cut him off and went into detail about her encounter with Roose Bolton. The more Margaery talked, the more she could see she was persuading Arya. She relaxed. Sansa always said Arya was relentless. If Arya was on their side, they could get Sansa away from him. She was relating what he’d said at the end, when she saw Arya stiffen.

“You had her followed?”

Jaime explained what he had done.

“And Sansa saw you?”

“Yes, I’m afraid she thought I wanted to harm her.”

Arya fixed her eyes on Margaery. “How could you do that to her? You of all people know what happened to her. How could you make her go through all of that all over again?”
“I didn’t know Jaime was going to do it himself. I didn’t mean for her to find out. I didn’t want to scare her.”

“Have they mentioned Margaery to you?”

Arya turned to Tyrion. “She said it was over and Roose said Margaery was out of the picture.”

“I just bet he did,” Margaery muttered.

“He said it after I explained why I didn’t like you.” Arya got up. “This was not cool,” she told Tyrion. “You’ve put me in a really shitty position.”

“I just want to make sure she’s all right. He’s not a good person. He’s changing her. He’s dangerous.”

Arya looked at Margaery evenly. “I’m going to stick around King’s Landing for a while. I’ll take care of Sansa now. I think you’d better stay away from her.” She tossed the water bottle in the wastebasket on her way out.

They waited until she was gone.

Jaime and Tyrion exchanged glances.

“Why doesn’t anyone see it? What do I have to do to make people understand what this freak is doing to Sansa?”

Jaime turned to Margaery. “You need to stop.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

I think I have at least one line from the show and/or the books in there.

As usual, I need to thank my beta, tafkar.
“This can’t be forever,” Margaery warned her after they’d made love.

Nothing good ever lasted forever. It was one of the many lessons Sansa had learned the hard way. “I don’t care.” She propped herself on her elbow and faced Margaery.

“I mean it. After I graduate, they’re going to want me to get married—”

“Margaery, I get it.” It would be a few years of happiness. That was more than she could have hoped for anyhow.

“I don’t want there to be—”

Sansa rolled onto her back. “We have each other till you finish graduate school?”

“Yes. I want a MBA.”

She could live with this and she said so. Margaery still seemed troubled. “Are you going to be all right?”

“It’s what I want.”

Sansa had doubts about that, but she kept them to herself. As long as she’d known her, Margaery’s serious relationships had all been with women. Sansa knew she’d had sex with guys on occasion, usually after a few too many drinks, and she dated eligible bachelors to keep her family happy, but Margaery was seldom if ever excited about them. It seemed unlikely to Sansa that Margaery was going to be happy settling down with a man, any man.

“You really don’t mind, do you?”

“I’m not the person who gets to have a happy ending,” Sansa said matter-of-factly. “I used to think . . . it’s not that I don’t want . . .” She tried to think how to phrase it. “I want things. But I know I can’t have most of them. I have to accept that.”

Margaery sat up. “You can have anything you want.”

“No, I can’t.” She felt her voice crack.

“Sansa—”

“—It’s fine. I accept it now.” But she felt tears coming on; she tried to swallow them. “He made damn sure that there’s no happily ever after for me.”
Family connections and promised inheritance aside, Tywin wasn’t enthralled with Margaery Tyrell. As Kevan said, she was a bright, charming, quite stunning girl. He differed with his brother on the opinion of her lack of depth. Whatever Margaery lacked in intellectual knowledge, she more than made up for in cunning. Tywin hadn’t gotten where he was today by letting a pretty face and a wide smile fool him.

He knew his suspicions were well founded when he discovered her with his two sons in his conference room. The only one he thought might not be lying to him outright was the little girl claiming to be a cross-cultural expert, and even then he knew she was not being entirely honest with him.

Margaery lived with his son in theory, but he had come to the unhappy conclusion it was a ruse for his and her grandmother’s benefit. The investigator all but confirmed it.

Tywin began with the supposed cross-cultural expert. After three attempts at trying to obtain her contact information from Tyrion, he made a call to one of his investigators. Shortly afterwards, he had a report on Arya Stark. He doubted her relationship to Sansa Stark was coincidental, but he wasn’t sure it was relevant. According to his investigator, Sansa Stark had removed herself from Margaery’s life several months ago. She was involved with someone else and she had no contact with Margaery.

He did not like the fact that Margaery lied so well and so easily.

He thought about Joanna then. She had been his partner, his other half. They had never lied to each other. They had been united. Of their children, Cersei was the only one married and it was a farce of a relationship. Tyrion preferred the company of whores and strippers, and Jaime . . . Tywin knew he should not have had to arrange a marriage for Jaime. He did not understand what was wrong with his children. They were wealthy, intelligent, handsome—even Tyrion had his charm, galling though it was to Tywin—and not a one of them appreciated the values with which he had attempted to instill in them.

For now he would speak with Jaime and with Tyrion. There was little else he could do other than to keep a close eye on the situation.

* * *

Sansa listened to everything her sister said in growing horror.

“I had no idea Margaery was involved. Tyrion Lannister told me a friend was worried about you. He didn’t say who. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I didn’t think it was going behind your back to tell him you were fine.”

Sansa believed Arya. Arya didn’t lie, not about things like this. She glanced at the clock. Roose would be back soon. He’d gone on his Saturday morning errands without her to allow her some alone time with Arya.

“What about the stuff she said about him being in her apartment?”

She read the concern in her sister’s eyes and came to a decision. Sansa took out her phone. She dialed her voicemail. “I want you to listen to these.”

Arya was still listening to the messages when Roose came into the house with the groceries. “Shit.” She handed the phone back to Sansa.

He looked at Sansa.
“I’ll put them away,” she said. “Arya, I need you to tell Roose exactly what you just told me.”

Roose’s expression hardened as Arya talked. Sansa finished putting the food away. She came back to the kitchen table and sat down next to him. She could tell he was growing angry.

“I didn’t know,” Arya repeated miserably.

Sansa shook her head. “You’re not at fault. They manipulated you.”

“What she said about you being in her apartment . . .”

Roose regained some of his composure. “Arya, if you’ve listened to half of those messages, you must know the Tyrell girl’s grasp on reality isn’t what it should be.”

Sansa could see Arya still had doubts. She brought up her texts. “Read these.”

They waited till she was done. Then Sansa showed her the emails.

“How did you figure out it was Jaime Lannister?”

Roose gave her a sad little smile. “For all the anguish he put Sansa through, he didn’t seem to know what he was doing. Sansa explained where she would see his car. I made sure I was nearby. I recognized his face. He’s something of a local celebrity.” He took Sansa’s hand and squeezed it. “He might as well have been driving a car with his name painted on the side. Red Jaguars aren’t often seen on our campus or in Sansa’s neighborhood. I did stay in the apartment in case the Tyrell girl came by and I did tell her to stay away from Sansa, but this business of me breaking into her apartment . . .” he broke off.

“What do we do now?”

Sansa bit her lip.

“I’ve suggested the police,” Roose told Arya. “But Sansa has been reluctant—”

“Why not? She’s stalking you. You have a case. It should be—oh shit. They’d dig up—seven hells. I didn’t think about that.”

Sansa hadn’t either, but it was another argument in favor of not going to the authorities. “I don’t know what to do.” She looked at Roose.

Arya stood up. “Is it okay if I go for a walk? No one’s going to mistake me for a stag or a wolf or anything, right?”

“My land is posted,” Roose said. “But you don’t have to leave; I’m sure Sansa would value your opinion.”

“No, you two need to talk. Sansa, whatever you want to do, I’m there, okay? No matter what.”

They waited until they heard the back door shut. They stood by the window, and watched her walk into the woods.

“She bought it,” Sansa said.

“There’s little for her to buy. Margaery Tyrell has become obsessed. She sent you every one of those messages. She sent him out to terrorize you.”
“I meant about what you did to Margaery.” She glanced over her shoulder at Roose.

“It was necessary.”

“You enjoyed it.” Her guilt about what he had done to Margaery was fading in the light of what Arya had told them.

He smiled. “Oh, yes, I did. What did Arya mean about things being dug up?”

Sansa couldn’t talk about it not even to him. She had tried several times and had been unable to get the words out. “I don’t want to go to the police.” She knew he didn’t particularly want to either.

“We’ll start with the grandmother. It may be enough.”

“No,” Sansa said with authority. “She keeps telling people she wants to talk to me. She wants closure. I will give her closure.” She watched Arya disappearing from view and began to suggest how they should proceed.

Roose turned her face toward his. “I’ve been waiting for this.”

“For what?”

“Your transformation.”

* * *

Margaery swore when she saw her tires. Two of them were completely flat. Winter was coming and although it seldom got cold enough to snow in King’s Landing, it was cold enough to make her shiver. It was dark too. She’d stayed to work on a project and now there was only one other car left in the lot.

She would get in her car and call the auto club. At least, it would be warmer inside.

The remaining vehicle pulled up alongside her.

Sansa got out of the passenger side. She walked around to Margaery’s car.

Margaery dropped her keys and her phone. As the phone hit the pavement, Margaery heard a sickening crack. She saw the driver’s window roll down on the other car.

Roose Bolton looked out. He glanced at her and then focused on Sansa. “One hour?”

“One hour should be enough.”

He nodded, then rolled the window up, and drove into his original spot.

“What’s going on? Sansa? Why are you here?”

“You wanted to talk to me,” Sansa said with a wry smile. “Pick up your stuff and unlock the car.”

“We’ll talk.”

Margaery stared back at the dark sedan.

“Roose is here to protect me.”

“He was the one who slashed my tires,” she said slowly.
“He just let the air out of them. Your tires are fine. Unlock your car,” Sansa ordered again. “The clock is ticking.”

Margaery fumbled twice trying to pick the phone and the keys up, but she managed on the third try.

Sansa got in. She took the phone out of Margaery’s hands. “You cracked it.” She pushed some icons. “It seems to be working, though. Oh, you can turn the ignition on if you want. You look cold. I’ll just hold onto the phone while you get the closure you’re so desperate for.”

The interior of the car was frigid, but it felt tropical compared to the iciness that was Sansa Stark.

“Well, I’m here. Say whatever it is you want to say.”

Margaery began with an apology for what she’d had Jaime do. She hadn’t thought. It had not occurred to her that Sansa would think he would harm her.

Sansa just listened. She didn’t engage. She let Margaery talk.

She apologized for the ultimatum, for interfering with Sansa’s research, for not understanding. Words fell from her lips in increasingly incoherent combinations until she had no more.

Sansa waited. Finally after a full minute, she spoke. “Is that all?” Receiving no answer, she put her hand on the car door and started to open it.

“Stay.”

“So there is more.”

Where was her sweet Sansa? Where was the girl who laughed at the same things she did? Who loved caramel macchiatos and silly movies and staying in bed together till noon?

“You have thirty-two minutes left. Or did you just want to sit here silently?”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you start up with him? When did it begin? Just tell me that much. Please.”

Sansa’s smirk faded. “I don’t know when it began.”

For the first time, she sounded like Sansa.

“We had that horrible fight in the coffee shop when you stormed out and I stayed. Roose came in and he needed a place to work. I offered to share the booth with him.”

“You slept with him that night? In our bed?”

Sansa shook her head. “I didn’t start sleeping with him till after you left Oldtown—the first time you came to visit. No, I meant—look, there was always an expiration date on our relationship. The first time we knew it was something real, you told me so yourself. You made it very clear that you were only going to be able to be with me till you graduated and that it would have to end after that.”

Margaery had. She remembered the conversation. She remembered the way Sansa had been hurt.
The way her beautiful blue eyes had filled with tears. She remembered consoling her.

“I never stood in the way of that. I didn’t complain when you went out on dates.”

“You complained all the time,” Margaery objected.

“Only when you made me go along,” Sansa said as she pulled the car door shut. “One second.” She dropped Margaery’s phone into the compartment on the passenger door side and took out her own. She dialed. “No, I’m fine, Roose. Thank you.” Sansa turned back to her.

Margaery glanced back. He was probably staring at the back of her head thinking of ways to hurt her.

“There was a point when I dared to hope that you might be willing to build a future with me, but I guess I started to accept that it wasn’t going to be permanent. Every time I time I tried to bring it up, you didn’t want to talk about it.”

“So you decided to find a replacement.” Margaery heard the bitterness in her voice and swore silently.

“This started a long time before I ever met Roose.” Sansa took a deep breath. “I realized I had to think about my future too. I don’t have a lot of money. I knew I couldn’t take the usual amount of time to get my PhD. I knew I would have to get my dissertation written sooner than I planned. I know I explained this all to you.”

Margaery turned away.

“But you didn’t really hear me. Long before I ever met Roose, you weren’t listening anymore. You stopped hearing me about a lot of things, like going out on those awful double dates. You knew I have issues and you kept picking out these guys who were all hands. Roose finally explained it to me. You chose them because you knew I wouldn’t like them.”

“No, that’s not true.”

Sansa looked at her.

Or was it?

“You would complain when I couldn’t drop everything to play with you,” Sansa continued.

“Okay, maybe I did that sometimes, but you would put in fifteen hour days over and over. It wasn’t just about me. I was worried about you. I still worry about you.”

Sansa shrugged. “I’m not saying you were entirely at fault. You weren’t. I do work too hard. I did cheat on you. But you asked why so I’m telling you why.” She sighed. “I tried to talk to you about how we were going to end things, but you never wanted to discuss it. You put your fingers in your ears sometimes and try to shut out unpleasantness. All of this was simmering, I guess.”

“And then you looked at his sick little smile and his balding head over your grilled cheeses and decided he was the one for you.”

“We didn’t really talk. We just worked. We were nearly at—he drove me home. I got into the apartment and I went to the window and I saw him looking up at me. And I knew he wanted me. I didn’t know I wanted him, but I saw his desire for me. I guess that’s when it started.” She dialed her phone again. “I need thirty more minutes. Trust me? Thanks.”
“You have to get his approval for everything you do, don’t you?”

Icy Sansa came back in a heartbeat. “I can step out of this car right now and I will destroy you. Do you want that?”

Margaery stared at her.

“This is why I didn’t want to talk to you,” Sansa said resignedly.

“Please, I have to know. This is killing me. I have to know.”

“Roose does not give me orders.”

Margaery nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“It was just sex at first. By the time you threw me out, it was more than that.”

“He said you used to call me while he was fucking you and he would try and make you orgasm.” Margaery pressed her point home. “It was more than just sex. Even if you were using him or he was using you, it was more than sex a lot sooner.”

“Yes, I suppose it was.”

“How could you do that to me? The Sansa I fell in love with would never have hurt me like that.”

Sansa didn’t say anything. For a moment, Margaery thought she saw shame and guilt on Sansa’s face, but then they were gone.

“You’re different now. You’re so cold. You’re so controlled. He’s not—did he tell you what he said to me? What he did to me?” Margaery asked.

Sansa looked out her window.

Shit, she was going to shut down again. “I haven’t been able to sleep in my apartment since. It’s like every object in there has his hands all over it. Seven hells, Sansa, how can you not find him disturbing?”

Sansa didn’t answer right away. Finally, she turned to Margaery. “I do find him disturbing. I know he’s not like other men. I know he’s dangerous.”

“I will do anything in my power to help you get away from him.”

“But I don’t want to get away from him.”

Margaery reached out to take Sansa’s hand.

“Don’t touch me.” Sansa folded her gloved hands and held them in her lap. “I like being with Roose. I think I knew he was different the first time I met him. I think that’s why I need him so much. I’m safe with him. I can trust him not to hurt me. When I told him I was being followed, I didn’t have to plead with him. He believed me the moment the words left my lips. He didn’t sit there and tell me it was in my mind. He didn’t ignore me. He did something about it. He protected me.”

“I believed you.”

Again there was a glimmer of the old Sansa.
“Whatever else I did, you know I believed you.”

“Margaery . . .”

“That has to count for something.”

Sansa bit her lip. “You aren’t willing to do what you would have to do to have a future with me. Roose is.”

“He broke into my apartment and went through my things.”

“You had your friend terrorize me. I’m sure you didn’t mean to, but you didn’t think. Just like you didn’t think when you’d pressure me to go out with some stupid business executive who would try and stick his hands up my dress. I didn’t sleep for days. I couldn’t let Roose touch me for weeks. I couldn’t even work. It was all I could do to show up to teach my classes. Even after I knew, and we knew early, every time I turned a corner, I saw Petyr. I would close my eyes, and I was back in that room with him touching me, with him hurting me, whispering ‘sweetling.’ You did that to me. You brought him back to hurt me all over again.”

Margaery didn’t know what to say.

“And that was after months of you hounding me. I specifically told you not to contact me and you disregarded my wishes. And then you pull that stunt and show up at my home.”

“Sansa—”

“So now you know what I’ve been dealing with for the past, oh, decade or so. Day in and day out, not knowing if he’ll ever show up, when he’ll appear murmuring ‘sweetling’ and coming into my room and—this is what I live with. Well, you don’t have to worry. You don’t have to live with it. It’s very simple. I’m going to get out of this car in fifteen more minutes, and as long as you stay away from me and out of my life—also meaning you leave Arya and any of the few family members I have left that care about me the hell alone—Roose will never bother you again. “

“I love you, Sansa. Please.”

“Please what? I’ll leave Roose, and move in with you and your future husband and we can all live happily ever after? I’ll be the guest that doesn’t quite fit? The friend who never leaves? I’ll forget how you made the monsters come roaring back into my head?”

Margaery swallowed.

Sansa took a deep breath. “I told him not to hurt you. I owed you that. You were there for me back then. You did so much for me. I don’t think I would be alive today if it wasn’t for you. But Margaery, it’s too late to go back. You want your family’s approval too much. You don’t understand the life I’ve chosen.”

“He’s changing you,” Margaery insisted.

“If you really think back, a lot of the things you say you see in me now were there all along.” She smiled. “All those times, you said I was evil or complained how bossy I was. I didn’t even know who Roose was then. I’m not a scared fifteen-year-old anymore. I’m not even a self-conscious twenty-year-old. This is who I am.”

The numbers on the clock advanced inexorably.
She couldn’t think of any words that would make Sansa stay.

“Does Jaime Lannister know about you?”

“Yes. He has someone he can’t marry.”

“He’s gay?”

“No, I think she’s married. I don’t really know.” So this was how it felt at the end, just sort of sad and empty. She swallowed. “Sansa, please.”

Sansa shook her head. “No, I don’t want you to beg me. I want to remember you the way you were when I first met you.”

She felt tears coming on.

“Margaery, come here.” Sansa leaned over and kissed her. It was gentle and tender and it felt incredibly final. “I think we’re out of time now.”

She heard Roose’s car pull up. “I’ll stay away,” she promised.

“Good. I hope you find happiness with someone.” Sansa reached into the pocket on the door and handed Margaery her phone. “Goodbye, Margaery.”

She watched as Sansa walked around Roose’s car and got in. Roose stared at her, his face an expressionless mask until Sansa reached over and touched his arm. Then he turned and took Sansa away and out of her life.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

My amazing beta, tafkar, cautioned me that I should insert a reminder that we’re at the halfway point of the story, not the end, because of the feeling of finality this chapter may invoke, so here’s your reminder.
Lady of the Dreadfort

Chapter Notes

Although I do not go into great detail, there is implied torture in this chapter and Ramsay Bolton makes an appearance. If you have triggers, please know your limits.

The action in this chapter takes place over a period of several decades.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

* * *

Ben Bones

* * *

When Ben was fifteen, his father brought him to the house near the old Dreadfort to meet Rodrik Bolton. Everyone knew the Boltons didn’t have much money anymore, but it didn’t matter. Everyone was still afraid of them. Ben was certainly no different. Although his father had worked for Rodrik Bolton his whole life, Ben had never met him before, but he was nervous all the same.

“He’s too young,” Ben heard his mother saying. “Let him finish school. Let him get out of here.”

“Mr. Bolton wants to meet him. Nobody says no to him, Nan.”

Ben wore his second-best shirt and trousers. His shoes were worn but polished. His mother trimmed his hair the night before. Now he combed and slicked it back.

They drove around to the rear of the large, white house. “We always go in the back,” his father told him. “Don’t forget it. They’re our betters.”

His mother thought otherwise, but she never talked about the Boltons in front of his father.

The house had seen better days and it was cold inside. Ben followed his father through a drafty kitchen and a dingy hallway into the drawing room.

Rodrik Bolton was a mild-looking man of thirty or thirty-five. His dark hair was receding and he had light, almost silvery grey eyes. Mrs. Bolton was reading. Ben thought she was maybe a few years younger than her husband. She was pretty in a washed-out sort of way, but her blue eyes were vivid. When they came in, Mrs. Bolton closed her book, nodded to them, and vanished up the stairs.

Mr. Bolton didn’t invite them to sit. He folded his newspaper back and set it on the side table. He looked Ben up and down and directed a series of questions to Ben’s father. When he had his answers, he turned back to Ben. “How old are you, boy?”

“Fifteen, Mr. Bolton.”

“One more year, Harlon. Then I’ll take him.”

“He’s old enough to leave school now,” his father offered.
Mr. Bolton shook his head. “Too many questions.” He picked up his paper.

Ben later learned this gesture indicated the interview was over. When they were in the truck and riding home, he asked his father what Mr. Bolton had meant.

“Mr. Bolton likes his privacy. He doesn’t want people poking around. I guess he figures if you leave school early, your teachers might do just that. I told him they said you were bright.”

“What kind of work would he want me to do?” Ben had asked this before. His father had not wanted to answer him in the past.

His father drove carefully through the snow. “Like I do for him now,” he explained sadly. “Whatever he wants me to.”

* * *

Ben carefully placed the stack of books on the table in front of Mrs. Bolton. She read everything she could get her hands on. One of the few tasks he actually enjoyed was going to the public library for her. Sometimes she had requests, but mostly she said it didn’t matter what it was. She read it all, from paperback romances to thick dusty books about things he couldn’t even pronounce.

“You cannot do this wrong, Ben,” she assured him. “It doesn’t matter. All knowledge is useful.”

He brought back books for her son, Roose, too. Until he was five, the little boy would just stare at him when he set the picture books on the table.

“What did I tell you to say, Roose?”

Mr. Bolton looked a question at his wife.

“He needs to know his manners. You’re always saying it doesn’t pay to have people asking questions. Manners cover a world of sins.”

Mrs. Bolton didn’t usually talk to her husband in such a forthright way.

Ben stared at his feet.

“Your mother is quite correct, Roose.”

The boy gazed at Ben with his grey eyes and said thank you.

“You’re welcome, Master Roose.”

“You may go, Ben.”

“Might I speak to you, Mr. Bolton?” Ben noted how Mrs. Bolton reached for one of the new books. It was something about the history of lacemaking. The little boy also opened a book, but his eyes were still fixed on Ben. “I got this yesterday.” He handed his employer the draft notice from the Night’s Watch.

Mr. Bolton read it. “I see.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“There is nothing to do. You’ve been called up. You’ll go, fulfill your duty. When you’re discharged, you’ll return here.”
Mrs. Bolton kept her eyes on her book, but Ben could tell she was listening.

“Your father will suffice while you’re gone.” He sighed. “Five years, well, it can’t be helped.”

“When does he have to leave?” Mrs. Bolton asked casually.

Mr. Bolton consulted the notice again. “In ten days. Why?”

“I’ll be done with these soon enough. Might he make one more trip to the library before he goes?”

Mr. Bolton had no objection to this.

Ben couldn’t think why it mattered who got her books. He picked things at random. His father had done the same. For some reason, though, Mrs. Bolton preferred him to go for her.

On his last day, he returned Mrs. Bolton’s library books and brought her back twice the usual amount.

She was waiting for him in the drawing room. “I need you to listen to me, Ben.” She shook her head when he started to back away. “It’s all right. He’s at the office and my monster of a son is at school. Don’t come back here. Don’t come back on leave. Don’t come back when you’re discharged. Not to see your parents, not for any reason. Go elsewhere. South if you can stand it. It’s a big, wide world out there and you do not have to live in this prison serving my twisted wreck of a husband. It’s not too late for you. He hasn’t had you help him yet. I know he hasn’t. He has your father for that still. Forget your parents. Forget us. Marry some pretty girl and find a job in the sunshine somewhere. Don’t come back.”

“Missus—”

“My name is Alys. Say it just once. He’s the only one who calls me it now and it’s—just say it, please.”

“Alys.”

She peered up at him. “I mean it, Ben. Don’t come back.”

* * *

Ben took Mrs. Bolton’s advice for ten years. Then his father died and his mother begged him to return for the funeral. He came back with his pretty wife who he had met while serving in the Night’s Watch. She had grown up in the New Gift and her hair was long and red as copper. When she smiled at him he felt like he could do anything.

The ground was frozen so hard that winter they had to have his father cremated. Ben’s wife approved of this. It was the way of her ancestors. It was safer, she said.

The Boltons made an appearance at the funeral. Mrs. Bolton murmured condolences and didn’t look any of them in the eye. Her son was an adolescent now; he stared unabashedly at Ben’s wife. Mr. Bolton said what was proper and then in a low voice ordered Ben to come see him the next day.

He was alone in the drawing room when Ben arrived. “How long will it take you to settle your obligations in the New Gift and return here?”

“I don’t live here anymore, Mr. Bolton. I have a good job. I don’t work for you.”
“I own you,” Mr. Bolton told him in a mild voice. “I should punish you for leaving. It’s only out of respect for your father that I do not.”

Ben started to turn away.

“Your young wife is a lovely girl. Roose is quite taken with her.”

Don’t come back.

“She’s mine too, you know. Everything in the Dreadfort is mine. When I die, it will all belong to Roose. He is a smart boy. He lets himself be guided by me.”

Don’t come back.

“I’ll let you have her and I’ll keep him from her, but you will return here and you will never leave again. Is that clear?”

Don’t come back.

“The old ways are very strong in him. Fortunately, he’s very intelligent. It is a good balance. It means he knows how not to get caught. How long?”

“Two weeks, Mr. Bolton.”

“You may go now, Ben.” Mr. Bolton unfolded his paper. “Oh, and Ben? The New Gift isn’t so far away. Roose has a driver’s license now. I expect you’d like your pretty wife to stay pretty.”

* * *

After the third miscarriage, the doctor sent his wife for tests. She went quickly after that. The Boltons came to her funeral too.

The things he did for Mr. Bolton and Mr. Roose began to gnaw away at his soul. They were both careful and meticulous men by necessity, and dark and cruel by nature.

He was fading into himself when Mrs. Bolton took pity on him one day as he dropped off an armload of books for her.

“Do you know why I don’t care what you bring me, Ben?”

“No, Missus.”

“Because it’s how I escape. I met him when I was at college and I took his quiet nature and his polite manners for compassion and gentleness. By the time I knew what he was, it was too late. Well, I’m stuck here now. My health is excellent, more’s the pity. The only kindness the gods have bestowed upon me is that I could only give him the one child. Roose is already worse than his father and he’s not even fully grown. All he inherited from me was my father’s nose, a fondness for reading, and a passion for knowledge. Everything else he has or is comes from my husband’s side of the family.” She laughed bitterly. “My husband hates my music. He won’t let me write. I can’t drink. I tried to after we were first married and my loving husband threatened to whip me if I touched the stuff again. The electricity is too erratic here or I might have escaped into soap operas, game shows, and sitcoms. So I read. I’ve gone through nearly everything that miserable public library has to offer twice and I’ll probably go through it ten times more before I die. You need to find an escape of your own or you’ll go mad. You didn’t listen to me about leaving. Listen to me about this.”
Mr. Roose went away to university, but he came back often enough for Ben to realize that Alys Bolton was right. He needed to find a way to escape even if it was only for a few hours. He began borrowing his own library books. Before he’d trapped himself in this mire, he’d worked on cars. Now he read about them.

* * *

When Mr. Bolton was dying, he called Ben to him one last time. “You belong to Roose now. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Bolton.”

“Good. Do as he says. He’s a smart boy. He won’t get into trouble.” Mr. Bolton looked at him shrewdly. “You should marry again. As long as you ask Roose for permission, he’ll leave your bride alone. Your family has served mine for hundreds of years, you know. It would please him for your sons to serve his.”

“Yes, Mr. Bolton.” There were women in town who looked his way enough to indicate they would not mind his company, but Ben could not bear the thought of keeping this line of misery going any further than him.

After the funeral, Roose Bolton summoned him. Mrs. Bolton nodded at Ben before disappearing upstairs. “My mother is fond of you,” sounding slightly displeased that this was so.

Ben frowned. “Mr. Roose?”

“I won’t be here much. Once I finish my dissertation, I don’t expect I’ll find a position in the north for some time.” He didn’t sound happy about it. “You will stay here and take care of the place. You will look after my mother. I’ll send you orders periodically. You will obey them. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Mr. Roose.”

His employer considered him. “Everything in the Dreadfort belongs to me.”

Ben nodded. “Yes, Mr. Roose.”

“Good. You may go, Ben.”

* * *

When Roose Bolton was away, it wasn’t so bad. Sometimes Ben drove Mrs. Bolton into town so she could select her own books.

Then there was the day he told her the college in Karhold let local residents borrow from their collection. She actually looked happy for a brief moment. It was true she could only take out two at a time, but they had far more of a selection than anything at the public library.

Ben received short direct letters with instructions from his employer that he followed carefully. Mrs. Bolton also received letters. She usually showed them to him while they sat drinking tea at the enamel-topped table in the drafty kitchen. They were slightly longer, but they were more stilted. Her son inquired after Mrs. Bolton’s health. He asked her if she required anything. He wrote of what he was doing and asked her questions about her days. They were off in a way Ben couldn’t pinpoint.
“He knows the rules, but he’s incapable of understanding the intent behind them,” she said sadly. “These estimates, can you arrange them?”

Ben could. As the years passed, the house grew less dilapidated. First came a new furnace and water heater, then the chimneys were repointed, and a new roof followed.

Occasionally Mr. Roose came home. Over the years he brought wives. The first was not unlike his mother. She was pretty and faded and she died rather quickly of the same kind of cancer that had killed Ben’s bride. She was buried elsewhere. Mrs. Bolton said it was in Dorne. She went to the funeral there. She said she enjoyed the trip. It was warm, she said.

Ben got into the habit of stopping off at the diner in the village with Mrs. Bolton on the way back from the library. The first time he tried to eat at the counter while she sat at a booth, but she put a stop to that. He would eat with her, she said. He ate with her at the house too.

Mr. Roose returned to make a thorough inspection of his property. He was buying up the land around the house. Most of it was still woods, and as far as Ben could tell, he meant it to stay woods.

“I didn’t realize professors were so well paid,” Mrs. Bolton commented as her son went over the list of improvements and repairs.

“I have other income,” he replied. “Well, Ben, can you have these things done?”

Ben nodded. “It might be difficult about the water lines—”

“Do I want to know from where this other income derives?”

Mr. Roose directed his gaze at his mother.

“I hope you don’t use that excuse on other people,” she told him mildly. “Say you had investments that performed well.”

Ben hardly dared breathe.

“Thank you, Mother. Perhaps you would be more comfortable upstairs.” He spoke politely but the chill in his tone was icier than even his father’s. He waited for Mrs. Bolton to leave and then he looked at Ben. “I am told you take my mother into town sometimes.”

“Yes, Mr. Roose. Missus likes to pick out her own books.”

“She stays here from now on. If my mother requires anything you will bring it to her, but I don’t want you taking her anywhere unless I order you to do so.”

Ben hesitated. “Missus has doctors’ appointments sometimes.”

“The doctor and nowhere else. Now what is the problem with the water lines?”

Mrs. Bolton lived long enough to see her son’s second bride. “She won’t last,” she predicted when they were alone again. “She’s me all over again.”

Alys Bolton’s heart gave out soon after. Ben found her dead in her chair with a book about the wildflowers of Dorne in her lap.

She was wrong about her new daughter-in-law’s life expectancy and right about her character.
Ben thought it a shame that Mrs. Bolton had died too soon to meet her grandson, Domeric. Years later, he realized it was a blessing she died too soon to meet her other grandson, Ramsay.

“Why do you put winter roses on my grandmother’s grave?” Ramsay asked one night in the chamber below the property. He was winded and bored of torturing some poor girl who had made the mistake of getting into his car.

The girl screamed.

Ramsay struck her across the face. “I asked you a question, old man.”

The girl screamed again.

Ben hated this. When Mr. Bolton or Mr. Roose had needed him it was usually at the end.

“Ramsay!”

Mr. Roose stood in the doorway. He took in the scene before him with disgust.

Ben saw the misguided hope in the girl’s eyes. He knew he would have nightmares about her for a long time.

“Please, I’ll do anything. Just let me go. I promise I won’t tell.”

Ramsay raised his hand again, but his father’s voice stopped him.

“Are you completely devoid of intelligence? This girl’s face is all over the news. From the Wall to Dorne, there are people looking for her. There’s a reward for her. I taught you better than this.” Mr. Roose turned to Ben. “End it.”

Ben ignored the protests of Ramsay. He knew what had to be done. He was quick with the knife. He watched as the light left her eyes and then he started the cleanup. Unlike his father and his grandfather before him, Ramsay did not understand the value in neatness. It would be a long night. Ben tuned out the heated discussion behind him. He didn’t even wince when he heard the thwack as Mr. Roose’s hand sent Ramsay flying across the chamber.

“Where are you going? Take off everything. You’re covered in evidence, you idiot. It’ll all have to be destroyed.”

“But these sneakers cost me $400.”

Ben went to the cupboard with the chemicals.

Mr. Roose’s voice went very quiet. “All you have I gave you. You would do well to remember that. Everything in the Dreadfort belongs to me, even you, Ramsay.” He exhaled. “You’ll have to go away for a time. I don’t care where as long as it’s outside of Westeros. Pentos will do. You can’t get into too much trouble there. It would be better for you if I did not hear of your amusements again.”

Ramsay skulked out. He would be in a temper for days.

Ben focused on the task. She couldn’t have been more than sixteen, he thought.

“That boy . . . I should have killed him the day his whore of a mother showed him to me. Ben?”
He turned around. “Mr. Roose?”

“Well, why do you put flowers on my mother’s grave?”

Ben frowned. “I don’t, Mr. Roose.”

“I heard what—”

“I put them on your father’s,” Ben lied.

His employer was taken aback.

“It was Missus’ orders. She said people would expect it. Widows were supposed to keep the stones all tidy, she said. Her arthritis was—”

“Ah.” Roose Bolton looked puzzled. “Why are you still doing it?”

“No one told me to stop, Mr. Roose. Do you want me to?”

Mr. Roose considered. “No. If anyone asks, say you do so on my orders.” He looked around the room in disgust. “He’s like a butcher hacking meat. I’ll help you with this.”

As tired and as sickened as he was, Ben thought he would rather do it on his own. He knew better than to say so, however, and he kept his mouth shut when Mr. Roose eyed the knife Ramsay had been using.

“He didn’t wear gloves,” Mr. Roose said flatly. There was a pause and then he inhaled. “Save the knife. No, don’t clean it. Wrap it carefully. If he asks for it, tell him I took it.”

Ben did as he was told.

“Why winter roses?”

Ben had an answer for this too. “They grow behind the house, Mr. Roose. When it’s summer I use the regular kind.” They grew in the garden where sometimes Alys Bolton liked to sit in order to try and forget the hell she was living in.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Karhold is probably much farther away from the Dreadfort. I did do research, but establishing scale for locations in Westeros is rather difficult. Assume that it’s a small-to-medium sized city about an hour and half’s drive away from the Dreadfort.

I saw the phrase “Everything in the Dreadfort belongs to me” attached to a gifset on Tumblr. I can’t find the post or I’d give proper credit for it. If you know where it comes from, please let me know!

From what I can recall and from what’s in the wikis, my Ben Bones differs drastically from canon! Ben Bones. I could make an argument about the modern world and society changing him, but let’s just say he is pretty much an original character. I liked the
name and I needed him to be a basically decent man who’s been trapped into the
darkness of the Dreadfort. And obviously Rodrik and Alys Bolton are original as well.

Thank you to tafkar for helping make these chapters what they are.
Chapter Notes

The flashback scene contains implied torture. As with everything I’ve written here so far, I tend to be vague with the gory details, preferring you to imagine whatever you will, but if this is an issue, you have been warned and you might want to skip past it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * *

Twenty-three Years Ago

* * *

Guns were his mentor’s weapon of choice. There was little he did not know about them.

Roose preferred knives, but he saw the logic in being skilled in multiple weapons and techniques. He absorbed everything his mentor taught him eagerly.

He was content with his life now. He continued to do well in graduate school. There were so many people here that his nature was easier to hide. He liked his research. He was considered a good writer and, to his surprise, a good instructor. And on a fairly regular basis, he had an outlet for his appetites. Even when the work wasn’t as satisfactory as he would have liked, it helped. He didn’t need to sate his urges nearly as much as he had before.

His father had claimed on his death bed that it would get easier as he grew older. Roose doubted this. He knew now he differed from his father in several ways, but perhaps he was right. In any case, Roose found the work with his mentor helpful on more than one level.

“You’ll like this one, college boy.”

Roose wished his mentor wouldn’t call him that, but he knew he was an apprentice. He could endure the nickname for a little while longer. He accepted the file and silently read it.

“I’m going to let you take the lead. You can show me what you can do with those knives of yours.”

“How much?” The client wanted their target to suffer. He had very specific requests.

His mentor considered. “Half.”

Ordinarily Roose got anywhere from ten to twenty percent. He looked a question at him.

“You’re going to do the heavy lifting. I need you to pay close attention on this one, the whole thing from start to finish. It’s not always about the killing. I don’t know what this girl did to piss the client off like this, but he’s thinking revenge. He’s not thinking smart. He’s got all kinds of clever ideas, this one, but they’re going to bite us in the arse if we’re not careful. Cunning is not smart. If we’re not careful, the cops will be all over it fast and our client isn’t going to sit quietly and take the blame. We do not want this job coming back to us.”

Roose did as his mentor asked. He thought he was being more than a little overcautious; even Father would not have gone to such extremes, but Roose obeyed nonetheless. The job itself was
extremely satisfying. For the first time, he found himself in the role of instructor. His mentor observed intently as Roose went to work on the target. He asked questions, all of which Roose could answer.

Roose’s only complaint, which he, of course, left unexpressed was that he couldn’t spend more time on the job. He hadn’t been able to let himself go like this in months.

“We need to end it,” his mentor insisted. “Now.”

When it came to the cleanup, his mentor left nothing to chance. It took longer to eradicate the evidence than it had to torture and kill the girl. “You’ll thank me for this later, college boy.”

A month later when the body was found, Roose did. The target’s family was a prominent one and they wanted their daughter’s killer brought to justice. The authorities very quickly zeroed in on their client. While nothing could be found to link him to this particular target, they found other things and very soon their client was on trial for unrelated crimes.

“Cunning is not smart,” his mentor repeated over breakfast in one of the anonymous diners he preferred, as they listened to news of the case blaring out of the radio on the counter. Then he looked at Roose. “You have to learn not to enjoy yourself too much. It’s too easy to lose focus.”

Roose nodded. “How did you come to be in this line of work?” Roose had wanted to ask this for such a long time.

His mentor didn’t reply right away. “I was a sharpshooter in the military—don’t ask which branch of the service or when—but I was good at it. Someone recruited me when I left. He trained me in a similar manner to how I’m training you.”

“You never dispatched someone before your time in the military?”

The older man mopped up egg yolk with his rye toast. “Nope.”

“Do you ever—” Roose stopped. He wasn’t sure how to phrase it.

“Only if I’m being paid.”

Roose felt a sense of disappointment. He had once thought himself like his father, but he’d come to learn they weren’t quite the same. Now his mentor, who Roose admired intensely, revealed he was radically different from him. Surely somewhere there had to be someone who thought and felt as he did.

* * *

Present Day

* * *

Roose watched as Sansa charmed his colleagues and their spouses. He and Sansa were being more open about their relationship now. They did not flaunt it, but they decided they need not be quite so discreet anymore.

He tended to keep to himself. Usually once or twice a year, a fellow professor would not take no for an answer and he found himself at a dinner party with a usually uninteresting, unattractive single woman. When he was pressed this time, he said quite candidly that he was seeing someone. So now here they were.

They all liked her, of course. He could tell. He often had difficulty reading people. The emotions
they felt made little sense to him, but it was clear they were taken with her. The skeptical looks he saw the women exchanging upon meeting her vanished within ten minutes of conversation. Sansa was articulate. She was intelligent. She was confident.

Dacey Mormont did not like him; the feeling was quite mutual, but they were respectful of each other. Now, though, she was looking at him curiously. “How did you two meet?”

“It’s a little clichéd, I guess,” Sansa said easily. “I took one of Roose’s classes, but we didn’t really get to know each other for a while after.”

“What’s a while?” Dacey wanted to know.

“It was six? No, seven months after that.” Roose put his arm around Sansa.

Sansa explained how they had met in Oldtown. She turned the conversation back on one of the other guests, a junior faculty member’s husband who did something quite pedestrian in the city connected with accounting.

“Would anyone like more coffee?”

Sansa, of course, was the first to say yes.

Dacey continued with her questions. “What took you to Oldtown, Sansa?”

“Ten linear feet of unprocessed archival material relating to the Nightfort legends.” Sansa declined cream and sugar and quickly explained her dissertation topic.

“What are the Nightfort legends?” the accountant wanted to know.

“There are a collection of stories—well, I guess some of them would be considered fairy tales—associated with one of the castles along the Wall called the Nightfort. Some of them are still popular today although they’ve been altered a lot. You may have heard of ‘The Rat Cook.’”

The accountant leaned forward. “Our son watches the movie incessantly!”

The northerners in the room kept their expressions neutrally polite.

“That’s one of the stories. The original is a lot grimmer. I’m interested in the connections and the themes they share.”

“My babysitter used to frighten the shit out of us with those stories,” Dacey commented. “I didn’t know King’s had anyone in the literature department researching that era.”

“My advisor is Ellyn Tarly; fairy tales are her area of expertise.”

“Wouldn’t Winterfell have been a better fit?”

It was a question Roose had put to Sansa before. He found it interesting how intently Dacey asked it.

“My interests changed. Ellyn says that happens a lot.”

They all laughed. The conversation shifted again.

Roose declined brandy. He gave the appearance of listening to one of his colleague’s anecdotes. He’d heard it before. Instead he considered the question Dacey had put to Sansa. Eddard Stark was
at Winterfell. Sansa was estranged from most of her family. Could she have chosen to go elsewhere so as not to deal with them?

When the first couple rose and indicated they should leave, Roose caught Sansa’s eye. They followed suit.

Their hosts protested. The evening was early. They were all having such a good time.

“We have a long drive back,” Roose said apologetically. He and Sansa expressed their thanks and were free to leave.

“I liked your friends,” Sansa told him as he drove them home.

“They liked you.” He smiled at her. “But they are not my friends.” Roose did not have friends. He had colleagues and associates. Occasionally he’d had wives. But he did not have friends.

“Then why were we over there?”

Roose waited until he cleared the intersection. “Our host would not take no for an answer. Once or twice a year, he presses me to go to dinner. I accept because to refuse would raise more questions than I want. He is a competent scholar and he’s likeable enough, but he isn’t my friend. Nor are any of the others.”

“You mean you won’t be hanging out with Mr. CPA anytime soon?” Sansa laughed. “I did like his wife, though.”

“What did you think of Dacey?” Roose asked curiously. They were nearing the city limits.

“She was all right. She asked a lot of questions about us. At first, I thought it was because of our age difference, but there was something more there.”

Roose nodded.

“You don’t like her.”

“No, I don’t. She doesn’t care much for me either, but she was impressed by you.” He turned onto the highway.

“Or she’s just nosy. You and she never . . . ?”

He shook his head. “No.” He did not engage in relationships with his colleagues.

Sansa shifted in her seat. “She kept bringing the conversation back to Winterfell.”

“She’s good friends with your father.” Eddard Stark was a prominent academic. They were all medieval historians.

“Fuck.”

Roose glanced sharply at her. Sansa occasionally let an explicative leak out, but this sounded very deliberate.

She dug around in her purse for her phone and made a call. “It’s me. Did you tell them about Roose and me? Either of them?” She listened. “You didn’t let it slip or anything? What about to Robb or Bran?”
Arya, he realized. She was phoning her sister.

“No, it’s fine. Just . . . don’t, okay? I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” She hung up. “Fuck,” she said again.

“The Tyrell girl,” he began.

Sansa shook her head. “No. Definitely not Margaery. Well, if they don’t know yet, they will soon. Shit.”

“There’s no need to swear,” he said mildly. “You’re a grown woman, Sansa. We aren’t doing anything wrong. I value discretion, but academia is a small world.”

“I am not ashamed.”

“I didn’t think you were. I am on the same panel with him in a few months at the WHA meeting. I expect there will be some awkwardness on his part, but it has nothing to do with us.”

Sansa folded her arms across her chest. “It’s a way in. It’s another way they can get to me.”

“Your family?”

“Yes. No matter what I do, they’re there.” She turned her head and stared out the window.

Roose tried a few more times to talk to her as he drove them home, but she just shook her head and refused to answer. Not until they were lying in bed did she speak.

“How close are you to my dad?”

“I know him, of course. We were colleagues at Stormlands.”

“Are you friends with him?”

Roose rolled onto his side. “No.” He knew she was upset for some reason, but he couldn’t imagine why. “Why should it matter? We’re consenting adults. Our relationship concerns no one but ourselves.”

“I don’t like them knowing anything about me.”

He could understand her wish for privacy, but he thought there was something more she wasn’t saying. “Is Arya the only one you’re close to?”

Sansa pulled the covers up over them. “I email or call Rickon once a month.”

“He’s the youngest?”

“Yes. And I email Jon a few times a year. He’s my half-brother. I think I told you about him. He’s serving in the Night’s Watch.”

Roose ran his fingers down the side of her cheek.

“Even if she keeps her mouth shut, he’s going to find out.”

“Most likely yes,” he allowed. “Why are you so worried? There is nothing he or anyone else can do that could keep us apart.”
“Because he’ll call me,” Sansa said in a depressed voice. “He’ll worry and he’ll call and then when I don’t talk to him, his worry will spread to the rest of them.”

Roose sat up and reached for the lamp.

“Don’t. It’s hard enough to tell you all this in the dark. It’s been fine for the last five years. We worked it out. Dad can call me if something big happens. The last time I spoke to him was when my maternal grandfather died a year and a half ago. But the rule is that’s all he can call me about.”

“What about your mother?”

“I haven’t spoken to her in nine years. She won’t call, not even if she finds out about you, but she’ll be upset so that will mean Robb will remember I exist and—” Sansa burrowed deeper under the covers. “I don’t want their calls and I don’t want their concern. I don’t want them in my life.”

He pulled her to him. “Sansa, I’m a respectable taxpaying member of society.” He smiled in the darkness at the notion.

“You’re twice my age and you’ve been married three times. I don’t care, but they will.”

“What if we were preemptive about it?” He felt her still herself. “Have your sister tell them about us. Suggest to Arya how to present the news to them.”

She twisted out of his arms. “I don’t know if it will be enough.”

“If you don’t think she can reassure your parents, then it should be simple enough for her to make it clear that overtures to you would only drive you further into my corrupting embrace.”

Sansa laughed then. “I don’t know how much further into your ‘corrupting embrace’ I can get.”

Roose reached for her. “I shall take that as a personal challenge.”

*C * *

Cersei’s house swarmed with Lannisters and Tyrells. Tywin watched his son’s fiancée drinking yet another glass of champagne. The young woman was unquestionably beautiful, but he could not shake the feeling something was horribly wrong with this whole match.

“She knows what her duty is,” Olenna told him with satisfaction. “She will be a good wife to Jaime.”

He didn’t reply.

“Margaery will get the bulk of my money when I die if that’s what you’re worried about. Your grandchildren are going to have a sizeable share of the Tyrell fortune.”

“Assuming she doesn’t drink it away.”

Olenna glanced at him sharply. “This is her engagement party. Naturally she wants to have a good time. I had the raising of her, no matter what her mother thinks. She knows where her duty lies.”

Tywin allowed himself to be persuaded.

A phone call about a business crisis took him out of the party for a half hour. He found a quiet room and dealt with it. Tywin was attempting to rejoin the guests when he saw his son and his fiancée standing in an alcove.
“It’s just another hour, Margaery.”

“It’s the rest of our lives. I don’t know if I can do this, Jaime.”

“We’re stuck. We don’t have any choice.”

They looked profoundly miserable. Both of them took a breath, squared their shoulders, and emerged the picture of a blissfully happy couple.

* * *

Sansa tried to lose herself in her book. It was too late and she was too on edge to focus on her research. It was a good story, but the subject matter was unnerving. She wasn’t enjoying reading the wife’s perspective at all. It was too close to the bone.

She was relieved when she heard the car.

Roose came in.

She’d never done this before. She wasn’t sure what to do. He didn’t look like he wanted to talk.

He smiled briefly, but proceeded directly to the basement door. He held it open for her.

Sansa preceded him downstairs. She was nervous, but he would want her to be calm. She had a change of clothes on hangers for him on the hook by the utility sink in the laundry room.

