**Who Else Would I Be?**

by vivilove

**Summary**

The job had sounded simple enough. Petyr Baelish, the wealthiest man in the Vale with powerful political connections, had been looking for a bodyguard for his daughter, a reclusive artist of nineteen, after she’d inadvertently witnessed a murder.

But that was before Jon Snow had started working for the man…or met the girl.

Beautiful and kind, Jon realizes he must guard his heart from becoming too personally attached to his charge, the lovely Alayne Stone. He's had enough trouble recently as it is. But he soon discovers she's like a puzzle that he can't quite figure out, mysterious and far too alluring to resist.

**Notes**
I started this story in March, I think? Anyway, it's been with me for a while and, since I recently finished a long WIP, I figured what better way to torture myself than to post the first chapter of another one? *hangs head*
The job had sounded simple enough. Petyr Baelish, the wealthiest man in the Vale with powerful political connections, had been looking for a bodyguard for his daughter, a reclusive artist of nineteen, after she’d inadvertently witnessed a murder.

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“Sweetling, come and meet Mr. Snow,” Mr. Baelish said in an unctuous tone that set Jon’s teeth on edge.

Everything about this man set his teeth on edge and they’d only met a few days earlier. But he didn’t have to protect him. Besides, Jon could not afford to be choosy just now.

He heard quiet footsteps on the staircase and turned to meet his assignment.

Tall and slim with long, dark brown hair, she entered the grand foyer of the manse where the two men stood wiping her hands on a smock. The smock was obviously well-used and Jon spied
different colors of paint on her delicate white hands before he lifted his eyes to study her face. A pretty girl with classic high cheekbones, soft pink lips and a pair of sparkling blue eyes that a man might drown in.

Mr. Baelish held out his hand to take hers but the girl ducked her head and said, “They’re covered in paint, Father.”

Jon caught just a flash of displeasure on his new employer’s face before he smiled and said, “No matter.” He draped an arm low around his daughter’s waist and steered her towards Jon. Normal enough perhaps but it struck Jon as odd when he noticed the way the girl stiffened at her father’s touch. “Mr. Snow was in the Nights Watch until recently. What do you think of that, sweetling? I’ve hired a man who has served the realm’s most elite force just to watch over you.”

The girl’s smile did not reach her eyes as she said, “Thank you, Father.”

*Maybe she knows what a load of horseshit that is.*

The Nights Watch was not what it had once been though Jon was highly trained. He was skilled with many weapons, an experienced hand-to-hand fighter and had been valued for his stealth, speed and quick wits when he was in the Watch. At least, he had been under Lord Commander Mormont. In truth, he was over-qualified for a job like this. While many of his so-called Brothers were little more than a dissolute band of soldiers just waiting for their pensions, Jon had been one of the best and brightest members...before the mutiny.

Jon wondered once again why Petyr Baelish had hired him to be his daughter’s bodyguard when he had plenty of hired muscle of his own from what he’d seen. And, from what he’d been told, the young lady rarely left their estate. Seemed like there was enough security around here to keep her safe from one hoodlum even if the perp was still on the loose.

“Well, here is your charge, Mr. Snow...my daughter Alayne.”

Jon smiled encouragingly at the girl and was pleased when she met his eyes. Perhaps she was shy, a bit mousy. He did not mind a shy girl being somewhat withdrawn himself. She was more than just pretty though. She was lovely. *She’d be beautiful if she smiled,* he thought.

He held out his hand and she started to demure.

“I don’t mind paint, Miss Baelish.”

“Stone,” she said uncomfortably, visibly drawing inward as if to shield herself. “I am Alayne Stone.”

“Yes, Alayne’s my natural child,” Mr. Baelish chuckled. “Mr. Snow won’t mind that, my dear. He’s a Snow after all.”

Jon stifled his initial impulse to draw his lips back in a snarl. He supposed it was amusing to those who didn’t have to live under a bastard name. But he caught the girl watching him closely and shook off his aggravation.

“Miss Stone then. It’s nice to meet you and I still don’t mind paint,” he said extending his hand a bit further.

“Likewise, Mr. Snow,” she said with a smile, a genuine one, as she shook his hand.

He’d been wrong. She wasn’t just beautiful. She was radiant.
“Get down! GET DOWN! Everyone on the ground if you want to live!”

She couldn’t move. She couldn’t breathe. The warning had triggered a memory of angry faces surrounding her and screams as she was roughly being pushed and then shoved to the ground by the palace guards. Just like then, she stood still and watched the nightmare unfold. She couldn’t just turn away.

**BAM! BAM! BAM!**

It was supposed to be a simple trip into town. She’d been so thrilled that Father had permitted her to go. The art supply store and the bank. Osney had wanted coffee and she’d said she could go into the bank alone. He didn’t have to follow her everywhere. Well, he was paid to do just that but he’d wanted a coffee and she’d wanted two minutes alone somewhere besides her bedroom.

The security officer lay dead upon the ground a few feet away as the criminals robbed the bank. Most were wearing ski masks but one…one turned to look right at her where she stood. His mask did not conceal his mouth or eyes. She’d never forget his eyes. Pale and cold, reminding her of dirty chips of ice. His full, wet lips twisted into a cruel distortion of a smile.

She stood there trembling like a leaf in a breeze.

“What’s your name, love?” he asked, apparently amused by this silly girl who didn’t have enough sense to cower on the floor and cover her eyes like the rest of the bystanders.

Too late, she looked down at the floor as if she’d not seen anything. She felt his fingers roughly pinching at her chin as he forcefully tipped her head back up. Blue eyes met pale ones, almost as pale as moonstones. He was standing so close. He smelled of cigarettes and gunpowder.

“Let’s go!” another man shouted. He was older and must have been in charge.

The man who’d spoken to her released her chin and raised a pistol, aiming it at her chest.

She was about to die. She’d looked when she should not have and now he would kill her.

But perhaps he’d expected tears or pleas. Instead, she’d stared right back at him. The cruel smile widened.

“I’ll see you around, love,” he winked.

“Miss Stone?” Jon called through the connecting door after knocking softly three times.

He’d been unpacking in his new bedroom. It was past midnight but he didn’t sleep so well
anymore and thought he may as well get settled. But, he’d heard her cry out. At least, he thought he had.

He pressed his ear against the door and listened. It was quiet. Her light still appeared to be off from what he could tell under the door. He went back to unpacking.

He’d already stowed his sidearm in the drawer by the bed. He didn’t have all that much in the way of clothes. Being in uniform most of the time for the past five years had precluded much need of an extensive wardrobe. And when he’d been sent undercover and infiltrated Mance’s group, he’d dressed like them, in torn jeans, old tees and ratty flannels.

At the bottom of his rucksack, he pulled out a folded-up photocopy of a file photo he’d snatched before he left. He traced the outline of her mouth and cursed himself for his foolish sentimentality. She was dead and gone and everything about their time together had been a mistake. But, he couldn’t seem to part with this last remaining reminder of her. He shoved Ygritte’s picture under his socks and underwear and stripped down to his boxer shorts.

He laid down in bed at last, his fingers subconsciously tracing the scars on his chest like they had the photo. When he realized what he was doing, he laced his fingers behind his head. He hoped for sleep but it was stuffy in the room.

He got up and threw open a window, inhaling the biting chill of the mountain air at night. He could hear an owl hooting and saw two of Baelish’s guards smoking down below. Jon shook his head in disgust. Smoking at night while on duty, it would ruin their night vision.

He had just shut his window and was scrubbing at his beard when he heard her again. Not a startled cry but a quiet sobbing coming from the girl in the next room. He wondered what sort of things made Alayne Stone cry into her pillow at night. Was it a lost love? A secret shame? A bad dream? Her father? Memories of that black-hearted beast Craster sprang to mind. He felt uneasy and hoped nothing like that was occurring under this roof. It’d be a shame if he was forced to murder his first employer after the Watch.

He could knock on her door again but knew how unlikely it would be that he’d learn the answer tonight. From what little time he’d spent with her this evening, he could tell she was a private sort of girl. Oh, she could paste on a smile and make polite chit-chat when the occasion demanded. But that girl and the one who stiffened at her father’s touch was not entirely the same person. Jon had spent enough time playing a ruse to recognize one when he saw it. As Donal might’ve said, Alayne Stone was a right deep file for such a young person.

She grew too quiet for him to hear and he hoped she’d fallen back asleep. He rolled over and hoped to do the same.
Alayne squeezed a bit more crimson onto her pallet and swirled it with a dab of white before considering the canvas before her. She straightened and rolled her neck when she realized she’d been subconsciously biting her lip. She often did so as she painted. Father would not approve if he saw.

“So pensive. Why aren’t you happy, Alayne? What do you want that you do not have?”

Freedom.

The word peeled like a bell inside her head but she didn’t dare allow it to cross her lips. Father would only call her ungrateful if she did.

She cast a glance over her shoulder where he sat reading a book. Jon Snow. A bastard from the North. A member of the Nights Watch until recently. Her new watchdog and babysitter.

Could he be trusted at all?

She’d like to think so. It would be so sweet to have someone here she felt she could truly trust. There was something warm and welcoming about his dark grey eyes when he looked at her, so different than the emerald green ones or pale strange ones that haunted her in the night. She tried not to think about whose eyes she recalled when she looked at Jon Snow.

But Father had hired him just as he’d hired Lothor, the Kettleblacks and the others. Therefore, he was likely just a more appealing version of them. They all belonged to Father but she still hoped that the same couldn’t be said of Mr. Snow.

“Is my daughter a fool? Money can buy anything.”

Not everything.

She would not say that aloud either.

He caught her staring. She’d looked too long. Why could she not look away from things? She could’ve pinched herself. But he smiled at her, that gentle, lopsided grin he’d given her the day before yesterday when they’d first met.

“What are you working on, Miss Stone?” he asked curiously.

“Just a landscape.” She paused and considered him a moment. “I’d prefer for you to call me Alayne.”

He was a few years older than her. It seemed unnecessary for him to address her as Miss Stone
when hardly anyone else did. And this way it was almost as if they were friends. She should like to have a friend. She’d not had anyone but Myranda Royce since she’d come here. She was a jolly companion and good fun but she was sharper than most people realized and it was hard to keep everything straight all the time.

Father had said it was best that Alayne not go visiting since the incident at the bank, as he persisted in calling it, and Myranda had not come ’round in weeks now.

_Because Father forbids her visits._

She didn’t know that for a fact but she suspected.

“Very well, Alayne...but in that case I must insist you call me Jon.”

“Jon,” she repeated softly. She liked the way his name tasted on her tongue.

_How silly, Alayne._

_But I am a silly girl. I wonder how he likes the taste of Alayne on his own tongue._

That thought was unseemly. Her cheeks grew hot and she couldn’t meet his eyes for a moment.

He rose to his feet and stretched. He wasn’t terribly tall or brawny but he was quite fit. More slender and quick than what she would consider overly muscular. He was strong certainly but not an intimidating man at first glance. However, there was strength within. She sensed it at once.

But, Jon Snow _was_ decidedly handsome, not at all what she had expected when Father had mentioned him.

He came to stand beside her. His fragrance was light but pleasing. _Not cologne…soap or maybe aftershave though he wears a beard._

It reminded of her pine trees, pups growling and nipping at her ankles, his deep laughter in the woods as she and Arya raced for their tent and…

_These are things Alayne doesn’t remember._

“It looks like Long Lake,” he commented.

Her scalp tingled and she felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. _Remember. He’s from the North._

But Alayne was not. She could lie and say she’d visited once but then that would lead to more lies. It was best to pretend ignorance.

“Oh? I’ve never seen it. It’s just…a place in my mind.” _A place in my memory._

She composed her rattled nerves with one calming breath and continued painting. He kept standing there quietly watching until she shot him a pointed glance.

“Sorry,” he mumbled and returned to his seat.

She missed his presence at once and wondered why she’d pushed him away.

_Because it’s safer. Safer for me…and safer for him._
When she was finished painting, she put her supplies away and tidied up her little studio in the attic of Father’s manse. Jon watched her, his hands flexing at his sides as though he didn’t know what to do with them. A man of action, not entirely comfortable being indoors so much.

A little impulse came over her. “Can you ride, Jon? Horses, I mean. I should like to go riding if you can.”

“Yes, I can ride,” he replied, that fetching grin forming again at once. An olive branch, a smile. She had surprised him. She had pleased him. That pleased her as well.

“Good. I’ll go change and meet you at the bottom of the stairs.”

Alayne scrubbed the paint from her hands and from under her nails with a brush. Father liked her hands clean.

But it was he who dirtied them.

She pulled on her black riding breeches and boots and a dove grey blouse before donning her dark blue jacket. She braided her hair before grabbing her gloves and leaving her hat on the dresser.

She looked in the mirror and the long rope of dark hair, no hint of auburn in the twilight of her shaded bedroom.

“Alayne. I am Alayne,” she reminded the girl in the mirror.

He was standing at the bottom of the stair waiting for her, glancing up with another friendly smile as she glided down towards him. Something told her he hadn’t smiled all that much of late.

Her heart fluttered unexpectedly but she kept her stride in check as she paced serenely down the stairs to where he waited. It reminded her of a movie, something silly but romantic with a girl coming down a winding stair where her date waited with an enchanted look. Except this date wore jeans, a henley, old cowboy boots and wore a gun on his hip.

She instantly chided herself for the foolishness of such daydreams.

"Life if not a song, sweetling."

How well she had learned that lesson.

He’d been so excited when she’d offered to take him riding for the first time. How could he be about to cry? He wanted to show her how brave he was but the horse was so big.

“It’s too high up, Mum,” he whimpered when she put him in the saddle.

She climbed up behind him, wrapping one arm securely around his waist as she held the reins. She encouraged him to lean back into her. He could smell the soft, florally fragrance she liked to wear even with the odor of manure or hay surrounding them outside the barn.

She kissed the top of his head. “Blue will behave for us. It is high up but you are safe with me. I’m
half a horse, didn’t you know?”

He grinned despite his fear and looked up and over his shoulder at her pretty face, the sunshine making her dark hair glow. “Half a horse?” he asked with all the skepticism of a child who knows it’s only a joke but partly wonders if it might be true. “Does that make me half a horse, too?”

“Nnn-neigh…a quarter horse perhaps.”

She was being silly, trying to make him laugh. Naturally, it worked.

“Take the reins with me and I’ll show you how it’s done, my sweet boy.”

He relaxed, trusting her to keep him safe and teach him.

Jon blinked rapidly in the autumn sunlight, the smell of horse, tall grass and distant wood smoke having stirred memories from long ago.

Those early experiences on the ranch where she’d worked for a time when he was small had benefitted him later in the Watch. In the winter, when the snows were too deep for anything else to move, they still made use of horses. And further north, the ability to ride had come in handy, too.

“Are you alright, Jon?”

“Fine.” She frowned and he regretted his gruff response. Alayne did not know his heartache. “Do you prefer to keep to the stable yard?” he asked in what he hoped was a more neutral tone.

“No,” she answered primly before her lips quirked into a mischievous smile. “Try and keep up!”

His mouth fell open as she quickly turned and galloped away. Chuckling to himself, he urged his horse to follow.

Tall and straight-backed, she sat in her saddle as though she’d been born there. Jon could not help but admire her form as they galloped across the fields. And when they slowed to a walk along a wooded trail, he could not help but admire her figure as he followed her.

Stop, he warned himself. She is your assignment, your job.

But she had looked so lovely riding beside him, encouraging him to race her to the fence line and then laughing when she’d beat him. Her cheeks were flushed and the sunlight made her hair glow. There were red highlights in it that he’d never noticed indoors. It reminded Jon of embers glowing amongst the coals of a dying fire.

Kissed by fire.

He pushed that thought away.

She slid down off her mare by a stream and walked her to the water. Jon did the same with the gelding he’d chosen.

“She’s fast,” he said, pointing to her mare as both horses began to drink. “Faster than this old boy.”

“My Lady loves freedom,” Alayne answered as she nuzzled the horse’s neck affectionately. “Maybe she’d run far away if she could.”
Her tone was light but he could hear the wistfulness underneath, a dreamy sort of longing for things she never expected to have. He wondered if Alayne was why he’d thought of his mother earlier.

There was also something in Alayne he recognized in himself, a kindred spirit in a sense. He’d been a caged beast when he’d returned to the Wall from the far north. She was a caged beauty, like a lovely girl in a portrait who was dying to break free from the canvas.

Perhaps her father would not be so hesitant for her to leave the grounds of their home now that he was here to protect her. Jon liked the thought of taking her somewhere, allowing her to enjoy something of life beyond her father’s estate without fear.

“You’re an excellent rider,” he commented as they walked the horses away from the water again and prepared to mount again.

Her smile widened and he caught the flash of pride his words had sparked in her eyes. It made him smile as well, feeling very pleased with himself.

“I didn’t used to be. I never was much of a rider until I…”

The hum of a motor reached their ears, cutting off whatever else she was going to say and Alayne’s joy diminished at once. A four-wheeler came over a rise in the meadow startling the horses. She murmured to her mare as Jon patted the hind quarters of his horse reassuringly. Lothor Brune, Mr. Baelish’s head of security, was driving, a shotgun and radio in the seat beside him, a pistol on his hip.

“You father wants you to come back closer to the house, Alayne,” he said.

“I’m here with her,” Jon answered. He had a gun of his own on his hip and one strapped to his ankle down his boot that he did not advertise. He’d been hired to watch over her, hadn’t he?

The older man turned his way but seemed to look right through him.

Alayne dipped her head and said, “We’ll ride back.”

“Your father said for me to bring you back this way,” Lothor said next. He moved the shotgun and patted the seat beside him.

Alayne looked at Jon, casting him an apologetic glance before she nodded to Lothor. “Will you please bring Lady back, Jon?”

“Of course, Alayne,” he answered. She handed him the reins, her gloved hand briefly stroking his bare knuckles. It was unreasonable that he should feel any sort of jolt from such an innocuous thing. He did all the same.

He watched her climb into the four wheeler next to the older man, feeling strangely sullen and like a boy from the wrong side of the tracks who wasn’t allowed to be alone with the pretty girl whose father did not approve of him.

*Keep your head on straight, you fool. Ask yourself why they’re so worried about her being no further from the house than this instead of nursing your wounded pride.*

The crime she’d witnessed and the criminals who’d committed it, there must be more there than he’d been led to believe. He’d need to ask some questions. And, if he was not satisfied with the answers, he’d need to do some digging.
As he rode slowly back alone leading her horse towards Petyr Baelish’s large manse, the sun from earlier was covered by clouds. The mountains surrounding them were a deep purple and the stacked grey stones of the house took on an ominous look. It reminded Jon of a prison for some reason…or a cage.
“For the Watch…” he heard one after the other say. Mormont was already dead.

He recoiled but it was too late. The pain was searing in his side and in his chest.

I am about to die, he thought as he collapsed to his knees in the snow.

“Jon? Jon?”

He startled and reached out blindly...thoughtlessly. She winced and he immediately let go of her wrists. “Shit! I’m sorry!” He rubbed at his face. He’d nodded off while she was painting. It was peaceful and warm in the attic today. That was no excuse. What was wrong with him? He couldn’t fall asleep on the job. “I’m sorry, Alayne. Sorry for frightening you…and falling asleep. Sorry for cursing.”

She giggled and said, “I’ve heard cursing before.”

“Well, you never curse. I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

“You didn’t hurt me. And I imagine it’s boring up here for you.”

“No, it’s not.” She smirked at him. “Okay, a little…but your painting is lovely.” So are you.

“Thank you. Do you not sleep well?”

Not at all. He didn’t answer but just shrugged.

“Nor do I. I could go for some caffeine,” she suggested.

“Are you finished?”

“No, but I think I can manage up here alone for a few minutes while you grab us both a soda.”

“Yeah, okay,” he grinned.

He walked down three flights of steps to the bottom floor where the kitchen was. He grabbed two sodas from one of the enormous refrigerators. There wasn’t a soul around. It was a vast room with all the latest state-of-the-art culinary equipment. All this for one man and his daughter. It was hard for Jon to comprehend.

He remembered the Home he’d been assigned to and the tiny little kitchen that had fed thirty boys twice a day. He also remembered going to bed hungry some nights and the games they’d play to distract themselves from the pangs.

Strolling back along the first floor, he passed Baelish’s study. He sounded like he was on the phone and worked up into a passion. Jon slowed his steps and listened.

“If you can’t keep your mad dog on a leash, I’m afraid our business relationship will have to be terminated.”
Jon paused outside the door.

“That’s not my problem. It’s yours. Just tell him not to worry about her.”

Why was he certain the ‘her’ involved was Alayne?

He tried edging nearer but heard footsteps crossing the carpeted floor towards him. He immediately started walking past the door as though he’d not been listening. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Lothor Brune at the door. The older man gave him an indifferent look. Petyr Baelish stood next to his desk, smoking. A man Jon didn’t recognize was in the room. He saw Baelish lay down the telephone just as Lothor closed the door.

It was time to give Sam a call.

Two weeks on the job and Jon had more questions than answers when it came to Alayne.

Even before that day at the bank, she’d rarely left the estate but that didn’t explain why no one here had ever heard of the girl’s existence until approximately two years earlier when Baelish had returned to the Vale unexpectedly from Kings Landing with a bastard daughter whose mother had reportedly died.

Sam hadn’t been able to yield any information about Alayne Stone other than two birth certificates being issued for live births of female infants born in Westeros with that name around nineteen years ago, one of them in Kings Landing. He’d found no mentions of her on the internet, in the media, nor even school or vaccination records. She had no bank or charge accounts either. He’d promised to keep digging though.

The girl with no past...

Everyone who knew her though spoke well of Alayne.

“Such a charming and courteous young lady regardless of what her mother was,” Lord Royce had said in Jon’s hearing just the other night.

Her mother. He sympathized with the girl based on what was rumored of her mother. His own mother had died when he was eight. His father had never been part of the picture. And, though Lyanna had been a loving and giving person, he knew what it was like for people to make unkind assumptions and say cruel things about unwed mothers even in this day and age.

Alayne’s mother had reportedly been one of Baelish’s amours in days gone by. Actually, amour was probably a gentle euphemism. Baelish was known to own a gentlemen’s establishment or two in the capital, another gentle euphemism. But, he’d supposedly fathered this girl roughly twenty years ago and quietly supported them both when he’d learned of her birth, a benevolence Jon had not known from his own father.

And yet, Petyr Baelish did not strike Jon as a particularly benevolent man. He didn’t seem the sort to do anything without there being some benefit in it for himself. And while paternity could be proven with testing, most whores lacked the resources to bully powerful men into caring for the
unintended results of their indiscretions. Another reason why moon tea was still one of the most widely sold products at the pharmacy after all.

One question that had been cleared up though involved why he’d been hired in the first place. The men working under Baelish reminded Jon of some of his Brothers from the Watch, displaying varying levels of incompetence. Lothor was no fool but he was getting on in years and never far from Baelish. The Kettleblacks were not completely inept but not very impressive either. The qualities and training of the men in Baelish’s employ went downhill from there. And they all seemed eager to plot and snitch on each other, taking some petty satisfaction in making their comrades look bad when they should be focused on more important matters.

The man Alayne had identified to the police as the shooter in the robbery was still wanted, ostensibly for questioning until they could tie him to their evidence and get a positive identification. From mugshots, Alayne had pointed out Ramsay Snow, his curious pale eyes being unique enough for the police to bring him in for a little chat…except he’d been off the grid since before the robbery.

After reading the man’s file, Jon couldn’t blame Baelish for wanting someone with his skill set assigned to protect his daughter. The bastard son of Roose Bolton, the rumored head of the Northern syndicate, Ramsay had been accused of various crimes. He’d never been convicted of anything though. Evidence went missing or victim’s memories got fuzzy whenever an arrest was made. And twice, victims had gone missing; both of them young women that no one important had particularly missed though.

Jon wondered where Ramsay was hiding and if he intended to seek out Alayne. A witness’s identity was supposed to be guarded by the police but Jon knew perfectly well how money talked. He needed to question Alayne about her interactions with Ramsay and what she’d seen that day. It might prove useful to know these things. But he’d been giving her space to get comfortable with him first.

Well, not just that. He suspected the topic was not one she’d enjoy discussing and he preferred to shield her from...everything.

He had tried asking Petyr Baelish about him but met a brick wall of ignorance and false flattery.

“You know…the irony just occurred to me that he’s a Snow as well. And yet, here you are, a good Snow protecting my daughter from a bad one. The police are doing their best to find him and I have complete faith in you, Mr. Snow. You would never allow anything to happen to our dear Alayne, would you?”

He wouldn’t, not if he could help it, but it also rankled when Baelish put it that way; as if sharing a bastard name meant anything…as if he already suspected how dear Alayne was becoming to him.

And just today, new questions arose.

She had knocked over the jar that held her brushes and managed to cut her finger on a piece of shattered glass. She’d seemed stunned by the blood and he’d wondered if Alayne was the sort of girl to faint over such things. But on second glanced, he’d dismissed the notion. She was tougher than she looked.

He knelt next to her on the floor, pressing the bottom of his shirt to her wound, trying to staunch the flow of blood.

“Your clothes,” she said concernedly as if that mattered to him in the slightest.
“We need to wash this and bandage it properly.”

She nodded and allowed him to lead her downstairs. He hoped her bathroom would have what they needed. His certainly didn’t.

As he led her to the sink, she pulled back, looking fearful. He was perplexed by her behavior, spying nothing but some make-up, a brush and a box of hair dye on her countertop. Young ladies probably had all sorts of beauty products in their bathrooms, he supposed.

But then, it struck him. Why would Alayne need hair dye? Surely, she was not going grey at 19.

He picked up the box, his curiosity peaked. Medium Ash Brown, 8 weeks of color, the box boasted. Girls could color their hair for a variety of reasons but most girls went blonde or maybe red when they experimented. Was she naturally a brunette? He stared more closely at her face. There was a flush creeping up her neck. She had a faint sprinkling of freckles, a light orangey tan color, similar to the one’s Ygritte had had on her nose, cheeks and shoulders.

“I, uh…sometimes, I use different sorts of dyes to help me create new colors…for my work.”

Jon was no artist but it sounded odd to use hair dye when there was a world of colors available in paints. She was often blending them to find the perfect shade. And while he couldn’t claim he always knew when he was being lied to, something about her body language and the shifty, frightened look in her eye told him he was being lied to now.

“Alayne, is there something you’re not telling me?” he asked, allowing a scowl to show.

She did not answer but stood there gaping at him, holding her injured finger. She pulled herself inward just as he’d seen her do the day they’d met. She appeared to be bracing herself for something, a blow perhaps.

Do you think I would hit you? Has anyone ever struck you? he wanted to ask.

Moving slowly, he took her hand in his. “Let’s wash this now.”

He turned on the faucet and placed her wound under the cold flow of water, keeping his eyes on her face and hoping she’d see he would never harm her. The blood was washed away and he gently patted her hand dry. She silently indicated the drawer that held bandages and antiseptic ointment when he asked. She allowed him to apply the ointment and bandage her wound, reminding Jon of an injured animal that didn’t want a human’s help but would permit it when there was no better alternative. He could feel her staring at him as he worked.

“There now,” he said, surveying his handiwork. She murmured a thank you. He could’ve let the matter go but he preferred being straight-forward when possible. “Alayne, your father hired me to protect you. Money aside, I want to keep you safe. You don’t have to tell me your life story if you don’t wish to but if you’re hiding things from me, it can make it difficult for me to do my job. I want you to trust me…and I want to believe that I can trust you.”

Her eyes flickered up to him. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. It was bewitching and he subtly reminded himself not to be drawn in by her beauty. He wondered if she had something to tell him or was busy composing a lie.

“I’m afraid there’s…”

“There you are, sweetling,” Baelish said from the doorway, interrupting whatever she was going to say and startleng them both. “I looked for you in your little roost.”
Her little roost. That was what Baelish called her attic studio. It made Jon think of a bird in her cage the way he said it.

Jon expected to see more fear in her eyes. She had been on the tip of saying something to him. But other than her initial surprise at her father’s appearance, the courteous mask he’d noted many times now covered Alayne’s face.

“What happened?” Baelish asked when he saw her hand.

“Nothing serious, Father. I cut my hand in a moment of clumsiness. Jon was kind enough to help me clean it.”

Baelish smiled indulgently at them both. It was not a genuine smile.

“Well, I was seeking you to tell you of guests that will be coming for a dinner tomorrow night, a small soiree. A little cut will not keep you from your duties as my hostess, I trust?”

“No, Father. How many guests?”

“Twenty-two including us. And you, Mr. Snow.”

“Me?”

“Yes. I don’t know everyone in the party well. I’d feel better knowing you were near keeping watch over my beloved daughter.” He smirked as he looked Jon up and down. “But your wardrobe leaves something to be desired, I’m afraid. I’m sure my tailor can find something for you. My treat.”

Jon was embarrassed to admit he had nothing suitable to wear. He should’ve realized that he might be expected to dress up on occasion.

He was stammering over his thanks when Baelish put an arm around Alayne’s waist. He kept his grey-green eyes on Jon as he slowly kissed her temple, his lips parted more than necessary for a fatherly peck. Everything about the gesture felt too intimate and territorial. And the way Alayne stood rigid made Jon think she felt the same. He flexed his hand and told himself it was nothing. But it didn’t feel like nothing judging by the rage that filled him.

The bathroom was suddenly too small. He needed space. He needed to get away before his temper got away from him.

But before he could escape, Alayne pulled away from Baelish and spoke. “That’s very generous of you, Father. I’ll ride with Jon to Olyvar’s shop and help him choose something suitable.”

“I hardly think it necessary for you to…”

“It’s no trouble, Father.” Her eyes met his when she added, “Jon will keep me safe. I trust him.”

Then, she swiftly kissed her father’s cheek and swept out of the bathroom.

Jon followed in her wake, grateful to leave Baelish. Her words left him feeling decidedly puffed up like a game cock. What had come over him?

But, when he glanced back, he saw the little man placing the box of hair dye in a cabinet under her sink with a vexed look and realized he’d never received an answer to his question.
Alayne stretched languidly in the passenger seat as she rode next to Jon into town. Perhaps she shouldn’t be so relaxed considering that Ramsay Snow was out there somewhere or considering the tense turn things had taken in her bathroom earlier but she was.

She hadn’t been to town in weeks, not since the police had asked her to look at the photographs. It was so pleasant to escape the house for a couple of hours. And this time, she wasn’t with Father or Osney or Lothor. She was with Jon.

Thankfully, he was focused on driving and hadn’t renewed his questions from earlier. Part of her had been tempted to share but that would not do. Lying to him though…that was not something she enjoyed.

You’re protecting him, she told herself. It was partly true.

As they made their way along the winding roads, she allowed herself to enjoy simply sitting back and observing him. One of his dark curls had flipped up, hugging his earlobe. She wanted to reach out and wrap that curl around her little finger. His lips were pursed when they encountered traffic. They puckered up rather nicely. They looked soft and…

Stop this.

It was ridiculous to develop a crush on this man. Had it been so long since she’d been in the company of a handsome man that this was the unavoidable result? Was a few smiles and some kindness all it took?

If he brought you flowers and said you were pretty, would you be on your back in a thrice?

No, it would take more than that…even with Jon.

Alayne was smarter than this, more jaded. Her heart would not easily be conquered. She wasn’t at all like silly little girls from the North who went south with their heads full of songs and their hearts full of hope.

But, Jon Snow wasn’t what that silly little girl had thought she wanted back then. He wasn’t some fairy tale prince with blonde locks and easy smiles that hid an ugly truth. Perhaps that’s why Alayne liked him better. She had no interest in fairy tale princes for they only existed in fairy tales.

And the real thing does not bear thinking on.

For just a moment, an image came to mind of fingers clawing at his throat as he coughed and wheezed for air. She had wept at the horror of it. She had wept to keep from laughing. And then, she had run away.

Run, run…as fast as you can...

That was not me. That was some other girl. I am Alayne. Who else would I be?

She knew it was a lie but the lie had kept her safe this long. The queen had offered five million dragons for the capture of that other girl. She wondered if five million dragons could tempt a man...
like Jon. She wondered what besides money might tempt a man like Jon.

Father said the queen had not forgotten that murderous little whore. How could she forget the girl who’d helped kill her beloved first-born son?

_I didn’t. I didn’t do it. I didn’t know._

_Who didn’t know? Alayne had no hand in it at all, neither knowingly or unknowingly._

Alayne was nobody, a bastard girl living in the Vale with her wealthy father. It was safer to be Alayne. There was no one looking for Alayne.

And, there was no one left for that other girl to go home to anyway. That was what Father had said.

But sometimes, when she dreamed at night, she could almost believe that some of them were still out there somewhere. Arya had left the capital before his execution and if she…

“Penny for your thoughts?”

She startled at the sound of his voice though it was gentle. The deep rumble of his Northern accent, did he have any notion how it affected her? Who it brought to mind? Why it made her heart ache even as she wished to beg him never to stop speaking? Of course not.

He was watching her as they sat at a red light. She wondered how long they’d been sitting here and he’d been watching her.

“What’s your favorite color?” she asked to deflect.

“Black.”

She snickered and nodded. “Silly me. Of course it is. But you’re not in the Watch anymore. What color of suit would you prefer?”

“Black,” he said again as though it were the most obvious answer. She supposed he had a point.

“Very well. Black it is.”

The bell over the door clanged as they entered the shop and a voice called out a greeting from further within. She browsed through a few suits on the rack and watched Jon standing awkwardly nearby. He subtly lifted the price tag on a jacket and then retracted his hand as if it’d been burned.

Olyvar’s assistant came out and Alayne did the talking. She’d been here a few times with Father and was now certain that Jon had not spent much time shopping in places like this.

“Thanks,” he murmured as the assistant led them to the back where Olyvar worked. “We didn’t have many tailors at the Watch or dropping by the…never mind.”

_Dropping by the what exactly?_  

He could’ve been an orphan, she surmised. She would like to ask but didn’t wish to make him uncomfortable. And she could hardly ask him personal questions and expect him not to ask her any in return.

“Miss Alayne,” the man himself said. He was terribly young to be such a widely respected tailor but he’d inherited the shop from an elderly ‘friend’ and made a name for himself thanks to his talent. Mr. Baelish’s patronage helped as well. “It’s a pleasure to see you again. You have a young
man with you, I see. Is this the beginning of a beautiful relationship?” Olyvar clasped his hands together and smirked at them.

“I’m her bodyguard,” Jon huffed irritably though his cheeks were turning pink. “We’re not…”

“I meant between you and I, handsome,” he laughed before Jon could finish, leaving Jon even more flustered in the process. That would not do.

“Oh, we’re here on a serious mission today and are in dire need of your assistance, I’m afraid.” Olyvar liked to flirt and Alayne was not opposed to playing along but she knew dragons and stags were his only true loves. “Time is of the essence and you’re the only one who can help.”

“Little old me?” he preened. He did love feeling appreciated. *Who doesn’t?* “What can a humble tailor like me do to help?”

“Father’s hosting a dinner party tomorrow night. Mr. Snow requires a suit to blend in with Father’s guests. Something off the rack is fine.”

“A tuxedo perhaps?” Olyvar pulled out his measuring tape and knelt to measure Jon’s inseam. Alayne had to cover her mouth to keep from laughing at Jon’s incredulous expression. “He’d look marvelous in a tuxedo.”

“Oh, no…just a suit. Black, if you please. It’s Mr. Snow’s color,” she added with a wink for Jon. Despite his evident distaste for this errand, he grinned at her playfulness and she wondered where this boldness had come from. It was more like something Myranda might do. But the way Jon looked at her made her feel bold. And later, when he came out of the dressing room wearing one of Olyvar’s suits and looking so dashing, she felt bolder still.

“That’s perfect,” she sighed. “Can it be ready by tomorrow?”

“It can be ready today if you’ll give me an hour or so. Mr. Snow’s an easy man to fit,” Olyvar said from the floor where he was pinning the pants for hemming.

“Excellent. I knew you’d save the day.”

“Just be sure to tell your father how I took care of you.”

“Always.”

She rose from her chair to walk over to the raised platform where Jon stood looking terribly uncomfortable over the fuss being made.

“What are we going to do for an hour?”

“When Olyvar’s done, perhaps I’ll let you buy me a milkshake.”

“A milkshake? Are we ten?”

“Anyone can enjoy a milkshake, Jon.” *Bastard girls and fugitives alike.*

His lips quirked into another one of his infectious smiles and she felt her cheeks growing warm. She was becoming far too attached to his smiles. She muttered an excuse about allowing him to change to escape.

By the time they’d strolled two blocks to the ice cream shop, she thought herself suitably in control
again. They placed their order and Alayne found them a seat by the window. She relished the opportunity to people watch. She saw so few of them in general. So many people walked by her window, all with some place to be. She wondered what it would be like to work somewhere, an ice cream shop or for a tailor, anywhere that took her away from the manse…and Father.

Jon returned with a chocolate shake for himself and vanilla for her. She had looked at the lemon sherbet longingly but she’d said a milkshake and this would suit Alayne. She popped the maraschino cherry in her mouth and licked the whipped cream off her straw with a covetous moan. At home, she’d be indulged with any desserts she requested. Why did this one taste so much sweeter?

“That good, huh?” he asked before sipping his own.

“That good,” she giggled. She felt giddy, like a ten-year-old. It was funny that he’d mentioned that age earlier.

Ten. Winterfell and being ambushed with snowballs by Bran and Arya…and Robb when he decided he wasn’t too big for such things. Cheery fires in the hearth and Mother helping Nan make the stew as she sketched away her boredom on long winter evenings. Father’s laughter and occasional cursing over the never-ending calls from King Robert for him to come south and put the bloody kingdom back in order for him. The pups getting into mischief, making almost as much trouble for Mother as Rickon.

_The last winter I was home._

_Who was home? Alayne doesn’t have these memories._

She glanced up to find Jon watching her again, his grey eyes dark as he studied her. She bit down on the inside of her cheek, a punishment for the lapse. What was wrong with her?

“Sorry, did you ask me something?”

“I just asked when did you come to town last?”

“Over a month ago, when the police had me look at the photographs.”

“Can you tell me about that day? At the bank, I mean?” She didn’t like thinking about it. She dreamed of it often enough. “I believe, the report mentioned that he spoke to you. May I ask what he said?”

_What’s your name, love? I’ll see you around, love._

She shivered involuntarily. “You may but could we discuss it at home later?”

He nodded, understanding her at least. She wanted a milkshake and an outing. She wanted to go somewhere with a handsome man and pretend. She didn’t want to think of unpleasant things.

He allowed her to steer the conversation elsewhere. “Before you joined the Watch, did you have a job at a place like this…or anywhere?”

“Oh, yes. Not an ice cream shop but from the time I was fifteen, I was earning money here or there. They expected it.”

“Your parents?” she asked, wishing she could think of a more delicate way to ask.
He shook his head. “No. Mum died when I was eight. I never knew my father. I was at a foundling home on and off from then until I was old enough to join the Watch.”

“I’m very sorry. What happened to your mother?”

“Car accident.”

“You weren’t adopted?” she asked, terribly heartbroken to imagine him as a little boy without a family.

“There was a man and his wife who fostered me as a teen for a little over a year. He taught me fishing and other things. They tried to adopt me but…” He grimaced and she could hear the bitterness as he finished, “it didn’t work out and I was sent back.”

His tone was flat but it did not disguise the pain beneath the surface. He preferred not to speak of it. She could understand. There were so many things Alayne preferred not to speak of. And so many she could not speak of.

She regretted asking as it had caused him pain but was also glad to know something more about him. Wishing to offer some comfort, she placed her hand on top of his. His hand was rougher than hers and warmer but she liked the feel of it. It was when she noticed how his eyes had widened as he gazed at her hand that she thought perhaps she’d been too bold.

She started to withdraw her hand but he flipped his hand to grasp hers and squeeze it lightly. Her heart began to pound and she felt herself flushing again.

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

His brow furrowed and he released her hand. “It’s not your fault, Alayne. What of your mother?” She shifted uncomfortably. She hated lying to him. “If you’d rather not say…” He stopped speaking and feared he’d caused her pain now, she knew.

“She died of an ague unexpectedly. I was seventeen. Father brought me here.” She died with Robb in a hail of bullets. The Lannisters sent their regards.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault either, Jon.” I’m sorry to lie to you again. I’m sorry to dishonor their lives and their deaths with my lies.

“Alayne,” he said so soft and sweet.

He mistook her tears for the loss of her fictitious mother with her ague. He grasped her hand again and she clutched it tightly before hurriedly letting go. She wiped her eyes and shook her head, giving him an overly bright smile as she focused on her milkshake again. She didn’t deserve his sympathy when she fed him lies. She would not seek his pity.

He turned the conversation in another direction after that, away from the things that pained them both.

They spoke of safer, innocuous topics…until the news came on. “I can’t believe it’s been two years,” Jon said, nodding at something behind her.

“Two years since what?”
“Since the assassination.”

He pointed and she turned to look over her shoulder at the television hanging in the corner. She felt like the air had left her lungs in a great whoosh.

Jon was grumbling about what a little shit Joffrey had been when it came to providing for the Watch. She couldn’t speak or pretend she understood him for there was his smiling face from his last official photograph. There was the film footage of the chaos outside the palace that night. There was Cersei’s tear-streaked face, hard and angry, as she made her plea for her son’s killers to be brought to justice.