He stripped out of what he was wearing, washed up, and put on the new ones. He handed her the discarded clothes. “Will you attend to these?” he asked before leaving her to handle the next task, whatever that was.

Sansa nodded. She inspected everything slowly and carefully. There were flecks of blood on the shirt and the trousers. She set to treating the stains. She put the clothes to soak.

She wondered if she should simply go back to the kitchen. Sansa moved toward the stairs.

Roose looked up. He was cleaning his knives.

Sansa hesitated. “Did you eat anything?”

He shook his head.

“It’s after midnight. Do you want breakfast or do you want me to heat up some leftovers?” Sansa glanced at his knives and then she wished she hadn’t.

“Breakfast, thank you.”

“How long?”

“Forty-five minutes. I have other things I need to do as well.”

She nodded. She didn’t want to know what those were, although he would tell her if she asked. He had been very clear about that. He loved her, he said. He didn’t want to have secrets from her.

Sansa went back upstairs. She set the table and got out the ingredients for his meal. Roose only ever drank water, but she filled the kettle. A cup of tea might soothe her nerves. There was no point in preparing any food until he was close to being done. Sansa sat down and picked up the book. He
came back up. He spared her a smile and he returned to the garage.

Sansa tried to read. She heard him open the trunk. He had no neighbors. There weren’t street noises so there was nothing to distract her from the sounds from the garage. It sounded like he was removing heavy plastic sheeting now. She didn’t want to know. Sansa focused on the book. There another twist and again it was deeply uncomfortable.

It was closer to an hour when he was finished. Sansa started the water for his poached eggs and turned on the burner under the kettle.

“I’m sorry. It was a messier job than usual.”

“I don’t mind. Sit down. It’ll just be a few more minutes.” She put two slices of whole wheat bread in the toaster.

Roose glanced at the title of her book. “What’s it about?”

“It’s a thriller with some very unreliable narrators. I think you’d like it.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him turning it over to read the back cover. He seldom read fiction, but he usually took her suggestions. “What time do you have to be on campus? Could you sleep in?”

“I have class at 11:00. I could go in an hour or so later than usual.”

Sansa set the plate down in front of him.

“Aren’t you having anything?”

“No, I’m not hungry. Go ahead.” She sat down next to him in her usual spot. He ate neatly and quickly.

She watched him slice into the yolks of his eggs. She thought of his knives then.

The kettle whistled. She jumped, but she was glad of the distraction.

Roose glanced sharply at it.

“It’s decaf.” She poured the water into a mug and dropped a tea bag in. “I like the comfort of something hot on a night like this.” She felt his eyes on her. “I don’t know why, but it always seems colder here in King’s Landing during winter than it ever did back home.”

He returned to his meal. “Their houses aren’t designed for winter. We understand the cold. They never will.”

“Perhaps that’s it.” She withdrew the tea bag and set it on a saucer. She wrapped her hands around the mug for a moment.

Roose glanced at the label.

“I told you it’s decaffeinated.”

He examined the staple.

“I have always been honest about my caffeine consumption. You’re the one who likes to play tricks.”

A smile played around Roose’s lips and he turned his attention to his eggs.

When he was done, she took the plate and his glass and put them in the sink. She started running
the hot water when she saw his reflection in the kitchen window above the sink.

Roose reached around her and pushed the taps back.

She felt a familiar frisson. He turned her around and kissed her hard.

He put his hands on her waist and guided her toward the kitchen table.

“Upstairs?”

“Here, I want you here, my queen,” he murmured into her ear as he untied her robe and pushed it off her.

Sansa managed to pull her nightgown off while he undid his trousers. She pulled at the buttons on the shirt.

“There’s no time.”

“I want you naked,” she insisted.

“I have a hard time believing you’re real sometimes,” he breathed. He took her up against the wall.

She dug her fingernails into his back. This was what she lived for. This was how she liked him best, fierce and powerful. He was her consort and he would never let anything harm her again.

* * *

Margaery accepted another glass of wine. The Lannisters drank a lot, she was learning. Sansa had often suggested that Margaery needed to cut back. If she could see just how much the Lannisters consumed, she—Margaery stopped herself. She would not think about Sansa.

There were rules. Lannisters were not drunks, but they knew about and enjoyed their wine. Tywin Lannister was taking pains to make sure Margaery understood all the rules about being a Lannister.

From what she’d seen, Jaime, Cersei, and Tyrion flirted dangerously with alcoholism, but she gave every appearance of listening to him attentively. His children had heard it all before.

The ring still felt strange. It was some family heirloom. It was not the ring Tywin Lannister had given to his beloved late wife. That was another rule. One did not speak the name Joanna or mention her in his presence. Jaime explained this one to her. No, the ring was Jaime’s paternal grandmother’s. It was stunning and it was very much to Margaery’s taste, but she wasn’t used to it yet.

Jaime and she had worked it all out. He would continue on with his lover and she was free to seek her own. At some point, probably sooner rather than later, they would face the question of children, but they pushed it off. Margaery didn’t mind sleeping with men. They were seldom her first choice, but she could manage it with Jaime if she had to. She wasn’t sure he felt the same. He was unflinchingly loyal to his still unnamed, unknown lover.

Margaery was back to being her grandmother’s darling. No one cast Sansa up to her once. No one talked about her at all. Jaime and Tyrion discouraged her from doing so. She’d done what she could. Sansa was with this man. She needed to move on. She gave them the same lip service she gave to Tywin.

Margaery had another lover now. She had met her at one of the parties she attended with Jaime.
She was a blonde with a heart-shaped face and a stunning smile. Her name was Jenny and her hair smelted like strawberries. She was closeted so she knew the rules. She was enthusiastic in bed. She was smart and she was funny, but she wasn’t Sansa.

Her wine was gone. Tyrion lifted the bottle, but Margaery declined. Tywin gave her an approving look. The man never smiled. According to Jaime, his uncles could list on one hand the number of times he had.

She twisted the ring on her finger.

“Didn’t you have it sized properly?” Tywin demanded of Jaime.

“He did,” she answered. “I’ve lost some weight.”

Cersei gave her a sharp look, but said nothing.

When dinner was finally over, Cersei and she withdrew. It was a stupid tradition. Grandmother would never have put up with it. Cersei seemed to agree on that subject. She glared through the archway to the closed door of the dining room before turning to Margaery.

“You’re still in love with her.”

Margaery turned to face her future sister-in-law with a puzzled expression.

“The Stark girl. I once thought she might be suitable for Joffrey, not that he would have appreciated her. Men can be such fools.” Cersei poured a generous amount of brandy in a snifter. “Do you want any? Father won’t mind, you know. Two cocktails before dinner, two glasses of wine with, two brandies after, it’s all fine with him. Three and well, then, it’s a problem.” Cersei didn’t wait for a response. She handed a brandy to Margaery. “We haven’t talked much, you and me.”

Margaery knew she needed to be careful. Cersei was drunk and she was dangerous.

“Jaime and I tell each other everything. And I do mean everything.”

She wondered if this meant that Cersei knew about Jaime’s mystery lover.

“So I know all about you and sweet little Sansa Stark.” Cersei drank. “He said you were obsessed with her. She left you for some middle-aged professor—such a cliché—and that you couldn’t let her go.”

Margaery caught her reflection in the mirror. She felt very brittle, but it didn’t seem to show on her face. “She hasn’t been sweet little Sansa Stark for years,” was all she said.

“No? The girl I remember was quiet as a mouse, docile as a doe, a pretty little dove in a cage, parroting back stupid phrases she learned out of some book of etiquette.”

She remembered the first time she’d met Sansa and the first time Sansa had let Margaery truly see her. “No,” she confirmed.

Cersei took this in. “She grew up?”

“She grew up.”

“What is she like now?”
“So cold, it’s like fire when she touches you.” Margaery swallowed some brandy and welcomed the accompanying numbness caused by five drinks in a few hours. “She’s icier than your father. She’s so sharp, you bleed when she speaks. She hasn’t been the Sansa you remember for a very long time. That girl is dead. A piece of shit named Petyr Baelish and her middle-aged professor did that to her.”

Cersei absorbed this.

Margaery cast an eye on the door. “If you’re worried I’m going to do anything to embarrass Jaime or your family, don’t. I know the rules as well as you do.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

My beta, tafkar, is amazing! I know I keep saying that, but her suggestions were so helpful and I think the story is that much stronger because of her.
Unlike Margaery’s previous roommate, Sansa was the soul of consideration. She kept her side of the room immaculate. She didn’t snore. She was super quiet and whenever Margaery’s friends came in the room, Sansa found other places to be.

“She’s so weird,” Jeyne Rowan commented.

“She’s very sweet,” Margaery protested, but it was true; Sansa was a bit strange.

When the mail came there was a large package for Sansa. She froze when she saw the handwriting on the label, but she took it back to their room.

“What is it?”

Sansa stared at it as though it might bite her. Finally she took a pair of scissors out of her desk drawer and slit the tape binding the box open. Then she did back the folds of tissue paper.

“That’s gorgeous.” Margaery told her. It was. They had a dance coming up and the deep blue dress would be stunning on Sansa. It was better than all the clothing Sansa owned combined.

Jeyne came by and she too was struck by it. “Wow. Is that from your parents?”

Sansa removed an envelope. “No.”

“I wish mine was half as sick as that.” Jeyne fingered the fabric.

“Do you want it?”

Jeyne blinked.

“Here. Take it.”

Margaery and Jeyne exchanged glances.

Sansa put the top back on the dress box and handed it to Jeyne.

“That’s really sweet of you,” Jeyne told her shocked. Then she seemed to recover her manners. “You’re a lot taller than me. It wouldn’t fit.”

Sansa shrugged. “Put it on. I can probably take the hem up.”

Margaery gave a shake of her head at Jeyne. “Sansa, you should wear this. You’ll look really hot in it. Jeyne has a lot of dresses. The boys aren’t going to know where to look when they see you dressed up.”

“If either of you don’t want it, I’m going to throw it out.” Sansa waited and then started toward the
waste basket

“I’ll take it,” Jeyne said quickly.

“Good. Go change and I’ll see what I can do to tack it up so it fits right. Bring the shoes you’re going to wear with it.” Sansa took her sewing box out of the top of the closet. While Jeyne went off to her room to try it on, Sansa opened up the card. She shuddered and then she ripped it into pieces.

Margaery couldn’t believe her. “Just because you’re here on a scholarship doesn’t mean you have to bow and scrape to anyone here.”

“I don’t want the dress,” Sansa told her calmly. “I’m not going to the dance and even if I was, I don’t want anyone to look at me.”

“That’s a very expensive gift you just gave her. She has a closetful of dresses.”

“I don’t want it,” Sansa repeated. “And it’s not a gift. There are no such things as gifts, not for me anyhow. There’s always a cost and I always have to pay.”

* * *

**Present Day**

* * *

Margaery surreptitiously glanced at the clock on the dash of Cersei’s car. Jaime seemed to think it would be easier if Cersei learned to tolerate her so she’d been stuck with pretending to be friends. Margaery had tried her best to charm Cersei and every one of her attempts had failed, but then this invitation had come for a morning of all girls together.

Cersei pulled into a parking spot in front of a jeweler’s. “Robert’s getting fatter by the day. I had his wedding ring resized. They said it was ready.” The store was like most of the establishments Cersei liked to patronize: the interior quiet as a sept, the carpet plush, the staff deferential. The moment they walked in a clerk materialized out of nowhere to attend to them. Another was waiting on the only other customer in the back of the store.

Margaery stayed in the front examining the items in the cases. She’d endured shopping, manicures, lunch, and now this errand. Once it was over, she’d be free of her future sister-in-law’s company.

Cersei murmured something to the clerk who disappeared to look for her husband’s ring.

“Yes, this is the one. I’ll take it,” a male voice said.

Margaery froze. She turned and saw Roose Bolton. His back was to her, but she would recognize his nasty balding head and that voice anywhere.

Cersei focused her attention on the item in question. “That’s stunning,” she told him.

“Aquamarine?”

“Yes, I thought they were greener in color, but apparently not always.”

“No,” Cersei agreed. “I’ve always liked them, more than sapphires actually.”

“A sapphire was my original thought, but I wanted something to match her eyes. This comes closest.”

Margaery found a case in the corner of the store as far away from them as possible. She stared
fixedly at the objects set out on velvet.

“Would it be possible to have this in a slightly larger box? I don’t want there to be any confusion on the lady’s part.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Not a serious someone?” Cersei murmured.

“Oh, yes, she is.”

Margaery lifted her gaze long enough to see him smirking slightly.

“The lady is a very serious someone, but I don’t wish to overwhelm her.”

Cersei seemed struck by this. “She is a very lucky lady. Most men are not so considerate.”

Margaery rolled her eyes. A moment or so later she felt Cersei at her elbow.

“Madam has excellent taste,” a clerk murmured in Margaery’s ear. “This is a one-of-a-kind piece. Would you like to see it?”

“That would suit you,” Cersei remarked. “I’ll tell Jaime. He’ll buy it for you.”

Margaery pursed her lips. She wasn’t even sure what piece they were talking about.

Roose Bolton turned around.

“No, thank you. I’m just browsing,” Margaery said to the clerk.

The clerk melted into the background. Another appeared with Robert’s ring.

Cersei left Margaery and went to pay for it.

There was no point in hiding now. Margaery moved to another case. She watched Roose Bolton out of the corner of her eye. He signed a charge slip and then accepted his purchase. He smiled pleasantly at Cersei and began walking out of the shop. At the door he paused, and met Margaery’s gaze. He thinned his lips. He looked her up and down slowly and contemptuously and then he left.

She felt like she’d been violated in some particularly horrible way. She stood there for a few minutes and then she too walked out of the store.

By the time Cersei rejoined her, Margaery had recovered her composure. Cersei was silent as they walked to the car. Once they were in and she started driving away, she turned to Margaery. “Who is he?”

“What?”

“I saw his face. I saw yours. You know each other. A former lover?”

Margaery shuddered. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“He’s not unattractive. I bet he knows what he’s about between the sheets.” Cersei braked at the intersection. “Most men would just take the small box and let their girlfriends think it was an engagement ring.”
“What was it he bought?”

“A pendant,” Cersei answered. “Square-cut aquamarine set in white gold. The chain was very pretty too.”

Margaery stared out the window. “His name is Roose Bolton and he bought it for Sansa. I don’t know what your brothers told you about him, but he is a nasty piece of work.”

Cersei frowned. “All Jaime said was that Sansa Stark had dumped you for an older man and that you weren’t taking it well.”

Margaery didn’t respond.

“He is a university professor?”

“Yes, at King’s University.”

“I didn’t think professors were so well paid.”

“What?”

Cersei inched the car forward. “Unless I miss my guess, that little bauble set him back a pretty sum, but perhaps he has family money.”

Margaery wasn’t interested in discussing it. Sansa had always refused to let her buy her gifts. She’d been rabid about not going over a certain amount for name day presents. Now Sansa was letting this dirty old man buy her jewelry.

When they got to Jaime’s, Cersei parked and came up with her.

“Jaime will—”

“Jaime is working very late today. He won’t be back for hours. I told you. Jaime tells me everything.” Cersei walked into the kitchen and selected a bottle out of the wine cooler. She found the corkscrew and glasses.

As she uncorked the wine, Margaery shrewdly watched how familiar she was with her brother’s kitchen. Other things clicked into place. “You’re his lover,” Margaery said slowly. It made a horrid kind of sense.

“Smart girl.” Cersei handed her a glass and took one herself. “Very little gets by you, does it?” They went back into the living room.

Margaery sat at the opposite end of the sofa.

“If you so much as breathe a word of it to anyone, I’ll have your throat slit from ear to ear.” She raised her glass in a mock toast.

Somehow Jaime and Cersei being incestuous lovers was of miniscule importance compared to the problems Margaery was facing.

“So now, tell me about this professor of Sansa’s.”

Margaery folded her arms, but she talked.

“When did it start?”
“She was thinking about it a few months before she went to Oldtown. According to her, they didn’t start fucking each other until she’d been there a month.”

“Sansa Stark swearing? Oh, my.”

Margaery poured more wine into both their glasses. “How old was Sansa the last time you saw her?”

“Twelve? Thirteen? Something like that.”

“Sansa is twenty-seven now. She grew up very fast.” Margaery swirled the wine around. “She’s done a lot worse than swear. ‘Fucking’ is my word for it, though. I rather doubt Roose Bolton knows how to make love. He fucks her. She fucks him. There’s nothing tender about their relationship. I know that much.”

Cersei’s eyes grew wide as Margaery told her about Sansa and her professor’s little game with the phone. “Sansa? Sweet Sansa who wanted to live in a medieval romance?”

Margaery drank. She set down the glass and continued with her narrative.

“Why didn’t you go to her parents?”

“Sansa and her mother are completely estranged. Her father is useless.”

Cersei stared at her.

“Do not tell me how wonderful the sainted Dr. Eddard Stark is.”

“I wasn’t about to. I’ve just . . . I’ve just never met anyone who saw through him before.”

“I thought your husband was his best friend.”

Cersei poured more wine into both their glasses. “Robert’s good opinion is hardly a recommendation. No one is that good or that honest. I never liked him or his wife. She was civil enough, but . . .”

Margaery drank more. “I don’t want to talk about her parents. Arya was my last hope and she drank the Kool-Aid too. She thinks he’s good for Sansa.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s over. There’s nothing I can do.”

“I have a private investigator I’ve used over the years. He’s very discreet. Perhaps he could find some information you could use.”

Margaery shook her head.

“How well did you know him before he decided to break into your home and go through your things?”

“I met him at a presentation once. We exchanged about five minutes of conversation.”

“And yet he hates you.”

Margaery shrugged. “I don’t think he does. He doesn’t like me. He didn’t like me when we chatted the one time and I don’t think he’d even thought about starting up with Sansa at that point. He seems very . . .” She tried to find the right words. “I’ve had two encounters with him. For the entirety of the first and most of the second, he was very detached. Amused in a sick kind of way for
the second, but he was dispassionate even when he talked about raping me. The most emotional he got was when he talked about how terrified Sansa had been.”

“Sansa didn’t believe you when you told her what he’d done?”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure he told her all about it. They probably got off on it together.”

“Surely—”

“Sansa isn’t a scared teenager anymore. She went through some very nasty stuff, and her parents and most of her family failed her on every possible level. I was all she had for a very long time. It’s probably the only reason she didn’t sic him on me. Well, now she’s got him. Your discreet private investigator could turn up live video coverage of Roose Bolton eating infants and Sansa wouldn’t care. She wants a protector. She knew our relationship was going to have to come to an end and she deliberately allowed him to seduce her. Now she has him. I used to think he pulled her strings. Now . . . I don’t know. But it’s over. It’s done.”

“You’re still in love with her.”

“Desperately.”

* * *

“I don’t drink any more than you or your children do, Tywin,” Margaery informed him.

Tywin glanced pointedly at her wine glass. “No?”

“I will tell you what,” Margaery purred. “I’ll contain myself to water tonight and I want you to keep an eye on how much alcohol just one of your children drinks.”

“How much have you had already?”

“One Lannister-sized glass.” She held up her wineglass and poured the contents in a potted plant. “Water for the rest of the night, I promise on my honor as a Tyrell. You watch one of your children. Any one of them. Your pick. All right, fine. The first one who comes in this room and has a drink will do.”

He had no intention of playing this ridiculous game, but he found himself doing so. His children knew their limits. They knew the rules. Tyrion took joy in testing him, but Jaime and Cersei knew when to stop.

Margaery refused everything but water.

Tyrion confined himself to two glasses of wine. He had one before dinner and one with.

Jaime and Cersei . . . they were clever about it, but the amounts they imbibed startled him.

He began refusing wine himself now. Tyrion left early. He seldom stayed. Cersei outdrank even Jaime. She did not outdrink her husband.

“Look at them drive home,” Margaery purred in his ear. “With your three grandchildren in the backseat. It’s too bad Joffrey’s had his license taken away for, what was it again? Oh, that’s right! Driving while intoxicated.”

He did not trust himself to speak.
“Jaime wasn’t too bad tonight. But when we get home, he’ll open a bottle and polish it off. I’m not the one you have to worry about, Tywin.”

“You are going to break off this engagement,” he said quietly. Jaime had gone upstairs to take a phone call. “Tonight.” He had already tried to persuade Jaime to do the same and his son had refused.

_You’ve been pestering me to marry for years, Father. Margaery fits all of your criteria. It’s done and arranged. It’s not my fault you’re never satisfied._

“And make you lose all that lovely Tyrell money? Really, Tywin, and Grandmother thinks you’re so clever. I’m the golden rose and Jaime’s the golden lion of House Lannister. We’re the perfect couple. Think of the beautiful golden grandchildren we’re going to give you.” She laughed. “Even more beautiful than the ones you’ve already got. My son will be saner than Cersei’s. I can promise you that much.”

Tywin directed his gaze to her.

She quailed.

“Break it off,” he repeated. “Tell him you’re not in love with him. I don’t care how you do it.”

Margaery smiled at him sadly. “Tywin, what could you possibly know about being in love?”

* * *

Sansa’s belief that she would get used to the real way Roose made his living was proving to be a fallacy. If anything, each time it felt weirder. It was easier staying on the periphery, but he seemed determined to bring her into every aspect of his life.

She could tell when he was preparing for a victim, or as he called them, targets. He turned inward. He was focused. He was intense. He was very cold.

This iciness was not directed at her per se. He remained very considerate of her, but she was learning that when he was in this mindset, it was best to be circumspect. He was clinical. He had a job to do and almost everything else was needless noise.

Sansa opened up a bag of decaffeinated coffee and measured out three scoops into the coffeemaker. Then she did the same with the regular stuff. As she filled the carafe, she felt his eyes on her. “I thought I would try and switch to half-caf.”

He nodded approvingly and then went back to studying the documents on the kitchen table.

She made two sandwiches. She set one and a glass of water in front of him. Sometimes he forgot to eat. She turned to take hers into the living room when she felt him snake his arm around her waist.

“Come here,” Roose murmured.

She didn’t have much of a choice. He pulled her forcefully onto his lap. “I didn’t mean to distract you.”

“I like you near me.” He spread out the photos on the table. “Would you like to help me?”

“What?”

“With my work.”
Sansa turned to face him. “How?”

“The target likes redheads. I thought I might use you as bait.”

“I’m not . . . no.”

“I think you might enjoy it.”

This was what always disturbed her. He was usually right about what she would like or not like. If he thought she would enjoy it, the chances were excellent she would. Roose understood darkness and he saw it in her. She shook her head. “I don’t want to.”

Roose sighed. “You are ready, you know. It won’t be long before you can start taking on targets of your own.”

Sansa froze.

“All right,” he said in a resigned voice. “I won’t force you.”

“Thank you.” She hopped off of him and went into the living room with her lunch. The words in the journal article swam in front of her. All his “lessons” made sense now. Thanks to him, she was proficient with a number of different handguns and rifles. She was in excellent physical shape. She knew how to defend herself. Their little game of characterizing absolutely everyone as either predator or prey fit too. He’d taken her hunting for deer and smaller game. He usually made her shoot. He had taught her how to use knives. Sansa pushed her sandwich away.

Dinner was awkward. He was disappointed in her. She picked at her food.

“Are you worried about the danger?”

She sipped her water. “Partly.”

“The target takes the same route to his vacation home. He prefers the back roads. We would take the car to a remote spot—I’ve been over the area thoroughly. No one lives or works at the stretch of which I am thinking. We’ll stage it to look like car trouble. He’ll stop for you. He has a penchant for ginger hair. I will have him incapacitated in seconds. It will be quite simple.”

She forced herself to take a bite of the stew, but it might as well have been paper for all the flavor it had.

“You needn’t watch. I would like you to, but I won’t insist on it.”

“I . . . I don’t want to.”

“I want to share this with you.” Roose took her hand in his.

His fingers were always so cold. “I help you after, isn’t that enough?”

“This is something entirely different.”

“I can’t.”

He dropped her hand. “Can’t or won’t?”

“I respect your wishes when you don’t want to do something,” she said quietly. “I am not comfortable with this.”
Roose frowned, but dropped the subject. He ate stolidly.

Sansa managed less than a quarter of her meal. She dropped her fork and practically ran up the stairs. She barely made it to the bathroom in time. She vomited. She felt better, but she stayed on the floor. It turned out to be a fortunate decision when she felt the food rising up in her again.

He came upstairs shortly after the second episode. “There is no need for dramatics,” he called out. Although his tone was even and dispassionate, he was angry. “Where are you?”

She threw up a third time.

Everything changed when he saw her. He was there for her. He held her hair as she retched again and again. He rubbed her back. He got her water.

“I don’t think there’s anything left to come up,” she said weakly.

“You don’t have a fever,” Roose pronounced after he felt her forehead. He sat with her for a while. “Let me help you to bed.”

“I feel disgusting. I need a shower.”

Roose ran her a bath instead. He was gentle and considerate. Afterward, he helped her into a nightgown and led her to bed. He brought her ginger ale and crackers. His icy rage was gone and he was everything she wanted.

Sansa curled up on her side. “I must have eaten something.”

“The only thing different you had from me was the coffee. It can irritate the stomach.”

“I had one cup and it was half decaf.”

He considered this. “Where did you buy the coffee?”

“The grocery store,” she answered. “It was sealed when I opened it today. Maybe it’s just a bug.”

“You’re working too hard,” he said finally. “Tomorrow I want you to rest. No dissertation, no reading, no writing, no shooting, no housework.” He folded the covers over her.

“That sounds nice.”

He lay down spooning against her. “I don’t like the idea of leaving you like this.”

She didn’t answer. She thought she was done being sick. She was just so tired.

“I shouldn’t have pressed you,” he murmured in her ear. “You have too many demands on your attention. It’s been a long time since I was in your position. I’ve forgotten how many stressors there are.” He rubbed her stomach. “Sansa, I’ve been thinking. There is no longer any need for you to try and finish your degree early. You could move in with me here. It would ease up the pressure on you.”

She wasn’t sure how she felt about this idea.

“Think on it. Either way I will be happy with whatever you decide. I just want you to know you have the option.”

She put her hand on his and positioned it around her. “All right,” she said. It wasn’t why she didn’t
want to help him, but he would never understand her reasons. He wasn’t like other people. Sansa knew she wasn’t like other people in many ways either, but she wasn’t ready to surrender to the darkness in the way he wanted. No, she corrected herself. She wasn’t willing.

Sansa felt him leave her a few hours later. She knew he did surveillance on his targets and unlike Jaime Lannister he was very good at it. She didn’t entirely relax until she heard him drive off. She sat up then and hugged her knees to herself.

She had earned a respite, but it was that and nothing more. He would ask her again, perhaps not for this man, whoever he was, but for someone in the future. Even then, it wasn’t going to be enough for him. He meant for her to learn to kill. They were the same, he said. They were predators. Predators hunted. It was who they were. It was their nature.

All his lessons, she thought, and she felt her stomach lurch again. She was Sansa Stark, straight-A student. She was the fool who thought if she just followed the rules, then everything would be all right. She had absorbed everything he’d taught her. If she hadn’t been like him before, she was like him now. And now she was trapped.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Usual thank you to tafkar
Arya sucked the eraser on her pencil and tried to focus on her math problems.

“Are you sure this is wise, Cat? To let her spend the entire break with a stranger?” Uncle Petyr demanded.

“Sansa rooms with this girl. She’s very nice. We met her when we went down for Parents’ Weekend. They’re very good friends. I didn’t have the heart to say no.”

Arya sourly thought everyone found a whole lot of heart when it came to saying no to her.

“If it were for a few weeks I could understand, but the entire break?”

“Petyr, what is the problem? Sansa is fifteen. She came home for two weeks at the end of term and we’ll see her again just before. I know how fond you and Lysa are of her and I’m sorry you’ll miss seeing her, but you can write. You and Lysa could phone her.”

Arya glanced over. Rickon was pulling on Mum’s leg.

“Yes, Rickon, what is it? Petyr, can you entertain yourself for a few minutes?”

Arya felt Uncle Petyr looking at her.

“What are you working on?”

“Math.”

“Do you hear from Sansa often?”

Arya shrugged. “She says hi to us in the letters she writes Mum and Dad.” She erased the numbers on the paper. Sansa emailed her too, but Arya saw no reason to tell Uncle Petyr about this.

“How often does she telephone?”

“Once a week.” Arya brushed the eraser crumbs away. “We just say hi. She mostly talks to Mum and Dad. When are you going back to Sothoryos?”

“Next month.” He bent down conspiratorially. “Do you need help on your assignment?”

Arya shook her head.

“Does Sansa have email?”


“Which is it?”
Arya couldn’t explain it, but she really didn’t want to be in the room with him. “I’m sorry, could you not talk to me right now? Dad said if I don’t do my homework, I can’t go hunting with him, Robb, and Bran next week.”

He ruffled her hair and returned to chatting with Mum when she came into the room.

Arya watched him with narrowed eyes. She wished he wasn’t around the house so much.

* * *

Present Day

* * *

Although she knew Pentoshi takeout was probably the last thing she should be eating with her stomach being what it was, Sansa couldn’t resist ordering it from the place she and Margaery used to patronize. Roose disliked exotic foods and since he was out of town, she thought she might as well take advantage of his absence and her improved appetite.

She bought a bottle of Dornish red as well. The purchase made her feel positively decadent. Before she’d taken up with Roose, she’d enjoyed the occasional glass of wine. Roose had the same attitude to alcohol that he did toward caffeine and any other drug. Anything that dulled or clouded the senses was to be avoided.

Other people were to be avoided too. When she’d asked him to go with her to a dinner with Ellyn and her husband, he finally told her quite bluntly that he didn’t have any friends. This was a deliberate choice on his part and he thought it should be one on hers. It was a mistake to get too close to anyone. They weren’t like everyone else and the sooner she understood that, the better. Roose acted like his statement ended all debate. Sansa stood her ground. He had taken her to his colleague’s home for a party; why was this any different? This was her advisor. This was someone who was important to her career. To his credit he’d agreed in the end, but his reaction when he found she’d invited them to her apartment for dinner a few weeks later had thrown her.

“This is why we do not become close to other people, Sansa.”

“We accepted their hospitality. We need to return it.”

“So now we’ll be caught in some endless cycle of reciprocity.”

She crossed her arms. “Look, you don’t have to be here. I’ll make some excuse for you.”

“Cancel it.”

“What is wrong with you? It’s not an ‘endless cycle’ of anything. It’s like sending a thank-you-note when you receive a present. It’s good manners. This is how it’s done. It’s what people expect.”

And then there had been a very long pause and a heartfelt sigh. “Once we go through with this nonsense, that’s the end of it?”

“Yes. Until next year. Just like you do with your colleague.” She didn’t understand why this was so hard for him to comprehend. “Roose, I’m not making this up. If you don’t believe me, I’ll find an etiquette site and prove it to you. If you don’t want to come, you don’t have to, but it’s the polite thing to do. I am having them here and that’s that.”

“I will never understand why—all right. Fine.”

But it was not fine and she had the suspicion that very little would ever be fine again. She was once
again on the outside looking in and the realization troubled her.

Sansa returned to her apartment and spread out her dinner on the coffee table. Margaery would have fallen over if she could have seen Sansa. Sansa had always preferred to eat at the dining room or kitchen table. But here she was feasting on greasy but delectable Pentoshi cuisine out of takeout containers while watching rom-coms on TV. It was the kind of thing Margaery always had to persuade Sansa to do. It was potentially messy and Sansa had never liked mess.

She was starting to see the appeal of it now. Everything about Roose was ordered. He had his routines. He didn’t care to deviate from them. He liked things to be just so. His standards were very high and he expected her to meet them. When she fell short, he was patient but firm. There was a reason he did these things. She needed to try harder and he would show her how he wanted them done until she had mastered the approved technique.

If he never taught her another thing, it would be too fucking soon. “Fuck,” Sansa said aloud. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.” Gods, it felt good to swear. She eyed her empty glass and the wine and then quite rebelliously took a swig out of the bottle.

She was about to take another drink when her phone rang. It was Roose. He called far too much. If she didn’t answer, he would keep calling. In his way, he was worse than Margaery. Roose sought her out if she didn’t answer. She was far more acceptable than he could send. He’d given her a number to call in case of emergencies; someone would come instantly if she required it, he told her. It wasn’t much of a stretch to conclude that Roose was quite capable of cutting her out of the process if he thought need demanded it. On the fourth ring, she picked up. “Hi.”

“I’d almost given up hope,” he said very pleasantly. He missed her, he told her. “Are you feeling all right?” His voice was full of concern.

It was hard to stay irritated with Roose when he was like this. She assured him she was doing much better.

“What’s that noise?”

Sansa turned the television off. “I was just watching a movie. *Music and Lyrics.*”

“Ah.”

She knew he didn’t care for the films she liked to watch. “I needed something mindless.” He found that a specious argument, but he never made a big deal about it. If she wanted to watch crap, he let her. She found she preferred it when he didn’t see them with her. He either sat through the films with a slightly puzzled expression or he would laugh at the strangest moments. “How did the first day of the conference go?”

Sansa listened as he told her about some of the sessions he’d attended. There were a few he thought might have some bearing on her research. He would secure the slides and send them to her. He had yet to run into her father, but it was going to happen sooner or later.

Sansa had been dreaming about her dad quite a lot. There had been a lovely one where he’d slain the monster for her before any of it had gone wrong. And then she’d woken up and Dad was back to being the person who had failed her when she needed him the most.

“I miss you,” Roose said again.

“I miss you too.” And she did. Sort of.
“Are you eating?”

“I was just about to have something.”

“Well, I won’t keep you. I’ll talk to you later tonight?”

That meant phone sex. She eyed the DVDs she’d borrowed from the library, the food, and the wine. “Would you mind if we . . . I was going to have an early night.”

“Are you certain you’re feeling better?”

Sansa lied, “I’m just tired, Roose. It was a long day and I don’t sleep well without you.”

He chuckled. “The same goes for me. All right, I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Released for at least the next eleven to thirteen hours, Sansa returned to her movie and her food. On her third glass, she had the insane notion to call Margaery. Margaery would have gotten the need to watch a fun romantic comedy to relax. Margaery would have eaten Pentoshi with her from some hole-in-the-wall restaurant. She would have preferred to drink from a glass and not the bottle, but she wouldn’t have blinked if Sansa had wanted some wine. She would not have considered it a deep personal failing.

She nearly picked up the phone to call, but she wasn’t drunk enough to go through with it.

By the time the film was over, Sansa had sobered up. She emptied the remainder of the wine down the sink and packed up the leftovers. Roose had gotten her in the habit of watching the news and she took a couple of Tylenol and sat down with a glass of water as it aired.

Perhaps she was being too critical of him. Roose did care for her. She could hear it in his voice when he asked how she was feeling. What they needed to do was to talk out all this stuff when he came back. Roose was a reasonable, intelligent man. They would have a discussion and they would work it out. They loved each other. They would make compromises and they would be happy. This was how problems were resolved.

. . . The body of businessman Theomar Dayne was discovered by hunters. Dayne was the victim of multiple stab wounds. Authorities conjecture he was en route to his vacation home in southern Kingswood when a person or persons unknown attacked him.

Sasna sat up. She recognized the picture. This was the man Roose had wanted her to help lure off the road. The reporter described Theomar Dayne as a noted philanthropist. His red-haired wife tearfully offered a reward for any information related to his murder. She listened as the two hunters went on in gruesome detail about the body.

“I’ve never seen anything like it. The guy who did this was a real sicko.”

It couldn’t be right. Sansa calmed herself. So what if he donated money? So what if his wife missed him? Petyr was a noted philanthropist too and Aunt Lysa worshiped the ground he walked on, and he was the worst kind of filth imaginable. It just meant that this Theomar Dayne talked a good game in public. For all she knew, Roose had done the world a service by killing him.

* * *

Eddard Stark deliberately avoided making eye contact with him. Roose supposed it was inevitable. It scarcely mattered; Stark was not vindictive. There would be no consequences to his knowing about Sansa. He didn’t particularly care, but it was important to Sansa. She’d been on edge as he
packed for the trip.

Roose was far more concerned with her health. There had been more bouts with nausea and vomiting. She wasn’t pregnant. She’d seen a doctor at the Student Health Center who had sent her for tests which had all come back negative. The only positive outcome from her illness was that she had finally given up coffee. He would willingly give her gallons of it if it would result in her renewed vitality.

The Q & A finally over, the panel received a respectable amount of applause and they were free to go.

“Roose.”

He turned. “Ned.”

“Do you have some time? I would like to talk to you. We could grab a drink.”

“I don’t drink,” Roose reminded him.

Ned suggested what Roose chose to imbibe was entirely up to him, so they went to the hotel bar.

“I think you know what this is about,” Ned began.

A server set down their order. They slid over money and waited for her to leave.

“I heard about it from Rickard Karstark of all people.”

“If Sansa wished to communicate the news to you, she was free to do so,” Roose said mildly.

Ned took a sip of his beer. “You’re easily twice her age.”

“I assure you Sansa is as aware of my age as I am of hers. So far it has not been an issue.”

“Is this a serious relationship?”

Roose felt his patience thinning. “It’s none of your business.”

“Sansa is my daughter.”

“She doesn’t seem to hold you in any particular regard. If she wishes to speak to you about our relationship, that is her prerogative. I am not stopping her from communicating with you.”

Ned looked away for a moment. “You had a son,” he said quietly. “Perhaps you can understand my concern. This estrangement is not something I want, but I have done my best to respect her wishes. That doesn’t mean I’ve stopped worrying about her. She is my daughter. I just want to know that she is all right. If you’re having some mid-life crisis—”

Roose didn’t answer right away. The appeal to him as a parent was meaningless. Sansa did not want her family to bother her, however. If it meant giving Eddard Stark a crumb or two to keep him away, it was worth it. “It is a serious relationship.” Sansa had given him carte blanche as to what he could tell her father. “I am not having a mid-life crisis. I am not using her. Sansa’s well-being is very important to me.”

“Thank you.”

He looked at Ned expectantly. “Anything else?”
“Does she talk about Catelyn at all?”

“She has mentioned her,” Roose said neutrally.

“Arya said there’s no hope of reconciliation—”

Roose felt he had been more than forthcoming. This went beyond what he was willing to discuss. He reached for his conference bag.

“How is her research coming along?”

“She’s doing quite well.” He did not think Sansa would mind him answering this. “Her advisor seems pleased with her progress.” In truth, Roose wished Sansa would slow down. There was no need for her to rush through. She was determined to keep her apartment and she refused his financial assistance. When she finished, it was likely her first position would be nowhere near King’s. The likely separation worried him, but Sansa was reluctant to discuss it.

“May I know what her dissertation topic is? I tried asking Arya, but the answer didn’t make much sense.”

Roose smiled faintly. It amused him how desperate Ned was for even the smallest scrap of information. “I forget the official title, but she’s exploring the Nightfort legends. Thematic interconnectivity, how the successive of the versions of the tales have been altered; it’s along those lines. She writes very well.” He glanced at his watch. “I want to make the next session. If there’s nothing else?”

He left Ned sitting there.

That night he phoned Sansa as arranged. It took four rings before she picked up.

“Sorry, I was working and I didn’t hear the phone till just now.”

Roose glanced at his watch. It was well after 9:00. “You’re not overdoing it, I hope.” Despite the recurrent bouts of nausea and vomiting, Sansa kept to a punishing schedule.

“I had papers to grade.”

“You shouldn’t pander to your students, Sansa. They should dance to your tune, not the other way around.”

Sansa made a noncommittal noise. “Did you . . . did you see my father?”

“He’ll leave you alone,” Roose told her.

“Good. Did he . . . what did he say?”

Roose recounted the conversation.

“That’s all right then,” Sansa said with audible relief.

“How are you feeling?”

“Better. I haven’t been sick once. I put on two pounds actually.”

Roose felt some of the tension leave his body.
“The referral to the specialist came through. I don’t know if I should cancel the appointment or not.”

“No, you should go.” These bouts of illness came and went too frequently for his taste.

“I think so too. Even if it’s just so that I know there’s nothing wrong with me.” Sansa paused. “I spoke with Ellyn. I’m going to slow down a little; another six months won’t make much of a difference financially.”

Six months more, he thought. When he returned, he would see if he could persuade her to push it back a full year. “Good.”

“I still want to keep the apartment. You live too far out. I need to be close to campus at least part of the week.”

Roose was not so pleased with this decision. They were virtually living together. He would prefer her to stay at his house with him. While the apartment was pleasant enough, it was too close to other people.

“How was your panel?”

He spoke easily about his presentation. She understood his academic work and her questions and comments were always intelligent.

“When I return and you have a clean bill of health, do you think you could find some time to take a trip with me? Two or three days?”

She was silent for so long he wondered if the connection had been severed. “What kind of a trip?”

“I have some property in the north. I go periodically to check up on it. I would like to take you there.”

“Where in the north?”

He disliked the trepidation in her voice, but then he realized she didn’t want to go near Winterfell. “The Dreadfort. I grew up there. I would like to show it to you. There’s a decent hotel in Karhold.” Roose would have preferred to stay at the house, but if she had a recurrence of her illness, he did not want to be in a remote location where they could become snowbound.

“I’d like that.”

They ended the call shortly after.

This trip was what they both needed. She would understand him better after he showed her his home. She still resisted his efforts to share his true work with her. He didn’t want to force her, not now with her health in such a precarious state. Once she was well, though, perhaps it would be best to just immerse her in it. She would understand quickly enough there was nothing to fear and everything to embrace.

* * *

“When were you going to tell me?” Arya demanded.

“It’s nothing. I’ve been working too hard.” Sansa said calmly. “I’ve been for tests. It’s just stress.”

Arya folded her arms. “Does he know?” She didn’t bother to name Roose. There was only one “he”
as far as Sansa was concerned.

“That I’ve been sick? Yes, of course, he knows. He’s been wonderful. He’s concerned for me.”

“You know what I mean.”

Sansa drank her tea and didn’t answer.

“Dad is worried about you.”

“Dad can go fuck himself.”

The bluntness of Sansa’s words took Arya aback.

“They lost the right to worry about me a long time ago. Look, I know you’re concerned, Arya, but I’m fine. I was pushing myself too hard with my dissertation. I’ll just finish it a little more slowly than I planned. My advisor thinks it’s a good idea. Roose thinks it’s a good idea.”

“Margaery,” Arya began and then instantly regretted it. Roose chose this moment to come into the apartment. He was instantly on alert and Sansa tensed up.

“Margaery can go fuck herself too,” Sansa said flatly.

“I was just going to ask if she’s been bothering you.” Arya saw them both relax.

“I haven’t seen or heard from her in months.”

Roose set down his briefcase. “Why do you ask, Arya?”

Sansa got up and went to him. She gave him a kiss. “I was telling Arya about my being ill. I told her it’s just stress.”

“Ah. Hence the question about the Tyrell whore.”

Arya nodded. She was surprised at how he referred to Margaery. She was a lot of things, but Arya thought calling Margaery a whore was out of line. “I just want to make sure Sansa is okay.”

Roose smiled at her pleasantly.

“I invited Arya to supper.”

Arya saw the silent communication the two did with each other. Mum and Dad did it too. This felt a little strange, though. Before she’d gone back to Essos on a trip for her new job, she felt pretty comfortable leaving Sansa with Roose. They seemed very happy together. Now though, it was weird.

Roose said all the right things, but she could tell he wasn’t thrilled she had stopped by.

She kept her conversation light. She had lots of stories. Both of them liked those. They asked questions and they expressed interest in what she was doing for her job, but she was left with the strong impression neither of them really wanted her there right now.

“To whom do your report?” Roose asked casually.

“Gerion Lannister mostly.” Arya saw them exchange glances. “He’s the CEO’s brother. He does stuff with their international divisions. He’s not much for desk work. It took them eight weeks to
get me paid because he couldn’t be bothered to sign the form.”

“Do you come in much contact with Jaime Lannister or his brother?”

Arya shook her head. “I’ve seen them in the hallways when I’ve been in town once or twice, but they seem to go out of their way to avoid me.”

“Good.”

“I’ll quit if you want,” Arya offered suddenly. She addressed Sansa. “I only took it because you told me to.”

“No, we don’t want that,” Sansa assured her. She stroked Roose’s hand.

“You must think me overprotective,” he said smiling. “But after what that slut put Sansa through . . .”

Arya felt her unease growing. It all seemed fine. They said the right things, but it felt so wrong. “No, I don’t,” she lied. “I’m glad you’re here for Sansa. She’s happy with you.” She saw them relax again. They didn’t overtly act any differently to her, but the sense that she was an interloper dissipated. “I should go. I have to get my stuff together.”

“Where are you off to now?”

“Braavos.” Arya wasn’t thrilled about it. Even before taking this new job, she had been there a lot in the past few years. It was starting to feel routine. This wasn’t why she traveled. Too much more of this and she might as well be on a commuter flight to Harrenhal. She said as much now.

She left soon after. She paused at the top of the stairs to the carriage house. It felt weird again. It felt like they were waiting. The dog from the main house barked madly. There was nothing she could do just now. When she got down to the driveway, she looked up and saw Roose and Sansa in the window. They were watching her. Arya gave them a friendly wave and then walked off slowly. She would need to think about this very carefully.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Usual thanks to tafkar for her help with this.
Legends from the Nightfort

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Ten Years Ago

* * *

Margaery sat hunched over her laptop. She had a hard time writing and her last two papers had come back with grades her parents were going to deem very unsatisfactory. A lot of her other classes were not going well either. She was barely passing history.

“Do you want me to write it for you?”

She jumped. It was easy to forget Sansa was in the room sometimes; she was that quiet.

“I don’t mind. I did Rhonda’s homework for her.”

“Sweetling—it’s very nice of you, but—”

“Do not ever call me that,” Sansa ordered her flatly.

Margaery was startled at the sudden icy rage in her roommate’s voice. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to piss you off.” She sighed. “Forget about Rhonda, okay? You’re not my slave. You don’t need to do anything special for me.”

Sansa shrugged. “You’re very kind to me. I’d like to pay you back.”

“Nobody can help me with history. It’s an exam.”

“I’m good at school stuff. It’s how I got to come here. What are the subjects giving you trouble?”

“Literature and history.”

“What about math?”

Margaery excelled at anything involving numbers.

“Could you help me with algebra if I helped you with your paper and your exam?”

This was much more palatable to Margaery.

Sansa held her hands out for the laptop and read over what Margaery had. “You don’t have an outline, do you? See you have to start with one. It’ll be a lot easier if you have a plan.” She looked over the assignment and then using a legal pad explained to Margaery at a very simple level what she needed to do.

Margaery didn’t quite get Sansa. She was very sweet. She was also very odd about a lot of things. When the mail got delivered, Sansa tensed up. She liked the letters from her family, but there would be others that would make her disappear for hours. When she got packages, and she did often, she almost always gave or threw them away.

Then there was the time she had visitors on the weekend.
“Your aunt and uncle are here,” one of the girls called out.

What little color Sansa had in her face drained away and she started to shake.

Margaery realized she didn’t want to see them. She didn’t understand this. She missed her own family so much. She knew Sansa missed her parents and her siblings, but perhaps she wasn’t close to her aunt and uncle. She took Sansa by the hand into Jeyne’s room and she persuaded the other girls to lie about her whereabouts.

The Baelishes were very disappointed when no one could locate Sansa.

“Sansa is probably off studying,” Margaery lied.

“We should go, Petyr.”

Margaery smiled politely. Mrs. Baelish seemed high-strung. Mr. Baelish struck Margaery as being very smarmy and shrewd at the same time.

“Lysa, we’ve come such a long way. Are you certain you don’t know where our niece is?”

If there was one thing Margaery was good at, it was lying. She widened her blue eyes, smiled regretfully, and denied all knowledge of Sansa. “We’re not really that close.” She noticed he seemed relieved. “But I’ll tell her you stopped by when she gets in.”

They left off a present for her and they finally took off.

Sansa thanked Margaery and Jeyne profusely. She didn’t even open the gift. She ripped up the card into tiny pieces and she handed the box to them. “Whatever it is, I don’t want it.”

Jeyne opened it up. There was a silver locket. When she clicked the catch there was a picture of Sansa and a picture of a girl Margaery assumed must be Sansa’s mother. “I took the dress and the sweater, but I can’t take this.”

Margaery brought it back to their room. “Sweet—Sansa, neither of us can accept this and I don’t think you should try giving it to anyone else. Is this your mother?”

Sansa sat on her bed, hugging her knees to herself. “Yes. Throw it out then.”

“This is solid silver. It’s an antique.”

“I don’t want it. Take the pictures out and toss it in the trash.”

“Are they the ones who send you those other presents?”

Sansa got off the bed. She snatched the locket out of Margaery’s hands. She removed the photographs and tore them into shreds. Then she dropped the locket and the bits of photos into the wastepaper basket. She left the room and she didn’t come back for hours.

* * *

**Present Day**

* * *

It had been over a decade since Sansa had been to the north. The hotel room Roose had booked was quite nice, even if the kindest adjective she could apply to Karhold was “non-descript.” The last time she’d been to the north, they’d all stayed in some cheap motel on one of Dad’s trips. But he’d been a young professor with too many children and not enough money. She shook off the memory.
She didn’t want to think about them.