Her heart began to pound again but this time it was a staccato rhythm that felt all wrong. She raised a hand to her forehead. The room had started to spin.

“Alayne?”

She stood abruptly, knocking her stool over with a great clatter. People were staring at them now. She could not seem to draw a breath. She was suffocating and she pictured his hands clawing at his throat. Except now, it was her throat.

“Alayne?” Jon said again.

His hands were on her shoulders and tears were already blurring her vision. “I just need some air,” she choked.

Jon glanced worriedly at the girl sleeping in the passenger seat as he drove back to the estate. She’d had a panic attack seemingly out of nowhere and he wished he knew what had triggered it. He knew a thing or two about anxiety but he was certain he’d missed something. Perhaps this was the reason she so rarely left the estate.

Her distress had been hard for him to bear and her sad attempt to dismiss it and continue on as if nothing had happened was even harder. Seeing Alayne vulnerable had made him feel vulnerable, too. He didn’t care for the feeling. He wanted to take care of her but he also needed to protect her. His instinct was to leave the openness of town at once.

He’d wrapped an arm around her waist to support her and tried not to inhale her soft citrusy fragrance too much as she’d leaned against him once they’d exited the ice cream shop. It wasn’t until they were nearly back to the car that she’d begun to protest, insisting that they stay until his suit was ready.

“We’re going home,” he’d said as he noticed a street person watching them. The man was nearing sixty. His hair had been cut recently and Jon had grown suspicious.

“But Olyvar said it’d be ready soon.”

They were too exposed here. He’d been a fool to go traipsing off for ice cream like some teenager on a date when she was a witness in a murder case.
“I don’t need it till tomorrow night. Get in,” he’d said more firmly, opening her door.

The older man had shuffled over to them. Jon had intercepted him before he drew too close to Alayne and tossed him a stag. The man had chuckled and sauntered off but Jon hadn’t felt any more at ease. *Paranoia’s a bitch.*

“Don’t be ridiculous, Jon. It’s nearly an hour to drive home and back here again. The suit will be ready in less than a half hour and the shop’s right there. I’m perfectly…”

“I’ll get the bloody suit later! Get in the car!” he’d snapped. He’d regretted it at once. He’d regretted the way she’d flinched when he did it even more. He’d sighed and took her hand in his, composing his own rattled nerves. “I’m sorry, Alayne. That wasn’t…I’m sorry.”

Perhaps if he’d not shouted, she wouldn’t have gotten her way so easily with her next plea. “Please, Jon. We can sit in Olyvar’s shop till he’s finished. It won’t be long. If you take me back and leave again, Father will know something happened. He’ll never let me leave again,” she’d finished in a whisper that had tugged at his heart.

Her lovely blue eyes had been beseeching and half a smile had already started to form at the corner of his lips as he’d slowly nodded. He feared he was already growing quite hopeless at asserting himself with her.

Thus, they had stayed to get his suit and she’d appeared to recover from her earlier ordeal. But as they’d headed towards home again, she’d fallen asleep, her body’s way of recovering from the panic attack earlier.

Once he pulled up to the manse and parked, he took a moment to observe her sleeping. He could smell the delicate hint of her fragrance on his jacket. The sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her nose and on her cheekbones drew his eye. He meant to nudge her shoulder but wound up hesitantly stroking her cheek to wake her. Her skin was soft as silk and he cursed himself for imagining pressing a kiss there as her eyes fluttered open.

“Don’t tell Father,” she said quietly when she realized where they were.

“I won’t, I promise.”

Her shoulders sagged with relief but his tensed as realization sunk in. Two weeks on the job and she had him wrapped around her finger. He’d do anything to keep her safe. Maybe he’d do anything at all simply because she asked it.

He wanted to protect her. He wanted to see her happy. He wanted other things as well.

Perhaps agreeing to be the bodyguard of a beautiful young woman had been a mistake. The same boyish notions that had led him to join the Watch in the first place still dwelled within him. Regardless, he was far too invested to walk away now.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

After their day in town, Jon and Alayne spend some time together in her room talking that night.

Chapter Notes

I meant to update this sooner but got busy with other things. I'm sorry! I'm working on the next chapter but still have a good bit of it to write. I hope you enjoy this chapter at least :)

Warning: This chapter has the most Creepyfinger being creepy that we've seen so far but it will also be the only chapter to have this much creep-factor from him so there's that...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Later that night, alone together in her bedroom, the pair sat upon the hearth rug amiably…except for the cutthroat business they were about at present.

“Death in four,” he smirked.

“I beg your pardon. My dragon is about to attack.”

“Your dragon is useless and won’t make a bit of difference. I have your king trapped with no escape. Death in four, my lady.”

Alayne grinned like a goose at his teasing courtesy. She wasn’t a lord’s daughter…at least, Alayne was not. Apparently, when it came to Jon though, she was still that silly little girl who had gone south.

However, she was vexed when she saw he spoke true. He had cornered her king. How had she let her defenses down so easily? How indeed?

He said he’d never played cyvasse before he’d come here. She’d been teaching it to him but he’d caught on remarkably fast. Either he was lying or he was a quick study.

“Are you certain you’ve never played before?” she asked as they put the pieces back in the box.

“Not once. No cyvasse at the Home nor with the Seaworths.”

“The Seaworths?”

He frowned and left the question unanswered. “I was lucky to have such an excellent teacher.”
She could feel her whole face growing warmer. She turned away, lest he should see. “You’re a flatterer, Jon Snow.”

He chuckled, amused. “I will not deny an acquaintance with the term though it’s not my natural inclination. However, in this instance, I also speak the truth, Alayne.”

What a novel concept.

Everyone at court had been liars, everyone but Lord Stark. Like Jon, he had been clever but he was not as slippery as Father and his friends, nor as cruel and calculating as the queen. She wondered how well Jon would fare against players like those. She feared she wouldn’t like the answer.

She stifled a yawn, hoping he did not notice. It had been a long day. She was tired and yet her episode from earlier had left her rattled. She dreaded climbing into her bed alone tonight.

She missed Randa. Her friend would’ve laid beside her under the covers and told Alayne bawdy tales about men to make her blush and giggle until they finally fell asleep. She wondered if half of what Myranda said was true but she would never come out and ask. Alayne enjoyed the stories too much to question their veracity. And, Alayne told stories, too.

So, to avoid the creeping loneliness of her room, she’d asked Jon if he’d come and play cyvasse with her. Certainly, it was not that she wished to spend even more time with him, was it?

They were sitting on the rug in their sock feet with their legs folded crisscross like children. There was a small table they might’ve used. There was also the bed. Alayne had chosen this. More intimate than a table, less intimate than the bed. And she liked the warm yellow light of the fireplace reflecting in his eyes. The merry pop and crackle of the logs was comforting as well.

Today had been eventful, to say the least. She’d found herself wanting to open up to him this morning in her bathroom after she’d cut her finger. She’d been lost in thought more than once in front of him…and because of him. And, he’d seen her defenses down completely for a time after the news report had made the room start spinning. And yet, the way he was with her did not leave her feeling exposed or endangered by those things. Why was that?

Because Jon is Jon. I trust him.

She could not explain it rationally if asked to answer that question out loud. She just believed in her heart that he was not someone she needed to fear.

He stood and she worried he meant to leave her for the night. But instead, he helped her to her feet and asked if they could sit at the table with a serious expression. She let him lead her there. She sat down and waited while he paced a moment before joining her.

“May I?” he asked, gesturing towards the top of her bureau. She nodded even though she had no idea what he was pointing at. He retrieved her sketch pad and favorite graphite drawing pencils and placed them on the table before her. “I want to ask some questions but I also want you to feel comfortable. I thought perhaps you might like to sketch while we talk.”

Her heart swelled with appreciation for his thoughtfulness even as new concerns flooded her mind. Sketching and painting relaxed her. But would he ask her about the hair dye? About the news report? About Father?

He sat down across from her as she opened the pad and selected a finely-sharpened pencil.

“Will you tell me about that day at the bank?”
Of course. He’d been hired to protect her because of the incident at the bank. If he knew the truth, would he want to protect her at all?

“What would you like to know?” she said as evenly as possible as her hand began to move.

A good deal apparently. He asked about what Ramsay wore, about his accent and his exact words. He asked about his eyes, his eyebrows, his chin, his teeth. He asked about his posture. He asked what weapons he carried. He asked about the men with him.

“The police asked me many of these questions, too,” she said as she continued her drawing. She bit her lip and studied his mouth.

“I’m sure they did but I’m not a cop and I wanted to hear it from you. Thank you for sharing it. May I see?” he asked with raised eyebrows as he glanced at her sketch.

She flushed and flipped the pad over. “You may…but not until it’s finished.”

He nodded before his chin dropped to his chest as he considered something. “Alayne, do you believe he’ll come for you?”

“Father says I’m safe here. He says as long as we’re cautious, I’ll be fine.”

“I didn’t ask what your father says. I asked what you believe.”

He reached across the table, offering his hand. Was she supposed to take it? She wanted to. It had been a long time since she’d willingly accepted a man’s touch but with Jon she found it the most natural thing in the world.

She reached across the distance and laid her hand in his. His hand tightened around hers at once, just like at the ice cream shop today when she’d offered comfort and he’d taken it. Perhaps that was all this was. But, why did her pulse have to quicken? Why did her breath grow short? Why did his lips have to be so full and inviting?

I trust him. But is it more than that?

He was waiting for an answer. Those dark grey eyes were watching her. Those dark grey eyes that reminded her so much of someone else. No wonder she kept letting her guard down around this man.

“I believe he’ll come for me,” she admitted. It was no more than a half-whisper. “‘I’ll see you around, love,’ he said. He could’ve killed me. He could’ve said dozens of things. But, he had seemed amused when he said it, as though he looked forward to continuing something with me. I don’t think it was an idle threat. He meant it. I think a man like him would enjoy the pursuit…the game.”

Jon inhaled sharply but nodded. “You’ve read his file then?”

“No,” she shook her head. “Father didn’t want me to worry.” Father likes me to be afraid and reliant on him.

Jon grimaced and flexed his hand. “I don’t want to worry you…but I won’t keep things from you, Alayne. If you want to know what Ramsay is, I’ll tell you.”

She wanted to know. She also didn’t, not tonight anyway. “You think he’ll come, don’t you?”
“I suspect he will try.” There was a hint of something in his tone that suggested he did not believe Ramsay would be successful.

“I’m afraid you might be right. But, I also believe you’ll do your best to keep me safe.”

“You have my word on that, Alayne. I’ll protect you, I promise.”

She fought the urge to say something scathing in response to such a naïve statement. Her bitterness had as much to do with events that didn’t concern Ramsay at all as that threat. Jon would only question what had made a sheltered, nineteen-year-old girl so hopeless and resigned to disappointment.

He looked down at his watch. She knew the hour was growing late.

“Please…tell me something pleasant. I’ll never sleep peacefully if Ramsay’s the last thing I speak of.”

“What would you like to know?”

“Do you have a friend? A best friend in all the world?”

He looked confused by her question at first. But then, his brow cleared and he answered. “I do. His name is Sam. We went through our initial training in the Watch together and became friends early on. He wasn’t really cut out for it though and left once his initial two years were up. We’ve kept in touch.”

“That’s nice. Do you have plans to see him now that you’ve left?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, his face suddenly guarded. “Perhaps someday. Do you have…”

“Just my friend Myranda Royce here. I’m not sure I can call her my best friend…” I’ve fed her too many stories. “…but she’s the closest thing I have. I’ve not seen her lately.”

“What about in Kings Landing? You grew up there.”

“No one that I’ve kept in contact with.” I had a sister but she is lost to me. I couldn’t trust anyone else.

“And Myranda is Lord Royce’s daughter?”

“Yes and no. She’s Nestor Royce’s daughter, not Yohn’s. He only holds a minor title.” She covered her mouth and whispered. “It irks Father to no end though to have to call him ‘my lord.’”

“I could believe that,” he chuckled. “A title is a title. Those of us without them must still call Nestor Royce ‘my lord’ no matter how minor of a lord he is. Will your friend be coming tomorrow night?”

“I hope so! And even if she doesn’t, perhaps now that you are here, Father might let me visit her again. She’d like you. I know it. But you mustn’t mind how she flirts. She doesn’t mean half of what she says.”

Where did that come from? I don’t know. I just know I wouldn’t like it if Myranda liked him too well and vice versa.

He grinned self-consciously and again looked towards his watch. She hated that watch.
“So, I guess I’ll…” He pointed towards the connecting door that joined their bedrooms. She wanted to ask him to stay a while longer but that would hardly be appropriate.

A sharp rap on her outer door kept her from being reduced to begging. Father strode in without waiting for her to answer. Plainly surprised to find her entertaining, his eyes darted between herself and Jon. She was wearing her pajamas but everything was covered. Jon was in his undershirt but still wearing his blue jeans. There was nothing wrong in what they were doing but she knew Father might think otherwise. He was always warning her of what men really wanted and what they were like beneath the surface.

*Men are all men deep down, Alayne, no matter how sweetly we speak.*

“Mr. Snow,” Father said coolly. “I didn’t expect you to be in here so late.”

“Alayne’s been teaching me to play cyvasse. Your daughter is very clever, Mr. Baelish.”

She took an absurd delight in his praise. Joffrey, the queen and even Father had called her stupid more than once. But he seemed rather cocksure in the way he stood and faced Father. If he was worried about what Father might think or do, he never showed it. She would need to warn him.

“Cyvasse, is it?” Father asked with a raised brow as he turned her way. “Such a bloody little game.”

“Bloody, sir?”

“The objective is to kill your opponent’s king after all.” Alayne kept her face impassive but inside she was recoiling from Father’s cold look. He was displeased. “I’d like a moment with my daughter, please.”

Jon looked at her, his eyes seeking her opinion on the matter. Foolish man. Father was his employer. It would never do to cross him. He could fire Jon, send him away.

*And what would happen to me if you left? I don’t want to be all alone again.*

“Thank you for playing with me, Jon.” She gave him an encouraging smile when he hesitated. “I’ll see you in the morning?”

“Of course, my lady,” he teased, recalling their earlier light-hearted play. It thrilled her more than was right. He murmured a good night and left.

Father waited a minute or two after the door between their bedrooms clicked shut before he spoke. He liked to leave her fretting when she knew he was unhappy with her.

“I’ve warned you about forming attachments.”

“I was bored. You won’t let me have Randa. I’m only being courteous to him,” she lied. *Please, don’t send him away.*

“He is unknown to you.”

“He’s not from Kings Landing.”

“No, he’s from the North.”

“A vast and sparsely populated land that’s not so fond of the monarchy, you’ve said.” She recited it as though she knew nothing beyond what he’d taught her.
“The world is far smaller than you might think, Alayne.”

He came closer and Alayne told herself to relax. His touch was not truly harmful. She could bear it without letting him see how much she loathed it.

She turned towards her dresser. She needed to tuck her sketch pad away. What if he saw what she’d been drawing? He never paid much attention to her artwork but if he saw she’d been sketching Jon, she knew he would not like it.

She felt his hands on her shoulders and his hot breath at her neck. “What do we really know about this Jon Snow? A member of the Nights Watch until Lord Commander Mormont’s murder. He was cleared of any wrong-doing but sometimes innocents are accused and sometimes the guilty walk free.”

“You hired him. I’m quite certain you found out everything you could.”

“I did. He has some rather impressive credentials. Tell me, Alayne…has he told you of his near-death experience during the mutiny?”

“What?!”

“Or his time beyond the Wall with the Free Folk?”

“The Free Folk?”

“A home-grown terrorist organization. He was reportedly undercover with them when that government outpost at Hardhome was bombed.”

“We’ve not discussed his service or…”

“It was said he had a lover amongst them even.”

Alayne sucked in a deep breath and closed her eyes. She didn’t want to hear this.

“Has he told you about his mother?”

“Only that she died in an auto collision when he was eight.”

“Yes, so sad. A bastard, a poor little orphan boy. Such a sad tale for my tender-hearted Alayne to hear. I was sure he’d share that.” He cupped her cheek and rested his forehead against hers. She could see the flecks of green in his eyes. She could almost taste the mint on his breath. Her skin crawled. “What’s the first lesson I taught you when you came here?” he asked sharply, his fingers pinching her cheek now.

“Trust no one.”

His fingers relaxed their hold. He patted her cheek. “Good girl.” He smoothed down her hair. Her heart was hammering in her chest. She wanted to cry. She wanted to shove him away. She wanted to call for Jon. “Is he any good at cyvasse?”

“He’s learning. He beat me tonight.”

“He beat you? Oh, Alayne…I’m disappointed in you,” he said before he leaned forward.

He had kissed her before but she had never wanted his kisses. In the past, she’d stay perfectly still, trusting it would not last long. But this time...for the first time, she pulled away before his lips
could meet hers.

*I don’t want your kiss. I’ll never stand still and accept your kisses again.*

He scowled at her refusal. She didn’t know if she was more pleased to deny him or more afraid of what he might do. She wondered if he already knew what might have brought about this change. Either way, she was still stuck in the same place she’d been for the past two years.

“Don’t forget who you can trust, Alayne.”

“No one, Father.”

He smirked and left her room as the first tear slid down her cheek.

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Jon wasn’t all that tired. Despite his insistence that he needed to go, he’d been tempted to stay longer.

*I’ve been tempted a good deal of late.*

He’d enjoyed the way her eyes would narrow when he’d glance at his watch. She was tired but she hadn’t wanted him to go either.

*You’re an ass to read too much into that. She’s just lonely…like you.*

When her father had come, he’d wanted to ignore his pointed looks and stay. But the silent plea in Alayne’s eyes had caused him to relent and go.

He paced the floor restlessly until he heard her outer door open and close again. Knowing her father had left was reassuring. He did not trust that man. Something was definitely off there. Just like earlier at the ice cream shop, he knew he was missing some pieces but once he had them, things would start to fall into place.

He washed quickly, pulled off his jeans and laid down in his bed, trying to ignore another form of temptation now.

*What does it matter? You’re still a man, aren’t you?*

He could give in. No one would know. He could tell himself to think of Ygritte. But, he would not give in. He knew who he’d be thinking of if he did. Not the dead girl he had known, but the living one in the next room. *Filthy bastard.*

Jon told himself to think of something useful like the information she’d given him regarding the bank robbery and Ramsay. He told himself to think of something intriguing like the box of hair dye in her bathroom this morning, the homeless man in town or what Alayne might’ve been sketching in her room while they talked.

Instead, he kept remembering her licking the whipped cream off her straw this afternoon and the adorable scowl on her face when he beat her at cyvasse.
His hand crept down below the covers and he told himself it wouldn’t really matter. A release from stress. A moment to forget his questions and worries. It would not affect his ability to protect her. He’d sworn to protect her. He’d not missed the flicker of bitter amusement on her face at his vow but she’d said nothing. She could harbor her doubts. Perhaps she had good reason to have them. If the gods allowed, he would show her that his words weren’t wind, not in this anyway. He meant everything he said to her.

He started stroking himself, picturing her pink lips as she popped the cherry in her mouth. He recalled the way she closed her eyes and her tongue darting out as she licked the whipped cream off the straw. He moaned at the memory and the pleasurable ache that was budding in his groin.

But before he could truly find his rhythm, he heard a quiet sob through the door, soft and broken, just like his first night here.

He released his cock and was flooded with guilt. He wasn’t completely sure what he felt the most guilt over; his desire for her or his inability to fix whatever hurt her so. The ache in his groin faded and moved to his heart.

That first night, he’d knocked on her door but then given up when she hadn’t answered. They’d been strangers then. He liked to believe they were more than strangers now.

He crossed the carpeted floor and knocked more assuredly than he had the first time.

“Alayne? Are you alright?” he called through the door. He still half-expected her to ignore him. He also realized knocking on her door in only his boxers and a t-shirt might be more than a bit inappropriate.

He forgot all that though and his breath caught in his throat when the door suddenly opened and Alayne stood before him, her eyes red-rimmed from crying.

She said not a word but rushed forward into his arms. He caught her quickly, steadying them both from the force of her embrace. He studied her face to be certain of what comfort he might safely give. Once he knew the answer, he murmured what reassurances he could in her ear.

“I’m here. You’re safe. Talk to me. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Just a bad dream.” A lie if ever he’d heard one. “I’m sorry. Could you stay with me…in there? Just until I fall asleep?”

He gulped and glanced at the large canopied bed behind her, bathed in firelight and inviting.

Professional…you’re her bodyguard, not her boyfriend.

She blushed and stared at his chest. “I meant, could you sit in the armchair?”

See?! The chair, you idiot!

There was an armchair by the fire where they’d played their game. It was close enough for her to know he was there but there would be no question of anything improper occurring. No matter how he might pine for her in the dark of his room, he could still behave like a professional, couldn’t he?

But, his extended silence must have given her the wrong idea for she backed away. “I’m sorry. You’ve been with me all day and I’m pestering you when you should be resting. I’m acting like a stupid little girl and shouldn’t have bothered you with…”
She stopped talking when he lightly pressed one finger to her lips and tipped her chin up so she’d look at him again.

_How very professional of you...idiot._

“I don’t want to hear that sort of talk. You’re the reason I’m here, Alayne. I’ll gladly stay with you till you fall asleep.”

“Thank you, Jon,” she sighed.

_Not remotely professional of me…and I can’t help it._

Chapter End Notes

No bedsharing yet but they are getting closer ;) Next chapter will include the dinner party and a couple of unexpected events.
Long ago, her eyes might’ve lit up with excitement over a party. She’d always fancied that stardust and dreams could be hiding in any old corner of even the simplest festivity. Anytime friends gathered to laugh and talk as she sat on the stairs in her nightgown to watch until a certain little sister would get into mischief and they’d both be sent to bed, she’d wished for something magical to happen. She might be invited to sing and impress them all. Someone would suggest she could be a star. A handsome prince might appear, offer her a rose and ask her to dance. Wouldn’t everyone be jealous? Such were the dreams of girlhood.

Even after Alayne had come to live with Father, she’d held onto a glimmer of hope for a time that parties might still be able to weave a magic of their own. Despite everything, she’d thought maybe she might meet some interesting new people to help her forget that other life she’d known.

It hadn’t taken long very long for her to dismiss such silly whimsies.

The men who attended Father’s parties were all cut from the same cloth. The women were few and far between. Most of the ones who came would never have been seen at those early parties she could still recall.

And Father’s parties were dull and yet anxious affairs for Alayne. The clatter of cutlery amidst the same old dry conversations about business, money and politics made them tedious. The necessity of playing the perfect hostess whilst never once allowing her mask to slip as she prayed some guest with a remarkable memory for faces didn’t look at her for too long made it all very nerve-racking.

And then, once the alcohol had been flowing freely for a while, she often found herself dodging hands that roamed.

*But tonight, things might be different,* she thought as she pulled her best cocktail dress out of the closet.

There’d been prettier dresses in the past but none of those had belonged to Alayne. The moss green was a rather muted shade though the dress was silk. It would look lovely with pale shoulders and dark brown hair, she supposed.

*Will it be lovely enough?*

She scowled at herself in the mirror. She was being a fool over him and she needed to stop. Father’s visit last night had been the only warning she would receive. He’d send Jon away if he felt they were getting too close just has he’d kept Myranda from visiting.

*What would he say if he knew of last night? Jon would already be gone.*

She’d laid in bed listening to the clock tick and the occasional sound of Jon clearing his throat or
shifting into a more comfortable position in the armchair by the fire for a what had seemed like hours. She’d mulled over the hints Father had dropped and wondered if there was any truth in the things he’d said regarding Jon’s activities with the Watch and if there had been a lover amongst the Free Folk…or if there still might be. She’d felt irrationally displeased by that notion.

However, in time she’d fell asleep and when she’d woken briefly around 2AM, he was gone. The covers which she’d pushed off as she’d attempted to settle had been pulled back up over her shoulder. She liked to imagine he’d done it rather than her perhaps having done it in her sleep.

All day she’d plagued him with concerned questions, worried that he was overly tired after sitting up with her.

“*I’m fine, Alayne,*” he’d always replied with a slightly stiff smile.

Had she upset him in some way?

She finished her make-up, just a touch of powder and eyeliner with a hint of shadow, and applied some lipstick. Not too much.

She pulled the dress on next and started to zip it up. A wicked part of her would like to knock on the connecting door and with feigned helplessness and innocence beg for Jon’s assistance with the zipper.

*Are you mad?*

Even the girl who’d refused Petyr’s kiss last night could not be so bold.

*Not Petyr…Father,* she reminded that girl. *Where is your head?*

Apparently, it was next door. There was a knock and she stifled a yelp of surprise. She quickly finished zipping up her dress and went to answer.

“Yes?” she called anxiously through the door.

“I’m sorry to bother you but would you mind helping me with my tie?”

A wide smile lit up her face but she’d beat it into submission before she opened the door. Good thing too because he was devastatingly handsome in his crisp new suit with his hair slicked back. He also looked like adorably sheepish as he held up the necktie.

“I’ve not worn them very often and always sucked at getting them right.”

“I’m happy to help,” she said as placidly as she could manage.

It had been a long night after a long day but he would not complain. Watching Alayne sleep from the armchair by the fire had been a good deal better than shivering under a blanket with only the Northern stars above him.

Once he was certain she was slumbering, he’d adjusted her covers, carelessly allowing one finger
to caress her upper arm as he did so. He’d clenched his hand into a fist when she’d sighed in response and swiftly left her room.

Sleep had alluded him most of the night but he’d tried to pretend otherwise. Alayne had not been fooled, he knew. He hadn’t meant to come off cold when she’d kept inquiring after him. He was merely troubled over the fact he was getting in too deep over this girl. He couldn’t seem to stop himself.

She was a vision in her dark green cocktail dress tonight and he was surprised he’d managed to speak when she’d opened the door at his knock. Jon could tie a tie but it looked terribly crooked… crooked enough for his conscience at least.

Her blue eyes had an almost greenish cast to them from the color of the gown. He knew little of evening gowns but imagined the silk could not quite compare to the softness of her bare skin. Her dark brown hair was loose, hanging in waves around her shoulders. There was a smattering of freckles on her shoulders and for some reason that drew his eye as much as her décolleté.

She’d been friendly and open all day despite his occasional gruff reply but when they joined her father in the parlor to receive the guests, a chill descended that Jon could not decipher at first.

Her fingers twisted in the fabric of her skirt. She bit her lip until he heard her father hissing at her to stop. Her jaw was clenched and her eyes were always darting here and there. She was completely ill-at-ease.

Was she frightened? Had she heard something upsetting? Did she expect Ramsay Snow to jump out from behind the hors d’oeuvre table?

Jon took a step closer, put one hand upon her elbow and whispered in her ear. “Are you alright, Alayne?”

“I’m fine,” she replied tightly.

Had he done something to upset her? Had he crossed a line?

He quickly moved his hand, not wishing to make her uncomfortable.

“Perhaps you stayed up too late playing cyvasse last night, daughter,” her father chided from the other side of her. “I see Olyvar worked his usual miracles,” he added with a smarmy smile Jon’s way that did not disguise the coldness in his eyes.

It clicked then. Her father. He’d said something to her last night, something about him. He’d hired him but Jon suspected he didn’t care for them getting close. Perhaps he’d thought Jon would keep himself at arms-length, like Brune or the others. But Jon had no experience being a bodyguard and he’d wished to gain her trust. It seemed the simplest way to be effective.

Gain her trust? Just like you did Ygritte’s?

He regretted that. He hadn’t meant to get his heart involved or hurt anyone else’s while on his mission. It had been an unexpected complication, one that had cost her dearly. Was he doomed to repeat that mistake now?

No. This is not the same. Alayne is not the enemy. I’m here to protect her.

Unlike Ygritte, he liked to think Alayne would never need protecting from himself.
Are you sure about that?

He subtly shook his head and allowed Alayne her space for the duration of the guests’ arrival.

Two hours later, after an awkward dinner for Jon who’d been wedged between a couple of tedious businessmen which he had absolutely nothing in common with, the socializing was in full swing and Alayne was smiling brightly once more.

Her friend had come as she’d hoped and he was glad of it for Alayne’s sake. Myranda Royce was somewhere between his age and Alayne’s, he’d guess. Petit and buxom with a pretty face and flirtatious air, she’d been gossiping in Alayne’s ear nonstop since her arrival.

It was good to see Alayne giggling and whispering with her friend. She was young, sweet and clever. She should have loads of friends to share laughter and gossip with her. She said there’d been no one close in Kings Landing. How could that be? Surely, she’d had friends at school…and perhaps boyfriends as well. Jon scowled at the thought though he admittedly had no right to be jealous of any potential past crushes, sweethearts or lovers.

He realized both young ladies were staring at him as he stood there frowning. He stood straighter and smiled at them both which triggered more giggling. Deciding to give them more privacy, he moved around the room to observe some of the other guests. So far, he’d seen no one to give him any cause for concern…at least, not in his capacity as Alayne’s protector.

Once he’d made his rounds, he returned to observing Alayne. He couldn’t help but feel self-conscious at the way Lady Myranda would often look his way and whisper something in Alayne’s ear which would promptly lead to blushing on Alayne’s part. He suspected Myranda was enjoying teasing her friend over him. Curiosity got the better of him when he saw a server handing Alayne another glass of champagne punch, her third. She’d already had wine with dinner and he suspected she might not have much tolerance for spirits.

“Does the punch pack a punch, ladies?” he asked as he approached.

Alayne rolled her eyes and stifled a giggle. It was far more enticing than it should be.

“It does,” Myranda laughed. “But my poor Alayne has been stuck up here for so long with no one to talk to, Mr. Snow…except you. I’m sure if she gets a bit tipsy her bodyguard will keep her covered.”

Alayne’s eyes widened and color flooded her cheeks. “Myranda,” she squeaked.

Her friend only laughed again and sauntered away. He wondered why. He’d not meant to make her leave. Though now that he thought about it, he was rather glad she had. He’d not been alone with Alayne since she’d tied his tie earlier.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” he asked.

“Very much. Are you?”

Their eyes met, her blue ones sparkling under the chandelier. There was a coquettish smile playing on her lips that were stained a dark pink. Soft and succulent and kissable.

He stumbled over his words. “Yes…well, no. It’s not my crowd or…I’m just here to keep an eye on things,” he finished gruffly.

“And on me?” she teased.
Gods, yes. “Of course, Alayne.”

“And if I drink too much, you’ll make sure none of these old rogues get fresh with me?”

“Fresh with you?” Nearly all the men present were her father’s age or older. He’d knock their lights out if they got fresh with her.

“Oh, yes. Their hands begin to wander and they blame it on Father’s excellent cellar.”

“They’d offend their host by disrespecting his daughter?”

“A bastard daughter. The old ways of thinking linger here in the Vale and much is whispered about bastard girls,” she replied, all the light having left her eyes in an instant.

He hated that kind of talk. He’d heard his share of insults as a boy but at the Watch such things didn’t matter so much. What was wrong with these people? And what century were they living in?

“I’ll not tolerate anyone making unwelcome advances towards you.”

“And what if there were ones I’d welcome?” she asked coyly, her hand playfully squeezing his forearm. His eyes widened just as hers did. “I’m sorry, Jon. That was…” She dropped his arm. They both stood there awkwardly and then she hiccupped noisily which only made her that much more irresistible in his mind. Her face, neck and chest were all flushed red. “I’m afraid I’ve drank too much,” she said as she quickly turned away.

He grasped her arm before she could flee. “You don’t have to run away from me.” Her eyes were big and blue and those lips were still far too damned kissable looking for his peace of mind.

“Oh, Alayne!” one of the male guests shouted boisterously from across the room. “Come here, lovely girl, and keep us old fools company.”

“Excuse me,” she sighed as he let go of her. “I’m neglecting Father’s guests and my duties as hostess.”

He glared at the older man and followed her. He was supposed to watch over her.

Jon observed her gliding across the room through the crowd of men, a smile upon her face. But it was not a real smile. He’d learned the difference between Alayne’s mask and the real girl.

His eyes scanned the other partygoers again. There were over a dozen men and only a handful of women there. Barring Myranda, all of the other women wore cheaper dresses than Alayne and far too much make-up. Alayne didn’t belong with this crowd. He was certain she knew it, too.

He found it exceedingly odd that Mr. Baelish had his daughter play hostess to these sorts of men. They were wealthy and some were even powerful, that was true. But they were not the kind of men that Jon Snow would allow near his daughter if he ever had one. What kind of father was Baelish?

Jon may not have known his real father but Davos had given him a fairly good idea of fathers and how they wished to shield their children.

“You can’t know, Jon. You won’t till you’re a father yourself someday. Once you’ve held them, watched them cry over a skinned knee and wondered if you’d rather just have broken one of your own bones than see them hurt. When you’ve kissed your son’s hair as he slept, you’ll see. You can’t bear to see any harm threaten them ever.”
Nothing Jon had witnessed of Baelish thus far seemed quite right.

When had he learned of Alayne’s existence? Had he known of her since she was a girl? Had he ever held her as a baby and kissed her little head? Had he only met her once her mother died?

*Even if she’d been seventeen when they met, she’s still his daughter and he chose to be a father to her. He should behave like one and protect her from…*

Years of training had taught Jon to trust his instincts. His stomach was churning over what his instincts were telling him now.

*The way he touches her. The way she stiffens when he does. The isolation and odd dynamic of this entire household. The looks he gives her, the same ones these old men give her. Either he’s just like Craster or…*

He needed to find out more, more about Baelish and more about Alayne and Kings Landing. He’d need to call on poor Sam again.

He watched Alayne’s smile become more and more forced as the group of men crowded around her, like flies swarming around something sweet.

“She must’ve been a beauty…your mother, Alayne,” one old man said.

“I’ve heard she was the prettiest whore in Kings Landing in her day,” another laughed, a fat old man with a reddish-grey beard who was well and truly drunk. “Worth every last dragon of her fee, I’d bet.”

Alayne’s mask slipped then…but just her eyes. Those blue eyes glittered dangerously. Jon’s fists were clenched. He wanted to make the lout apologize to her.

The drunk, who he’d learned was Mr. Belmore earlier, slipped his arm around her small waist and whispered something in her ear.

“Hands off the lady,” he snarled. Four head whipped his way, three old men and Alayne.

“Who are you again?”

Alayne’s voice was steady when she said, “This is my bodyguard Mr. Snow. And I would appreciate you moving your hand please, Mr. Belmore. What would Mrs. Belmore think? Jon, I think I’d like to retire if you would…”

“Another bastard, eh?” the ass chuckled. “Why don’t you have a drink, Snow, and let me guard this sweet young body for a bit?”

Alayne’s face paled as the man slid his hand downward and patted her ass.

He’d heard the term seeing red plenty in his life but this was the first time he thought he’d ever understood it so well. Jon surged forward, quick as a snake and removed the man’s hand from her. He then raised the offending hand upward and bent Mr. Belmore’s fingers backwards until the man was on his knees and shrieking.

“I think you broke my fingers, you bastard!”

“I think you should have listened to me,” he said darkly before letting go of the meaty hand with two fingers that were already starting to swell.
Every eye in the room was turned towards them. Jon saw Petyr Baelish striding towards him and squared his shoulders to face him. He would want an explanation but Jon wanted one of his own from this man who claimed to be her father.

But before Baelish reached him, his eyes were drawn to Alayne. She was staring at him, terror plainly on her face before she whirled and bolted from the room in a flash of green silk.

Baelish could go fuck himself. Ignoring everyone else, Jon chased after her. He would not leave her unprotected.
She did not know exactly where she was going as she ran, she just knew she needed to get away. She didn’t expect anyone to come looking for her right away. Father would be busy appeasing his guest.

*Or buying him off.*

But Jon…Father would send him away now, she was sure of it. Mr. Belmore wasn’t the most affluent man there this evening and Father had once described him as corruptible but Alayne knew
what Jon had done would probably be deemed as unforgivable all the same.

*And what about what Mr. Belmore did? What about the things Petyr has done?*

“Stop,” she whispered to herself as the tears clouded her vision. *Father, Father, Father…not Petyr. You are Alayne.*

*Must I always be her? Will I never be…*

“Alayne!” she heard him calling from down the hall.

He had followed her but he had not seen her yet. What had he said to Father? She could not face him just now. If she did, she was bound to cry. She might fall into his arms and confess everything.

Without a backwards glance, she darted into Father’s darkened study and then slipped through the glass door that led to the veranda. A searing pain was building in her lungs as she ran as fast as she could across the grassy lawn towards the stables under the starlight.

There was a lone light burning inside as her heels clicked across the stable floor. She headed straight to Lady’s stall. The mare whickered softly when she approached. For a moment, she almost laughed to think of climbing on the horse’s back in her dress and high heels and riding away. Instead, she buried her face in Lady’s mane as great heaving sobs escaped at last. Her sweet Lady didn’t seem to mind.

She had wiped her eyes and was hiccupping when she heard the quieter sound of his leather-soled dress shoes coming towards her.

“Alayne.”

His voice…it was shameful how it stirred her. She loved the way he spoke, his deep rumbling accent caressing the syllables in a way no one else here did. Just once, she wanted to hear him say another name.

She did not turn towards him; too ashamed of her girlish tears and too heartbroken at the thoughts of him leaving her when they’d only known each other a handful of weeks. Why had she allowed herself to get so attached to him?

“I’m sorry for what you witnessed in there. I’m sorry if it upset or frightened you.”

“I wasn’t frightened by you,” she sniffed. *I was frightened for you.*

“I’m sorry for ever letting him put his hands on you. I should never have allowed that to happen in the first place. I’m just sorry all around, I suppose.”

She closed her eyes and stroked Lady’s neck. He was feeling sorry for things he couldn’t change.

“You didn’t know.”

“You tried to tell me.”

“They’re all used to doing whatever they please.” She straightened but still couldn’t face him. “Are you going then?”

“Going? Where would I be going?” He sounded genuinely surprised by the notion.

She spun towards him as hope was rekindled. “You mean he didn’t fire you?”
He scoffed. “I guess I didn’t give him a chance to. I ran after you. You lost me when you left through the back of his study. You’re faster than I expected. You’ve got very long legs though.”

He was grinning and she could’ve slapped him. “Long legs?! Jon…he’s going to fire you and send you away!”

“For doing my job? I was protecting you.”

“My life was in no danger.”

“There’s more to protection than just me guarding your life.” She blinked at him, not sure what to say. His voice was deep and raspy when he continued. “No one, and I mean no one, Alayne, touches you unless you want them touching you. And if they do…”

“You’re going to break their hand?” He nodded as if it were that simple. How could he be this calm? “You’re an idiot.”

He chuckled. “Probably.”

“No, I mean it! You are an idiot! He’s going to fire you. No one embarrasses him like that. You have no idea what he’s really like. You’ll be sent packing tomorrow morning at the latest. You’re going to leave me here and…” She bit her lip before she could say anymore.

Clearly, Jon didn’t like being called an idiot from the way he scowled, his brow furrowed. “I’m not leaving you,” he growled. “Not with him.”

Not with him? Does he suspect something?

There was a touch of hysteria beneath the sarcasm when she replied. “Oh, really?! Are you going to camp out under my window every night once he has Lothor and the others run you off? Will you turn yourself invisible to sneak onto the estate by day to watch me paint and draw? Are you planning to steal me away?”

One corner of his mouth turned upward as he moved closer. “Maybe. I’m not so sure the Vale is the best place to keep you safe. Maybe I’ll steal you away for your own good.”

From some men, the look he was giving her might’ve worried her but not with Jon. She knew he’d never mean her any harm.

But he was prodding her, testing, seeking a chink in her armor…looking for a place to unlock all her secrets perhaps.

You’re being paranoid. He doesn’t know.

He was just a couple of feet away, his eyes blazing with an intense scrutiny. Her heart was fluttering wildly in her chest like a bird trapped in a cage. She was between him and the mare’s stall. She could still just walk away. And yet, it wasn’t him she wanted to walk away from.

Instead, it was her turn to scoff. “You’d be dead before we ever made it out of the Vale.”

“You think so?”

“I know so!” she shouted, taking a step closer to him now.

“Your father, the business man? Sounds like a dangerous guy.” There was a touch of mocking in his tone. It made her angrier.
“You don’t know him.”

“I may know more than you think.”

“You know nothing, Jon Snow!”

His mouth fell open and it was clear she’d wounded him in some way with her words. She hadn’t meant to do that.

She took the final step, closing all reasonable distance between them. She watched his chest heaving under his suit jacket and the tie she’d tied for him hours ago. There was a ringing in her ears. Alayne was slipping. She was going to fall.

“Jon…I’m…”

His eyes dropped to her lips. Alcohol and stress had already lowered her inhibitions. She reached for him and their mouths met with bruising force.

But what started off as hot and hungry, quickly became tender and loving, a careful exploration that left her even more intoxicated than the champagne punch. His tongue swept into her mouth and she tentatively did the same to him. He tasted of the strawberry pomegranate sorbet that had been served after dinner and black coffee, sweet and tangy with a hint of bitter. She found she liked it far more than the taste of mint.