Roose slipped on his coat. “Ready?”

She nodded and followed him out. The snows were starting up here and it was likely to take them some time to get to his property. It was a house, he said. There was land attached to it too.

He drove through the snow the same way he did most everything, carefully and calmly.

Sansa didn’t talk. This part of the country was alien to her. The north she remembered was friendlier. The trees here looked the same as the ones from her childhood, but it seemed much darker, so much more dangerous to her here.

At some point, Roose was going to ask her again to help him with his work. He was already hinting at it. During their last target practice in the woods, he’d made her use a silencer on the handgun. There was only one reason you used a silencer.

She glanced at him. He seemed content. “You really don’t like living in the south, do you?”

“No, I don’t.”

Sansa knew he ultimately wished to secure a position at Winterfell. His scholarship was excellent. He had publications enough. His two most recent books were the standard works in their respective areas. All he needed now was a vacancy. He had been pressing her to discuss their future. It was likely she would need to move outside of the area for her first position. He thought they should face it sooner rather than later. If they were married and he left King’s, he would most likely be able to negotiate a spousal hire for her.

She didn’t want to marry him. She didn’t want to be his fourth wife. Even after people learned he was three times a widower, it sounded odd. She definitely did not want to get a job on his coattails. From everything she’d heard, the stigma might be something she would never get past. She didn’t want children either, and although he hadn’t said anything directly on the subject, he brought it up obliquely and with increasing frequency. He had said more than once that aside from an aged aunt, he was the last Bolton.

“We’re nearly there,” he commented. He began pointing out things to her.

This was his childhood home, she realized. They weren’t sentimental locations, but they had significance to him for some reason. Or perhaps he thought she expected him to tell her about all these places.

The house was large. So large that she was surprised. “How much land do you have?” she asked when they’d parked the car.

Roose unfolded a local map and pointed to the boundaries.

It was a lot of property. Granted, they were in the north where land was not exactly expensive, but it was more than she could have imagined.

They walked up to the house.

“Is it just left empty year-round?”

“There’s a caretaker who lives on the property.” He unlocked the door.
“When do you expect him?”

Roose smiled faintly. “I never tell him when I’m coming. It keeps him honest. Besides,” he told her, “it isn’t as if there is anything to discuss. He sends me monthly status reports.”

Someone had attempted and failed to brighten up the inside. Sunny yellow paint graced the living room. No, Sansa corrected herself. Not a living room, this was a drawing room, really. “Walda?”

“Yes,” Roose said amused. “There is no pink. I put my foot down about that. She only came with me a few times. Even she couldn’t make this place into one of her Disney castles.”

It felt still inside. Sansa had the sudden sense that even when the house was filled with people, it would feel like this.

They removed their coats and he gave her the tour.

Walda’s improvements were confined to a few rooms on the first floor and her decorating efforts were restricted to paint colors. They were tasteful enough, but the cheeriness was forced. You couldn’t make this house cheery, Sansa thought.

Sansa took note of the moldings, the elegant plasterwork, the marquetry in the hardwood floors, and the fireplaces. Almost everything was in excellent condition, although she saw Roose frowning at things here and there. “So you were well off growing up?”

“No,” Roose said shaking his head. “Not particularly. Most of the house was shut up when I was a boy. My father got a reduction in the taxes because we only used a portion of it. I’ve had repairs and renovations done over the years.”

Sansa followed Roose upstairs. His childhood room was spartan. There was a low single bed, a dresser, a desk, a chair, and a bookcase by the bed. “Are those your books?”

“Yes.”

She bent over. He had evidently been interested in history even as a boy. Almost everything looked like it was non-fiction, but one title jumped out at her. “Legends from the Nightfort,” she read aloud. She still had Bran’s copy. She took it off the shelf and started to flip through it. The pages fell open to the story of the “The Night’s King.”

“It was one of my favorites as a boy,” he told her. “I wanted to find out who was the real Night’s Queen. It prompted my interest in history. Little did I know I would find her in the present.”

Sansa let her hair fall over her face to hide her expression. She put Legends from the Nightfort back in the bookcase. “What’s this?” She opened a large flat tome. “Anatomy? Did you think about becoming a doctor?”

Roose arched an eyebrow.

“Oh.” She started to shut the book.

“Sooner or later you will need to look, Sansa. You knew what I was when you met me. I saw it in your eyes then. You know it now. We are not like other people.”

“An anatomy textbook is going to give me a glimpse into your soul?”

A look of exasperation washed over his features.
“Tell me,” she said suddenly. “Just tell me.”

He took the book out of her hands and led her to the bed. “I don’t think you should sit on my lap. I don’t know how stable the frame is.”

Sansa sat next to him. She much preferred this in any case.

He began talking then. Roose spoke in his usual melodious voice. There was no excitement or disgust. He was detached as he told her of the first time he’d killed one of his father’s dogs. “He knew what I was. It runs in my family, this . . . darkness. He taught me to master it, to bring it to heel.”

It sounded like something out of *Dexter*, she thought.

“He was different than I was, though. He felt things.”

“How do you mean?”

“Emotions,” Roose clarified.

Unease washed over her. More and more he opened up to her and with every word he spoke, she felt increasingly trapped. He was binding her to him with his revelations. There was no going back. He would never let her go. She knew too much. Sansa listened as he told her quite pleasantly of the first time he learned he wasn’t like other people. How he discovered to his bafflement, they didn’t think like he did. “Do you . . .” she broke off.

“You may ask me anything, Sansa. I don’t want to have secrets from you.”

“I don’t know the right questions.” It was a cop-out. “What about me?”

Roose looked at her intensely. In the same calm tones, he told her how exciting he found her. He had never realized what it was to be with someone who thought as he did; who wanted the same things he did; who was like he was.

“I feel things.” Sometimes she wished she didn’t. Like now. It would be so much easier if she could just turn off the sick dread she felt every time he opened up to her.

“Yes, I know, but you understand me. We complement each other. There is so much we can learn from one another.”

Sansa suddenly wanted to be anywhere than in this room, in this house, in this place. It felt suffocating.

Roose gently turned her face toward his. “I do care for you. It is deeper than anything I’ve ever felt for anyone. I love you and I know I want you in my life.”

She couldn’t look at him anymore. “Kiss me.” She could close her eyes if he kissed her.

He obeyed.

As he nibbled at her neck, Sansa once again had the disturbing realization that while he might want her in his life, she did not want him in hers.

* * *

Mr. Roose was not in the habit of announcing his visits, but Ben always performed his duties
diligently. He had seen what happened when the Boltons thought they were being cheated.

The woman with Mr. Roose was a surprise to Ben. She had red hair and blue eyes he could see even from a distance.

They came upon Ben later in the afternoon. He was chopping firewood.

Mr. Roose didn’t bother with pleasantries, nor did he introduce Ben to her. They were staying at a hotel in Karhold, he told Ben, but they would be coming out here over the next few days. He mentioned a damp patch in the kitchen he wanted seen to. He also asked about the floorboards in the master bedroom. “I pay you to take care of these things.” He spoke mildly, but it was clear he was displeased.

“It’s an old house, Mr. Roose. I wrote you about the kitchen three days ago. The letter must not have—”

His employer considered him. “Did you?”

“Roose, you’re scar—” She was even more beautiful up close.

Mr. Roose shook his head at her.

Ben held his breath.

His employer collected himself. “Fix it. If it’s beyond your skills, get estimates and send them to me.” He smiled reassuringly at the young lady before returning his focus to Ben. “Was there anything else in this letter of which I should be apprised?”

Ben made a verbal report and Mr. Roose gave him instructions. Finally the ordeal was over.

She looked back at Ben as they walked away.

Everything in the Dreadfort belongs to me.

* * *

Everything felt right to Roose. Sansa understood now. He knew this. She hadn’t shrunk from his revelations. She had in fact found them arousing enough to ask him to make love to her then and there. His mother had been wrong. He could in fact love. There was someone who could complete him.

He watched her as she applied lipstick and brushed her hair.

Sansa inspected herself in the mirror. “All set.”

“There’s something missing.” Roose put the jeweler’s box on the top of the hotel dresser. “Open it.” When she didn’t, he lifted the lid for her.

Sansa stared at the pendant.

“Don’t you like it?”

“It’s beautiful. I just... Roose, I can’t possibly accept this.”

“Why not?” He didn’t like how troubled her expression was.
Sansa shifted her gaze toward the floor. “It wouldn’t be . . . it’s not appropriate for me to accept this kind of a gift.”

“We’re together. It is what you deserve.”

“I never took anything when I was with—”

Roose stopped her there. “That part of your life is over.” If he never heard her mention Margaery Tyrell again it would be too soon. “You are mine.”

“I can’t . . .”

His good mood started to evaporate.

“It’s just I could never reciprocate.” Sansa seemed embarrassed.

“I don’t expect you to.” Roose wondered if this was some remnant of a societal expectation she clung to. “We will be together for the rest of our lives. It is entirely appropriate.” Now that he thought about it, he dimly remembered his mother saying that ladies did not accept expensive gifts from men.

“Put it on me, please?” she asked finally.

The stone and the setting suited her.

“Thank you.” But she was looking at the floor again.

“Sansa, listen to me. It is bad enough we have to hide what we are from the rest of the world; we do not need to do so with each other. The so-called rules do not apply to us, certainly not to us as a couple.”

She finally nodded. “I’m sorry. This is very new to me.”

“I know.” He kissed her forehead. “You excite me so much that I forget.”

* * *

Tyrion didn’t reply immediately.

“I am waiting.”

“I don’t know the specifics, Father. They didn’t consult me when they worked it out.”

Tywin tapped his fingers against the desk. “Do you know the generalities?”

His son sighed. “I was hoping you wouldn’t ask me.” He leaned back. “She prefers women. He has someone of his own who he can’t marry. They agreed to pretend in public and go their own way in private.”

“Who is she?”

“Margaery’s latest? I don’t know. She’s very discreet. I don’t think you have to worry about a scandal.”

“This woman Jaime can’t marry,” Tywin clarified impatiently. “Who is she?”
Tyrion wouldn’t meet his eyes. “Ask Jaime. No, I mean it, Father. This isn’t my problem. For once, you cannot blame this on me. I don’t want to get involved. It was bad enough when they—no. Ask him. Do not involve me.”

“This concerns the future of the family. It is therefore, our problem. Who is she?”

“He doesn’t confide in me about his relationship.”

Tywin saw he was going to get nowhere with this tack.

“You’re not wrong to be worried about Margaery,” Tyrion volunteered. “She’s been coming apart at the seams for a while now.”

“This is ludicrous. He could have any woman he wants. He’s everything a Lannister should be and he—and that girl. To hear her tell it, she’s signing up for a life sentence to the Night’s Watch.”

“She was in love with someone and it ended very badly.”

“And you know this how?”

Tyrion got out of the chair. “We talk a little. She was in love. From the sounds of it, I don’t think it was ever going to last, but well, logic and love aren’t always partners in the dance. The person she was in love with left and Margaery can’t get past it.” He looked at Tywin. “Let it alone, Father. You’ll get your Highgarden stocks and she’ll be a good mother. I think she’ll be fine in time. Just leave it alone.”

* * *

Sansa fingered the pendant in the dark. She could hear Roose’s steady regular breathing. He slept lightly. If she moved, he would wake. His arm was slung around her. She had always felt so safe snuggled up against him. Now she felt trapped; stupid Sansa Stark running blindly into yet another doomed situation.

Even if she could somehow make him tire of her, he would never let her go. She knew too much. And he wasn’t going to be satisfied with her merely knowing about him. He had made reference to her helping him once when they’d walked around the grounds of his house and twice as he took her tonight. He didn’t say anything about her killing, but the suggestion would come soon.

“You’re still awake.”

Sansa wanted to feign sleep, but he wouldn’t be fooled. “Yes.” She felt him fondling her. “Roose, I’m really tired.”

“I’ll do all the work,” he promised with a whisper in her ear. He started to reach for the lamp.

“No.”

“No?”

She knew he didn’t like it when she told him what to do, but if she had to look in his eyes he would know. “You need a challenge.”

This earned her a laugh. “I shall endeavor to please my queen in the dark.” He slid off of her and pushed her onto her back.

Sansa had always liked it when he set to pleasuring her. Now it felt obscene. Her body responded
the way it usually did to the touch of his fingers (why were they always so cold?), but she knew what he was. He said he saw darkness in her too. He wasn’t crazy, but he wasn’t sane either. Sane people didn’t kill animals because it gave them pleasure. They didn’t kill people. There was darkness in her, though. He wasn’t wrong when he said he recognized it in her. He had taught her to nurture it, to value it, to let it encase her. And now she couldn’t break free.

He moved up and she wrapped her legs around him. Thought left her as the demands of the act took over. Afterward he pulled her against him the way they had been before he’d started this. “Can you sleep now?”

She told him she thought she could.

“I know what you need, Sansa.”

She wished he would stop talking.

Roose pulled her tighter. “You’ll help me now.” It wasn’t a question.

Sansa reached for the pendant. “Please, I—”

“We will proceed slowly,” he assured her. “I will teach you the same way I’ve taught you everything else. You do like my lessons, don’t you, Sansa?”

She thought she would be sick, but if she gave any indication she was troubled, she would never make it back to King’s Landing. He would know then and he would have to kill her.

He was waiting for an answer.

“Yes,” she murmured.

“The completeness you’ll feel . . . there is nothing like it, I promise. You will understand everything.” He stopped talking then.

Sleep came, but it was filled with nightmares.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Thanks, tafkar.
The Night's King

Chapter Notes

If you have triggers for dubious consent and physical abuse, please proceed carefully. It gets somewhat more explicit than it has been thus far.

The action in this chapter takes place over several decades.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Roose Bolton

One of the other TAs looked up when Roose came into the office. “Your mother called for you twice. She said it was an emergency.” He handed Roose a slip of paper.

“Go,” his professor told him. “Do you have enough for the payphone? I would let you use the one in my office if they didn’t track every call I made.”

Roose shook his head. “I’ll reverse the charges.” He was able to bring home enough money on each visit now that such things were no longer luxuries for his family. He used the payphone in the mercifully deserted graduate student lounge. His mother picked up on the second ring.

“Your father has pancreatic cancer,” Mother told him in a flat voice. “The doctor thinks he has three weeks at the outside. Two before they’ll have to put him on morphine. From what the doctor says, once they give him that, he’ll be too far gone to know we’re here. Your father wants to see you before it’s too late.”

Roose wasn’t sure what to say.

His mother seemed to sense this. “Is your professor like you and your father?”

“No.” No one was like he was.

“Tell him what I said about the cancer. Tell him what kind of cancer it is. Tell him how long your father has. He will let you go.”

“My classes—my dissertation—surely, they will expect me to—”

She sighed. “They will look at you oddly if you do not come home.”

Roose thought about this. Mother was always right about what people expected. “I will call when I know what my arrangements are.”

“Don’t wait too long. He’s very weak.”

“Do you need anything?” He had heard people ask this sort of question of others in similar situations.
“No one can give me what I need. Just come home as soon as you can.”

* * *

Mother was as polite to Bethany as she had been to his first wife. “She is brighter,” she told him after Bethany had left to go for a walk.

“It is all right,” Roose assured her. “Your advice continues to work as well with her as it did with the other one.” He disliked the way his mother looked at him. “What?”

“If I had your undivided attention for a million years, I could never make you understand.”

“Is this because I don’t let you cavort around town like a whore with our handyman?”

She struck him across the face. “In my entire life, I have only been with one man. One man: your father.”

“Who felt it necessary to keep you a prisoner here,” Roose countered. He rubbed his cheek. “If you ever do that to me again, I will not hold back. I am master now.” He watched through the window as Bethany came into view. He would go out to meet her.

“Do you know why he kept me locked up?”

Roose turned.

“I found out what he was a year and a half after we were married.”

“And you tried to leave him,” Roose said in a bored voice.

“No.” She picked up a book from the stack by her chair. “I never did.”

She had his attention now. “Why not?”

“Because of you. You will never understand this and it saddens me. I stayed because I love you. He kept me here the way he kept all his possessions, because he thought what he felt for me was love. He didn’t understand what love meant. He was empty inside and he tried to fill that emptiness with things. For a time it was with me, but mostly it was with whatever it is you do in that room below. The vast majority of people in this world know what love is. They aren’t hollow. Your pretty bride out there, she’s not empty inside, but she will never fill you. Nothing will ever fill you. Not power or money or children or even the violence that you crave. Nothing will ever be enough. Nothing will ever complete you. You will die as you were born, empty.”

* * *

Roose’s mentor was waiting for him in the diner. “When someone in our profession sets up a meeting, you need to be there ahead of time.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Not today. Do this going forward and it’d be best if you kept face-to-face contact with people like us to a minimum.”

Roose absorbed this even as their waitress approached them. They gave their orders.

“Anything to drink, fellas?”
“How fresh is the coffee?” asked his mentor.

The waitress glanced at the counter. “Ten minutes old. Maybe fifteen.”

“Coffee, black.”

“Water, please.” Roose did not trust stimulants. He was probably the only professor at Stormlands who eschewed both alcohol and caffeine.

“She has a nice arse,” his mentor commented absently.

Roose looked. “Adequate. Her legs are better. Why are we here? I thought you told me last week there weren’t going to be any assignments for a while.”

“That is going to change. Thank you, sweetling.”

The waitress slid the water to Roose, bending over as she did so. She wore no bra.

“She fancies you,” his mentor told him after she’d gone. “I’m retiring. I finally have enough. I was going to hold out for one last job and then I thought about all the others in our line of work who all hold out for the final job. It never ends well. My needs are simple. So after tonight, you won’t see me again.”

Roose was not expecting this. Thanks to his mentor, he was now skilled with most weapons. The cash he’d amassed during his apprenticeship was considerable, but there was still so much he had to learn.

“You’re ready. I’ve given your name—don’t look at me like that; they’ve known of you for some time—to them. Don’t turn anything down. Not for six months. Do the jobs they give you. They’ll be child’s play for you. You’ll do well. They’ll keep you busy.”

Roose kept his eye on the waitress. She was flirting with a trucker. “And yet you told me the last time there weren’t going to be any jobs for a while.”

“You’ve helped me with are the mid-range targets. The organizations don’t know your work directly. They won’t trust you with those for a while. You’ll need to pay your dues first. After six months, a year maybe, you’ll raise your prices. The money is better with the harder assignments, but they aren’t as plentiful.”

It felt like the truth.

“What else? Be careful with those cell phones. They say they can’t be traced, but,” his mentor grimaced. “They’ll figure a way to do it. Don’t get this life and your other life mixed up. Keep your peanut butter and your chocolate separate. Be careful with the cash. Take a little trip to Braavos. Open up a numbered account. Make them wire the money there. It’ll be a bitch to verify, but it’s safest.”

Their food came then. The waitress came back twice. Roose decided he had been too critical of her arse. She moved well. They ate silently.

“One last thing, college boy,” his mentor said as he moved his empty plate to the side.

“I am no longer a boy.”

“I’m sixty-two. You’re still a boy.” He drained the last of his coffee. “Don’t shit where you eat—"
no matter what. That’s the one exception to ‘the don’t turn any jobs down’ rule. Don’t shit where you eat.” He threw some money on the table, clasped Roose on the shoulder, and walked out of Roose’s life.

Roose finished up his meal. He kept his face expressionless although he was very agitated. He added more money to the pile on the table.

The waitress came back. “My shift is over. Serra will take care of you if you need anything.”

He pushed the cash toward her. “We’re done. Thank you.” He slipped out of the booth.

The lot was quiet. The diner was on one of the older roads. Most of the traffic was now routed to the highway. The air was crisp here in the Stormlands. It was better than Dorne, but it was not home. He missed the summer snows. He missed the cold.

One more person gone from his life, he thought. Just like that. At least Father had done him the courtesy of preparing him. Mother had fallen over dead in her chair without warning. His mentor had just dropped this bomb and left Roose sitting there. He tried to calm himself. He had Bethany and soon he would have the baby. He needed to focus.

“Are you okay?” It was the waitress.

Roose gazed at her evenly in the way he did when he wanted a student to come to heel. She stared right back at him.

She walked up to him. “Why don’t we go somewhere for a drink and maybe I can cheer you up?”

“No.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “No? Okay, my mistake.” She turned to leave.

He reached for her then and pushed her up against his car.

“I’m not a whore.”

“No, you’re a slut.” He slid his hand up the skirt of her uniform and yanked her panties down.

“Let me go.”

Roose pinned her arms behind her. “Shall I tell you what you had in mind? You thought we would go to some tawdry cocktail lounge where I would buy you a few drinks and listen to you whine about your pathetic life. Then I would take you to your tacky little home in a trailer park somewhere, where you would spread your legs for me once I told you how attractive I found you. I don’t drink. I am not interested in your life. I have no intention of ever seeing where you live.”

She tried to twist out of his grip.

“You have rather good legs and firm, plump breasts. Is that what you want to hear?” With his free hand, he rubbed his fingers between her legs. She was ready. He could feel himself hardening.

“Yes or no?”

“Yes, you son of a bitch.”

Roose unzipped his trousers. “Are you on the pill?”

“Yes.”
“If you give me anything, I will hunt you down and I will destroy you.”

She shook her head. “I’m clean.”

He fucked her. Cars whizzed by, but he kept on thrusting into her. She clawed at his back and whispered obscenities as she came. Afterwards as she cleaned herself up, he unlocked his car.

“You’re just going to leave?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me your name at least.”

“No.” He got into the car and drove away. He didn’t even look back. She had been scarcely adequate. It would have been better if he could find someone to kill, but he knew better than to hunt unprepared. Bethany would be waiting for him. Roose didn’t like leaving her for too long. He was halfway home when he heard a thumping noise. He pulled over. His right tire was flat. Then it started to thunder. He changed the tire in the pouring rain.

* * *

Roose liked going into the university on Saturdays. Most of his colleagues were gone and he found he could work undisturbed for a few hours. It was normally a very productive way for him to focus on his book. He was doing well in his official career. He had a paper accepted to the next national meeting. The publisher with whom he was working thought there might be some general interest in his book; that would mean actual income.

Bethany wasn’t thrilled about this practice, but she accepted it the way she accepted most things. He spent his Saturday mornings in his office and then returned and spent the afternoons with her and Domeric. She claimed it was important for him to bond with his son. Roose did not mind. The boy was bright and he lit up every time he saw him.

He reached a stopping point and locked up.

“Roose.”

He turned around. Eddard Stark was standing at in his office doorway. He would want to chat. Roose hadn’t thought much about Ned, but he was a fellow northerner. He was also a Stark, not that those things meant much anymore. “Ned.” He smiled politely and kept walking.

“Are you going to the symposium next week?”

Roose stopped. “I was planning on it. Why?”

“Do you want to get dinner afterward?”

He no longer needed his mother to get him through these situations. “I will have to let you know. I had intended to go home. My son is a handful.”

“You just have the one, don’t you?”

“Yes, an eighteen-month-old, Domeric.”

Ned chuckled. “Wait till you have more. I have three and they keep us very busy.” He started to reach for his wallet.
Roose knew what came next. He would be expected to exclaim over the man’s children and to show him pictures of his own son. “I promised my wife I wouldn’t be too long. I’ll let you know about the symposium on Monday.” He smiled again and walked away quickly.

There was some football game going on across campus so the ordinarily deserted lot was fuller than usual. He unlocked his passenger door and stowed his satchel. He was walking around to the other side when he saw her.

“Assistant Professor Roose Bolton. Wife: Bethany. Son: Domeric.” The waitress held up a toddler about Domeric’s age. “Other son: Ramsay.”

He looked around. There was no one in sight. “You told me you were on birth control.”

She plunked the boy down in a stroller and strapped him in. “It didn’t work. I didn’t think I was ever going to find you, but then I saw you and your happy little family at the mall. You bought your brat all those clothes and you charged them to your account at the store. Fortunately, the clerk is a single mom with a deadbeat ex so she looked you up for me. I know where you live.”

He would find out where she lived and then he would kill her and the child. “You let me take you against a car in a diner parking lot. I doubt that was the first or last time you spread your legs for a man.”

“Look at him, you son of a bitch.”

The child stopped chewing on a dirty plastic rattle and stared up at him.

The toddler’s dark hair meant nothing. His grey eyes were another story.

She thrust a piece of paper in his hands. “I want $500 a month, cash. You show up once a week and you spend an hour with him. I guess you will get to see my tacky little home after all.”

* * *

“Does any of this go toward the boy or does it all go up your nose?” Roose counted out $500 and put it on the cheap wooden coffee table.

Ramsay flung the books Roose had bought him across the room.

She took the cash and stood. “It barely pays our rent. I have to feed and clothe him out of this.”

“I’m sure you have other sources of income.”

“For the last fucking time, I am not a whore.”

Roose watched as Ramsay took a spoon and beat it relentlessly against a battered metal pot. Roose pushed his bastard’s mother into the tiny hallway. “I don’t like women who swear,” he whispered in her ear. “Do it again in my presence and I’ll have to show you what happens when I get angry.”

“You don’t frighten me, you motherfucking son of a bitch.”

Ramsay stood in the hallway, his nose dripping with snot.

She smirked at Roose.

He led Ramsay into the bathroom, helped him blow his nose, and made him wash his hands. “You are not an animal. You will be clean.” Then he brought him into the living room. He turned on the
television and slid a videocassette into the VCR. Ramsay plopped himself down on the floor and watched mesmerized as the animated figures filled the television screen.

“Your hour is up.”

He shook his head and looked at her suggestively. She usually offered. He had always refused her.

Ramsay’s mother perked up. She fairly danced into the bedroom.

Roose locked the door. She slithered out of her jeans and top. He reached for a chair and positioned her over the back of it. Then he took off his belt. Before she knew what he was about, he was whipping her backside. She tried to move, but he pinned her hands. When she started to cry out, he whispered in her ear, “For every sound you make, I will give you ten more. Do you understand?” He waited for her to nod. He hit her over and over. When he was done he slid the belt back into his trousers. She slumped to the floor. “Get up and get dressed. The next time you use profanity in my presence, it will be ten times worse. And if you ever refer to my mother again in any way, I will kill you. Then I will kill him.” He saw comprehension dawning in her face. He waited until it blossomed into obedience and fear.

He walked into the living room. Ramsay glanced up at him. “Are you leaving, Daddy?”

“Yes.” He was distracted momentarily by the image on the television of dancing salt-and-pepper shakers singing a song about the Nightfort. “Father. I want you to call me, Father. Not Daddy. Do you understand, Ramsay?”

The boy’s face flushed with pleasure. “Yes, Father.”

“Good boy.” Roose left him with his cartoon. He drove home.

Domeric ran up to the door and hugged him. “Daddy, you’re back! Will you read to me?”

Roose ruffled his hair. “Go pick something. I’ll be up in a minute.”

* * *

Roose jumped when he heard the screeching. One moment it was peace and the next it was chaos. “Give it back!”

“Arya!”

He got up from his desk and peered out into the hallway. Two children ran past him at breakneck speed.

“Both of you stop it this instant!” Eddard Stark came to his door. He smiled apologetically at Roose. “I’m sorry. I have three of them today and they can be a handful. Arya! Bran! COME HERE NOW!”

They careened down the hallway and skidded to a stop in front of their father.

“This is Dr. Bolton. Roose, this is my daughter, Arya and my son, Bran.”

Roose smiled politely.

“I told you that you have to be quiet here. Dr. Bolton is working. I am working. Go join your sister and do your homework.” He turned to him. “On behalf of my children, I apologize, Roose.”
Roose nodded and went back to his marking. He doubted the Stark brats would be quiet for more than ten or fifteen minutes. He wanted to get a good deal more done before he went for his weekly visit with his bastard. The situation with Ramsay was becoming more critical. He now had an understanding with his bastard’s mother. Each week she produced receipts proving where his money went or she got nothing from him. The boy was dull and cunning. He had learned to obey Roose, but he was wild in every other sense of the word.

He finished the last paper. As he walked past Ned’s office, he glanced in. A thin girl with long red hair looked up at him. This would be Ned’s eldest daughter. Roose couldn’t recall her name; he didn’t particularly care. He was interviewing. He would be going elsewhere very soon.

* * *

As soon as he found out he had a half-brother, Domeric was eager to get to know him.

Bethany didn’t want Ramsay anywhere near them. Roose didn’t want Domeric near Ramsay either. Now that he had his bastard staying at the house at the Dreadfort, he had hoped the distance would make this less of an issue, but Domeric refused to let it go.

Roose tried to explain it to Domeric. “He is not your equal.”

“You’re acting like this is medieval times. He’s my brother; we share DNA.”

“His mother was a slut I took in a parking lot.”

Bethany got up and left the room.

“Dad, you shouldn’t have said that about his mother in front of Mum.”

“I pay for his upbringing, but I do not want you near him. He is dangerous.”

Domeric waved this away. He wasn’t a snob. He wanted to please his father, but he loved the idea of having a brother. He’d always wanted siblings. This was his chance.

Roose washed his hands of it. He went upstairs to Bethany.

“It’s bad enough I have to endure you screwing every woman in sight, now you want to bring your whore’s son into my home,” she said.

“He is not coming into my home. I’m sending him to the house at the Dreadfort. Since you refuse to go there with me, you won’t have to see him.”

“Forgive me for not wanting to spend time in the same spot where you fucked my sister.”

Roose let this lapse slide. She would calm down. “Can you do anything with Domeric? I would rather he not strike up a relationship. He won’t listen to me.”

“This is your response? I tell you I know you’ve been sleeping with my sister and you try and get me to persuade our son to stay away from your bastard.”

He was fond of Bethany. He tolerated a good deal from her. “I don’t know why you’re being so emotional. Yes, I had sex with Barbrey. It was merely that. It meant no more to me than it did with Ramsay’s whore of a mother.”

“Do you even love me?”
He hated questions like this. “Yes, of course.” He had stayed with her for over fifteen years. Her looks were fading. Her company was not particularly scintillating, but she was his wife and mother to his son and heir. She normally obeyed him without hesitation. He reached out to caress her and she pulled away.

He had a memory of his mother looking at him like that.

“What have I done?” she said to no one in particular. She put her head in her hands.

Roose knew how to respond to this. He took Bethany in his arms and he soothed her. He murmured words about how special she was to him. He told her how he hated to see her cry. Roose made a mental note to buy her something. He would get her a locket with Domeric’s picture. She would like that. He kissed her on her forehead and then on her mouth. He felt her relaxing in his arms. Soon she was returning his kisses with fervor. He took his time with her. She was always silent when he made love to her. It was a game of sorts. He wanted to make her cry out, but no matter what he did, she never made a sound. All he had to go on was the enthusiasm with which she thrust her body and the way she clawed into his back with her nails.

It turned out to be one of the last times he lay with his wife.

Ramsay killed Domeric within the month.

* * *

Roose took the pills away from Bethany. It became a nightly ritual to check her for sharp objects. Unsure what else to do, he brought Barbrey to stay. She kept watch during the day.

When Bethany developed a vicious cold that turned into pneumonia, they didn’t think to make certain she took the antibiotics. Roose came back from work one night to find that she’d flung the windows open and that rain was streaming into the bedroom. They had to restrain her in the hospital because she kept ripping the IVs out of her arm.

She died very soon after.

Domeric had left him by going against his wishes and getting himself killed. Bethany had found a way to leave him too.

Roose took pleasure in fucking Barbrey in their bed each night.

“It won’t bring them back,” Barbrey said wearily.

* * *

Eddard Stark appeared to have aged twenty years since the last time Roose had seen him. They were at the opening of The Twins, which was being turned into a living history museum. “I heard about your wife and son. I’m very sorry.”

Roose nodded. He despised small talk. “Your family is well, I trust.”

“Mmm.”

Ordinarily it was impossible to shut Ned up when it concerned his children. Roose noted the dark circles under his colleague’s eyes, how thin the man looked, the way he gripped his notes, and he was tempted to inquire further. “You’re still at Stormlands, aren’t you?” Roose was now at King’s University. It was a more prestigious appointment, not that he meant to stay there, not now that
there was an opening at Winterfell. He would get it and he would go home. Finally he could go home.

“Yes. Did you hear about Umber’s retirement?”

Ned would be after it too. He changed the conversation. “They don’t seem to be very organized here.”

“I think the old man is giving them trouble.”

They watched as Walder Frey harangued first one official than the other.

“Who would have thought?” Ned mused. “The last of the great houses to go.”

“The Lannisters and the Tyrells are still very much forces to be reckoned with,” Roose pointed out.

Ned took a sip of his water. “They have money, but their ancestral homes are ruins, the same as yours and mine. This is the only one left.”

“Their line appears to be in no danger of expiring.” Roose eyed the large contingent of Freys. It was a grimy looking lot for the most part. A few of the girls were passably pretty. “So how is your brood doing? Your oldest boy must be at university.” If his colleague had a chink in his armor, Roose meant to find it.

“Robb is nearly done. I think you met Arya. She’s just starting high school. My two youngest are still in grammar school.”

“You have another daughter, don’t you?”

“She’s starting university at the Westerlands,” Ned told him quietly. “I’m going to see what’s going on. Excuse me.”

They began soon after that. Their talks were well received. Roose was tired, but he knew it was expected for him to mingle at the reception. He listened intently to various people, pretending to care, and finally he could bear it no longer. He found a spot in the corner and sipped his water.

“I enjoyed your speech.”

Roose turned and smiled faintly and automatically at the plump girl who approached him. “Thank you, Miss?”

“Oh, I’m Walda Frey.”

The only Frey with any money was Walder Frey and he dispensed it sparingly. Whatever influence the man had, he’d lost the moment he’d turned this pile over to the Westerosi Heritage Foundation. But Roose remembered his manners and introduced himself.

“I wish I could have lived back then.”

He was used to hearing this sort of sentimental claptrap, particularly from young women. “It would have been a hard life, I’m afraid.” Now she would speak of pretty clothes, knights, and jousts.

“I would be married. I would have a husband and children.”

This was unexpected. Roose registered what he thought was sadness in her voice. “Those are not the exclusive province of the middle ages.”
“They call me ‘Fat Walda,’” she said matter-of-factly. “Back then someone would have seen that my hips would be good for child-bearing. Now I’m just some fat cow.”

“You’re a pretty girl,” he told her truthfully. “I’m sure you will find someone worthy of you sooner than you think.”

She seemed unconvinced. “You look exhausted. It’s winding down. You should go back to your hotel.”

He would like nothing better. “My ride is taking one of the tours.” This was what came from socializing with people.

“I don’t know why they’re all making such a fuss over this place. It’s drafty and it smells.” She hesitated, evidently fearing that she offended him. “I know about the strategic part, but no one’s cared about it for hundreds of years. It’s been a moldering pile of stones going back for centuries. Grandfather really should have taken the highway deal fifty years ago.”

“Highway deal?”

Walda explained it to him. The government had wanted to pay him for his property so they could run the Kingsroad highway across the Green Fork. “It would have been much better money.” She named a sum.

“That’s a pittance compared with what he got for this,” Roose said mildly.

“Not when you figure out what it would have been worth in today’s dragons. I looked it up. It would have been five times the amount.”

“What do you do for a living?”

Walda sighed. “I’m an aide in a pre-school.”

“You don’t enjoy it?”

“Oh, I like the children. They’re adorable, but I wanted to be an accountant. Grandfather wouldn’t pay for college.” She gestured to the people milling about at the reception. “It’s okay if you want to go talk to someone else. I’m not very important.”

“What I want is for my ride to finish his tour so that I can go back to my hotel and get some rest. But if I can’t do that, I am rather enjoying our conversation.” And to his surprise, he was.

Walda blushed. She had the complexion for it. “Is your wife waiting for you at the hotel?”

“I’m a widower.” He drew himself up. It was a clumsy attempt on her part to find out if he was attached. Fat or not, the girl should have known better.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Why?” He had never understood why people said these things. Why should they feel sorry about his losses? He didn’t care about theirs.

Walda pointed to his biography in the program. “They didn’t catch it.”

Roose put on his reading glasses. He was wrong. She had merely been making conversation. “Their deaths happened recently. I never thought to look.”
“Your son too?”

“Yes.” He waited for her to say she was sorry again.

“Who is your ride?”

“Eddard Stark. He is the one who spoke before me.”

Walda concentrated. She made a line straight for one of the museum people. She spoke very determinedly to a waiflike girl in an expensive suit. Finally Walda returned. “I’ll drive you to the hotel; that bitchy girl who weighs two pounds will tell Dr. Stark you went back.”

Fifteen minutes later, Roose was at the hotel.

Walda pulled into a parking spot.

He waited for her to coyly suggest a drink, but she said nothing. “Thank you, Ms Frey.”

“Just call me Walda. Everyone else does.”

“I would be honored.”

* * *

Roose watched with amusement as Walder Frey terrified the Heritage aides into submission. None of them seemed to realize the old man had no power. Roose’s last talk in the series would be tonight. He would miss the generous honoraria; it made up for the inconvenience of the long drives.

Satisfied of his victory over one of the underpaid aides, the old man turned to him. “How long has your wife been dead?”

“Ten months.” Although the inquiry was impertinent coming from a near-stranger, it was easier to answer. In any case, there was no need for sentiment with Walder Frey. Roose simply responded to his questions. It was somewhat restful.

“Are your friends thrusting widows and divorcées your way yet?”

Roose wondered where this was going. “With abandon.”

“Walda likes you.”

“She is a charming girl.” It was only a slight exaggeration, but Roose liked Walda well enough. She wasn’t unintelligent and she was respectful of him.

“She’s fat.”

Roose shrugged, unsure of what the old man was getting at. Roose had always liked slender women, but Walda had a pretty face and her figure was proportionate. She knew her place. She seemed to intuit when he wished to talk and when he wanted to be left alone.

“I have too many mouths to feed. She’ll eat me out of house and home. I’d much rather she ate you out of yours. $25,000.”

It was not often Roose was surprised. “I don’t follow you.”
“Marry her and she’ll have $25,000 as a dowry.”

Not even his mother would have known what to say to this.

“Or you can have one of the others for $12,500. Fair Walda’s a pretty thing. I wouldn’t recommend Ami, not unless you want a case of the clap, but if you want her, you can have her.”

“Do they know you are making me this offer?”

The old man peered at him. “Yes, although I haven’t discussed the amounts.”

“Don’t.” Roose straightened his tie. “Walda.”

“Which Walda?”

Roose didn’t answer. He approached her. “After this is over, would you care to go out to dinner?”

Walda’s face lit up.

* * *

Living with Walda was an entirely new experience for Roose. He had accustomed himself to feigning the behaviors and attitudes that the vast majority of people held. If he occasionally appeared to be out of step, most put it down to his quiet nature. As far as he could tell, Walda had yet to notice any discrepancy. She danced to a tune only she could hear and she persisted in believing they were perfectly in sync.

She didn’t seem to care one whit that her grandfather had sold her to him. It was a dowry, she said. If they had been married even a hundred years ago, no one would have blinked. She had what she wanted. He had what he wanted. And they got to be together. What was wrong with that?

As tempting as it was to pick apart her logic, Roose knew there was some truth to it. He had not needed Walder Frey’s money. His real work paid quite well and his legitimate salary was generous enough.

It was oddly enjoyable coming home to her. Walda went out of her way to make him comfortable. She was as efficient in her way as he was in his. She took classes at one of the area colleges during the day, but by the time he made it back to the house, she focused every ounce of her attention on him.

Roose wasn’t sure what to make of her. She was clever and unsentimental about certain things—his finances for one. She redid the household budget and insisted they make personal economies. Under her advice and management, his legitimate investments were performing better than they ever had before. Walda understood money.

She did not understand him, but somehow it made their marriage work remarkably well. She persisted in seeing him as the handsome prince who had rescued her and brought her to a land of happily ever after. According to Walda, he was a good, kind, gentle man. As someone who often had to labor to achieve the status of pleasant, it was restful knowing that no matter what he did or said she wouldn’t blink.

The only thing that seemed to give her pause was Ramsay. She made one or two abortive overtures before agreeing with Roose that it was best for her to keep her distance from his bastard.

Roose even liked bedding her. It was gratifying the way she cried out with pleasure. She was quite
adventurous in a way that neither of her predecessors had been. She was game for anything he suggested and after the first few months, she began to have suggestions of her own. Some gave him pause; others were quite satisfying.

His one fear, if one could call it such, was that Walda would try to put off having a baby until she finished her accounting degree, and that soon proved groundless. She wanted several children and she thought it was best if she had them while she was young and energetic. She conceived almost instantly. Walda was organized and efficient; she thought she could continue to do everything she had been.

“Babies don’t always cooperate with one’s plans,” he warned her. Domeric had been a quiet, unfussy baby, but Roose remembered how they’d been bound by Domeric’s schedule for quite some time.

“We’ll work it out,” Walda assured him. “You’re not used to being happy, are you? It’s all going to be different now that we’ve found each other.”

Happiness may not have precisely described what he felt, but he was strangely content with her. She would bring new life and vitality to his line. The future looked bright.

Until Ramsay took it all away from him by sabotaging the brake lines on her car.

* * *

Roose endured the funeral. He kept his features neutral while his bastard stood at the graveside wearing an ill-concealed smirk.

Roose didn’t act for three months.

Ben was waiting for him in the chamber below the property per his instructions. He sat on an upended bucket.

Roose didn’t waste time. “Where did you put the knife? You know the one.”

The old man opened up one of the panels and lifted out a plastic wrapped bundle. “I got the other things like you asked.”

Despite all of the training and advice he’d given Ramsay, the boy had never listened. He was sloppy and he was careless. If he had paid the slightest bit of attention to Roose, this might have been harder to pull off, but Ramsay was far from bright. Roose was reminded of his mentor’s words, “cunning is not smart.” It would be his bastard’s unofficial epitaph.

“Get me the gloves.” He slipped a pair of disposable latex ones on and inspected the items in the bundle.

He did not want for selection. Ramsay had never valued the precautions Roose or his grandfather took. Ramsay trusted to Ben to clean up after him. He did not understand—had never understood—that Ben was Roose’s creature and not his.

Roose picked the knife Ramsay had used on the girl whose disappearance caused a nationwide stir. There were other items too. He moved everything over to the bag he’d brought for this purpose. “You are going to forget you ever saw these.” He didn’t wait for a response. He didn’t have to. Ben always did as he was told. He removed a list from his jacket pocket. “This is what we will work on. I want you to write down the supplies we’ll require.”
“I can go buy those things myself, Mr. Roose.”

Roose gave Ben a slow, meaningful look willing the old man to understand. “You’re to stay in the house with me. You can use the room off the kitchen.” He ripped off the gloves, dropping them into the pile of items Ben would destroy.

After he had the list, he made several trips to the village hardware store and then into Karhold. He took care to consult with several people to ensure he was noticed. He spoke extensively with a consultant at Home Depot about the best way to go about one or two of the tasks. It went counter to his every instinct to make himself so noticeable, but it was what the situation demanded.

“I will be back by tomorrow afternoon. Do not let on that I have left.”

“Yes, Mr. Roose.”

He drove back quickly and made his preparations and his phone calls. It wasn’t difficult. After he planted the items, he began with the family of the girl. When he made his second anonymous tip to the police, he tersely suggested that Ramsay was armed, dangerous, and unstable. The irony of it pleased him; Ramsay definitely was all of those things. He then made the long trip back to the Dreadfort. It was closer to night when he arrived, but Ben was waiting.

Roose worked side-by-side with him on repairs to the house. He took care to keep Ben nearby. He even ate with the old man. He kept the radio on at all times.

Three days in, the news report about Ramsay aired. He had died in a shootout with the police who had come to question him about the death of a fifteen-year-old girl who had gone missing seven years ago. They referred to him as Ramsay Snow, the child of a working-class single mother, who had died young and tragically of a drug overdose. There was no mention of Roose.

Ben ate his stew stolidly.

“Ask.”

“Why not after Mr. Domeric?”

Roose poured himself more water. “Domeric wouldn’t listen. He ignored my advice. Domeric left me. They all left. She didn’t. Ramsay took her from me. He did this despite what I told him repeatedly: everything in the Dreadfort belongs to me.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

For my non-US and non-academically-focused readers, a TA stands for teaching assistant. At the start of this chapter, Roose is in graduate school and like Sansa held a position where in exchange for a tuition waiver and probably a stipend, he would teach and assist a professor.

Thank you to tafkar
Dropped Stitches

Chapter Notes

If you have triggers for partner/spousal abuse, this may be rough going. It’s more of the emotional/psychological kind, but there are some physical things happening. Please know your limits.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

* * *

Nine Years Ago

Arya tried to get Bran to help.

“I’m meditating.”

“Something is really wrong, Bran.”

Bran shut the door in her face.

Arya thought. Then she went into Robb’s room. He was away at university and he wouldn’t care as long as she didn’t mess with his stuff. She shut his door carefully and lowered her ear to the heat register. If you were quiet, you could hear pretty much everything from the living room.

“And she told you this when?” Dad was asking.

“When Lysa and I went there for a visit.”

Arya scowled as Uncle Petyr reported several more incidents where Sansa had made accusations against him.

“I couldn’t believe it. I wish someone else had been there to hear. I know it sounds incredible, but the paranoia, the delusions.” Uncle Petyr sounded very sad. “It’s just how Lysa gets.”

Aunt Lysa was crazy. Mum and Dad said it was a mental illness and that it wasn’t her fault. Arya understood this, but when Aunt Lysa stopped taking her medications, she was off-the-charts bonkers. Sansa was not bonkers. Sansa was sane and levelheaded. She was a bitch sometimes, but she was very, very not crazy.

“Oh, Ned.” Mum sounded worried and upset. “This was how it started with Lysa.”

“I should go. I don’t like to leave Robin for too long when Lysa is in one of her states. I love Sansa dearly. She needs help.”

Arya listened some more until Uncle Petyr left. Mum and Dad had been worried about Sansa for a while. She was so distant, so quiet. She hadn’t been herself in a long time. This was Uncle Petyr’s third visit in three weeks. His job had been taking him to the Reach. This was why he got to see Sansa so much.
Arya tried to think. Jon was ranging beyond the Wall right now. It was too hard to get a signal so email was out and usually phone calls were tough. They had a satellite phone, but he mostly got a minute of time with a call. There had been a really terrible fight with Robb and Sansa the last time Sansa was home. Robb called her a selfish bitch for staying away and leaving Mum and Dad so worried all the time. Sansa had said horrible things to Robb. In any case, Robb was away at university. Bran . . . Bran was probably getting high eating tree paste again and Rickon was eight.

It was all on her.

* * *

**Present Day**

* * *

Roose let himself into the apartment. He found Sansa where he’d left her this morning. The table was strewn with papers and books, and she was bent over in exactly the same position. She didn’t appear to have showered or dressed either.

She glanced up at him, gave him a distracted smile, and continued writing.

He set down his satchel and removed his coat. He cast an eye over the kitchen. “Did you eat?”

“What?”

“Did you have any lunch?”

“I had an apple.”

“Sansa, you have to take better care of yourself.”

She didn’t respond.

He touched her shoulders and felt her tense up. “You promised me you would slow down.”

She shook him off. “I’m fine. Look, I had some ideas about how to structure this section. It’s flowing really well. I don’t want to stop.” She turned around. “I’m not hungry. Why don’t you go get dinner somewhere? When you come back, I promise I’ll stop.”

Instead he began cooking. The first time she had suggested this course of action, he’d willingly ordered takeout, and let her work undisturbed once she’d agreed to eat something. It had not been unpleasant. He had reading of his own to do. Once it was time for bed, Sansa refocused on him. The second time, he’d consented reluctantly. The weekend had been an exercise in frustration. Sansa insisted on writing and reading. She would eat only if he pressed her. She was his in bed, but she spent the majority of her time out of it on her dissertation.

Roose understood her drive. He appreciated it. He was the same way with his academic career. It did not pay to procrastinate, but she was months ahead. She was teaching the same classes and had no need to change her material. Her own coursework was done. Sansa should be concentrating on other things—the things he was trying to share with her.

This state of affairs was no longer satisfactory. She was shutting him out. He did not care for this.

“Can’t you just go somewhere to eat?”

“Will you come with me?”
“I told you, I need more time with this.”

Roose returned to peeling potatoes. He noted the sour look she shot him.

When the meal was ready, she wasn’t. He pushed a pile of papers out of the way.

“I need them there. Go eat in the living room.”

Roose moved so he was behind Sansa. Putting his hands on her arms, he pulled her and the chair backwards. “You are done for the evening,” he told her coldly. “I will give you five minutes to clear this mess away. If you do not do so, I will.” He bent down. “Do you understand?” When she didn’t respond, he repeated it again more quietly, “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she whispered back.

He knew she was afraid. It was unfortunate. He didn’t wish to inspire fear in her, but he knew he was in the right. She would thank him for it later. “Good.” He took his hands off her.

Sansa stacked everything and moved it to the desk in the living room. She started toward the bedroom.

“Come here.”

“I wanted to wash up.”

Roose shook his head. He pointed to the kitchen sink. She’d tried this trick on him before.

Sansa washed her hands and then sat down. She ate what he put in front of her.