The first mad rush to consume one another cooled enough for his hands to cradle her face as she wrapped her arms around his torso, pulling him close, not wanting to let him go. Her nose was a bit stopped up from her cry and she had to breathe sooner than she wanted.

“Shit, shit, shit,” he murmured against her lips. “I shouldn’t have…”

She gulped in air, leaning against him. She didn’t want him to say all the things she knew he’d say. She just wanted to go back to that precious, fleeting place where only them and that kiss lived.

Her eyelashes were still wet from her earlier tears as she glanced up at him. “Please, don’t say it was a mistake. I’m…I’m not sorry for that and I don’t want you to be either.”

She could see him struggling with his conscience or his code or whatever it was that was making him try and take the blame for that kiss, the kiss she’d given him. His mouth was so close. She could stop his words with another kiss. There was a soft vulnerability in the way he was gazing at her. He would not object too strongly.

There were popping sounds in the distance and she thought it might be fireworks.

*Fireworks. How perfectly romantic right after a first kiss,* Sansa thought with a dreamy sigh.

It wasn’t until Jon shoved her to the ground and pulled out his gun that she realized it wasn’t fireworks after all.

She tasted like champagne punch and strawberries and her kiss was every bit as enticing as he’d
imagined. He may have groaned when her teeth nipped his bottom lip. Honestly, he knew he did. But, he quickly slowed things down. Madness or no, he wanted to savor her in this moment. And despite the passion that had spurred her to act, it was soon apparent that Alayne was not all that experienced at kissing. He was far more pleased to discover that than he’d freely admit. How gladly he would teach her though if permitted. But right now, she deserved gentleness, he thought.

She’d been angry but underneath it she was hurt and frightened. He could see it so plainly in her eyes, a little girl who feared being left by someone she’d thought she could trust. All he’d wanted was to reassure her, to show her that Petyr Baelish could not intimidate him and would not run him off. *Still the bastard boy trying to prove yourself to everyone, huh?* But he feared he’d wound up coming off as a cocky asshole more than anything.

*Or a kidnapper.* What had gotten into him? Steal her away? Why had he said that?

Every thought he’d had earlier tonight during the party though was still with him. What kind of father was Petyr Baelish? And was he her father at all?

“You know nothing, Jon Snow.”

He’d been rendered speechless to have those words thrown in his face again after everything. Was he going to fail her too? Would he watch Alayne die just like Ygritte?

But then she’d reached for him and all those thoughts left him. There was only this girl now.

“Please, don’t say it was a mistake. I’m…I’m not sorry for that and I don’t want you to be either.”

Gods, he wanted to tell her he’d never call her sweet kiss a mistake. He wanted to tell her he wanted more of them even as guilt was eating him up. *She’s nineteen. You’re twenty-five. You’re her bodyguard. You can’t do this with her.*

Before he could say anything though, he heard the unmistakable sound of gunfire.

*A handgun, more than one, outside, closer to the house.*

“Stay down,” he ordered as he crept to the stable door to peer out. The house was still lit up. He couldn’t see anyone.

He double checked his gun and scanned the stable again to make sure of the exits. There was more than one way out. *And more than one way in.* He couldn’t leave her here alone. She was the job. He wasn’t here to defend everyone else. The rest of them could be their own bodyguard tonight. But, she was more than a job. Alayne was his to protect.

She was still crouched by the mare’s stall where he’d left her. She was frightened but not panicking. She was no stranger to trouble, he recalled. She’d faced Ramsay Snow and looked him in the eye when he had a gun pointed at her chest.

“Come on,” he said, pulling her to her feet. “Stay close to me.”

Both of her hands were grasping his left as his right grasped his gun. They went to the back of the stables and he led her just outside into the night to see if he could learn more about what was going on. The car he’d taken to town yesterday was closer to the house. He didn’t have the keys on him. They were up at the house. He knew how to start it without keys but would that be wise?

His mind rapidly went through the myriad of scenarios and options available in their situation. She was safer indoors than in the open but also easier to trap. She might be quick but she was wearing
heels. His Glock held fifteen rounds. The Sig strapped to his ankle held six. Unless an army was coming for them, he liked those odds at least.

The gunfire had come from near the house meaning that if this had anything to do with Alayne, and he had to assume it had everything to do with Alayne, the assailant was not aware that she was here.

He led her to the edge of the stables. It was chilly out and she was in her evening gown. If he’d had any time to be chivalrous, he’d offer her his jacket. There was no time for that right now.

There were raised, excited voices coming their way and he darted backwards, pressing Alayne against the side of the building. He could feel her breath coming in pants against the back of his neck as the voices drew nearer.

“You get him?”

“No. You?”

“I might’ve clipped him.”

“Bullshit.”

Jon rolled his eyes as he realized who was talking. “Umfred and Bryen,” he hissed over his shoulder at her. Two of the most worthless.

“Should we say something?”

He started to but decided to let the pair blunder on down the drive towards the guests’ parked cars. Any trespasser who wasn’t as great a fool as those two could easily slip away.

“This way,” he whispered instead and led her around the far side of the stables.

By avoiding them perhaps he might still see whoever had led to shots being fired. He found a good hiding spot for them in the shoeing shed near the stables.

“Put this on,” he said as he handed her his jacket.

He placed a stool for her to sit on and lingered in the doorway, keeping back in the shadows to watch for anyone.

Sirens were wailing in the distance. Baelish had called the authorities then. Or a guest did. Somehow, that seemed more likely to Jon. Whoever called them, it would probably be wise to go back to the house. The perpetrator would probably be long gone by now.

Without turning, he gestured for her to join him and felt her hand slipping back into his free one. They had nearly left the shed when he heard a sound and froze.

Along the back side of the stables, a lone man dressed in black was dashing away from the house. It was dark but Jon could make out his closely cropped hair and that he was older. The bushy eyebrows had fit in with the ragged look yesterday but the hair cut had not. He’d taken Jon’s stag with a grin and gone on his way. He could be connected to Ramsay but it just felt wrong. Jon didn’t think Ramsay would send some old man after Alayne. He’d want to come himself.

He took aim, not intending to shoot but ready to take him into his custody and question him.

“Please, don’t kill him,” Alayne murmured in his ear.
He whipped his head to glance at her and when he turned back the man had vanished into the woods behind the stables.

“Do you know him?” She shook her head and fiddled nervously with her hands. “I saw him yesterday in town. He tried to approach us.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“You were…” He didn’t want to bring up her panic attack at the moment.

“I just…I didn’t want you to kill him. The police are coming. I wanted…I don’t know. I thought it’d be wrong to kill him without ever knowing his name.”

He didn’t want to tell her how many people he’d killed without ever knowing their names. “I wasn’t going to kill him, not unless he’d forced me to. Let’s get you back inside.”

She’d seen Myranda leaving with her father but only exchanged a wave. Most of the guests were already gone. Mr. Belmore was snoring on the sofa in the parlor. Osney winked at Jon and said he’d been given a sedative and he’d be driving the old fart home soon. She pulled Jon’s jacket closer around her and inhaled the scent of pine trees and a subtle hint of sandalwood. It calmed her nervousness.

Petyr was speaking with the police chief when they made their way to his study. Lord Yohn Royce had stayed behind to hear all of it. Petyr needed his backing so he would be reluctant to send the older man away. Him and Myranda’s father were two of the few men she could tolerate here.

She’d held Jon’s hand all the way there but then dropped it before they entered. She would beg for Jon to stay but she would not let him see them holding hands.

Or kissing.

Her cheeks were flaming when Petyr saw her. “Ah, Alayne! I’ve been very worried about you, sweetling. Where have you been?”

She pretended not to notice that he had his arms held open for an embrace. “I needed a bit of solitude away from the party, Father.” *Away from your lecherous guests.* “Jon came and found me. What happened?”

Petyr’s eyes narrowed when he realized she was wearing Jon’s jacket but he continued chatting to the police chief and telling her about the would-be thief. A thief.

“Maybe I’ll steal you away for your own good.”

She trembled and felt feverish from the memory of his words. She wished she could take his hand again.

She awaited her opportunity. The police chief was making promises of finding the culprit. She wondered if Jon would say anything about the man they saw running. She kept her mouth closed. So did Jon.
The wily old man she’d seen the outline of beside the stables was no common thief, she thought. He could have been one of Ramsay’s associates. He might even have been at the bank that day.

But something deep inside had whispered otherwise and she’d made her plea to Jon. She’d feared he’d be angry over it but he’d only accepted her answer and brought her back to the house.

Now, she’d make a different plea.

“I want Jon to stay. Don’t send him away.”

Petyr’s eyes widened. She was not typically so blunt with him in front of others. The police chief looked confused. Lord Royce coughed but said nothing. Lothor Brune looked like he’d just found an engaging competition to watch.

Petyr’s mouth quirked into a curious smile. “Who said anything about him leaving?”

“Mr. Belmore was foul. He was touching me in an offensive manner and Jon made him stop. I don’t want him sent away over it.”

“The disgraceful old goat,” Royce grumbled.

The police chief pulled out his little notepad but put it away at Petyr’s scowl. He was bought and paid for too.

“I’m certain that Mr. Snow could’ve prevented Mr. Belmore’s boorish behavior without…”

“I beg your pardon for the scene, Mr. Baelish, but I did give him a warning. I don’t mean to insult your choice of friends but I was shocked at the audacity of any man who would treat a young lady, his host’s daughter, in that manner.”

Perhaps he could have been a bit more apologetic with his apology but no matter. Father was still composing his reply but the police chief and Royce started nodding in acknowledgement, accepting Jon’s words.

“I was so embarrassed by the way he talked and what he did,” she sniffled. Alayne was good at whipping up some tears when she needed them. “Jon found me and was very kind. When we heard the gunshots, I was terrified but Jon was brave. He stayed by my side and kept me safe. It may have just been a thief but couldn’t it have been Ramsay, Father? Perhaps the Chief has his own suspicions.”

The man cleared his throat, not expecting to be addressed. “Well, I suppose it could’ve been…”

“I just want to feel safe, Father,” she sobbed next, allowing the fat tears to slide down her cheeks.

Royce’s face was the picture of sympathy along with the chief’s. Lothor looked amused. He was Petyr’s but perhaps he found this amusing at least.

Petyr’s lips twisted into a smirk. He liked it when she played well.

“Of course, Mr. Snow will stay, sweetling.”

He opened his arms again. She stumbled forward as though she was overwrought and seeking her father’s comfort. A hug was well worth the victory. She had won her point…for now at least.
That night, as she changed out of her dress, washed her face and brushed out her hair, she thought of their kiss again. She suspected it’d be best not to bring it up next time they were alone. He’s probably say they couldn’t do that again. He’d bring up his job or her safety, his mission or whatever men liked to say when they were worried about feelings getting in the way. It was alright. He wasn’t going to leave and that was what mattered.

She finished brushing her teeth and wondered what Jon would say if she knocked on his door and asked him to watch her sleep again. She just might be bold enough to ask.

But when she came out of the bathroom, he was already standing in her room, wearing a t-shirt and sweatpants. He looked shy and ill at ease compared to last night when they’d played cyvasse.

No, I won’t mention the kiss.

“I’m sorry for barging in. I knocked but you didn’t answer.”

“I didn’t hear.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. You’re welcome here.” She went over to her bureau. Her unfinished sketch of him was still lying face down. Perhaps she would finish it tomorrow. She might even ask him to sit for her. He might indulge her. “Did you want to talk or…”

“Alayne...I want to thank you for what you did earlier.”

“It was nothing.”

“No, it wasn’t. I would’ve bungled it. I would’ve been fired if not for you. You said it all just right and the right people were there. You were clever and I was hotheaded earlier and…”

She took a deep breath. He probably didn’t realize how much his thanks and his praise meant to her. “I just wanted you to stay.”

“I’ll be staying.” He scrubbed at his beard and was looking at his feet when he continued. “Speaking of staying...I thought you might have trouble falling asleep.”

Her pulse was pounding and she felt a tingling sense of excitement coursing through her similar to what she’d felt earlier when they’d kissed.

“I’m sure to if I’m alone. Thank you.” She climbed into the bed. “Turn off the lights, please.” She pulled the covers up over her and watched him doing her bidding. He glanced between the bed and the arm chair he’d slept in last night. “You need your rest. The chair can’t be that comfortable,” she said by way of encouragement.

He nodded and grabbed the blanket from the chair. The bed dipped as he sat down on the other side. Was he nervous? She wanted to start giggling like a silly girl. She also wanted him to pull her close and make her breathless again.

He laid down on top of the covers though, keeping that much of the pretense alive.

“Good night, Alayne.”

“Good night, Jon.” My name is Sansa.

She couldn’t say it just yet. Maybe someday though.
Her hand slipped out from the covers and she found his hand in the dark. He didn’t say anything but held on. She fell asleep holding his hand. She dreamed he’d kissed her good-night before returning to his room.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, that was not the kind of bang you wanted, I know, but they'll get there so I went ahead and changed the rating ;)

This is the first time Sansa's name has appeared in this story. Did you notice when it did?
Jon was glad it was already dark out. Old Mr. Flint wouldn’t say anything about his tears but he was less ashamed of them this way.

“Mum, please,” he begged.

“Hush, Jon.” She wrapped an arm around his shoulder for a quick squeeze to take away any censure from her words. Ghost whimpered beside him. The pup didn’t want him to leave either.

“We hate to lose you, Lyanna. You and the boy have been a…well, I hope this will help see you through winter anyway.” The old man passed her a thick yellow envelope.

“Mr. Flint, this is…this is much more than...”

“You’re a fine horsewoman, Lyanna. You’d be welcome here again, both of you. He’s a good lad.” The rancher clasped his mum’s hands in his old leathery ones. “I hope whatever you’re running from never finds you, girl,” he added before ruffling Jon’s hair one final time and walking away.

“Please, Mum,” he cried as she wiped her own tears away and finished loading the car. “I’ll be good. I won’t get into another fight ever again, I promise.”

His mother stopped her loading and knelt in front of him. “Is that what you think?” She pulled him into her arms as he cried his guilty tears. “My sweet, sweet Jon, this isn’t your fault. I’m not upset over a playground scuffle. It’s just time for us to move on.”

“But why?”

She stroked his face and smiled sadly. “Just is, I’m afraid. Mr. Flint said you could take Ghost if you like.”

“He did?”

“He did. Do you think Ghost would like to come with us? He’ll probably miss this place but I think he’d miss you more. You’d have to help me take good care of him. Could you do that?”

He nodded rapidly, his misery cut in half, and wished he could’ve thanked Mr. Flint.

He didn’t want to move again. He’d loved living on the ranch. He liked the school even if some of the boys there were arses. But if he could keep Ghost with him, maybe that’d be something at least. As long as he had his mum and Ghost, that would be good enough.
“Come on. We’ll stop for a late dinner somewhere on the road.”

“Pancakes?” he asked hopefully as he hugged his best friend.

The diners his mum chose for them at times like this always seemed to have delicious pancakes and there was something very comforting about that.

“Pancakes, my love.”

“Was she running from something?” she asked, their hands linked between them.

The first hints of morning were creeping through the curtains and Sansa wished she could delay it. Night was her favorite time of day now when Jon would lie beside her. Most mornings he was gone before she woke but today she’d woke up first. She’d reached for his hand before he could rise, knowing he wouldn’t leave just yet if she did.

“I never thought about it till I was older, after she’d died. We moved a lot. We’d be settled somewhere and then I’d come home from school one day and she’d be packing. We were at the ranch for almost a year. It had felt like…a real home.”

Home. The way he said it made her heart ache; not just for the lost little boy Jon had been but that lost little Northern girl who had been too young to appreciate all she’d been blessed with until after it was all gone.

“I think she must’ve been running to leave a place like that. Do you think it could’ve been your father chasing her maybe? Or some other man?”

“I don’t know. Mum never dated that I can recall. I never knew my father. I don’t even know his name. Mum never said anything about him. I’m…I don’t know if she knew exactly who…” He trailed off uncomfortably.

She knew his name. She’d bet money on that. “What happened to Ghost?”

“They wouldn’t let me keep him after Mum died and I was sent to the Home. I was told he was given to some farmer. He was a smart dog…a good dog. Sometimes, I would picture him chasing chickens, herding cattle and being given a juicy bone every day to gnaw on. I liked telling myself he had a good life.”

He rolled to his side, facing her. She would’ve liked to stroke his beard. She wondered if it would feel more bristly or soft depending on which way she rubbed like her father’s had. “I’m sure he did,” she said instead.

“Did you ever have a dog?” He liked to redirect things back to her when a memory pained him. She was familiar with the strategy having used it enough herself.

There were always dogs at Winterfell. Pups in the barn to visit, dogs under foot in the hall. I suppose they belonged to all of us. “I had one once.” He smiled and waited to see what she would share. “Her name was Lady.”
“Like your horse?”

“Yes.” Bran rolled his eyes when I told them her name. “I got her when I was ten.”

“And…she’s…” he said sadly. There was no dog named Lady living with Alayne on Father’s estate. Lady had died years ago in Kings Landing.

“She died.” The first time Joffrey slapped me, she bit him. The palace guards took her to the stables and shot her before I could do anything. None of them cared that he’d slapped me but they all cared very much about putting down my mad dog. She’d never harmed a soul before then. She was good. The king just stood there stupidly that night while Father shouted at him. It didn’t bring her back. “She died,” she repeated.

“I’m very sorry,” he said kindly.

She could see the curiosity in his eyes but knew he wouldn’t push for more information about her dog. It was time for her to redirect.

“Do you think you could drive me down to the Royce’s today? I’d like to see Myranda.”

“If you like.”

She loved the gravelly sound of his voice early in the morning. She wondered if it always sounded this way. She would need to wake up early more often.

Alayne might’ve had to beg Father to get her wish. She could beg prettily when she wanted. But Petyr wasn’t here. He’d left the night before on business. He wouldn’t be home for three more days. Osney might object. He was sure to call Petyr but that would not stop her. His absence…it tasted like sweet freedom but Sansa thought Jon Snow’s kisses might’ve tasted even sweeter.

Her eyes were drawn to his lips at the thought of those kisses. She heard him inhale sharply…or was that her? A heavy tension filled the space between them.

“I should go back to my room,” he said gruffly after several beats passed of them staring at each other with fingers laced together in the predawn light. She didn’t care for that but knew better than to protest. The house would be stirring soon and none could know he slept here at night.

“I know.” She snuggled deeper under the covers as Jon rose from his place on top of them. The nights were growing colder. She wondered how much longer it would be before she convinced him to join her under them. She felt a delicious thrill chasing down her spine at the thought along with a ripple of nervousness, too. “I’ll see you in a couple of hours?”

He nodded and soon she heard the quiet click of the connecting door.

She laid on her back allowing her hands to trail along her curves, dreamily imagining they were not her hands. She should probably be ashamed of the thought.

She knew she’d never go back to sleep. She should probably touch up her hair this morning. The roots were starting to show. She found she didn’t much want to. She wondered if Jon liked red heads.

Don’t be a fool. Sansa Stark is wanted by the Crown. No one’s looking for Alayne.

It’s early. There’ll be time for that later.
She didn’t want to leave the warmth of her blankets yet. So instead, she turned on her bedside lamp, grabbed her sketch pad from her bureau and crawled back under them. She flipped to her unfinished sketch of Jon. She’d delayed finishing it long enough. This morning, she’d watched him sleeping in the half light. She felt like she might be able to get his chin and ears right at last.

A week had passed since the party. A week had passed since a stranger had caused a disturbance by creeping onto the grounds. A week had passed since Alayne Stone had kissed Jon Snow and decided she was Sansa Stark again.

*A new sort of fairytale where the girl kisses the boy and becomes herself again with nary a frog in sight.*

There had been no kisses since that night. She thought about it a lot and she suspected Jon was thinking of it as well. But a superstitious part of her wondered what a second kiss might lead to if the first had been followed by gunfire. Either way, she had a feeling she’d find out in time.

“Alayne.”

Jon groaned and closed his eyes, increasing the pace of his hand’s movement under the hot water. Her blue eyes staring back at him in the darkened room, the curve of her lips, the velvety husk of her voice first thing this morning…her lovely face swam before his eyelids. He could still smell her fragrance lingering in his nostrils. He bit his lip and imagined her saying his name.

“Oh, fuck…”

He released his softening cock and leaned against the shower wall, trying not to hate himself for this, for wanting her. He wanted her so badly despite knowing what a bad idea it was. He wanted her even as he suspected more and more that there was a shit ton of stuff going on with Alayne that he wasn’t aware of.

And, knowing there was a chance she might want him too was driving him mad. She’d not said a word about that kiss since the night it happened though so he’d followed her lead. He knew it was for the best. He also hated that it was for the best.

*But the way she was staring this morning…*gods.*

He’d been tempted to pull her to him and kiss her senseless.

The water was turning cold and he climbed out to dry off. He usually went for his morning run before showering but had opted to get his heart rate up a different way this morning.

*I’ll go for a run later maybe,* he told himself.

He pulled on some clothes in his chilly bedroom and looked at the bed that hadn’t been touched. He always came back to it before morning but, when he’d stirred around 2 in the morning, he’d merely rolled over instead of getting up.

Deciding it would be best for the bed to appear slept in, he grabbed his phone and slid under the
covers to check and see if Sam had anything for him yet. Not knowing how secure his internet was here in Petyr Baelish’s manse, he’d been using some of the Watch’s old secret codes to make his requests of his friend at the Citadel, just as he had when he’d been undercover with the Free Folk and needed to send reports. Sam had been able to read the coded messages without even looking at a key most of the time.

He smiled to himself thinking of Sam and wondered how things were with him and Gilly and the baby. He wouldn’t be a baby anymore. He’d be about five, I guess. They’d rescued Gilly along with all the other girls during their raid at Craster’s. Their intel had described it as a sex slave operation. Awful as that would be, the truth had been even more stomach churning.

But there was no new email from his friend. He stifled his impatience and knew Sam was doing him a favor. He had to be careful not to draw too much attention from his superiors either.

On a whim, Jon decided to do a bit of digging for something else. Flint’s Ranch was still in business but Old Mr. Flint had died. It looked like it’d been bought out by a corporation which wasn’t so surprising these days. He wondered what had become of all the hands who’d worked there back then.

Jon stared at the screen before deciding to look up someone else. The last he knew, Davos had moved to the Sisters after Marya had died. He did a search but found no hits there so checked White Harbor. Davos had been from Kings Landing originally but as a sailor had sailed all around Westeros and other places, too. Him and Marya had been living in White Harbor when they’d taken in a sullen fourteen-year-old.

He must’ve moved back.

Jon wondered what might have prompted him to return there and told himself not to think it had anything to do with him.

It’d be quite the conversation if I turned up on his doorstep nearly seven years after we last spoke in person...after her funeral.

The Home hadn’t been too choosy when it came to foster parents. Anyone who was willing to temporarily take a boy off their hands for a small stipend would do. The Home would still receive their own stipend from Government for having legal custody of the child.

But, when the Seaworths had sought to adopt him and filled out a petition to the Magistrate, the tune had changed. Davos had been convicted of smuggling among other things years earlier. The high and mighty all thought they knew best. Never mind that Davos and his wife had given an unwanted bastard boy a loving home. The man had committed a crime once upon a time and couldn’t possibly be a fit parent.

“I can’t out sail my sins, it seems. I’m so sorry, son,” he’d told Jon sadly the day their final appeal had been denied.

Filled with rage and the recklessness of youth, Jon had run away. When he’d been caught by the authorities a few weeks later, he’d been returned to the Home instead of the Seaworths.

“My Marya was never the same after they took you from us,” he’d told Jon after the funeral.

They didn’t take me. I ran away. It had only compounded his guilt.

He turned off his phone again. It was good to know where the old man was in case they needed to run unexpectedly. He didn’t want to bring Davos any trouble after everything he’d already put him
through but for Alayne, he’d do what he must.

He laid back under the covers and thought of his earlier conversation with Alayne. Had his own mother been running? Alayne had seemed convinced she was.

And why would she think that?

He was busy working through the questions when he heard her get up and start moving around her room. She was singing softly but the sound carried. He pictured her in her pajamas with her hair a mess and her eyelids still heavy with sleep. He cursed under his breath as her singing and his imagination started to stir his blood. He’d need to go for a run this time.

“Do you like it?” she asked hesitantly after he’d been staring for a full minute. She started wringing her hands together. Perhaps he hated it and didn’t know how to tell her. “Jon?”

He turned back towards her, still holding the sketch of himself. “You did this…just from memory?”

“I…” She flushed, not sure how to respond. “I started it the night you asked me about Ramsay, the first night you came to my room. But most of it is from…do you hate it?”

“Hate it? No! I…well, I feel awkward saying I love a drawing of myself but I love this, Alayne. May I keep it?”

She hadn’t thought of that. She liked having the drawing of him but if he liked it that much, he could have it. She would draw another. “You may.”

He stepped towards her, his eyes sincere as he gazed at her with a hint of reverence. “You’re amazingly talented.”

“I am not,” she demurred.

“You most certainly are.” Before she could thank him or argue or preen with pleasure at his compliment, he pulled on his jacket. “Should we get going?”

“Yes, of course.”

She went to her room to grab a jacket. She glanced at herself in the mirror. How many times had she stood there telling herself she was Alayne? She frowned when she realized she’d forgotten her hair this morning. She could hardly do it now.

It’s not so bad, she told herself. Men barely notice such things, right?

Alone in the car, they headed off towards Nestor Royce’s home to meet with Myranda. Tomorrow, she’d ask Jon if they could go horseback riding again. He had seemed to enjoy it last time and, given what he’d shared of his mother, it seemed to be something that would hold special meaning for him. She wanted to enjoy these days with Petry gone.

She sat in the passenger’s seat giving directions as they wound along the quiet roads.
“I should’ve had you drive,” he teased when he nearly missed a turn. He’d been darting looks at her ever so often but apparently not attending what she was saying.

“That’d do us little good since I can’t drive.”

His head whipped back towards her just as she realized she’d said that out loud. She played with the hem of her jacket to avoid looking at him. Lying to him grew harder every day. There were so many things she wanted to tell him.

“I never learned. We walked or used public transportation in the capital and here Father has me driven everywhere.”

Jon mulled that over in silence for a moment as she looked out her window. There’d been no one to teach her in Kings Landing. Palace officials took them anywhere they needed to go when she left the Red Keep. Those occasions grew rarer after Father…he’d said he’d teach her when she turned sixteen. But then, Father had been accused of treason and locked away.

*And then executed after my betrothed promised me he’d grant him mercy.*

“A firing squad is a mercy compared to rotting in prison for years and years. *He was a traitor, Sansa. He met a traitor’s end.*”

He’d stood right in front of her speaking those words as if he was merely being logical. His fat lips had been twisted into a cruel smile when he’d tipped her chin up and forced her to meet his emerald green eyes. She’d stumbled backwards away from him only to be met with the solid wall of Meryn Trant’s chest.

*“Your brother Robb will be next for daring to raise the North in revolt. Shall I send him a message about defying the crown?”* Robb would never know of her bruises though. It had only been a game Joffrey liked to play. *“Not her face. I like her pretty.”*

“Would you like to learn how?” Jon asked, startling her from the memories.

“Are you serious?”

“Of course.”

Her heart start racing as a giddy thrill of potential took hold. She could run so much farther and faster in a car than on horseback. Would he run with her? If she told him…

*Stop. You’re getting ahead of yourself.*

Even so, learning to drive would be useful, a skill most everyone her age already knew.

“Please, Jon. I’d love to learn.”

“Okay but what if I had a favor to ask of you later?”

“Anything,” she said perhaps quicker than she should’ve.

“Alright. First lesson after your visit.”

She grinned like a child on her name day and rubbed her hands together in anticipation. For once, she didn’t want to stay at Myranda’s very long.
Thank you so much to those of you who are reading this story. I really love writing it but I know there are some heavy parts. Next chapter, a name will be brought up that will get him thinking and doing a little investigating. So, if you're eager for him to learn her real name...I promise it's coming!
Chapter 9

She’d not thought Myranda would already be entertaining when they arrived. She should’ve known better. Two men were in the parlor, both handsome in their way and older than herself. One was blond and smiling, sitting close to their hostess and making her laugh. The other was darker and looked bored whilst reading a newspaper.

“Oh, Alayne! I’m so glad you’ve come! Sers, I hope you’ll forgive me for cutting our visit short but it’s so rare for me to have Alayne all to myself.”

The tall, dark man stood, looking relieved to go but the blond man adopted a wounded look. “You’d send me away now just as this lovely young lady appears?” He gave Sansa a charming smile and took her by the hand. Jon coughed behind her. “Ser Harrold Hardyng, at your service, sweet lady. You may call me Harry. Alayne, is it?”

Sansa could’ve laughed at his courtly manners. As a girl, she might’ve been all a-flutter over them. Now, she just found it ridiculous. “Yes.”

His eyes drifted past her shoulder towards Jon. She could tell he was sizing him up. “Mr. Snow is Alayne’s bodyguard,” Myranda supplied.

“Bodyguard? Are you famous, Miss…”

“She’s Petyr Baelish’s daughter, Harry. Mr. Snow keeps my sweet Alayne safe.”

The charming smile curdled like spoiled milk before making a reappearance. His eyes darted towards her chest. She was glad of her bulky sweater.

The darker man huffed irritably and Sansa would swear she could feel Jon tensing behind her.

“Forgive my manners,” Myranda said. “Alayne, this is Ser Lyn Corbray.”

“Manners, my lady? You’re casting us out to entertain bastards and you speak of manners?”

Corbray tossed down the paper he was still holding and strode out the door they’d just entered, leaving Sansa to choke on her outrage. It was no more than she’d heard a dozen times before here in this part of the country but she was outraged on Jon’s behalf.

She felt Jon’s hand at the small of her back. Perhaps he was more concerned for her.

“Why’d you bring that arse with you, Harry?” Myranda asked, easing the tension.

“My apologies, Myranda, Miss Stone,” he said in a conciliatory tone.

There it was, that look she’d come to recognize. Despite his apology, she knew his opinion was not that different than the other man’s. Young men like Ser Harrold might flirt with girls like Alayne. They would certainly take them to their beds at the drop of a hat. But there was no need to continue to flatter her with his best manners. Just like with Jon, he’d already determined her role. Common people didn’t care so much about bastard status anymore but the Faith, old money and the
aristocracy still did. People in the Vale did. Alayne Stone could be Ser Harrold Hardyng’s lover but never his wife. Sansa despised men like him.

“I suppose I must be going. It was lovely to meet you, Miss Stone. Mr. Snow,” he said with a nod before walking out the door.

“I’m very sorry for that but thank the gods you came!” Myranda said, taking them both by the hand and leading them further into the parlor. “Corbray is a bore and an arse and we have absolutely nothing to say to one another. My charms do not appeal to him and his courtesies would not recommend him anywhere.”

“And the other?”

“Harry? He’s charming in his way but a cad. He comes sniffing around from time to time. My reputation proceeds me, I’m afraid.”

“Your reputation, my lady?” Jon asked politely.

“My reputation as an easy lay, Mr. Snow. It’s well-earned but I’d like to think it might earn me a more lively bedfellow than Harry Hardyng,” she laughed.

Jon gulped and made a hasty excuse to use the bathroom. Sansa pressed her lips together and gave her friend a warning look…not that Myranda would heed it.

“I’ve missed you coming here,” Myranda said, hugging her tightly.

“I’ve missed visiting. I hope you’ll come see me soon in return.”

“Will they let my car past the gates? Are they afraid I’ll have kidnappers stowed in my trunk?”

“I’ll speak with Father.”

The two young women linked arms and walked towards a settee by the large picture window that looked out on the lawn below. A tray of tea and biscuits were brought by the butler. Jon returned and took the seat Corbray had abandoned, giving them their privacy to chat.

“How are you, Alayne?” Myranda asked with a twinkle in her eye.

“I’m quite well.”

“And, are you happy?”

“I am.”

“You seem happier than I’ve seen you in a good while.”

“We’ve not seen much of each other in a good while but thank you.”

Myranda walked her fingers along Sansa’s arm and tilted her head to one side. “I think I may know who to thank for this Happier Alayne who’s come to see me today.”

Sansa wanted to start giggling. Her cheeks grew warm and she gave a subtle nod. Her eyes darted towards Jon who was reading the paper. “He’s very kind. He’s…”

“A knight in flannel and blue jeans come to sweep you away?”
“That’s silly. We’re just…”

“Are you sleeping with him?” Myranda whispered in her ear.

“What?!” She felt the blood drain from her face. I am but not like you’re suggesting. Just as quickly, her face grew hot again.

“Are you going to tell me you’re not interested?”

“I’m…he’s my bodyguard.” He’s my friend. He’s more than that.

“But those dark, sultry eyes and pouty lips, my dear. I’ll bet he could make a girl come apart while she was still fully dressed.”

“Myranda!” she hissed. Come apart how exactly?

“Perhaps this body could use some guarding.” Myranda pretended to fan herself and then laughed at her own joke.

She thought it was amusing to shock Alayne with her coarseness. Normally, Alayne found some amusement in it as well but Sansa did not. And not when it comes to Jon.

“Please, don’t say such things. He’s a gentleman.” A gentleman I’m sharing my bed with. She wouldn’t dare admit that now, even if there were a few things she’d like to ask Myranda.

“A gentleman who wants to get in your pants,” Myranda replied with a knowing smirk.

Does he? She glanced over at where Jon sat again. She felt a jolt when she saw he was staring at her now…and scowling. She flushed and busied herself with the cup of tea she’d been poured. As if we’re discussing sonnets or the latest fashions.

“Myranda, you know I’m…”

“I know.” Myranda laid a warm hand on top of hers and squeezed it gently. “I’m only teasing you, Alayne. I won’t say another word about him if you like.”

“Thank you.”

“Would you like to hear the latest gossip of the Vale and elsewhere?”

“Please.”

Myranda proceeded to prattle away and Sansa relaxed again…or tried to. She found herself trying not to think too much about Myranda’s words but images of Jon kissing her, holding her and pressed up against her in bed kept assailing her.

She’d never been intimate with a man. Joffrey’s sloppy kisses and a few groping touches before everything had turned so horrible was the furthest she’d ever gone. Her feelings for him had been those of fickle youth, a girl’s crush on a handsome prince, swept away in a trice by his callousness and cruelty the day Lady died.

Father had kissed Alayne more than once but Sansa preferred to forget that. She’d had to feign her indifference and hide her distaste enough here in the Vale from advances which did not interest her.

But Jon? She knew she’d welcome more than just his kisses given the right circumstances. And, there was nothing feigned about her feelings for him or the wicked thoughts Myranda had placed
in her head.

“Oh, did the police ever turn up anything regarding that man at your father’s party?”

Sansa sat down her tea cup to answer but nearly spilled it when Jon replied for her. “No, they have not.”

He was standing right behind her and she’d not heard him approach. And, if he’d heard that question, what else had he heard? And what would he think if he had heard them? Sansa couldn’t decide if Myranda was being any louder now than before or not. It vexed her to no end for the remainder of their visit.

“Oh, gods! I’m sorry!” she yelped.

Jon cringed as they cleared the postbox by a centimeter or so but tried to sound unconcerned. “You’re doing fine.”

“Liar. I’m horrible,” she grumbled with her hands clutching the wheel so tight her knuckles were turning white. *She’s not alone there,* he thought as he looked down at his hand griping the armrest.

“Not at all. Your father’s insurance is all paid up, right?” he asked dryly.

He could feel the grin spreading across his face as her eyes narrowed and her mouth fell open. “Jon Snow!”

“I’m kidding.”

For a first timer, she wasn’t doing that badly. The roads were narrow but quiet at least. It might be safer to practice on the estate but something told Jon that would immediately be reported back to Baelish, same as their trip to the Royce’s had likely been already. He also suspected it would be forbidden in an instant. But, she wanted to learn and he wanted to teach her. *So, on the sly then.*

“Did you enjoy your visit?” he asked in what he hoped was a nonchalant tone. Her friend wasn’t very discreet or all that quiet.

“I did.” She was biting at her lip and there was a flush creeping up her neck. “I hope you weren’t too terribly bored.”

“Not at all.” *Your friend’s queries distracted me to say the least. I had to get up and move around to distract the libidinous direction my thoughts were taking.* “I’m sorry about that man earlier.”

“I’m used to his sort here. I’m sorry if he offended you.”

“I was only concerned for your feelings, Alayne. They’re really a strange set, aren’t they?”

“They really are strange birds.”

Her lips twitched and a giggle escape. Her giggles were infectious and soon he was laughing as well. It was rather like being marched off to the sept when he was in the Home. One boy would
mutter a rude remark or fart just as the congregation was quieting and suddenly they all were
laughing and could not stop.

“Gods, watch the road!” he cried as they drifted towards the ditch. “Pull over before we literally
die of laughter.”

She pulled the car to the side of the road, her expression reminiscent of earlier when she’d shyly
shown him the sketch she’d drawn of him. She swept a tendril of hair behind her ear and lifted
eyes to meet his. “Was I horrible?”

“No, not horrible at all,” he reassured her, his eyes drinking her in and his hands itching to touch
the silk of her hair.

The sun was shining behind her and it was more apparent than ever. Why do you dye your hair?

He did not want to do anything to cause her to erect her walls or tell him lies. The trust that had
been building between them was growing but still nascent enough to be damaged by too many
questions. Nor did he wish to offend or hurt her. Though I wish you would trust me enough to tell
me the truth.

“Was there anything good in the paper?” she asked once they’d switched places.

“It was a political paper. Nothing about Ramsay or anything that affects us here.”

“Politics can affect everyone, Jon.”

“Very true. Well, Stannis Baratheon and the Targaryen faction down in Dorne are still questioning
the Queen Regent’s sovereignty and the North is still in open revolt.”

“Are there still uprisings?”

“Oh, yes. The North Remembers, they say. Government is doing no better with them than the
Watch did with the Free Folk.”

“The Free Folk?”

He pursed his lips and adjusted the sun visor. He’d not meant to bring them up. They were nearly
back to the estate but it would be nothing short of rude to ignore her and hope to evade answering.
“Just a group of terrorists…or activists, depending on your point of view.”

“What was your point of view?”

“It shifted,” he admitted. “I suppose the best answer would be both. They were activists for a cause
that was not without merit. They were also terrorists. Just like the North has good reasons to rebel
but Lord Stark was also a traitor.”

“HE WAS NO TRAITOR!”

The vehemence of her reply shocked him so he nearly took his mind off the road. He’d never heard
her so angry except the night of the party when she’d feared he was leaving her. The harmony
between them was extinguished like a small flame exposed to a gust of wind. She turned away to
face her window but he could tell her chest was heaving with emotion. He’d struck a nerve to put it
mildly.

He said nothing as they pulled into the estate. He could see her peeping at him curiously as he
parked the car. Umfred, the fool, was coming their way with a worried look.

“Jon, I’m sorry about…”

“Let’s get you inside,” he said smoothly.

She should never have let her emotions overwhelm her that way. Jon made her so comfortable, too comfortable perhaps. Her carefully constructed façades and defenses crumbled away like sandcastles with the tide when it came to him, it would seem.

But I believe I can trust him. Is it so terrible to want someone I can trust? Someone I can be myself with?

Which self?

A dangerous question.

At Myranda’s when Ser Lyn had been rude and then again in the car, it had felt as if they were united in some manner. In their bastardy perhaps…though hers was a lie. Maybe because we are both Northerners and look at things differently than these people. But of course, Jon would not know that, no more than he would know she was the trueborn daughter of Ned and Catelyn Stark.

At Court, after his execution, when she’d been held hostage to keep the Northern lords in check and later because they’d risen against the Crown, how many times had she called her father and the rest of her family traitors to avoid being punished? To stay alive?

But today, she’d not thought to hear her father called a traitor from Jon’s lips. It had felt like a physical blow.

There was a soft knock at the connecting door. Her heart pounded. He’d kept his distance the rest of the day, not physically but he’d been withdrawn. She’d feared he wouldn’t come tonight. She was also fearful of what he might say or ask.

He smiled when she let him in though and there was that easiness again. Her slip was not so egregious. She’d applied her dye again after dinner. She could still be Alayne until it was safe to tell Jon the truth.

“You want me to do what?” she gasped after he asked his favor, the one he’d procured in exchange for driving lessons.

“Would you try? If it’s too upsetting or…”

“It’s not upsetting. It’s just…I don’t think I can give you anything that will really help.”

“Please, Alayne.”

“How am I supposed to tell you no when you look at me like that?”

“Like what?” he asked, that boyish smile on his lips and his eyes sparkling merrily in the firelight.
“Never mind.” She shook her head and took the sketch pad from his hands.

A sketch of the man they’d seen fleeing the night of the party. That was nothing too difficult. She doubted it would amount to anything but his friend had some high tech computer program.

“Facial recognition software.”

“I thought that only worked with actual photographs.” She would know. Petyr had said for her not to stare at security cameras for too long. Just in case, sweetling. You never know who’s watching. He’d secured the footage from the bank heist for a small fortune.

“Sam’s system is, uh…unique.”

Accepting that response, she sat down and began to sketch.

He slipped out of her bed not long after she fell asleep. He would like to stay longer but Sam might still be awake this time of night in Oldtown. He hoped if she could provide the sketch and Sam could run it, maybe it might lead to something.

“Sam?”

“Gods, Jon. Don’t you ever sleep? What time is it there?”

“Two hours later than it is there,” he chuckled. “Did I wake you?”

“No, I was still up.” His friend was silent again.

“Everything alright?”

“It is. Gilly’s expecting. We’re expecting. She’s had round-the-clock morning sickness, I’m sorry to say.”

He was flabbergasted though he shouldn’t have been. They were a couple. He just didn’t think they’d be having a child for some reason. Sam was his age. He was ashamed of the sharp stab of jealousy he felt over Sam becoming a father to a child of his own and not just Little Sam.

“That’s wonderful, Sam. Not her morning sickness but…I’m happy for you both.”

“Thank you. I don’t have anything for you yet. They’ve been monitoring our query searches. I’m not sure why. I’m planning to go in this weekend when it’s slower.”

“Please, don’t put your position in any danger over me.” Don’t put yourself in any danger.

“Oh, I’m not so worried about that. It’s just a lot of paperwork sometimes and a great headache. I’ll let you know when I get the information. Baelish is good at covering his tracks.”

So is Alayne but not as good as she thinks. She was proficient with her dye job but after today it had stood out like a sore thumb tonight.
“Alright. I’m sending you a picture for your scanner program.” That belonged to Sam, not the Citadel. No one could fault him for that.

“Sure thing.” He could practically hear Sam rubbing his hands together with glee. He was very proud of his program and eager to test it out. It might not ever hold up in court but it could still be marketable to law enforcement and government agencies. “Send it through and I’ll get back to you if something turns up.”

“Thank you, Sam.”

He ended the call and sent the picture of her sketch. She was very talented.

He didn’t feel remotely tired and there were things he wanted to know which he didn’t want to wait till the weekend for Sam to possibly dig up. Jon was hardly a tech genius (or a hacker) like Sam but knew his way around a search engine. He tapped in a name and waited.

_Eddard Stark_.

She awoke the next morning, pleased to find Jon was still beside her. He was watching her, his expression serious and his eyes tired.

She smiled and stretched. “Good morning,” she mumbled, wishing she didn’t have morning breath.

“Good morning…Lady Sansa.”

Chapter End Notes

Yep, Jon Snow knows something...but not everything.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The truth comes out.

“Good morning...Lady Sansa.”

Sansa blinked rapidly at him, the blood rushing through her eardrums as her pulse picked up speed. She wished perhaps she’d misheard him or that this was a dream. She hadn’t misheard him though and this was no dream. He knew. She’d wanted to tell him but now he already knew.

“Are you going to deny it?” he asked, his voice hard. His grey eyes, which were usually so soft when he looked at her, had turned to jagged pieces of flint.

‘I am Alayne, Father. Who else would I be?’

How many times had she told that lie? It had been easy enough to live with before Jon had come and before she’d come to care so much about him. But, Jon had cared about Alayne. What would he think of Sansa? Would he care about her at all?

Only one way to find out.

“I won’t deny it.”

He closed his eyes and exhaled slowly as if he was trying to maintain his composure or perhaps he wished this was a dream, too.

Sansa closed her own eyes. Two years of running and denying who she was, the dance had been going on long enough. Let the spikes catch her if they would, Jon would get the truth from her. She drew a deep breath and let it pour forth from her mouth and soul in a great gush.

“My name is Sansa Stark. Lord Eddard Stark was my father. He was King Robert’s prime minister and good friend until his death when he was accused of conspiring against Prince Joffrey and his claim to the throne. I do not know what evidence my father had to support his claims but I do not doubt their veracity. My brother Robb raised the North in revolt after his unlawful execution. The Lannisters later murdered my brother and my mother at the home of Walder Frey at what was supposed to be a peaceful parlay.”

Her breath hitched. She squeezed her eyes shut tighter as if that could purge the images of bullet-riddled loved ones from her mind. How delighted Joffrey had been. How closely others had watched her then, waiting to see if she would break. The heart of me was broken but the rest of me...I’m a tree, I can bend.

“I’d been brought to court when my father became prime minister. I was eleven. When I turned fourteen, I was betrothed to Joffrey.”

Jon inhaled and exhaled forcefully, an angry but resigned sound.
The nobility and Faith still had old-fashioned and queerly formal notions when it came to
arranging marriages. Father had tried to delay the betrothal confirmation but been unsuccessful. As
an acknowledged follower of the Old Gods, he’d not been invited to attend the ceremony at Baelor
with her. She’d been so excited, not knowing any better back then, but sorely missed his comfort
and support.

“May I present Lady Sansa of House Stark, a comely maiden of fourteen and faithful servant of the
Seven and His Grace King Robert, as a potential bride for your son, our beloved Crown Prince,
Your Grace?”

“My sweet little dove needs no introduction, High Septon,” Cersei had said with a smile which had
momentarily calmed Sansa’s nerves. “I already know you’ve had your blood,” she’d said next.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she’d murmured, embarrassed to speak of that in front of so many men and
strangers, embarrassed by the way Joffrey was yawning through it all.

“And she’s a maiden?” she’d asked the Septa at her side.

“Yes, Your Grace. We’ve confirmed it,” the woman had answered as Sansa had wished the floor
would open up beneath her to save her from this mortification and the memory.

That was long ago.

Sansa kept her eyes closed and forced herself to continue her confession.

“We were two teenagers who didn’t really know each other. I was to wed the prince. I thought I’d
landed in the middle of a fairy tale. I suppose he thought I was tolerable enough to give him heirs
someday. He was…” a monster.

She paused. This was not what she wanted to tell today.

“He set me aside for a more suitable bride after my father’s fall from grace. I was told I would be
married to Tyrion Lannister, the king’s uncle and a man twice my age, once I turned eighteen. He
at least refused to marry me until then. I was given no choice in the matter. I remained a hostage in
Kings Landing until Mr. Baelish took me from there the night of the king’s assassination to protect
me from the queen’s wrath. Mr. Baelish had been a childhood friend of my mother’s. I didn’t kill
Joffrey but Petyr knew I’d be accused. I did in fact play a role in his death but unwittingly. I wore
the poison around my neck, hidden in jewels that had been gifted to me by a…an acquaintance.”

Poor Dontos had already played his part and paid with his life for knowing too much.

“Petyr brought me here and made me Alayne,” she finished.

It felt strangely like she’d been drinking too much champagne punch again, confessing so many
things at once. She could nearly laugh over the heady sensation, the way the truth affected her.

When she opened her eyes, she found that Jon had opened his again as well. Those grey eyes
weren’t so hard now but they didn’t miss much, did they? She could almost hear the whirl of
thoughts racing through his mind as he stared at her.

“Will you turn me in?” she blurted out.

“Alay-…I mean…”

“I’m worth five million dragons to the queen, dead or alive, though I suspect Cersei wants me
alive. There’s no pleasure to be found in tormenting the dead. I’m betting your Nights Watch pension isn’t nearly so much as that.”

“Hardly,” he huffed. She felt his hand grasping for hers. She grabbed it like a lifeline. “Do you think I’d do that to you? You lied to me but…you had good reasons for keeping the secret.”

She drew another deep breath. She’d exposed herself and told another person who she was. She felt naked without the safety net of lies, stripped and vulnerable.

‘How are the best secrets kept, sweetling?’

‘No one tells so no one talks, Father.’

‘That’s right. Remember it well.’

Her nose began to tingle and her chin trembled. She’d lied to Jon. Who could ever love a liar like her?

His hand was warm when he started caressing her face. His eyes were soft again, like fog. Like Father’s. The sobs came next and filled the predawn quiet. She felt herself being pulled closer. No one had ever held her as she cried here alone in her bed but she was not alone now.

“Shhh…” he breathed, his lips pressed against her forehead. “I told you already, didn't I? 'I'll protect you, I promise,’ I swore. That hasn't changed. I wouldn’t betray you.”

“I’m sorry, Jon. I wanted to tell you.”

“You’ve really been hiding here since he died? You’ve been pretending all this time?”

She nodded before burying her face in his chest. His arms were around her and his words gentle. For once, somebody cared that she was hurting. He wasn’t looking for what advantage she might bring him. He wasn’t scheming to make moves of his own. He was holding her as she wept to comfort her. She allowed herself to relax into his embrace. No threats or blows or insults were given like she’d known from other men, just comfort.

“I didn’t kill him,” she whimpered. “I hated him but I didn’t kill him.”

“I believe you. You’re no murderess. But, why did Baelish take you and claim you as his daughter? What was his reason? Why would he risk himself to ferry you away? And why has he kept you here all this time? Is there some agenda or purpose that he’s got in mind?”

“He…my mother…he was…”

Jon gave her a baleful look and she closed her mouth. She’d wondered the same things many times. She might even know the answer to some of those questions. His infatuation with her mother and with her by default was one thing but not enough of a reason to run the risks he had. She’d protected Petyr’s secrets just as he’d protected her but was protecting her really what he’d had in mind?

The questions made her head hurt. She was emotionally wrung out after everything she’d already said and felt this morning. Jon realized it and went back to caressing her face, the pad of his thumb sweeping away the tears on her cheeks and she couldn’t seem to think about Petyr or the lies.

“We’ll worry over that later, shall we?” he murmured.
The atmosphere between them changed. Suddenly, it was charged with that other tension, the tension of a man and a woman lying in bed side by side after a confession and a release of emotion. She wanted him and she knew he wanted her. She placed her hand over his heart. It was thumping hard and fast. Her breath grew short. His did as well. Their eyes were busy roaming each other’s faces. He drifted closer.

“Sansa,” he said, testing the name, tasting it on his tongue. Never had it sounded so sweet to her ears. “Alayne is a pretty name but I think Sansa might be even lovelier.” She glanced up at him beseechingly. He would not turn her in or leave her behind. She had to believe that. “It’s nice to meet you, Sansa.”

Her eyes fluttered close as he chastely pressed his lips to hers, her heart unfurling like the petals of a flower welcoming in his light.

The autumn days were waning and winter was drawing nearer. The snows in the Vale were nothing compared to the ones at the Wall but it would be best to leave before then. A superstitious part of him dreaded footsteps left in the snow. They needed to be away from the lies, away from the threat of Ramsay which had brought Jon here in the first place and well away from whatever games Petyr Baelish was playing.

Speaking of his employer, he was to return the day after tomorrow. Jon hoped Sam might have something for him before then. He needed to plan and be ready. Her life was too precious a thing to remain in that man’s hands indefinitely.

He watched her galloping ahead of him on Lady and mulled over his discoveries and his choices.

Kissing her this morning had not been planned but he would not regret it. A brief kiss of devotion rather than hunger, nothing more, he’d told himself. And he was devoted to her.

‘You’re going to be loyal to your woman, Jon Snow.’

Aye, that I am.

All it had taken was a simple photograph of Lord Stark’s family for all those pieces to fall into place at last. One photo of a happy family captured on film in a happier time. He’d studied the faces long after he’d spied his Alayne amongst them with red hair and the name Sansa Stark under her image.

Jon had seen more than a few pictures of Eddard Stark before he’d stumbled upon the family photo. In those other pictures, he’d looked as stern and forbidding as a Northern winter. But with his family, Jon saw a different man, a loving one. One arm wrapped around his wife’s waist and a hand resting on the shoulder of the second son, Brandon. Jon wondered what it would’ve been like to have had a father like that growing up.

Lady Stark had looked happy though a touch harried in the picture, a mother of five and the wife of an important man. Jon was not surprised. But her dark copper hair and blue eyes had been passed down to her children save the younger daughter, the one with an impish grin and hair cut short, Arya.
The eldest, Robb…Jon had seen him a time or two when he’d made the news with his rallying speeches following Lord Stark’s execution. Up at the Wall, most of those newscasts had been censored but in other parts of the North, they’d been widely applauded. Jon had also seen the images of his body, the ones Government had taken such delight in displaying after he’d been shot and killed.

On Lady Stark’s left stood a little boy, Rickon, no more than three or four in the picture. Brandon and Rickon Stark were reported missing and presumed dead. Arya Stark was as well, last seen shortly before her father’s arrest. Beside Rickon, grasping his hand was Alayne…or Sansa. She’d been eleven in the photograph, a child but still recognizable to him.

He’d run her name next and dozens of images had appeared; tabloid cover pages of her and Prince Joffrey at various official events and social functions, pictures of them kissing at a dance, images of her tear-streaked face, red and splotchy, at her father’s trial and wanted posters calling for her arrest with her dressed in her finery from the night of the assassination.

There had been no mistake. She was Alayne.

Like the stages of grief sped up, he’d mourned for Alayne during the night as it had sunk in, the girl he’d thought he knew. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally, acceptance.

He’d spent hours scouring the internet and then laid in his bed staring at the ceiling trying to make sense of it all. For a man who’d tasted betrayal more than once and recently under quite deadly circumstance, it was not easy for Jon to forgive the lies…until he saw her again.

Despite her lies and his own paranoia from past trauma, he could not help but believe that deep down she was still that girl he’d been getting to know for several weeks now; the artist, the romantic, unmistakably a lady bearing a bastard’s name, the girl who rode so well but couldn’t drive a car…the girl he’d fallen for was none other than Sansa Stark.

But what to do with this information?

He’d nodded off very briefly but awoke in a panic. ‘For the Watch’ echoing in his head after a fitful dream filled with fire and blood. Crawling back into her bed, he’d watched her sleeping. His heart ached worse than his head at the thoughts of something happening to this girl despite the lingering sense of betrayal.

“Shall we take a rest?” she asked from the edge of the woods.

Jon slid off his gelding and together they walked the horses to water. She was quiet and he was pensive.

“Alayne. You must call me Alayne outside of my room,” she’d whispered before they left the house.

He’d figured as much. I’ve been calling you Alayne for so long but I will remember. One slip could mean your head.

“Your younger brothers and sister are presumed dead. Do you know if that’s true?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Petyr says they are but, in my heart, I dream of them and hold onto feeble hopes.”

He nodded, harboring hopes of his own.

The horses drank their fill as the pair of them sat upon a newly fallen tree, snapped by some
autumnal tempest. He held his hand towards her and she accepted it. The sounds of the woods surrounded them, peaceful and forgiving. Part of him wished they could remain.

They rode back later, careful to appear as if nothing had shifted between them when in the presence of the others. Baelish would not be as easily fooled as his men though.

When night fell, he went to her room again. She was brushing out her hair in front of the fire. She’d never done that before. The dye had only been applied last night but, as she swept the brush through her tresses, he imagined the flames licked auburn waves instead of brown.

He climbed into bed, permitting himself to lie under the covers beside her.

Her eyes were pools of blue surrounding black as she faced him, her breath growing short in anticipation. He wanted her but she was young and had been through so much. He needed to know more. He needed to plan. And, he couldn’t take advantage of her in their current state.

*When we leave, you’ll need to keep dying your hair…maybe another color. I’ll probably have you cut it, too.*

They’d not discussed it. He’d already made the decision to leave for them. She deserved more than that but would she trust him enough to go?

“If I could get you out of here, would you come with me willingly? Or would I need to steal you away?” He asked it teasingly but she would know he meant it.

“I would not put up much of a fight,” she laughed. “But…he’s kept me safe for two years. Do you think leaving is the best decision?”

“Yes. I cannot offer you anything but my gut instincts and they’ve steered me wrong a time or two but I think you’d be better off leaving.”

“Where will we go?” she asked wistfully.

“Home…wherever that may be.”

“Home,” she repeated. “I like the sound of that.”

“We could search for leads on your siblings.”

“Yes, please. I’d give anything to…”

Her eyes clouded up with tears and he drew her into his arms, pressing another kiss to her forehead. He held her close until they both fell asleep.

He loved her. He wanted her but he wanted to protect her even more. He would wait for anything else that might happen between them. For now, his goal was getting her out of the Vale.

Sansa Stark had successfully disappeared two years ago. It was time for Alayne Stone to do the same.

In the predawn quiet, he snuck back to his own bed. There was a new message from Sam and his pulse quickened with hope and dread both.

But before he could open it, he heard noises below his window. He glanced out and nearly snarled at the sight that met his eyes. Mr. Baelish had returned early from his business trip and Jon still needed time to plan.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Sansa considers what Petyr’s early return might mean and how best to handle it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jon had woke her early with news of Petyr’s unexpected return. A cold chill of apprehension had gripped her and fear rapidly took over. Her breath had grown short just like at the ice cream shop. She’d begged him to lie with her again, wanting the comfort of his arms and desperate to avoid an episode.

“It’s almost dawn.”

“Please, Jon.”

She’d seen the concern in his eyes as she’d started to tremble, gulping in air as if she were in danger of drowning. “A few minutes.”

He’d relented but not for long. It was alright. The warmth of his arms wrapped around her had calmed those precursory flutters of true panic but even better were his whispered words in her ear as he told her to breath slowly in and out. Then, he’d counted to a hundred as she buried her face in his neck, the timbre of his deep Northern voice reassuring her, lending her some of his strength when she needed it most.

By the time he’d finished she’d felt more in control.

“I've got to go,” he’d brusquely said as he rose but the gentle way he’d brushed her cheek with his lips had told her he hadn’t wanted to.

She’d spent nearly an hour after Jon had left lying in bed considering what Petyr’s early return might herald but at least she already knew and wouldn't be surprised when she saw him. He sometimes returned before or after he said he would but she couldn’t help wondering if his reason was related to herself or Jon. Given what had happened yesterday and all she’d shared, there was a part of her that feared Petyr might somehow already know her secret had been discovered.

Whether or not that’s true, he’ll know something is different. He was already suspicious of the growing closeness between us and he’s too clever at reading faces and body language. As soon as he sets eyes on us, he’ll know something has changed and then he’ll start probing.

It would be up to her to make sure Petyr only saw what she wanted him to see. Jon was clever and perhaps he could play a role when needed but she did not believe it was something that came easily for him. And he didn’t know Petyr the way she did.

“You think you know me?” he’d mockingly asked her once, clearly amused by the notion. “You think you know what I want?”
I watch and I learn...just like you taught me. I’ve watched you a long time now. I may not know precisely how you plan to obtain it but I know what you crave most.

Bright prospects but not high-born, Petyr Baelish had been sent to live with the Tullys as a boy through some minor connection between the families. He’d been a playmate to her mother and uncle but Petyr had had higher aspirations as he grew from a child to a young man. However, his youthful crush on her mother had been curtly rebuffed by her grandfather. He’d been sent back to the backwater where he’d been born but not allowed that to deter him. Clever with coins and possessing a keen sense of when to gamble and when to play it safe, he’d managed to rise all the same, a self-made man. Sansa might have admired that about him if she wasn’t aware of how completely he’d abandoned any semblance of scruples or morality in the making of himself.

But what that man truly wanted, what that little boy from the Fingers desired most of all was power...uncontestable power, the sort money alone couldn’t buy.

She’d been thinking about Jon’s questions from yesterday. The past year or so she’d stopped questioning things too deeply, frightened of the answers she might find. She’d slowly allowed Alayne to take over and reconciled herself to a fluctuating state of unhappiness and uneasy inertia, only finding any sense of self through her art.

But now, she could not keep her head buried in the sand simply because the answers might be unpleasant ones. If they were going to escape and escape for good, she needed to thoroughly examine what she might be up against.

What had Petyr’s intent been when he’d taken her away two years ago and what future plans might he have for her? She was nineteen. Was she supposed to live the rest of her life in his home under an assumed name, pretending she was his daughter and never going much of anywhere or meeting much of anyone beyond the odd little circle he brought around?

You know better than that.

Petyr was heavily involved in politics, or at least he was in the background, busy maneuvering pieces of his own here and there throughout the political landscape of Westeros. Was she one of his pieces? And if so, what value did he see in her? What end game did he have in mind for his precious Alayne or for Sansa Stark?

Alayne was just the bastard girl of a rich man but Sansa Stark had other potential value. The Queen wanted her but Petyr had protected her from Cersei. There must be a reason why. Who else might have uses for the daughter of a dead traitor and the sister of another dead traitor?

They weren’t traitors. I don’t believe it...and I am not alone in that.

The Stark name was still revered in the North as it had been for generations. Eddard Stark hadn’t just been another politician to the people there. She’d been a child when she’d left Winterfell but she remembered the parties her parents would host and with the passing of time she’d come to understand the particularly high esteem in which her father had been held in comparison to other lords she’d seen at court. The men and ladies who’d lined the large table of Winterfell’s hall happily sharing jests and ale with their host were a far cry from the tight smiles and sullen bows that Joffrey had received. The cloying words of men on their knees rang false compared to the blunt but honest talk she’d been raised around. As a child, the honeyed tongues of the South had sounded pleasing but with age she saw the value of the plain-spoken way of the Northerners who’d admired her father.

All her life, she’d been taught about duty and its importance. It hadn’t always been easy to
understand as a girl. She recalled when there’d been a horrible flood around Barrowtown and how she’d whined to her mother that it wasn’t fair that he was away on her eighth birthday.

“Do you think the people of Barrowtown think it’s fair that a flood came along and destroyed so many homes and businesses? Stop your crying now,” her mother had said, passing her a handkerchief and holding her close to take the sting from her words. “Your father loves you very much, Sansa. He is going to call you later and he regrets missing your special day but sometimes it cannot be helped. He is the highest lord in the North and he takes his duty to represent our people and see to their needs very seriously. It is a heavy burden at times and sometimes it takes him away from us for longer than we like. From Widow’s Watch to the Stony Shore and from Moat Cailin to Castle Black, your father makes a point of visiting as much of these extensive lands as possible each year. And when disasters occur, he will go to them. He says it’s important that he knows the people and that they know him. It’s the surest way to earn their hearts and loyalty, my love.”

And they had loved him. They still did.

There was a reason the North rebelled when Lord Stark was executed. He wasn’t just some lord to them. He was Ned Stark, the embodiment of their values and their homeland who Joffrey had had shot like her dog after the flimsiest excuse for a trial Westeros had seen since days long past.

And when Robb had called the Northern Lords together and they as a body had all had a say, they’d condemned the actions of the Crown as unjust and declared the North an independent kingdom from that day forward. But the Crown had the numbers when it came to military strength and, while Robb’s Rebellion had known success for a time, Joffrey’s grandfather was a very cunning strategist. Tywin Lannister might not have been there but he’d orchestrated Robb’s murder along with her mother’s. And in doing so, he’d killed not only her brother but effectively turned the remaining rebels into hunted shadow warriors over the course of a dinner.

And what can you do about any of that?

She didn’t know. It was such a long way from her here. She only wanted to escape the life of Alayne Stone. She wanted to leave the Vale and find her younger siblings if any of them still lived. She wanted a life away from the intrigues of court and politics. And Jon…she wanted something with him, something too fragile to name just yet but she cherished the possibility deep within her heart.

But first, she had to deal with Petyr’s return. Jon might be the soldier, the muscle and possess the knowledge and skills to get them away but that didn’t mean she couldn’t help their cause. There might be times she’d felt like a maiden locked in a tower but that didn’t mean the maiden had never before considered making herself a key.

As her room grew brighter, she got up, showered and dressed before heading downstairs to the kitchen. She found the cook and did a quick assessment of the larder.

“Shall I make it for you, Miss Alayne?” the woman asked.

“No, thank you. I can do it,” she answered, tying back her hair and throwing on an apron. She had not done much cooking or baking of late but she had not forgotten how.

She carried the tray to his study, figuring if he’d returned before dawn he might be working already. But he was not there. She sighed as she looked down at the platter of food. It would be a pity for it to spoil. Lifting her chin, she climbed the stairs, turning down the hall away from her room and Jon’s and towards the master suite. He might have decided to sleep for a few hours. She knocked and heard his call for her to enter.
The room was dark except for the bedside lamp. He was in bed but obviously awake and gratefully still in his trousers and button-down shirt. He was on the phone. His laptop sat open beside him.

“I can understand his reluctance to leave the warmth of the south on the cusp of winter but I assure you he’ll find it well worth the…” He trailed off when he saw it was her. “I’ll call you back.” He tossed his phone aside and removed his glasses. He looked her up and down appreciatively. She reminded herself to stand up straight instead of wilting under his hungry gaze. She’d chosen a fitted black skirt and blouse that matched her eyes, far dressier than what she’d generally wear for a simple day at home. “What’s this, Alayne?” he asked, eyeing the tray next as he closed the laptop and leaned back against his pillows.

“Breakfast, Father,” she answered, kissing him lightly on the brow before setting the tray down across his lap. “When I learned you’d returned early, I prepared it to welcome you back.”

“You prepared it? For me?” A cat-like grin began to curl the corners of his mouth. Suspicion warred with his desire for her attention.

“Yes, of course,” she smiled sweetly.

“Sit,” he commanded. There was an armchair by his bureau but she knew where he’d want her. She sat upon the bed, close but not too close. His fork pierced the omelet. “Is that pomegranate I spy?”

“Yes, they’re in season and cook had them on hand.” He also happened to like them very much. “I hoped it might please you,” she said demurely.

“It does please me. But to what do I owe the generosity of this gesture?” he asked as he took a bite. “Is it for allowing Jon Snow to remain?”

“Partly but mostly because I missed you. I wish to be a dutiful daughter.” He nodded and took another bite. His narrowed eyes told her he wasn’t buying it. She ducked her chin and lifted her eyes slowly up to meet his. “But also because I have something to confess.”

The grey-green eyes widened. “Something to confess, is it?”

“Yes, Father.” She chewed her bottom lip and gave him what she hoped was a convincing look of penitence.

A trace of the sticky red juice dribbled down his chin as he smacked his lips in anticipation. She offered the fine linen napkin but he only leaned towards her, allowing her to wipe away the juice. She pretended she didn’t mind when his hand clasped hers and his fingers stroked her palm even after she’d finished cleaning his chin.

The grin became a smirk. “Go on, Alayne...confess.”

He’d slept more than the previous night but still felt tired. Dreams of fire and smoke, of knives in the dark, of blood in the snow had plagued him on and off even as he’d held her close. When he’d returned to her room shortly after leaving it to tell her of Baelish’s return, he’d felt caged and angry, wanting to leave but needing to prepare. It was her obvious distress which had moved him to stay.
He couldn’t bear to leave knowing she was afraid and that she might be on the verge of another panic attack.

“One…two…three…four…” he’d counted.

He wondered if Sansa knew the counting had been for himself as much as her. He had to be smart about this. And gods be good, he’d need patience, always the most difficult virtue for him. He might not know why Baelish had returned early but it didn’t change what needed to be done. He needed to focus.

“forty-nine…fifty…fifty-one…fifty-two…”

He’d thought of the unread message from Sam and wondered what he might have to share. He’d considered the best potential places to steal a car. They wouldn’t be able to stay in one of the estate’s cars for long. He’d like to send word to Davos but feared tipping his hand too soon.

But focus was not so easy as she’d been nuzzling into his neck, her body nestled against his, soft and pliant in his arms, this girl he loved. He’d pictured a rainy day lying in bed with Sansa like now except away from the Vale. He imagined making love to her for an entire day.

“eighty-uh…eighty-eight…eighty-nine…ninety…”

He’d clenched his hand and told himself to stop that line of thinking right now. He’d kissed her cheek and left her bed for the second time that morning, crawling into his own and not expecting to sleep a wink. He’d fallen asleep though and the dreams had haunted him all over again.

Sansa was brushing out her hair by the fire and singing to herself as he entered her room. But then she’d morphed into Ygritte, stripped to the waist and washing the soot and smoke from her hair and body by the sink in Mance’s house, an angry-looking bruise on her cheek. His own cuts and bruises had been bandaged but they throbbed as he laid in bed and watched, regretting what must happen soon now that he could no longer play this game.

“Here,” she said, pushing the bottle into his uninjured hand. “Drink this.”

The ale was strong and bitter. He drank and drank till he found oblivion. It hadn’t changed the outcome.

The dream changed again to his mother making pancakes in the flat they had shared after they’d left Flint’s Ranch. She was singing as she flipped a pancake. Ghost was sitting by his side, his head cocked to the side as they eagerly watched and waited.

There was a sharp knock on the door just as she sat the syrup in front of him. She went deathly pale, clamping a hand over his mouth and hissing at Ghost to be quiet. He might’ve reminded her that the pup was always quiet but obviously he was supposed to be quiet, too. She pressed his head against her chest. He could feel the frantic beating of her heart and it frightened him.

“Mum?” he whispered as the silence crept on and on even when the heavy retreating footfalls could no longer be heard.

“It’s nothing,” she said with false cheer and kissed the top of his head. “Would you like some more juice?”

“For the Watch,” they said as the stabbed him again. The snow was stained dark red from the blood.
Jon startled awake, reaching for someone who wasn’t there. He was in his bed and alone.

“San-”

He stopped himself before he could finish. Alayne. She must be Alayne here in the house. You cannot give her away to anyone and he cannot know what you learned.

He glanced at the time with a grimace. He needed to tell her what Sam had shared. With his heart pounding, he quickly dressed and knocked on her door. He was greeted by silence. He hesitated for a few seconds before opening it to find she was not there. His mother’s panic from the dream along with Sansa’s distress last night revisited him and now it was he who felt short of breath. He needed a shower but he needed to find her more.

He left his room and started towards the stairs but heard a door opening and turned towards it. Sansa was emerging from Baelish’s bedroom with a tray tucked against her hip. Her back was to him and he was surprised by her attire. The skirt was fitted, an alluring sight. Her long dark hair was hanging loose in waves. Why was she dressed like that? Was she going somewhere? Somewhere with Baelish and not him?

“What were you doing in there?”

She jumped at the sound of his voice. He’d spoken more harshly than he’d meant to. No, I meant it. He didn’t like the thought of her alone with that man in his bedroom. He worried for her but he’d also tasted betrayal not so long ago. He’d learned her secret and she’d gone straight to Baelish as soon as he’d returned. His heart cried that two nights of indifferent sleep were messing with him but it didn’t quell the spark of suspicion, anger…and jealousy.

“I brought my father breakfast.”

“You brought my father breakfast? Breakfast in bed? How very cozy.” He sounded like a jealous ass. Her brow creased and she frowned. She started to walk past him so he stepped in front of her. “Why’d you go to him?” he whispered. A whisper? It was practically a growl. He was a jealous ass…and a worried one. “I thought we’d agreed to…or maybe you prefer it here.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened as she realized what he was hinting at. “I’ve shared many things with you, Jon. I trust you but do you trust me at all?” she hissed under her breath.

He bit down on the inside of his cheek, ashamed of his outburst and all the things he’d not yet shared with her.

“I’m sorry. I do trust you. That was completely uncalled for and…let me carry that back to the kitchen for you,” he said in a far calmer voice, taking the tray of dirty dishes and cutlery from her.

She allowed him to take them and told him she’d be in her studio. “You may join me there. There’s things I’d like to discuss…once you’ve showered though.”

Risking a glance her way, he saw her nose wrinkling up but her eyes were sparkling with humor. His cheeks grew hot but he also knew he was forgiven. “I’ll find you up there once I no longer stink, Alayne.”

Her smile widened, pleased that he’d not slipped with the name at least. He hurried off to the kitchen and then back to his room to do as his lady commanded.

An hour later, they were alone in her attic studio. She’d pulled out a half-finished painting and placed it on the easel and set up her paints but she’d not been working…not on art anyway. They
were sitting on the small loveseat together, quietly exchanging what they had learned since the previous night.

“Petyr’s in business with Roose Bolton?”

“For over a year now apparently.”

“Gods, that’s...that’s troubling.”

“You can say that again.”

The father of Ramsay Snow was in business with Baelish. Jon had to wonder if Alayne’s presence in town the day of the bank heist was as random as it had appeared. Possibly. Ramsay seemed to be a bit of a wild card.

“Another reason to get you away that much sooner.” She slumped inward. He didn’t want her fretting endlessly. “Hey,” he said, tipping up her chin. “It’s going to be alright. I’m working on it, okay?”

Jon had never seen the Sunset Sea in person but he thought maybe her eyes might rival them as she bravely agreed. She trusted him to keep her safe and he was far more aware of the heady fragrance of her shampoo and the subtle hint of pomegranate that lingered on her skin than he should be.

“What’d you learn from him?” he asked, struggling to shift his focus to where it should be again.

“He said he met with Cersei but told me it was nothing, just that she’s desperately in need of a loan. Meanwhile, Stannis Baratheon has been making overtures to the Iron Bank, potentially blocking her efforts. He also met with others who he did not name and told me a wise player keeps his options open.”

“Could that have been Stannis?”

“No, I don’t think so. I only saw him at court a time or two but him and Petyr never seemed friendly in the slightest.”

“What else?”

“He also mentioned that Sansa Stark was highly sought after still and not just by the Crown. He said I could play an important role in bringing the North back into harmony with the rest of the country depending on how certain pieces moved. I asked what he meant and he said that there could come a day when someone else sat the Iron Throne. Then, he made a vague reference to all the gifts he’d give me some day but I knew he wouldn’t tell me anymore just yet.”

Jon scowled, not quite sure what to make of that. “Why’d he return early?”

“Said there was a new friend coming to visit us soon and he wanted everything to be ready.”

“Ready? What would he need to do to be ready for a house guest?”

“I’m not sure.” She drew a deep breath and put her hand in his. “Jon, do you see why I went to him this morning? I had to reassure him of my loyalty but also knew he’d have information to share.”

“I do see and you were right to go. I’m sorry for my behavior. It is wise to keep him believing you’re content and I shouldn’t have reacted that way.”

“Thank you,” she said, blushing slightly before she nervously tucked a stray lock back behind her
ear. “But in order to prove my faithfulness, I confessed my sins as a dutiful daughter should.”

“Your sins?” He felt the blood draining from his face at the thought of her sharing certain things before reminding himself that he did trust her. He also remembered how clever she had been when she’d saved him from being sacked the night of the party.

“I told him I’d talked you into taking me to Myranda’s although he’d told me not to leave the estate before he left. I also told him I’d asked you to teach me how to drive. It was wrong of me to do those things while he was away when I know how much he worries over me and only wishes to keep me safe,” she said with a coy smile.

He chuckled. Those were very minor things but he could well picture her making her confession, her big blue eyes imploring as she begged forgiveness for her wickedness. A man with Baelish’s ego would find it satisfying.

Perhaps any man would, a more primal part of him thought as he stared down at their hands twined together. It was warm up here in the attic and her thigh was pressed against his. She smelled nice and would feel nicer in his arms.

“Are you sure he won’t blame me for leading you into temptation?” he asked teasingly.

“Oh, no. He believes I’ve bewitched you,” she replied, her tongue darting out to wet her lips.

Whether she did so innocently or not, it had an effect and he groaned softly. “Bewitched me?” he repeated as he wetted his own lips.

Her eyes tracked his movement. “That’s what he said.”

“Maybe he’s right about that.” He cupped the back of her neck. Her breath hitched waiting for him to close the distance but he stopped himself from going further just yet. “I want to kiss you. I shouldn’t but I really want to all the same.”

“I’d like to be kissed,” she breathed.

“I promised myself I’d wait for…I’ll wait for anything that might happen. I told myself just last night that we need to get away and that nothing can happen between us until I feel like we’re relatively safe. And that’s only if you want it to but…”

She leaned towards him, pressing one slim, cool finger to his lips. His resolve was going to crumble without a doubt. “A kiss wouldn’t be so bad, would it? It’s just a little kiss.”

“Just a little kiss? That’s not the kind of kiss I mean to give you.”

She gasped just before his lips crashed against hers. He savored the sweetness of her eagerly kissing him back and the heady rush before he started nipping her bottom lip. Her lips parted and she melted against his chest, her arms circling his neck as he slanted his head to deepen the kiss. He was still cupping the back of her head with one hand, holding her steady as the other hand found her hip and squeezed. He slid his tongue into her mouth, exulting in the moan he drew from her.

He was annoyed with himself for giving in to desire but not enough to stop apparently. The minutes ticked by as they kissed and kissed. Their lips would be swollen but Jon didn’t want to stop. She was supposed to eat lunch with Baelish later. He had to think with his head and not his heart…or his cock.
Her eyes were nearly black when he straightened again. “I’m sorry,” he said gruffly.

“No, you’re not.”

“You’re right. I’m not really,” he laughed. “But we need to be careful and I need to control myself.”

She sighed, her head resting on his shoulder and he felt her fingers slipping through his hair sending a delicious jolt coursing through him all over again. She started kissing his jaw.

“Sansa…” he said warningly.

“Alayne,” she corrected.

“I can’t think straight when you’re kissing me.”

“That’s lovely to hear.” She cleared her throat though and moved her head off his shoulder. “Did Sam tell you anything else?”

“No. Well, yes. He sent a list of possible hits on your sketch but there’s dozens of them and I haven’t had a chance to look through them all yet.”

“Can I see?”

“Of course. I actually…” He pulled his phone out where he’d taken a screen shot of Sam’s list, thinking he’d read through it more thoroughly while she painted. “Here.”

She began to scroll through the names so he stood to pace, needing a little separation after their impromptu make-out session had left him hungry for more. He wondered if Roose Bolton could potentially be the guest Baelish was anticipating but surely even he wouldn’t be that bold? Or could it be whoever he’d been encouraging to come visit from the South over the phone when she’d entered his bedroom?

“Jon?”

He stopped his pacing at her startled cry. She pointed to the screen. Towards the bottom of the alphabetized list a name had jumped out at her even if it hadn’t rang any bells with him when he’d briefly scanned it earlier…Brynden Tully.

**Chapter End Notes**

FYI-Lysa doesn’t exist in this AU in case anyone was wondering.

Thank you for reading ❤️
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Sansa has tasks and planning to do before she and Jon can make their move but Petyr has moves of his own in mind.

Chapter Notes

Warning-Creepyfinger's being creepy in this chapter.

Also, first POV that isn't Jon or Sansa in this chapter. There will be more of those as we go along.

Her great-uncle Bryden. He'd attempted to approach her that day in town according to Jon. He'd been on this very estate the night of the party, trying to make contact with her it would seem. Sansa wondered where he was now and hoped he was alright. She wished there was a way to get a message to him.

She tried picturing him as she’d last seen him when she was no more than nine. Rickon had been a baby and he’d come to Winterfell for a visit to see his great-nieces and nephews. Sansa remembered his gravelly voice and the way he’d smelled of pipe smoke. His whiskers had been scratchy against her cheek. She recalled how close her mother and him had been. Father had been away on Parliamentary business and Robb had followed him around everywhere.

“My father works for the king. What do you do for a living, Uncle Bryden?” she remembered her brother asking.

“Little of this, little of that. Mostly, whatever I please, lad,” he’d chuckled in response.

Her mother had said he’d been a soldier in his younger days. She wondered what it was he did. How long had he been looking for her?

What would he think of me now? More importantly, how did he find me?

If her great-uncle could find her, who else might?

But there’d been little time to do anything about her discovery thus far.

A week had passed since Baelish had come back and Sansa had never seen such a flurry of activity around the estate in preparation for the mysterious guest who’d prompted his early return. Extra servants had been brought in and they were working day and night, cleaning the manse from top to bottom. The grounds crew was busy as well seeing that every flower, shrub and garden stone was just so. One would’ve thought royalty had been invited but Petyr had only said there’d be a dozen or so guests from the Vale attending a dinner tomorrow night along with visitors from Dorne.
Despite her curiosity, Petyr had not shared any more than that tidbit of information.

“Dorne?” Jon had asked. “I hope that means we can rule out Roose Bolton at least.”

“I hope so, too.”

“Who does he know in Dorne?”

“I don’t know. Maybe one of the new acquaintances he made on his trip.”

Meanwhile, she’d been given her own set of tasks to see to which included arranging the welcoming dinner party for tomorrow night, hiring a string quartet to perform as well as servers for the party and overseeing the floral arrangements. She’d found herself quite busy, only pausing at mealtimes and at night before falling into bed exhausted.

Jon had given her a task as well but that was something she couldn’t breathe a word of to anyone.

“Pack a small bag; a jacket, two shirts, good shoes, a pair of jeans, socks, underwear…money if you have any.”

“I only have a little, a few dragons at most, I’m afraid.” She hated being a disappointment. “I could ask him for some. I could say I wanted to go shopping or…”

“No. I’ve got some. I don’t want you asking, making him suspect anything.”

“But we’ll need money.”

“We’ll have some. I’ve got some savings tucked away elsewhere.” She’d started fretting and he stroked her cheek. “When I was a teenager, I ran away from home once without so much as a groat to my name. I managed not to starve. We’ll live like kings by comparison.”

“This isn’t the job you signed up for,” she’d sighed.

“No…this is much more than a job to me now. I hope you know that.” She couldn’t help smiling when he was so sweet. “Pack the things I said. We can pick up any other necessities on the road. Is there anything of special value to you here? A piece of jewelry? A photograph? Some memento?”

She’d left Kings Landing with nothing but the clothes on her back. There’d been no time to grab anything when they’d fled the palace even if she’d known where she was going ahead of time.

“No, nothing here like that except my art.”

“I’m sorry. We probably can’t take any of that. Put a sketch pad and some pencils in the bag though. Might come in handy or at least alleviate boredom.”

“Are we leaving soon then?” she’d asked, suddenly nervous at the prospect.

As much as she wanted to go, this would be a huge step. She’d known safety here even if it was partly an illusion.