It was yet another silent meal. When they were done, she automatically moved to clear the table and do the dishes. He let her do so. After she wiped the table down, he opened his satchel and removed his files.

“So you’re allowed to work, but I’m not? Gods, you’re worse than Margaery.”

Roose pushed the one chair over so that he could move another immediately next to it. “Sit.”

Sansa swallowed.

“I will not ask you again.”

“I am not your fucking child or your toy or your pet.”

Roose gave her a measured look. He very calmly moved toward her. She backed up until she was against the wall. She stared at him with a mixture of defiance and fear.

“Please, you’re scaring me.”

He grabbed her by the shoulder, marched her to the chair, and pushed her into it. Then he sat beside her. He undid the clasps, removed the contents of a manila envelope, and slid them toward her.

Sansa shook her head.

“We will sit here until you look at these.”
“I don’t want to do this. I’ve told you and told you.”

“I know what you need better than you do. I’ve proved this to you repeatedly. Now do as I say.”

When she didn’t move to touch the documents, Roose removed his reading glasses, put them on, and with one arm around her, he read the report aloud to her. Sansa tried to squirm way from him twice, but he held her fast. “Where does our target live?”

Sansa stared at him.

Roose waited. “You weren’t paying attention, were you?” He read the report to her a second time. “Where does he live?”

“17 Weirwood Lane.”

“What does he drive?”

“A Mercedes SUV.”

“What color?”

“Black. I don’t want to do this.”

Roose ignored her sullen manner. He drilled her. When she got an answer wrong or refused to speak, he read the report aloud again. Her recall improved by the fourth time. “Names of his children.”

“Tom, Alysanne, and Steffon.”

“Good.”

“Why does someone want him dead?”

He shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“Don’t you care?”

It was a foolish question, but he reminded himself she was new to this. “Occasionally if it would make a difference in how I approach a target or how the client wants the target dispatched, then I am told.” He scanned through the report looking for the next detail to use as a question. “When the targets are in Witness Protection—I do at least one hit on those types of targets a year—I am told. I need to know what I am up against. Ordinarily, it does not matter. And no, I do not care.”

“What about his family?”

“What about them?”

“He has three little kids. He has a wife.”

Roose pointed to the photo. “I am not being paid to dispose of his wife or his children. They are irrelevant.”

“Then why is it important I know their names?”

“It is not unheard of for a target to run, to go into hiding.”

Sansa wasn’t saying anything.
He couldn’t tell if she understood his meaning. “They don’t always think to protect their loved ones and even if they do, their families can often lead me to the target themselves. Or I’ve had targets come out from hiding in order to spare the people they care about.”

“Have you ever killed a child?”

“Yes.” He disliked the way she was looking at him.

“And it doesn’t bother you?”

It was going to take time. He knew this. “I prefer targets that provide me with a challenge, but no, it doesn’t.”

“And you never refuse an assignment?”

This was a more intelligent question, although he realized the intent behind it was still sentimental. “Of course, I have.” Roose slid the photo of the target over to her. “My personal safety and wellbeing are paramount. I do not accept assignments that might jeopardize those. If for instance, someone wanted Dacey Mormont removed, I would refuse the job, not because I like or dislike her, but because I do not care to be questioned by the police for any reason. Occasionally the assignment isn’t worth the fee and sometimes it is inconvenient to me personally.” He smiled. “I passed up a job so that we might go to the Dreadfort together. Now look at him.”

She turned her face from the picture.

“He is prey, Sansa. We hunt prey. This is our nature.”

“And if I—?”

He stopped her. “I am not asking you. I am telling you. You are going to help me with this one. I will not make you kill him, but you will assist me.”

“So everything you said to me about us being equals was just a line. You want a slave; you don’t want a partner.” She started to rise.

“I did not say you could move.” Roose pushed on her shoulder and forced her back into the chair. He turned the photo over. “Eye color?”

“Brown. Dark brown. I don’t want to do this, Roose.”

“Describe his hair.”

“Black, cut short, parted on the left.”

Roose continued to put her through her paces. He asked her questions about the man’s appearance and the details mentioned in the report. If she missed an answer, he forced her to look or listen as was appropriate. Finally, he was satisfied.

“Now what?”

“I do surveillance.”

“Do I have to do it with you?”

Roose shook his head. “Not yet.” Not while she was acting like a child and might do something to endanger the both of them. “This job will net me $50,000.” He could see the question forming on
her face. “I have a numbered account in Essos. They wire the money there. Usually it’s half before a job and half after it.”

“Not cash?”

Roose slid the documents back into the envelope. “You’ve seen too many movies. A large amount of cash isn’t convenient. I make a trip once or twice a year to Braavos if I need to access anything. Since we are speaking about money, I want you to start changing how you spend yours.”

“So you’re going to tell me how to handle my money too?”

“You are to avoid using your debit card and your credit card. Pay for as much as possible with cash. Your rent, your utilities, those you may pay by check.”

“Why?”

Roose ignored her tone. “Because every time you use a piece of plastic, you make it possible for someone to track you.” He put the envelope in his satchel. “You may move now.”

The rest of the evening passed without incident. Sansa took a shower and went to bed. He let her sulk for a while and then he joined her.

“We are not having sex.”

Roose undressed in the darkness. He got into the bed and reached for her. She flinched. He ignored this and pulled her to him. He was tired himself. Her moods were making it very difficult for him to keep his temper. “You are behaving like a child.”

“Maybe you should stop treating me like one. Gods, I don’t know what’s worse, you holding me like I’m your fucking teddy bear or having to—”

Roose held her fast. “I told you once I don’t like women who swear. I ignore the occasional slip because I know you are trying. Now you are deliberately provoking me. It isn’t wise to do so. You’ve never seen me angry, Sansa.”

She made an audible swallow.

Good, he thought. “If you ever compare me to that southron whore again, I will make you very sorry. Do you understand?”

She tensed up.

“Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“From this point on you will take better care of yourself. When I return tomorrow, I expect you will have eaten breakfast and lunch. You will be properly groomed and you will have put your work away. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

He heard her trying to swallow a sob. “I am doing this for us, Sansa.”

“Why do I have to kill someone? Isn’t it enough that I help you after?”
Roose stroked her hair. It struck him as ironic that she had the opposite problem as Ramsay. His bastard had been entirely too eager to kill. He had been reckless and foolhardy. Sansa was cautious and methodical, but she was plainly terrified of her nature. “This is who we are. This is what we do.”

* * *

Working for Gerion Lannister was always weird. He was nice enough to Arya. He could handle physically challenging things really well. He came into the office one day and told her they were going rock climbing. This meant getting on a plane and going to a mountain and climbing it. She enjoyed the experience, but she knew they were supposed to be working on seminars for the employees who would be going to Yi Ti.

There was also the matter of her getting paid. Arya hadn’t been exaggerating to Sansa and Roose when she said it took him so long for him to do what he needed to so they could issue her a paycheck. When she ventured to bring it up to him, he’d been very apologetic. He dug through his pockets and handed her $2,000 in assorted currencies, none of which were going to be acceptable to her landlord.

Still, it wasn’t bad working here. She had her apartment which she liked. She could go places and she got to see Sansa, in theory anyhow.

Increasingly Sansa didn’t answer her cellphone. Whenever Arya called the landline, Roose always answered. He was always very pleasant to Arya, but more and more, Sansa wasn’t available. She was working, he said. He didn’t like to disturb her. He would, of course, but he knew she had just hit her stride and he hated to interrupt her. He would be happy to let Sansa know Arya had called. When would be most convenient?

When Sansa called back, it was always when Arya said it would not be a good time and the calls went to voicemail.

She finally looked up Sansa’s teaching schedule online and went out to the campus herself. The building where Sansa taught was easy enough to locate. It was a squat, grey structure. Inside there was a hallway that went all around the building with classrooms located off of each side. Arya found the room and waited.

After the students streamed out, Sansa finally emerged. For a full second, alarm flooded her face. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see you. I was worried about you.”

Sansa was pale and she looked very tired. She was fine, she assured Arya. Everything was fine.

Arya knew Sansa was lying.

“We were going to go to Castle Black. I still want to do that.”

“It’s not a good time, Arya.”

“I didn’t mean we would go right now,” Arya said. “I just thought—” She stopped short as Roose came towards them. His smile had no warmth in it.

“Hello, Arya. This is a pleasant surprise.”

Sansa stepped closer to Roose. “Arya, I wish I could stay and talk, but we have to be somewhere.
I’ll call you later.”

Arya nodded. “Okay, sure.” She walked the other way and purposely went around the hallway until she could hear them. She ducked into a doorway.

“I thought I made it clear that—”

“—She just showed up here.”

“You didn’t arrange it?”

“No, Roose. I didn’t. I tried to put her off. Please.”

“It’s all right, Sansa. There’s no harm done.”

They walked outside and she could see Roose opening the car door for Sansa.

Arya felt sick in a way she hadn’t felt since the day they locked Sansa in her room.

* * *

Sansa may have been done with her coursework for her PhD, but now she was enrolled in Roose’s own degree program and he was a brutal instructor. He accepted nothing less than 100% effort and if she didn’t perform to his standards, he made his displeasure known.

“You’re pulling to the left again,” he commented as she shot at the targets he set her.

“I’m trying to correct for it.”

Roose watched her critically. He made a suggestion as to her stance.

Sansa obeyed.

“Better.”

She shot at whatever he told her to. Sometimes the things he had her do felt awkward and they were nearly always hard, but she knew better than to complain. She simply emptied her mind and obeyed.

“You did well,” he told her when they were walking back to the house. “Would you like to go into town for dinner tonight?”

Sansa glanced at him to see if it would be safe to express a preference. The hardest part of being with him now was trying to determine when he wanted obedience and when he wanted her to be honest with him. “Where were you thinking we’d go?”

“The place by the bay.”

“All right.” When they’d last been there, she had still been under the delusion he was a normal human being. “Thank you, I would like that.” At least if they were in public, he would need to be circumspect about their conversation. She wouldn’t have to look at pictures of the people who would be dead at his hands within days or weeks and she wouldn’t have to endure him whispering poison in her ear about darkness and her true nature.

She’d been lucky so far. His last two contracts had been trickier than he wanted them to be. They were nothing he could not handle—the man with the three small children and the smiling wife died
quickly enough—but he deemed them unsuitable for her assistance. She knew he’d turned down an assignment since. He had commitments. She was drowning in papers to grade. But something would come along very soon.

“Would you like to stay here while I do errands? You’ve been looking peaky again.”

Sansa read the concern on his face. It would be safe to say yes. She nodded. She was pale because she was trapped for the rest of her life with a sociopath who envisioned their future being filled with the exhilaration of killing innocent people. She seldom slept for more than a few hours at a time now. Everything she ate tasted like ashes. She felt hollow inside. He wouldn’t let her see Arya; the girl was too sharp, he said. Once Sansa truly understood what he was trying to teach her, he would permit it. Until then she was to content herself with phone calls and to discourage Arya from visiting. After the last phone call, Roose told her he wanted those to cease as well. The last time she’d felt this alone she’d been fourteen.

“No reading,” he suggested when they were back in the house.

His suggestions were commands. “May I knit?”

“Yes, of course. You don’t need to ask my permission for everything, Sansa.”

This wasn’t true. He never hit her, but if she displeased him he would have her pinned beneath him or up against something in seconds. She must not have kept her features neutral enough because he was looking at her. “I don’t know the rules,” she said softly.

Roose seemed perplexed.

There were so many things that he simply did not understand. She saw it more and more. Sometimes he perceived it as weakness. If that was the case, she gave lip service to whatever he told her. Then there were the times like these. He was mystified. “I don’t know when it’s all right for me to do what I want anymore. I don’t . . . I’m not trying to be contrary. I just don’t understand what you want of me.”

He didn’t get angry. Roose appeared to be processing this. “When we’re training, I would prefer you to be guided by me. If you want to read . . . you sometimes lose yourself in your work. You don’t take proper care of yourself. This is why you keep getting sick.”

“So . . .” she paused and re-modulated her tone so it was clear she was not being sarcastic. “If I don’t overdo it, you don’t mind what I do?”

“I don’t mind.” Roose smiled at her, pleased that she finally understood. “I’ll only be a few hours. Any special requests?”

Sansa shook her head.

After he left, she sat in the living room and found a movie. She wanted to start sobbing, but he would notice her red eyes if she permitted herself to cry. Then he would grow very cold and very angry. She had seen him angry now and it was worse than even . . . no, she wouldn’t think about that. If she started thinking about Petyr, she would lose it.

The film was moronic. This was all she could handle any more. She worked on the sweater she was knitting for Roose. She had meant it as a surprise. Then the credit card bill came and he’d been furious. She had to tell him why she had a charge on her card. She had been forced to explain at length why she’d had to buy the yarn for it online. He finally forgave her. He was even pleased once he realized it was for a gift for him.
Sansa knit wishes into every stitch: wishes that he would drop dead suddenly and she’d be free; wishes that someone would kill him; wishes that the authorities would find out what he was and haul him off to prison; wishes that she could go back in time and erase her ever having met him. They wouldn’t come true. None of her wishes ever did.

Sansa finished a sleeve and began to thread the live stitches onto a piece of waste yarn. She heard his car coming up the driveway. He would want to eat and then he might let her read or write for a few hours.

His landline rang.

“Hello.”

“May I speak to Roose Bolton?”

Her knitting fell from her hands as the bottom dropped out of her world.

“Hello?”

Half her stitches had come off the needle.

Roose stood in the doorway. He looked a question at the phone.

Sansa managed to hand the receiver to him. She got down on the floor. Trying not to shake, she focused every bit of her remaining control on carefully threading the live stitches back onto the piece of waste yarn.

“This is he.”

It had to be a coincidence. She couldn’t imagine why Petyr would be calling Roose. Stick the needle through the loop, she told herself. One at a time. Just focus on the stitch.

“You have the other number.”

He knew him.

“I don’t care if I didn’t pick up. Call the other number exclusively in future.”

The other number meant his disposable cell phone. Roose only got calls on that for one reason. She was on her hands and knees. She would not cry. She would not panic.

“Yes, I received the file. Do not call this number again.” Roose hung up and put the phone in its cradle. “Whatever are you doing?”

“Go away.” She bit her lip; the last time she’d told him to do anything, his reaction had been horrific. “I’m sorry, it’s a knitting thing. It’s going to be hours of work if I don’t fix this just right. I need to concentrate. Could you go into another room? Please?”

“Of course.”

Sansa found it ironic that Roose dismissed her ethical objections to murder out of hand, but had the greatest respect for her knitting. He was fascinated by it. Without a murmur, he left her alone. She let herself shake then. For five minutes she shook and then she found the strength to calm down. She got the stitches back and she counted three times to make sure she had them all.

He was making sandwiches when she came into the kitchen. “All fixed?”
“Yes. I dropped the sleeve when the phone rang. Everything fell off the needle.”

“Ah.” He spread mustard on a roll. “He shouldn’t have called the house. Did he say anything to disturb you?”

Sansa shook her head. “He was asking for you just as you came in. Is he . . .”

“He is one of my contacts. He’s new.” Roose reached for the turkey. “Should he call again, keep it to a minimum.”

“Do they know who I am?” Sansa managed. “Your contacts, I mean.”

“There is most likely someone in the various organizations who has a file on me. It’s another reason why I am so concerned with discretion. I haven’t told them what I’m training you to do either.”

“Would he know about me?”

Roose shook his head. “He sends me the assignments. As I said, he’s new.”

Petyr didn’t know about her. This was all right. There was no reason to panic. “Do they ever come to your house? Your contacts?”

“No.”

It was all right. It had to be all right. Roose would make it clear to him not to call the house. She wouldn’t have to talk to Petyr or see him. It was going to be fine. “Is there any of the cranberry sauce left?”

Roose looked in the refrigerator. “A little.” He took it out and put it on her turkey sandwich. His other cell phone rang. Roose looked at it without favor. “Eat. I’ll join you in a moment.” He went into the other room.

Sansa tried to pick up the glass of water, but her hand started shaking. She set it down. She gingerly bit into the sandwich.

“I prefer to maintain minimal communication. I received the file. I understand the instructions.”

It was nothing to do with her.

“Who answers my phone is none of your concern.”

She dropped the roll. No, it had to be all right. All she had said to him was “hello.” How could he possibly recognize her voice?

Roose was clearly irritated and then he stopped short. “How much?” His tone was speculative. He was looking at her. “That’s not enough.”

Sansa managed to wipe her fingers on the napkin.

He was considering something. She could tell. Why was Roose still looking at her like that? “No, that’s not enough,” Roose repeated.

No. He wouldn’t.

“That would be an acceptable sum, but it will have to wait. I have—”
She somehow rose from the table and walked slowly to the backstairs.

Roose raised an eyebrow at her.

She smiled and shook her head to indicate she was fine. Very calmly she climbed the stairs and made it into the bathroom. She shut the door and stared at herself in the mirror. She was fifteen years older and just as stupid as the day she let the first monster into her life.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

My usual thanks to my beta, tafkar.
Nine Years Ago

The call had been muffled and confused, but Margaery thought she got the gist of it. “Shit.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Sansa’s little sister whispered into the phone.

Of course she didn’t, Margaery thought. The poor kid was fourteen or fifteen. Margaery wasn’t sure she knew what to do either. She was at Grandmother’s and they were supposed to leave on their trip to the Free Cities in two days. “What if I talked to your parents?”

Arya didn’t think it would do any good. “He’s got them snowed. They think she’s like Aunt Lysa. She gets all paranoid sometimes and comes up with these crazy theories.”

“Can you bust the lock somehow?”

“Not without them knowing.” Arya had a muffled conversation with someone who had a high-pitched voice. “Hold on.”

Margaery heard a series of unidentifiable sounds.

“Rickon and I think we can get her out through the window, but what do we do after that?”

“Do you have any money?”

Again, Arya put the phone down. Finally she came back. “$72. I stole Bran’s name day money and I found some extra in Robb’s sock drawer. $10 of it is in change.”

They were just kids and they weren’t very well off. Grandmother was out shopping somewhere so Margaery moved over to the landline and got Loras on the other end. She cajoled and she pleaded and finally she ordered.

“Rickon says they’re talking about taking her to the hospital with or without the second doctor.”

“Get her out of there now,” Margaery commanded. “Do you know how to get to the bus station?”

“Sure. That’s where we take Robb when he leaves for uni.”

Margaery spoke into the other phone. “Find out when the next bus from Storm’s End gets in, Loras. I don’t care what you have to do, but you need to meet it.” When she had compliance from her brother as well as some advice, she turned back to Arya. “Can you get her there?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“I’m going to give you some numbers. Sansa shouldn’t take the phone. They can track it, Loras said. Loras will meet her in King’s Landing and she’ll be safe with him.” She rattled off the numbers for Loras, Garlan, her cell, and then she gave Arya her email address. She doubted Sansa was going to be in any condition to remember any of these.
“Okay.” Arya took a deep breath. “We have to do it now.”

* * *

**Present Day**

* * *

Lannister parties were unpleasant, wine-soaked affairs. Everyone was impossibly beautiful and everyone was miserable. She was going to be a Lannister very soon. She wondered if she fit in. Margaery didn’t know about the first part, although judging from the looks the men were giving her she was attractive enough. She was certainly miserable enough.

It wasn’t Jaime. They got along quite well, actually. He was funny and articulate and as long as it didn’t involve Cersei in any way, shape, or form, he was a decent man. Their living arrangement was the exact opposite of what she’d had with Sansa. If it involved any of their respective relatives save for Tyrion or Cersei, they managed to sleep in the same bed. He stayed on his side; she stayed on hers. Otherwise, they kept to themselves.

Her life felt incredibly hollow. *She* felt hollow. There was some dull ache in her that was never going to go away.

Grandmother didn’t understand. “You can do as you like, Margaery. Just make sure you’re discreet,” she would say as if that made it all better.

The three Lannister siblings understood, but they had no solutions other than to drink. She drank with them too. It helped for a while.

She was on her fourth glass of champagne when Tywin Lannister appeared at her shoulder.

“Switch to water.”

It was not a request.

Margaery furrowed her brow prettily. She set down the champagne flute.

“I will not have a drunk for a daughter-in-law.”

She couldn’t see why not, he already had three drunks for children. “It’s not a problem, Tywin.” Snagging the arm of a passing waiter, she asked for club soda and set about making the rounds, smiling till her cheek muscles ached. His eyes finally left her and she found a powder room. She was staring into the mirror wondering how she had reached this point when her phone rang. She answered it without looking at the number. “Hello.”

“Margaery?”

She froze.

“Please, I know I have no right to call you, but I don’t know what to do. I can’t reach Arya.”

“Call your psychopathic boyfriend.”

“Roose knows Littlefinger. He knows him. Margaery, I’m terrified. Please, I’ll do anything.”

* * *

Roose read through the call for presentations. “Your advisor is absolutely right. You should accept the invitation.”
“You don’t mind my going?”

“Of course not.” Roose found this communication gap very frustrating. Sansa would balk at some technique he wanted her to master, but she wouldn’t change the television channel without his express approval. “A national presentation will look very good on your cv. It will make you much more marketable as a candidate.”

Sansa bit her lip. “I thought you wouldn’t like me leaving the area.”

“It’s only three days. We’ve been parted before.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Roose sighed. “Sansa, I don’t object to your career. Your research is very important. I just want you to have some balance in your life. Is that so very unreasonable of me?”

“No.”

“You don’t have much time to prepare.”

“Ellyn thought I could take what I did for the symposium and modify it for this. I don’t think it would need that much more work.”

He hadn’t attended her presentation for the symposium to which she referred, but she’d rehearsed it for him. “How long will you have?”

“It’s the same amount of time, but I need to massage it to fit their theme.”

Roose nodded. She was a very good scholar. If she did well and made a name for herself, it would make it that much simpler for them to stay together. He had been pressing her to marry him, but she resisted this almost more than she did assisting him. She wanted to advance in her career on her own. He could respect this, but the practicalities of the job market were such that such idealism would likely not be rewarded.

* * *

Her hands shaking, Sansa dialed Roose’s number. “I’m still at the airport, Roose. They canceled the flight. Something is wrong with the plane and I guess it’s too late to get another one.” None of this was part of the plan, but somehow Tyrion Lannister thought it would work even better.

“Will they put you up in a hotel?”

“What do you think?” Sansa made her voice sound sour. It wasn’t hard; the airline hadn’t been very helpful. “I found a room, but I had to charge it. I’m sorry. I didn’t know what else to do.”

Roose was quick to reassure her. “That’s fine, Sansa. Where are you staying?”

She rattled off the name of the hotel. She noticed a man looking at her curiously. She moved a bit further away.

“Downtown?”

Shit, of course he knew the address. He’d lived here for two years. “It was the only one I could find. There are conferences going on all over the place. The airline was absolutely no help. I don’t want to ever fly on them again, Roose.”
Roose laughed. “That bad?”

“That bad. Look, my battery is dying. I’m going to get something to eat first and then I’ll call you from the hotel once I get it charged, okay? It might be a while. I’m waiting for a taxi now and I heard them talking about traffic jams.” This wasn’t exactly true, but Tyrion said it happened often enough that it would sound plausible. The man with the shaved head was staring at her avidly. She didn’t think his interest was sexual, but it was unabashed.

“Your presentation went well?”

Sansa answered in the affirmative. It had gone so well that it hurt. That part of her life would be over forever in a few minutes.

“Good. I’ll let you go. Call me.”

The man with the shaved head was on his phone.

“Okay.” She hung up. The car Tyrion described was approaching. She only had her carry-on. Somehow although the plane had never left the airport, the airline had managed to lose her luggage. Not that it mattered really. She’d started over before. She would start over again.

* * *

Margaery hoped Tyrion knew what he was doing. They had Sansa on speaker phone.

“What do you mean he’s not there?”

“I mean the first car left me off exactly where you told me to tell him, and your second car and driver aren’t anywhere to be seen. I’m being followed too.”

“Are you certain?”

“I know when I’m being followed.”

“Is he following you like Jaime or—”

Sansa sounded resigned. “No, he’s very good; he’s a professional. There’s a child too, who is even better. Look, this isn’t going to work. I was a fool to try it. I’ll go to the hotel and in the morning, I’ll fly back. Roose will never know I tried to leave. I’ll . . . I don’t know what to do about Littlefinger, but I’ll—”

“No.” Margaery interrupted. “You are not going back to that freak show and I will not let Petyr Baelish anywhere near you.”

“Can you shake them? Are you sure it’s a child?”

“Yes, of course I’m sure. He trained me to spot these things. But where would I go? Your driver isn’t here. I don’t have that much cash.”

Tyrion ran his hands through his hair. “We can wire you the money or you can charge it.”

Sansa sighed audibly. “You don’t get this, do you? If I withdraw money from an ATM, I leave a trail. Anything I charge leaves a trail. If you wire me the money, you leave a trail. I have another hour at the most before he starts to worry. He will phone the hotel first. After that . . . he knows people. The first thing they will do is look at the charges from my credit and debit cards and the calls from my phone. That’s why I’m on this one. But no matter what, eventually he will find me.”
“He’s a middle-aged professor who likes to beat up women,” Jaime interjected. “I realize you’re scared, but—”

“He will find me,” Sansa repeated. “What he did to Margaery—”

Jaime leaned forward. “That’s true then?”

Margaery stared at Jaime. He hadn’t believed her?

“Of course, it’s true.”

“She can press charges,” Jaime suggested.

Sansa didn’t say anything right away. “Fuck, you people don’t understand this at all. Gods, I am such a stupid fool. Roose was playing with her. That was nothing. I need you to listen to me. It was nothing. I know it scared the shit out of you, Margaery, but that was Roose being . . . Take what he did and multiply it by a hundred and you have the beginning of what he’s like.”

Margaery wasn’t sure what was more sickening: the sheer matter-of-factness in Sansa’s voice or what she was intimating.

“All right,” Tyrion began again. “I think there’s a way to salvage this—”

“Take me off speaker and go into a room by yourself,” Sansa ordered. “The fewer people who know whatever you’re planning the better. If, no, when, Roose finds out I’ve gone, I don’t want him coming after Margaery.”

“Sansa—”

“Margaery? Whatever happens? I did love you.”

* * *

By the time she finished her call with Tyrion Lannister, Sansa was beginning to feel some hope again. She saw the child inching forward. She took advantage of a passing group of tourists with cameras to slip the burner into her bag. She’d tossed her old smartphone earlier, but up ahead there was a lone pay phone with a tattered phone book hanging by a chain. Sansa moved toward it and placed a call to a taxi company. As soon as the child was in earshot, she asked for a cab and casually complained about the car company someone had called for her having been a dead loss. She’d been dropped in the middle of some tourist trap and she really wanted to get to her hotel.

Sansa managed to evade both of the tails as she moved toward an intersection. She hoped they would assume she was going to wait for the cab there. On the way she withdrew another hundred from her account. Tyrion suggested if they already knew where she was, it wouldn’t hurt for her to get more cash. A hundred wouldn’t go very far, but if she had to go back to him, she didn’t want him realizing what she’d been trying to do.

It was a popular spot and it wasn’t hard to move away undetected.

The address Tyrion gave her was in a nasty part of town, but no one bothered her or even seemed to notice her. They were probably all too busy scoring drugs to care.

Tyrion’s friend was less than reassuring in appearance. He let her into his apartment. It was dark and dim, but it seemed to be clean. “What did he tell you?”
“That I was to do whatever you asked.” Bronn smiled lazily. “And that he’d pay me handsomely for my efforts. He’s good like that, Tyrion is.”

She didn’t know how Tyrion knew this guy, but if he was easily swayed by money, she had to be careful. “I need a gun, a 9mm if you can manage it, and ammunition.” She thought quickly. There was no chance of her letting him drive her anywhere. She would need to revise the plan on the fly.

* * *

Roose’s other cell phone rang. “Yes,” he said impatiently. He didn’t have time to reassure his new contact that he could do his job. He was worried about Sansa. He had phoned the hotel twice now. Sansa had yet to check in. Even allowing for traffic and a long meal, she should have been there two hours ago.

“I don’t know if you remember me.”

“You have the wrong number.”

“Oh, but I’m quite certain I don’t. When last we met, you had kindly done some . . . friends of mine a favor as a professional courtesy.”

Roose moved his finger away from the button that would end the call. The Spider. “Yes. This is not a good time.”

“I find myself in the happy position of being able to return the favor to you now. I believe you are still involved with the object of our last conversation.”

“Very involved. Why?”

“I happened to be in the airport as she phoned you. I can read lips. It is a useful skill.”

“Is she all right?”

There was a pause. “I don’t believe the young lady was being entirely truthful when she spoke to you. She mentioned traffic.”

“Yes.”

“At this time of year, as I’m sure you may recall, most people have gone to their vacation homes. The city is quite navigable.”

It meant nothing. Sansa told him she heard “them talking.” She could have overheard it from some fools who didn’t know any better. “Do you know where she is?”

“I took the liberty of having her followed. She turned down three taxis before she got into a very specific car. It let her off in the heart of Sunspear. My little birds lost her, but I have them looking for her.”

“Whose car?”

There was a sigh. “I don’t know. Inquiries are being made.”

Roose felt anger rising in him.

“When she is located, what you like us to do?”
"I want her back."

"In what condition?"

Roose saw her knitting bag on the sofa and one of her notebooks on the end table. She would have taken them if she meant to try and leave him. "Alive and unharmed." Someone might have gotten to her, but it would be prudent to take precautions. "If it is not too much to ask, there are some things I would like to know."

Varys was more than willing to oblige.

* * *

Their carefully orchestrated plan had fallen to bits. Margaery didn’t know all of the details. Tyrion kept saying it was better she didn’t, but it seemed immaterial now. Whatever he’d cooked up with Sansa was no more. Sansa had gone off script. She’d reached his contact and then from there she’d improvised because Tyrion’s contact had lost her. Or Sansa had lost him.

Margaery hoped it was the latter

"You gave her a gun?!"

She felt her stomach lurch.

Tyrion went back into the other room.

"Does she know how to use one?" Jaime asked.

"She didn’t when she was with me. That freak must have taught her.” Her conversations with Sansa had been furtive, desperate things. Sansa had been adamant only she could make the calls. Sansa had purchased what she called a burner—Tyrion later explained to Margaery that this was a phone bought with a prepaid and limited number of minutes on it. It was disposable and less traceable. There had been other precautions Sansa had mandated. Sansa had not said very much about Roose Bolton to her or to Tyrion. She was plainly terrified and she wanted to get away. When they had asked her questions, Sansa kept responding that the less they knew the better and that the police were not an option.

"Tyrion will figure something out,” Jaime told her quietly.

Margaery didn’t see how. "You didn’t believe me.”

He had the grace to look ashamed. “I thought you were exaggerating.”

He’d thought she was obsessed.

“I’m sorry,” Jaime apologized.

“So am I.” She was sorry about such a lot of things.

* * *

Roose let himself into the apartment. There was nothing at his house to indicate Sansa hadn’t meant to return. Her knitting projects were in the living room. Two fat notebooks, along with a stack of her books which he knew were central to her dissertation research sat in the room she used as an office. Her favorite clothes were still in her half of the closet. The Winterfell Direwolves sweatshirt, which she categorically refused to throw out even though it was falling to bits, was
hung on the back of the closet door.

He scanned the apartment. Everywhere he looked he saw pieces of her life. Even if she had somehow decided to try and leave him, she would have taken these things. Either she had herself been taken or . . . could someone have gotten to her while she was away?

His other cell phone rang. “Yes.”

“It is as if she vanished.”

There were perfectly legitimate reasons why she might have fallen from view. “The hospitals?”

“No, not the morgue either. There is no trace of her.”

“And the other matters?”

“Do you have a pen?”

He found one and flipped open her notebook. “Go ahead.”

Varys recited several numbers.

Roose knew most of them: Arya’s, Sansa’s advisor’s, his own. He scribbled down the ones unfamiliar to him. “The last three?”

“Hotels. There has been only one charge on the credit card, also for a hotel. She withdrew $100 from an ATM in the area where my little birds last spotted her and she evidently called for a cab. You know the other numbers?”

“Yes.” Roose thought. Varys’ help would only go so far. He wondered what Arya knew. He would need to find her.

“There is no trace of the original car. I do have one sighting of the young lady in a rather insalubrious part of town, but I don’t know how much credence I can give to it.”

Roose stared at the names and numbers Varys had listed. “There is nothing here to indicate she left intentionally. Could she have been taken?”

“It is possible, but I’ve spread the word I have an interest in her safe return. A reward may sweeten things. Five thousand?”

“You may go up to fifty.”

“You are serious about this lady.”

Roose was prepared to make it more. “Very.”

“I will see that it is made known.”

* * *

Tywin was not sure who was more surprised: the girl or him. “Who are you?”

“I’m a . . . friend of Tyrion’s.”

He took in her disheveled appearance. Her clothes were dirty. Her ginger hair was coming out of its
“Isn’t that Tyrion’s usual type, but there was no question in his mind what she was. “And where is my son?”

“I don’t know. He’s coming to get me. He said I could stay.”

“Did he?” Tywin inhaled. “This is my home, not my son’s. Did he pay you for your services?”

“What?”

Tywin drew out his wallet. He looked her up and down. “I doubt you get more than $50 at a time. Here.” He counted out $500. “Take it and go. If you know what’s good for you, you won’t return and you will stay away from my son.”

The girl frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“I do not tolerate whores in my house. Now get out before I throw you out of here bodily.”

“I am not a prostitute.”

“Then who are you?” He casually walked toward the desk. There was a gun in the center drawer.

She hadn’t moved from the sofa. “I’m Sansa. Look, I’m sorry Tyrion didn’t tell you about me. He’ll be here soon.”

“This is my house.”

“If you would just let me stay until he gets here, please? I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“That isn’t my problem, Ms?”

She sighed. “Stark.”

Tywin stopped then. He knew who this was. “You’re the one who was mixed up with Margaery Tyrell.” He had a file on this creature back in King’s Landing. Olenna had told him she was out of the picture, but clearly she was wrong.

“I used to room with her. Please, I promise I’ll go away if you’ll just let me stay till Tyrion gets here.”

“So I was right about what you are after all.” He watched as her expression hardened. He opened the desk drawer. “How much to make you go away?”

“It won’t cost you a copper star if you’ll just let me stay here. Look, I’ll wait in your garage. I don’t have anywhere else to go,” she repeated.

He leveled the gun at her. “How much?”

Sansa Stark stared at it. “I don’t want your money.”

“I came into my house and discovered a vagrant on the premises. I was surprised and I shot her.”

“With that?” she asked with disdain. “I don’t think so. Look, I don’t want any trouble. I don’t want your money. I don’t even want to inconvenience you. I’m sorry that Tyrion didn’t ask you. I can’t help that. I just need a place to stay until your son comes to get me.”

Tywin gestured toward the door with the gun.
“It’s not loaded and it hasn’t been cleaned.”

“And you know this how?”

“Because I saw it when I was looking for a pen and I checked. I know about pistols. You shouldn’t leave them lying around. Someone might get hurt.”

He set it down and moved toward the phone.

“No, I don’t think so, Mr. Lannister.” She had a gun of her own and it was pointed straight at him. “This is loaded.” She disengaged the safety. “Sit down in that chair, please.”

“You’re being very foolish.”

Sansa Stark shrugged. “This is what is going to happen. You are going to sit there and we’re going to wait for Tyrion. Then I’m going to go away and you can have your house back.”

He doubted her aim was anything he need fear. She was a slight thing. It shouldn’t take much to overpower her.

“I can shoot the button off the cuff of your suit jacket, Mr. Lannister. You have a very lovely home. Don’t make me shoot it up.”

He sat then and stared at her. “You should have taken my money. If you think this is going to end well for you, you are sadly mistaken.”

Her laugh was short, bitter. “Nothing is going to end well for me. I was a fool to ever think it would.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

As always, I need to thank my beta, tafkar.
Once Upon a Time

Chapter Notes

There are mentions of child abuse and rape in this chapter. I’m assuming that by now, you have figured out what happened to Sansa. As always, the detail level is low, but should you have triggers, it’s discussed in this chapter, albeit obliquely.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * *

Nine Years Ago

* * *

“Go. Hurry.”

Sansa hugged Arya. “They’re going to be furious.”

“I don’t care. You have to go. I have Margaery’s phone number. I’ll figure out how to call her. I’ll watch over Rickon. You have to go.”

Sansa got onto the bus. She found a seat by a window. She didn’t dare breathe until the bus was well away from town.

She clutched Arya’s backpack to her chest. Arya had packed it in a hurry. Other than her purse, which Arya had managed to grab, this was all she had in the world now. Sansa unzipped it.

There wasn’t much: four cheese sticks, two juice boxes, Robb’s Winterfell Direwolves sweatshirt, Jon’s hunting knife, Rickon’s teddy bear, every copper star Arya had in the world and every copper star she had found in their brothers’ bedrooms, a toothbrush, toothpaste, Arya’s algebra homework, and Bran’s book of northern fairytales.

* * *

Present Day

* * *

Arya’s apartment was in a part of King’s Landing yet to be gentrified. Most of the buildings here were decrepit warehouses. The door to her building was locked and lacked any kind of buzzer system. Roose slid lock picks in and opened it easily enough. According to the name scrawled on the mailbox in the lobby, she lived in #14. He found it with difficulty; none of the units were labeled in any kind of sequential order. He knocked first and then he began to pound his fists against the door.

“Who is it?”

“Roose. It’s an emergency.”

He heard locks clicking back and a chain being slid off.

Arya stared up at him. “What’s wrong? Is it Sansa? Is she all right?”
He pushed past her. The place was one large loft. He found the bathroom, but it was empty. He returned to the main part of the apartment scanning everywhere. There was no sign of Sansa here and Arya was plainly bewildered.

“What’s going on?”

“Have you heard from Sansa?”

Her face blanched. “I knew there was something wrong when she wasn’t eating. Is she okay?”

Roose understood lies. Arya was not lying. He gave her an edited version of what had happened.

“She just disappeared?”

“No one seems to know. I’ve called every hotel I could find. Her phone was dying when I spoke to her last.”

“What do the police say?” Arya switched on more lights.

Roose hesitated. “I haven’t reported it yet. I wanted to see if she’d contacted you.”

Arya hunted for her phone, which of course was completely dead. This necessitated a frantic search for its charger. She dialed into her voicemail. “I have twenty-seven messages,” she said in a small voice.

He stood while she replayed them. The girl’s face went paler and paler. She scrawled times down on the back of a paper shopping bag.

Finally she put the phone down.

“Did she contact you?”

“I have a message from yesterday at noon. She just said to call her. The others are all from before then. They’re not good, Roose.”

“Play them for me.”

Arya hesitated and then let him listen.

He noted the dates and times. The calls started a week and a half ago. That Arya should let so long go without checking her messages was hardly surprising. In the short time he’d known her the girl had lost her cell phone at least twice. The calls themselves made no sense. Sansa sounded panicked or hysterical in all of them. She merely begged Arya to call her. Finally on message eighteen she’d whispered the word “Littlefinger.” They were all of like variety until he reached the last few. Sansa sounded eerily calm on those. “I don’t understand any of this.”

“She didn’t tell you about Littlefinger?”

“No.”

“Fuck,” Arya said.

Roose listened as Arya made her call to the Dornish police. When she indicated they wished to talk to him, he reluctantly took the phone and shared what he knew. Then he handed it back to Arya.

“They’re putting out an APB on her,” Arya said glumly after she finished talking to the police. “I
think I should phone Dad and Mum.”

“She won’t go to them.”

“No, but they need to know. I’ll call Jon too, just in case she went up there or he heard from her.”

Arya placed those calls.

He noted she referenced Littlefinger, whatever that meant. He asked again when she put the phone back down.

“If Sansa didn’t tell you, I don’t feel comfortable—she said she was better. Did she have a relapse?”

“She recovered. The specialist determined it was brought on by stress.”

Arya poked around in her refrigerator. “I have beer, cream soda, or water.”

“I’m not thirsty.”

She didn’t listen. She poured him a glass of water. “I forgot; you don’t drink.” She popped the top off of a bottle of cream soda and drank. “Are you sure she got better? It’s usually the first sign things are about to get bad.”

Roose stared at her.

“Did the nightmares start up?”

“No.” Roose saw no reason to mention Sansa’s insomnia or the times she would sit bolt upright in bed shaking. It was stress, pure and simple. She’d allowed her academic work to overwhelm her. She was recovering.

“Well, I guess that’s good, but we should probably call the hospitals down there.”

Roose saw worry etched on Arya’s face. “The police will do so, but we can call the emergency rooms, of course.” Varys’ men would have made their own inquiries, but Roose knew there would have to be some duplication of effort through official channels.

Arya’s eyes were weary. “Those aren’t the kind of hospitals I mean.”

* * *

The girl continued to look at him equably, even politely.

Tywin contented himself with planning the various ways he was going to destroy Sansa Stark.

“You’ll have to get in line,” she told him.

He arched an eyebrow.

“To hurt me. There’s a whole list of people ahead of you.” She twisted her lips into an ironic smile.

“I am going to destroy you.”

Sansa Stark shrugged. “There’s probably a list for that too. I bet you’re not even in the top five.”

Tywin considered her. “Is it money you want?”
“Are you going to start calling me a whore again?”

“You lived off of Margaery Tyrell. You have apparently inveigled my son into some demented scheme. It seems the appropriate designation for you.”

“Define whore.”

Again he arched an eyebrow. “A whore is a woman who exchanges sexual favors for monetary compensation. That means—”

“I know what compensation means. I’m a doctoral student. Or was. I guess that’s all over for me too,” she said to herself in a brittle voice. “I paid my half of the living expenses with my own money when I was with Margaery.”

He could well imagine how.

“I temped as a file clerk. I worked in the bookstore. I had lots of jobs, respectable jobs. They paid terribly, but I worked. I had loans and stipends. She didn’t have rent. Her parents bought her the apartment, but I paid her for half of the taxes, the utilities, our food. She tried to give me things sometimes, but I always refused them. Even for my name day. The rule for both of us was any gifts had to be less than $25. I’m a lot of things, Mr. Lannister, but I am not a prostitute.”

“Very well,” he allowed.

They didn’t talk for a while.

He was tired and hungry and thirsty. Involuntarily his eyes flicked toward the bar.

“Did you want a drink?”

“You’re offering me my own alcohol in my own home? How very kind of you.”

“No, I’m offering to get you one.”

“Fine. Whiskey. Two fingers, neat.”

Sansa looked at him blankly. “I’m not good with liquor, Mr. Lannister. Which bottle and what does ‘two fingers, neat’ mean?”

“The bottle on the far right contains the whiskey. Neat means without anything else.” He gestured with his fingers as if he were holding them against a glass. “This much.”

“Oh.” She stood. Keeping the gun pointed at him, she carefully poured out a measure of whiskey. She set it on the coffee table and then backed up onto the sofa again.

He took the drink and sipped at it. “I’m surprised. The way Margaery imbibes, I would have thought you would be conversant with such things.”

“Margaery never drank much—” She stopped short.

“She makes up for it now.”

Sansa bit her lip. “Does she—is it a problem?”

He was surprised to see her concern. “Margaery is a bit too fond of wine. I didn’t mean to imply she is an alcoholic.” He set the glass down. “What are you studying?”
“Literature.”

He shifted in the chair. “You said you were a doctoral student. What is your dissertation topic?” Perhaps if he could get her to relax, he could overpower her. The whiskey had been a poor choice on his part. It would dull his reflexes. He should have asked for water.

“I was researching the Nightfort legends.”

He was unfamiliar with these, whatever they were. He allowed his ignorance to show.

“The Nightfort was one of the outposts at the Wall. There are a number of stories associated with it. They date back to the Age of Heroes.”

He nodded. He knew enough about the period to hold a very general conversation.

“You’ve probably heard of ‘The Rat Cook.’”

“Yes. One of my grandsons watched it incessantly.” Tommen had always gravitated toward childish things long after it was appropriate to do so.

“That’s one of them.”

Tywin grunted. “That puerile cartoon?”

Sansa shrugged again. “The original story is a lot darker. There aren’t any animated salt-and-pepper shakers. There’s no prince trying to rescue the beautiful girl confined to the kitchens. No songs. No dances. And there’s certainly no happy ending.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you had a drink yourself. There is probably a liqueur you’d find more to your taste.” She’d claimed unfamiliarity with alcohol; if her tolerance was low, it shouldn’t be too hard to get the gun away from her.

“I don’t drink, Mr. Lannister. He doesn’t let—I don’t drink.”

“What is the original story?”

Sansa sighed. “One of the Andal kings did a great wrong to a man who became a member of the Night’s Watch. This man was a cook. The Andal King visited and was served up a meat pie of bacon and the King’s own son. The King ate the pie without knowing its contents. He enjoyed it so much, he even asked for a second helping.”

Tywin’s eyebrows shot up. “How charming.”

“They left that part out of the movie. So the gods cursed the cook and turned him into a giant white rat. Part of the curse was that he was unable to eat anything but his own progeny. Also not in the movie,” she told him. “The reason the cook was cursed because he broke the laws of hospitality.”

“Something you might consider.”

“Mr. Lannister, the gods cursed me when I was twelve.” She shrugged. “Most of the stories are about the inhumanity of man. There’s another called ‘The Night’s King.’ It’s Roose’s favorite, which in retrospect was yet another glaring sign that I was in way over my head, and which I blithely ignored.”

“Who is Roose?”
Sansa shook her head. “Someone you don’t want to know.”

He reached for his drink again. “What is ‘The Night’s King’ about?”

“The thirteenth Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch was a man who knew no fear.” From her practiced manner, she was clearly accustomed to recounting these tales. “This was his downfall, because all men must know fear. He was a great warrior. One night he saw a woman atop the Wall. Her skin was said to be ‘as white as the moon’ and her eyes like ‘blue stars.’ He chased her and loved her and although ‘her skin was as cold as ice, when he gave her his seed, she took his soul.’”

“Very pretty.”

“Not really. He called himself the Night’s King and she was the Night’s Queen and they sacrificed people to the Others until they were defeated. The legends don’t specify what atrocities they committed, but the earlier versions suggest they were beyond vile; my research confirms it.”

He swallowed some whiskey. “But these are fairy tales.”

She shook her head. “Well, I don’t know about the Rat Cook, but the Night’s King was a real person. His name was struck from all the records of the Watch after they killed him. He really was defeated by one of the Kings in the North and by Joramun, who was King-Beyond-the-Wall. I have no idea who his consort was. Maybe she was just some woman with bright blue eyes and a very fair complexion, but she existed. They were probably a Dark Ages era pair of especially depraved serial killers, but they were real. Their story got whitewashed too. It’s often included in modern collections for children except now she’s this beautiful lady and he’s the handsome lord who rescued her.” Sansa made a face. “Most fairy tales were really dark in origin. It makes me sick sometimes to see how they’ve been sanitized.”

“I imagine most parents don’t feel it’s appropriate to subject their children to disgusting stories about serial killers, Ms Stark.”

“It’s better to know the truth. I spent years thinking the pretty fairy tales were real. I dreamed of being rescued by the handsome prince. I would have been better off if I had been taught that there are no happy endings and that the monsters always win.”

* * *

Margaery and Jaime were staring at the television news without actually seeing it. Tyrion heard from Sansa and then he’d left them. That had been hours ago and he still hadn’t called.

“The weather . . .”

She didn’t bother to answer him.

“I can try him again.” Before he could even start dialing, his phone rang. “Where are—yes, this is Jaime Lannister.”

Margaery watched as his face changed.

“Is he all right?”

Shit.

“What hospital? Yes, I can be there right away.” He hung up. “Tyrion was in a car accident.”
It was past 2:00 and there was no sign of Tyrion. Sansa Stark occasionally shifted the gun to one hand while she shook the other to keep it from cramping, but she didn’t appear to be tiring otherwise.

“I could help you, you know. I have money, resources, people who will get you whatever you need, take you wherever you want.”

“In exchange for what?”

“I don’t require repayment.”

Sansa Stark looked at him with eyes decades older than she was. “Nothing is free, not for me. I learned that lesson fifteen years ago.”

“What happened then?” he asked suddenly. If he remembered correctly, the woman was twenty-six or twenty-seven. “You’ve mentioned this all beginning around that time at least twice. Something happened. What was it?”

“Aren’t you tired of fairy tales?”

She had told him enough of them. These Nightfort stories were dark and disturbing.

“Fine. Once upon a time, there was a pretty little girl with long red hair and big blue eyes who lived in a crowded ranch house with her four brothers and her younger sister and her parents. There was never enough money or space and the little girl dreamed of being taken away to a castle where she would have all the pretty dresses and toys she could ever want.”

“If you’re going to make a mockery of this—”

Sansa waved the gun at him. “You asked. I’m telling you. The little girl’s mother had been a beautiful princess once. Her mother and her aunt had long red hair and bright blue eyes too. They had grown up in a beautiful land with rivers, rolling hills, and green grass. There was a boy who lived next door and he fell in love with the little girl’s mother, but she had eyes for another. He then turned his affections to the sister, but she too looked elsewhere. The little girl thought this story was very romantic and asked to be told it again and again.”