He’d stepped closer. “As soon as can be.” He’d pulled her into his arms and kissed her brow tenderly. “It’ll be alright. I’ll take care of you,” he’d murmured, his warm breath tickling her skin, sending chills through her but giving her comfort all the same.

“I trust you. I can be brave.”
“You already are. Give me the bag once it’s ready, alright?”

Speaking of clothes, Petyr had brought her an evening gown back from Kings Landing and insisted she wear it tomorrow night. A seamstress had come to the manse for a final fitting this afternoon. It was beautiful but she’d never worn such a sultry gown, neither as Sansa nor Alayne.

“It’s perfect. Who could possibly resist you?” Petyr asked as she reluctantly descended the stairs to model the fiery red silk dress for him.

Jon was following behind her and she could well imagine the murderous expression he’d be wearing as her so-called father’s eyes swept up and down her figure. With spaghetti straps and a plunging neckline, it was cinched at the waist and had a ruffled slit that came part way up her thigh. Jon’s own eyes had lit up with appreciation when she’d stepped out of her room but it had quickly occurred to him that other men would be seeing her in it as well.

“I may be forced to break a few hands tomorrow night,” he’d groused as they’d headed down the hall.

“You will not,” she’d admonished, hoping her giggles wouldn’t escape and infuriate him further. “Do I look like a tart?” she’d asked next, fearing her voice might betray her mixed emotions. She enjoyed dressing up but she didn’t want to feel cheap. She’d thought of some of the other women who would attend Petyr’s parties. She never wanted to be compared to them.

“No, you’re gorgeous, a confident young woman wearing an evening gown. Not a tart in sight.”

“Thank you, Jon.”

“I’d prefer you in black though.”

She had laughed then. “Perhaps someday I’ll wear a little black dress for you.”

When she reached the bottom of the stair, Petyr circled her twice, his eyes never rising above her shoulders until he’d completed his circuit. He slid a finger under one strap, feeling the silk and she tensed, loathing his touch and worried that Jon might react in some manner.

Petyr seemed oblivious to the discomfort he was causing. He studied her hair. “Wear it up tomorrow night.”

“Yes, Father.”

“What do you think, Mr. Snow?” he asked next, acknowledging Jon’s presence for the first time. “Isn’t she a vision?”

She glanced his way, nervous of what he might say but he smiled and said, “Yes, Mr. Baelish. She’s radiant.”

Her cheeks grew warm and she felt warm all over from his words. Don’t be a silly goose, mooning at him like a little girl with a crush.

She quickly scurried up the stairs before Petyr could turn his full attention back to her. She’d avoided being in the same room with both Petyr and Jon as much as possible. Despite her worries over Jon playing his part, she was finding it hard to maintain the façade of Alayne when Jon was present and she was finding it hard to hide her feelings for him. That simply wouldn’t do.

With all the preparations the past several days, there’d been precious few moments for painting or
for her and Jon to be alone together at all. And at night, he’d not been staying with her, mindful of Petyr’s presence and no doubt trying to avoid acting on his desires like he had the other morning in her attic studio. She understood the need to be careful but she sorely missed his company. She missed Jon’s warmth beside her in bed and the comfort of his arms. Her sleep had been troubled last night, dreams of being lost in the woods and the ominous baying of hounds.

And tonight, she’d been denied Jon’s company again as Petyr had asked her to join him for dinner, just the two of them.

She stifled a yawn as she finished her entrée and Petyr noticed. “Are you tired?”

“Yes. There’s been a good deal to do the past week.”

“There has been. It’ll all be worth it, Alayne. You’ll see. Do you believe everything is arranged on your end?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Excellent.”

“Aren’t you going to tell me who’s coming to visit, Father?”

“You’ll see tomorrow, sweetling. Be so good as to bring the wine down this way,” he said glancing at the clock.

He wanted to play his little games and keep secrets. Fine, she would let him play. But she would not play along tonight. She just longed to escape his company.

“I’m sorry but I’m very tired. I believe I’ll retire early,” she said, rising from the table and ignoring his request.

“Early? Very well. But what’s this? No kiss goodnight for your father, Alayne?” he asked with a smirk.

She froze. He’d not asked for a kiss in a good while. He’d not tried to force one on her either since the night she’d refused him, the first night she’d asked Jon to stay in her room till she fell asleep. Warning bells were sounding in her head from the dangerous look in his eyes but she kept telling herself not to overthink it, not to give anything away.

“It’s just a little kiss.”

‘Just a little kiss?’ echoed in her head, Jon’s words the other morning right before he’d kissed her.

She bit her lip, wishing this didn’t feel like a betrayal before crossing to Petyr and planting a swift, dry kiss on his cheek. She spun on her heel but his hands darted out and he snatched her by her wrists. He pulled her back down towards him, his eyes hard and his intent clear. This would be more than a little kiss.

When she’d been Alayne, she might’ve let him pull her into his lap and kiss her like he wanted. But Sansa wanted no part of his kisses. That former passive acceptance had completely disappeared and she struggled, doing her best to yank away from his grasp but he was stronger. She lost her balance and started to stumble into him.

Just as she started to open her mouth and scream though, the door leading from the kitchen to the dining room opened and Sansa found herself being released. She nearly collapsed with relief and
could only feel elation at the sight of the cook. The poor old woman couldn’t quite conceal her shock as she awkwardly asked if Mr. Baelish wanted his dessert now.

“None for me, thanks,” she said hurriedly, silently blessing her for the unusual intrusion.

“I think you should turn in early as you suggested, sweetling,” he said, the picture of polite concern as if nothing had even happened. *How do you look at yourself in the mirror?* “You need you beauty sleep, Alayne. We wouldn’t want you looking bedraggled tomorrow night for our guests.”

“Yes, Father.”

Her pace was quick as she left the room. She was running by the time she reached the stairs. She didn’t care. Her heart was pounding and the tears were already falling fast. She bumped into the housekeeper at the head of the stairs and gave an incoherent excuse before she turned down the hall towards her room. But she bypassed it and headed straight to Jon’s. She didn’t even knock. She pushed her way inside.

He was on the phone but sprang off the bed like he was ready to fight an intruder. She supposed he was.

“I’ll call you back, Sam,” he said into the phone after making a rapid assessment of her state.

She ran straight into his arms. “Soon,” she sobbed. “Please, make it soon.”

She’d told him she would be eating dinner alone with Baelish tonight. He hadn’t liked it but it would hardly do for him to go charging in to check up on them. He’d eaten a quick bite in the kitchen after going for a run. He’d asked the cook if he thought they were almost finished. She’d glanced at the clock and said she was supposed to go check about dessert in a few minutes. He’d come up to his room to call Sam, thinking he might break his self-imposed isolation tonight and visit her later.

He clasped her hands and saw the reddish marks around her wrists. Wrath filled him and he vowed never to leave her alone with Baelish again.

“Tell me what happened,” he urged, straining to keep his voice level and prevent his rage from taking over.

“He grabbed me. He tried to kiss me. He was rougher than he’s ever been.”

“That fucking…”

He choked on the rest of his words, too angry to speak. Hadn’t he suspected this? He had but knowing it to be true was somehow worse. He wanted to kill that son of a bitch. It’d be murder but he found himself not caring more and more when it came to Petyr Baelish.

“I didn’t want to kiss him. I didn’t want his kiss, Jon,” she wept. Did she imagine he’d ever believe she did?

“I know, darling,” he assured her, holding her close. She leaned back, blinking at him. He
wondered if she minded the endearment. “Is that…”

“I liked it,” she said quietly, allowing him to hold her again.

She was upset but, as she continued to talk, he sensed she was also angry. Good. A little anger would help steel her resolve when it came time to go. There was no room for crippling fear or misplaced guilt when it came to that man and what must be done.

Her sniffles quieted and she wiped her eyes. “I’m sorry for bursting in on you.”

“It’s alright. You can always burst in on me.”

“What if you’d been indecent?”

“Then, I guess you’d have got an eyeful but I still wouldn’t care.”

She blushed and looked away. “Were you talking to Sam before I came up here?”

“Yes. He’s working on getting me some documents we’ll need.”

“Documents?”

“I’ll explain in a minute. But first, I told him to stop looking for information about Alayne Stone. Sam’s careful but I’ve asked him to stop looking into a lot of things right now. I don’t want anything traced back to us here. Also, I was thinking about what you said the other morning and maybe we can figure out a way to get a message to your great uncle.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” She was swaying on her feet. “You’re exhausted.”

“I am.”

“You need rest. When we go, sleep might not be a priority for a while.”

“I’ve had a horrible time sleeping of late.”

“Me, too,” he said, trying to hide his grin and failing. “I miss you.”

“I miss you, too.”

“But it’s better for now if we’re…careful.”

“I know.” She glanced towards his bed and her cheeks blossomed with color. “I’ll go to my room and…”

He tugged her towards the bed. “No, you can sit and talk. There’s still things I want to tell you if you don’t mind hearing them.”

“I’d like that.”

She sat down and he joined her. She’d never been in his bedroom before other than hovering in the doorway. But now, she was sitting on his bed. He ignored the quiver of desire that sent racing through him. He had things to tell her and they had plans to make.
Petyr sat at his desk, checking his email. All was in place and tomorrow should go off without a hitch as long as Roose upheld his promise with regards to Ramsay. Roose was a good business associate. It was a shame his bastard son was such a nuisance, one of those annoying pieces that had moves of his own in mind.

Sometimes, Petyr reveled in unexpected moves. It made the game more exciting and allowed him to show of his prowess but in Ramsay’s case what at first had seemed to be an unexpected and fortuitous way to keep Sansa on her leash had wound up leading to other problems, Jon Snow being the most immediate of those. Never mind that Petyr had hired the man. He’d seemed like a good prospect for the job, someone with no family ties to distract him, a man who needed the work and a place to live. He should have been grateful to get hired after what was said of his time with the Watch and the Free Folk. Maybe Petyr should’ve anticipated what might happen when he brought two lonely young people together in this isolated little corner of the world though.

Snow…the bastard was clearly besotted with her. That would’ve been alright if she’d kept her head and kept him in his place. He thought he’d trained her better than that. He’d hoped all those girlish notions and songs would’ve left her by now. He had to suppress the urge to snarl when he recalled the lovesick way she’d been staring at her bodyguard earlier as she’d been modeling the dress Petyr had bought her.

*Ungrateful little chit.*

It was alright though. She was only a girl, just as Cat had once been. He’d forgive her.

But Snow…

“Yes, Grisel?” he asked with a smile as the housekeeper entered.

“I checked like you asked, sir.”

“And?”

“Miss Alayne’s not in her bedroom, sir. She went into his room. She’s still there as far as I know.”

Lothor’s head popped up from his chest where he’d been dozing. He scowled but Petyr waved a dismissive hand his way.

“Thank you, Grisel.”

He’d frightened her, knowing the cook would come in at the precise time he’d instructed her to and ask about dessert. He’d also told Grisel to be waiting for Miss Alayne to come up the stairs from dinner and then to discreetly take note of where she went.

He waited for the housekeeper to leave and composed another email as Lothor watched him.

“We may be making a journey south soon,” he said at last.

Lothor nodded. He was an ideal bodyguard. He never argued or caused trouble. He never got notions in his head that Petyr hadn’t put there first. He just accepted Petyr’s gold and did as instructed. And there was no way Petyr would ever be seduced by him or have any desire to seduce him in return.
“Tomorrow night, my daughter will be meeting her future husband. I think he’ll be charmed by her, don’t you?” Another nod. “And if the prince takes to her as I expect he will…I really don’t think she’ll need a bodyguard anymore, do you?”

Lothor nodded once more and smiled. He knew exactly what was meant by that.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The mysterious guest is revealed and Jon and Sansa decide they must leave before the party's over. However, Petyr has other ideas and an uninvited guest will complicate things even further.

Chapter Notes

TW-Brief violence this chapter with minor character deaths.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She hadn’t wanted to let him into her room after last night but what choice did she have? She had to play the game just a little while longer. She heard a sound from the connecting room and worried Jon would be coming through the door any minute. She’d wound up falling asleep in his room after they’d talked. He’d carried her back to her bed an hour before dawn. She noticed Petyr’s eyes drifting to his door as well and wondered if he somehow knew.

But she had more immediate concerns this morning.

“And he already knows who I am? Who I truly am?” she whispered, her heart thundering away. He’d never told her secret to another soul for all she knew. Why now? What made him sure enough to take the risk?

Petyr was standing in her bedroom, idly flipping through the pages of her sketch pad, the one she hadn’t packed. She’d removed all the half-finished sketches of Jon already; sketches of his hands, his mouth, his eyes…things she’d drawn over the past few weeks to keep her own hands busy and occupy her mind when she was troubled.

“Yes. It’s not as if Alayne Stone would be enough of an inducement to bring him to the Vale, let alone make him an acceptable bride.” He cast her sketch pad aside and rubbed his hands together. “Don’t let that worry you. He will call you Alayne and you’re to call him Griff until we’re in Dorne.”

“Griff?”

“He has reasons for concealing his identity as well, sweetling. At least outside of Dorne.”

“Of course. But Dorne? Are we…”

“The Stark name combined with the Targaryens. The North and South allied against the Crown. Cersei won’t know what hit her.”

“I didn’t think Northerners were that fond of the Targaryens or Southroners in general.”
“They’re not but rebellions can make for strange bedfellows. Everyone wants peace.”

“Everyone but Cersei.”

“Oh, she wants peace…just on her terms. But everyone else is tired of the squabbling since King Robert’s death. War can be a fine thing for the economy but not a civil war. It’s costly.”

Dragons and stags, pennies and groats. Was that what it all came down to? “Stannis will never accept…”

“Even with the Iron Bank financing him, Stannis is unlikely to find the political backing he needs. Even his own brother isn’t fully supporting his claim. The Targaryens have powerful supporters in Dorne and Essos. And the Tyrells are secretly making contact with them against Cersei. And you, my sweet daughter, you could bring the North and dare I say the Vale through me into that alliance. You could be the key to it all. Rhaegar might take the throne but Aegon is his heir. You’d be his queen someday.”

I don’t want to be his queen. I don’t want some stranger to be my husband.

Petyr came closer and she stiffened. She did not know if she could stand still if he touched her. Mercifully, he did not but she could smell the mint on his breath as his eyes roamed her face before dropping down to her body.

“You were a child when I first laid eyes on you but even then I could see it. You’ve grown into a beautiful woman, more beautiful than she was even. You’ll make a lovely bride. I envy him.”

She felt ill but forced herself to smile as if nothing could please her more. She forced herself not to look towards the connecting door. Jon had said he wouldn’t leave her alone with him again but he couldn’t promise that here. They’d planned on leaving in a few days but perhaps they wouldn’t be able to wait for Sam’s forged documents to be ready. Perhaps Myranda could help them or maybe her message to her great uncle via Sam might reach him sooner than hoped.

“What do you think of all the gifts I’m giving you, Alayne?”

“I’m…I’m overwhelmed, Father. I can hardly believe it. You arranged all this just for me?” It wasn’t for her. It was very much about Petyr and his power and position but he’d want her to think it was all for her. He’d want her appreciative and humble. “I’m so grateful but a little overcome. I hadn’t expected such a…surprise. May I ask if the prince is handsome?” she asked wistfully as if that was what mattered most.

He appeared satisfied with her response. “They say he is. I’ve not met him personally. Dress with care tonight. He’ll appreciate the color, I believe.” He lightly touched her hair. “We’ll see your hair red again soon but for tonight, he’ll meet Alayne.”

“Yes, Father.”

He started to leave but then turned back. “Charm him, Alayne. Tempt him and beguile him but do not give him your sweetest gift until you are wed. Princes do not marry whores. Is that understood?”

Why would he say that? Fear pricked at her as his eyes shifted to Jon’s door one final time. “I understand. You know I…I’m still a virgin, Father.”

“I know, sweetling.” He left at last, closing her bedroom door behind him.
Her knees felt ready to buckle but instead she went to Jon’s door and softly knocked. There was much to tell him.

“Don’t leave me alone with either of them tonight,” she’d murmured under her breath.

He’d been stashing their bags as Sansa quietly said goodbye to Lady before she had to get dressed for the party.

“I won’t,” he’d replied before seizing the opportunity to kiss her in the empty stables.

The earthy scent of horses and fresh hay along with leather and saddle oil hadn’t detracted from the moment for Jon in the slightest. They were smells he associated with the happiest memories of his childhood and also with their first kiss.

But the kiss soon turned passionate and he’d had her pressed up against Lady’s stall when the mare had snorted and head butted him, bringing him back to his senses and making them both laugh.

“She doesn’t like me interrupting your goodbye.”

“She’s reminding us to be careful, I think.”

“Aye…you’re probably right. A smart horse.”

“She is,” she’d sighed sadly.

They were going tonight. When the party was in full swing after dinner and the musicians were playing and the guests were growing suitably drunk, Sansa was going to excuse herself for a moment. He’d watch for her signal, follow her and then he'd steal her away.

It was sooner than he’d planned but essentially it boiled down to getting in the car and going and that’s what they were going to do. Baelish would not be selling her to some hidden exiled prince from Dorne.

All day long, as soon as she’d shared this new plan, every cell in his body had been screaming that it was time to go. He knew it but the timing needed to be right.

Dressed in his tailored black suit she’d helped him select once more, he knocked on her door to escort her downstairs to the party where she was to meet her future husband.

He’ll never be her husband but I will be…sort of.

He’d have to communicate with Sam once they got away. Some coffeeshop or public library with Wi-Fi would serve. He’d find a way to get those documents and they’d be Jon and Lyanna Stone, a married couple. Two bastards from the East who’d found each other and traveled North in search of work and long lost kin.

He felt guilty asking this of Sam. Using his position at the Citadel to look up information was one thing but forging government documents was a felony. If anyone could do it, it was Sam but Jon hated asking especially when he couldn’t be entirely forthcoming as to why he needed them.
I’m sorry, Sam. I know this is not fair of me to ask while keeping shit from you and I wouldn’t if I...

Sam hadn’t balked even for a moment though. “You’re my brother, Jon, now and always. So no more apologies or excuses are necessary nor do I wish to hear them.”

And would your wife feel the same if you wound up imprisoned because of me?

It couldn’t be helped now though. Sam had already said he’d do it and this was their best chance.

The door opened and he gulped at the sight of her. He’d seen the dress just yesterday but with her hair artfully arranged in a bun with tendrils hanging down around her ears, she was nothing short of stunning.

“I’m…I feel underdressed,” he joked.

“You don’t look it. You’re quite handsome in black.”

“Thank you. You’re beautiful.” He checked the impulse to lean forward and kiss her cheek. He wasn’t a boy and this wasn’t a date. He offered his arm. “Shall we?”

She grinned and took his arm, glancing over her shoulder for what was hopefully her final look at her bedroom. “Let’s go meet my prince,” she said once she’d had her look. Jon grimaced though he knew she was partly teasing. “Are you all packed up?” she whispered next.

“All packed up and packing.” He tapped the butt of his Glock to emphasize his meaning.

Now, she was the one grimacing. “I hope you don’t have to use it.”

“I know.” But I will if I must.

He’d worn sturdy boots instead of dress shoes tonight and hoped no one would remark on it. He had his Sig strapped to one ankle and his knife down the other boot. He wasn’t about to leave weapons behind.

“There you are at last, sweetling!” Baelish declared as if he hadn’t told her to arrive a late enough to make an entrance. “May I present my daughter, your…young man,” he said with a bow to the blue-haired man at his side.

Jon felt the urge to laugh as he took in the blue hair and lanky build. This guy is supposed to be a prince? He didn’t look remotely Dornish but Jon recalled that the Targaryens were supposedly known for their silver hair and purple eyes. Is blue hair supposed to make him blend in better than silver?

He wasn’t exactly dressed like Jon had pictured either. His black and red floral jacquard jacket looked like something a dandy would wear…or a pop star. His face was clean shaven and youthful but, if Jon had to guess, he’d say they were probably around the same age.

The dandy smiled at Sansa, taking her hand in his and kissing it lightly. His eyes made a swift appraisal of her figure and her face but at least he didn’t leer like some of the men from the Vale were already doing.

“Miss Stone, it’s a pleasure. I believe you lied to me, Baelish.”

“Oh, surely not,” Baelish simpered, apparently anticipating the forthcoming line.
“You claimed your daughter was pretty but pretty is far too common a word for this enchantress.”

Sansa gave a delighted (and feigned) gasp as if she’d never before heard such flattery. Jon clenched his fists and reminded himself to focus on what mattered. It was going to be a long night.

An hour later, he watched the man calling himself Griff pull out a chair for the girl calling herself Alayne at the dining table. He’d already had a bellyful of watching the prince preening over himself and flattering her but he told himself he could be patient.

He’d been informed that he wouldn’t be dining tonight with the guests so he found a spot by the wall to discreetly keep watch. He didn’t expect her to make her excuses until well after dinner was over but he also anticipated that things could change quickly and if Sansa signaled that it was time to go, they’d be going. They’d agreed on an emergency meeting spot in case events separated them but he didn’t plan on needing it.

As the servers brought another course, Osmund Kettleblack approached. “You got a minute? Cook’s asking for a hand with the thundering great trifle the boss wanted.”

“In the kitchen?”

“Nah, delivery van ‘round back from that fancy pastry shop in town. Blasted thing weighs five stone at least and she’d nattering about it getting dropped.”

“Your brothers busy?”

“Well, Osney’s slipped off with one of the serving girls to dip his wick and Osfryd’s surly arse is around somewhere but you’re right here,” he shrugged. “Come on, Snow. Only take a sec.”

Jon looked at Sansa, sipping her wine and laughing at something her companion had said. He’d promised he wouldn’t leave her alone with him but she was surrounded by other people right now. It shouldn’t take but a minute and saying no might raise suspicion. He gave her one last long look, wishing she’d glance his way but had to give up at last.

“Yeah, alright. I’m coming.”

Through the woods, they emerged like shadows as one. Sweat rolled down the side of his face and neck from their final sprint and long coats despite the chill of the autumn evening. He pulled back his hood and sniffed the air.

“Smells like it could snow tonight.” The wind kicked up in response and the bare branches could be heard clattering together overhead. Sour Alyn hawked and spit. “Such a charmer,” Ramsay smiled.

His father had warned him to stay away from the girl and he had. Ramsay had been behaving himself like a good little boy…more or less. But then things had changed. Petyr Baelish was hoarding the pie and Roose Bolton didn’t like being shortchanged. He’d been keeping secrets from his principal business partner and that wasn’t very nice at all. So, his father had a new plan and Ramsay was finally going to get to play. It was about time. He’d promised her, hadn’t he?
She was a pretty girl, a very pretty girl, but what he’d liked the most was the unflinching way she’d stared right back at him. She’d been trembling with fear but she hadn’t looked away, hadn’t been cowed. Even when she’d ducked her head at last, he thought she hadn’t wanted to. He’d tipped her chin up and been mesmerized by her blue eyes. Doves and does were alright but there’d been the promise of something a bit more fearsome lurking there, a spark in those blue eyes that promised a worthwhile chase with perhaps a bit of a fight at the end. How much more fun the games were when your prey had spirit. It was so much more enjoyable to break a girl like that than one who whimpered and cried the first time you laid a hand on her. He hoped Alayne would give him that.

“You’re not to harm her. The girl has value to me but only if she’s unharmed. Bring her here to me.”

Ramsay gnashed his teeth at the recollection of his father’s orders. He could still have some fun, couldn’t he? He’d bring her back in one piece anyway.

His boys were all waiting for the word, the heavy packs on their backs. He rubbed his hands together and began issuing his orders.

“Weapons.” Four of them readied their assault rifles. He turned to Ben and Sour Alyn. “Give us a diversion, boys. We’ll give you a ten minute head start. And then…” They all smiled in response, as eager as he was for the games to being. “…we’ll crash this little soiree and steal us a pretty girl.”

With the low lighting and his hair dyed, Aegon’s eyes appeared dark blue but Sansa thought they might be indigo in another light. She’d never met any of the Targaryens. They’d been in power before King Robert but Parliament had finally seen them ousted after the late King Aerys had lost the confidence of Government and the people alike with his paranoid ravings and wildly illogical decisions.

The short and bloody revolution had occurred years before she was even born and the only surviving members of that family, Prince Rhaegar and his wife and children, had fled to his Dornish in-laws for succor despite the rumors of ill-feelings between himself and his brothers-in-law.

Sansa vaguely recalled some of the things she’d been taught in school about the fanatical police state citizens of Westeros had known under Targaryen Rule as Aerys plunged deeper and deeper into madness. Unfortunately, it appeared that as Cersei struggled to maintain her own grasp on the throne, that state was returning. Her father had complained more than once that things hadn’t completely improved under Robert either and he was glad to live in the North where Government took minimal interest in things most the time.

As she feigned amusement over another quip of Aegon’s, Sansa wondered if he’d be any better as a ruler than his grandfather or the family that had unseated him had been. It was hard to say. He was a young man, Jon’s age, though he’d obviously known less hardship. He had an easy manner and seemed to consider himself quite jolly company. Myranda would enjoy you, I think.

He was handsome but she was hardly bowled over. Would she have been grateful for this little
I am and I’m not. I’ve stopped pretending to be someone else now. I never asked to play these games but I will no longer be a pawn. I’m Sansa Stark of Winterfell and, even if I have to continue to live under an assumed name, I’ll never forget it again.

But as the evening wore on, worries began to assail her. Dinner had ended a little while ago and she’d not seen Jon since the fish course. He’d promised not to leave her alone. Where was he?

“If we’re separated tonight, meet me in the washroom nearest the kitchen, alright?” he’d instructed her earlier in the stables.

Should she make an excuse and go there now? But what if he wasn’t there?

“The quartet plays beautifully, Miss Alayne. Wherever did you find them?”

“Oh, they’re from around here…Griff.”

“It’s a pity my father couldn’t come. He’s very fond of music.”

“Is he?”

“Yes. Perhaps some day soon you might like to meet him.”

She swallowed hard and nodded. “That’d be…lovely.”

“Would you care to dance?” he asked next.

She had little choice but to agree. Petyr was watching and seemed quite pleased as they began to sway together.

She kept discreetly scanning the room, looking for Jon. She thought after this dance she could claim a call of nature or a run in her hose…something. But Jon was still nowhere to be seen. She glanced back at Petyr. Lothor was by his side. Could they have done something? Her heart began to race.

“You know, Alayne…your father is rather keen to visit Dorne. He’s got plans to fly back with us when we return. Do you think he’d permit you to come as well if I invited you?”

“T don’t know. I’m not sure what he…”

“You’re a dutiful daughter,” he smirked. “I’m a dutiful son. Perhaps we are not the authors of this arrangement but we can make the best of things, yes?”

“Yes, of course but…”

“The Water Gardens are beautiful…almost as beautiful as you. If you come with us…”

She could hardly attend to what he was saying. Jon was missing. Petyr was talking with Lothor, looking smug.

One of Aegon’s companion, Mr. Connington, was busy sweeping the room with his pale blue eyes, a hawkish look of suspicion upon his face. She wondered if he was a bodyguard like Jon or if he had some other role.
The prince stumbled slightly as they continued dancing. “Forgive me,” he laughed. “Your father’s cellar is quite good.”

“Oh, that’s…”

She was cut off from saying anything further as Osney raced past her with Umfred puffing behind him. Suddenly, Petyr no longer looked smug. His face was twisted in consternation.

The muscle flanking Connington drew their guns and were ordered to follow Osney and Umfred. She could hear shouts from outside. Something was definitely wrong.

“Jon,” she whispered.

Aegon grasped her arm as Connington pulled out his own weapon. “My lady, my prince…this way,” the older man ordered before leading them away from the rest of the guests.

For the Watch.

Like a premonition, he'd heard it plain as day inside his own head half a second before he stepped outside. He was already tensed and ready when he saw the white van that didn’t hold any confectioner’s masterpiece in it. He supposed it would be less messy for them to take him away from the estate to be disposed of that way.

Osfryd and Bryen came towards him and Osmund was at his back. They hadn’t drawn their guns yet. They really were fools. If they thought they were a match for him, they were about to find out they were sorely mistaken.

“Give me the Glock.”

“Am I getting sacked?” he asked dryly.

“This isn’t personal, Jon. We like you alright. It’s just orders,” Osmund said. “Now, give me the gun or…”

A cold and focused sort of rage took him. Without warning, he dove to the ground and flung a fistful of gravel in Osfryd’s face. While the man yelped and rubbed at his eyes, Jon yanked the knife from his boot, spun and slashed Osmund across the throat before flinging it straight into Bryen’s chest. The young man gasped and stared at it stupidly before pulling it out, the red quickly obscuring his white shirt. He could hear a gruesome gurgling sound behind him and Osmund falling to his knees.

He grappled with Osfryd next who’d recovered from his temporary impairment. His gun had a silencer on it. No doubt meant to be used on him. Somehow, that pissed him off even more but it didn’t slow him down. He disarmed Osfryd and shot him, double tap to the head before repeating the action with the other two. No need to wonder if an opponent was truly dead or not.

“I’ve got to be honest, guys…that felt kind of personal. And you tore my suit, you shit,” he added, kicking Osfryd’s body before he started heaving the three of them into the back of the van.
He had to get back to Sansa now. If Baelish was bold enough to try and off him in the midst of the party, they had to go at once.

But just as he started to go back inside and find her, he heard a commotion coming from the stables, a horrible sound that awoke some primal fear in him. Horses screaming in panic…

*Fire.*

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the cliffhanger and there's going to be a lot of chaos next chapter but those of you who read my stuff regularly should know not to fret too much about the outcome :)

And although his alias is Griff and he's sporting blue hair, the prince truly is Rhaegar's first-born son Aegon in this story.

Also, for any fellow Marvel fans, I couldn't help my little nod to 'Captain America: The Winter Soldier' there in Jon's fight ;P
He was startled awake by someone banging on the door of their little cabin. “Fire, Lyanna! Get up! Fire!” a man was shouting.

“Mum?” He groggily rubbed at his eyes. He’d had a bad dream earlier and she’d brought him to her bed. He’d been nestled close to her, pink and sleepy. He didn’t want to move.

She clicked on the overhead light. He squinted and scowled at it. She was already throwing on clothes. It was chilly outside the covers. He ducked down further under them.

“Get up, Jon.” Her voice was steady but he could tell she was afraid. It made him afraid as well. His tummy started to hurt and his chest felt fluttery. “Get up, son, and get dressed.”

Another thundering knock at the door. He stifled a yelp.

“I’m up!” She jerked open the door.

It was Artos, Mr. Flint’s younger son. He was practically a man grown and Jon liked following him around the ranch. Artos had told him he’d grow to be as big and strong as him soon. Jon liked that. It made him feel like he was almost a man grown, too.

“Where is it?”

“The barn! Dad’s afraid of it spreading to the stables! We need every set of hands!”

“I’m coming!” she cried, pulling on her boots.

Artos took off again leaving the door wide open. It was dark out and freezing cold…and snowing. How could there be fire in the snow?

“Get up, Jon. You have to go up to the main house at once.”
“Can’t I stay here? I’d rather stay here.”

He shouldn’t whine or answer back. He knew it. She’d be cross with him but he wanted to stay in bed where it was warm and pretend this wasn’t happening. He was frightened. He’d been sleeping so nice and sound and something horrible was happening. Why did it have to happen?

His mother sat down on the edge of the bed. She didn’t look cross as she peeled back the covers. He peeked up at her and hugged himself.

“My sweet boy, if the fire could spread to the stables, it could reach us here. You’ll be safer at the main house with Mrs. Flint.”

He didn’t like it but this wasn’t a bad dream and it wasn’t going to just go away. He thought of the horses and how afraid they must be. Boys who were almost grown shouldn’t be hiding under the covers and arguing with their mothers.

“I’ll go with you.”

“No, you won’t.”

“I can help.”

“I know,” she said, tenderly brushing back his curls. “I know you can help. But, Mrs. Flint will need someone to help her and I need to know you’re safe. Come on. Fire doesn’t wait around for sleepyheads.”

There was nothing left to do then but get dressed and do as she bid him. He was still just a boy but that was alright. He’d be a man some day and then he could help her.

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The memory passed as quickly as it’d appeared. There’d been a little damage to the barn but nothing serious. No livestock had been lost and Jon had helped Mrs. Flint make a hearty early breakfast to feed everyone once the fire was out. They’d all reeked of smoke but had sat around laughing, taking their ease over the meal after their busy night.

That was then and this is now, he thought. He could already tell this fire would not be put out that easily.

The flames were rapidly licking their way up the westernmost wall as Jon raced towards the stables. Inside the horses terrified neighs and snorts grew in volume. He had to get to them, free them. He had to save Lady for her.

But before he could rush headlong into danger, he paused long enough to remember his training and that night long ago from his childhood.

‘I need to know you’re safe,’ his mother’s voice whispered in his ear.

He took a moment to analyze what was happening, calculate the risk and assess what he could possibly do.

He spied two men running from the back of the stables towards the house. He couldn’t tell who
they were. There were others coming towards the stables, men from the house, a few in tuxedos and suits but mostly servants and security. He saw Lothor and Umfred running his way and tightened his grip on Osfryd’s Beretta. They didn’t take any note of him as a dozen men were shouting at once. Questions of how it started, if someone was to blame, who to call first and what to do arose.

The fire won’t wait while you host a bloody debate.

A shrill whinny from within sent shivers through him. Made of wood and filled with hay, the fire could consume the entire dwelling before a fire truck arrived but it wasn’t gone yet. Maybe he could help save the animals. There was only six of them. The wind was whipping through his hair and he saw a few scattered flakes flying through breeze.

Snow.

He glanced up at the manse and thought of how quickly fire could spread. Sansa was his priority but she was still inside the house. He’d take this one risk for Lady’s sake, he told himself.

He tucked the spare gun into his waistband and hurried ahead of the others to the stables. Two of the lads who cared for the horses were standing just outside of it looking frightened and confused.

“Come on! We’ll open the stall doors for them and then get right back out!” he shouted at them.

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and tied it around his face. He wondered if he looked like a highway man. Well, I am planning to steal a maiden later.

He unlatched the stall door of the gelding he always rode and whooped at him till the frightened horse ran. He reached Lady’s stall next, holding up his hands as the mare stamped and whickered nervously. She kept backing further into her stall, tossing her head and threatening to rear. As skittish as your mistress once was. He’d need a gentler approach.

“Come on, sweet lady. Let’s get you out of here.”

Even in her terror, the animal seemed to recognize his voice. She allowed him close enough to pat her neck. Her bridle had been removed. Suddenly, it occurred to him he’d stashed their go-bags in here. He picked them up and used them to usher her out of the stall. Miraculously, it worked. Once they could see the exit, he gave her hindquarters a swat and she charged ahead and out into the night, leaving him in her wake.

“That’s my smart girl.”

He looked around to see to more horses but it looked as though the lads had done the rest. His eyes and lungs were burning from the smoke. The fire was already completely out of control. That was awfully quick.

He ran towards the exit and there stood Umfred staring at him with his mouth agape. Jon dropped their bags. “Get out of here!” he shouted. You’re a fool but don’t be this big of a fool, he thought.

“Snow? How...how are you not dead?” the man stuttered as he slowly raised his sidearm.

“I’m fast,” he answered as he pulled the Beretta with lightning quick and shot Umfred through the head. “And you’re slow.” The fire could have him.

He picked the bags back up again and hurried from the chaos of the fire. He needed to get back to the house.
‘I need to know you’re safe.’

Panic started building but that’s where training came in handy. He drew a deep breath and could hear Mormont barking ‘Sit-rep, Snow!’ in his mind. He started another assessment as he ran towards the manse, careful to avoid Lothor who was yelling at Osney and three of the others. Seven rounds left in the Beretta. Fifteen in the Glock. Six in the Sig. Not the worst odds he’d ever faced. He had no choice anyway. Lothor, Osney and the five remaining men in Baelish’s employ…maybe the prince’s three. The objective was simple. Get in the house, find Sansa, keep her safe and get out.

But then he heard something else, a new wrinkle in the equation, something that made his stomach twist and clench all over again. An intermittent rat-a-tat-tat coming from inside. Assault rifles, fully automatic, more than one. It may as well be an army compared to his tiny arsenal.

*What the fuck is going on?*

The fire was a diversion. Somebody had crashed the party, somebody packing some serious firepower with an objective of their own. What was that objective? There was an exiled prince inside the house but there was also Sansa.

Jon ran as fast as his legs could carry him to where she waited.

“Please! I’ve got to…”

Her heart was racing and she felt that tightening in her chest. She couldn’t panic now. She had to make them see. She needed to find Jon. She’d go to the washroom like he told her and lock the door. She’d wait till he came for her. Whatever else was happening, they were going away tonight but they couldn’t go if they weren’t together.

These men weren’t listening to her. Sansa successfully managed to twist her arm free of Aegon’s grasp. He stopped when he realized he was no longer dragging her in his wake.

“I can’t go this way! He won’t know where I am! I need to find Jon…my bodyguard. He’ll keep me safe. I’m…”

But Connington had already heard enough. “Carry her or leave her, dammit.”

Aegon shook his head. “I apologize for this, my lady.” Then, he hefted her bodily over his shoulder. She writhed and squirmed, raining blows down on him anywhere she could. “Oof! Easy now!” he laughed. “This is hardly ladylike behavior, Lady Sansa. My father always said Northern girls were feistier than you’d expect!”

“Put me down! Please!!”

Her breath was growing short. *Breathe. Think. You’ve got to focus and be brave for him.*

But Sansa could nearly cry with frustration. Despite his less than imposing build, Aegon was stronger than he looked. It made her think of Jon but he was nothing like Jon. Jon would never do
He would if he thought he was protecting you from harm.

As she continued to fight, Aegon smacked her bottom so Sansa yanked his silly blue hair.

“Ow!”

“Let me go, you…you son of a bitch!” she screamed.

“That’s no way to speak of my lady mother.”

“You’re an ass!”

“I’m an ass? Is the honeymoon over already, love?”

“I’m never marrying you!”

“Come on!” Connington roared.

As they started up the stairs, Sansa resigned herself to the fact that she wouldn’t be going to the agreed rendezvous point just yet and stopped squirming. It was doing her no good and adding to Aegon’s amusement wasn’t helping her keep her temper in check. Plus, the last thing she needed was to cause them to tumble down the stairs and for her to break her neck.

Up and up, they climbed bypassing the second and third floors of the manse until they reached her little roost. She’d thought she’d seen the last of it.

Aegon tossed her down on the loveseat where she’d last sat with Jon, where he’d kissed her ardently the other morning till they were both breathless. She scowled at the pompous prick of a prince with her here now and adjusted her dress when his eyes dipped down to her exposed cleavage. Her hair had come undone and he was entirely too pleased with himself at present.

“Are you sure you’re not part wildling, my lady?” he teased. “Or part Dornish perhaps? Back in my younger days, there were these two Dornish twins I knew who liked nothing better than to…”

She lifted her chin and huffed at him. “Your man seems to think we’re in danger and you’re boasting and making jokes. And a sensible person would be more focused on what’s going on than annoying me.”

He rolled his eyes playfully. “But sensible people are so boring, darling.”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Both of you, shut up!” Connington pulled out his phone and started calling for help. Whether it was the police or friends of his, she didn’t know.

She looked out the little window but it faced the woods and the mountains beyond. She couldn’t see anything unusual except a few snowflakes. She stalked back over to the loveseat and sat down, ignoring the prince and his wounded puppy look.

Just as Connington hung up though, she heard the faint sound of screams. They were coming from within the house. And, every now and then, she heard scattered bursts of what Sansa soon realized must be gunfire. She was afraid but also felt a sense of detachment. It was downstairs and she was up here. Vaguely, she knew it was her mind’s attempt to protect her from the panic that was building within once more.
Please, gods…keep him safe. Let him find me.

The gunfire sounded different than what she’d heard the night she’d kissed Jon. It reminded her of a woodpecker, on and off, a rat-a-tat-tat. She decided whoever was shooting had some pretty big guns with them.

Connington had obviously come to the same conclusion. “Gods be damned. Is the queen’s entire fucking army down there? Did that smarmy little shit sell us out? I told your father this was a bad idea,” Connington grumbled. “Does he ever listen to me though? No, he does not.”

“What are we going to do?” Aegon asked, his voice higher than before, betraying his fear. “And why’d you bring us up here? Now, we’re trapped.”

“I wouldn’t call us trapped, my prince. We’re hiding and waiting for back-up.”

Her pulse was picking up its pace and the room seemed dimmer. She closed her eyes. Her breath grew short again. Please…not now. Please. Jon would need her to have her wits about her.

“What is this place anyway?” Aegon asked, gazing around at the easel and plain white canvases.

“My studio,” Sansa answered quietly. She glanced at her jars of paint neatly lined up where she’d left them and felt an ache at leaving these things behind. Perhaps someday Jon and I will have a little place and I can get new supplies. “It’s where I paint.”

“You’re an artist, my lady?”

“You could say that.”

The panic was receding. He was distracting her whether he meant to or not. Maybe it was helping them both.

“What do you paint?”

“Why do you care?”

“I don’t know. I thought if…well, you said you’re never marrying me so I guess it doesn’t matter what I thought now.”

“I’m not marrying you. I’m sorry but I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I…I can’t tell you,” she said, feeling her cheeks grow hot at the mere thought of admitting why out loud. I’m in love with another man. I fell in love with my bodyguard. I’m running away with him. If I ever do marry, it’s his wife I’d want to be. I am going to be his wife…sort of.

“I’m really not such a bad sort, you know,” Aegon said ruefully. “The Dornish twins were cousins of mine and we never did anything but kiss when we were still half children.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “I didn’t say you were a bad sort.”

He sighed and took off his coat. “Here, my lady,” he said, draping it over her shoulders. “It’s stuffy up here but perhaps you’re cold.”

She begrudgingly accepted his jacket. Maybe he wasn’t all bad even with his silly blue hair. Myranda would definitely like you.
More gunfire was heard. Aegon stiffened but was trying to hide that he was afraid. Connington started pacing. Sansa smothered a sob. She wasn’t going to panic but where was Jon? What if something had happened to him? What was going to happen to them all?

She nestled into the corner of the couch, waiting to die…waiting to live. She was praying for whoever Connington had called to come when she heard a loud boom like an explosion. The floor shook and the window pane rattled. Sansa yelped and jumped to her feet. The three of them stood transfixed for several heartbeats, listening and trying to figure out what had happened. Then, there was a building, rumbling roar below. An intuitive voice deep inside told her what it was at once.

*Fire.*

“You stupid cunt!” Ramsay screamed at Grunt as he entered the parlor to find half of it blown apart and the other half ablaze.

They’d had nearly everyone rounded up, everyone except who he’d come for, when some dumb shit had decided to play the hero and made a move towards Damon. That had set off a chain reaction and within the space of twenty seconds, nine of their hostages were dead and Damon had killed Ben by mistake with friendly fire. Women were crying and so were some of the men. They were all going to give him a headache.

Unfortunately, Alyn the dumbass had accidently sloshed Ben with some of the accelerant he’d used to start the blaze in the stables. And then Grunt, that utter moron, had lit a cigarette out of nervousness and tossed down his match. A whoosh and a boom followed, the blowback knocking them all to the floor. No more Ben and now the whole fucking place was on fire.

Grunt opened his stupid mouth and Ramsay shot him dead, too enraged to listen to one single fucking syllable.

“Get up!” he shouted at Baelish, yanking him off the floor by his arm. “Where is she?!”

“I don’t know!” he whimpered. “Please! Your father…”

“My father sent me! Where is your daughter?!"

“She’s…I don’t know! I’ve not seen her since…”

He smacked the little prick across the jaw with the butt of his rifle. He was going to fail. He wasn’t going to get to play. Father would never let him forget it.

“Shoot these assholes and then spread out and find her before the fire burns us all to seven hells!” he told Skinner and Alyn.

But before the turkey shoot could begin, they had unexpected company.
Gods, oh gods, oh gods!

He’d been headed back into the kitchen the same way he’d left after quickly stashing their bags in the white van that was still sitting there. The three bodies were in the back but what mattered were the keys were in the ignition. It would be their escape vehicle.

He’d had his hand on the kitchen door, planning to check the washroom first and see is she was there when…

**BOOM!**

When he heard the explosion, he was back at Hardhome again. Screams, people running, the billowing smoke and the realization that he’d failed to stop Mance’s insane plan. For one excruciating minute, he was living it all over again. His hands were trembling and he felt paralyzed, helpless and lost. He could smell the blood and smoke. He could see the bodies, everyone of them dead because he hadn’t been able to stop it in time. Ygritte had said it would be justice. It was terrorism. It was murder.

‘I need to know you’re safe.’

Sansa.

He jerked himself back to the present. She was in here somewhere, she had to be. He’d saved a couple of animals but, if she died while he stood there dithering, he’d shoot himself. He wasn’t going to fail her like he’d failed at Hardhome and he couldn’t live with himself if he had to watch her die in his arms like Ygritte had in the end.

He rushed into the house, checking the washroom first. She wasn’t there.

“Seven hells! Sansa?! Sansa, where are you?!” No one was there.

Alayne. I am Alayne here, Jon. Don’t forget.

“ALAYNE!” he roared next.

He heard shouts coming from the parlor and then a single shot. *Stop shouting, you idiot. Use your head. Quick and quiet.*

He crept down the hallway. There were three armed men holding the guests hostage. In disbelief, he realized that one of them was none other than Ramsay Snow.

Why tonight?! he wanted to scream. *It was a just a stupid dinner party and we were going to run!*

It didn’t matter now. They might have assault rifles but they weren’t minding their six very well. They were oblivious to his presence.

He pulled the Beretta and opened fire, dashing behind the parlor’s entryway wall as they turned a spray of bullets his way. He was out. He dropped Osfryd’s gun and pulled his Glock. He liked it better anyway.

Their spray was erratic and went wide. The disadvantage of automatic weapons was a drop in accuracy for most shooters and, clearly, these guys were not marksmen.

He’d noted approximately eight hostages and a number of dead bodies. It looked like Baelish was either dead or unconscious at Ramsay’s feet. Half of the large room had suffered from the
explosion and a fire was raging. Jon really hated fire with a fucking passion.

“Where’s is she?! Where’s Alayne?!” he shouted, figuring it didn’t hurt to ask.

“That’s a good question,” Ramsay bellowed back. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Her bodyguard,” he answer right before he darted out from cover long enough to shoot the gunman next to him right between the eyes. A hail of bullets chased him back into hiding. “You missed. I didn’t,” he taunted.

He’d spent hours reading the man’s profile and pondering what Sansa had told him. Sadistic, impulsive types tended to screw up when they were angry. He wanted this guy angry.

“You fucking bastard! I’m going to tear your eyeballs out! I’ll skin you alive!”

Mission accomplished.

Another spray of bullets but he couldn’t waste time here. Fire doesn’t wait for sleepyheads or shootouts. The house was on fire and he had to find her. Maybe she’d already escaped the house, maybe not.

Ramsay was still busy yelling threats and obscenities at him as Jon slunk away towards the entryway and the main staircase where he’d first laid eyes on the girl calling herself Alayne.

Maybe if he loves the sound of his own voice enough, we’ll be half way to town before he realizes I’m gone and the house will have burned down around his ears.

The smoke was getting worse. He looked back over his shoulder. No one was following him but he spied some of the hostages running, making a break for the front door. He was considering following them to see if she was already outside but before he could act on that, he saw her charging down the stairs with the prince and the older man who’d accompanied him here.

“Jon!” she cried, racing towards him. She was coughing from the onslaught of smoke filling the house as he reached her but she was alright.

He pulled her to him. He’d found her. Next step was to get out. “We’ve got to…”

Bullets whizzed past him before he could finish and Jon dove on top of her, both of them landing hard on the floor. He heard a shout and then a grunt from someone nearby. The older man started returning fire. Jon quickly rolled to do the same. The pair of gunmen were advancing but the one dropped. Ramsay’s lone surviving accomplice was dead and Ramsay screamed in fury. He turned back towards them and Jon was sure they were dead but either his gun had jammed or he was out. Jon opened fire again. Ramsay ran when either Jon or the prince’s man nicked him.

The fire was spreading beyond the parlor and they had to go. He rolled back over to Sansa who was still half under him. She was frightened but her eyes were loving as she touched his face.

“You’re alright?” he asked hoarsely.

“I am. Are you?”

“Never better.” He kissed her brow swiftly to prove it.

“Get them out of here,” the prince’s man moaned. He was holding his belly. Ramsay or his man hadn’t missed them entirely, it would seem.
“I’ll help you,” Jon said, offering a hand.

“No.” He shook his head. The wounds were low in the guts. He was a goner and he knew it. “Get the girl and my prince out of here.” He sagged back against the stairs.

Jon turned towards Sansa who had stood up. She was hovering over the prince. “He’s been shot, too!”

Aegon’s wound was in the leg. He’d live—if he didn’t bleed to death. Or die of smoke inhalation.

“Connington?” the prince groaned as Jon gave him a once over.


Together, they drug the prince towards the kitchen. Jon wondered where Ramsay had fled to and where Baelish was but all that really mattered was getting them out of here.

They went out the same door Jon had passed through for the first time with Osmund maybe 45 minutes earlier at most. Time had a way of speeding up and also slowing down in the thick of a fight. He gulped in the fresh air and laid Aegon on the gravel drive. Sirens were wailing in the distance. Help was coming and they had to go.

“Jon, we can’t just leave him here.”

“He’ll be alright.” He didn’t know that for sure but Sansa was the priority for him. She was always going to be the priority. He wasn’t a doctor either. “Give me that jacket.” He leaned over Aegon as Sansa handed him the tacky red and black coat. He grabbed the knife from his boot again and sliced one sleeve off. He made a make-shift tourniquet to slow the bleeding. He had to hope the paramedics would find him. It was the best he could do. “Keep the pressure on it till they find you, your highness.”

He was starting to rise when the prince feebly grabbed his arm. “You…you saved me.”

“Yeah, I guess I did. Forget about that, alright? We’d all be dead if it wasn’t for your man…Connington. Call him the hero. Forget you saw us tonight. In fact, forget her name, too.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t have to.” He stood and wiped the blood from his hands. He reached for her and she ran into his arms. “You ready to blow this joint, my lady?”

She laughed hysterically. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Good.” He removed his own jacket and put it around her. He lightly kissed her lips. Snow was falling but the fire would burn away their tracks. “Hop in the van. Don’t look in the back.”

She climbed into the passenger seat as instructed. He glanced back at the house which was quickly turning into an inferno and started up the van. They drove past the stables that were already a total loss.

He deftly maneuvered down the crowded drive where half a dozen guest were congregated. None of them even seemed cognizant of the white van passing them. Too shell-shocked. He knew the feeling. And if any did take note of it, it wouldn’t matter. They’d be ditching it along with the bodies in the back soon enough.
“Lady,” she whimpered.

“Right there.” He pointed and Sansa saw her then. The grey mare was standing off to herself in the distance, placidly eating grass nearer the woods.

“She’s safe.”

“She is.”

“She’s free,” Sansa sighed.

He pulled her hand to his lips after he took the turn that would lead them onto the road and away from the estate for good. “So are you.”

The mug of coffee he’d bought was nearly a drinkable temperature at last when he heard it. The transmission was a bit garbled coming from three radios at once and his hearing might not be as good as it had been but he heard it all, loud and clear.

“All units, respond! Fire at the Baelish Estate, 77 Eyrie Lane. First Responders en route. Reports of shots fired. Proceed with caution. All units, respond! Fire at the…”

The three police officers sharing the booth behind his had thrown down some money and left their half-finished meals on the table. He’d had to check his urge to race after them, knowing that would blow his disguise. They saw what they expected to see and what he wanted them to see, an old man who was down on his luck nursing a cup of coffee at a greasy spoon.

He waited till their cruisers had torn out of the parking lot with lights flashing and sirens blaring to leave his money on the table and slip out into the night. He needed to see what was going on. He’d come this far and got so close. Had he lingered too long out of caution after the incident a few weeks ago?

Driving down the quiet lane, he could see the inferno in the distance and his gullet closed up with dread. Half the Vale’s emergency and police vehicles were present. He didn’t think he’d be able to get too close without drawing attention and he had more than his own hide to think of.

He pulled over to the side of the road, burying his head in his hands in frustration. He’d told them he’d find their big sister if he could. Wouldn’t be the first time you’ve failed them, he thought sadly, not noticing the sole vehicle, a white van, that passed him heading towards town and away from the scene.

Tomorrow, he’d see what he could find out but for now, he was forced to stay back and wait before plotting his next move.
Whew! They're away and on the road at last! Thank you so much for reading :)

Three hours on the road. An almost superstitious silence had fallen as they’d headed down the quiet lane, passing very few vehicles that weren’t police or fire personnel. They’d both been on edge as they’d driven through town. Sansa had spied Olyvar’s and the ice cream parlor and realized she might never see them again. She told herself it was silly to feel sad about that. They’d passed the bank as well and she’d shuddered to know that Ramsay had indeed come for her as he’d said he would. She preferred not to think what might’ve happened if not for Jon.

They must’ve passed some invisible barrier in their minds once Jon turned onto the main highway that would lead them west and then north for then they had spoken in hushed but hurried voices, a period of eager discussion covering most everything that had happened since he’d escorted her to dinner. It seemed like a week had passed since then.

They’d slipped back into silence the last hour as the road stretched on and Sansa grew drowsy. She’d almost been asleep when he’d spoken again to tell her his plan. Since then, she’d been wide awake though no less exhausted.

They’d crossed the enormous bridge over the icy river not half an hour ago. Now, Sansa tugged Jon’s jacket around her tighter and suppressed the unpleasant roiling of her stomach as the white van disappeared into the waters outside of Strongsong.

Jon stood closer to the edge after he’d put the vehicle in neutral and gave it a final push. He had both their satchels over his shoulder and kept watch until he was certain no flash of white was visible.

“The water is deep and the current is strong. I doubt it’ll be found anytime soon if at all.”

She nodded numbly, trying not to think too much about the bodies in the back, and ducked down deeper into his jacket. It smelled of smoke but also of Jon. “On foot from here, I guess?”

“Aye, but just for a little while. It’s only about two miles to town. You should switch shoes.”

Sansa looked down at her heels and dress. She knew her hair and make-up were bound to be a
mess but Jon was worse. He looked like he’d been fighting a fire. He had blood on his trousers and shirt tail as well.

“We should change. We’ll stick out like a sore thumb otherwise.”

Jon’s brow furrowed and his expression became pinched. “Shit. You’re right. I should’ve had us change before we ditched the van so these clothes could’ve gone down with it. I meant for us to. I just forgot or…”

He scrubbed at his face and reminded her vaguely of a boy who’d failed to complete an assignment for class. He normally appeared so strong and in control to her but she’d seen how white his knuckles would grow with every car they’d passed that first hour. And she’d seen the concern etched on his face when they’d reunited in the house amidst smoke and gunfire. He was just as human as she was no matter how much military training he’d had. She needed him but maybe he needed her, too.

“It’s been a long night for us both. We can change and worry about these clothes later.”

He nodded, rubbing his eyes before looking back up towards the road above them here on the riverbank. He looked as tired as she felt. She wondered if he felt as happy as she did though. Maybe happy wasn’t the right word. Relieved perhaps.

It would be wrong of her to be happy when people had died tonight, innocent people who’d been expecting nothing more noteworthy than a dinner party. She couldn’t find it in herself to care right now though. Was it shock doing that to her? Probably.

And the others, the men she’d known for a couple of years who had never done her any direct harm but had tried to kill Jon earlier. She couldn’t summon any sympathy for them but didn’t feel any hatred either. She just felt sort of numb.

Jon was still dazedly staring at the road. She thought he might be feeling a bit numb as well. There were some bushes a few feet away. “I’ll change first,” she said decidedly, striding towards him across the uneven ground in her heels to claim her bag.

He handed it over. When she reached the bushes, she saw they were thorny. There’d be no creeping in amongst them to change. Casting aside her natural modesty, she kicked off her shoes and removed his jacket. She started to unzip the evening gown and looked over her shoulder. Jon wasn’t watching. He was resolutely facing the other way. She didn’t think he’d look without permission but something about having it confirmed was comforting knowing that they were truly alone together now and would likely be sharing a bed for many nights to come. She desired him but she was also skittish about crossing that line from being held and sharing kisses to more.

In her jeans, sweater and boots, she stuffed the red dress and heels back into her bag to be disposed of later and rejoined him.

“I’d planned on driving all night.”

She figured as much. She also didn’t think it wise. “We don’t have a car.”

“There’ll be cars in town.”

She grimaced. She knew stealing cars would be part of this but she couldn’t say she liked it. Worried about stealing a car after everything tonight? What’s wrong with you?

“There’ll be motels in town, too. Ones with free Wi-Fi,” she offered casually. “I won’t argue if you
say we must keep going but other than the prince, who knows that we’re even alive right now, Jon?” He opened his mouth and she pushed on. “We both need some sleep…and a shower.”

He grinned at that. “You’d prefer if I didn’t stink, huh?” She grinned like a goose back at him and ruefully shook her head. “We do both reek of smoke and you make a good point. We’ll get a room but we’re only staying for a shower and a nap. I’d prefer not to steal a car in the middle of the day. I’ll reach out to Sam when we stop somewhere on the road tomorrow, agreed?”

“Agreed. Your turn,” she said, jerking her chin towards the bushes.

She stared at the river rushing by to distract herself from the events of the night and from the thought of Jon changing his clothes. But a car zipped by overhead and she instinctively turned towards him out of worry. He’d already pulled on his jeans but she gasped when she saw the scars on his chest illuminated by the moonlight. They were faded but still redder than the pale skin surrounding them. There were at least a dozen of them, knife wounds. Their eyes met and he was flexing his hand.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, turning away.

He said nothing but came closer. She could feel him standing beside her and when she turned back he was so close she could feel his breath on her cheek. “You didn’t do it. Don’t be sorry.”

His chest was still bare and she slowly raised her hand. He closed his eyes and nodded. Her fingers lightly brushed the one closest to his heart. Gooseflesh was starting to appear although his skin was warm to the touch. She could see the mists from their breath intertwining between them as she gingerly touched another scar.

Petyr had said he’d nearly died during the mutiny of the Nights Watch when the old lord commander had been murdered by his men. At the time, she hadn’t been sure what to think or if Petyr had been misleading her. She’d not felt close enough to ask Jon of it back then.

*Things are different now.*

“What happened?”

“It’s a long story that we don’t have time for right now.” She sighed and withdrew her hand, wishing it didn’t hurt just because he didn’t want to tell her. But he captured her hand and put it back on his chest, right over his heart. “It’s a long story that we don’t have time for right now but…I promise I will tell you all about it soon, alright?”

“Alright.”

She smiled, her heart feeling lighter as he grabbed his shirt and threw it on. It wasn’t snowing here but it was cold. He cupped the back of her neck and his thumb swept across her cheek. He started to open his mouth but instead pressed a quick kiss to her lips, a mere peck but soothing all the same.

“Temperature keeps dropping. We’d better start walking,” he said when her eyes opened once more.

They put on the jackets they’d packed and headed up the embankment to the road, hand in hand.
They were both chilled to the bone by the time they finally reached the motel. Sansa’s hands were chapped, an angry-looking red. His fingers and toes were frozen feeling as he chaffed his hands together and stomped his feet. They’d needed gloves, hats and warmer clothes for walking this far in these temperatures. *The plan changed. It happened. You’re here now at least.*

“I’ve only got one king room available,” the clerk sniffed as Jon approached the counter.

It was 2AM and the parking lot was nearly empty. Likely, the ass didn’t want to leave his seat and his television to get one ready. Jon’s eyes flickered to the TV, an old movie. Not the news then.

The clerk leaned to his side to look at Sansa standing by the space heater. “How old is she?” the man asked with a salacious grin.

“Old enough,” Jon growled and put ten dragons down on the counter.

“It’s twenty.”

Highway robbery. A decent hotel room might cost four times as much but this place was a dump. He regretted it was the closest motel and wondered if they should’ve kept walking. One glance at Sansa still huddled over the space heater convinced him otherwise. He hoped the room would be cleaner than the tiny lobby had led him to expect. *It’s just for a few hours. A shower and a nap… and Sansa in your arms.*

“Twenty,” he begrudgingly agreed and put the money down.

The clerk pushed the registry towards him. He signed it Jon Stone. Actually, he made an illegible scrawl. This was hardly the sort of place that really cared. If they wanted to stay any place nicer, he’d need to reach Sam.

“Do you know anyone in Strongsong?” he asked, fumbling with the key to get them in their room at last.

“Does Mr. Belmore count?”

“Mister…that ass from the party who…”

“Whose hand you broke?” she snickered. “Yes, him.”

“Gods. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I don’t want to walk another thirty steps, let alone to the next town. I don’t think the Swift Water Inn would be his preferred sort of establishment either, do you?” She dropped her bag down on the bed with a relieved sigh. “I’m going to draw a bubble bath. Will you order us some room service, dear?”

He chuckled and wanted to kiss her again. Despite everything tonight, she was doing her best to stay positive, keeping her spirits up and his as well. The room wasn’t much and the furniture looked very old but it did appear clean enough. The heater was on but the place was chilly.

*Guess we’ll have to share our warmth.*

“I’ll, uh…fetch us some toothbrushes from that pharmacy across the street. Anything you need?”
Deodorant for starters, baby powder scent. A hairbrush. We can stop somewhere else later tomorrow, right?"

"Of course. Will you be alright here if I go?"

She chewed at her bottom lip and peeped into the bathroom without answering for a moment. He hated leaving her alone here and he hated leaving her even more knowing that she might be afraid. But, she put on a brave smile for him and said, “I’ll be fine. I’m taking a 30 minute shower and crawling into bed for an entire day.”

She was joking but he couldn’t help himself. “Four hours and then we’re going, Sansa.”

“I know. Hurry back.”

He headed across the street to the pharmacy, grateful that it was open 24 hours. His eyes started to cross at the numerous hairbrushes to choose from and then he was completely bumfuzzled over the selection of women’s deodorants. He nearly wept with relief when he spied the one he thought he’d seen in her bathroom the day she’d cut her hand and he’d treated it.

The day I saw the hair dye. Which reminds me…

He strolled down the hair product aisle, looking at the array of dyes available. Light Auburn, Cherry Red, Dark Copper…he shouldn’t be staring at shades of red. Alayne was dead but she couldn’t be Sansa, not openly yet. It wouldn’t be safe. He looked at the myriad hues of blonde available and thought he liked Strawberry Blonde the best. He snorted at himself.

Of course, you’d choose something with a hint of red in it. He would readily admit that he really wanted to see her with her natural color but her safety was more important. You need her for this. It’s her hair and she should decide what to do about it.

He didn’t think Baelish, assuming he was alive, would plaster her picture all over the evening news but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t be looking for her.

Grabbing some portable snacks and bottled waters, he headed to the cashier to pay. On a rack near the cash register were three-packs of condoms. He rolled his eyes and reminded himself that his hands were full anyway. Literally and figuratively.

The room was steamy when he returned where she’d evidently done her best to get that 30-minute shower. He hoped the shower had eased some of the tension she’d been enduring so well tonight.

“Did you leave me any hot water?” he asked as he deposited the bags on the dresser.

“A bit,” she said quietly as she came out of the bathroom wearing one of his flannels and no pants. “I’m sorry. I forgot to pack pajamas. I borrowed your shirt since it was, um…longer.”

“Young things,” he said quietly as he came out of the bathroom wearing one of his flannels and no pants. “I’m sorry. I forgot to pack pajamas. I borrowed your shirt since it was, um…longer.”

“Oh, that’s…” awesome. He gulped to keep from saying it and handed her one of the bags. “We can pick something up tomorrow if you like.” Actually, we won’t. I like you in my shirt. “Here’s your stuff. We can share the toothpaste but the rest is yours.” She was twiddling with the hem of his shirt and he knew she was nervous. He ducked his chin and waited for her to notice. Her eyes met his. “We’re not doing anything but sleeping, Sansa. You’ll be comfortable in that.”

“It’s cold in here. I’d like for you to hold me while we sleep. Can you just…hold me?”

It was cold but a lot of bad stuff had happened, too. She wanted to feel safe. The fact that he could make her feel safe made him happier than he could adequately put into words. Also, with all the
terror and anxiety he’d felt until he’d found her again, he didn’t think he could bear not to hold her close.

“I’d love that.”

She looked less nervous now. The ground rules were set and he’d remember them. They might change but it would be because Sansa said so.

She smiled when she pulled out the deodorant. He had remembered correctly. “I’ll finish up quick so you can have your turn.”

“Take your time,” he croaked as he watched her walking away. The shirt covered her ass…barely. But, it didn’t hide those tantalizingly long legs. *Gods, give me strength.*

By the time he finished his shower (his rather chilly shower) and brushed his teeth, she was already in the bed and the lamp was turned off. He plugged his phone in to charge and set an alarm. He was only wearing his boxers and t-shirt. It was a king-sized bed but…

“Someone took all the hot water.”

A girlish giggle escaped and then she scooted closer. “I’m sorry. I was very cold.”

“Me, too. Still am.” He put his arm around her waist and pulled her back up against his front. He lightly kissed her cheek. “Perfect.”

“Thank you, Jon,” she sighed as they grew warmer and began to drift.

“For what?”

“For saving me. For stealing me away.”

“Maybe you stole me.” *You stole my heart at least.*

Another giggle. “I’m no thief.”

“Of course not.” *I think it might’ve been yours from the moment we met. I’ll freely give it to you anyway.* “I guess I am the thief.”

“More like a knight.”

He scoffed. “I couldn’t have left you behind. If they’d managed to drag me away, I’d have broken back in to steal you, remember?”

“No one came for me there,” she murmured sleepily.

He didn’t understand what she meant at first. She sucked in a ragged breath and before long she was dozing off.

No one came for me there.

Kings Landing. A girl but also a captive, held hostage by the Crown as her brother waged war against them. Surely, her family had wanted her back but no one had come for her. No white knights had ridden into the capital and freed the maiden. Instead, a sly little man had spirited her away for reasons of his own and locked her in a different sort of tower.

“I’d come for you anywhere,” he whispered as he listened to her soft snores.
'You know nothing, Jon Snow.' Guilt pricked him as Ygritte’s words echoed in his mind. There were things Sansa deserved to know about her knight. She should know he’d never be as clean and pure as the driven snow.

Sansa grumbled and stirred at the strange little chirping sound. What was that? She stretched and was pleased to find herself still in Jon’s embrace. The chirping was getting louder and something was poking her backside. It was cold in the room but warm under the covers. She heard a sleepy mumble as his phone started to chirp repeatedly. Her eyes flew open as she realized what was poking her. He must’ve realized it, too.

“Sorry. Shit.” He grabbed his phone and silenced it and started scooting away.

“Don’t be. Don’t…” She reached back and placed her hand on his hip. “I’m cold. I don’t…” Care that you’re hard? Mind it? “Just keep holding me a little longer, please.” He exhaled, his warm breath on her neck as he moved back to where he was. Actually, he moved closer. “I wish we could sleep longer.” I don’t want to leave your arms.

“We’ve got to get headed soon.” She knew he meant it even though he wasn’t moving.

“I know. I saw you bought some food.”

“Granola bars, a bag of donuts, dried fruit and some water.”

“Sounds…filling.”

He huffed a laugh and she rolled to her back. He put his arm under his head to prop it up. The nightlight from the bathroom had seemed like very little light last night but her eyes were quickly adjusting to the gloom and she could see the planes of his face rather well. His hand was still draped across her. He started tracing small circles along her hip.

“Is this alright?” His voice was thick, gravelly, the way she liked it best when they were alone.

“Yes.”

She shivered and rolled to face him, their chests nearly touching. She arched her back slightly, wanting to be as close to him as possible. Between her legs, that impossible ache was building. If she was alone, she knew her hand would be down there. Her whole face grew hot at the realization and she licked her lips.

He leaned closer. “Would a good morning kiss be alright?”

“More than alright.”

“Are we going to make out?”

“We could but then would we ever get up?”

“Absolutely not.” They laughed and then he did kiss her, slow but chaste. “You get first crack at the bathroom.”

“I had my turn first last night.”
“I’m generous.”

“You are.”

An hour later, they were leaving Strongsong in a black sedan which just happened to belong to Belmore Industries.

“Jon?” she laughed incredulously when he’d let that fact drop.

“It just happened to be right down the street.”

She couldn’t say she’d feel all that sorry for Mr. Belmore. They’d be switching again by nightfall anyway.

He called Sam during a pit stop that morning and by dinnertime Jon was printing off papers at a public library near Green Fork. Sam really was a like a wizard or something. The forged document looked completely legitimate. The fake id’s would be delivered at a post office box a hundred miles further along but that would take a couple of days even with priority delivery. They’d have to lay low somewhere in the meanwhile, Jon said. It wouldn’t be safe to cross the border into the North without proper credentials. Sansa felt like she was in some espionage film.

They were doing what they could to cajole each other but tension, boredom and fatigue were wearing on them both by nightfall. Jon was determined to make it a bit further.

“It’s not like we have reservations,” she grumbled, watching another motel pass by.

“The one I want offers a free hot breakfast.”

“Tired of granola bars already?”

“Yes…and we ate all the donuts this morning.”

He’d looked pretty cute with the powdered sugar in his beard, too. She snickered and they drove on.

Her tummy started to cramp just before 11 when they were nearly at Jon’s preferred motel. She counted up the days and groaned internally.

“I need to make a stop.”

“We’re almost at the motel.”

“Find a pharmacy or grocery store for me.”

“We just stopped at a store thirty minutes ago. You bought your shampoo and conditioner and…”

“Jon, I need to stop.”

“Look, there’s a service station if you need to use the…”

“I need tampons, okay?” she said through gritted teeth. “I’m going to need them soon anyway.”

“Oh! Yeah, okay,” he said sheepishly. He pulled into the nearest grocery. “Did you need me to…”

“I can manage a purchase on my own, thanks,” she said, slamming the door on the white SUV he’d stolen after dinner. But in the store a love song was playing, one that she adored and she bought
him another bag of powdered donuts. “For the road,” she said when she put the bag between them.

He thanked her with a kiss. She kissed him back. They kissed in the grocery store parking lot till someone parked next to them, an older woman who was grinning at them both. They were both smiling like lovesick ninnies when Jon backed out of the space.

They arrived at the motel twenty minutes later. She braced herself and reached for the TV remote when Jon was showering. News reports about the fire were the first thing she saw. The reporter didn’t mention any gunmen, only that a fire had destroyed Petyr Baelish’s home and that several people had died and the investigation was ongoing. A picture of Petyr flashed up on the screen and the reporter said he’d escaped but was hospitalized, his condition unknown.

“Not dead then?” Jon said from the doorway of the bathroom, his curls still dripping. He didn’t sound remotely surprised.

“He’ll live. His kind always does,” she said bitterly.

He climbed into bed and put his arms around her, dropping a kiss on her collar bone where it was exposed. She was still wearing his flannel. She’d conveniently forgotten to look for anything to wear at the little store they’d stopped at earlier. Anything there would’ve been hideous anyway. Jon’s shirt was comfortable and it smelled like Jon.

A list of the confirmed dead popped up on screen. Her name wasn’t there but her and Jon weren’t mentioned as missing either.

“Myranda will be distraught.” She hated thinking of her friend worrying over her. She wished she could get her a message, tell her she was alive and well.

“We can’t make contact, Sansa.” He could read her like a book at times, it seemed.

“I know.”

“Did you sign the certificate?” he asked next.

The papers were lying on the dresser but they’d be safely stowed before they left in the morning. They’d already disposed of their party clothes in a dumpster back in Green Fork earlier.

“I did.” She’d noticed the date he’d chosen, too. September 1st-the day they’d met. “We’re officially unofficially married, I guess.”

“Like a movie or something, huh?” He clicked off the television and she turned off the light before he pulled her closer. “I never thought I’d be a married man someday.”

She snorted. “Being married was all I thought about from the time I turned ten, I think. I’d picture my dream wedding.”

“Looked just like this, right?”

“Hardly.”

“Sansa…”

“I couldn’t ask for a better fake husband though.”

He kissed her cheek. “I couldn’t ask for a better fake wife.”
“Let’s get some sleep, Mr. Snow.”

“Nah ah…not Mr. Snow.”

“Mr. Stone, I mean.”

“Got to keep it straight.”

She gave him a playful shove. “I will. It’s you who’ll struggle to remember.”

“Aye, you’re right, Alayne.”

He got another shove for that. “Not Alayne. That girl is gone for good. You’re Jon and I’m your wife Lyanna Stone. Who else would I be?”

Chapter End Notes

Flood of updates this week...lol. I'll probably update Skirling tomorrow and then take a little break :)}
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Petyr awakens. Jon and Sansa are laying low as they await Sam's package and Sansa discovers something in Jon's things. Aegon talks with his mother.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Petyr’s eyes opened slowly, squinting at the brightness. His body ached but it was almost numb in a way, a remote sort of pain. Something told him that the pain would be increasing shortly. His throat felt raw.

“Here, boss.” Lothor stood beside him holding a cup with a straw in it. “They said to offer you some when you woke up. The vent tube was removed,” he added, gesturing towards his own throat.

Ramsay. The fire and…

“Where is she?” he croaked after he’d had a sip.

“They’ve not found her. I’m afraid she’s…”

He couldn’t accept that. Cat had been taken from him. Not her, too. “The prince?” he interrupted.

“He made it out. He was shot but alright from what I heard. Connington had called for back up from the house. He’s dead. Some of the prince’s people had him on a plane back to Dorne before the authorities knew their asses from a hole in the ground.”

“She might be with him.”

“She ain’t with him, boss. The house is gone. They’re still looking for…remains. I’m sorry.”

Lothor bowed his head, clearly thinking the worst. He’d cared for her, Petyr knew. No matter the job, no matter the money they’d been paid, she’d managed to win all of them over with her sweetness the past two years, without even trying.

He couldn’t give up on her as easily. She’d be lost without him but also she was his key to keeping his influence when Cersei lost her war.

“The media? The police?”

“I didn’t say nothing, boss. I played dumb and just gave them a list of the partygoers. The cook and a few of the other servants have been asking after Alayne but I told them we were keeping quiet so you didn’t find out no bad news while you were recovering. Royce’s girl has been calling but we’ve not told her nothing either.”
Lothor was worth his weight in gold sometimes. He knew the meaning of discretion. The servants were one thing but he’d have to craft some sort of story for Lady Myranda. That girl talked a lot.

“Jon Snow?”

“No signs of him since Osmund took him out back. On the other hand, Osmund and the others never showed back up either. Lot of people died that night who weren’t supposed to. If they don’t find her body, I can ask the Police Chief to…”

Petyr shook his head vehemently. It hurt to move but Lothor had to understand. Lothor would never say it but he knew who she was. They couldn’t take the chance of the secret being exposed. If Cersei ever learned he’d been hiding her all this time, she’d have him drawn and quartered if it was the last thing she ever did.

The door opened and Osney came in. “Heard you were awake, boss. What’re we going to do?”

“He just woke up. Let him be.”

“Well, while he’s been sleeping my brothers are dead.” Osney crossed the room, his eyes flashing with rage. “Snow killed them. I know he did. I want his head.”

“How do you know they didn’t kill him before everything went to seven hells? How do you know he didn’t die in the fire or that crazy fucker and his friends didn’t do it?” Lothor asked.

“Their bodies weren’t found and the van’s gone. No one remembers seeing Osmund or Osfryd after they took him out back. Snow’s gone. He killed them and probably took them off in the van.” He looked back at Petyr. “And if he’s gone and she’s missing, you know she’s probably with him.”

A very good point. Petyr tried to take a deep breath but it just made him start coughing. His head was starting to ache but worse pain was making itself known now. He looked down at the bandages covering his body.

“How bad, Lothor?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Pretty bad, boss. They’ll have to do more than one skin graft on your legs.”

“How pleasant.” But this was not the first time he’d been laid low and tenacity was one characteristic he did not lack. “Ramsay?”

“Don’t know. Looks like the rest of his crew were killed but no sign of him.”

“Hmm.”

“Boss?” Osney prompted.

Osney didn’t care about Ramsay. Petyr did. He owed Roose some payback for that. But, Osney was all about vengeance for his brothers. Petyr supposed he could use that.

“Find them if you can. Bring her back to me, unharmed. Kill Jon Snow. Recruit any help you need and I’ll foot the bill. But if you draw unfortunate attention to yourself, you’re on your own.” I’ll have you killed.

“Got it. Where should I start?”

“You’re looking for a Snow so I’d imagine somewhere north of here.”
It was rather vague and he wouldn’t give him any additional leads. Petyr wished he still had the information on Jon Snow he’d obtained when he’d hired him but that would be ashes now. Osney lacked Lothor’s discretion anyway. Petyr would put Lothor on the hunt soon enough but he’d let Osney have a turn. After all, even a blind squirrel finds a nut once in a while.

Sansa tipped up the little plastic container until every last drop was emptied out before picking up her fork to tuck in. They’d found another motel offering a free hot breakfast and she’d decided she only wanted to stay at ones like that from now on.

“I think you missed a spot there. Sure you don’t want me to fetch another syrup for you?”

“Yes, get me two more.” She rolled her eyes when he started to rise. “I’m kidding. I like maple syrup, okay?”

“Me, too. Pancakes are one of my favorite things ever.”

“Really?”

“Uh huh. Since I was a kid.” He stole a bite of hers to prove it, making her grin. He smacked his lips and took a sip of coffee. “Almost as sweet as my wife.”

She flushed. They were surrounded by other guests and she knew this was part of their agreement to behave like a young couple in public, the logic being it would come across more natural if they were truly forced to talk to anyone.

“Nice but forgettable is what we’re aiming for.”

Still, anytime Jon referred to her as his wife, she’d grow ridiculously flustered. “We need to run a load of wash,” she commented to try and keep her cool.

“I’ll get some change at the front desk on our way back to the room. There’s a thrift shop down the block and I was thinking of seeing if they had a decent suitcase for everything.”

They needed it. They’d picked up more socks and underwear and another shirt apiece yesterday. Their satchels would be full to bursting.

Three days had passed and they were still anxiously waiting on Sam’s ‘care package’ to arrive. This variety of lying low was a bit more exciting than hiding out on an estate as Alayne but not much. Regardless, Sansa was enjoying being Mrs. Jon Stone very much more than she’d readily admit. She liked being held in Jon’s arms at night as well. She loved being kissed till she was dizzy on rainy afternoons in motel rooms even more.

Free of Petyr and the past, she liked being out in the world for the first time in forever, too. It was a game of sorts though she knew it’d be foolish to treat it lightly. Jon had warned her not to get too comfortable since they needed to stay alert but it was hard to stay on edge all the time. She supposed moving on would be good. They were already bored silly with television but she liked sketching. Jon had bought a pack of cards and was teaching her the elements of poker. He’d also
promised to give her more driving lessons once they were in the North and not using stolen cars.

Jon was hopeful Sam’s package would arrive today but Sansa was secretly nervous about it. She knew Jon trusted Sam but, once they had the IDs, they’d be attempting to cross the border into the North.

When Sansa had left the North years ago, cars had crossed right over the boundary between one kingdom to the next but that had been before Robert had died and Cersei had started reinstating some of the older regime’s practices. Now, there were guard booths, crossing gates and random vehicle searches.

Jon had already said they couldn’t use a stolen car for that so he’d be renting one with his new ID. She worried that they’d be running out of money but Jon seemed to think they could make it to White Harbor on what he’d managed to earn from Petyr.

“I’ve got more in White Harbor,” he murmured.

“At a bank?”

“No, not exactly,” he answered in a tone that meant he wouldn’t tell her here.

She decided to change the subject as she finished up her pancake. “I’ve been thinking about getting a haircut.”

He didn’t manage to hide his frown. “How short?”

Her hair was long. It hung down well past the middle of her back. She also knew he liked it very much. “Just to my shoulders. Nothing radical.”

Last night, Jon had had a nightmare. They’d drifted apart in the bed at some point but she’d felt him thrashing. Alarmed by the rapid pounding of his heart, she’d nestled close again and started whispering that he was safe. He’d asked to stroke her hair in a voice that had been so sweet and boyish she’d wondered if he was fully awake.

“Thank you, Sansa,” he’d said though as his hand had started drifting through her loose tresses.

She’d barely felt his touch and yet every single one had been felt all the same. She’d wanted to ask what haunted his dreams but kept her silence. She’d wound up staying awake a long time, gazing at him after he fell back asleep. She’d ached with how much she loved him. She wanted to believe he loved her, too.

“It’ll change my look but be less damaging then dying it again so soon,” she whispered. She had another idea she wanted to try as well but decided not to mention it.

“Okay,” he said noncommittally as he took a final sip of his coffee and asked if she was ready to go back to their room.

“Yes. I’ve got a pair of scissors I bought the other night.”

“So, you’re saying…now?” he gulped.

“Yes. And, I won’t be able to get it straight if I do it myself.”

“Wait…me?”

“Yes, you.” He blanched. As she suspected, he’d been hoping to put it off. “Jon…”
“Yeah, alright."

Back in their room, she sat before the bathroom sink as Jon clipped methodically along. His expression was so anxious that part of her wanted to laugh. But as she looked down at the dark hair covering the towels beneath her, she kind of wanted to cry, too.

They’d stayed here last night and would stay again tonight. Jon said that hopefully they’d be staying somewhere in the north tomorrow night as they made their way to Davos Seaworth.

“What’s he like?” she asked as the little clipping sounds continued.

“He can come across sort of gruff at first but he’s a good person. You’ll like him, I think.”

“Will he like me?”

“He’ll love you. Who wouldn’t?”

She smiled tremulously and wanted to ask something. She didn’t.

“How’d I do?” he asked next with the same tremulous smile she’d just given him.

It was shorter than she’d had it since she was probably ten. Her chin quivered for half a second but she’d already decided Lyanna Stone would have shorter hair. It’d be more practical. And there’s still plenty of it for him to run his fingers through.

“You did great.”

He didn’t look entirely convinced but he gave her a quick kiss and left soon after to check and see if Sam’s package had arrived and if he could find some cheap but decent luggage.

He’d dumped the white SUV before they checked in here so he’d be walking which would add a little more time to his excursion. They didn’t have cell phones right now. He’d been too suspicious of being tracked through his old one and she’d never had one anyway. She didn’t like when they were separated but she’d be busy while he was gone this morning.