Tywin noted the way Sansa’s voice was starting to catch.

Sansa took a deep breath. “One day the boy, who was now a man, came to visit her family. He brought presents for everyone. He gave the little girl a doll with a blue silk dress and long red hair just like hers. Even though the little girl was too old for dolls, she was charmed by him. He said she looked just like her mother at that age. He liked the little girl and every time he came, he brought her nice presents. He bought her pretty clothes and books of the fairy tales she loved so much.”

He didn’t like the look in her eyes. Something was quite wrong with this young woman. His initial assessment of her had been very off. She wasn’t nearly as hard-bitten as she had first seemed.

“The little girl’s father did well in his job and was rewarded with a purse of gold and a new position. He moved his family into a bigger house where they were less crowded, and for the first time the little girl had a bedroom of her very own.”

“How old was the little girl?”
Sansa made a short brittle laugh. “She had turned thirteen. The man was always around now. He
wooed and married the little girl’s aunt. Everyone thought he was so good and kind. He adopted
his wife’s son as his own. He often stayed at the little girl’s house and when he knew no one was
looking, he would come to her pretty pink bedroom and he would tell her how special she was.”

“You don’t have to go on,” Tywin told her grimly.

“Oh, but you asked, Mr. Lannister. And this story might not end the way you expect. There’s no
singing in this one either. Where was I? Oh. He would kiss the little girl on the forehead and tell
her that not everyone would understand his feelings for her. He told her a time would come when
she was ready and he would make her the happiest little girl in the world. When she turned
thirteen-and-a-half, he began to kiss the little girl in other places. He began to touch her too. When
she was fourteen, he started doing other things to her.”

“Sansa—”

She waved the gun again. “I’m still talking here. The man continued to bring her pretty presents
and each time he made her pay for them. He made her do lots of things. She felt dirty all the time.
Every time she would think of telling someone, he would make her understand that no one would
believe her. Then one day the man had to go away with his wife and his new son on a long journey
to a faraway land. The little girl saw the way out. She was a very smart little girl and she learned of
a special prize that would let her escape. She studied very hard and she told no one and she won it.
She persuaded her parents to let her go away to claim her prize. And she traveled to a magic
kingdom and she met a beautiful princess who wondered why the little girl was always so sad.”

“Margaery. You met Margaery.”

“Don’t you want to hear the end?”

“I don’t think you are in any condition to tell me.”

Sansa lowered the gun. “No, I don’t think I am either.” She looked at her hands. “You said before
that you would destroy me.”

“I think under the circumstances—”

Sansa put the gun on the coffee table and pushed it toward him. “I’m going to stand up now. Shoot
me. You’re right. Everyone will think you killed an intruder. Make it clean, please? I really think
I’ve suffered enough.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

I took the original Nightfort legends straight from the books. The newer versions are
my invention (I was inspired by the ‘Be Our Guest’ song from Disney’s Beauty and
the Beast.)

This chapter was quite a mess before my beta, the awesome tafkar made some
suggestions. If it works at all, it’s because of her.
Sansa hung in the back as the girls fingered the scarves in the boutique. She didn’t have any money to spare on expensive non-essentials. Margaery was drawn to a robin’s egg blue one. It was pretty enough, but Sansa couldn’t believe how much the store was charging for a garter stitch scarf. Jeyne pointed to another item and while Margaery was distracted, Rhonda Fossoway reached in with her claw-like hand and grabbed the item Margaery had wanted. Although Sansa realized Margaery was pissed, she noticed that her roommate did a good job of concealing it.

On the way back, Sansa made an excuse and slipped into the local yarn shop. She found what she wanted easily enough. The yarn wasn’t an exact match, but Sansa thought the colors were prettier in this anyhow and would be flattering to Margaery.

Sansa found Margaery fascinating. She really did seem to lead a charmed life. She had a loving family who wanted the best for her and who looked out for her. Margaery was all that was beautiful and delightful and she still managed to be kind to the people around her—even to her. Sansa knew she couldn’t be an easy roommate to tolerate. If she wasn’t waking Margaery up with one of her nightmares, she was moody. And she’d become strange. Not odd. Strange. She saw it in their faces when she gave away the packages he sent her or when she ripped up the letters without reading them. She was different. She felt a pang as she watched the girls chattering away. There had been a time when she had been one of those girls—she had never been as rich as Margaery, but she’d been popular. Now she would forever be the person on the outside looking in.

The least she could do was spend some of her money and time to make a gift. Over the next week or so, she worked on the scarf whenever Margaery was out of the room. When it was done, she folded it and placed it on the bed. Sansa settled down with some of her reading for her classes. She was deep in her social studies text when Margaery came back.

“Did they send this to you too?”

Sansa looked up from her book. “No, I made it for you. It’s because I was such a bitch to you after you kept them away from me.”

“You made it?”

“It’s just a garter stitch scarf. I can’t believe how much they charge for those.”

Margaery sat on the bed. She seemed surprised. “You’re so sweet. You didn’t have to do this for me.”

Sansa deliberately shrugged. She acted casually because she didn’t want to alarm Margaery. If she thought it was something more, it would be very unpleasant. “Don’t make a big deal out of it. It’s just a scarf.”
Sansa toweled herself off. She put on the clothes that were piled on the bed. The sweatpants surely belonged to his son. They, like the t-shirt, were too big on her, but everything was clean. She pulled the drawstrings on the sweatpants as tight as they would go. She didn’t have much in her purse, but at least she had a comb, so she ran it through her hair. Mr. Lannister, or Tywin as he told her to call him, had told her to come down to the kitchen when she was done so she did.

He was making what appeared to be hash. “I am not much of a cook. There were frozen pot pies, but after your story . . .”

“They probably contain worse things than the son of the Andal King. This will be fine.”

He brought the frying pan to the table and they ate.

For the first time in weeks, she had an appetite.

“You are going to stay here for a few days. You’ll have to brook my company, though.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t call the police.”

Tywin looked at her. “I’m not a monster.”

Sansa felt her face flushing. She focused on the food in front of her.

“I finally reached Tyrion. He was in a car accident.”

“Is he okay?” She dropped her fork. “Shit, Roose found out. He must have gone after your son to —”

Tywin was shaking his head. “No one knows you’re here. Tyrion’s accident was just that. A drunk driver crashed into him. It had nothing to do with you. His car was totaled, but he walked away unscathed. In any case, he explained your situation to me. I don’t quite understand who you’re running from, but this place is secure enough.”

There was no place Roose wouldn’t find her. Essos would be safest, but even then . . .

“He says your father is Eddard Stark. Do you want me to call him?”

Sansa finished chewing. “No.”

“This is what family is for, Sansa. If your parents knew what this man did to you—”

“They know. They didn’t believe me.”

“But—”

Sansa drank her orange juice. “They didn’t believe me,” she repeated.

He spooned more food onto her plate. “Would you like some coffee?”

Sansa considered. “Not now. Maybe in the morning, though.” If nothing else, she would go to her grave having had a hot cup of regular coffee. It would be a small fuck you to Roose, but it was probably the only victory she could claim.
“Why didn’t they believe you?”

Sansa speared a piece of fried potato. “My sister thinks Petyr started to worry about me telling people because apparently he started talking about how oddly I was behaving. He claimed I was saying strange things to him. How it would be so tragic if I had the same thing my aunt did—she’s bipolar.”

“Your sister knew?”

“No one knew.” Sansa ate some more. “He taught me well. I didn’t tell anyone. I was focused on surviving. When I first got to the boarding school, it felt like any minute he was going to bash the door down and drag me back. I didn’t belong there. Those girls tried to eat me alive. It’s like they could smell it on me—my otherness. Margaery’s roommate got expelled for something and they put me in with her. She was nice to me. She was nice to everyone. It felt kind of shallow, but at least she wasn’t actively tormenting me. We became friends after a while.”

“And you confided in her?”

Sansa drank her orange juice. “She guessed. In our senior year. They used to sneak boys into the school. Margaery fixed me up with one. I didn’t like him and after what Petyr had been doing to me, well . . .”

Tywin nodded.

“I had a meltdown.” It was describing it mildly, but it was more important that he understand why she didn’t want to go to her parents. “Margaery figured some things out. I told her and she believed me. She said I needed to tell my parents. My family would make it stop. They would protect me. She believes that line about family being there for you when you need them too.”

“It’s not a line.”

“Maybe not for you and maybe not for Margaery,” Sansa said. “It’s always been just one more pretty little lie for me.”

He seemed to know she needed more time. They ate in silence for a while.

“That was very good, thank you.” She pushed her plate away. “I pretty much spent every one of my breaks at Margaery’s. I was applying to universities. I ended up deciding to go here for my undergrad, you know, in the Westerlands. But finally, I graduated. I had to go home. Margaery’s grandmother was taking her on this big trip and there was no question of me tagging along. I thought I could handle it. I would tell my parents about Petyr and it would all be over. May I have some water?” She started to get up, but he waved her back into the chair.

He found her a glass and poured her some.

“I told them. It was the hardest thing I’d ever had to say. I just knew that if I could finally get the words out, it would be okay.” She laughed shortly. “That was a huge joke on me.”

“They didn’t believe you?”

“They wanted to have me committed to a mental hospital.”

“You’re not serious.”

Sansa started to shake.
“Wait here.” He stood up and vanished into the drawing room. He came back shortly with a decanter and a snifter. “This is brandy. I want you to drink this.” Tywin poured it out for her.

“I don’t drink.”

“Are you an alcoholic?”

She shook her head. “He doesn’t like it—” She stopped. Well, that would be two fuck yous to Roose. “All right.”

“Sip it slowly.”

Sansa obeyed. It burned going down, but it wasn’t a bad sensation.

“I assume you mean they literally wanted to commit you.”

“Technically they wanted to have me admitted for observation.” Sansa curled her lip. “The distinction was lost on me at that time.” It was probably a meaningless one in any case. Petyr would have made certain she never got out.

He waited.

“I panicked. All I knew is that they wanted to put me in a mental hospital. I lost it at that point. My father and Petyr locked me in my bedroom. Arya said my parents were really not prepared for it. She said they were trying to call the doctor. My sister never liked Petyr and my youngest brother wasn’t a fan of his either.”

“Was he abusing them as well?”

Sansa shook her head. “Just me. I’m glad. I wouldn’t want them to have gone through the things he did to me. Rickon was eight so his support was more emotional and I wasn’t really in a state to appreciate it. Arya got ahold of Margaery and they concocted a plan. The next thing I knew Arya was crawling into my room through the window and she helped me down the trellis. Rickon staged a full-on tantrum to distract everyone, while Arya got me to the bus station. They could have made a fucking movie out of my escape; it felt that dramatic.” She saw him flinch at the profanity. “I’m sorry. It’s just—”

“I have heard worse.”

“Arya gave me every copper star she had or could find. It was enough to get me as far as King’s Landing. Margaery’s brother came to get me and that was that. By the time my parents found me, I had a lawyer and two doctors of my own. I haven’t been back since.” She took another small sip of the brandy. “It took me five years to pay Margaery and Loras back, but I did.”

“Do you communicate with any of them?”

“Rickon. He’s eighteen now. And my half-brother Jon. He was away when all of this happened. Arya. I was trying to reach her. They’re it.”

He poured her more brandy. “You do have family on whom you can rely, then.”

“My dad calls me once in a while, usually when someone dies. My mother . . . I don’t know. Dad tells me how sorry the both of them are, but . . . he might help me, but I can’t possibly go to him.”

“Sansa—”
“Roose knows who I care about. If he figures out I left him on purpose, he will kill them all.”

* * *

Contrary to Arya’s dire predictions, no one fitting Sansa’s description had been admitted to any sort of hospital in Sunspear or anywhere around it. Roose could find nothing referencing “Littlefinger” in any of Sansa’s files or belongings. He asked Arya several more times, but she just shook her head. He had never considered Sansa’s past relevant before. Now an hour didn’t go by where he didn’t regret asking her for more information.

The Dornish police were looking for Sansa, but they were proving even less adept that Varys and his little birds.

With each passing day, he lost more hope.

He was in his office at the university when his other phone rang. It was Varys and as he listened, Roose grew very grim.

The report of someone seeing Sansa in a bad part of Sunspear, the one Varys dismissed out of hand, was apparently quite accurate after all.

Varys told him it wasn’t going to cost him more than $7,500.

Sansa’s disappearance was a deliberate act.

Roose hung up the phone. The trail was cold. Varys had done all he could do. Roose knew what his next steps were. When he found her she would know what he was like when he was truly angry.

* * *

In some ways staying at Casterly Rock was not unlike staying with Roose. Tywin was a quiet methodical man who disliked mess and trouble nearly as much as Roose.

Sansa had brought both into his home and she was sorry about it.

She tried to keep out of his way at first, but when he found her padding around the drawing room at 5:00 in the morning, he invited her to go fishing.

She sat quietly on the beach while the sun rose and watched him rig up some apparatus. He didn’t talk at first so she didn’t either. Whatever he was doing was successful because before long he had a basket full of fish. He sat opposite her on a rock and started gutting and scaling them.

“I can do that if you want,” she offered.

“Do you know how?”

“Show me.” Sansa moved over to him and watched him do one. She held her hand out for the knife and did another.

“Have you done this before?”

Sansa shook her head. She took his place and worked away at them as he built a fire. “I can gut other animals, though. Roose taught me.”

Tywin showed her how to roast the fish and they ate them off sticks.
She licked her fingers. “Do you go hunting too?”

“Sometimes. Deer mostly, but it’s not the season for it.”

“Where’s your wife?”

Now it was his turn to go silent. “She’s dead,” he told her finally.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” And then she saw his face. She remembered Roose asking “why” when she’d said the same thing to his announcement that he was three times a widower and had two dead sons. She’d taken his flatness for grief when in reality there had been nothing underneath.

“I hate that expression. It’s meaningless. For months after her funeral, I endured it. Fools babbling about my loss as if they could even begin to understand a tenth of what it felt like to lose—” he broke off, evidently not trusting himself to speak.

Not like Roose then.

He composed himself after a few minutes. “Tyrion said this Roose is dangerous.”

“Yes.”

“Why were you with him?”

“Because I’m stupid.”

“Because I’m stupid.”

Tywin looked at her. “No, you are not.”

“I thought he loved me.” Sansa stared into the fire. “I guess I projected things onto him. He was . . . he was a difficult professor. That’s how I met him. I took one of his classes. I always liked the hard instructors. I prided myself on the way I got along with them. I knew the rules and the tough professors always respected me. This is what I told myself. I found him exciting too. I loved Margaery, but we grew apart. We wanted different things out of life. I liked being with Roose. He was the first person who didn’t try to make me slow down. She never got my research. She stopped understanding me. Roose . . . it just clicked.”

“Until he wanted to bed you?”

Sansa smiled wryly. “No, after the first hiccup, we clicked there too. Sex has never really been an issue for us.”

Tywin speared the last fish and lowered it over the fire.

“I won’t be able to stay here much longer. He will find me. I like you. You’ve been very decent to me and it’s more than I deserve. I should leave here before he comes for me. It’s all over anyhow. No matter what, it’s done. Everything I’ve worked for, it’s gone. I’ll either end up hiding out in Essos trying to survive, looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life, or he’ll find me and kill me. I’m poison to anyone who helps me.”

“It seems to me you’re imbuing the man with superhuman qualities. You may stay here as long as you need to.”

“Do you know what Roose does for a living?”

He offered her the last fish. “Tyrion said he is a professor at King’s University.”
“Call that his day job. Roose’s real work is killing people and he’s very, very good at it.”

* * *

Arya’s phone rang. Her heart did a little leap the way it had started doing ever since Sansa had gone missing, but it was only Rickon. “I don’t know anything,” she told him wearily. “I just finished talking to Mum and Dad.”

“I know.”

She closed her eyes. “How are they doing?”

“Not good. Dad just got back from Sunspear. He said the detectives told him to go home. That there wasn’t—”

She hated this.

“This guy they’re talking about. The one she was living with—”

“Roose. Didn’t she tell you about him?”

“Sansa only ever wants to talk about me when she calls. I try to get her to—no, she didn’t.” There was a sound like a door shutting. “Dad doesn’t like this guy.”

Arya twisted her lips. “I don’t like him either.”

“Dad’s wondering if he could have something to do with her disappearance. I guess the detectives asked Dad some questions about him too.”

Arya thought about it. “He’s weird and I don’t like how he is with Sansa, but I don’t think he had anything to do with her going missing.”

“Do you think she could have—” Rickon stopped.

Arya didn’t need him to finish the sentence. “No,” she said firmly, wishing she could believe what she was saying.

* * *

Sansa kept looking back toward the house. “We shouldn’t be out here like this.” She gestured to the bonfire. “It makes us visible. If he’s out there, he’ll be able to see us.”

“I do have a state-of-the-art security system.”

She gave him a pitying glance. “Before I left him, Roose was giving me lessons. I’m not as good as he is, but I could probably bypass what you have, even without the password your son gave me. Roose is expert. We should not be out here. I don’t care what happens to me, but I don’t want you to get hurt.”

It struck him as deeply ironical that this slip of a girl was worried about his physical wellbeing.

“I never thought it would be so restful being by the ocean,” she said a little wistfully. “I always meant to spend some time on the beach when I went to university here.”

“Why didn’t you?”
Sansa held her hands out to warm them. “I was here on borrowed time. My scholarships only took me so far. There was a professor who told me I had a future in academia. I figured out what I needed to do for a career and that was that. I couldn’t have ‘the college experience.’” She shrugged. “I had to work. I set myself goals. It changes you starting over, I think. When I crawled out of my bedroom window, I left with nothing but what I was wearing and whatever Arya managed to throw into her backpack for me. You’ve never been poor. I don’t think I can make you understand—”

“My father nearly ruined us,” Tywin told her. He stared into the flames. “He liked to be liked. He wasn’t . . . he was a good man and he loved us, but . . .” he gave himself a little shake of the head. “The money started running out when I was at school. We weren’t poor, but he was making very questionable deals. He extended more credit than he should have. His so-called friends defaulted on the loans he made them. We nearly lost the house and the business. Our name was a joke.”

“What happened? I mean, you’re rich now, right?”

“I didn’t want to go into business,” Tywin said suddenly. He’d never told anyone this. Joanna had been there. She had known. It had never been necessary to discuss it. “I liked mathematics.”

Sansa turned her eyes from her watch on the house to him. “Why?”

“There’s certainty in numbers, I suppose. But the mess he was making . . . Like you I set goals. I met them. I succeeded. But there was a cost.”

She nodded.

“For a time I was happy. I had Joanna. She understood me. Then well . . . that was gone too. You really are uncomfortable out here, aren’t you?”

“We’ve gone hunting at night, Roose and I. I wish I could make you understand.”

They banked the fire and returned to the house. Sansa insisted on searching it top to bottom.

“Okay, I feel better now,” she said after.

He offered her a drink which she declined. He poured one for himself.

“Is Margaery all right?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I tried to persuade her to break it off with Jaime, but she refused.”

“That’s not surprising.”

Tywin raised his eyebrows and waited.

“It’s exactly what her family wants for her. Margaery’s been living on borrowed time too, ever since I met her. I don’t think she realized it for years, but she was. The Tyrells . . . well, you can see it with Loras. Do you know him?”

He did. “Unfortunately.”

“He’s a nice man,” Sansa said surprised. “He was very sweet to me. I can never repay him for what he did. When he got me off the bus, I thought I was never going to be okay again. I was scared shitless and Loras was kind. I haven’t known a lot of kind people in my life.” She flinched at a sound. “What was that?”
“The furnace.” He saw the doubt in her face. “I’ve lived here on and off the better part of my life. It makes that noise just before it comes on.” He was rewarded by a blast of heat from the grates in the walls.

“Well, Loras. It’s not like with me or Margaery. He’s gay. With most families, they would either accept this or they would disown him. The Tyrells don’t work like that. It doesn’t matter that he’s seeing someone who has money of his own, who he loves and who loves him. He can do whatever he wants, but sooner or later, he’s going to have to marry somebody of their choosing and have kids. That’s how they roll.”

Tywin swallowed some whiskey. “It is not always a bad thing to put one’s family first.”

“No, it’s not,” she agreed. Sansa hugged her knees to herself. “But it’s going to kill him. I worry about Margaery. If she’d never been in love, maybe it would have been all right. You can’t miss what you’ve never had. Your son . . . could they learn to love each other?”

Tywin started to answer and then stopped. “I don’t know,” he said finally. “I always loved my wife. I don’t remember a time when I didn’t love her. She is the only woman I ever felt anything for. I don’t know what it is to learn to love someone.”

The furnace kicked off again and Sansa jumped. She took a deep breath. “I am going to have to leave.”

“I have a great deal of money, Sansa. I have resources and I have power. I can help you. It may not be the life you would have chosen, but you would be comfortable and you would be safe.”

She shook her head regretfully. She was beyond anyone’s help. Roose had finished what Petyr started. They’d pushed her outside the bounds of normal society, she said. “I have to go back to him.”

“Why?”

“Because I let him in. He knows about me. He knows who I care about. If by some miracle, he cannot find me, he will start with them, Arya probably, and work his way down. If he finds out Margaery is involved; he’ll go after her. They will suffer. He pretty much told me this is what he does when he has targets in Witness Protection he wants to flush out. What he doesn’t know, Petyr does. I don’t know what Petyr paid him for me, but the deal wasn’t completed so I’m still Roose’s.”

“You are not a slave. You are not this man’s possession.”

Sansa rolled her eyes. “I believe that. You believe that. Roose? Does not believe that. Even if he doesn’t give me to Petyr, he’s not going to let me go. I know what he is. He let me in too. He told me things. I’ve been shown things. He doesn’t think like you do or I do. He’s a sociopath. You don’t know what it’s like to look into the eyes of someone who is empty inside.”

“Sansa—”

“I think Roose can like people. He doesn’t understand love, but he does get like. He liked his son, Domeric. I think he even misses him, probably not the way you or I miss people, but for Roose, yes, I think he misses Domeric. His other son, Ramsay, who sounds like he was worse than Roose, he killed Domeric. He also killed Roose’s third wife, who Roose also seems to have liked. And Roose’s response was that they didn’t listen when he warned them so oh, well, it’s on them.”

Tywin didn’t know what to say. Sansa spoke so matter-of-factly.
“But anyhow, that’s Roose. Our rules don’t apply to him.”

“Sansa, I don’t think you understand—”

She ignored him. “I needed this. I needed to know that there is some decency left in the world, but I cannot stay here. If I don’t go back, he will find you. If he learns I told you things . . .” She shuddered. “So this is what is going to happen. I am going to leave here very early tomorrow morning. I will not say goodbye. I would like to leave you a note for Arya, but you need to wait until you hear from me or of me again. If I don’t get in contact with you, or if you don’t hear of my corpse being fished out of the Blackwater or turned up in the earth when they plow for a new subdivision somewhere in the next year or so, destroy it.”

“You cannot expect me to let you go off to be raped or killed.”

“You’re a very kind man, Tywin, or at least you have been to me, but it is beyond your power to help me with this.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

The title to this chapter is from a poem by Mary Oliver (in the beginning notes for the story).

My beta, tafkar, did some serious edits on this. If it works, it’s because of her.

I will be traveling for the next five or six days. I think I’ll be able to post as usual, but it may take me some time to reply to comments.
Solving for X

Chapter Notes

Physical abuse, discussion of past rape, past child abuse . . . I think, though, if you’ve made it this far, anything in this chapter is mild in comparison.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Nine Years Ago

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Margaery would not take no for an answer. “He’s really cute, I swear. You need a break. It’s just a couple of hours. Please?”

Sansa was unenthused, but finally after a lot of wheedling, she agreed to meet Martyn’s friend.

He was cute and his jaw dropped when he met Sansa.

Margaery couldn’t believe how beautiful Sansa looked all made up and with her long ginger hair curled. She and Jeyne had ambushed Sansa and practically forced her into one of Jeyne’s outfits. Their house mother was out and they’d taken every precaution before sneaking the boys in. It wasn’t anything they hadn’t done before. Sansa had never joined in, but after they swore up and down she wouldn’t get in trouble for this, she’d finally consented.

Martyn wasn’t bad looking and after a few drinks, Margaery was getting into making out with him, when she saw Tom backing away.

“What the fuck?”

Sansa had fled to the other side of the room and she was in the corner, hugging herself, and sobbing.

Margaery didn’t know what to do. “Sansa? Are you all right?” She wheeled around to face Tom. “What did you do to her?”

“I barely touched her!”

Martyn watched Sansa. His annoyance at being interrupted from getting Margaery’s top off faded. “I think we’d better go, Tom. Like now.” He hung back and as she let them out the side entrance, he turned to her. “I think your friend has been through some shit.”

“What?”

“My sister was . . . attacked. She gets like your friend sometimes. I don’t think you should leave her alone.” He took off.

Margaery hurried back into the room. “Sansa?”

Sansa was curled into a tight little ball.
It was a hundred times worse than when Sansa had been afraid to go home. Margaery knelt down in front of her and tried to get her to calm down. She put her arms around Sansa. She tried to soothe her. She apologized profusely for setting her up with Tom. She promised never to do anything like that again. As she held Sansa and as Sansa cried, Margaery started to do the math: the expensive gifts from her aunt and uncle; the way Sansa freaked out when they’d showed up here; the way she tensed up anytime there were calls for her or when the mail came; she wasn’t a virgin and yet she was almost pathologically shy around boys; the way she’d decided on going to Westerlands right after Garlan and Willas told them about her uncle not being welcome there.

“You were raped, weren’t you?”

Sansa cried even harder.

“It was the smarmy uncle, right?” Margaery hugged Sansa. “Do you want me to get someone? We can find one of the other house mothers if you want.”

“What’s the point?” Sansa managed between sobs.

“You have to tell someone.”

Sansa shook her head.

It was a very long night, but Margaery stayed with her. Sansa wouldn’t volunteer anything so Margaery made guesses. She slowly pieced the story together. “You have to tell your parents. He’s been doing a number on you. They love you, right? They’ll be there for you. This is what family is all about.”

* * *

Present Day

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One of the many things Margaery felt deeply guilt about was keeping Arya in the dark. They’d never been friends by any stretch of the imagination, but Arya loved Sansa as much as she did. She felt like a fraud as she listened while Arya frantically conjectured that Sansa had suffered another breakdown and was in a mental hospital somewhere in Dorne.

“I can’t stand thinking about her being all alone and scared, not after what—”

As long as Arya stayed convinced of how great Roose Bolton was for Sansa, Margaery couldn’t tell her anything.

Even if she could, Margaery reasoned, it wasn’t as if she knew much. Tyrion had kept them deliberately in the dark. After the car accident, he’d once again altered the plan. It had changed so much, Margaery wondered if any it was the same. He refused to tell her. The less Jaime and she knew the better, he said. Sansa was safe, he assured her. She was with someone who would be more than a match for Roose Bolton.

Margaery wasn’t sure she could believe this, but once again she was powerless to change the situation. As soon as Sansa was someplace safe, and they could persuade Arya that Bolton wasn’t to be trusted, they could tell her then. “What about Littlefinger?”

“Robin told Rickon that Littlefinger has been out of Westeros on business for a couple of weeks. Besides Mum and Dad don’t talk to him anymore. He hasn’t been allowed near the house or us for years.”
This was news to Margaery. “I thought . . . does Sansa know?”

“You tell me.”

It occurred to Margaery that Arya somehow blamed her for the estrangement. “How would I have known?”

“You’re the one who wouldn’t let Mum and Dad talk to Sansa.”

Margaery was horrified. “Sansa refused to speak to them. She never wanted me to mention them. You don’t know what she could get like. She . . . Fuck.” She tried to marshal her thoughts. “The last time I talked to your father was . . . it was when we worked out the phone calls. He asked me to tell Sansa how sorry they both were, but he didn’t say anything about . . . I told Sansa and she got so mad. She would always get so angry about them.”

Arya made a small sigh. “I’m sorry. I guess . . . I tried too.” She exhaled. “The messages she left me . . . it was worse than the last time. What if—what if she killed herself?”

“Sansa wouldn’t do that,” Margaery managed.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” But Arya sounded unconvinced and unbearably sad. “I have to go.”

If Arya had stayed on the line one more minute, Margaery would have broken and told her everything.

* * *

Arya didn’t know what to think. Roose was worried. He wasn’t lying about it. He wasn’t pretending. He really thought Sansa was in trouble.

He didn’t know about Littlefinger.

He didn’t know about Sansa’s problems coping.

He didn’t know about what the signs meant.

He was pretty much living with Sansa and yet he had not been the one to call the police when she’d first gone missing. He had been extremely reluctant to speak to them, although Roose finally did so. It didn’t fit with his being worried and she didn’t understand it.

He called Arya twice a day.

He was genuinely concerned.

They met for coffee. Well, Arya had coffee. Roose drank water.

He looked at her searchingly. “Is there anywhere she could possibly be that you haven’t thought of?”

“I don’t know,” Arya said miserably. “Mum and Dad are falling apart. This is crazy. How can someone just vanish like this?”

Roose was grim. “It happens all of the time, Arya. She may have been taken. She must have been.”

“She could still be in a hospital somewhere,” Arya insisted.
“She would not have left me. If she was ill, she would have called me.”

“Maybe she doesn’t know who she is.”

Roose shook his head. “Amnesia is very rare and the Dornish police sent her description to the hospitals.”

Arya didn’t like what they were left with.

* * *

Tywin handed Margaery the note and watched as she read it with growing disbelief.

“She went back to him.” Margaery slumped in defeat.

“Yes, I think she did.” The note made no mention of such a plan. In it, Sansa thanked him. She said it was better if she left before she was found. It was pointless to stay. That was the extent of it.

Tyrion examined the piece of paper.

“How would she get there? Did she fly? Did she take one of the cars?” Jaime asked. “It’s over a thousand miles to King’s Landing.”

Tywin shook his head. “Everything is here. All she took with her was whatever she brought.” She left behind pads of yellow foolscap she’d taken from his office along with a few bills meant to compensate him for the loss. They were covered with her neat writing. Tywin had an uneasy feeling that in all the time she’d stayed here with him, she’d slept mere hours.

In the second note on top of the pile, she asked him to keep these safe somewhere. If her body was discovered, she wrote, she wanted them to go to her sister. He had scanned through the rest. There was an account of the abuse she had suffered at the hands of Petyr Baelish and then there were what he thought were stories. They were hard things to read. They were powerfully written and they made him uncomfortable.

“How could she go back to him?”

Jaime poured Margaery a stiff whiskey.

Margaery stared at it and then she pushed it away. “It doesn’t solve anything.”

“It dulls the pain,” Tyrion suggested.

“And then it’s ten times worse the next day,” Margaery told him.

A week ago, Tywin would have been pleased by this exchange. Now it didn’t seem to matter.

“Sansa was terrified of him. I could hear it her voice on the phone. She said he knew Littlefinger. There is no way she would voluntarily go back to him.”

“She no doubt felt she didn’t have any choice.” Tywin felt their eyes shifting to him. “There is nothing more that can be done.”

Tyrion left to cancel the arrangements he’d made. Jaime’s phone buzzed and he too disappeared to deal with it. Margaery picked up the discarded note and reread it.

“She spoke of you a great deal,” Tywin told her quietly.
“What did you say to make her leave?”

Tywin poured half the whiskey into another glass. “I offered to help her. I told her I would find a position for her somewhere in Essos. We have interests there. She repeatedly told me it didn’t matter where she went. She indicated this man would never stop looking for her.” He sipped at it. “She told me how you helped her escape this Littlefinger. I had no idea you were so resourceful.”

“Not resourceful enough.”

“Who is this woman Jaime cannot marry?”

Margaery looked up from the note. She arranged her features in a mask of confusion.

“I am not a fool.” He waited, but she just returned to rereading the message. “Very well, then suppose you tell me what your arrangement is with my son.”

She carefully refolded the piece of paper and set it on the table. “We’ll be everything we’re supposed to be in public. You’ll get your grandchildren. In private, Jaime and I go our separate ways.” Her face was bitter, cynical now. “The children will get my money. That’s all you really care about, isn’t it? The money. You have no idea what it is to love. Grandmother doesn’t. That freak who has his claws in Sansa certainly doesn’t. I suppose she’s right after all. There’s no point to any of this.”

* * *

Roose began his hunt for Sansa the same way he did everything, methodically. He was still uncertain if she had left intentionally. That she had left so many things behind suggested it was unplanned. She possessed limited funds and as far as he or one of the more reliable contacts he had could tell, these were untouched. On the other hand, if Varys was correct, her choosing a very specific car suggested this was, in fact, a deliberate act on her part.

He kept Arya close for now. She was a clever thing, but he would have bet every copper star he possessed that she was in the dark about Sansa’s whereabouts.

“Your half-brother?”

Arya shook her head. “Jon wouldn’t lie about it. Not to me. He said he hasn’t heard from her in months. Besides the Wall is so far away from Sunspear. Even if she drove, wouldn’t someone have spotted her?”

“The Tyrell girl.” He watched Arya closely, but she only shook her head.

“No. She doesn’t know. I know she doesn’t.”

“Her previous boyfriends?” Roose looked up from the pile of papers in Sansa’s apartment he was sorting through. “Sansa once mentioned another girlfriend. Could she have gone to her?”

“I think she was someone from the boarding school,” Arya said. “I don’t know her name. I can ask Margaery, but I doubt it. The guys Sansa dated were not nice people. I don’t think she would have contacted them.”

He waited expectantly.

“I only met two of them. I can ask Margaery about them too, but they never lasted long. She wasn’t . . . it was a bad time for her.” Arya took her phone outside to place the call—she thought she could
get more out of Margaery if she didn’t hear him in the background.

Roose paged through the address book while he waited. The majority of her contacts were here, but there were several living in Lannisport. She’d gotten her undergraduate degree there. She would be familiar with the region. Varys was insistent that there was no sign of her in the Reach or Sunspear. The Westerlands wasn’t his territory, but he would make inquiries.

Arya returned fifteen minutes later. “She’ll call the ex-girlfriend, but she doesn’t think they’ve talked in years. She said definitely not on the ex-boyfriends. One’s dead. The other was abusive and Sansa ended it right away. There’s one who is now an accountant, but she can’t remember his name and she thought they only dated for a few weeks.”

“Which are the ones you knew?”

“The dead guy. I guess he overdosed.” Arya sank onto a chair. “The other one had a motorcycle and worked out of a head shop. Margaery didn’t know anything about him. I think he was from her freshman year.”

“Do you expect me to believe that Sansa dated, let alone knew drug addicts?”

“It wasn’t . . . she wasn’t in a good place for a long time back then.”

Roose turned to her. “Your loyalty to Sansa’s privacy is commendable, but we are past the point when you have the luxury of keeping secrets from me. I need to know everything, Arya. What ‘Littlefinger’ means; who these people were; whatever this mysterious trouble Sansa went through—all of it.”

Arya set her jaw. “I promised her I wouldn’t tell. If I thought it would help, I would, but it won’t.”

The police knew, presumably through Ned, but none of them were sharing this information with him.

Roose set the address book back on the desk. His eye was drawn to the objects on the shelf above it. “What is this?” He pointed to the framed algebra problems.

Arya came over. She seemed puzzled at first and then she sighed. “That’s my math homework.”

“Why would she have it framed?”

“It’s a long story.”

“The hunting knife? The teddy bear?” He picked up her copy of *Legends from the Nightfort.* “This?” He had always wondered why it wasn’t with her other books.

“Same long story.”

“Tell me.”

Arya bit her lip. “The hunting knife was Jon’s. That’s Rickon’s teddy bear. The book was Bran’s. She had Robb’s sweatshirt too, but I guess it isn’t something she could put up on a shelf. I don’t know if she still has it. It was grey and had the Winterfell Direwolves logo on it.”

“It’s in her closet at my house.” Roose found this puzzling. “She told me you gave it to her.”

“I did.” Arya fiddled with the bear.
“I know you said you spoke to Rickon. What about the others?” He had met the one brother years ago, but the boy had been a child.

Arya shook her head. “They know she’s missing, but she would never go to Robb and Bran isn’t an option.”

“Why not?”

“Robb and Sansa had a huge falling out while she was still at school. Sansa’s never forgiven him even though . . .” Arya straightened the framed homework problems. “No, he would have told Mum or Dad if she’d contacted him.”

“And Bran?”

Arya ran her fingers over the book. “Bran is not really . . . he got into some weird stuff. He sees things.”

This was beyond frustrating.

“He thinks he’s a psychic,” Arya explained. “He took a bunch of mind-altering drugs when he was a teenager and he’s never been the same since. He’s kind of new-Agey. He’s gotten better over the years, but he doesn’t really live in the here and now. He hasn’t talked to Sansa in seven years.” She moved away from the desk. “Roose, none of our family knows anything. They wouldn’t lie to me. If they knew or if she’d even tried to contact any of one of them, they would tell me.”

“And if Sansa asked them not to?”

“No.” Arya was adamant. “I would know.” She looked at her watch. “I should get going. If I hear anything from Margaery, I’ll call you.”

He let her leave. She was proving useless to him. All she had done was clear up a few leads he needn’t bother pursuing. He would begin with inquiries for the Westerlands.

* * *

Sansa caught a bus that took her as far as Deep Den. She kept to the back roads. She walked mostly at night. She had very little money and she spent it sparingly. The old Gold Road was not well traveled. It was the safest, most anonymous way she could think of to go. She stuck to the graveled shoulder of the two-lane road. The seemingly endless hills made her calves ache, but the trees still had some of their leaves and provided some shelter.

Once or twice people tried to help her. A family offered to give her a lift. She looked at the children’s curious faces and the golden retriever in the back seat and then she thought of Roose. She shook her head and kept walking. Another bus took her five hundred more miles. No one wanted to sit near her she smelled so badly. It had been a rather restful ride.

By the time she reached his house, she knew she looked and smelled as dead as she was on the inside. That was all right. Monsters should look like monsters. They’d turned her into one—no, that wasn’t entirely accurate, she thought—she had let them turn her into one, and there wasn’t going to be any Prince Charming to return her innocence to her.

He wasn’t there so she sat on the back stoop. Sansa didn’t know what day it was. He could have been teaching or at the university or buying groceries or even out killing people. It didn’t matter.

She fell asleep at some point. When she woke, it was night and Roose was standing in front of her.
She knew what his expression meant. She stood and waited. Her last conscious thought was that at least it would be over soon.

* * *

Arya’s daily call came in at the expected time. Roose answered it.

“I don’t understand how someone can vanish like this.”

“I should have gone with her to Dorne,” he said. He should have known Sansa was lying when she asked his permission to leave. He should have seen the signs.

Arya sighed. “I feel like those people on the news who just want to know. Call me if you hear anything, okay?”

He didn’t particularly care about Arya’s anxiety, but he agreed as usual and they hung up.

He went about his errands. When he returned, he went down to the root cellar.

Sansa didn’t appear to have moved since yesterday. She was huddled in the corner, hugging her knees to herself.

“Get up,” he ordered coldly.

She obeyed. She never gave him any trouble. Roose held the gun to the back of her head and frog-marched her to the half bath. He stood in the room with her as she relieved herself and washed her hands. He then brought her back. When they came to the root cellar, he pushed her in. He watched as she hit the floor. She winced at the impact, but then she crawled back to the corner and returned to the same position.

“Are you ready to tell me why you left me?” Roose asked. He needed an answer. If she wouldn’t give him one soon, he would take her to the house at the Dreadfort and he would wrest it from her in another way.

“Why does it matter?” She looked at him with weary eyes.

“Tell me why and we can end this.” She had returned to him. It was the only reason she was still alive and comparatively unharmed, but he had to know why. It gnawed at him.

“There’s only one ending to this and we both know what it is,” she said in a dull voice.

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Chapter End Notes

Again, thanks to my beta, tafkar.

I’m traveling but please do comment. I promise I’ll reply when I return.
Mentions of past rape, child abuse. If you’ve made it this far, I don’t think it will be any more intense.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Twenty Years Ago

Sansa hugged her arms to herself. It wasn’t fair how her brothers and sister always spoiled everything. Mummy and Daddy hadn’t even listened to her side of things. They’d just ordered her to the corner and made her have a time out. She could hear Arya and Bran running around the back yard shrieking and hollering.

“Honey?”

Sansa scowled as Mummy called her over.

“Do you understand why you had to sit here to cool down?”

“It’s not fair—”

“—Sansa, you were screaming at Bran and Arya because they didn’t want to play the same game as you.”

That wasn’t what happened. Sansa tried to explain. “It was my turn to pick. It’s not fair. It was my turn and they—I followed the rules. They never do. Why isn’t Bran in the corner too?”

Mummy sighed. “Bran is four. Sansa, you have to . . . you’re older now. You know better. He doesn’t.”

“They all ganged up on me. I’m always alone. Nobody cares about me.”

“Sansa, you know that isn’t true. Bran is your brother. Arya is your sister. I know you love them and they love you.”

Sansa wanted to hold onto her anger, but she could feel it deflating like a balloon. “They don’t love me.”

“Yes, they do.” Mummy put her arm around her. “I know it’s hard, but you have to be the bigger person. Your father and I will speak to Arya and Bran, but I want you try harder to get along. All this fighting, it has to stop. This is not what a family does. A time may come when you need your brothers and sister to help you.”

* * *

Present Day

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Ironically Tywin seemed to like her now. Margaery didn’t quite understand why, but he was extremely courteous with her. He asked her several more times about Jaime’s lover, but she simply refused to answer.

Jaime concocted some convoluted story for her to use.

“Tell it to him if you want. I don’t want any part of it,” Margaery told him.

She saw Arya once at one of the coffee houses Sansa used to love to go to. She was there with Rickon. He was a good looking boy with dirty blond curls and the same bright blue eyes Sansa had. He was staying with Arya, he said.

Arya was putting up a flyer with Sansa’s face on it.

“It’s been weeks,” Margaery said.

“I just need to know.”

“I needed to know once too. Sometimes it’s better not to.”

* * *

Arya was tacking flyers onto a kiosk in the business district when she felt someone watching her. She turned around to see Gerion Lannister’s brother standing behind her. He was taller and older than Gerion. She had met him only once before.

“You’re Arya Stark,” Tywin Lannister pronounced.

“Yes.” She didn’t know what else to say. “Gerion has me on flex time.” She had the vaguest notion of what flex time was, but she’d heard the other employees talk about it. She hoped it would explain why she wasn’t working at 2:00 PM.

He scoffed. “Gerion wouldn’t notice if you came to work naked let alone know what flex time was. Never mind about him. I want to talk to you.”

Arya put one last staple in the flyer and followed him into the massive office building that housed his company. She got on the elevator with him. It took them to the top floor.

“No calls,” he told his secretary. He glanced at her. “Come along.”

As the door shut behind them, Arya had the sense of being enveloped in quiet. His office was larger than her entire apartment. Even if she hadn’t known he was the CEO, the décor and the view of the city from the window would have told her so. Arya wasn’t very good with identifying furniture styles, but everything seemed very solid, very handsome, and very expensive to her.

They walked across a thick Myrish carpet in reds and golds with stylized lions woven into the pattern. When they got to his large mahogany desk, Tywin waved her to the seating area at the end while he rummaged around for a file folder. Arya sank into the depths of a red leather armchair.

She realized belatedly that this was probably his chair. Arya started to get up, but he shook his head and sat across from her on the matching sofa. He gave her the folder. She opened it and read the letter on the piece of yellow-lined paper. “You know where Sansa is! Is she all right? Is she hurt? Can I see her? I have to call Mum and Dad!” She was reaching for her phone when she saw his face.
“I knew where Sansa was. She stayed with me for a time. She’d run away from the man she was living with.”

“Roose,” Arya said flatly. She should have known.

“Yes.”

“Was he hurting her?”

“I don’t think he was physically abusing her, but yes, I think he was hurting her deeply.”

“For how long?”

Tywin Lannister shook his head. “I don’t know. For some time it sounds like. She left when she discovered he knew Petyr Baelish.”

Arya almost fell off the chair. “He knows him? Sansa told you about him?”

He nodded. “It is a long story, but the short answer is yes. She stayed at my house for a time and then she decided she needed to go back to this Roose Bolton.” He poured her a drink. “That was a month ago.”

“How could I have been so stupid? I believed him. He seemed so worried. I talk to him every day. He—” Arya kicked the coffee table.

“I think we need to pool our information.”

* * *

Gerion Lannister’s house had the virtue of being full of fascinating objects. Ordinarily Arya would have been charmed. He had curios from all over the world. There were so many neat things. But all she could think about was Sansa. Rickon was just as worried, but he peered at everything in the clean but fusty living room with more than casual interest. Arya pulled his attention back to her and introduced him to Tywin and Gerion.

“My sons and Margaery will be here shortly,” Tywin informed them.

Gerion rummaged around and produced a strange assortment of things for them to eat and drink. Arya received the impression he wasn’t used to entertaining. He seemed happy enough to host them, though.

Tywin dubiously picked up a bottle of a thick blue liqueur. “What is this?”

“Qarthian absinthe,” Gerion explained. “It is derived from shade of the evening and it is said to bring clarity.”

“It is also illegal. Gerion, we merely require your living room and your discretion.” Tywin shook his head at the items on the tray. “Put these away.”

Rickon fingered one of the daggers on the mantel, but Arya scowled at him.

Finally, Margaery and Tyrion arrived. Margaery was even less confident and more resigned than the last time Arya had seen her.

Arya was about to introduce her brother when he turned and bumped into Tyrion. “Sorry, sorry,” he mumbled. “Hi, I’m Rickon.”
Tywin took charge. He spoke briskly. “Very well, I thought we would—”

“What about the other guy?” Arya asked. “Jaime, the one who—”

Margaery shook her head. “He didn’t believe me when I told him about Roose. We all need to be on the same page here. Besides he’s with—” she stopped. “It’s not important.”

Tywin took control. They each went around the room and shared what they knew.

Arya was startled to learn that the reason Sansa had run away in the first place was her discovery that Roose knew Littlefinger and that she believed Roose was going to sell or give her to him. Arya exchanged miserable looks with Rickon. All this time she’d been helping Roose, she thought.

Tywin went last. Sansa had told him she was returning to Roose Bolton because she wanted to ensure her family and Margaery’s safety.

Tyrion was the first to break the silence. “The police—”

“—Littlefinger is a lawyer. He’s got all kinds of pull with the cops,” Rickon said. “Robin talks to me sometimes. I hear things.”

Robin was kind of a freak, but he had come to loathe Petyr Baelish more than Arya and Rickon did.

“She’s dead.” Margaery’s voice was sad. She sounded old too. “Those monsters killed her. I should have tried harder. Maybe I could have saved her.”

They sat silently, no one wanting to say anything.

“Excuse me.”

Everyone jumped. They’d forgotten about their host.

“The first man, the one the young woman was living with, you said you thought he was worried for her.”

Arya sighed. “I did. Roose was really upset when he came to my apartment that night. Roose is usually kind of controlled, but he wasn’t that night.”

“And you said he didn’t know the meaning of Tinyfinger.”

“Littlefinger,” Tywin corrected patiently.

Gerion seemed to be puzzling something out. “From what you are telling us, Margaery, this man was very insistent on making you understand the young woman belonged to him. You were encroaching on his territory.”

“Yes.” Margaery’s voice was dead.

“This matches up with what the young woman told Tywin.” Gerion set his absinthe down. “And Cersei told you the jewelry he was buying her was expensive.”

“If he’s a hit man, then he probably has lots of money,” Arya muttered.

Gerion persisted, “But why would he spend any time worrying over the color of a stone in a necklace if he wasn’t serious about her?”
“Maybe Littlefinger had him buy it and told him to get something specific,” Rickon ventured.

Margaery shook her head. “Not him. Roose Bolton would have thought it beneath him to run an errand for someone; he’s very full of himself.”

“And Uncle Petyr would have wanted to get it himself,” Arya added. His gifts to the rest of them had always been haphazard things. He always got Sansa presents she wanted, things he had clearly chosen very carefully.

“And if Roose Bolton had problems with her having been with me in the past, he certainly wouldn’t have shared her with that child molester,” Margaery said slowly.

“Let’s not ignore what she overheard,” Tyrion pointed out.

“Does anyone else call this man ‘Littlefinger?’” Gerion inquired.

Rickon shrugged. “I think it’s just Sansa, Arya, Robin, and me. He doesn’t like the name.”

“Is it not possible then that this was a coincidence? This young woman heard his voice and jumped to the conclusion that her lover meant to give her to the other man.”

Tywin looked with new respect at his brother.

“So if Sansa is being held by this guy, all we have to do is wait for him to leave and we can break in his house and look for her,” Rickon concluded.

“And if she’s not there?” Tywin tapped his fingers against the arm chair. “I made inquiries. He commands a very high price for his services.”

Tyrion held up a hand. “How high?”

“High.” Tywin rummaged in his pocket for his phone. “I have figures here—”

“You took notes on your phone, Father? That doesn’t seem very wise of you.”

“The amounts are meaningless without the context,” Tywin snapped. “I must have left the phone in the other room.”

Arya sensed that Tywin and his son did not get along particularly well.