Sansa crushed up the Vitamin C and mixed it with the small bottle of anti-dandruff shampoo she’d picked up in addition to her usual one. She worked the mixture into her hair and watched some television for a little bit before showering to rinse. She’d read about this method but never tried it.

If her hair turned green or something, Jon would return to find her a sobbing, wailing mess in the bed.

Her hair did not turn green. The dark brown was no longer so dark. The red underneath was more noticeable. Not too noticeable though, she decided after several minutes of studying it in the mirror. She hoped he’d like it.

Jon had not returned yet and she thought she’d be useful by emptying out their satchels in hopes of him having some success at the second-hand store. And if not, they needed to wash their things anyway. What else was there to do as they laid low another day, right? At least till he came back and hopefully kissed her dizzy some more.

As she dumped the contents of Jon’s bag onto the bed, a folded-up piece of paper fluttered out from the very bottom. Slightly tattered at the edges, she opened it, thinking it might be an old receipt he’d forgotten about. It wasn’t.
His mother was sitting in her favored parlor when Aegon limped down the stairs in search of coffee.

“You shouldn’t have gotten up without ringing for help,” she admonished though the tenderness in her tone belied the scolding.

“I’m alright, Mother,” he assured her, kissing her hand and taking a seat by her side.

His leg did still pain him something fierce but lying in bed was so dull and he wouldn’t cause her anymore worry. She’d already been worried sick over him…literally. She’d been poorly throughout his childhood and his Uncle Oberyn had said even when she was younger she was often unwell. Aegon supposed years spent living in exile and putting up with his father would take a toll on even the healthiest woman.

“Do you want something to eat?”

“Just coffee, please.” She called for it and they waited in silence till after the servant had left, closing the parlor doors at her bidding. “I had thought Father would come see me.” She grimaced and he didn’t wish to cause her any grief just because his father was cold and distant. “I don’t care that he hasn’t. I just…what did he say?”

He’d been sedated when they’d brought him home from the airport. He remembered the fire raging and the men Connington had called finding him amongst the chaos. He recalled a friendly EMT treating his injuries at the scene. One of his father’s men had been hovering over them both and Aegon had hoped they wouldn’t kill the poor man simply because he was treating some hidden prince. They hadn’t. There’d been other people to treat and the man had moved on and Aegon had been carried off in the confusion of the scene.

“Your father blames Baelish for failing to have proper security in place.”

From the sharper edge to her tongue, his mother blamed him as well.

“That’s all? He hasn’t said anything else about…he’s not still hoping for me to marry her, is he?”

“I doubt it. Your father says she’s probably dead though her body’s not been found from what he’s heard. The girl might’ve been a decoy anyway. We’ll find you a good Dornish girl to wed.”

He doubted those were his father’s words. No Dornish girl would bring him the Northern half of the continent as a dowry.

“No, it…Mother, I think she really was who he said but…” He scowled, remembering the man’s words to him outside the burning manse.

“Forget you saw us tonight. In fact, forget her name, too.”

Her bodyguard…Jon. He’d saved his life and Lady Sansa had kissed him. He’d seen the way she’d looked at him. A girl or two had looked at Aegon that way before. He hoped Jon had more sense than he did when it came to girls for the sake of Sansa’s heart. He wondered where they went after they’d pulled away in that white van. It didn’t matter. The hidden princess had been carried off just as he had.
“You liked her?” his mother asked, a gentler look now.

“I did.” But, she didn’t want me and she doesn’t want to be found. He started chuckling to himself, remembering her feisty side. “She was beautiful and quite a lively companion. Father always says Northern girls are…” He bit his tongue at the flash of pain in his mother’s eyes. Aegon, you ass. Sometimes, I wish I’d been born without a tongue.

His father had been unfaithful more than once over the years but there’d been a Northern girl he’d loved…or talked like he had. The affair was over before he’d been born but he’d heard the whispers that Prince Rhaegar had made fool of his wife and himself over some wild rose from the North. There were even rumors that a bastard had been born not too long after he was. His uncles told him that was not true and his sister refused to believe it. Fool though he was, he didn’t dare ask his mother or father of it.

“It doesn’t matter, I guess. I’m sorry if she died. She was lovely and kind.”

“It is sad regardless of who she was.”

“Yes…and you’re probably right about her being a decoy.” He stared into his coffee cup. He was a decent liar, he supposed, but he never could meet his mother’s eye when he lied to her. “Pass me the newspaper, will you?”

Jon was smiling as he reached the motel parking lot at last despite the chilly day. He’d met with success at the parcel service store and at the thrift shop. The suitcase was in good shape and the wheels had made it easy to roll it along the sidewalk. He’d made another purchase there as well.

The money was not endless but there was enough for the rental car, gas, three nights on the road and food. They could sleep in the car if unexpected expenses came up. He didn’t like leaving her side and wanted to get them both phones but they could get by without a bit longer. He patted his jeans pocket and hoped she wouldn’t call him a fool for buying this instead of two inexpensive phones. It would help sell their story but he knew that was not the real reason he’d made the purchase.

Once they crossed the Neck, he could get them to White Harbor in less than three days even stopping for meals and to rest at night. And the rest of his money from the Watch was with Davos. After he’d been discharged and with everything that had happened, his old distrust of all the established institutions had been strong in him. Davos had been flabbergasted when he’d had his entire pension transferred to the old man’s account with Sam’s help. He’d thought he was coming to stay with him. He’d been disappointed then. Hopefully, he still wants to see me.

From there, he and Sansa could regroup and decide what to do next.

“Honey, I’m home!” he called out like some cheesy actor in an old sitcom might’ve as he entered the room.

She didn’t answer with a laugh like she had when he’d done that yesterday. The room was empty and his heart started beating frantically. Fuck it, he was buying them both cell phones tomorrow.
He’d eat stale crackers till they reached Davos if he had to. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the note taped to the mirror.

_Gone to do the wash._

He laid the suitcase on the bed, figuring she’d be back soon—or he’d go find her shortly. He hoped she might be sketching again. She’d been drawing yesterday when he’d crept over to see what she was doing. She’d smiled shyly and then shown him a sketch of Lady. He’d kissed her nose and then her cheek. She’d laid the sketch pad aside as he’d crawled over her and started working his way along her jaw to her ear. When she’d started giggling that it tickled, he’d claimed her lips and they’d stayed like that for quite a while.

Now that the anxiety of waiting for Sam’s package was over, Jon decided he’d like to enjoy the rest of their day here. Sansa could have more pancakes in the morning before they hit the road and they could have another lovely make-out session in between.

He supposed he could start transferring some of their things into the suitcase now. It looked like she’d emptied out their bags in anticipation of just that. He went to the dresser where their marriage certificate sat. He’d put it in the zippered inner pocket for safekeeping.

But sitting on the certificate was something else. Folded up neatly on top was the photocopy of Ygritte’s picture he’d taken with him when he’d left the Watch. He must’ve grabbed it when he’d hastily chosen some socks and underwear to take. Maybe it was best it hadn’t been left for Baelish to discover—except the house had burned down anyway.

Sansa had found it though and left it sitting out. He didn’t think that was an accident.

Jon covered his face with this hands. He’d told her on the night they’d fled that he’d tell her about his scars. He’d promised himself later that night as he’d held her than he’d tell her everything. Last night, he’d woke up in a panic having relived the horror of Hardhome all over again. She’d comforted him without question…and he still hadn’t told her a damned thing.

She was alone in the hotel’s little laundry room for guests when he found her, sitting in one of the plastic chairs and flipping through a magazine that was several months old. Her sketch pad sat idle beside her.

She smiled when he entered. It was horribly forced and he hated it. “I just started a load.”

“Good.” He shoved his hands in his pockets, at a loss for how to proceed. “Your hair is different,” he blurted out.

_Brilliant…idiot._

_Well, it is!_

He hadn’t butchered the haircut at least. It was short but not so short that he couldn’t still imagine lying beside her and running his fingers through the silky strands. And it didn’t take away from her beauty in the slightest. But it wasn’t the cut he’d noticed.

“I tried something to remove some of the dye,” she said, fingering the ends uncertainly.

It was more of a reddish brown, closer to her natural red, he’d guess. It was pretty and very flattering with her skin tone. “I like it. It’s lovely.” He pulled off his sweater and the t-shirt under it. He tossed the t-shirt in the wash. “It needed washing, too,” he said as casually as he could manage. Her eyes flitted to his scars but she quickly reverted to looking at the magazine. He pulled
his sweater back on. “Sansa, can we talk?”

“We talk all day. Three days of talking about how much I like syrup and which late-night talk show to watch,” she said quietly with her eyes still glued to the page before her.

“I know but you asked about my scars the other night and I said I’d tell you later and I’ve let three days go by. Honestly, there’s a lot of things I’ve not told you about me that I should.”

“Why now? Because I found her picture?” At least, she was looking at him again.

“I’ve wanted to tell you before but I…” The skepticism was plain on her face. He was a hairsbreadth away from fucking up.

“If I haven’t already fucked up completely. “It’s hard for me to open up to people, Sansa. Trust isn’t easy for me and…”

“And you think it’s easy for me?”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that. I know you’ve got plenty of reasons to struggle with it, too. I tend to avoid uncomfortable conversations. I’ve been guilty of withdrawing from people I care about to keep from discussing those things even.”

“Is that what you want to do with me?” There were tears in her eyes. He was gutted by those tears.

“No, not at all.”

“Who is she? Or is this another secret you’ll promise to tell me later and never will?”

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know. I want to share everything with you, darling. I’m sorry if…”

“Why do you call me that?”

“What?”

“Aegon called me that and I didn’t like it. I told him not to. I told him not to call me darling because you had. I liked it when you’d called me darling because I thought it meant something.”

“Sansa, it means something. Please, can we talk? Maybe in the room?”

“I shouldn’t leave our clothes here unattended.”

He chuckled despite himself, even knowing she was angry. *Let me fix this if I can.* He held out his hand. “I don’t think anyone’s dying to steal my old flannels and boxer shorts, dar-” Her eyes narrowed and he stopped himself. “Please?”

She stood up and took his hand…very begrudgingly. “That’ll be finished in 30 minutes. It’ll need to be moved to the dryer.”

Yes, *I know how laundry works.* He didn’t dare say it. He followed her back to their room.

An hour later, the clothes would still be sitting in the washing machine but he’d started coming clean at least.

He told her about his early days in the Watch and how he’d managed to impress Lord Commander Mormont. He told her of his recruitment by Qhorin Halfhand to infiltrate the Free Folk and Mance Rayder’s squad in particular.
Then, he told of her Ygritte.

“I never meant for it to happen. She seemed to take to me when the others were all still rightly suspicious. I guess she was suspicious too but she wanted to believe I was with them.”

“They knew you were Nights Watch?”

“No. They would’ve killed me if they’d known. But I remembered what I was before I joined…an orphan with a chip on his shoulder, a bastard ward of the state with very little prospects who was tossed on the streets the day he turned 18.”

“So, you played a role.”

It struck him then that she would understand that in a way not many people he knew would.

“Yes. I just didn’t have to change my name is all.” She nodded and let him continue. “Ygritte liked me from the start but I wasn’t sure why. She was, uh…very straightforward about what she wanted. I shied away and it amused her.” Sansa smirked but said nothing. “Mance kept pairing me off with her for different little errands, mostly bullshit that he could trust anyone with. I don’t know if he wanted her keeping an eye on me or if she’d asked him but, in time, she grew on me. I didn’t like a lot of the things they stood for but some of it made sense and Ygritte was…there was more than one side to her.”

“There’s more than one side to most of us.”

“Yes, you’re right. Qhorin had said to do whatever was necessary once I was part of them. Maybe I was naïve. I had not considered that he might mean getting involved with someone…sexually. I didn’t want to dishonor her that way with my deception and feed her false hope of something that couldn’t last. But as Ygritte became more insistent and as the others continued to look at me with suspicion, I realized that it would be necessary to maintain the ruse.”

“You’re saying you didn’t want to sleep with her?”

“I told myself I didn’t at first but then, I guess I did.” He wasn’t sure how else to put it.

Her brow was furrowed as she pondered his words. “What happened to her?”

“She died not long after Hardhome. I had already left them by then and…there was a raid planned. It was intended to take out the terrorist cell but it was also about revenge for a couple of our brothers who’d died in the bombing. I shouldn’t have been part of it. Qhorin didn’t want me to be part of it. He knew after my debriefing about Ygritte and that I’d got too close and would be a liability. But Qhorin wasn’t in charge and I was sent anyway. She was shot by one of my brothers. She died in my arms.”

A breath he didn’t realize he was holding was expelled as Sansa wrapped her arms around him and pressed her lips to his forehead.
Their clothes dried and put away at last, they’d walked to the pizzeria down the block to pick up dinner and shared it in their room. They’d spent a majority of the day talking. Well, Jon had done most of the talking but she wouldn’t have traded this day for anything. He had shared many things about himself in the time since they’d first met but for the first time she felt like she had the whole picture. And, she only loved him that much more now that she did.

He’d feared she wouldn’t like the things she learned, that she’d be disappointed by him, disgusted even. She’d assured him at every turn he’d been mistaken. He was as far from the monsters she had known in Kings Landing as any man who wasn’t a saint could possibly be.

He’d told her about Hardhome and his failure there but it wasn’t his failure at all. Mance Rayder had been suspicious of Jon till the end apparently. Jon had known where the devices were planted and he’d sent his warning. But the bombs had gone off an hour before he’d been told they would.

“Most of the personnel had already been evacuated, you said.”

“Not all of them.”

“How many died?”

“Fifty-seven.”

“And how many would’ve been there normally at that time?”

“Eight hundred, give or take.”

“Your information saved lives, Jon. You saved lives that day.”

Not everyone had seen it that way and she supposed it had clouded Jon’s perception of the events. Government had blamed the Watch for not preventing the attack altogether. The fall-out back at Castle Black had led to lots of hard feelings for over a year afterwards between two very different groups of the brothers. Tensions had boiled to head at last with the so-called Loyalists attacking the Progressives which included Lord Commander Mormont and Jon.

“For the Watch,’ they said when they stabbed me, one after the other.”

Only the bathroom light had been left on and the room was shrouded in shadow. Most everything was packed in anticipation of their trip across the border tomorrow. They were lying in bed together as he shared this part of his past. There was an intimacy to be found here in the dark as he revealed this final piece of the puzzle to her.

He’d left his t-shirt off tonight and she was caressing his chest, silently mapping the scars with her fingers and possessed by the urge to sketch his body. She wouldn’t though, not unless he allowed her someday. It had been a horribly traumatic event in a life already filled with too much heartbreak and tragedy.

“How did you survive?” she asked, swallowing her tears.

“I didn’t.” Startled, she raised her head to look him in the eye. “I had nearly bled out when they got me to the base hospital. I coded on the table. I was dead for all intents and purposes for roughly three and a half minutes.”

“But they brought you back.”

“They did.”
“What did you…” She bit her lip and wasn’t sure if she should ask.

He kissed her softly. His arm was wound around her, lazily caressing her back. “You can ask, darling. You can ask me anything, remember?”

It was one of life’s great mysteries, wasn’t it? “When you died…did you see anything?”

“I did. I thought I was dreaming. Maybe I was. Maybe it was the mind’s final thoughts playing out before everything faded to black but I saw my dog Ghost.”

“The one you had when you were a boy?”

“Yes. He had a stick in his mouth and I was chasing him. It was a game and I was laughing. That’s it. That’s all I can remember. I never told anyone that before.”

Sansa sighed and he pulled her closer. “It was a nice thing to see.”

“I thought so, too.”

It was late and he’d shared so much. They needed their rest. But there was one thing that was still niggling at her. He’d said she could ask anything and she didn’t think this was any exception. She just had to find the courage to ask. The darkened room helped.

“Jon? Did you love her?”

He was quiet for a moment but it seemed more reflective than as if he was choosing his words. “Not at first but in time I did. It was only after I realized that…once everything had gone to shit and our time together was nearly over that I realized I did.”

“Oh.” He had brought her picture from Castle Black and he’d packed it in his bag before they’d fled together. Of course, he’d loved her. Does he love her still? Does he love a ghost more than he’ll ever love me?

“I did love Ygritte but she’s gone and I’m not. I took the picture with me when I left the Wall but I did not intentionally bring it with me here. What happened between me and Ygritte is different than us.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve known how I feel about you for some time now and it’s not the same. Because she’s my past and you’re my future…at least, I hope you’ll be. I’d like for you to be. I’m not deceiving you and I won’t give you any false hopes. We may be pretending we’re married and carrying fake IDs but I’m not playing any role with you, Sansa. I love you.”

She gasped softly and her heart filled with quiet joy. “You do?”

“I do.”

“I love you, too.”

Even with the low lighting, she could see his eyes glowing and the brilliance of his smile. She
imagined her expression matched his. Their lips met in a deep but tender kiss. She wanted a dozen more of them.

“Hang on,” he yelped as he sat up unexpectedly. “This is…I meant to give you this earlier. It’s nowhere near good enough but…”

He fumbled for the bedside lamp and she squinted at the sudden brightness. He climbed out of bed and reached for his jeans, sitting in the nearby chair. He returned to the bed and knelt beside it. Sansa sat up, her heart pounding rapidly now.

He held out a golden band. “I know we’re not really married and I’m not trying to trivialize what this ring represents. I won’t pressure you to accept it and I’ll never pressure you for anything else. But I do love you and, if you wouldn’t mind, I’d like for you to wear this as a symbol of that anyway.”

“A symbol?”

“Of my love.”

“Your love?”

“Yes, and a promise.”

“A promise?”

“That it’s you and me together, looking after each other.”

“Looking after each other.”

“Well, yeah. I’ll stay by your side for as long as you’ll allow.”

“As long as I’ll allow.”

“Am I hard to hear? Because you keep repeating me and it’s making me very nervous.”

She laughed and held out her hand. It fit perfectly.

Chapter End Notes

I meant to check in with the Blackfish this chapter as well but couldn't fit it in. He should appear next chapter and Jon and Sansa should cross the border into the North.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Jon and Sansa cross the border into the North. Brynden makes a phone call and Sansa is ready to try new things as they make their way to Davos Seaworth's house in White Harbor.

Chapter Notes

Gorgeous mood board by @sweetaprilbutterfly :) Thank you again, my dear!

“Almost there.” He’d said it half a hundred times at least in the past 30 minutes.

“So you’ve said.”
His jaw clenched in response and his hands gripped the wheel harder. She didn’t mean to sound so
snappish but she was.

Tension was running high as they rolled another ten feet. Both of them stared hungrily at the
marshy forests ahead. The Neck, the southern-most part of the North…it was so close. Sansa had
thought she might never see it again in her lifetime and it was a stone’s throw away. Well, less than
half a mile anyway. But there were dozens of uniformed men and crossing gates between them and
there.

“Smile,” he said between gritted teeth as one of the border guards walked towards their rental car
again.

“I am smiling. You’re the one who looks ready to tear someone apart,” she murmured.

Jon had rolled the window down a few minutes ago, complaining that the car was stifling. It was
near freezing outside.

The guard came closer. “So, you were telling me about when you first met Sam,” she said airily
when he was within earshot.

They’d started this conversation hours ago only for it to trail off when they’d wound up in this
gridlock. But as hoped, some of the tension left Jon’s face. The guard walked past them. He
answered anyway, taking her hand in his. His hand were sweaty. So was hers. She still enjoyed his
touch.

“We were training in the yard, hand to hand combat and such when Sam was marched up by a
corporal to join us. Sam was not…well, no one would ever look at Sam and think he looked like a
fighter. He’d been misled about what would be expected of him by his father as it turned out. Our
drill instructor was a difficult man to please and he took an instant dislike to him. Lots of the
recruits did to be honest but I…”

Sansa laid her head on his shoulder as he talked. He smiled as he spoke and she could tell the
distraction was helping. And though he attempted to downplay his importance in seeing Sam
through his first three months of training, it was clear they’d formed a close friendship and she
could imagine Sam was very grateful to the friend who’d done his best to protect him from the
whims of a brutal and petty man in a position of power over them. You were always meant to be a
protector, I think.

“But he didn’t stay?”

“No, volunteers are given the chance to opt out after two years. He left for the Citadel at the urging
of one of the high officers to make better use of his abilities. He was too smart for that place
anyway.”

“You missed him though.”

“Very much. He was the best friend I ever had. It wasn’t long after that I was recruited by Qhorin.”

Of all the rotten luck, the rental car place had taken twice as long as expected this morning and
there’d been an incident at the crossing about 20 minutes before they’d arrived. From the
smattering of conversations they’d overheard from the guards, someone had attempted to cross
without proper identification. When the guards had told the man to step out of his vehicle, he’d
attempted to ram through the crossing gate. The investigation and clean-up had the highway
backed up for approximately three miles as every car headed north was forced to inch through the
sole lane that had recently been reopened. Needless to say, none of this had helped an already stressful situation.

For three hours, they’d been within sight of Moat Cailin, creeping towards their homeland. “I’m starting to regret that bottled water I drank earlier.”

Jon chuckled. “I’m sorry. There’s a rest stop right past the gates. We’re almost…”

“Don’t say it.”

He laughed more fully and leaned over to kiss her cheek.

At last, their dark blue rental car rolled up to the guard booth. Sansa’s stomach was in knots now that they were actually here but Jon’s earlier nerves seemed to have vanished.

“Training,” he shrugged when she mentioned it. “The engagement is what we train for. It’s waiting for the action to begin that’s the hardest part for me.” He turned to greet the approaching guard.

“Rental car?” the man asked, noting the plates.

“Yes. My old piece of shit gave up the ghost at last,” Jon said affably.

“Where you coming from?”

“Saltpans.”

“Where you headed?”

“Barrowtown.”

“May I see your credentials?” Jon passed over his ID. “Hers, too.” Sansa hoped he didn’t notice her trembling hand when she passed it to him. He barely glanced at hers before passing it back.

“Alright, then. Safe travels.” He waved them through.

All this waiting and anxiety and this was it? The gate raised and Sansa exhaled audibly as Jon rolled the window up.

She’d taunted him the night of that dinner party when he’d broke Mr. Belmore’s hand and she’d feared Petyr would fire him that he’d never make it out of the Vale alive if he tried to take her. He’d just done precisely that, partly thanks to Sam.

“I can’t believe…”

“One lane open and miles of cars behind us. They’ve got their hands full in more than one way today,” he said as he nodded towards the side of the road.

There was a car pulled over with a photographer taking pictures and blood all over its interior. The ‘incident’ from earlier, the man who’d tried to force his way through.

Jon squeezed her hand reassuringly as the blood drained from her face. “It’s not us, darling. Look away. Look at the forest ahead. We’re heading north.”

It’s not us. It’s not us, she chanted to herself. We’re safe. We made it.

By the time they were pulling into the rest stop, the terror had ebbed some and she found her voice again. “We actually made it.”
“We sure did.” He grinned then. It was a smug sort of grin and she just knew he was recalling the same conversation she’d been thinking of earlier. She raised an eyebrow. “Don’t worry. I won’t get too cocky about it.”

He lamented that payphones were getting harder to find these days. Mobile phones were useful but there was something to be said for the anonymity of a good payphone. It was late and he watched an ambulance pulling into the bay across the street. The hospital had yielded some good intel.

The phone rang several times and he was about to give up when a groggy voice answered. “Lo?”

“Edmure.”

“Oh, Uncle—….it’s…where are you?”

Brynden rolled his eyes. “Where I’ve been.”

He loved his nephew but he had more heart than smarts. They never said certain names over the phone and Brynden never gave his location. Edmure had been Cat’s brother, Ned’s brother-in-law and Robb’s uncle. He was also the uncle of the girl wanted by the queen for conspiring in the assassination of King Joffrey. Government still kept tabs on him from time to time and wiretapping was always a possibility.

Funny enough, it’d been Edmure who’d drawn his attention to Petyr Baelish. He’d not thought of the clever little boy from the Fingers who’d been his brother’s ward years ago in ages until Edmure had read a society page article about him and brought it up one night over dinner. It had mentioned him having a bastard daughter named Alayne living with him and Brynden had found that odd. Not Petyr having a bastard, just him actually raising her. It had got the wheels turning. When he’d discovered no one had heard of the girl until around the same time Joffrey had died and Sansa had gone missing, he’d decided to go take a look.

“Sorry, I…”

“Family alright?” he interrupted.

“Yes.”

“Roslin going to bake me one of her pies when I get back?” Any trouble?

“She will. Cherry, she says.” No, they’ve been leaving us alone.

“Good.”

“Did you…we saw the news. Is she…”

“Working on that. Is Nan there?”

“I’ll get her.”

It was quiet for over a minute. The attic was on the third story but it wasn’t long till she came on
the line. “You should’ve let me come along,” she said by way of greeting.

Seventeen and so headstrong. She reminded him remarkably of his niece, her mother. He’d not been able to help Cat but he’d done what he could for her children. *Still one left to save.*

“You’d have just slowed me down.”

“I wouldn’t’ve.” The mulish tone was gone the next instant when she asked, “Did you see that play you wanted to catch?” *Did you find her?*

“I did but my seats weren’t any good.” *I saw her but we did not speak. She did not know me.* “I wanted the lead’s autograph but she was swamped.” *She had hired muscle with her.*

The young man had been sizing him up on the street that day. Brynden had managed to find out the names of the men in Baelish’s employ and he’d been the newest and youngest of them…Jon Snow. Compared to the two oafs Brynden had had the bad luck to run across on the estate, he’d seemed competent enough.

If I’d brought you along with me, maybe we would’ve avoided those idiots that night and found a way to take her with us.

He couldn’t risk her safety like that.

“I’m going to make a new dress. What color do you think?” *Is she dead?*

She asked it tonelessly but Brynden knew better. She’d tried hardening her young heart as a means of protecting it but she was not so hard as she pretended. He hesitated. He hated to give hope if he was wrong but he wanted to believe and wanted her to believe as well.

“I’ve always been partial to pink.” *She’s still alive.*

She snorted but something like a sob came out over the line as well. “We miss you.”

“Be good for ’em, alright? Keep the pups fed.” *Take care of your brothers.*

“I will.”

They hung up and Brynden rubbed his tired eyes.

Bran and Rickon had been the first found. Before the family estate had been raided by Government after Robb and Cat’s death, the boys had fled with a couple of loyal servants. The rumors had swirled that they’d been killed during the raid and Government was keeping it under wraps. But in fact, they’d been hiding out with some of the other Northern families until Brynden had made the right connections and swept his great-nephews away to the Riverlands with the hope of keeping them safe. He knew many of the Northerners wanted to rally behind them for their cause but they were only children. It wasn’t right to make them the figureheads of a revolution, no more than it’d been fair to make Robb one who’d been little more than a teenager when his father had been killed.

Arya had been harder to find. Actually, he’d not found her at all. He had feared her dead until the day she’d walked right up to him and introduced herself. She’d fled Kings Landing right before Ned’s arrest and wound up in Braavos for a time. Brynden still didn’t know half of what she’d been up to in those intervening years but she knew an awful lot about weapons for a girl of her age and upbringing. But while she might burn for vengeance for her dead family, she yearned to be reunited with what remained of her living family even more.
Brynden walked across the street and bought himself a cup of coffee in the hospital cafeteria. Alayne Stone’s body had not been listed among the dead, nor was she listed as missing. It was like she’d disappeared. *Or like she’d never really existed.*

There was another name not listed among the dead or missing as well: Jon Snow. Brynden would call that curious. Curious things made him suspicious. He’d bet money she wasn’t dead and maybe she wasn’t alone either.

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The Kings Road Highway stretched through the boggy forests of the Neck for miles and, though it was highly traveled, it was narrow with little to no shoulder for miles in certain spots. It called for the strictest attention of the driver and Sansa had sat silently beside him as that unwelcome tension descended upon them again.

But once they’d managed to make it five hours past the border and through the worst of the causeway at last, Jon had said he was more than ready to stop for the night. He’d pulled into the parking lot of an older and clearly lower-end motel but she would never complain. He’d bought them prepaid mobile phones this morning and then the rental car had wound up more expensive than anticipated. No more pancake breakfasts but at least there’d be a bed.

Tomorrow, he hoped to make it past the split where the highway branched west towards Barrowtown, east towards White Harbor or continued on north towards Winterfell. She hoped she wouldn’t cry when they made the turn east instead of heading further north. Jon might not understand. Then again, he probably would.

They stepped inside the lobby where an older woman was sitting behind the desk wholly absorbed in a romance novel. There was a scantily clad couple clutched in an embrace on the cover, a man with dark hair and a woman with long red hair. Sansa knew it’d be silly to ask the title. She tried to make it out on her own without being too obvious. The woman’s head popped up when Jon politely cleared his throat and she set the book aside, face down. *Oh, well.*

“Oh, goodness! I’m so sorry. Welcome to the Causeway Inn. You two needing a room or two for the night?”

“Yes. Just one room, please,” Jon answered.

“A single or a king?”

“A, uh…” Jon glanced at the prices listed. “A single.”

Money was running out and they were still a couple of days from their destination. She knew it was weighing on him. It shouldn’t. Safe, together and away was what mattered. “A king is so big and we don’t mind sleeping close,” she said, mostly for him.

He smiled at her and she heard the clerk sigh wistfully.

Sansa signed the registry and started chatting with the friendly clerk whose name was Lemore. She was maybe around 40 and wore no wedding band. That didn’t mean anything but Sansa hoped she
knew more love than just what she found in romance novels.

She told her they were Jon and Lyanna Stone from Saltpans, a husband and wife stopping for one night while on the road and heading to promised jobs in Barrowtown.

“How long you two been married?” Lemore asked.

“Just since September.”

“Why, you’re practically newlyweds!”

“Well, I guess you…”

Jon wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her cheek. “We certainly feel like it, right, darling?”

Sansa blushed and leaned into him, enjoying this part of their façade very much. Lemore beamed at them both. “Listen, we’re not busy tonight. I’ll give you kids the Honeymoon Cottage.” Jon started to protest but Lemore wouldn’t hear it. “Same price as a single and no arguments.”

_The Honeymoon Cottage for newlyweds who aren’t technically married._ Sansa just wanted a clean room with a heater that worked but it was kind of Lemore…and romantic.

_But, the blushing bride is still a maiden._ That made her shift her focus back to Jon. They were in love and after the day she’d had she wanted nothing more than to be held close tonight.

_Is that all you want?_

Her face grew hotter as she considered the question.

She followed him back to the car and then through the parking lot as he pulled their suitcase along towards the cottage. It was in the far corner and, whereas the rest of the motel was connected, the cottage was detached from the rest though quite small. There was a Sentinel tree growing beside it which had probably been planted decades ago to give a sense of privacy. It was enormous now and nearly hid the place from view. Perhaps there was something romantic in that as well. What looked like the remnants of a flower garden was out front and Sansa wondered if the original owners had perhaps lived there when this place had been new.

“Did you want to get dinner?” Jon asked, distracting her from musings. “Maybe we can find a diner for our pancakes this time.”

He was handsome even in his rumpled flannel. His beard was no longer neatly trimmed but she liked running her fingers through it when they made out, the hair prickly but also soft. His grey eyes reminded her of the sea in a storm tonight but they were crinkled up merrily as he smiled at her and waited for a reply.

“No, I’d rather get settled. We can get something later if you like. I’m not terribly hungry…not for food.” Her voice had dropped with emphasis on those last three words.

His throat bobbed as he swallowed, his eyes not missing the intensity of her stare. He licked his lips and fumbled to unlock the cottage door.

When he flipped on the light, Sansa was vaguely aware of the enormous heart-shaped headboard over the bed which dominated the room, a mirror hanging over it and an overwhelming amount of peach-colored décor but, the instant the door was locked behind them, Jon reached for her and she
thought no more of interior design.

She eagerly returned his kisses and then tugged at his hand. “I want…” She didn’t know what she wanted exactly but she knew he would give it to her.

He lifted her into his arms and carried her the remaining steps to the bed. He tenderly laid her down before lying down beside her. It was a good start.

He loved her. She loved him. He’d given her a ring and got her across the border. They were together, looking after each other. She might be a maiden but she didn’t plan on remaining one forever and tonight she wanted to take another step.

In between kisses, they shed their socks and shoes and helped each other out of their jeans while giggling over the mirror overhead.

“Let’s hope no one’s filming us behind it.” She gasped, shocked at the very idea. “I’m joking.”

“Make sure.”

He rolled his eyes but was chuckling as he stood on the mattress and verified that the mirror was indeed just a mirror.

Jon pulled off his shirt and dropped down to his knees. Their hands busily explored every bit of flesh they could, hers roaming his chest and his running up and down her thighs before returning to her hair and face.

“You’re beautiful. I love you.”

“I love you,” she replied, her hands spanning his lower back and then dipping lower still.

The kisses continued till he broke away, his brow furrowed. “How far, Sansa?”

She liked him asking, she just wasn’t sure of her reply. “Farther than we’ve gone before but not…” She bit her lip uncertainly. Would he think her a child?

He didn’t bat an eye or make her feel childish. “That’s fine. Whatever you say. I don’t have any condoms anyway so I would’ve had to go get some.”

Somehow, that was a relief. She wasn’t ready tonight regardless of the suite. She’d be ready soon but not yet. “Maybe you should get some for later, once we’re in White Harbor.”

He nodded and jerked his Chin downward. “I want…can I see you?” His husky voice made her tremble with desire.

She couldn’t think of a coherent response. She merely nodded. He slowly started unbuttoning the shirt she’d put on this morning which happened to be his.

“Damn…you’re fucking perfect,” he groaned when the warmth of the flannel and her bra were gone.

She shivered and her nipples hardened but she didn’t mind him looking in the slightest. He drank her in greedily but she liked it. He cupped one breast and squeezed it lightly. She leaned forward wanting more. His eyes were dark as onyx as he gazed his fill.

He kissed his way from her lips downward. When his mouth closed over her nipple, she arched towards him wantonly. His tongue only teased for a moment though and she yelped delightedly as
he rolled on top of her, a saucy, adorable grin on his face.

“Are you going to watch us?” he teased as his beard scraped along her neck and then her chest.

“Maybe,” she sighed. She looked up at the mirror, seeing her face and watching the muscles in his back and shoulders move when he did.

Their stress and anxiety from the day had melted away completely. If someone had asked her to recall her terror during the crossing earlier, she would’ve waved it away as a distant memory.

“Oooh…” she moaned when his mouth found her breast again. The tantalizing tugging at her nipple as he sucked and licked by turns bringing her the most delicious jolt. This was not sex but it was something new for her to explore and he would give her that.

“Mmmph. Ah, fuck,” he muttered against her flesh when she bucked her hips experimentally. “Is this alright?” He moved with her.

“Yes,” she cried, chasing that spark of pleasure she felt grinding against his hardness. It was maddeningly sweet.

“Wrap them around…” He reached back and hooked an arm under one knee to show her what he meant.

In her panties and with him only in his boxers, their bare chests pressed together, she wrapped her legs around his waist and he started thrusting against her. That spark of pleasure was quickly becoming a conflagration, his erection giving her the most ideal friction where she wanted it most and a naughty part of her enjoying the sinfully sweet view the mirror gave her.

Bracing himself so as not to crush her, he tilted his head to claim her lips again. Her moonblood had finished yesterday but she felt something vaguely like cramps, desire was so strong. She squirmed and mewed into his mouth as she restlessly, frantically bucked into him, afraid of losing her rhythm and falling short.

“Shhh,” he said soothingly. “Relax and enjoy it. Just let it happen, darling.” He dipped his head back down and started suckling again.

Feeling almost dizzy with this all-consuming need, she was determined to follow his advice. “Jon…please, don’t stop,” she begged although she knew that he would not.

He nodded once in acknowledgement before he moved to the other nipple. The sensation sent those sparks all through her again. Combined with the pressure down below, it was hurrying her faster and faster towards a climax and she wanted to cry out with relief as she became more and more certain she would reach it.

Rocking against him and the blood rushing through her, this was like galloping across an open field on horseback.

Better.

Maybe it was what a bird experienced when it spread its wings and soared for the first time.

But, as she sang out his name along with a litany of things no lady should say with the lights flashing behind her eyelids and blood pounding in her eardrums, she thought it might even be better than that.
In a hazy, cloud-like state, she floated after that crest, content, at ease and in love.

She missed his warmth though when he rolled off of her and watched curiously as he shoved his boxers down enough to stroke himself a few times before grunting with his own release. Her mouth fell open involuntarily and he smiled sheepishly when he glanced her way. “Sorry.” He grabbed a few tissues from the nightstand to wipe the semen off his belly.

“Don’t be.” He’d given her such pleasure and she was glad he’d found pleasure, too. She worried slightly that she’d not given it to him. Should she have?

*Be patient and let him teach you.*

She looked forward to being taught.

He hopped up to wash but, when he laid back down next to her, she stared at his hands as he folded her up in his arms. Hot and rougher than her own, she liked the way it set her body on fire wherever he touched her. She thought she might like to feel them touching her elsewhere next time.

Dry humping wasn’t something he could say he’d done since he was a teenager but seeing Sansa like that…she’d been breathtaking. Her hair spread across the pillow, her nipples still moist from his attentions and panting from her climax, the rosy stain spreading from her face downward and the dreamy, slightly unfocused look in her blue eyes, he’d already committed it all to memory and when he died for good someday that’d be the memory he’d want to recall.

“I can’t believe you’re mine,” he’d murmured after that first time at the Causeway Inn when he’d pulled her into his arms after crawling back into bed.

“I’ve never done that…never had a…not with anyone else before at least,” she’d whispered quietly, her lips brushing his neck and making his heart thump harder.

He’d figured. He was not remotely ashamed of the absurd pride he took in it either though he’d happily go at her pace.

And last night, she’d been shy as she’d worked up her nerve to ask for something else. He’d eagerly obliged her.

When she’d removed her panties and he’d seen the ginger curls covering her mound, he’d unabashedly whimpered like any green boy might’ve, too.

Her moans and cries had filled their tiny room that next night, no Honeymoon Suite that time. Her fingers had been wound through his curls as his own had curled just a touch where they’d been buried in her tight wet heat after he’d slowly worked her to that point, letting her adapt to the invasion. With his mouth on her breast, he’d watched her come apart just for him. What could be better?

“I didn’t do anything for you,” she’d said worriedly after she’d slipped his shirt back on. He’d talked her into leaving the panties off for he’d already known how he planned to wake her in the morning.
“You did plenty for me. I got to see you completely naked.” She’d blushed the sweetest pink. “I got to kiss you, touch you and make you cry my name. I want that whenever you’ll allow. I want to make you happy.”

“I want to make you happy, too.”

“You do,” he’d told her and sealed it with a kiss.

Obviously, he did want her to touch him. He wanted more than that but he wouldn’t push…not after all she’d dealt with.

After he’d opened up about Ygritte, Hardhome and the Watch two days earlier, Sansa had shared some new things on their long drive after making the turn east. They weren’t the same kind of secrets like her identity but more personal. They were wounds she’d kept concealed for years which she finally felt free enough to speak of with someone she loved and trusted: Queen Cersei’s twisted ideas of mothering, the stares and smirks of all those at Court who’d expected her to hate her own family, from Joffrey’s bruising hands and hurtful words to his most monstrous cruelties, Baelish and his unwanted kisses, the lechery of men twice her age and more she’d suffered from such a tender age. Her faith and trust in him meant so much as she unleashed the bitter chapters of the past with every passing mile. Despite his anger on her behalf, he understood now how sharing these things would bring them closer.

He wanted to be her shelter, her joy and her salvation just as she was his. His greatest fear was still the fear of failing her though, the fear of knives in the dark and blood in the snow.

Don’t think like that. You’ve not had those dreams since you left Baelish’s. You’re nearly safe.

For how long? She shouldn’t have to live under an alias forever.

“Wake up, darling,” he said softly, his knuckles grazing her cheek.

Sansa’s eyes fluttered open as he came to a stop outside the familiar and modest one-story home. He wondered if the poor old man moved back here to reside with her ghost. It made sense in a way though it pained him.

Where would I go if I ever lost her?

He couldn’t breathe when he thought like that so he quickly jumped out of the car and opened the door for her.

“Jon and Lyanna for now,” he said as they walked up the sidewalk. He trusted Davos but he’d not seen him in years and Sansa’s safety was paramount.

“I know,” she smirked, poking his side. “My part’s easy. You’re still you.”

He’d already told Davos he was coming to stay with him and bringing his wife. He’d been vague but hinted at some trouble with Government. That’d been good enough for the old man who’d had his own share of trouble with them.

He could see the warm light pouring out from the window of the little sitting room where he’d done his school work once he’d finally stopped being such a sullen arse towards them and applied himself to his studies. Marya had brought him biscuits and milk while he worked every afternoon. She’d started off just leaving them by his side with only a kind word or two but before long she was dropping a kiss on top of his head when she did so. He’d always acted like he hadn’t really notice, too intent on his work to acknowledge the motherly affection. He’d been fifteen after all.
But of course, he had. He’d come to look forward to that kiss as much as the biscuits. She’d been the closest thing to a mother he’d had since his mum had died.