“In any case, from the things Sansa said, I think we need to proceed cautiously. The house could be rigged with booby traps. He might not even have her there. She could be anywhere. I have men who could look, but if she isn’t at the house, and if he realizes anyone broke in, there could be disastrous consequences for Sansa. I would ordinarily suggest the police but—”

“She’s already dead. All right, maybe he didn’t give her to Littlefinger, but she’s dead. None of this changes it. He killed her. She dared to leave him and he killed her. She’s rotting beneath his floorboards or she’s—” Margaery stopped, her initial excitement fading back into defeat.

Tyrion put his hand on hers. “Arya told us he was insistent in the beginning that Sansa wouldn’t have left him so at some point, even if it was in his own mind, he valued her and on some level he trusted her. Whether she’s alive or dead, I think our first action is the same: he needs to learn about Littlefinger.”

“From who? I refused to tell him. He’s stopped asking me,” Arya said unhappily. “He knows Margaery hates him. Why would she call him?”
Rickon chewed his lip. “He wouldn’t be suspicious if it came from me.” He stood up and set down Tyrion’s wallet and Tywin’s smartphone on the table. “Sorry, I can’t resist. It’s kind of a game for me.”

* * *

Roose sensed the student in his doorway. “My office hours are on Tuesdays from 2:00 to 4:30. I do not make exceptions.”

“Are you Roose?”

“And I do not allow students to address me by my first name.”

“I’m not a student. I’m Rickon Stark.”

He looked up then. The boy was perhaps eighteen. He had dirty blond hair and blue eyes. They were even brighter than Sansa’s. He gestured to a seat and then closed the door. “Arya didn’t tell me you were in town.”

“I surprised her. I’m staying with her for a couple of weeks. She said you and Sansa are a thing.”

Roose smiled sadly. The boy came closer than he knew to describing the relationship. “Would you like some water or a soda?” He didn’t particularly want to talk to him, but he needed to continue to play the concerned lover.

“Water is good, thanks.”

Roose left him to go into the department offices. Along the way a colleague stopped him and he was forced to exchange pleasantries. He found two bottles of water in the mini refrigerator and returned.

Rickon was darting his eyes everywhere.

If he didn’t know better, he would have sworn the boy was casing the place. “I have no news, I’m afraid. I speak to Arya every day. The police know nothing.”

“Have they questioned Littlefinger? He’s been here in town, lots of times. I only found out a few days ago from Robin. If he’s been around, maybe he took her.”

Roose leaned forward. He knew if he questioned the boy about Littlefinger’s identity, he’d clam up. “Robin is who exactly?”

“Oh, yeah, she wouldn’t have talked about him, I guess. He’s our cousin. Littlefinger adopted him when he married our crazy bitch of an aunt. Robin said Littlefinger got an extra job of some kind and he’s been commuting here a couple of times a week for months. Did the cops talk to him? Because this is exactly the kind of thing he would do.”

“I don’t know. I can ask.” An aunt, he thought. He dimly remembered Barbrey mentioning a sister of Brandon Stark’s, although it was possible Catelyn Stark had sisters too. He needed to go carefully here. “Tell me something, Rickon. I’ve never been clear on this. Why is he called Littlefinger?”

The boy shrugged. “He hates the nickname. That’s why we always use it. He claims it’s because he was from the Fingers and he was small for his age. Uncle Benjen claims it’s because he has a tiny dick. I don’t know which is true.” He sighed. “His dick was big enough when he was raping
Sansa with it.”

Roose set his water down with a thud. “I didn’t realize he was anywhere near King’s Landing.” Sansa had made oblique references to her past . . . the estrangement with her family. It made sense, he supposed, but it did not explain why she had left him. It was obviously connected to her leaving or she wouldn’t have referred to this man on the message she left Arya. “I can tell the detective.” He needed this man’s name. “I don’t suppose you have a current address for him. Is he staying in King’s Landing or is he . . .”

“Oh, yeah. There’s no way Sansa would have it. I should have thought.” Rickon took the note pad and scrawled something on the paper. “Can you read this? My writing sucks.”

He put on his reading glasses and froze as his eyes scanned the first line: Petyr Baelish. Sansa had answered the phone when he called. She had heard him speaking to this man. He had indicated Baelish was a contact from his real work. And then he’d told her there were people in the organizations who would know about her . . .

* * *

Arya and the others were relieved when Rickon returned. They were at Gerion Lannister’s again. Tywin thought it was best to continue meeting there.

Rickon thought it had gone well. “He’s got a .38 strapped to the underside of his desk,” Rickon said quietly. “The cleaning people probably never bother to do much but push a vacuum around and empty the wastepaper baskets. I couldn’t get into the desk, but he has a .45 in his satchel, and I’m pretty sure he was packing.”

Arya was used to this side of Rickon. The others were not.

“It is commendable that you want to help your sister,” Tywin remarked. “But I don’t think it’s wise of you to put yourself at risk. If Bolton realizes you searched his office—”

“I spend my breaks on Skagos with Aunt Lyanna,” Rickon said by way of an explanation. Then he returned to describing his encounter with Roose. “He did not know about Littlefinger, none of it. He’s not that good an actor, although I bet he thinks he is. When he read the name and address for Uncle Petyr, he was shocked.” He sipped some water. “The front of the car is clean. The stuff in the trunk is not good. He’s got a giant roll of plastic sheeting, disposable latex gloves, and duct tape. I couldn’t spend too long on it. There were people around.”

“Why aren’t we calling the police again?” Tyrion asked.

“The cops would need cause before they could search his trunk or his office. They can’t bust you for having plastic sheeting and duct tape. Anyone can buy that stuff. He can move the guns. Unless they can be traced to a crime, they’re not much of a problem either. They’d just fine him, maybe. He might have permits for them.”

Tyrion looked at Margaery. “You’re up.”

She took a deep breath and dialed Roose’s office phone number.

Arya listened as Margaery fairly spat out instructions.

Afterword, Tyrion held up a hand. “Remember the points you need to hit when you meet with him.”
“Arya and Rickon think he’s good for Sansa.” Margaery looked like she wanted to vomit. “What
the signs are when she’s about to break down, how important it is for her to stay in contact with
Arya, Rickon, Jon, and the shrink.” She shook her head. “He is never going to buy it.”

Arya remembered what Sansa had been like the day Dad had believed Uncle Petyr. “It’s all true.
Even if he only believes part of it, it’s something. If she’s alive, we need to make sure he lets us see
her if he frees her. This is the only way; you have to try, Margaery.”

* * *

Margaery Tyrell was sitting at a table with her back against the wall. She greeted Roose sourly as
he approached. “Do you see that man to your left?”

Roose looked. The man was plainly out of place in the bistro filled with mostly with business
people enjoying overpriced food and drink. Her protector was massive, ill-dressed, and obviously
carrying at least one weapon.

“If you so much as touch me, he will kill you,” Margaery informed him flatly.

Roose arranged his features in an expression of mild amusement. “How dramatic.”

She gestured to the chair opposite her, waited for him to sit, and then slid a manila envelope over to
him. “You wanted to know about Littlefinger. There you go.”

“What is this? An investigator’s report?”

“No, I have those, but they were as useless as the ones Jaime had done on you. You wanted to
know what Petyr Baelish did to Sansa. Most of it’s in there.”

He slit open the envelope and scanned the documents. They appeared to be copies of depositions
and statements. He read the first few paragraphs and looked up at her.

“I hate him more than I hate you. That should tell you something.”

Roose kept reading. He heard the approach of a waiter. “Water.”

“He’ll have a glass of the chardonnay,” she corrected. “I’ll have the cabernet and water for both of
us, please.”

He continued to read. After the waiter left, he murmured, “I don’t drink.”

“No one is forcing you to. This is a busy place. They’re not going to let us sit here if we just order
water.” She pointed to another paper. “The important one is the second document. That’s her
statement.”

Roose looked at her and then turned to it. By the time the wine came, he understood.

“I have other copies. You can have those.”

“Nothing came of this?”

She shook her head. “He didn’t end up rotting inside being someone’s prison bitch, no. He had too
many friends who made sure that the prosecutors never filed charges, and all the so-called adults in
her family thought she was crazy. But I got my brothers to back us and he was made to understand
if he ever came near Sansa again it would end very badly for respectable Petyr Baelish, Attorney-
at-Law.”
Roose leaned back.

“Arya said Sansa wasn’t eating. She didn’t have an appetite? She was having trouble keeping food down?”

“For a while, yes, but she recovered.”

“It was always the first sign something was wrong.” Margaery’s voice was tired.

Roose glanced at her sharply. Arya had said something to this effect as well.

“Usually she starts—started having the nightmares afterwards. If they go—went unchecked or if they get—got worse, you had to watch her. She would take razor blades sometimes. Or she’d sort of turn inward. Once she took off somewhere for three days. She just started walking and didn’t stop.”

He grew still. Sansa claimed her leaving had nothing to do with him. He had thought she was lying.

“There’s a therapist she goes to—went to on and off. She was very good with her. Usually that stops—stopped it. You’re probably the kind of person who thinks only weak people need help.”

“Why do you keep using the past tense?”

Margaery pushed her wine away. “Because she’s dead. I’ll never be able to prove you did it, but I know you killed her,” she told him flatly. “If she were alive, we would have heard by now. I don’t know how you snowed Arya and Rickon. They both think you actually cared for her.” She snorted. “We both know that’s a crock, don’t we? I’m only here because Arya begged me to come. I am not here for you.”

“I did not kill Sansa.” He took a deep breath.

“I thought I could fix her on my own. I couldn’t. No one can. It goes way too deep. Sansa knows—knew when she needs professional help. She would go and it would get better.”

“How often do these incidents happen?”

“It depends. She’s gone years. Stress usually triggers it, but other things can set it off. We were at a store once. There was an elderly man buying something for his granddaughter. He asked her opinion because she was standing by the display. After she helped him, he called her ‘sweetling.’ I practically had to carry her to the car. That was what Littlefinger used to call her. You’ve been with her long enough that I assume you know not to do that. She said the man smelled like peppermints. That does it too. Littlefinger is addicted to them.”

Baelish had been sucking on a peppermint candy during their last meeting.

“Any other questions?”

“Her family?”

Margaery arched her eyebrows. “Why do you care?”

“When she is found, I need to know what to do.”

She gave him a measured look. “Right.”

“Tell me.”
She didn’t respond right away. Roose waited with what he knew was ill-concealed impatience until she seemed to come to some sort of a decision.

“Do not waste your time with Robb or Bran, and whatever you do, do not contact her mother. The last time I spoke to him, her father seemed to be realizing what a colossal mistake they made, but he’s useless. Arya, Jon, Rickon. In that order. Jon is at the Wall. He’s voluntary and he can’t get away easily, but he can call. If it’s super bad, he can come. Arya said you met Rickon. He believed her and he helped her get out of there, but he was very young at the time. The best you can probably hope for there are phone calls, but they calm her.”

“Sansa confided in you.” It still rankled. She refused to tell him anything and yet she had trusted this empty-headed slut.

“She didn’t sit down and tell me about it. I found out after—” She stopped. “Did she ever tell you how we met?”

“No.” He didn’t particularly care. “Your name comes up very little in conversation.”

Margaery twisted her lip. “Right, you just liked to fuck her while she was talking to me on the phone.” She ran her finger around the rim of the water glass. “We met at boarding school. My roommate at the time got expelled and they put Sansa in with me. I was friendly with her, but she wasn’t really . . . Sansa was a scared mouse, but she was neat and clean, and she was very sweet. She helped me with my assignments—unasked, mind you. It was just before the holidays. I found her sitting in a corner of the room, hugging her knees and crying. She didn’t want to go home. So I took her to mine.”

“And seduced her,” Roose said shortly.

“We didn’t become involved for years. She needed a place to stay. I didn’t understand why she didn’t want to go home to her family, but my parents didn’t care, and I liked her well enough.” She shrugged. “We were friends after that. She hated it when the mail came and on the rare occasions she got phone calls, she would start to shake.”

“And you thought nothing was wrong?”

Her mouth twisted into a frown. “I was fifteen. We had a house mother. There were teachers and counselors. I assumed if I was picking up on these things, someone who actually knew what she was doing was taking care of it.”

“But no one did.”

“I don’t know if anyone spotted the warning signs. Perhaps they did. Sansa was very guarded with me back then. She stayed to herself a lot. Every time I asked, she pushed me away.”

Roose returned to scanning the documents. “What happened with her family? Why aren’t they to be relied upon?”

“You’re going to have to talk to Arya for the full story.”

He didn’t have time. “Tell me.”

“When she finished boarding school, she told her parents about the abuse. They didn’t believe her. Littlefinger had been ingratiating himself with them for years. He had them convinced she was as crazy as her aunt. They were going to commit her.”
“What?”

“They were going to put her in a mental hospital against her will. I guess they wanted to have her hospitalized for observation, but he would have seen to it that she was never released; he had a lot of influence even then. Arya and Rickon got her out of there. My brother and I did the rest. We helped her with lawyers and doctors. She hasn’t been back since.”

The waiter dropped the check on the table.

He reached for it.

She got to it before he could. “I want nothing from you,” she practically spat. She slid a credit card into the portfolio and caught the waiter’s eye. He came back and collected it.

Roose dropped the documents into the envelope.

“She picked you,” Margaery said suddenly.

He had started to get up, but he paused now.

“She said she liked that you were dark and dangerous.” Margaery rolled her eyes. “She said she knew you wouldn’t hurt her and you would protect her. Well, you hurt her and you certainly didn’t protect her. I know she’s dead. If you ever . . . if you ever cared the slightest bit for her, you will kill that monster.”

Roose rose. He would do just that.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Another bear of a chapter that wouldn’t be what it was without my beta, tafkar’s help.
The Illusion of Knowledge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* * *

Six Years Ago

* * *

Roose stood off to the side of the lobby of the high school auditorium with Bethany waiting patiently for Domeric to join them so they could get away from the throngs of parents and relatives clustered in small groups around the students. Roose had long accepted Bethany’s wisdom that it was important for them to be present at these events. It seemed to mean a great deal to Domeric so he continued to take her advice, but he disliked the inevitable socializing these sorts of activities engendered.

His son emerged triumphant from his performance. “I wish you could have seen the whole concert, Dad.”

Roose gave Domeric a regretful smile. “Something came up.” He could feel Bethany’s disapproval and suspicion radiating off of her. He’d rushed disposing of a target so that he could make his son’s solo, but he could hardly tell her so. “Besides, I saw you play and that’s all that matters.”

“How was I?”

“You were wonderful,” Bethany told Domeric.

Roose had no way of knowing how well his son had performed. Neither Bethany nor he was at all musical and neither could fathom from where Domeric’s talents had arisen. The boy was passionate about music and he had begged them to let him have private lessons. After a meeting with his grade school music teacher, Roose had agreed. It didn’t seem to be a phase; if anything Domeric only grew more interested in his playing as he got older.

“Oh, I keep forgetting to tell you. My new violin teacher says she knew my grandmother.”

Bethany arched her eyebrows. “My mother?”

“No, Dad’s.”

Roose paused in the act of buttoning his overcoat. “Mine?”

“She said they were really good friends. Hang on. She said she wanted to meet you.”

“Who is she?” Bethany demanded while Domeric ran off to corral the woman.

Roose checked his watch. “I have no idea. My mother never spoke of any friends.”

“Not the teacher,” Bethany hissed. “The whore you’re sleeping with. The one who made you late to your son’s concert.”

Roose fixed his wife with a cool gaze. “There is no other woman. I had a work-related matter.”

Bethany didn’t flinch. “Of course you did.”
“I refuse to discuss this here.” He was about to say more when Domeric returned with the violin teacher. She was a well-dressed lady in her mid-sixties. Introductions were performed. It was instantly clear that Domeric thought well of her and she of him.

After the pleasantries were concluded, she turned to Roose. “I was so sorry to hear of Alys’ death. We lost touch after she married, but we were very good friends when we were at college.”

Roose pressed his lips together in a thin smile. “Oh?”

“Did she keep up with the violin?”

“You must be mistaken. My mother wasn’t musical. Perhaps you’ve confused her with someone else.”

The teacher shook her head. “Alys Locke?”

“It’s not an uncommon name.”

“She married Rodrik Bolton?”

Roose frowned. “Yes, that is she, but—”

“She was a very competent violinist. Not good enough to make a career of it, but we were in the college symphony together.”

He’d never seen a violin in the house, not even after she’d died and he’d packed up her belongings. They’d never even owned a record player. The only time his mother listened to the battery-operated radio was when the power went out and she wanted to hear a weather report.

“I suppose Alys must have concentrated on her writing.”

His polite expression of interest grew fixed.

“Those stories she used to write. They were very good.” The woman paused. “You didn’t know about those either?”

“No.”

Bethany’s hostility was dissipating. Roose thought she was looking at him with sympathy. It was unwanted, but he supposed it was better than having to endure her silent disapproval of his infidelities supposed and otherwise.

“It was a different time,” the woman said finally. “I suppose . . . I didn’t know your father very well, but I remember how Alys was when she fell in love with him. I’d never seen her so happy. She must have focused on being a homemaker and mother.”

“Yes.”

Bethany linked her arm in his.

The discussion turned to talk of Domeric’s playing. Roose made appropriate replies until the woman mercifully went to speak to another pupil.

Domeric opted to ride back in the car with him. “Your mother never told you any of that stuff?”

“No,” Roose replied shortly.
“That’s really weird.” Domeric shifted his legs. “I could never give up the violin. I wonder why your—”

“—Domeric, I don’t care to discuss this. I know you mean well, but the topic is closed.”

“But—”

Roose inhaled. “Tell me about your day.”

Thankfully Domeric left it alone.

Bethany did not. Later that night when they were in bed, she brought it up again. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” The only things he ever remembered his mother writing were grocery lists, requests for books she wanted from the library, and the rare letter to Father’s sister.

“You never talk about your mother.”

“There is nothing to say. You met her. She was a quiet woman.” Roose sensed this was not going to be enough to satisfy Bethany. “She was a voracious reader.”

“Well, now we know where Domeric comes by his musical talent.”

There was that. Roose sometimes wondered at how different his son was from him. He had the same dark hair and he had the Bolton grey eyes, but with those all resemblance stopped. Oddly enough, this pleased Roose. It would be easier on the boy in the long run if he was not burdened with this . . . otherness.

“I think sometimes we forget that our parents had their own lives and hopes and dreams before we ever came into the world,” she commented with a yawn.

“Mmm,” he murmured. He wished she would stop speaking.

“You must take after her.”

“What makes you say that?”

Bethany nestled against him and drew the quilt over them. “There’s a part of you that you hide away from everyone else. She must have been a very private, reserved woman. It’s all right that you didn’t know about her past, you know. We can never truly know everything about anyone.”

* * *

**Present Day**

* * *

Sansa felt the weight of a comforter over her body. Her head was on a pillow. She tried to move. Her body ached, but she definitely was not lying on the hard cement floor of the root cellar. Sansa pushed herself up on her hands. The room was dark, but yes, she was back upstairs. She looked to her left. She was alone in the bed. She reached for the lamp and turned it on.

“You’re awake,” Roose said softly. He was sitting on the chair in the corner.

“Yes.” She felt herself tense up. “Why am I here?”

Roose slowly got up and then sat down on the edge of the bed.
She took a deep breath. She’d resisted asking the question because she didn’t want the answer, but it was time. “When is he coming for me?”

“No one is coming for you.”

Sansa swallowed. This was it then. He was going to kill her.

“You would probably like to take a bath,” he suggested. “And you must be hungry.” His hand hovered above hers. “May I?”

“Like I could stop you,” she said dully. Why would he let her bathe if he was just going to kill her? He wouldn’t drown her. He would use his knives—unless he meant her to die in the tub because it would make for easier cleanup.

He drew it back. “After what I’ve done to you, I’m not surprised.” Roose looked at her earnestly. “Sansa, I promise, I will make it up to you. Would you prefer a shower?”

Sansa discarded the last thought. She could usually tell when he was lying and this wasn’t the case now. No, he didn’t mean to kill her. He was just enlarging her prison. But her skin was crawling and the thought of a shower was tantalizing.

Roose extended his hand to her.

She hesitated, but took it.

He led her to the bathroom. “Take as long as you like. I’ll make you something to eat.”

Sansa had expected him to come in with her as he had down in the basement. She heard him moving about in the bedroom. She stripped out of her clothes and went to work. All her toiletries were still here. He hadn’t moved a thing. She found herself wondering at what point he was going to box everything up and add them to the collection of his dead wives’ belongings.

Why was she even up here? From the moment he’d knocked her out until just now, Roose had practically seethed with a cold rage. He’d struck her, kicked her, imprisoned her in the root cellar like some kind of an animal, and now he was treating her with consideration?

Sansa stepped into the tub and recoiled from her smell. He’d let her on his bed reeking like this? This didn’t make sense. Images from *Psycho* ranged through her thoughts. She went so far as to rip the curtain back, but she was alone. Sansa arranged the curtain again, and then stared at the faucet. If nothing else, she would die clean. She had missed that more than almost anything else. Sansa turned the taps, and almost expecting the water to bite her, reached down below the faucet to judge the temperature. She pulled the shower valve and let the spray hit her.

As she worked the soap into lather, she noticed the grey water pooling around the drain. The more she scrubbed, the dirtier the water got.

Twice she stopped the shower to check to see if she was still alone in the bathroom.

Even after the liquid swirling in the tub grew clear, she stood underneath the showerhead until the water turned cold. She stepped out of the tub onto the bathmat. The cool air hit her. She sniffed and was rewarded by the smells of shampoo and soap. The stench coming from her filthy clothes on the floor was the only sour note in the room. She wrapped a towel around herself and rapped on the door. “I’m done,” she called. There was no answer. Sansa tried the handle. To her surprise it was unlocked. Roose wasn’t in the bedroom at all.
Sansa sat on the stripped bed. What was he playing at? Still. The chance to wear clean clothes after so long was very appealing. She opened up the drawers of the dressers. She chose things that would be comfortable in case he decided she needed to go back in the root cellar. She might as well be warm. As she dressed in fresh clothes, she was hit by a feeling of softness. She had nearly forgotten what it felt like to have soft cotton, warm wool, and crisp denim against her skin. The sensation of having clean socks nearly undid her, but she finished quickly and waited.

And then she looked at the bedroom door. There was no harm in trying. Like the one to the bathroom, it was unlocked. She stepped out into the upstairs hallway and listened the way Roose had taught her. He was in the kitchen.

It occurred to her that she could go down the main stairs and try to get out through the front door. He never used it. But on the rare occasions someone—usually a delivery man—came to it, the thing stuck. He would be on her in seconds if she tried to get out that way. If she cooperated with him, he might begin to trust her again. Sansa gave herself a little shake. This kind of speculation was pointless. There was nowhere she could go. He would find her and he would kill her if she ever left again; it was why she’d come back in the first place.

She took the backstairs.

“Feeling better?”

Sansa nodded.

“Sit, please.” He ladled some soup into a bowl for her. “There are rolls on the table too.” Then to her complete shock, he poured her a cup of coffee. “I don’t know if it’s to your taste; I’ve never made it before. I followed the directions on the bag.”

“What’s in it?”

“Coffee.” Roose sat down opposite her.

“And—”

Roose smiled. “That’s all over, Sansa. I understand now. Go on. Eat while it’s hot.”

She hesitated and then she tucked in. After the little he’d given her in the basement, the beef barley soup tasted like it came from the kitchens of a five-star restaurant. She sipped the coffee which was weak, but it warmed her. “What happens now?”

“We’re going to take a trip.”

“Where?”

“I am taking you to my house at the Dreadfort. You may bring whatever you like. There’s no wireless or internet, but you’ll be safe there.”

Sansa’s hands froze around the cup. She wondered if she would ever be allowed to leave.

“It may be only a day or two or it may be a week before I can join you.”

“You’re not going to stay there too?”

Roose shook his head. “I have a new target. He is a very dangerous man. I mean to protect you and the best place for you until I dispose of him is in the north.” He reached for a manila envelope and
He wasn’t going to kill her. He was acting like everything was back to the way it was.

“I want you to look at this. Just once more, Sansa,” he said very earnestly. “This is the man I am going to destroy.” He pushed a photo toward her.

The man in the picture was Littlefinger. He was older, thinner, greyer, but it was him.

“He will die very slowly and very painfully. I will exact vengeance for every hurt he has dealt you.”

“Who told you?”

“Margaery Tyrell.”

Sansa fell back in the chair trying to absorb this new knowledge.

“I understand now. You feared I was in his pocket or that he might come for you?”

“Yes.” She could scarcely breathe. Just hearing Petyr’s voice had been enough to throw her into a panic. She hadn’t really stopped to think. The two monsters in her life knew each other and she had jumped to the wrong conclusions.

“I wish you had confided in me. We could have avoided all of this—” Roose shook his head. “It doesn’t matter now.” He rose and poured her more coffee. “Do you want to participate?”

The liquid heated up the outside of the cup.

“Either way I will need to bring him to the Dreadfort to dispose of him, but I will need to know if you wish to take part or not. It will affect the condition in which he arrives.”

“Isn’t the organization you work for going to object to you killing one of its employees?” Sansa stared down at the picture of Petyr Baelish, thinking. Roose was asking her what she wanted. He would abide by her decision.

“I don’t work for them. I am a contract killer. And they won’t know.” He reached for her hands again. “May I?”

This time she let him. He was going to slay the monster for her.

“Tell me what you want.”

Sansa stared into the depths of her mug. “I want to watch when you kill him.” She could sense his pleasure at this. “I want him to die in agony. I don’t want you to hold back. When it’s done,” she paused thinking out her next words. “I don’t want to kill anyone or to help you and I don’t want you to pressure me to do so either.”

“You might change your mind after. Sansa, I want to share—”

She closed her eyes. “No more lessons, Roose. It’s destroying me; it’s destroying us.” She looked at him then.

Roose finally nodded assent.

Good, he knew they were negotiating here. If she couldn’t be free of him, then she needed to
establish limits and boundaries that would make her life bearable. “Your turn.”

“I want to marry you.”

She didn’t want this, but she could see he wouldn’t be swayed. “We go to a registry office. I’ll have Arya there. No fuss. I am going to keep my name and we’re not going to tell anyone unless we have to.”

“Sansa—”

“You’ll know. I’ll know. I want to make my own name. No spousal hire,” she said suddenly. “I will slow down and take my time with my dissertation if you want. I’ll restrict my searches to places that are within a doable commute to you.” If she could get out of this with her career intact, if she could carve out something that was hers, she could stand this.

“And when I go north?”

“I don’t want to go to Winterfell, Roose. Not while my dad is still there.” She saw the idea striking him. “You will not kill him or hurt him. I’ve had more than enough twisted shit go down in my life. I do not need my husband killing my father for me. I mean it.” Besides, she wasn’t ready to reestablish a relationship with the rest of them. She couldn’t deal with her family on top of everything else.

“All right.” He was silent for a time. “Anything else?”

“I don’t want children.” She saw him frown at this. “It has nothing to do with you. I don’t want them with anyone ever.” Sansa thought she could handle being with him for the rest of his life, but the idea of raising someone who might be just like him was too much to bear. “Coffee and the occasional glass of wine. PowerPoint without guilt.” She saw him smile.

“Would you object to waiting up for me after my assignments?”

“No, I don’t mind doing that.”

Roose considered. “We live here together. You will let me take proper care of you.” He thought a moment. “There are other universities in the north.”

As long as her father wasn’t on the faculty, she thought she could stand it. “All right.”

“You may keep your maiden name, but we are not going to hide our marriage from anyone.”

This was harder to accept. “It’s . . . you’ve been married three times.”

“I’m a widower.”

“But most people are going to think they ended in divorce.”

Roose ladled more soup into her bowl. “The number and details of my previous marriages are not common knowledge. I have always been very discreet. I told you about them because I don’t wish to have secrets from you.”

“I don’t know if . . . we’ll know we’re married; why should it matter what other people think?”

He took her hand again. “Precisely.”

She supposed he had a point.
“As for children—no, don’t pull away from me.”

He could throw her back down in the root cellar within seconds. She looked down at the hand that was covering hers.

“Suppose we table the question of having them for a few years? I know a baby would be extremely inconvenient right now. If you still aren’t interested in having a child in say, two or three years, I will abide by your decision.”

Her opinion was never going to change. She nodded reluctantly.

“Eat.”

Sansa tore a roll apart. “I want to be on top sometimes, not just physically.”

“You never asked me or I would have been—”

“At least once a week, whatever I want. I miss being in control. I know you liked it too. I think . . .” She dunked the bread in the broth. “I think the balance we had got messed up.” Throughout all of his “lessons,” he had persisted in telling her everything he was doing was for them, which was a crock of shit, but Sansa thought he honestly believed it.

Roose reached for the coffeepot. “More?”

“Just a half cup, please.” She knew he wanted to believe they could go back to how it had been. She could take advantage of this desire—no matter how wrong he was. It was really the only move left to her.

* * *

The call came in the middle of the night. Arya’s phone was by her at all times now. By the time she reached for it, Rickon was there with her. They sat on the edge of the bed with the phone between the two of them.

“I’m all right. I needed to get away. It got bad; it got really bad, but I’m alive and okay,” Sansa assured her.

“I’m coming over there,” Arya said.

“NO!”

It was not all right then. Arya and Rickon exchanged glances.

In a more normal voice, Sansa went on. “We have to go into the police station. They need to see me, I guess to make sure I’m okay. Then Roose wants me to see a doctor. I’m not hurt. I’m just really hungry and tired. I think I could sleep for days.”

“Tomorrow then—”

“Roose has a house up north. I’m going to go up there to rest. We think for maybe a week or so.” There was a pause. “When I get back, I can see you then.”

Arya realized he was probably sitting right next to Sansa coaching her as to what to say.

“Roose said Rickon is in town.”
“I’m right here, Sansa,” Rickon piped up.

Sansa started to cry. “Can you stick around? I haven’t seen you in so long.”

“I can stick around,” he confirmed.

They heard Sansa swallow and then her voice was a little more distant as she presumably turned away to talk to him. “I’m okay, Roose. I’m just so tired, I swear.” She swallowed again. “I need you to call Dad and my advisor for me. I’ve got Ellyn’s number here.” She read it off. Then there was another pause. “Roose wants to talk to you.”

“It’s finally over, Arya. I know you’re worried, but I will take excellent care of her.”

“Can’t we see her? Just for a few minutes. Please, Roose. We’re glad you’re there for her,” she lied. “But we’ve been so worried; we just want to see her.”

There was a very long pause. “Can you get out to the house tomorrow by 1:00?”

“I’ll figure something out. Yes, we can do that.”

Rickon was nodding. Arya thought he would want to steal a car, but she could talk sense into him.

“It can’t be for very long. I want to get on the road, but yes, I think she would feel much better if she could see you too,” Roose told them. “It’s all going to be all right now,” he said very firmly. “Sansa is back where she belongs and we’re going to be very happy together.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title comes from a quote by Daniel J. Boorstin.

Thanks go out to tafkar. I am not good with description and she is. Chances are if there’s anything dealing with the five senses it’s because she gently pointed out that you might all like those details. And in many cases, she kindly made suggestions as to what those details might be.
Unreliable Narrators

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings for torture (implied), quite a bit of violence, and references to past child abuse and rape.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * *

Nine Years Ago

When Arya walked in the door, she saw Sansa in the living room with Mum and Dad.

“Go upstairs,” Dad told her. “Bran is over at the Reeds. We need to talk to your sister.”

Sansa smiled weakly at Arya.

Arya had moved back into her old room. Having to retake ninth-grade algebra over the break was killing her. She dumped her backpack onto the bed. She was rooting around in it for her homework when she heard a car door slam. She glanced out the window and saw Uncle Petyr striding up to the house.

Then she heard screaming. There was a lot of shrieking, yelling, and the sound of things being knocked over. Arya rushed out of her room. Rickon stood in his doorway, his eyes huge and round. He pointed. She saw Dad and Uncle Petyr dragging Sansa up the stairs and into her room. She was kicking and screaming and she was begging Dad to listen to her.

“DADDY!”

They emerged and locked Sansa in. Dad saw her and Rickon then. “Arya, I need you to take Rickon to his room now. Stay with him.” He looked devastated.

Through the door, Sansa shrieked. “Daddy, please! You have to believe me! He’s lying to you! I don’t know what he told you, but he hurt me! Please, Daddy!”

“Arya, Sansa isn’t well. We’re going to do what we can to get her the help she needs.”

“Mummy! Daddy! Please!”

Arya grabbed Rickon.

Her father looked like an old man as he descended the stairs.

“PLEASE! I’m not crazy! I’m not!”

Arya didn’t know what to think. Dad wouldn’t do this unless he was right. Maybe Sansa was sick. Maybe Uncle Petyr hadn’t been lying after all. Mum always said how normal Aunt Lysa used to be.
“PLEASE! DADDY!”

She backed up with Rickon, but then as Uncle Petyr followed Dad down the stairs, she saw the smirk playing on his lips.

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* * *

Present Day

* * *

This time when Mr. Roose brought Sansa Stark to the house at the Dreadfort, he introduced Ben to her.

She was thinner than Ben remembered and her eyes were sadder. The women who ended up with Bolton men tended to look that way after a while.

After Mr. Roose got her settled in, he summoned Ben to him. “This lady is very important to me. You are to address her as Miss Sansa. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Mr. Roose.”

“If she wants anything—anything at all—you are to do it or get it for her. I don’t care what it costs. I’m leaving you extra money for her comfort. You’ll stay in the house while I’m away. You may use the room off the kitchen.” He glanced up the stairs where presumably she was lying down.

“She may wish to go into town or to Karhold. Take her wherever she likes. I’ll call periodically. I want to know where she goes, what she does, and who she speaks to, but she is not a prisoner. She is very special to me. She is not to be harmed in any way. Do you understand?”

Ben did and said so.

Miss Sansa wasn’t anything at all like any of Mr. Roose’s wives. She reminded Ben a little of Mrs. Bolton, in the way she liked to read, but she wasn’t much like her either. She asked questions of him. She was unfailingly polite and she kept trying to get him to call her Sansa.

Ben didn’t know what to make of her.

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Sansa would have liked to have had more time in King’s Landing to spend with Arya and Rickon. Roose let her see them for fifteen minutes only, but they had not been able to leave as soon as Roose wanted. Dad had flown down and had insisted on seeing her—not even Roose could keep him away. For an hour, she’d sat awkwardly in the living room with him and Roose. There were so many things she wanted to say, but it was too late now. She’d listened to her father’s apologies and pleas to come home and forced herself not to react. Roose had been stony-faced the entire time, probably quite ready to remove her father bodily and permanently. There was nothing to do really except to lie to Dad that she was all right; she was happy where she was; and that she preferred to stick to the boundaries they had already established. Roose did not like Dad. That was abundantly clear. She’d already put Arya, Rickon, and Jon on Roose’s radar. She couldn’t risk endangering anyone else.

For days, she had met with police and more police. There had been an announcement to the media, but the ongoing crisis in Sothoryos, a ballplayer’s arrest for drug possession, and the revelation of a government official’s teenage mistress pushed her now not-very-interesting story to the back of the local news.

Everyone was finally satisfied with the story they’d concocted and she was in the north again.
Roose promised that when they came back, she could see Arya and Rickon as much as she liked.

Despite the spookiness of the house at the Dreadfort, it was comfortable enough. The caretaker was terrified of her. She didn’t know what Roose said to the old man, but whenever she asked him for anything, Ben Bones jumped to obey.

He drove her into Karhold and let her off at a small college that let people from the public use their computers. Sansa logged onto a PC. She checked her email and responded to the important messages. It was sad really how much her world had shrunk; there were probably only a handful of people left in the world who cared that she was safe now. Then she logged onto the other email account. There were no messages, but that wasn’t surprising. She started to type. She was done in less than half an hour.

Ben was horrified she had been waiting for five minutes.

“It’s all right,” Sansa reassured him. “I finished early. You couldn’t have known.”

“Please don’t tell him, Miss Sansa.”

“There’s nothing to tell.” But his obvious fear on his weathered face was illuminating. She watched as fat flakes of snow dropped down onto everything. “And it’s Sansa. No ‘Miss.’ How long have you worked for the Boltons?”

He glanced at her anxiously. “I started working for his father when I was sixteen.” He brought the car to a stop at a red light.

“Do you live up here alone?”

“I had a wife, but she died young. Cancer.”

“I’m sorry.” She stopped asking questions then. He chauffeured her around the shopping plazas of Karhold. Thanks to Roose, she had plenty of cash. Her purchases were small things, but they would keep her sane. She bought legal pads, pens, a few paperbacks, and groceries. By the time she emerged from Target, the snow had stopped.

Ben was anxious to get back. He pointed to the dark clouds on the horizon. The clear weather was a temporary state of affairs. But despite his fears, they returned without incident. He unloaded her purchases. He brought in firewood. He could not do enough for her.

Roose called on the landline. “Where were you?”

Sansa explained about going into town. He didn’t respond immediately. “Should I not have gone?” This was how it was always going to be, she thought with resignation. She would be under his thumb for the rest of his life.

“No,” he said finally. “I don’t mind. It’s merely that the snows can be treacherous and he is getting up there in years. I’m not confident in his driving abilities.”

“He’s terrified of displeasing you.” She kept her voice light.

Roose laughed. “Good.”

“How much longer?” Sansa needed this to be over soon.

“Tomorrow or the day after at the latest.”
She hesitated. “Roose? Be careful.” It seemed the right thing to say.

“I always am.”

* * *

Mr. Roose called twice, once for her and then once to speak to Ben. Aside from leaving off the bit about letting her wait, Ben was completely honest.

“I know I gave permission for you to drive her into town, but use your judgment. If the weather turns, stay at the house. Her safety is paramount.”

“Yes. Mr. Roose.”

“He was checking up on me,” Miss Sansa said after Ben hung up the phone. “It’s okay, I expect it now.” She sighed. “Would it be okay if I made some tea?”

Ben gaped. “You don’t need my permission, Miss Sansa.”

*Everything in the Dreadfort belongs to me.*

“Did he chew you out for taking me shopping? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get you into trouble.”

“Mr. Roose was worried about the roads. You wouldn’t know about them being a southerner, but it can get bad up here.”

“I’m a Stark. I was born in Winterfell.” She filled a kettle and took out two mugs. “Did you love your wife?”

Ben blinked at the abruptness of the question.

She dropped two teabags into the mugs. “Honey and lemon or do you want milk and sugar?”

He realized to his horror she meant to serve him. “I can make my own tea, Miss Sansa. Mr. Roose wouldn’t like you waiting on me.”

“Mr. Roose isn’t here.” She held up the honey and waited for him to nod. “You didn’t answer me about your wife. What was she like?”

“She had red hair,” he said quietly. “Like yours.” He accepted the tea from her. “I loved her more than anything.”

Miss Sansa looked at him searchingly. “Shit, you did, didn’t you? Then what in the seven hells are you doing working for Roose?”

* * *

Ben stared into the trunk at the body.

“He’s not dead,” Roose told him. He pried open one of the man’s eyelids. “Did you set up the room as I asked?”

Ben nodded.

He rattled off a series of instructions. It had been easy enough to incapacitate this piece of filth and he doubted he need worry about their prey escaping, but it paid to take precautions. “Give me an
hour and then I want you to bring Miss Sansa to me.”

Ben hesitated.

Roose didn’t care for the expression on Ben’s face. “Are my orders clear?”

“Yes, Mr. Roose.”

Roose shrugged. As long as the old man obeyed, Roose supposed it didn’t really matter what he thought of it all.

* * *

Ben brought her to the basement to what was ostensibly some storage room. Then he turned the hook and a panel opened, Sansa followed him through the tunnel. She had been in it before with Roose when he’d brought her up here the first time. The smell was less dank and the darkness less absolute than she remembered, but she couldn’t think why that would be the case.

“I can find my own way.” Roose had shown her the trick to finding the correct path to the chamber.

“Mr. Roose said I was to come with you.”

Sansa wasn’t sure she was ready for this, but she kept going. Ben asked her to beam the flashlight in front of their feet. The surface varied from stone to dirt to brick and it was slick or uneven in many parts, he cautioned. He kept his flashlight directed ahead of them.

They were somewhere deeper below the property. The tunnel branched off at different points. Some led to long-gone parts of the original Dreadfort. Others would take their followers to dead ends, paths that opened up into deep pits, or staircases that led to nowhere. For the hunts his ancestors had practiced, Roose had explained the first time he had taken her here. She hadn’t wanted to ask him then if he ever did such things, hadn’t even wanted to think about it, but now she wondered.

There were three sets of worn stone stairs, each leading them lower and lower. Finally they paused at the last set of steps.

“He said if you wanted to go back, you could, Miss Sansa.” Ben held out the possibility of retreat open to her. He spoke as if he hoped she would turn around and return to the house.

It was too late for that. She shook her head. She descended the final stairs tentatively. She looked up at him and smiled to reassure him. He nodded before disappearing back into the darkness.

She moved forward and saw Roose waiting for her. Battery-powered lanterns lit up the windowless space. The figure that had to be Petyr was on his knees. His head was covered with a rough burlap sack and his hands were bound behind his back. He was talking, pleading, begging, wheedling.

Roose hit him three times before Petyr fell silent.

The chamber was large and surprisingly warm; Roose had told her about the volcanic vents that had heated the castle that had once stood over this place. He and Petyr were in the center of the room. Heavy plastic sheeting lined the floor. Behind them was a sort of frame that looked like a giant wooden letter X with manacles on the ends. To the side was a table also covered with plastic. On it were Roose’s knives and a set of instruments with strange curves and oddly carved handles, the purposes of which she could only guess. At the edge of the sheeting directly in front of the frame was a carved, straight-backed, wooden arm chair. From its placement, Sansa intuited that it
was for her, a throne for the Night’s Queen.

“Please, I have money. I can pay you whatever you want.”

Roose struck him again.

Sansa sat. She composed herself and then she looked at Roose. She was ready.

Roose ripped the hood off of Petyr. He kicked him from behind so Petyr fell at her feet.

When she had been five or six, her family had owned a cat. He was a mouser. Every morning he sat by her parents’ bedroom door. When her mother emerged, he would drop his prey in front of her. Tribute, Dad had called it.

As a child, Sansa had found the concept disgusting.

Now she found it thrilling, intoxicating even. After all this time, she was in control—truly in control. “Hello, Petyr. It’s been a long time.”

Whoever Petyr had been expecting, it was not Sansa. He looked uncertainly at her and then back at Roose. “Sweetling, please. I don’t know what this is about but—”

Roose pulled him up and then struck him again.

“If you call me that again, Roose will cut out your tongue,” Sansa coldly informed him. “Nod if you understand.”

“I will give you every copper star I have if you’ll let me go.”

“I didn’t tell you to speak. I told you to nod.”

Roose grinned and kicked him in his side. He was in his true element, Sansa realized. The veneer of civility was gone revealing the violent, hard, soulless man beneath. This was Roose. And at this moment, as she sat watching Petyr writhing at her feet, she wouldn’t have had Roose any other way.

“Do you understand, Petyr?”

He nodded.

Roose hit him hard enough that he lost consciousness. He cut the clothes off of Petyr. He paused at the briefs and looked at her.

“Everything,” Sansa said after a moment. She wasn’t used to Roose deferring to her, but this was right somehow. This was all for her; she was the Night’s Queen. “I want him to feel totally vulnerable.” Sansa rose and came to the edge of the sheeting.

Roose shut the manacles on Petyr’s limbs. “Do you want him gagged or blindfolded?”

Sansa cocked her head and considered Petyr. “No.”

“Then we’ll begin.” He strode across the plastic sheeting. He picked up the bucket of icy water and threw the contents at Petyr’s face. Then as Petyr came to, Roose moved so that he stood behind her.

“Please, let me go. I will give you anything you want—I can give you enough money that you’ll
never want for anything again. Just stop this."

Sansa shook her head. “I don’t want your money, Petyr. That’s not why Roose brought you here. You’re his gift to me, you see.”

“He’s not quite right, is he?” Roose suggested.

“No, he’s not.” She leaned her back against Roose’s chest and positioned his arms around her waist. “Not yet, anyhow.”

Roose whispered audibly in her ear. “What would Your Grace have me do to him?”

“Please, Sansa. Tell me what you want. I will do anything you want.”

“Anything?”

He nodded desperately.

“It’s very simple, Petyr. Don’t worry. Roose is going to help you. All you need to do is suffer.”

* * *

Roose followed Sansa up the stairs. She fairly skipped ahead, but he took his time. He wasn’t a young man anymore and per his promise, he had not held back with their prey. There was a cost to such abandon, and he would pay for it with the aches he felt in his back and his arms.

“Why don’t you get cleaned up and I’ll start dinner?”

If he didn’t know better, he would have sworn that Sansa had been never through any sort of physical ordeal. With every cut and blow he’d dealt Petyr Baelish, it was as if she’d regained commensurate strength and energy. She was practically glowing now.

He was on the seventh step of the back staircase, when her voice stopped him.

“Can we go back down after dinner?”

Roose saw the need in her eyes. “Tomorrow,” he promised.

“But—”

His body would betray him if he didn’t get some rest. “Tomorrow.”

* * *

They made Petyr pay at night and they slept by day. Or rather Roose slept. Sansa noticed with dispassion the physical toll this was taking on him. His rest was sound and deep. It was hers whose was now light. She wasn’t tired from the lack of it, however. She usually managed about four hours before waking up and escaping his embrace, feeling fully energized.

She had the house to herself. On the first day, she couldn’t concentrate enough to work on her dissertation so she explored. It surprised her how little Roose had thrown out. She came across his father’s clothes and personal effects the first morning when she poked around the upstairs. The only thing she could discern from them was that the late Rodrik Bolton had been a meticulous man in life and that he cared deeply about dog breeding.

Alys Bolton’s possessions occupied what Sansa suspected had once been a small dressing room.
The closet still contained her clothing, all of which had once been of good quality. Most of the outfits had been much mended, but as she dug back further, she unearthed tailored suits, party dresses, hats, gloves that hinted at better, more prosperous times. These were packed away in garment bags and boxes. In the room itself were two large floor-to-ceiling bookcases that took up almost the entirety of the corresponding walls. They were crammed with books on all sorts of subjects. They had been much read. Sansa opened some of them and found faint notations in pencil. Either Alys Bolton’s hand had been light to begin with or time had worn the words to such a degree that her thoughts were now lost to history.

There were a large number of boxes here too. The recent ones were labeled with Roose’s precise printing, but before she could investigate, she heard him stirring.

On the second day, Roose had been so exhausted he had gone straight to bed after finishing his meal. He wasn’t superhuman after all, Sansa realized. Knowing he’d be out for hours, she went through the newer boxes. There wasn’t much of note, but once she got past the ones he had packed, the contents grew more interesting.

There was one box filled with nothing but sheet music. Another contained more than a dozen composition notebooks with black and white marbled covers. Again the faintness of Alys Bolton’s handwriting was nearly impossible to read, but Sansa wondered if these had not been attempts at creative writing of some kind. From the dates, it looked like the most recent preceded Roose’s birth by a good two years.

The boxes at the bottom of the stack contained memorabilia. Most of the photographs weren’t labeled, but Sansa assumed they dated back to Alys Bolton’s youth. Roose’s mother had been a pretty woman and if the pictures were anything to go by, her childhood and adolescence were conventional and happy enough. Sansa waded through concert programs, announcements for poetry readings, dance cards, pressed corsages, and snapshots of carefree coeds at dances and picnics. As she flipped through the stack of mementos, she noticed a man with dark hair and grey eyes starting to appear with increasing frequency in the group shots. Sansa didn’t need to ask Roose or Ben who he was. The eyes told her everything. Roose’s father was usually in the background and his gaze was almost always fixed on Alys.

Gradually the variety of keepsakes diminished as did the number of people in the photographs.

Sansa stopped and put everything back in the box. She didn’t need to look anymore. She knew how this story ended.

* * *

Ben tried to sleep, but it was tough going. He dreamt of his mother, his wife, but mostly he dreamt of Alys Bolton. She was sitting in the garden surrounded by a bower of sweet-smelling winter roses and she beckoned to him. When he approached her, she stood and kissed him. As his lips touched hers, she turned into Sansa Stark.

When he didn’t sleep, he sat on a bucket in the foul chamber and tried not to feel sorry for the man they were torturing.

On the third day, Ben made the mistake of looking too long at her. Mr. Roose saw, and from the set of his mouth, Ben knew Mr. Roose was most displeased. He kept his eyes averted from her after that.

Everything in the Dreadfort belongs to me.
Sansa ate with gusto. “Is there any more stew?”

Roose spooned some onto her plate. It felt very right to be here with her in the kitchen of his family home. The room which had always seemed drafty and barren to him—he remembered his mother had never liked it—now struck him as being quite comfortable. He had Sansa back. It was winter. They were home where they belonged, eating a well-deserved meal in a warm, almost cozy kitchen. They were in perfect sympathy with one another. Sansa understood everything now. She’d warned him last night she never wanted to do this again, but it didn’t matter. Once was enough.

“We’ll have to finish it tonight.” He was pleased by her appetite and her disappointment. “I want him disposed of before anyone comes looking for him here.”

“I haven’t seen him in ten years.”

“If the police ask you, say it exactly like that.” There would be no need to worry about her cracking under questioning to the police. She lied quite well.

“Where will we bury him?”

Roose swallowed the last of his water. “Ben and I will attend to it.” He thought she could handle any questions that came her way from the authorities, but it would be best if she didn’t know too much. “Ben has taken to you.”

She smiled. “He’s terrified of me.” She took their plates and brought them to the sink. “I can’t get him to call me anything but Miss Sansa.”

Roose watched her. “He is following my orders. He isn’t your equal. He’s a servant. Don’t get too familiar with him.”

She dunked the dishes in the soapy water. “Is he dangerous?”

“To you? No. But I don’t want him forgetting his place.”

“All right, but I’d prefer Miss Stark to Miss Sansa.” She wiped the plates clean. “When can we go back down?”

“Now if you like.”

They walked through the tunnel together. “I know you’ve enjoyed punishing him, but . . . it’s time.”

She nodded. “I can smell it.” She stopped and wrinkled her nose at their prey’s stench. “Literally.”

“That wasn’t what I meant, but yes, it is one reason.” He wondered at her stomach. The smell had been bothering even him since yesterday, and it was only now that Sansa had said anything about it.

Ben was sitting on the upended bucket, waiting for them. He leapt up at their approach. Roose gestured for him to leave. He noted the way the old man glanced at Sansa. Roose made sure Ben saw his displeasure. The old man swallowed and he vanished up the stairs. Good. He understood. Sansa understood. It was handled.

Sansa took her seat.
Roose ripped the sack off of Petyr Baelish’s head. The man was virtually unrecognizable. He’d stopped offering them money after the first day. There had been a period where he’d tried making threats. Now he simply begged.

“Do you want this to end, Petyr?” Sansa inquired.

It amused Roose how very polite Sansa remained. She grew more controlled with each passing hour.

* * *

“You’re going to kill me,” Petyr managed.

“Oh, yes.” She’d told Roose she wanted Petyr’s death to be as agonizing as possible. He had to pay, she insisted, a hundredfold for everything.

“Lysa, Robin . . .”

Sansa shrugged. “They will be much better off without you. The world will be much better off without you.” She didn’t care about Aunt Lysa, but Robin deserved better. For all she knew, Petyr had hurt other children. He had to pay.

“You wanted it. You know you wanted it as much as I did.”

She heard a roar from inside of her, like the sound of ice on a lake cracking.

* * *

Roose saw Sansa’s expression alter. Her eyes flickered.

“You wanted it,” Petyr Baelish rasped for a second time.

Sansa stood up. “Say that again.”

“You wanted me.”

There was a sudden stillness in the air that had nothing to do with their prey’s reek of blood and piss and flayed flesh. Roose had never entirely understood other people, but as he watched the muscles of Sansa’s face freezing in place, it was if something was breaking inside of her.

Sansa moved past him in a blur. Before Roose knew what she was about, Sansa had a knife in her hand and was stabbing it into Petyr Baelish. All her control left her. She was like a wildling, with her red hair whipping around her, her brilliantly blue eyes blazing as she plunged the knife in again and again.

He savored it at first. He knew Sansa felt what he had been trying to share with her all along. She would understand what that emptiness he usually experienced was like and from this point on, Sansa would appreciate what it was like to be whole. If she was frenetic, well, this was her first time and her need for vengeance was mixed in with the fulfillment. Perhaps she would want to do this again after all. Roose could teach her control.

But as she continued, she began to shriek. With each stab of the knife, she screamed obscenities. This was very different from anything he’d ever witnessed or experienced before. She wasn’t like Ramsay who simply pursued his pleasures without thought or consequence. There was no passion or joy. It was . . . he didn’t know what it was.
“You broke me, you fucking piece of shit!”

The screaming brought Ben. He hovered at the doorway unsure of what to do.

On and on she attacked Petyr Baelish. The knife ripped into what was left of his corpse long after he had stopped breathing.

* * *

Ben was halfway up the second set of stairs when he heard her screams. He didn’t know what he could do to help her, but he descended as quickly as he could. As he ran into the room, his nostrils were assailed by the smells of fresh shit and blood emanating from the man on the saltire.

Miss Sansa had one of the knives. She was shrieking as she stabbed the man on the frame. With each thrust of the knife, blood splattered over the man, the plastic, her clothes, her hair, her pale skin. Ben saw Mr. Roose staring openmouthed at her; he wasn’t prepared for any of it. He was clearly as paralyzed as Ben. She screeched words Ben hadn’t heard since his days in the Watch.

“You motherfucking son of a whore, you stole everything from me!”

* * *

“Sansa!” Roose called sharply. “He’s dead.”

Just like that she stopped. She looked down at the corpse, at the knife, and then at herself. She dropped it like the hilt was burning her hand and then she started to shake and sob.

Roose cursed himself for not anticipating this. He took over. His lessons had held. There was blood, but it was not nearly as bad as it could have been. He had cleaned up worse things. Between him and Ben, they would be able to manage this.

“Sansa, I want you to look at me. He will never hurt you again. You did very well. Focus on me, Sansa.”

* * *

It took a seeming eternity before Mr. Roose managed to stop her. He told Ben to fetch a robe and slippers and together they stripped her out of her clothes. She was trembling badly and crying.

“You’ll have to help me get her to the house. I don’t think I can manage her in this state.”

Miss Sansa began to retch.

* * *

Roose and Ben were taking her clothes off. She tried to stop him, but Roose said it was necessary. They had to eliminate the evidence he said.

They weren’t alone, though. She shouldn’t be without her clothes when other people were in the room. Ben was there and so was Petyr. “I don’t want him to see me naked,” she told Roose. “Not ever again. You promised me he would pay.”

“He’s dead, Sansa.”

She looked and then she started shaking again.
Mr. Roose and he had to pause on the landing. Ben thought it would almost be easier to try carrying her, but when she would come to, she was a wild thing, and nothing Mr. Roose could say or do would calm her.

“We’re nearly there, Sansa.”

They were still deep beneath the property and neither he nor Mr. Roose were as young as they once were.

“Don’t let him hurt me,” Miss Sansa begged looking straight at Ben.

“Ben is helping us, Sansa. He won’t hurt you. Please, I need you to be calm.”

Ben locked eyes with her. He knew exactly which “him” she meant.

* * *

“It’s almost over, Sansa,” Roose assured her.

She jumped at the sound of a door slamming. “Who’s in the room with us?”

“No one is here with us, Sansa.” Roose told her to put her arm around his neck and to lean on him.

“But I heard . . .” Her slippers were tacky against the newspapers they wanted her to walk on.

“The basement door, Miss Sansa. That’s all.”

* * *

Roose could have done with fewer stairs. Sansa was a light thing, but she was either dead weight or when she snapped out of it, she was squirming like an eel.

Every few minutes it was the same thing. “Where is he?” she asked.

“He’s dead,” Roose reassured her again. “I promise you, he’s dead.”

And then she would shake.

* * *

Sansa looked down at the robe she was wearing. It didn’t fit her right and it wasn’t hers. The pattern was of red and white poppies. “Whose is this?”

“My mother’s,” Roose told her in a puzzled voice as if he was surprised to find that it was so.

“I couldn’t find—I’m sorry, Mr. Roose.”

Roose shook his head. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“How did we get up to the bathroom?”

Roose began running the water and Ben left them. “Sansa, it’s over. Look at me. I need you to be calm.”

Sansa listened as he gave her orders. She was to give him the robe and slippers. She dimly
registered Roose saying they would need to be destroyed too. It was a shame. It was such a pretty garment, she found herself thinking. She liked the pattern, but she gave it to him regardless. She was to wash herself thoroughly. Every inch of herself, Roose told her. Her hair too. Three times, he said. At least three times. And then he wanted her to get into the bed. He would take care of everything else.

* * *

Ben left quickly and went back to the room. It wasn’t as bad as one of Ramsay’s, but it wasn’t going to be an easy cleanup either. Ben eyed the knife. He remembered what Mr. Roose had done the first time his bastard son had risked his father’s reputation. Ben wiped the knife clean, hilt and blade. That done, he went to work on the chair. He didn’t know what else Miss Sansa had touched, but he decided he needed to be thorough.

* * *

Once she was in their room, she was more herself although she continued to shake.

“You did very well,” Roose repeated. “It’s all over.” He gave her instructions and was relieved when she obeyed. “I will be back with you as soon as I can. Will you be all right?”

She trembled, but she nodded in the affirmative.

* * *

By the time Mr. Roose came down again, Ben thought he had done a good job of eliminating the traces of her presence.

“I should have anticipated that,” Mr. Roose said to himself. He looked around. “Even at her worst, she is a miracle of tidiness compared with Ramsay.”

“I can finish it by myself.”

He shook his head. “No, I want to be sure it’s done right. None of this is to come back to us. Is that clear?”

Ben nodded, feeling relief wash over him.

* * *

Time must have passed because she was in the bed and her hair was damp. The drapes were threadbare and the light they let in cast weirdly-shaped shadows onto the floor and onto her bed. There must be a moon, she thought, reflecting light from the snow. Or was it the other way around?

_Sweetling._

She stiffened and reached over for Roose. He wasn’t there. Why wasn’t he there?

* * *

The two men worked in silence. It took hours.

They dealt with the corpse. Ben hated this part, but it was better to burn the body than to bury it. There were fewer issues with ashes. They burnt her clothes and those of the corpse too.
“Tomorrow I want you to scrub the place out, the staircases too. Forget your other tasks. I don’t care if it takes you a week, get rid of every trace.”

Ben didn’t need to be told twice.

***

It was so cold in the house.

*I’ll warm you up, my sweetling.*

Sansa couldn’t move. She didn’t want him to touch her. Why was Uncle Petyr touching her like this? She wanted her mother. She tried to call for her and she couldn’t make sounds come out of her mouth.

***

Roose and Ben were thorough. The old man had cleaned up after Ramsay. He knew what he was about.

By the time he was able to return to Sansa, it was well into the daylight hours. She was curled up in the bed. He showered and then collapsed next to her.

Roose felt every one of his years. He was exhausted. “Were you able to get any rest?”

“I’ve been afraid to shut my eyes.”

Roose was relieved that she sounded like herself again. He turned on his side. He was too tired to even reach for her, but she seemed to sense this; Sansa nestled against him and pulled the quilt over them. He managed to sling his arm around her. “I’m here now and I will never let anyone hurt you ever again.”

***

*You’re a very special girl, sweetling. I hope you know that.*

*This is what family is all about.*

*This is who we are. This is what we do.*

Sansa felt hot tears pricking her cheeks. Why was she crying?

*You broke me, you fucking bastard. You broke me and I will never be whole again. I tried to put the pieces back together and it’s all wrong and it will never be right again. You motherfucking son of a whore, you stole everything from me. You stole my future. You bastard, you took my family from me. You took it all and I will never be safe or happy again.*

***

Chapter End Notes

If you got through this . . . it’s less intense from here on out. I promise.
This chapter nearly killed me. I wrote it and rewrote it. You can thank my beta, tafkar for her suggestions as to how to tackle it, how to improve it, and how to organize it.
Happily Ever After

Chapter Notes

The action in this chapter takes place over several months.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * *

Nine Years Ago
* * *

Garlan was initially dubious about the situation, but after he met with Sansa, he changed his mind. “I have this. She can stay here with us. Go on your trip with Grandmother. Your friend will be safe with Leonette and me.”

“Your parents will realize what a mistake they made,” Margaery promised Sansa.

Sansa was as white as paper, but she was calm. “It’s better this way. I know who the monsters are.”

Margaery exacted promises from Loras and Garlan and then very reluctantly, she left on the trip she no longer wanted to make.

When she returned, Sansa had already left for Lannisport to start university.

“She’s very strong,” Garlan told Margaery. “The girl looks like a mild wind would tear her to pieces, but she’s a survivor.”

* * *

Present Day
* * *

Like most of the things on Roose’s property, the godswood was eerie. It wasn’t beautiful the way the godswoods of Sansa’s childhood had been. “Are you religious? I never asked you.”

“There’s time enough to speak of those things later.” Roose removed his gloves and extended his hand to her.

She realized he meant to marry her here and now. It wouldn’t be legal, but they would be bound by rules of the old gods. Sansa stripped her gloves off and took his hand.

They dropped to their knees, said the words, and then it was done.

“We’ll have the legal ceremony in the registry office when we get back to King’s Landing,” he told her later as they lay entwined in each other’s arms.

“Will we come back here?”

“Oh, yes.”

Sansa beat her pillow into submission. “We need a better mattress.”
“Whatever you want,” he assured her.

It felt like it had before everything had gone wrong. It wasn’t, of course. It would never be like that again. Sansa knew this was what Roose wanted, though. On some crazy level, it was what she wanted as well. “Wireless?”

“That might be more difficult. We definitely need a more stable bed.”

Sansa laughed. The frame had given way beneath them. “A very stable bed and a proper headboard,” she concurred. “How often will we come here?”

“Over the Intersession? The Third Semester?”

“If you don’t mind driving me into town so I can use their internet, yes to both.” Sansa turned to face him.

“Speaking of driving, when we return, I am buying you a car. Your days of waiting hours for the bus are over.”

She wasn’t sure how she felt about this, but at least she would have some time to herself. Sansa had a feeling she was going to need as much of that as possible.

“We are married now. I mean to take proper care of you.” He had more ideas of how he might do this. When they returned, she would move out of the apartment, he told her. “You may do whatever you want to the house.”

Sansa would be sorry to lose the apartment. It was the first place that had truly been hers. She saw him frowning slightly. It wasn’t wise to let too much silence pass. A light remark seemed called for. “Pink. I want the whole place to be pink.”

Roose chuckled. “I let Walda do it, how can I refuse you?”

“I want their things out,” Sansa said suddenly. “No more boxes of their stuff.”

“You told me it didn’t matter or I would have disposed of them months ago. As soon as we’re back,” he promised. “And I think you should have a meeting with your advisor.”

“I had Arya tell her I would after we returned.” Sansa knew Ellyn was deeply concerned.

Roose ran his fingers over her lips. “Get an honest assessment from her of your chances. Tell her about our marriage. I want you to speak with her about spousal hires.”

She pulled away. “We had an agreement.”

“I am not asking you to change your mind. I merely want you to be as informed as possible. In any case, see what she thinks of the universities and colleges in the north. I don’t want your career to suffer because of my wish to come home.”

This, Sansa was willing to do, but the sinking feeling was back. “I know you said Ben is a servant.”

“He is.”

“What is he going to call me now? Mrs. Bolton?”

“He called my mother ‘Missus’ for years.”
Sansa rolled her eyes. “No. Not Mrs. Roose either. Miss Stark or Sansa. You pick.”

“Miss Stark it is, but it will confuse him terribly,” Roose predicted. “Especially after we have children.”

“Did that conversation mean nothing to you?” She sat up. “I agreed to consider the question in three or four years. I did not agree to have children in three or four years.”

“You would make an excellent mother.”

If he was going to try and pressure her about this or about getting her a job on his coattails he would certainly attempt to get her to help him with his targets. “So everything we agreed to that night was just what? Lies? Lip service to—”

“—it was not—I forgot myself.”

She let him think she forgave him and then she let him make love to her. This was just another fiction she’d woven for herself out of dross. The time had come for her to start seeing things as they really were.

* * *

Ben stared at the envelope of cash.

“For your assistance.”

“Mr. Roose?” In all his years of working for the Boltons, he’d never gotten a thank you let alone a bonus.

His employer smiled. “This was a very special job, Ben. We won’t speak of it again, but know that it has made me very happy. Miss Sansa and I were married in the godswood yesterday. We’ll go through the official ceremony in the next week or so. Which reminds me, you’re to call her Miss Stark from now on.”

“No Mrs. Bolton?”

Mr. Roose almost seemed human. He looked amused. “My wife is keeping her maiden name. It’s not uncommon for academics. She told me in no uncertain terms she does not want you to call her Mrs. Bolton or Missus or Miss Sansa. The choice she gave me was Sansa or Miss Stark. Obviously you cannot call her Sansa. So . . .”

“Miss Stark,” Ben repeated dubiously.

“I told her you would find it confusing.” He smiled again. “We’ll be up here with greater frequency from now on. I expect to have more for you to do while we’re gone. If it’s easier for you to stay in the house during our absences, you may. When we’re here, you’re to stay in your cottage, however.”

Ben absorbed this.

“I’m giving you a raise of $100 more a week. That should account for any increased work.” Mr. Roose handed him his check. “You never remarried.”

“No.” Ben thought of his late wife and the way Mr. Roose had stared at her at his father’s funeral.

“You should. Find some young girl to give you children while there’s still time. I rather like the
Ben thanked him for the money and wished him congratulations. As he walked out of the study, he passed Miss Sansa—no, Miss Stark. She must have overheard her husband. She looked terribly sad, but then she gave herself a little shake and then went in to join Mr. Roose with a smile on her face.

*L * *

Loras listened to her, but from the implacable expression on his face, Margaery knew it was hopeless.

“Did Grandmother put you up to this? Why am I asking? Of course, she did. Margaery, I love Renly. I want to be with him.”

“They won’t mind as long as you’re discreet,” she insisted.

“Renly will mind. I’ll mind. Whoever it is they want me to marry—she’ll mind.”

Margaery twisted the engagement ring on her finger.

“Can you honestly tell me you’re happy with Jaime Lannister? That you don’t miss Sansa?”

“I think about her every day,” Margaery said quietly. She wanted to see her so much, but everyone thought that was a very bad idea and after talking more with Arya, she’d reluctantly agreed.

“I’ve seen what it’s done to you, losing her. I can’t lose Renly the way you lost Sansa.”

She pushed the glass of wine away. “The circumstances aren’t the same.” Margaery felt Loras looking at her. “What? You know she left me. I don’t blame her anymore. She was upset and messed up, and he snowed her.”

“That’s not why Sansa left. Well, not entirely,” Loras allowed. “She knew you wouldn’t stand up to Grandmother. She knew you weren’t willing to come out. She knew there was no future with you because you weren’t willing to fight for one.”

“And how in the seven hells would you know this?”

Loras stared into his drink before setting it down. “Sansa let a few things slip when you used to drag us on those awful double dates. You told me the rest. And I have eyes.”

“She cheated on me. She left me.”

“You told me you woke up in the bed of one of Garlan’s friends,” Loras said quietly. “More than once.”

Margaery didn’t want to hear this. She rose.

“And that Sansa found out about it.”

“It was meaningless.”

Perhaps it was, but Sansa probably thought it was one more sign that you meant to go through with this plan of Grandmother’s.”

Margaery thought of some of the accusations Sansa had lobbied at her. That she didn’t like to think
about unpleasant things. It was true, Margaery didn’t.

“I know who I am, Margaery. I’m sorry it’s not who Grandmother wants me to be, but I can’t change it. I don’t want to change it.”

“What about your family? What if—”

Loras shrugged. “Willas and Garlan both said they’ll stand by me. Mother told me she loves me no matter who I sleep with. Father may have to appear to go along with her, but Mother seems to think he’ll be supportive even if he’s quiet about it. I don’t care if Grandmother disinherits me.”

“You’ve already told all of them?”

“You’ve always known it,” he said simply. “I was nervous about them. I never thought I had to be worried about losing you.”

Margaery sank back down. “I love you. You’re my brother. I would never desert you.”

He sat next to her. “I’ve lined up another job just in case Grandmother rains fire down upon me. Oddly enough, I think Stannis will have Renly’s back, so no matter what we’ll be able to survive.”

“How long have you been planning this?”

“I decided for certain when you lost Sansa. I’ve been dreaming about it for years.”

“Oh.”

“I saw what you were going through.” He hesitated a half minute and then he continued, “Maybe it’s not too late for you. The only one who would be difficult would be Grandmother and she might come around. You have a good job. You wouldn’t starve. You would have Sansa.”

Margaery closed her eyes. From everything Tywin and Arya had told her, Sansa was set on this course of action. “She’s gone, Loras.”

* * *

The chaos on the kitchen table greeted him as soon as he unlocked the door. Roose inhaled sharply and then calmed himself. He was early; Sansa had no way of knowing he was returning so soon. She would clear it away as soon as she reappeared from wherever she’d gotten to. He bent down to pick up a few sheets of yellow foolscap that had fallen to the floor. As he set them on the table, his eye was caught by the website still displaying on her laptop.

“Oh, hi. I didn’t expect you until 5:30.”

“Since when do you use Yahoo for email?” He turned to face her.

“I have an address I use when I buy things online; it keeps the spam in my main email account lower.” Sansa gave him a peck on the cheek and started tidying her mess of papers into neat stacks. “Give me a few minutes and I’ll have this out of the way.”

Roose took them out of her hands. “Buying what online?”

“Yarn. I was looking through the Webs catalog and they have a great deal on some Madeline Tosh DK weight.”

He relaxed. “Another sweater?” he asked hopefully. He liked wearing the things she made for him.
“A sweater for you out of Madeline Tosh yarn would cost us $500, Roose.” Sansa shook her head. “Do you want to see the pattern I was looking at? It’s a shawl for me.”

He sat next to her as she showed him what she’d found in some magazine.

“It’s going to be really difficult. It looks like if I make a mistake it’ll be a huge pain to fix, but I loved the way the sample looked in the shop.” She flipped to a larger picture. “It looks like cloth almost.”

“Why didn’t you buy the yarn there?” He had been made to understand that sometimes what she wanted could not be obtained locally and it was necessary for her to make online purchases. Since even he could not see what someone tracking him or them could make out of this sort of activity, he allowed her to do this.

“Because they have it for 20% more than the online place.”

Roose smiled at her indignation. “My thrifty Sansa.” He went upstairs to change. By the time he returned, the table was clear and she was in the living room knitting. Everything was in its place.

* * *

“Why now?” Tywin asked Margaery.

“I can’t do this anymore,” she said simply. “I don’t remember a time when I wasn’t taught to dissemble. They didn’t call it that, but that’s what it was. I used to wonder why it was all right for Grandmother to say and do what she wanted but not me. She told me ‘she’d paid her dues.’ Well, I’ve paid mine and then some. I lost Sansa because I wasn’t honest with her and because I wasn’t honest with myself. I’m done.”

He absorbed this. “And you want to work for me, why?”

“Because you’re immune to Grandmother’s influence. I don’t know if she’ll try and bring me to heel. Perhaps she won’t, but I have to be prepared before I tell them what I’m doing. I’ve already ended the engagement with Jaime. I think he’s secretly relieved. We’re not going to announce it until I’ve got everything in order.” Margaery waved that away. “I’m good at what I do. I will give everything I have to this job and you won’t be sorry you hired me.”

Tywin nodded. “Very well.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.” He stood up and extended his hand to her. They shook on it and he walked her to the door. “I received another email from Sansa. She assures me she’s all right. I trust you’ve been reading about Petyr Baelish’s disappearance.”

Margaery had. “I hope he made him scream in agony before he killed him.”

“From what I’ve heard, that is almost assured.” Tywin hesitated. “There may yet be a way to free her. We should discuss it later.”

It was clear that she both knew what he meant and that it was not a new idea to her. “Sooner, rather than later.”

* * *
Sansa checked her watch three times before she logged onto a computer in the library. He would be fifteen minutes into his lecture. She was at a station with a full view of the place. She logged onto the other email account. There was one message. She read it. Then she hit reply:

Yes  
Close call  
How soon?

After she sent it, she deleted the original message and her sent mail, and then emptied her trash folder. She hurriedly logged out of Yahoo; shut down the browser; and logged off the computer before logging back on. From a conversation with the lab consultant, she knew the machines wiped themselves clean after each use. Sansa had no doubt there were ways of calling it all back up and that Roose knew people capable of doing so, but as long as he didn’t suspect anything, there was no need to become paranoid.

For the most part, it had been tolerable since returning from the Dreadfort. Roose treated her well enough. He had a new assignment, though. She could always tell. He became sharper, less easy-going, quicker to anger. So far he was keeping to their agreement, but Sansa stayed well away from the kitchen when he was planning. She packed him lunches for when he did surveillance, but other than that, she kept to other parts of the house.

It couldn’t last. It wouldn’t last.

The tracking device on her car was proof of that. She hadn’t let on that she knew about it. Every night when he asked her about her day, she made sure to tell him all the places she’d been. Once in a while she left something out to see what he would do. It was never a pleasant evening. Nonetheless she did it periodically. She needed something to remind herself that this existence was just another prison. He was one of the monsters and she was just his pet. That was all she had ever really been to him. Roose might think otherwise, but sociopaths couldn’t love. The textbooks she’d been surreptitiously reading in the stacks at the library all said as much.

When Sansa walked into the kitchen, Roose was waiting for her. He let her lock the door and then he held out his hand to her.

She recognized the look he gave her. He wanted her. “Now? It’s not even 3:00.”

“No.”

They barely made it to the bedroom.

“What’s got into you?” she asked laughing as he stripped off her clothes.

Roose wasn’t interested in her conversation. He devoured her.

She should feel used, but she never did. It made her feel alive when they fucked like this. And it was fucking. There was absolutely no tenderness in his touch.

“The target went quickly,” Roose murmured afterward. “It was highly satisfactory.”

“You killed him during the day?”

“Her and yes. It’s rare, but the opportunity arose and it was too good to pass up. I hope you weren’t planning on working this afternoon because we’re not leaving this bed.”

Sansa repressed a shiver. “Not ever?”
Roose dropped a kiss on her shoulder. “Would it be such a very bad fate?”

“To spend the rest of my life in bed with you?” Sansa laughed. “No, I suppose not.” And it wouldn’t. Sex was one of the few things in their relationship that never gave them any trouble.

* * *

Roose found Sansa in her office. The library table he’d bought for her was covered with her yellow legal pads and books. When he first met her, she wrote almost exclusively on her laptop. Now she preferred writing longhand.

“Did you want me for something?”

“I’m leaving for the supermarket. Was there anything you wanted?”

“Some of that lemon ginger tea, please? I think we’re almost out.”

Roose added it to the list.

“That’s it.”

“I don’t mind you using the kitchen, you know.”

Sansa shook her head. “Yes, you do. You tense up every time I take up more than a quarter of the table. Once my dissertation is done, I’ll go back to the kitchen. For now I think it’s better for both of us if I write in here.”

The solution was for her to work in a more organized fashion. When he first met her, she had. At some point she’d let the scope of her dissertation overwhelm her. Now she claimed she needed access to everything then and there so that her flow not be interrupted. It was a specious argument. If she were more disciplined, it would not be a problem.

“Please, just go to the store.”

He put his fingers on the door handle.

“You forgot something.”

He turned around and arched an eyebrow.

Sansa slipped out of her chair and kissed him. “I promise I’ll stop working when you get back,” she murmured.

“I won’t be long.”

Sansa smiled and sat back down.

Roose left her. He wasn’t a fool. She was trying to placate him, but there was no point in arguing. He could easily force her to accommodate him, but she would be resentful and there were still two major battles he needed to win. He wanted her with him when he went back to the north and he wanted children. If necessary he would put his foot down. He would negotiate a position for her through spousal hire and she would learn to accept it.

Persuading her to have children was going to be more of a challenge. After a few disastrous attempts, he steered well away from the subject. She claimed it had nothing to do with him. It was possible, he supposed; Sansa still had nightmares about Littlefinger. They alarmed him when they
happened and they certainly unnerved her. One night after a particularly violent one, she had told him she was afraid of what sort of a mother she might be if one of her dark moods hit her.

He didn’t press her. If she wasn’t amenable when the time came, he would find a way. Birth control failed often enough. It wouldn’t be that difficult to decrease its efficacy. He thought if she found herself pregnant, she would accept children easily enough. He thought her fears groundless; she would be a perfect mother.

For now Roose would keep to the boundaries they’d established. He didn’t mind most of her conditions, but he was not about to suffer a separation or endure some hellish commute for the sake of her ego. Now that his aunt had died, he was the last of the Boltons. Roose meant for his line to continue.

What Sansa still failed to understand was that she was his. It wasn’t necessary for her to know this unless she took it in her head to try and leave him again. Roose felt reasonably certain she would never attempt it.

He understood her reason for her flight and he had forgiven her for it. If she had only shared her secret with him, it would never have been an issue, but he forbore pointing this out to her. There was no need. Sansa hid nothing from him now.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

The usual thanks go out to my beta, tafkar.

Spousal hire is a practice whereby someone being hired by a university or college can try to negotiate a job for their spouse. It’s a practice that’s no longer as common as it once was and there can be some resentment on the part of the faculty toward the new hire. It’s still done, though, and in this story, I’ve made Roose a big deal in academic history circles so if he was offered a position, it is something he could probably negotiate very easily. Since no one would say word one to him about him bringing in his wife, he’d have no problems. Sansa would probably face more hostility, especially since she is new to academia and less established.
The sense of déjà vu was strong as Sansa arranged her few sticks of furniture and belongings in the second bedroom of Margaery’s Lannisport apartment. Once again she had very little and once again she was depending on Margaery’s largesse. “I want to pay my half, all right?”

“I told you it’s not necessary—”

Sansa stopped her right there. “Yes, it is. Work out what that should be and I’ll make sure you have it every month.”

Margaery reluctantly agreed. She watched as Sansa made up the bed. “I’ll never get over how strong you are.”

“Strong? You’ve got to be kidding.” This time she’d been forced to pack up and flee while her now ex-boyfriend was at class.

“No. You are,” Margaery insisted. “No matter what happens, you keep on going.”

“It’s the definition of insanity,” Sansa muttered. She shook her pillow into a case. “It’s just . . . if I stop, I’ll fall to pieces.”

Sansa stepped into the outbuilding in the park. She found Tywin reading outdated notices on the bulletin board.

“Is it necessary to be so cloak-and-dagger?”

“Are we alone?”

“I checked the men’s room per your instructions. I’ve seen no one and I’ve been here ten minutes.”

Sansa inspected the ladies’ room and walked around the outbuilding twice. She didn’t see anyone either. She rejoined him.

“Well? I feel like I’m in a spy movie,” he complained.

“He has a tracking device on my car and he goes through my things on a regular basis. We probably shouldn’t meet again.”

“I wanted to make sure you were all right. After what you said he did to you—”

Sansa sighed. She hadn’t told him half of it. “He hasn’t hurt me, not since he found out about Petyr. It’s not so bad.” She kept an eye on the entrance to the park. “I can bear it. It’s not like when
Petyr was raping me. I can stand being with Roose. There are times when I can almost forget what he is. Roose and I actually get along most of the time.”

He shook his head. “This isn’t a life.”

“It’s the best I can hope for. I think this has to be the last time we communicate, Tywin. No more secret visits. I don’t think we should even email anymore.”

“He is not omniscient.”

“He is a hit man. He is very, very good at what he does. If Roose can’t do it, there is a whole network of people who can. I’ve seen what they’re capable of finding out. Those reports he gets,” she shuddered.

“Is he still pressuring you to assist him?”

She thrust her hands deeper in her pockets. “Not since Petyr. Apparently, ‘I understand now.’” She rolled her eyes. “The sick thing is . . . I think I do.”

Tywin’s expression was unreadable.

Sansa had never come out and said anything directly to Arya, Rickon, or him, but she knew they knew. She wasn’t worried about Roose pressuring her to kill. It was the one thing that she knew he wouldn’t do. However she’d reacted—the events of that night were still hazy to her—she’d managed to frighten him somehow. Her nightmares troubled him. After each one, Roose would assure her it was over, she was safe, and she never needed to do that again.

“But there’s something else,” Tywin guessed.

“He wants a position at Winterfell. If something doesn’t open up by the time I finish my PhD, he’s going to create one.” Roose gave lip service to the idea of another university in the north, but Winterfell was the prize he wanted.

Tywin seemed taken aback.

“Fortunately, I think there are a couple of people close to retirement.”

“And what about your own career?”

Sansa took out her gloves. “Roose is a big name. If they want him, and I think they will, then he can negotiate a job for me. It’s called spousal hire and it’s done all the time. I’ll probably have to spend the rest of my life trying to fight the perception that I got my job because I married a professor. He knows I don’t want it, but he will press the point and I will have to cave. There isn’t any other decent college near enough and he is not about to suffer a long distance relationship. He doesn’t want to be parted from me.” She stared at a flyer asking for volunteers for a medical study. “So I’ll go with him. Roose will let me pursue my career. He respects my work so I guess it’s something. I’ll get to keep that at least. And then he’s going to want children.”

“I thought you said he agreed to your conditions.”

She laughed bitterly. “He’s a sociopath, Tywin. He wants what he wants when he wants it. He’s backed off the subject, but trust me, he hasn’t forgotten. It creeps out sometimes, usually after he’s fucked me and he talks about our future.”

“My offer still stands.”
“I appreciate it.” She did. She meant it sincerely. “But there isn’t a corner of the world where he couldn’t find me. It’s too late for me. I am stuck with him until he dies.”

Tywin appeared to be taking this in.

In the distance she noticed a youngish man in a nondescript tan jacket casually ambling their way. “Shit.”

“Sansa—”

She pulled on her gloves. “We’ve been spotted. I’ll tell him I stopped here to use the restroom and that you seemed to be waiting for someone. I’ll have to imply it was clandestine; I can’t think why else you would be out here. I’ll tell him you warned me to stay away from Margaery. He’ll believe that. No more email, Tywin. It’s too risky. If I don’t see you again . . . thank you.”

“You could come with me right now.”

“He knows who I care about. He would go after Arya and Rickon. Maybe Jon. And then he would come for me, and this time, I wouldn’t get out alive. I am his until he dies,” she repeated. “And knowing my luck, Roose is going to live another forty years. It’s over for me. It’s been over for me since I met Petyr Baelish. Just let me go.”

Sansa thrust her hands in her pockets and she walked away. She gave the man in the tan jacket the briefest of glances as she passed. Once she was in her car, she called Roose. Briefly she told him exactly what she promised Tywin she would say.

“Tywin Lannister is loitering in a public park?”

“He wasn’t expecting me. I don’t know. There was some guy heading his way when I left. I wouldn’t have thought he was gay, but who knows.” She could practically hear Roose thinking. “I didn’t want to stay and ask. He was unpleasant enough as it was.”

“Did he threaten you?”

Sansa started up the car. “He just implied it was good that I hadn’t bothered Margaery. What do you want me to do?” Roose liked it when she looked to him for guidance.

“Leave.”

“I’m doing so right now. I’ve got books at the library waiting for me and then I’m going to head home. Is chicken okay for dinner? There’s a recipe I thought I would try.”

“Anything you make will be fine. I’ll be a little longer here and then I’ll see you at the house. Watch to make sure you’re not followed. If you are, call me immediately.”

She promised and then hung up. In her rearview mirror, she could see the young man on his phone. Sansa gave herself a little shake and drove away.

* * *

Sansa heard Roose’s sedan pulling into the garage. Setting her book down, she turned on the oven. She removed the casserole from the refrigerator. Roose preferred breakfast after his jobs, but they’d run out of eggs and she hadn’t discovered this until an hour or so ago. She was getting the silverware when it occurred to her that he was taking an unusually long time.
She peered outside. The garage door was still open. The car was there, but she couldn’t see him moving about. “Roose?”

There was no answer.

Sansa stepped back in the house. She grabbed a jacket and the gun he kept strapped to the underside of the sink. “Roose?” she called again when she got near the garage.

“Get in here.”

She stepped into the garage. The door lowered behind her and the lights went on. She saw Roose then. “Seven hells.”

He had blood all over him. The majority of it was on the lower half of his torso, but there was staining on his arms, his trousers. There were flecks of it on his face too.

She knew better than to hope. “Are you—”

“It’s not mine,” he told her.

“Are you hurt?”

Roose didn’t answer her. His pale eyes were hard, so was the set of his jaw. He rattled off a series of instructions.

Sansa obeyed him without question and got the things he wanted. She glanced in the car when she came back. He was going to need to spend hours to get it cleaned. “What happened?” she asked as she set down newspapers for him to step on as he made his way into the house and then to the cellar.

He didn’t answer her. Usually that meant he was focused on what he was doing, but she didn’t think that was the case here.

It suddenly occurred to her that she could have just shot him.

_I heard a noise and I found one of his handguns and I went to investigate. I don’t know what happened. He startled me and I just . . . I can’t believe this._

It was too late now. Stupid, she thought. That was stupid. She tended to go on autopilot with him when she was around his real work. It was simpler and safer to merely obey.

She spread the plastic the way he instructed. He stepped onto it and stripped his clothes off and she handed him the rags. “You are hurt.”

“Where?”

She pointed to a nasty cut on his arm. “I’ll get the first aid kit.”

“Not yet.” His manner shifted. “After. I want to deal with this mess first.”

“It could get infected.” Sansa bit her lip. She should have kept her mouth shut. Maybe the wound would have gotten infected and he would have died from blood poisoning.

“Very well.”

When she came back down, he was scrubbing himself off at the utility sink. As she followed his
orders, she again felt the atmosphere in the cellar changing. It was less charged somehow.

Roose extended the injured arm to her. “Someone else was there.”

“With the target?”

“Waiting for me.”

“Like a bodyguard?” Sansa knew sometimes his victims had their own security;

Roose was watching her carefully. “Another hit man.”

“I don’t follow you.” She put the antiseptic on the wound and carefully bandaged his arm.

“No, you don’t, do you?”

Sansa sensed something close to relief or possibly satisfaction coming from him.

“Someone was waiting for me.” He returned to his ablutions. “I disposed of the target. I was leaving when he stepped out of the shadows. His blood,” Roose pronounced pointing to the red water swirling down the drain. “The question is why was he there.”

Now she understood. He had thought she was responsible for sending someone to kill him. He still might think so. “Stand still. No, it’s all right. I thought you had another cut.”

Roose wiped away the blood in question. “This smacks of the Tyrell whore.”

Or Tywin Lannister. Sansa wondered if they had been foolish enough to try and hire someone to get rid of Roose. She could have told them it was a waste of money. “I haven’t talked to her since that night in the parking lot.”

He wrung out the rag, put it on the pile with the clothing, and took another. “She is still obsessed with you.”

“Was he any good?”

“We wouldn’t be having this conversation if he was.”

“No, I mean.” Sansa set the first aid kit down. “I don’t think she’d have the first idea how to hire someone. If he was just some guy she—”

Roose patted himself dry. “No. He was a professional. Her own family would know how to locate someone as would her future in-laws.”

She had to get him off this train of thought. “Who both have a vested interest in me staying unavailable and away from her,” Sansa pointed out. It was going to get so much harder with him once he found out Margaery was no longer engaged to Jaime Lannister. “Could the target . . . could someone else, besides your client, have wanted the target dead?”

This brought Roose up short. “Possibly. I’ll make inquiries. Meanwhile, we’ll need to take some precautions.”

It was a long night and an even longer week. In the end, his contacts could offer nothing concrete. There was nothing that remotely suggested Margaery’s involvement. The rival hit man was not someone in their hire. The target did in fact have many enemies.
“An occupational hazard,” Roose reluctantly concluded. He misinterpreted her weak smile as fear. “I’m not going anywhere,” he reassured her.

He wasn’t. And therein lay the problem.

* * *

Tywin handed Margaery the newspaper. He’d folded it back so that the article in question was visible.

She read silently, her face growing grimmer with each second. “We can get someone better. I don’t care what it costs. I can borrow on my trust—”

“No.” Tywin shook his head. “This avenue is closed to us. We had, or rather—our former hire—had one shot. He missed. He’s dead. Sansa sent me word care of Arya. Unless the next man can dispatch him cleanly, and she doubts he can, she suggests strongly we do not attempt it.”

“How much?”

“It’s not a matter of money, Margaery. It’s the risk to Sansa and the risk to you. His first thought was that Sansa was behind it. His second was that you were. She suggested another possibility which he accepted, but from what she told Arya, the explanation will only serve once.” He looked at her critically. Margaery had lost more weight and if the dark circles under her eyes were anything to go by, she wasn’t sleeping. “There’s nothing more we can do unless she asks us.”

Margaery continued reading the article. “She always said the monsters always win. I guess she’s right.” Her voice was bitter.

“This isn’t your fault.”

“I was a coward. I pushed her away. I wanted Sansa so much. I was happy with her, but I knew it couldn’t last. I didn’t want to risk losing my family. . . .” She shuddered.

Tywin moved to the bar to make her a drink, but her voice stopped him.

“I can’t. If I start, I won’t be able to stop.” Margaery stared up at him. “I wasn’t faithful to her. I think I wanted to hurt her for being so pragmatic. She accepted the situation. I was upfront with her when we got involved. I told her it couldn’t be forever. Sansa said to me that she’d stopped believing in happily ever after a long time ago. And when it was going to have to end, I didn’t want it to. She was making plans for her future. I wanted her to hurt. She’d been hurt so much already, but I think I wanted her to hurt for me. I pushed her into this.”

Tywin sat down opposite her. “You could not have foreseen that she would become involved with a sociopathic hit man.”

“I knew there was something off about him from the moment I met him. I did this. It’s my fault,” she insisted.

“You cannot go on like this.”

“No, I guess not,” Margaery said finally.

* * *

One Year Later

* * *
Sansa was very different now. She answered her phone regularly and she saw Arya at least once a week, but she was not herself. She was calm; she was controlled; and she was dying on the inside.

“It’s okay,” she insisted in a low voice while they waited for Roose. “He doesn’t hit me. He doesn’t force himself on me. Sometimes I can almost forget.”

“Dad is really worried.” Mum was a wreck too, but Arya was hesitant to bring her up to Sansa.

“You’ve been telling him about this?” Sansa asked alarmed.

Arya watched as Roose drove up in his car. “No. I haven’t, but—” she stopped. It was never easy to know what to say to Sansa about their parents. It might be all right. Of late, Sansa hadn’t been snapping every time she or Rickon slipped and let something out about the family.

“Tell him not to worry. I’ll be seeing him a lot soon.”

This made no sense.

Sansa twisted her lips into a wry expression. “Roose just got hired at Winterfell. He obtained a position for me too. I get to go ‘home.’” She sipped her water. “With Roose. Lucky me.”

Roose was approaching the restaurant now. He stopped and then smiled as Rickon walked up to him.

“He likes Rickon,” Sansa went on. “I’m not sure if that is such a good thing. We took him out shooting and Roose was impressed. I don’t want Roose corrupting him.”

“If you’re up north, Rickon is going to be the only one who can help you.”

They weren’t able to continue. Roose and Rickon joined them.

Arya understood what Sansa meant about almost forgetting. They were all expert liars, she realized. It was easy for them to slip into the roles of four happy family members out to dinner.

“I keep meaning to ask, Arya. Are you dating anyone?” Roose had his arm over Sansa’s shoulder. She shook her head. “There was a guy in Braavos, but he travels too much. I never see him so it fizzled out.”

“You should see if you could land one of the Lannisters,” Rickon commented between bites of pie. “You’d never have to work again and you could support me.”

“Uh, no. They’re either all taken or all—” she stopped. She was about to say old, but Roose might take offense to that and Sansa would be the one to suffer. Arya made a face. “A lot of them are kind of weird.”

Sansa laughed.

Roose didn’t. “How so?”

Fortunately she had examples. “Kevan’s son is a religious fanatic. His team has to pray with him twice a day. And my boss is just nuts. He asked me if I was interested in getting lunch the one day.”

“And that’s weird how, Horseface?”
Arya pursed her lips. “Shut up, Rickon. I said yes. Then he asked me if I liked fish. I said yes again. The next thing I know I’m in a plane to Lannisport with him.”

Roose blinked.

“He totally wants you,” Rickon insisted.

“It does sound like something out of the movies.” Sansa sipped her water. “Being flown to a different city to have lunch in a fancy restaurant.” She turned to Roose. “No.”

“I wasn’t about to suggest it,” he said in mild voice as he stroked Sansa’s arm.

Arya stirred five sugars into her coffee. “With Gerion Lannister? I don’t think so. There was no fancy restaurant. We get there and then we’re at his family’s house, on the beach fishing. He made me build a fire and we roasted the fish he caught over it.”

They were startled and amused.

“I bet it was nice on the beach with that massive house in the background, watching the waves, eating food over the fire. It’s so warm there.”

Arya noticed how Roose stilled his fingers.

“When were you at Casterly Rock, Sansa?”

“I went to university in Lannisport for undergrad.”

His voice was still mild, but now there was something else there too. “That isn’t what I asked.”

She shouldn’t have mentioned the house, Arya thought. “It was kind of fun. I just wish he—”

“Just a moment, Arya,” Roose interrupted. “Sansa?”

Sansa wrinkled her face. “I’ve never been there. You can’t move two feet in Lannisport without seeing Casterly Rock. It’s there every time you look up. It’s like being at the Wall. You can’t not see it.”

He resumed stroking her arm. “You know, you’re right. I’ve only been to Lannisport a few times, but yes, the house is quite prominent.” He looked at Arya. “Do go on.”

“Oh. So, afterward we got back on a plane and came back here at about 4:30. He missed some huge meeting and his brother had a fit. We were in the lobby and Tywin Lannister lit into him right there. Then Gerion pointed at me and said in this very calm voice that I had wanted fish for lunch.”

“Oh my gods, what happened next?”

“His brother turned to me. He’s very tall so he’s looking down at me and all I could think of to say was ‘I thought he meant we’d get takeout.’”

Everyone laughed.

Roose chuckled again. “I must say, Arya, you always make me laugh.”

When Arya and Rickon were walking to the subway after dinner, Rickon turned to her. “He asked if I wanted to come and stay with them at their place at the Dreadfort sometime. I think I’d better go.”
“She’s worried he’s going to snag you into his hit man work or worse.”

Rickon thrust his hands in his jacket pockets. “She needs one of us around. You have a job. I don’t. I’ve got the year off. I can look out for her in Winterfell. If he lets me stay with them at his family place, at least I’ll be there if something happens.” He looked around. They were alone. “Arya, we have to stop thinking short-term.”

Arya nodded. “He has to die.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

My beta, tafkar, read through this thing in its entirety about four times and it is so much better because of her input, so thank you!
Forty-one Years Ago

Mother looked over the floor plans that Father had marked.

Roose knew he was expected to be quiet. It wasn’t hard. He did his homework and kept his ears cocked. Occasionally he flicked his gaze to his parents.

“I’ll save a considerable sum if we don’t use most of the house.”

“How much?”

Father pointed to a figure on another set of papers.

“Is that . . . that’s annually or quarterly?”

“Quarterly.”

Roose could tell his mother didn’t like this plan. It had to do with the taxes. They were too high. Father had sold off another parcel of land, but it wasn’t enough. If they shut up more of the rooms in the house, Father could save money.

“This isn’t up for debate, Alys.”

Mother didn’t say anything.

“You’ll go along with it because I—” Father’s voice changed mid-sentence. It was less hostile and almost surprised.

Roose looked up. His mother had placed her hand on his father’s and there was an expression on her face he’d never seen before. It was softer somehow.

“I think it’s a good idea, Rodrik.”

Mother never called Father by his first name, at least not that Roose had ever heard.

“You do?”

She was nodding. She told Father that this was a sound economy. They were only three people. They didn’t use most of the house as it was. It would be easier to maintain the place and she would have more time to focus on his comfort.

Father was pleased. He was even smiling.

“Could we . . . no, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t . . .”

“Tell me.”
“It’s not my place to make suggestions.”

Father shook his head. “I would value your opinion, Alys.”

Mother was pointing to different places on the plans. She asked if it mattered which rooms they used. Could they not shut up some of the larger rooms on the first floor so that they wouldn’t have to all move downstairs? They could keep their bedroom, the full bathroom, Roose’s room, and the little room next to it. It would make it easier for her to clean and there would be less disruption.

Roose didn’t quite follow how it would help with the cleaning, but that was his mother’s domain, not his. He was alarmed at the notion that he might have to sleep in another room. He liked his bedroom and he didn’t want to live on the first floor. A proper house should have at least two floors. That’s what Father had told him once when he’d asked if they couldn’t move into a ranch house, like the ones some of the boys from school lived in.

The little room housed his mother’s clothes and books. He wasn’t to go in there. Father could, but as far as Roose knew, he never did.

“I think it would work,” Father said finally. “It’s less square footage. I might even to be able to get more of a reduction.”

It was all right then. Roose could keep his room.

“Thank you, Alys.”

Roose noticed his mother hadn’t let go of Father’s hand and Father’s face had gone peculiar.

“Go outside, Roose,” Father said abruptly.

“But I have homework.”

“You may work on it later,” Mother told him. “Go and play. I’ll call you when you may come back inside.”

Roose knew enough to obey. As he was putting his coat and hat on, he glanced over his shoulder. His parents were going upstairs. There was a smirk on his mother’s face that he did not understand at all.

* * *

Present Day

* * *

Sansa could tell Roose liked the farmhouse. There weren’t any neighbors for five miles in any direction. It had been ages since anyone had farmed this property and woods had grown up around the house. There was plenty of room inside. The realtor described it as well built, solid, and unassuming. They would have privacy. All were qualities and criteria Roose valued.

She hated it.

“I would have you all to myself out here,” he murmured as they followed the realtor from room to room.

Sansa had become a master at concealing her real feelings. She smiled at Roose serenely even as she embarked on a course of action to persuade him against this house.
She fingered the carved railings of the stairs while she asked hard questions about the road conditions in winter. She admired the cupboards and pointed to signs of mice. She was frank about how they would have to gut the kitchen, even after she told him that she thought the house had good bones. When it came to the bathrooms, Sansa didn’t have to say anything. Someone had redone them badly about twenty years ago and they were a mess. And then finally while agreeing the cellar was spacious and useful for storage, she found the flashlight app on her phone and directed it at the corners the realtor kept avoiding; Roose registered the decaying beams and the state of the walls.

Sansa could practically see him doing mental arithmetic. Roose had plenty of money, but he was careful with it. A house was an investment. If he couldn’t get back what he put into the property, he wouldn’t be willing to spend it.

That was the end of the farmhouse.

They went back to see the house in town she liked and in the end he agreed that it was their best option.

Sansa could tell he wasn’t entirely happy about it, but they hadn’t found anything else that fit their criteria and they both wanted to be settled before the academic year started.

“I don’t like having neighbors so close by,” he complained.

“It’s not so close,” she said mildly as they measured and planned their move. Across the street, she could see an elderly couple unpacking their groceries from their car. They worked in tandem and moved slowly. “I know you don’t love the house. I don’t either,” Sansa lied. “But you didn’t want to rent and wait for something better to come along, and I don’t see what else we could have done.”

“No, you’re right,” Roose agreed after a moment. “Besides we’ll have more time together if we aren’t suffering a lengthy commute.”

As far as Sansa concerned, it was the only mark against the place.

“At least there are only four houses on the street.”

When they went upstairs, she heard a car door slam.

Sansa glanced out the window of one of the bedrooms. The elderly couple had finished bringing their groceries in and they were heading into the house. “That’s weird.”

“What?”

Sansa pointed across the street. “When we were downstairs, I didn’t hear them pull up, but I saw them. They were in and out of the house. But up here, we could hear the door.”

“It’s the windows,” Roose told her after considering a moment. “The previous owners skimped when they replaced the ones on this floor. We’ll pay the price for that. Another thing we’ll need to change.”

“We won’t be here much during the day,” Sansa pointed out. “They probably go to bed at 6:00 or 7:00.” That earned her a smile.

She stepped into the master bedroom. It was a good size. There were two closets. They weren’t walk-ins, but they were large enough. The neighbor on the other side of the house was inching out
his door to the waiting wheelchair van below.

“He’s walking with a portable oxygen tank. I don’t think we would have to worry he’s going to be peering into our windows or keeping us up playing Lady Gaga.”

Roose’s lips twitched.

It was always easier if she could make him laugh.

They walked into the next bedroom. It was small and she suspected it would be her office. He’d want the large room downstairs for his. That was fine. She would have time away from him.

The third and fourth bedrooms were bigger and had been obviously the previous owner’s children’s rooms. Both were wallpapered. Disney Princesses cavorted on a pink-and-white striped background in one room and circus clowns lolled about on the blue-and-red background in the other.

“We might leave these up for when—if we decide to have children.”

There it was again. The hints were growing more frequent. “If we have children, we are not subjecting them or us to this crap. I hate clowns.” She hated princesses too and she especially hated the pink in the wallpaper. It reminded her too much of her childhood bedroom and of Petyr. She looked out the window to the house on the left. There was a woman who had to be at least eighty talking with the man from the snow plowing service. She pointed her out to Roose. “Do you mind the house that much?”

“No,” he admitted. “It will serve well enough, I suppose. And we’ll have the house at the Dreadfort. It will be easier to go there with greater frequency.”

The only thing she truly liked about going there was Ben, but she acted pleased. “We’ll make this place ours,” she promised. The irony was they would too. They had similar tastes. They were both handy. They were in sync when it came to most aspects of daily living. There were days when Sansa could almost forget. Almost. It was never quite enough, but it made it bearable.

As she predicted, the move went smoothly enough.

They were unpacking boxes when they came across Domeric’s possessions. Despite his seeming indifference to his son’s murder, she thought Roose did miss him in his way. He was certainly tenser and much more irritable after they unearthed the box.

“I’ll dispose of it later,” Roose promised her.

“I don’t mind if you keep this stuff.” Sansa saw the confusion in his face. “These were your son’s.”

“You wanted my former wives’ belongings gone.”

She hid her frustration. It was times like these when it got very hard to accept her existence. Sansa never quite knew what Roose truly felt about anything. She couldn’t imagine what it was like for him. He seemed to go through life mimicking what he thought was acceptable behavior. He was good at certain aspects of it, but others threw him. When still he hesitated, she put everything back and resealed the box. “It’s fine, Roose. I would tell you if it wasn’t.”

Without a second thought, he had most likely poisoned her career by negotiating a job for her. She’d probably spend the rest of her working life trying and failing to live it down, but he would respect something minor like a promise not to inflict her with his dead wives’ possessions.
The only way out of this was death, either his or hers, or possibly theirs both. Her own life, she held cheaply enough, but then he told her the truth about Bethany that night. He was agitated about it even now, years later.

Sansa propped herself up on an elbow. “Did she leave a note or—”

Roose didn’t answer right away. “Barbrey believes it was because of Domeric. She says Bethany was never the same after his death.”

“You didn’t notice?”

“She would take pills,” he said in an expressionless voice. “I brought Barbrey to help. It wasn’t enough. In the end, she left me just as Domeric did.” A smile played about his lips as he stared up at the ceiling. “Bethany knew about my affair with Barbrey. It had long been over by then, but after she left me, I used to fuck Barbrey in our bed.”

Sansa’s stomach lurched.

“I would have killed Barbrey if I could have done so without raising suspicion.”

“Why?” Sansa managed.

He turned to look at her. “To punish Bethany for leaving me,” he said simply.

She’d learned not to go down the rabbit holes of his occasional scary illogic. Sansa nodded as if this made complete sense. “That’s all behind you now.”

“Yes,” Roose agreed. He seemed calmer. “I have you and soon we’ll—”

If he brought up having a baby right now, she would lose it.

But he seemed to sense that this was not the time. “We’re happy together.”

“Yes,” she lied. “We’re happy together.”

* * *

For Jaime Lannister, the scion of the Lannister family, the wedding was absurdly simple. Margaery had the impression that Jaime and his amazingly tall blonde bride had sprung it on Tywin at the last possible moment. She sat toward the back with Arya, grateful that neither her father nor her grandmother had been invited. She didn’t need either of them pointing out all the things that would have been hers had she been the one up there marrying Jaime Lannister.

“They look happy,” Arya opined later during the reception.

They did. Margaery knew Cersei was livid, had been so for months, but she wasn’t there. For herself, Margaery was pleased for Jaime. He’d had his own troubles and he seemed to have found his way out of them. She couldn’t tell how Tywin felt about it. He still seemed somewhat gob smacked.

With her eyes fixed on the bride and groom, Margaery switched the subject. “Will Rickon still be able to stay up north?”

“He was supposed to go to uni, but he told Mum and Dad he wanted to defer it a year.”

“If he needs any money, come to me,” Margaery said in a low voice.
Arya nodded. “Okay.” She cocked her head and looked at her. “She asks me about you sometimes—about how you’re doing.”

Margaery took a sip of her club soda before answering. “Tell her I’m all right.” And she was. She had an interesting job with a great deal of potential—potential that was starting to see fruit. She had her family still; not everyone was uniformly pleased with her, but they were supportive. She had friends and the occasional lover. It wasn’t the life she would have chosen, but it wasn’t a bad life.

“We have some ideas,” Arya said very casually.

“Anything you need—anything at all—come to me.” For all that Roose Bolton was a monster, he wasn’t superhuman. There had to be a chink in his armor, somewhere.

* * *

Whenever the blizzards hit, the house at the Dreadfort was often snowed in. Roose hadn’t minded this time. The cupboards were well stocked. There was plenty of firewood. There was Sansa. Still, he was relieved when Ben plowed them out and brought fresh supplies. The storms could last weeks and Intersession ended soon.

Roose settled in with one of the past three days’ worth of newspapers. The article on the crisis in Sothoryos was mildly interesting and held his attention. When he finished it, it occurred to him to wonder how his father had filled his days when they’d been snowed in all those years ago. Had he just continued to reread the same thing over and over until the plows came?

He was starting another article when he heard Sansa shriek. He dropped the paper and raced up the stairs. “Sansa?”

“I’m fine. I think,” she called out.

Roose found her in the bedroom.

“I fell through the floorboards. I guess they must have rotted and the weight of the ladder was too much for them.”

He helped her to her feet. After he ascertained that she could stand and walk without pain, he took in the stepladder and the drapes. “Why didn’t you wait for Ben?”

“I didn’t know when he would be back. He did all the drilling already. All I had to do was hang them. They look good, don’t they?”

Roose shook his head at her. “That isn’t the point.”

She slipped her arm around his waist. “I’m sorry, all right? I got them all done without incident. It was just this last one. Admit it, they look good.”

They did. On this last trip, Sansa had made him take her sewing machine as well as a pile of fabric. She’d busied herself making the house more comfortable.

“Plus, they’ll help with the drafts.”

“They are very handsome, but I employ Ben for a reason. I want you to use him in the future.” He waited for her to nod and he moved the stepladder into the hallway.

When he returned, he found Sansa kneeling by the hole in the floor.
She brought up a metal deed box and opened it before he could stop her.

“Don’t.” It was probably something of his father’s and he didn’t want her to see whatever it was. Their relationship was better now, but there were enough rough spots that he wished to avoid them.

“It’s just papers, I think.”

His face cleared.

“Is this you?” She brought the box to the edge of the bed and sat. She held up a photo of him at two or three.

Roose sighed and put on his reading glasses. “Yes. Sansa, I would prefer it if you didn’t—”

It was too late; she was already inspecting the contents. “Oh, this must be your baby book. Why would anyone put it under the floorboards?”

“My what?”

“You know, like a keepsake book with the dates you first sat up, walked, said your first word. See there’s a lock of your hair. Mum had one for each of us. Didn’t Bethany have something like that for Domeric?”

Roose didn’t know. “My mother was not a sentimental woman. I doubt she would have kept—”

Sansa handed it to him. She lifted more items out. “This is weird.”

“Stop this now.” Roose found himself growing agitated. “My mother was not sentimental. Maybe someone put it together for her, but it wasn’t her doing. She did not care for me. Now put everything back in the box and when you are finished, join me downstairs.”

Sansa swallowed.

He left her there to put the papers back. He took the stepladder down to the cellar and returned to the drawing room. He focused on the article he had been reading and gradually calmed himself. By the time he finished with the last newspaper, he realized Sansa was sitting opposite from him, waiting. The box was on the coffee table in front of her. He had not told her to bring the box down, but it was likely she assumed she was to do so.

“I think you need to look at this stuff. It’s fine if you don’t want to talk to me about it, but you need to look.”

“I have seen photos of myself as a child. I know roughly at what age I could walk and talk. I don’t require—”

“That’s not the only thing in there.”

Roose told himself she didn’t know any better. He should keep his temper. He had never really spoken to her about his mother. “My mother stayed with my father because he kept her a prisoner. She hated him and she disliked me. At best, she tolerated me. I do not need to look at anything.”

“May I ask you one question?”

“One and then I do not care to discuss this again.”

“How old were you when you first traveled outside of Westeros?”
It was not the question he was expecting. “I was twenty-two.”

Sansa opened the box and slapped a child’s passport on the table. “It’s yours. You would have been four.” She slid it over to him.

Roose inspected it. There were no stamps on the pages.

“She has one too. Same issue dates.”

“Is there one for my father?”

Sansa shook her head. She was taking other things out of the box now. “I think that would have defeated the purpose.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Two one-way tickets from White Harbor to Volantis. There’s a letter of credit for her in the amount of $7,500 from someone named Torrhen Locke.”

Locke was his mother’s maiden name. He didn’t know who Torrhen was.

“She’s got a list of names and phone numbers here too.” Sansa opened a banker’s envelope. “This has $5,500 in it. They’re the old style bills. I don’t know if the banks would honor them anymore, but it wouldn’t have been a problem for her back then. Immunization records for the both of you.”

Roose stared at everything.

“You don’t get it, do you? She was going to leave your father and take you with her. I don’t pretend to know what happened later on, but she loved you enough at one point to want to bring you with her. She probably could have done it a lot more easily without dragging a little boy along.”

“$13,000 would not have gone very far.”

“Fifty-something years ago?”

He read the list of names. They weren’t familiar to him. He remembered the vaccinations. Mother was allowed to take him to the doctor’s. He recalled howling as the nurse stuck him again and again and he remembered his mother rubbing her own arm afterwards. “We never left. Father must have found out and put a stop to it.”

“You told me there wasn’t a lot of money growing up.”

“There wasn’t.”

“Was he a smart man?” Sansa asked.

Roose looked at the tickets for Volantis. “He wasn’t an intellectual, but he was very shrewd.”

“Then why would he let your mother keep passports for the two of you and an envelope with $5,500?”

“The irony would have appealed to him.” Even as he said it, he realized he was wrong. The irony would have appealed to him. Father had not possessed a sense of humor.

“He let her keep $5,500 in cash while he had the taxes lowered on his house by making you live in
a couple of rooms? Even if he was greedy or miserly, wouldn’t he have taken the money away from her?”

“Something must have gone wrong with her plans and she kept all this squirreled away.” This theory didn’t make much sense either.

“The only thing I don’t get are these.” Sansa took out a package. She did back the sheets of yellowing tissue paper and pointed to a pair of mittens. “The knitting on these is very good. Fair Isle. It’s too bad they’re stained. What is this stuff? Paint?”

The dates on the tickets. He would have been five. He remembered the puppy. It had been cold. He remembered the blood soaking into the mittens. “I was wearing those when I killed one of Father’s dogs.”

Sansa stopped picking at the mittens.

“Mother left me then. Father said there were ways to leave someone while staying in the same room. She did that.”

Sansa folded the tissue paper back over the mittens. She began piling everything back in the box. “I know you don’t . . . I know you don’t always . . . understand how other people . . . feel, but she kept everything, Roose. She could have left you with your father. She didn’t. She stayed and she kept all of this stuff. She wouldn’t have done that if she didn’t love you.” Sansa rose and left him with the box.

When they retired for bed, Sansa closed the new drapes. They ensured the darkness was absolute in their bedroom. Roose wrapped his arms around Sansa and kept her close. “Promise me you will never leave me again.”

“I promise,” Sansa assured him.

He believed her.

* * *

Sansa sat by the fountain in the shopping mall. She had a half hour before Roose would meet her. They’d split up, she to find an outfit for a faculty reception and he to buy men’s dress shirts. The mall was teeming with people. If the gods were disposed enough to grant her any mercy, this would delay him ten minutes longer. She knew enough not to pray for anything larger.

A little girl with ginger hair approached the fountain and solemnly dropped in a copper star. She squealed with delight as it hit the water and sank. “All gone!” She trooped back to her mother and begged for another coin.

Sansa smiled as the toddler repeated the process twice more.

On the fourth occasion, her mother shook her head. “I don’t have any more change, sweetling. There’s Daddy. Maybe he might.”

As the child ran toward her father, Sansa froze. It was Robb. He was an inch or so taller than she remembered and he’d filled out since she’d last seen him, but aside from those things, he was unmistakably Robb.

He recognized her almost as soon as she did him.
His wife didn’t notice. “I’m going to look at shoes, Robb. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

The little girl, her niece, Sansa supposed, wanted more coins.

Robb found a few copper stars and gave her one. “Stay where I can see you, Minisa.” He took a few tentative steps closer to Sansa. He gestured to the spot on the bench and looked a question at her.

She nodded.

“I’m so sorry,” he told her quietly as he sat down. “I’m sorry for all those stupid things I said to you when we were younger. You don’t know how many times I wish I could take them back.”

She was sorry too. As she said the words, she felt lighter as if she had finally shifted a great weight off of her.

“I didn’t know. I didn’t know any of it. If I had . . .”

“It’s all right.”

“No, it’s not all right. When we realized what you went through—”

Minisa ran back with her palm outstretched. “Please, Daddy?”

He dropped a coin in it.

Sansa focused on her niece. “She’s adorable. How old is she?”

“Minisa is three. Didn’t Jon or Arya . . . didn’t they tell you about her?”

Sansa had never wanted to hear anything about any of the people she thought had failed her. “I knew you were married. Jon said your wife was nice. Are you happy?”

“Very. Happier than I thought was possible.” He pointed to his daughter. “And then we had Minisa . . .”

Sansa watched as he gave her another copper star. “I don’t have a lot of time, Robb. My husband will be back soon.”

His face darkened. “Arya and Rickon have told—”

“There’s nothing you can do,” she said simply. “I’m okay if that’s what you’re worried about. He doesn’t hurt me.” Not physically, she thought, but he was denying her a life in every other sense of the word. “How is Bran?”

“I don’t know how much you know.”

“Rickon says things about him sometimes. Probably because he knows I can’t stay mad at him. He told me Bran’s been seeing a psychiatrist.”

Robb let Minisa take his last copper star. “He’s better. Do you want me to tell him you asked after him?”

Sansa nodded. “Yes and could you . . .” She took a deep breath. It was time. “Would you tell Mum I did the same? How is she?”
“She misses you.”

“Would you tell her that I’m sorry for everything I—” her voice cracked. She took a deep breath. She needed to calm herself. Roose might understand if she got upset given the circumstances, but it would be an extremely uncomfortable evening.

“Do you want to see her? I know she’d like nothing better than to—”

She shook her head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Tell her what I said. Maybe some day, but I think it’s best if I don’t get too close to anymore people right now.”

“Seven hells, Sansa.”

“Robb.”

He swallowed. “All right.”

Arya and Rickon must have told him a lot, she thought.

Minisa trotted back and was deeply disappointed that her father was out of change. She looked at Sansa curiously.

“This is your Aunt Sansa.”

“Hi, Minisa.” Sansa opened her purse. She had a single coin. “This is a dragon. Do you want to throw it in? Or do you want to save it and buy something nice?”

“Throw it in!”

Robb laughed in spite of himself as his daughter practically ran to the fountain. “She looks like you, but she’s pure Arya. It’ll hit her later that she has another aunt.”

“Am I interrupting something?” Roose’s voice sounded from behind them.

Sansa didn’t need to see his face to know he was displeased and suspicious. She didn’t miss a beat. She turned around. “Do you have any change?”

“What?” The hardness in his expression shifted to puzzlement.

“Roose, this is my brother, Robb.” She silently willed Robb to stand up and shake hands. To her relief he did. “Do you have any change?” Sansa repeated.

Roose didn’t seem to know what to make of the situation, but he produced a handful of coins.

Sansa scooped them out of Roose’s palm and gave them to Robb. “For my niece.” She stood and picked up her shopping bag and her purse. “It was good to see you.”

Minisa came back and enveloped Sansa’s legs in a hug. “Thank you!”

She looked down and her heart broke just a little. “You’re welcome, Minisa.” The little girl released her and went back to her game.

“Are you all right?” Roose inquired after they’d gone a few feet.

“I’m fine. I was waiting for you when they came up.”
“I wouldn’t have minded if you wanted to meet somewhere else in the mall.”

Of course, he thought it was all about him. “I decided you were right,” she told him. “It’s not worth getting upset over. I don’t know if I want to see him again, but I thought it was better to be civil.”

He approved of this attitude. “Did you find the dress you wanted?”

“Yes.” Sansa looked back at her niece playing happily by the fountain and then at her husband. If the gods weren’t going to grant her anything bigger than a few stolen moments, she was going to have to get what she wanted another way.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, tafkar.
Present Day

Miss Stark set down a mug of tea on the scaffolding in the foyer. “What does he have you doing now, Ben?”

“I’m painting the molding, Miss Stark.”

“He drove into Karhold. I want you to call me Sansa whenever he’s gone.”

“It’s a dangerous habit. If I forgot while he was here . . .”

She shrugged. “Fine, then can you at least think of me as Sansa?”

Ben dipped his brush into the tray. “All right.”

“What were his parents like?” Sansa climbed a few of the stairs and sat on them with her tea. “I’m guessing cold and sociopathic.”

“Mr. Bolton had a temper,” Ben told her. “He lost it a lot. He was neater than Mr. Roose. Tidier.”

Sansa’s eyebrows shot up. “I didn’t think that was possible. Roose thinks I’m a slob and Margaery thought I was an OCD neat freak.” She collected herself. “Don’t mention her name to him, okay? He’ll know I was talking to you. That’s it? His father had a temper and he was tidy?”

“He liked dogs,” Ben offered. “He read the newspaper cover to cover every day. More than that . . . I wasn’t his equal. I just did what he told me to do.”

“What about his mother?”

Ben took a sip of his tea. “I liked her. She was always very good to me.” He hesitated. “She tried to get me away from here, but I didn’t listen.” He cast an eye on the road. There was only one approach to the house. He told Sansa about Alys Bolton.

“You were in love with her,” she said quietly when he finished.

“Yes.”

“She was trapped too. Just like us. We’re stuck with him until he dies.” Sansa cradled her mug with her hands. “He wants kids. I was safe for a while. It would have put a wrench in his plans if I’d gotten pregnant before I got my PhD or before he got me hired at Winterfell, but now I’m there . . .” She smiled at him wryly. “I think I have two more months and then if I don’t agree, he’ll put his foot down. If I knew the child would be normal . . . Domeric sounds like he was. . . If I knew I could have a kid like him . . . but I don’t think the odds favor it.” She drank. “Even after your Alys was a widow she was trapped. That’ll be me.”

Ben didn’t know what to say.
“What would you do if you were free?”

“I would like to go someplace warm. Dorne maybe.” He returned to his painting.

“It’s nice in Dorne,” she offered. “I’ve been trapped one way or the other most of my life. I think if I were free, I would like to go back to the Westerlands. I did my undergrad degree there. Maybe if I had some money, I could rent a little cottage. I’d like to just do nothing but sit on the beach and watch the waves crashing into the rocks for about six months—nothing else—just that. And then I would like to write.”

Ben paused and looked at her. She wrote all the time now. She had to write a book for her job she had told him.

“I’m tired of analyzing about other people’s books. I’d like to write my own stories. When I tried to leave him, I started to once.”

“Would Mr. Roose mind?”

She considered. “I don’t think he would mind in theory, but he’d want to read them and he wouldn’t understand them. Roose doesn’t like things he can’t understand.”

He didn’t say anything.

“I would very much like to live a life where I didn’t have to worry about whether a word or a deed was going to anger my sociopathic husband. I would like a chance to be my real self for more than a handful of stolen moments when he’s asleep or at the store or teaching. I would like to have the chance to cry my heart out without fearing that I’m going to send him off into some kind of rage.” She sighed. “And I would really love to watch the news without seeing the faces of the people he kills staring back at me.”

Ben wiped excess paint against the tray and attacked another piece of molding. “Why do you think it will be a few months? Why not now?”

“Before he wants children?” Sansa shrugged. “Our anniversary is in two months. He lets out hints here and there. Roose is a romantic.”

He stared at her.

Sansa laughed. “Oh, he is. Trust me. It always comes out in twisted ways, but he is less of a cynic than you might think. He’d love the idea of us starting to try for a baby on our anniversary or agreeing to start to try.”

They heard the car.

He looked at her with worry, but she made no move to get off the steps.

“Just keep painting.”

Mr. Roose opened the front door a few minutes later. His eyes darted from Ben on the scaffolding to the mugs of tea to Sansa.

“I thought I would wait for you,” she told her husband with a sly smile. “I’ve been tormenting poor Ben.” She rose, went down a few steps, and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I want you to take me for a walk.”
Ben kept his eyes on his work.

“Lock up when you’re finished, Ben,” Mr. Roose directed. A smile played around his lips. He extended the crook of his elbow to Sansa and they left.

Two months, Ben thought. When he went back to his cottage, his eye was caught by the car repair manuals sitting on his bedside table.

* * *

Sansa’s brother looked like less of a northerner than she did.

Mr. Roose was initially displeased that the boy gravitated to Ben so much. Rickon Stark was not Ben’s equal. He was his better. He did not want Ben to forget his place. He was in the middle of stating this in no uncertain terms when the boy popped up.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize you’d have a problem with it, Roose. I just thought I should make myself scarce when you and Sansa are together. I’m not much of a reader and you don’t have TV. When the weather is like this, there’s not a lot to do.”

Ben knew better than to speak. He kept his eyes downward, but he could feel Mr. Roose relaxing. He led his brother-in-law away, but Ben could hear them talking.

“I appreciate your consideration, Rickon. But Ben is easily confused and he does have work to do. It might be best if you could make your conversations with him . . . less personal.”

If anything they became more personal, although Rickon grew more careful about when he talked to Ben. He waited until Mr. Roose took Sansa into Karhold before he approached him again.

“He’s a piece of work,” Rickon muttered. “I need to know. Is he hitting Sansa?”

Ben hoped not. “I’m not here all the time, Mr. Rick—”

“It’s Rickon. Just don’t call me anything when he’s around. Is he hitting her?”

“I don’t think so.”

Rickon nodded. “Does he talk about Arya or me to her? Does he try to keep her away from us?”

A lifetime of serving the Boltons and observing the games they liked to play with their victims had taught Ben to recognize truth from lies. Rickon Stark was worried about his sister. This was no game. “They don’t talk much in front of me. He said you would be visiting and that I was to treat you like I treat Miss Stark. That’s all I know.”

“How often does he drive off alone?”

“Up here?” Ben thought. “Not much. He goes into Karhold once in a while, but usually he takes Miss Stark with him everywhere.”

Rickon made a face. “That makes it harder. I thought I could do something to his car, but I can’t risk her getting hurt.”

“Have you ever killed anyone?” Ben asked quietly.

“I’m not an innocent; I’ve done a bunch of things.”
“Have you killed?” Ben repeated.

The boy shook his head.

“It changes you.” Ben sighed.

“Sansa says you’re a good man.”

Ben folded up the ladder. “I’m a lost man. Killing did that to me. Your sister wouldn’t want that for you.”

“Every time I see her, she’s worse. She puts a good face on it and she’s conning him, but she’s sadder and more lost herself every time we see her. I have to help her. We can’t go to the cops. We can’t get her to leave; she says he’d hurt us if she did. He watches her like a hawk. If she says one wrong thing, he makes her pay for it. I don’t know how, but he does. I have to find a way.”

He looked at the boy’s stubborn face. “Do you know anything about cars?”

Rickon shrugged. “I know how to hotwire them.”

“Does Miss Stark drive with him when they’re at Winterfell?”

“Not always. She has her own car. Why?”

“A month and a half,” Ben said. “That’s how long we have.” He cast an eye out on the road. “Tell me about Winterfell.”

Sansa inspected the preliminary program for the Westerosi History Association meeting. “I’d rather stay here.”

“And I don’t care to be separated from you.”

Meaning he didn’t trust her enough to leave her alone. She nodded and changed her tactics. “It’s just that I was hoping I could spend the time taking down the wallpaper in the two bedrooms upstairs.”

Roose took the program back. “We have several months to remove wallpaper, Sansa.”

“Spouses don’t usually go to meetings like this. I’d be stuck wandering around alone in Qarth while you’re in your sessions.”

“It’s at a resort. I’m sure you could find activities to occupy your time.”

“I freckle too much in direct sun and I’m not exactly anxious to spend four days fending off other men’s advances.” There, Roose hadn’t considered that. “Rickon could help me with the wallpaper,” she suggested.

Roose was wavering. “Would he mind spending four days on the sofa?”

“Why would he sleep over? My parents live less than ten miles away.” Sansa cradled the glass of water. “I hate clowns and I hate pink. It’s killing me knowing I have both in our house. I want them gone. While I’m at it, I want to change out the light fixtures.” She got up and found the folder with the paint samples and pictures of the overhead lights she liked. “What do you think of these?”
He was distracted enough that he inspected the colors and proffered opinions.

It did not escape her that he chose the most baby-like of the blues and a pale yellow perfectly suitable for either a boy or a girl, but she agreed to both.

“All right,” Roose consented finally. “But I want Ben up here. He may sleep on the floor in my office. I would feel better about him dealing with the electrical work. There’s no need for you to bother your brother.”

That was just fine. It was Ben she needed.

* * *

They waited until they received confirmation from Sansa’s father that Mr. Roose was in Qarth before they went out to the garage. “Do you ever drive his car?” Ben asked.

“Are you kidding? He’d have to be on his deathbed before he would let me. No, he drives that exclusively. Unless I’m at the university or doing any of my approved errands, I go with him. He never drives mine.”

Ben opened the hood. “I can do it, but it’ll have to be right before.”

“Shit.” Sansa tapped her fingers against the wall she was leaning up against. “Define right before.”

“A few hours maybe.”

“He goes grocery shopping and runs errands on the weekend. He likes it when I go with him, but I’ve gotten out of it before.”

Ben didn’t care for this idea. “What if Mr. Roose insists?”

“Then I die.”

He hated the casual way she said it.

“I will not be another Alys Bolton. I am not bringing a monster into this world and I cannot go on like this. Either he dies or the both of us do.”

They went into the house. Upstairs, Sansa pointed out the back way. She had an extra key to the rear door to the garage that she would give him. The back was wooded and there was a side road by which he could park undetected. She knew the neighbors’ schedules. They were all gone early on Saturdays. “As long as you think you can do this unobserved. I mean it, Ben. I don’t want you getting caught or hurt for me.”

They heard a car door slam.

“The hood,” Ben said suddenly. “He’ll hear it if I’m—”

“Come with me.”

They returned downstairs and Sansa made him go out to the garage and slam the hood again while she stayed in the kitchen. When he returned, she was smiling. “Nothing. It’s the windows you see.”

Ben didn’t see.

“When the previous homeowners replaced them, they went with cheaper options for the second
floor. I just need to make sure he’s downstairs that morning.”

“How?”

“Leave it to me,” Sansa told him.

* * *

Roose slid the box across the table. He watched with satisfaction as Sansa slowly smiled as she lifted the lid.

“They’re gorgeous.”

“Wear them for me tonight?” It was their anniversary. This time he’d given her earrings. The star sapphires were the exact shade of blue as her eyes.

“Of course.” She pointed to the package on the table. “Your turn. It pales in comparison.”

He removed the wrapping. He was pleased although not surprised. He unfolded the hand-knit sweater. “It is perfect. I will wear it tonight.”

“No, you will not,” she laughingly told him. “The restaurant is too fancy for a sweater.”

“As my queen commands, so shall it be. May I wear it today?”

“Yes.” Sansa came around the table and climbed on top of him. “But first I want you to take me. Right here and now.”

Roosecocked an eyebrow. Their house in Winterfell was not as remote as he would have liked. Most of their neighbors kept to themselves, but there were houses on either side of them as well as across the road.

“Please? The blinds are drawn. I can be quiet if I have to be.”

He loved how wanton, how insatiable she was. “Can you?” He smiled at her. “I think we may have discovered a new game, Your Grace.”

Sansa lost, but the consequences were not dire. Their neighbors on both sides were elderly and hard of hearing. The house was built by northerners. It was solid and insulated. It was all in all quite a delightful morning.

He dressed for the errands he usually ran. The sweater fit perfectly. “I wish you would come with me.”

“I have papers to grade. I want them done so I can focus on you tonight.”

He relented. “The reservations are for 7:00,” he paused and put his arms around her waist. “I think we should begin trying for a baby.” Roose waited for her protests. He had arguments to counter each one. If she proved adamant, he would simply tell her it was to be.

Sansa hesitated, and then to his great pleasure, she gave her assent. “All right. I’ll go off the pill starting today.”

“You won’t regret it. Our child will be worthy of both of us.” He would have his heir after all. “I should go.”
She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him hard. “Hurry back.”

* * *

Sansa’s smile withered and died as Roose drove down the street. She showered and changed. She busied herself with housework. She stripped the bed and remade it with clean sheets. Just in case, she set out the dress she promised to wear for Roose with the shoes and stockings. She put her new earrings in her jewelry box in the wall safe. She did the dishes and cleaned off the table.

She sat down to grade. Her neck and back ached, but she worked as quickly as she could. She remembered what it was to be a student waiting anxiously for grades. She entered the marks in the course management system. She was typing in the last one when the doorbell rang. She hit enter.

When the policemen informed her that her husband had been killed in a car accident, she was so relieved she almost fainted. The officers took her reaction for grief and sat with her until her family came to be with her.

* * *

Sansa Stark let him into her house. “Hello, Tywin.” She looked quite elegant in a black suit and her ginger hair tied in a neat knot at the back of her head. She offered him her cheek and brought him to the kitchen. “Thank you for coming.”

Tywin nodded.

“You offered to help me once. Is that still a possibility?”

“Yes, of course. But he’s dead now.”

Sansa grinned. “Shit, I have to stop smiling. Yes, he is. I’ve gone back three times to make certain. The funeral director thinks I need to see someone to get over my grief. I’m safe, but there are things I just don’t know how to handle.”

“Do you have enough money?” Money was a simple solution.

“That’s just it. I do. There is a lot of money. There are the two houses, this one and the one at the Dreadfort. There are stocks and bonds, bank accounts, and two insurance policies.”

“Who is the primary legatee?”

“Me. He left Ben $10,000.”

Tywin waited for an explanation as to who Ben was.

“He’s, well, he was like me. A prisoner, but he’s basically a very sad old man who did things for Roose and the Boltons that he can never forget. I don’t think $10,000 is enough for what they did to him.”

“That is not your concern.”

Sansa sighed. “It’s not enough for what he did for me, okay? He helped me. I want to help him.”

Tywin absorbed this; he speculated as to what this “help” had consisted of, but if anyone deserved killing, it was Roose Bolton. “The taxes will take most of his legacy. You could establish an annuity for him. I can advise you. How much were you bequeathed?” He took the folder she handed him and perused the documents the lawyer had given her. Whatever else Roose Bolton had
been, he had been good with his personal finances; Sansa would not want for money.

“There’s also a lot of cash in the house. I know there’s more both here and probably at the place at the Dreadfort. So far I’ve found $50,000. That and what he left me comprises what’s in Westeros.”

“And outside of Westeros?” he asked shrewdly.

“There’s a numbered account in Braavos which has about $3,500,000. I have no idea what to do with it. It’s all from his jobs: blood money, literal blood money. I have an account number and I’m a signatory. He took me down there last Intersession to set it up. He didn’t trust me with the key or the code, but they were in his safe deposit box at the bank and I have them now.” She handed him another folder of various financial documents.

Tywin examined them. “I can advise you about the money there. If you are thinking of giving it away, don’t. Most of the money in this world is dirty. Set up a charity if you like, but I rather think you earned it. You will need an accountant and a proper lawyer. I will help you with those too. What else?”

“Can you bring Margaery here to the funeral? If she doesn’t want to, I would understand, but—”

Tywin nodded. “I think she would come.”

Sansa went to the counter. “I would like to go back to the Westerlands for a little while. I can afford to rent some place on the beach.”

“Would you like to stay at Casterly Rock?”

She shook her head. “It’s very nice of you, but I think I need some place of my own. I started to have that with the apartment before he took it away from me. I need something that’s mine, even if it’s just for a couple of months.”

“There are properties near Lannisport that I own. If you insist, you could rent one from me.”

She poured coffee for the both of them. “Do you still have those stories I wrote while I was at your house?”

He nodded. “I will bring them.” He declined the sugar and cream she offered him. “I read them. They were very powerful.”

“There’s one more thing.”

“Yes?”

She hugged herself. “Would you teach me how to fish sometime?”

* * *

Ben was surprised at the number of people at the service in Winterfell. Barbrey Dustin sat next to him. He remembered her from when her sister had been alive. He remembered seeing her and Mr. Roose in the woods behind the house. He had been helping Bethany Bolton inside. He had seen the look on her face as she watched her husband through the window thrusting into her sister.

“What’s she like?” Mrs. Dustin asked as they stood toward the back at the reception watching Sansa.

“Not like any of the others Mr. Roose married,” was all he told her. “I didn’t think there would be
so many folks here.”

“They wanted proof he was dead,” Mrs. Dustin suggested.

He knew some of these people were Sansa’s kin. There was an older woman who she resembled. She tentatively approached Sansa at the receiving line and then started to cry before hugging her. Rickon and a younger woman with dark hair and fierce grey eyes stood next to Sansa at all times.

There was a very tall man with fading gilt-colored hair and green eyes who sat with a pretty brown-haired woman. Ben heard him call her Margaery. Sansa had spoken of Margaery before.

There were people who he thought must be professors. They stood in clumps and talked about papers and books and scholarship.

“Are you Ben?” the grey-eyed girl wanted to know.

“Yes.”

“Sansa asked if you had a place to stay tonight.”

He shook his head. “I’ll drive back to the Dreadfort.”

“Sansa wants you to stay at the house with her. You’d be doing her a favor. She said she has some things she needs help with.”

Ben saw her talking with some of the professors. He caught her eye. He knew she would understand. He would stay.

“I’m Arya Stark, by the way. Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For taking care of her when we weren’t able to do it.”

* * *

Sansa accepted condolences from Roose’s colleagues. The northern contingent was out in full force. She could tell the ones who’d known something hadn’t been quite right—they didn’t waste time talking about her so-called losses. They spoke exclusively of his scholarship and contributions to the field.

She was startled to see members of her own department there too. On Roose’s orders, she had been distant with almost everyone; yet here they all were. Perhaps when this was over, she could actually begin to make some friends again.

There were people here who knew what he was. Arya and Rickon. Ben. Tywin Lannister came with Margaery. There was so much she wanted to say to Margaery and she’d been limited to a handful of words. She consoled herself with knowing that she’d see her tonight. She’d see them all tonight.

Her family clustered around her, apparently determined to make up for years of estrangement in one go.

Sansa looked down to see Mum tentatively touching her arm as if to assure herself that Sansa was really there. They’d spoken on the phone every day since the afternoon of Roose’s death, but this was the first time they’d seen each other in ten years.
“If I had known,” her mother began.

She couldn’t do this, not here.

But Mum pulled herself together, apparently realizing this was neither the time nor the place. “Are you going to be all right on your own? I wish you would let us take care of you.”

Sansa rather thought it was time she started learning to take care of herself.

* * *

Ben followed Sansa to one of the bedrooms on the second floor.

“I can’t sleep here, Miss Stark. This is too fancy.”

“He’s dead. It’s Sansa. Don’t call me anything except Sansa ever again. You’re free. I’m free. We’re not his anymore. This isn’t the Westerosi Dark Ages or even the Renaissance. You don’t have to tug your forelock to me. He wasn’t some high lord. He was a sick, twisted academic who liked to hurt people. You are a hundred times better than he could ever have dreamt of being. My name is Sansa.”

Ben didn’t understand half of what she said, but he thought he got the most important point.

“Free?”

“Free. The last of the fucking Boltons is dead and gone. I would have a party if I didn’t think people would talk. As it is, I am having a few people coming over tonight and I want you there with us. It’ll be Rickon, Arya, Tywin, and Margaery. They know what I went through. I know what you went through. I am probably going to swear like a fucking sailor and I am going to have several drinks because he would have hated that.”

Ben didn’t know what to say. He followed her down to the kitchen.

“You can just sit quietly tonight if you want. I just want you here because we’re survivors. I want to toast his mother. It sounds like she was a survivor too.”

“She would have liked you.”

Sansa kicked off her shoes. “The lawyer is going to call you in a few days. Roose left you some money. It’s not enough, not for all the things they made you do. I get the rest of it. Tywin is going to help me figure out how to handle the estate, but we’re already planning to make sure you have what you deserve.”

“Mr. Roose left me money?”

“$10,000. Tywin says after taxes it’ll be more like $6,000. That’s not enough, Ben. You were their slave for nearly fifty years. You deserve more than $6,000. If I could I would dig up his father and bring him back to life so I could kill him for you.”

Ben looked at her alarmed. “You shouldn’t talk like that.”

She smiled. “No, I guess I shouldn’t. Before they get here, I need to know . . . what did you do with Petyr’s body?”

“It was burned. There may be other bodies on the property, but they date back to before Mr. Bolton’s father. Mr. Bolton and Mr. Roose were very careful. Mr. Roose was very insistent we
clean up all traces of that man’s death. I made certain. There’s nothing to link you to him.”

“That’s all right then. I’d like to ask you one more favor—it’s okay if you say no.”

“Miss St—Sansa, I will do anything you ask.”

She lifted bottles out of paper bags. “I had brandy once. I liked it. Do you want to have a glass of brandy with me?”

“Is that the favor?”

She laughed. “That’s an offer. We bought other things if you want something else. There’s Scotch, vodka, whiskey, gin, soda. I can make coffee or tea too. I got juice in case someone wants it with their vodka or gin. You may have anything other than water. I am never drinking another fucking glass of water as long as I live.”

“Whiskey? Neat, please.”

“Oh, I know how to make that,” Sansa said laughing. “Two fingers?”

Ben didn’t know why this was funny, but he liked seeing her happy. He accepted the drink.

“To Roose rotting in the seven hells for all eternity.”

He clinked his glass against hers. They drank. “What do you want me to do for you?”

Sansa sighed. “I know where he hid things in this house. I can find the guns and the knives. I know where he kept all his special little tools. I don’t know where the things are in the house at the Dreadfort. I want to sell the place. I’d like to burn it to the ground, but that would raise questions. If I sell the house at the Dreadfort, then I have to clean out his toys and I’ll need to figure out what to do with the room below.”

“I can help you with it. He liked his father’s hiding places.” Ben thought about the room. “I can figure something out. We can close off the passage. Fill it in maybe.” He sipped the whiskey. “What will you do after this?”

“I don’t know. I will finish out the semester. Over the break, I think I’m taking Tywin up on his offer of a place in the Westerlands. I won’t be able to stare at waves for six months, but I could do it for three. I may come back here, but I’m going to sell this house too. I want a place never touched by Roose’s hands.” She poured herself some more brandy. “I am going to start writing my own stories. Do you want to go to Dorne like we talked about?”

Ben was surprised she remembered. “I’m an old man now. There’s not a lot left for me.”

“Do you have any family?”

He shook his head.

“Well, think about what you’d like to do. I was thinking maybe you’d like to come with me to the Westerlands for a while. It’s not as warm as Dorne, but it’s nice there.”

“You want me to work for you?”

Sansa set down her drink. “No. I thought we could go as friends or I guess, like family? I’m not close to most of mine. We could just hang out, talk, maybe go for walks? I plan on crying a lot. I could never cry with Roose. He’d see my red eyes and he’d get angry at me for not being an
iceberg. Do you know how to fish? I watched Tywin do it once. It looked kind of restful. Maybe we could learn to do that. He said he would teach me.”

Ben didn’t like the way she was talking so fast. “I don’t want to be alone,” Sansa said finally. Her eyes started to fill. He didn’t like seeing her cry, but he knew she needed to. “You don’t have to be.”

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Tafkar had a lot to do with how this chapter turned out. Thanks.
Margaery followed the directions Sansa had sent her in the email. For some strange reason, Sansa wrote, the mapping websites and GPS never got it right. The route took her down along the boundaries of Casterly Rock. Margaery missed the turnoff the first three times, but finally found it. She followed a twisting road down toward what she presumed was the shore. For most of the way, huge trees formed a canopy over the pavement. Finally, she came upon the house.

Sansa had written that it would look like a cottage from a fairy tale—a fairy tale with a happy ending—and it did. The walls were stone and the roof was tiled. Flowers grew in riotous, colorful profusion on the sides of the walkway, in the beds in front of the cottage, and in boxes beneath the mullioned windows.

Ben Bones was trimming the hedges. He greeted her. He looked older, but he seemed considerably less defeated than she had the one and only time she had met him. “She’s on the beach.” He opened the front door for her and gave her directions.

To get to the beach, Margaery went down three narrow sets of twisting stairs built into the rock. When she came to the last set, she saw Sansa. She was sitting in the shade on a blanket. Margaery’s breath caught and she descended the final steps.

Sansa looked up.

Margaery forgot every word of her carefully rehearsed greeting. “You cut your hair.”

Sansa reached back and felt it as if she was surprised to find this was so. “Oh, yeah. I did. It’ll grow back,” she promised. “I’m so glad you came.”

They stared at each other for a long minute. Intermittent, awkward emails and strange, halting, largely silent phone conversations over the last few months had done nothing to prepare them for a face-to-face meeting.

Sansa was the first to recover. “Are you hungry? I thought we could have a picnic.” She patted a spot next to her.

“You always said sitting on the ground was stupid.”

“That was a very Roose-like attitude of mine. I have made a concerted effort to shed as many of those as possible. I should have gone on picnics with you. It’s not stupid. I was stupid.”

Margaery sat.

“Tywin said you don’t drink anymore. I have lemonade. Or do you want a soda? I have Coke or ginger ale or—”

She hadn’t come all this way, after all this time, to drink, but Sansa had such an eager look on her
face. “Lemonade would be very nice, thanks.” She accepted the frosty glass and sipped. Sansa did the same.

“I’m sorry about your grandmother,” Sansa told her. “I know how much she meant to you. Did she . . . did she forgive you before she died?”

“She accepted me. I guess that was enough.” Margaery wasn’t quite ready to talk about it. “Do you live here all year round?”

Sansa shook her head. “I’m still at Winterfell. I come for breaks and over the Third Semester. Ben lives here all the time. He wanted to stay with me, but the cold isn’t good for his health.” She scooted back a little further into the shade. “I’m happy enough there and I love the teaching. There is a small contingent in the department who still think I’m a floozy who slept my way into a job, but most of my colleagues like me. I’m on track with my book—the one I need to write to get tenure.”

“Do your short stories help?”

Sansa blinked. “You read those?”

“I read them,” Margaery confirmed. Arya had told her about them and she’d hunted each and every one down.

“Really?” Sansa was shocked. “I would have thought . . . Margaery, they’re so dark.”

“I know, but I needed to read them,” she explained. “I’m glad I did. They explained a lot.”

Sansa shifted the topic of conversation. “I didn’t want to ask Tywin. Are you . . . are you with anyone these days?”

“No.” Margaery took another sip of the lemonade. “I’ve had the occasional lover, but there’s no one special. You?”

“There’s no one. No affairs either,” Sansa told her. “The therapist suggested I work through some of my issues first. She said I needed to get comfortable in my own skin and that I learn to understand why I pick the partners I do. You’re the only one who was ever worth a damn. And given that it was a fling that took me and everyone who cares about me into the seventh hell, I think she was right.”

“Does the therapist know everything?”

Sansa set her lemonade down. “No. I wasn’t comfortable with that. I sketched in a lot of it with very broad strokes. I think she thinks I was a mob wife, but it’s close enough to the reality of the situation. She’s helped me a lot.” She took a deep breath. “I wanted to tell you at the funeral how sorry I was for everything I put you through, but I wasn’t in a good place there either. After the glee faded . . . well, let’s just say, the crash was not fun for the people around me.”

“You always were very high-maintenance.”

Sansa started to take umbrage at that and then she laughed. “I suppose you’re right.”

“I wasn’t exactly a joy to be around either.”

“I’m sorry for everything.”
“I’m sorry too.”

They sat very quietly for a time.

“Are the flowers up by the cottage your doing?” The sun was starting to go down.

“That’s all Ben. Alys used to like reading about gardening. I guess he always wanted to try his hand on it.”

Margaery wasn’t sure who Alys was, but she nodded. “What do you do out here? Swim?”

“Minisa—she’s Robb’s little girl, and Rickon like to. They all come to visit now and then.”

“You’re reconciled with your family then?”

Sansa nodded. “Yes. It’s been rocky. I don’t know if it will ever be entirely right again, but I have them back in my life.” She brought her knees up to her chest.

“What do you do when they’re not here?”

“I’m friends with one of the professors in my department. She came last week for a few days. I think it was too quiet for her though. Asha likes a lot of bustle. I go fishing with Tywin and Ben on occasion. Mostly I write in the mornings and I come out here and sit in the afternoons to watch the tide coming in.”

“It’s very restful,” Margaery offered.

“It makes me feel that I belong—like I’m part of the world.”

The two of them stared into the waves for a long time.

* * *

**The End**

* * *

Chapter End Notes

I’ve already thanked a bunch of people in the notes, but I really want to thank Vana who has been incredibly supportive and encouraging from inception to completion. You have no idea how many times I typed random phrases to her asking questions about punctuation or usage. Unfailingly, she would respond with the correct answer. When I had doubts, she was there to keep me going. She’s also the one who encouraged me to write smut (although I don’t think the smut scenes from this are at all what she had in mind) and it was that first draft that spawned “Creepy Roose.”

I need to give a shout-out to my peeps in the J/B community—even though I did not in the end formally title this “Creepy Roose Fic” the way so many of them suggested—they were there for me from start to finish and they were so supportive.

Thanks to all of the commenters! I’ve loved getting the feedback so much and if you weren’t a regular, I’d love to hear from you now.
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End Notes

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And last but certainly not least, I need to extend my profound thanks to tafkar for beta reading this monster and encouraging me to keep up with it when I thought it might be unpublishable.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!