*And you ran away and broke her heart.*

Logically, he knew it wasn’t his fault she’d fallen ill. Cancer was not caused by worrying. But, Government had refused to let the Seaworths keep him and he’d wound up back in the Home after his few months on the streets. When he’d found out she was sick, he’d sworn to himself if he ever had a real home again, he’d never run away. There hadn’t been another home.

*Until now.*

Looking at Sansa, he knew he’d never run away from her.

The front door opened just as he raised his hand to knock and Davos stood before him. He was his height but his shoulders were a bit hunched with age. His hair had more grey in it but his weathered face still held the same pair of kind brown eyes.

“Hello, Davos. Thank you for letting us come stay.”

The old man’s lips twitched into a smile though his chin trembled, clearly uncertain if he wished to shout with joy or weep. “You’re always welcome here, Jon.” His arms opened and he seized him in a warm hug.

Jon hesitated initially, guilt still plaguing him over Marya, but he found himself reciprocating soon enough. His eyes were starting to water and he obviously had no plans to start weeping here on the front steps.

He gently pulled back. “May I introduce my wife? This is San-” He clapped his mouth shut and could’ve kicked himself.

But Sansa was quicker than him and before Davos could even take note of his mistake, for the old man was busy wiping his own eyes, she spoke. “Mr. Seaworth, I’m so glad to meet you. I’m Lyanna…Jon’s wife.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lyanna. What a lovely girl you are. Please, call me Davos. You’re family as far as I’m concerned. Come in, come in and we’ll get you settled. I’ve some crab stew on the stove in case you’re hungry and…”

Jon closed the door behind them as Sansa followed Davos down the hall to the kitchen at the back. He breathed in deep and savored this moment. He’d got her away and brought her some place safe.

*And, what now?*

Myranda angrily slammed her bedroom door closed as her father tromped away. She was one and twenty, hardly a little girl. So, why did it feel like she was being treated as such?

“Are you so afraid of that little weasel of a man?!” she shrieked at the indifferent wood between
them.

Mr. Baelish’s house had burned down, he was injured and in the hospital still. There were reports coming out that more than just a fired had happened that night. And her poor, sweet Alayne had been in the thick of it, Myranda was sure.

But where was she? Where was her friend? Not listed in any news reports and no word of her. The answers she’d received all around had been unsatisfactory to say the least.

First, Lothor Brune seemed to have developed lockjaw the instant she drew breath around him.

The servants of the manse, the ones she could locate at least since several had just lost their home, had had no more guidance to give her. They’d all expressed worry as well but had no knowledge to share.

Then, Mr. Baelish had sent her a terribly brief letter, pleading his injuries for the scarcity of words. She might’ve accepted that and felt sorry for him if not for the fact that the flimsy excuse felt so much like a lie and he wouldn’t tell her where she was.

‘Alayne was so distressed by the fire. She’s gone to stay with some of her mother’s relatives. I can’t remember the address at present but I’ll let her know you’d like to hear from her when I speak with her.’

What a load of horseshit.

And when she’d placed her advertisement in the local paper begging for information on the whereabouts of her friend, Alayne Stone, her father had stopped just short of threatening to take her car keys and ground her for the remainder of her days when he’d found out.

Admittedly, she had felt rather bold walking into the newspaper office and more than a little guilty as she’d shared the one photo of Alayne she had off her phone.

“I don’t know…” Alayne had demurred that last time she’d spent the night with her, months and months ago.

“Oh, come on! It’s just a selfie! Smile, my sweet girl!”

“Promise not to post it on your…”

“I promise.”

Her father was such an oddity about those things. Nineteen years old and forbidden to have an account on any social media site.

“We’re not bloody children!” she shouted impotently to the now silent hallway.

The young newspaper reporter, a handsome devil, had eagerly taken down every word and sworn he’d place the missing person ad the next day. And he had…only the following day it was missing. She’d paid for it to run for ten days and it’d only ran one. She’d gone back to the office to complain and been told he’d not shown up for work and no one had heard from him. The ad had been misplaced as well, they'd said.

Then, this morning, her father had come storming into her room, raising a great hue and cry over her placing the ad in the first place.
“But she’s missing and no one seems to care or know where she is and…”

“For gods’ sake, stop worrying over Petyr’s bastard and keep your nose out of it, daughter!”

Bastard. Why did that matter so much to these idiots? And she was certainly including her own father in that.

*I don’t care that she’s a bastard. She’s my friend and everything about this feels all wrong.*

And it wasn’t just Alayne who was missing. Another handsome devil, one who would put the young reporter to shame, was missing, too. Some wildly romantic part of Myranda hoped they’d run away together. But for Alayne to run away with Mr. Baelish hurt and after the fire like that and with Jon…that hardly seemed like the responsible girl Myranda knew. It was all very fishy.

She massaged her temples and decided to go ask for some tea once she spied her father’s car pulling down the drive.

An hour later, she was alone in her parlor when the housekeeper poked her head in. “My lady? Are you receiving guests?”

“Depends who it is, Lynderly.” She wasn’t about to waste her time with Harry or that arse Corbray today.

“It’s an older man, my lady. Says he’s come in response to an advertisement you placed in the paper.” Myranda perked up at once, her heart pounding excitedly with hope. “He’s not all that posh and Lipps nearly sent him on his way but he presented a calling card.”

“A calling card?” That was quite old-fashioned these days. Only the elderly of the gentry still bothered with them as far as she knew.

Myranda held out her hand as the housekeeper passed it over. A plain white card with a black trout on one side and on the other a name: Blackfish Investigations.

“Please, show him in, Lynderly.”
Mother had given her the watercolors and easel for her name day, a gift she couldn’t have been more pleased by. For over a fortnight, she’d been painting whenever she could.

“She is only a child, my lady, but I believe she possesses some real talent,” their tutor had told Mother.

“She does, Mr. Luwin,” Mother said proudly. “Sansa has always expressed an interest in creative endeavors. We will encourage it and see what it may lead to in time, yes?”

“Certainly, my lady.”

Sansa wasn’t supposed to have overheard them but she had. Ever since then, she’d been dreaming of growing up to be a famous artist someday. Her paintings would hang in museums all over the world and everyone would admire them. No wretched siblings would dream of calling them silly, boring girly stories or dare suggest they were ‘blotchy-looking.’ She’d be much sought after for interviews and autographs. And in her spare time, she’d do charitable works, painting pictures for sad or sickly little girls and boys to make them smile. They would all love her.

She usually painted in her room but Arya was recovering from a cough and Mother had permitted her to have a friend over since she wouldn’t allow her to play outdoors yet. Sansa had thought she should give the younger children their privacy. That and Arya had told her rather rudely to get out. It was alright since Sansa wasn’t interested in playing Snap or Cheat with them. She couldn’t whine to Mother about it either as she’d done the same to her sister just last month when Jeyne Poole had come over.

Bran had begged Robb and they’d gone outside to make snow forts and have a war. They’d even taken Rickon though he was still a babe. They’d not asked her to join them. She’d much rather paint anyway.

Feeling a bit sorry for herself, she’d walked around the house carrying her watercolors and child-sized easel, looking for a quiet spot out of the way and hoping she wouldn’t be forced to paint in the attic where there might be spiders or mice. Luckily, she hadn’t been. He’d invited her into his private study, a place the children were rarely permitted, with a smile. It must’ve been because she was the quietest and most well-behaved, she told herself.

She wetted her brush and carefully swirled the blue and red together to make the perfect shade of lilac for the shield.

“What are you painting, love?” he asked from behind his desk.

“A princess at a tourney.”

He chuckled and came from behind his desk to see. “She’s pretty. I especially love her red hair. Will she be named the Queen of Love and Beauty?”

She flushed at his praise. “She could be a knight perhaps and win the tourney herself.” She’d
thought Arya might like it better that way. Father looked perplexed and Sansa chewed at her bottom lip. The shield could become a gown easy enough. “But I’m sure you’re right, Father. The Queen of Love and Beauty.”

He placed a hand on her shoulder, pulling her into his side for a hug before kissing the top of her head and sitting down again.

She had nearly finished her princess when the phone rang. She was busy working on the tourney’s champion who was tall and looked remarkably like the man sitting behind the desk for a watercolor when she noticed by his tone something had him agitated.

“No, I didn’t think you’d find anything. It’s likely a dead end. I’d only hoped…well, I suppose I’ll never know now. Thank you for your efforts all the same.”

He hung up and scrubbed at his face like he sometimes did when he was vexed or tired. Sansa hoped he wasn’t vexed by something one of her siblings had done. She couldn’t think of a single thing she might’ve done to vex Father but with the other four it was always likely.

He realized she was watching him and smiled. It was not his usual smile. Sansa’s tummy felt queasy. “Daddy?” she said sounding much younger than a girl of nine should. “Do you have to go south again?” He’d only just got back.

“No, love. Well…yes, I will but not yet. Is it finished?”

“It is.”

“Your princess has found her champion, I see.” She grinned. “It’s my name day next month. Could I beg you to paint one like it for me, love? I’d like one of your paintings to take with me when I go south again.”

She nodded eagerly. She’d paint him a thousand pictures if he wanted.

“And he took your painting with him?”

“He did. By the time he came home again, I’d become obsessed with sketching and he asked for some of those next. Could you turn my way a little more? I need more light.”

“How much longer will this take? I’m getting tired.”

“Are you sleepy?”

“Not sleepy, just tired of being so close but not touching you,” he said with that wicked look that made her squirm. He was at the head of the bed wearing only in his boxers and she was at the foot, sitting cross-legged wearing nothing but his shirt and her panties as she sketched him.

“A bit longer.” It wouldn’t kill him to wait although she was very much looking forward to being touched. “I’m not finished with your body.”
Jon rolled his eyes self-consciously but did as she directed. She was grateful he’d been willing to let
her sketch him this way. The scars weren’t the point of this sketch. It wasn’t like they were some
sort of curiosity to her. It hurt her to think of him being hurt. But they were part of him.

Myranda had been the only person to ever willingly sit for her since she’d been a child. She’d
never asked a man to do so but this was Jon and she wanted it to be as honest and life-like a portrait
of the man she loved as possible. She hoped he might see the beauty she saw when she looked at
him. Maybe that was a lofty goal but he’d been touched by the first sketch she’d done of him and
she wanted to see what he thought of this. She would likely never be a world-famous artist but, if
her art could bring someone she loved pleasure…well, there wasn’t anything better, was there?

“Jon? Lyanna? I’m turning in,” she heard Davos call through the bedroom door.

“Good night,” she responded as did Jon. “We’ll see you in the morning.” She continued sketching.
She might not finish tonight. He’d sit for her again, she was sure.

“Are you happy to be here?” Jon asked after they could hear the older man moving around in the
bedroom next to theirs.

“Very happy.”

She was. They’d been with Davos in White Harbor for less than 48 hours and it already felt more
like a home to her than the Eyrie ever truly had. A simple man who’d spent years at sea fishing as
well as other activities, Davos was kind and loving. They shared a love of stories and she’d spent a
happy hour sharing tea with him as he told her tales of the sea. It made her heart hurt sometimes
how much he brought her father to mind but it was infinitely preferable to the emptiness and
constant fear of pretending to be Petyr’s daughter.

“Did you talk to Sam earlier?” she asked as she resumed sketching once more. He was covertly
looking into various things for Jon as well as trying to contact her great uncle. She hoped he’d find
something soon though they both knew it was a risk for Sam and she didn’t want him to draw any
unwanted attention down upon his head.

“Yes, he wanted to know how I was adapting to pretend married life.”

“And what did you tell him? That your pretend wife tortures you for hours by making you sit still
for her to sketch or that she frightened you and Davos half to death when you let her attempt to
drive to the market earlier?”

“Neither,” he said with that same mischievous look. “I told him there’s nothing sweeter than my
wife and I’m loving every minute of our pretend marriage.”

He grasped her ankle and pulled her across the bedding. She shrieked and dropped her sketch pad
before smothering her giggles. His fingers were warm as they hooked into the waistband of her
pants.

“What else did Sam say?” she asked breathlessly.

“Nothing urgent nor of interest so far…and you can finish that later.”

She pretended to pout but immediately lifted her hips when he tugged at her panties. He’d done this
the other morning, their last morning on the road. She shuddered with anticipation and her pulse
thrummed. She could feel herself getting wetter. She would’ve blushed at the knowledge except
she knew Jon would say something dirty about how he liked it and she wouldn’t feel ashamed at
all. She’d need to bite her tongue though. The house was small and Davos would be lying down on
the other side of the wall.

“What if I lose my inspiration to sketch?” she asked teasingly.

“I’ll do my best to inspire you again.” His warm breath fanned over her and she shivered. “Are you cold, darling?” She shook her head and he licked his lips, a dark and sinful look on his handsome face. “I think you are. Will you permit me to warm you?” She nodded dazedly as he settled between her legs. She felt his hot, wet tongue upon her. “A little wider, darling,” he mumbled.

Her knees fell open and her head lolled back. She moaned as he swept her legs over his shoulders. His hands cupped her ass and his tongue sent sparks shooting all over her body. Her toes curled as she silently called his name.

Sated and nestled against his chest later, she ran her fingers through his hair. He tilted her chin his way and kissed her lightly. She could taste the musky tang of her sex upon his tongue. She kissed him back, deeper and wantonly.

If someone had asked her how she was adapting to pretend married life, she would’ve replied ‘quite happily.’

Davos rubbed his filthy hands on his dungarees before wiping the sweat off his brow. He’d been sitting in the truck for ten minutes willing himself to get out, staring at his meager back lot and the tire swing he’d hung up for Dale, Allard and Mathos years ago. The rope was worn thin. Didn’t matter. No one would be playing on it.

Our babes dead and gone and this one’s well past tire swings if he ever cared for them at all.

Three fine sons lost to the shivers in one fell swoop and their parents left to linger in their grief. The gods could be so cruel. He was no angel and he knew it. But Marya…what had she ever done to deserve this?

He opened the back door and a smile crept across his face despite his fatigue, heartache and worries. Marya was humming, a sweet tune of their youth. How long had it been since he’d heard that song? How long since he’d heard his wife humming?

He took off his boots with their salt and brine and slime covering them and hung his jacket on its peg quiet as a mouse lest he break the spell. He could smell good food, stew and fresh bread. His stomach growled and he was not content to hide out for very long listening to her hum.

“Let me do that, love,” Davos said, entering the kitchen to find his wife struggling to lift the large and very full pot off the stove.

“Nah, I’ve got it. Wash those hands, old man. Jon, would you place the cutlery on the table, please?”

Davos could feel his belly tightening up. He’d not noticed the boy sitting there when he’d come in. He was at the table with a book and what looked like school papers in front of him. Davos tried not
to scowl when their eyes met. Jon’s grey eyes were guarded with a touch of fear in them perhaps.

Three weeks he’d been here and in three weeks he’d barely said a civil word to either of them. They’d had a row last night after supper. Jon had stomped off to his room, slamming the door behind him as Davos had stood impotently in the sitting room, shouting at him to come apologize to Marya for making her cry. He hadn’t.

He was starting to lose hope of ever hearing a civil word from his mouth and wondered if this fostering business was a mistake. Granted, he understood where Jon’s anger came from and he did not blame him for it. Losing his mum at the age of eight and then six long years at the home, it would’ve been a hard life. And despite its intended purpose to provide foundlings and orphans like Jon with a safe, caring environment, Davos had never seen a place less suitable for the nurturing of children. Even on the decks of the smugglers’ cogs he’d served in, a boy would’ve been shown more warmth and concern. A crew was a family. They had to work together and look after one another, didn’t they?

However, the constant resistance to all their efforts was wearing and Davos worried that the never ending resentment and petulance of an angry teenager was too much for his poor wife after everything she’d suffered.

He watched the boy and waited for the handful of seconds that had passed since Marya had made her request. Would he fetch the cutlery as asked or was this to be yet another refusal, another way for him to show them he wasn’t interested in trying to make this work?

But to his surprise, Jon rose and did as Marya bid him. He didn’t say a word but he did it.

Marya flashed a smile at him as he finished. “Thank you, Jon,” she said and started humming again.

Davos tried to conceal his astonishment but judging by the looks both Marya and Jon gave him, he figured he’d not quite managed it.

They sat down at table together soon after, digging into the stew and crusty bread and chatting. Well, Davos and Marya chatted as Jon stayed quiet like usual, inhaling his food as though he was half starved. Davos expected as much from a boy his age but somehow he worried the child had known an empty stomach more than once and that was why he ate so voraciously.

Once he’d finished, Jon eyed the platter of bread with longing but he never asked for seconds. Marya passed it his way and asked how much more homework he had left to do.

“A bit. Maybe another half hour,” he replied, taking half the remaining bread with a conscious look.

“Well, there’ll be time to get it done after supper is through. Perhaps you might like to work in the sitting room? The desk there might be more comfortable than sitting on your bed and it’d be quieter than in here when I’m cleaning up.”

“Yes…that’d be fine.”

“Your name day will be here soon. Anything you’d like?”

He scowled and looked vaguely suspicious of the question. His eyes narrowed. “Ice cream and a pony ride. Hire a clown, too,” he said in that peevish tone that was all too familiar.

Davos gripped his spoon tightly but before he could say anything, Marya tilted her head to the side
and grinned at him. “A pony ride and clowns for your fifteenth name day, Jon? That’s funny,” she chuckled. “Should we get your face painted as well?”

His whole demeanor changed at once. The narrowed eyes disappeared and his lips twitched into a smile. “I’d like a cake. Chocolate if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Oh, of course, I’ll bake you a cake but wouldn’t you like something else? It’s not a pony ride but Davos knows an old fellow who keeps horses about his place. Would you like to go horseback riding perhaps?”

Jon’s mouth parted in surprise and there was a softness in his eyes as he nodded. Marya had landed on something there. “Is that…could I really?”

They both turned to Davos, one expectantly and one with dubious hope. “I’ll call up Sal and take you out there this weekend if you like.”

“That’d be…” He blinked and shoved all the bread in his mouth before finishing with a mumbled ‘thank you.’

Davos and his wife exchanged a smile before she started humming once more. What had changed from the time he’d left for work this morning, from the fight last night till now?

Lyanna was a sweet girl and eager to please. She was a joy to have around the place and her smiles lightened even his bitter old heart tremendously.

*Though this old heart may need a tincture of whiskey to settle my nerves before she drives us anywhere again.*

No, he would see that she learned if Jon became too busy. It was a shame no one had taught her earlier. It was the least he could do for the girl who’d baked him such a tasty pie today. Davos had never had a daughter but now he supposed he did.

*A son again and now a daughter.*

The thought pleased him immensely. He’d been lonely for so long.

They’d been here three days and he never wanted them to leave though he wouldn’t fool himself. That smuggler’s instinct told him all was not smooth-sailing for them and they were not ready or able to let go their anchor just yet. The sea had taught him many things and there was one thing that ever-changing and treacherous element had taught him very well; enjoy the sunshine and good times while they lasted and he meant to.

For instance, Davos was relishing this clean-up after supper. It was the first time he’d had Jon all to himself. Lyanna had sensed how keenly he’d missed him these past several years. There’d been more than one occasion she’d tried to slip off to give them some time alone but Jon was always following after her within minutes. Davos knew Jon well enough to see he was desperately in love with the girl. He also knew him well enough to recognize he was avoiding being alone with him and suspected the reason why. The boy had always been too hard on himself over things beyond
his control.

So tonight, when Lyanna had complained of a headache over supper and Jon had urged her to go lie down, she’d claimed she only would if he’d be sure and help with the dishes. She’d then winked at Davos behind Jon’s back and he’d mouthed his thanks to her. She was a dear girl. Jon had chosen very well for himself.

Not wanting Jon to flee within minutes of her departure though, Davos had washed at a snail’s pace and kept the conversation fairly light at first. But as Jon grew more comfortable, he couldn’t resist asking about something that he’d wondered over for years.

“She never told you what happened that day?” Jon asked as Davos passed him a final plate to dry.

“No, never.”

He started grinning, the first time he’d talked of Marya without looking sad or guilty. “A phone was stolen at school that day. I didn’t do it but two boys who didn’t like me swore they saw me do it. I was the perfect patsy, I suppose…a foster kid, a bastard. They searched my cubby and my pockets and found nothing. But the headmaster wouldn’t listen to me and they were going to beat me over something I never did. It’s not as if I’d never been beaten before but Marya was called and informed I was to be punished. She told them not to lay a finger on me till she got there…even after I’d made her cry the night before.”

His expression was pained at the memory but he continued.

“After she’d spoken to me and heard their charges, she told them they had no evidence that I’d done a single thing and that she would lodge a formal complaint if they punished me with no proof. I don’t know if they were going to ignore her or not but the culprit was discovered in the interim and I was told I could go back to class. No one had ever stood up for me like that…not since…” He scowled for a moment but then was grinning once more. “She even guilted the headmaster into apologizing to me.”

“That sounds like my Marya.”

“We talked that afternoon when I got home. She made me biscuits and…it was a turning point between us.”

“It certainly was.”

“I asked her not to tell you what happened at school but I didn’t expect that she’d never tell you.”

“Why’d you ask her not to tell?”

“I still half expected they’d find some way to blame me and I was afraid you’d be angry and send me away after how I’d behaved the night before. I’m sorry for that. Neither of you deserved it. She was an excellent woman and I loved her. I wished I’d told her.”

“You did.”

“Not enough. I’m sorry for all the ways I’ve let you down since then, Davos.”

“You’ve not let me down at all, lad. You more than made up for your early behavior in the months that followed and we were happy having you here. We loved you, Jon. I love you still. As for what you’ve done with your life since you left here, don’t ever think you’ve been a disappointment or anything like it. But I do want to help you. I care about you. I care about your wife, too…whoever
she is.”

Jon’s mouth fell open and then he sighed, his shoulders drooping. “Is it that obvious?”

“Only obvious to an old smuggler like me that things aren’t exactly what you say. Plus, I saw your ID when you bought the whiskey at the market. It says Jon Stone when it’s not your name. You could’ve taken your mother’s name.”

“I thought Stone would be safer than Knight. Westeros is full of bastards.”

“True enough. I’ll brew us some coffee and let’s have a chat, shall we?” Davos guided him to the table. If Marya could get that sullen boy to confide in her, perhaps he could winkle at little of the truth out of the troubled man. He’d spoken of difficulties with Government but he’d not been explicit.

Jon rubbed his hands across his face, looking miserable. “It’s not fair of me to put you in this position, Davos. I’m sorry. You could be in trouble or even serious danger for helping us.”

“Bah,” he said with a dismissive wave. He couldn’t care less about Government. When had they ever helped the likes of him? And Marya and their boys were gone. Jon was all he had. “What are they going to do to me? Cut me young life short? And, who is in danger? You or her?”

“Both…but mostly her. It’s like the thing at school except much more serious. She’s been blamed for something she didn’t do but no one will care if I lodge a formal complaint about it. They’ll only seek to punish her. I must protect her, Davos. It’s what matters most to me.”

Davos nodded. What else could he say to that? And truly, there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for them if only they’d let him. “Jon, is her name really Lyanna?”

He shook his head slowly. “I don’t want to lie to you. It’s safer for her to be Lyanna for now. I hope you’ll accept that answer and let it be.”

He would have to for now. He was intrigued but he trusted that Jon knew best in this instance. “Did she choose to go by your mother’s name or did you choose for her?”

“I chose.”

“Hmmm. And, is she really a Stone? I may be an uneducated son of a crabber and I’m not saying she couldn’t be someone’s natural child but everything about her…she’s a lady, isn’t she? A high lady, I mean, and not a Stone.”

“She’s not a Stone.”

“So, what are your plans?”

“I want her safe but I’d like to find a way to exonerate her if possible. If that’s not possible, I want to help her find some of her family which she’s lost contact with.”

“That’s all?”

“No, not all. I want…I love her. I want to spend my life with her, Davos. I don’t want her to spend the rest of her life in hiding or on the run either.”

Davos could respect that. “And what of the more immediate future? Did you want to settle in here? Did you want a job? I could call some of my old friends down at the fishery.”
“I'm afraid I wouldn’t know much about that. It’s been several years since those days you took me out with you and I never had your knack with rod and reel. We’ll use my pension for now but then I’ll have to come up with something better and…”

He trailed off as the girl calling herself Lyanna appeared in the doorway, wearing one of Jon’s shirts and nothing much else. Tall and slim and beautiful. No wonder the boy’s eyes looked ready to spring out of his head.

They were staring at each other and something in her pinched expression told Davos there was a real headache brewing. He also had a feeling their chat would need to pick back up tomorrow.

“I’m sorry to interrupt. I’m afraid the toilet won’t stop running,” she said, wringing her hands together.

“Ah! It’s temperamental at times. No worries, my dear. I’ll take care of it. You two can head on off to bed. I’ve kept your husband up long enough.”

“I’m not supposed to…”

“Don’t be silly, Alayne! You’re a woman grown. What’s he going to do about it, take away your paintbrushes?”

She smiled half-heartedly. She was curious though it was silly. She would never be able to use it. She rarely got to use the computer at home. Myranda was sweet but this would be a waste of time. And if Father ever found out, he’d be so angry. Or worse, if the queen found out somehow...

One slip and I am dead.

“I don’t even have a cell phone for this.”

“You might someday. Oh, come on. You can look at my account and see what it’s like. We’ll ogle dashing actors or read moronic posts about our favorite soap operas.”

“We could do that, I suppose,” she conceded, giggling at the thought.

“One little account. He’ll never know. You can use anything for your username, nice and anonymous. We can even message each other that way.”

“And you created this account?”

“I did. I only logged on a couple of times when I visited Myranda…before Ramsay, I was too scared to try it at home. I’m surprised I remembered the password. Well, not really. I don’t have
He looked angry and it made her feel vulnerable. She crossed her arms over her chest as he kept staring at her phone. For a moment, she felt like she was back at the Red Keep watching the guards tearing her room apart, tossing baubles, sketching pencils and hair clips willy-nilly as they searched for evidence of her father’s treason…or her own.

“Where’d she get the picture?” His voice was gruff but not the way it was early in the morning, not the way it was when he loved her either.

It wasn’t the best quality but clearly it made Jon uneasy. It made Sansa uneasy as well, every bit of it. She was touched that Myranda had been worried and looking for her but it would’ve been so much simpler if she could’ve disappeared entirely.

“Last year. I slept over one night and she talked me into a selfie the same night we did this. She made this post a couple of days ago. It’s a private account so not just anyone can see this.” She hoped that made it better.

“Enough people can probably see it knowing Lady Myranda.” She winced, knowing he was correct. Myranda’s so-called private blog had tons of followers. “What were you doing looking anyway? Were you planning to contact her?”

“No! I just…I was worried that she might do something like this.” I was worried about how she was doing. I wondered if she cared I was gone. “What do you think of the message?”

“‘If you see this @lemoncakes, contact me if you can. Your real family is looking for you.’ I don’t know.”

He frowned and read back over it. “‘If you see this @lemoncakes, contact me if you can. Your real family is looking for you.’ I don’t know.”

“The number listed, that’s a Riverlands prefix. My uncle lives there,” she said as hope started to build again. Could it be a chance worth taking?

“Is it his number?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never called him.”

“It could be a trap.” She deflated. He was right. “I’ll try it for you, alright?”

“You will?”

“I’ll get another disposable phone to place the call maybe. These are not completely untraceable but close enough. I’ll mention it to Sam. For now, I want you to log back off and stay off.”

“Alright. Should I dye my hair with that picture floating around?”

“What?”

“My hair. There’s this picture and…”

“Alayne Stone has dark brown hair that hangs down to her waist. Your hair is reddish brown and is shoulder length. Leave it as it is.”

She smirked. “You like it closer to red.”

“I won’t deny it.”

“I was going to dye it blonde.”
“Meh. Blonde is boring.”

Her lips twitched but she had to know for sure. “Are you angry with me, Jon?”

“Angry with you?” he asked, clearly surprised by the suggestion. “No, darling. Just worried. Come here.”

He pulled her into his arms and her fears receded. He wasn’t angry. He loved her and had vowed to keep her safe. He’d turned his whole life upside down for her and she knew if he had it to do all over again, he would.

And there was that little spark of hope growing within that maybe Myranda had somehow, some way discovered something important and was doing whatever she could to let her know without giving too much away.

*Your real family is looking for you.* Who? Great Uncle Brynden? Uncle Edmure and his wife? Or could it be Arya or the boys? The thought of her siblings…it was a dull, thudding ache deep in her chest. She was so afraid to hope too much.

She sighed as Jon started trailing kisses along her jaw before resting his forehead against hers. “I’m not angry with you at all. This may lead to something very good. We’ll be cautious and see what we can find out. But, Sansa, I’m afraid you’re going to be angry with me.”

“Why would I be angry?”

“Davos and I were talking in the kitchen.”

“About time you weren’t running away. He loves you, Jon. He doesn’t blame you for Marya’s death.”

“I know. He…Sansa, he knows something’s up. I didn’t tell him your name or anything but he’s figured out that Lyanna’s not your real name. He knows we’re on the run from something.”

“Did you slip up again?” she asked jokingly, wanting to reassure him.

She’d had a go at him more than once over nearly saying her name when he’d introduced her but she couldn’t be angry over that. It wasn’t easy pretending all the time. If he’d been forced to take some stranger’s name, how well would she have fared? She tried picturing calling him Griff like Aegon had gone by. It made her snort.

“I did not…well, not really. He figured some things out and then I hated to outright lie.”

“You trusted him enough to send your life savings to. You trusted him enough to bring us here. I trust him as well.” Wanting to distract him from their worries tonight, she tugged at his belt buckle. Actually, she wanted something more than a distraction. “It’s getting late. Are you ready for bed?”

He looked down at her hands as she started unbuckling his belt. His eyes were pitch black when he looked back up at her.

“Sansa?”

“I saw the condoms you bought at the market in the bag. Where are they?”

“My drawer. I bought them like you suggested but I’m not pressuring you.”

“I know that. You didn’t even tell me about them. But what if I want to?”
“Only if you’re sure.”

“I’ve never done this before but I want this. I want you. Do you want me?”

“You know I do.”

“Then, what are you waiting for? Lyanna Stone is a married woman. She shouldn’t still be a maiden,” she said with what she hoped didn’t sound like false bravado.

“No, not Lyanna.” He cupped her face and waited for her eyes to meet his again. “I’m not making love to anyone but you. This is us, Sansa. What happens tonight will be about us and not a game nor a lie, right?”

She blinked rapidly before clearing her throat. “This is us…Jon and Sansa.”

Her fingers fumbled with his jeans and he took over. “Let me,” he rasped. But he didn’t finish unfastening his jeans. He pulled his t-shirt over his head and then took his time unbuttoning the shirt she wore.

Her heart was fluttering, a nervous sort of excitement. She was going to make love to Jon.

He opened his bureau drawer and grabbed the box, placing it on the bedside table. He helped her slip her panties off and then finished taking off his jeans. He walked her backwards towards the bed. She sunk down on it as soon as the back of her knees hit the mattress and laid back, bare before him. He removed his boxers next but she only had a moment to gaze at him before he climbed over her. She’d have to have a good look later, she decided as his lips met hers. His body felt so warm against her own. She loved it. She liked the feel of his chest hair against her smooth skin. She ran her hands up and down his muscled arms and along his back. She couldn’t seem to get enough of touching him. She suspected he couldn’t get enough of it either.

“I love you,” he whispered between kisses.

“I love you.”

She gasped when he slid inside of her. She was so tight and warm and he was groaning at the pleasurable sensation but she was biting her lip. Her breaths came out in measured puffs.

“Does it hurt?”

“A touch. It’s only a pinch and it’s…wait for me to move?”

He nodded. He’d never been with a maiden before and he definitely didn’t wish to hurt her.

She rolled her hips slowly a time or two and his cock was throbbing at the bliss of it. He wanted to start thrusting. He stayed still though and focused on letting her grow more comfortable. Her fingers were slipping through his curls. He lowered his mouth to her nipple. She arched her back and her hips began moving more steadily. He met her movements.
“Alright?”

“Yes,” she whimpered.

She’d been tense at first but he could feel that leaving her. He wasn’t sure if she’d come but he’d try his best to make that happen. She wrapped her legs around his thighs. He adjusted his forearms to keep from crushing her and began thrusting at last.

“Oh…ohhhh.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes, Jon. Yes…”

The look of wonder in her eyes was enough to give him a swollen head. He was going to do his best to make her come. She jerked her chin towards her breasts and he took the hint. He teased one nipple and then the other, lightly suckling as she mewedled and bucked beneath him. Her hands were everywhere, grabbing, clawing, desperate.

“Jon, I’m…I think I’m going to…oh, gods. Yes.”

“Fuck.” He gripped the pillow under her head and started thrusting harder.

The headboard was banging against the wall of the little bedroom. Her face went from flushed to bright red. “He’ll hear,” she whispered worriedly.

He nipped at her collar bone. “He knows we’re together. Don’t you dare be embarrassed,” he chuckled before reaching between them to stroke her clit. Her eyes rolled back. “I’m making love to you, Sansa, and that’s all there is right now, do you understand?” he growled in her ear.

She nodded fervently. And soon, she found her rhythm with him once more and her mouth opened in a not-so-silent scream. He followed her into that sweet rapture.

Afterwards, he held her after they’d washed up. Brushing her damp hair back from her brow, he kissed her with all the love he bore her. “Someday, Sansa Stark, I’m marrying you for true if you’ll have me.”

“For true…someday, I’ll be your wife, Jon Snow.”

Chapter End Notes

18 chapters till they finally banged. I think this is a first for me...lol.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter. I loved writing Little Sansa and Broody Teenage Jon :) Suspense will be picking up again next chapter as we check in with some of the other players. Thank you for reading!
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Some plotting, some danger and a little sex.

Chapter Notes

What?! I updated the same story twice in two days?! Yeah, I've been STRUGGLING with Skirling and this one was already half written so here we go :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Your Grace,” he said, bowing low once he was shown inside. His eyes were still adjusting to the gloom of the interior after the bright Dornish sun. He could make out the shock of silver hair as the man rose and walked towards him. He gestured for him to rise and patted him cordially on the shoulder.

“How are you, my dear Hightower? I’ve missed your presence.”

A warmer welcome than he would’ve expected from Rhaegar. Certainly, warmer than any he’d ever received from his father. “I am well, Your Grace. I’m sorry for your troubles while I was away.”

“Connington…it was a loss. However, Aegon is alive and safe.”

“Thank the gods for that, Your Grace.”

“Mmm,” he said noncommittally.

His Grace was attached to his son in his way but he had never been terribly impressed by him. Gerold could see why. Aegon had a Dornishman’s love of idleness. He got on better with his uncles, much like his older sister.

When the prince had been very little, he’d been sickly for an extended period and Rhaegar had grown quite keen to locate his other son, the bastard by his Northern girl. At one point when the boy’s prognosis had been poor and Elia’s doctors had sworn another pregnancy would kill her, His Grace had even made plans with his closest advisors, a small council within his Small Council, but those had all been for naught. The Northern girl had managed to elude them. Despite poverty and little aid, she’d managed to keep herself and the boy hidden. It had been an embarrassing affair for Ser Gerold and his companions that had nearly gotten them exiled. Of course, we were already exiles.

“There’s a frolic here tonight, Ser Gerold. I want you to attend.”

“Gladly, Your Grace.”
“Keep an eye on the prince for me, will you? He seems unusually downcast of late and quieter than is his bent.”

“Certainly.”

“Actually, I’m afraid there’s something he may be keeping from me.”

“Something serious?”

“Yes. Baelish promised me the North through that alliance. I don’t like losing.”

Gerold’s eyes had completely adjusted to the gloom by this point and he saw that flash in his sovereign’s indigo eyes. He sighed and nodded. “I will see if I can cheer him.”

“Or find somebody who can.”

Of course. A girl would be needed. “Yes, Your Grace.”

He’d sworn a vow to serve his king, not to judge him. He would do what he asked of him…as he had many times before.

Heavy snow was falling outside the picture window of the recovery center where they’d moved him. If he was still a boy and whole, he might’ve hurried outside to catch them on his tongue. He’d played that game with Cat and Edmure as a child except it’d been raindrops instead of snowflakes at Riverrun.

Snow. He thought of the man he’d hired months ago with the impeccable skill set and tarnished record. He’d had her so carefully hemmed up, practically in his pocket. He was keeping her safe. No one could protect her like him. No one could love her like he did. How could that stranger named Snow, a man who was little more than a disgraced solider, change all that? Snow. He didn’t care for it, not the name nor the weather.

He drew in a shuddering breath and wheeled away from the window. He hated being confined this way. Just thinking of running now left him feeling winded, every breath an agony on his scarred lungs.

He lifted the blanket the nurses liked to keep draped across his lap and studied the mangled flesh with a cynical eye. It was hideous and he’d walk with a limp for all his days. Like a spark, that burning hatred washed over him. Ramsay Snow had done this but his hate didn’t end there.

He was weaning himself off the drugs, palming them or gagging himself when the nurses left the room. He needed his wits about him. And he couldn’t let emotions overwhelm him either. That was how the lesser players always wound up losing the game, just like that sentimental fool Lord Stark.

The door opened and Lothor came in. “Boss?”

Petyr covered his legs and slowly turned towards him. “Yes?”
“Spoke to Osney.”

“And?”

“The reporter didn’t give him anything worthwhile before he got rid of him.”

“Hmm. Lady Myranda?”

“She won’t be no more trouble. Her father will keep her in check.” Petyr rather doubted that but he wouldn’t say so to Lothor. Some men were cut out for certain jobs and some were not. “Osney says he’ll be heading North soon, maybe Castle Black to see if he can dig up anything on Snow.”

After he takes care of one last thing for me here. Petyr’s lips twitched. “Plenty of Snows in the Watch and plenty of snow up there this time of year. Good luck to him. What else?”

“Your man inside at the Bolton’s checked in.”

“Oh?”

“Said Ramsay hasn’t shown his face around yet but Roose wired some money over to Braavos the other day. Hundred thousand dragons.”

He curled his hand into a fist but sounded perfectly in control when he spoke. “Interesting. I’ll call some of my associates at the Iron Bank and elsewhere there. Men on the lamb shouldn’t be allowed to breath too easy.”

Lothor cracked a smile. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to find her for me, Lothor.”

The smile faded. He looked physically pained. “Boss…she’s…”

“Not dead, Lothor. Her body would’ve turned up by now. She’s not dead and she needs us. I need her. I need to keep her safe from the queen, don’t you see? You want Alayne to be safe, don’t you?”

“You know I do. But if she’s alive and really with Snow then maybe…he seemed to care about her.”

“No. He lusted after her as so many men did. He was infatuated with her maybe but he could never care about her the way I do. His hands aren’t clean either, Lothor. He might have an agenda of his own. He can’t protect her like we can. If you care about me, if you care about her, find her for me.” He thought that little speech was rather convincing.

“Where do you want me to start?”

“Go to Winterfell. Check around…discretely, Lothor.”

“Got it.”

“It’s a long shot but you never know. And if you can’t find anything there, try her closest living relative next.”

“Tully?”

“Yes.”
“What about Snow? I know he’s a bastard and lived in an orphanage as a kid but any chance he’s got someone from his past they might run to?”

Petyr blinked and then smiled. The pain medication had left him too groggy of late. Good thing Lothor was no fool. There’d been no application to fill out nor had he asked for his next of kin when he’d hired him but there might be someone.

“That’s not a bad idea.” Where was that foundling home Snow had lived in after his mother died? In the North but where? He wished he still had the information he’d collected on the man. Ah, yes. His memory usually served him well. “You’re going North anyway and it’s worth a look. You’ll need to do some digging…but in White Harbor.”

They were still panting as her nails lightly scraped his sides. He quivered at the way it tickled and brushed her messy hair back. He loved that blush which touched her face and crept down her throat to her bare chest. There was a trickle of sweat between her breasts. He licked it and she gasped then playfully smacked his ass.

“Oh, yeah?”

She nodded with a mischievous grin. He kissed her deeply once more before rolling off of her.

Three days had passed since their pretend marriage was indisputably consummated. He’d loved every minute of those days. Whether they were making love in this little room or Sansa was helping Davos in the kitchen while Jon repaired the old man’s truck or the three of them were sitting together in the evenings watching a program or just talking, it’d been so long since anything had felt so right to Jon, so much like home. He knew Sansa felt the same. He hated for this blissful interlude to end. Part of him liked pretending it never would.

“I could get used to starting every morning this way.”

“I’ll bet you could.”

“Are you complaining?”

“You know better.”

“Yeah, I thought your moans might mean you liked it.”

“Jon!”

“Yes, that’s exactly what you kept saying except maybe the pitch and tone was slightly different. ‘Oh, Jon! Like that, Jon! Don’t stop, Jon! Oh…”’

He got his ass smacked again. He didn’t care. They were both laughing. He loved her more than anything. He loved the way she’d cry his name when he made her come. He loved the way she’d bite at her lip a little shyly after when she realized she’d been loud. He almost had her convinced Davos was really hard of hearing.
“It’s chilly in here,” she whined when he pulled back the covers so he could dispose of the condom.

“I’ll warm you soon enough.” He padded over to the rubbish bin and quickly jumped back under the covers making her giggle.

“Warming me up was how things started earlier.”

“No, I already had plans. Warming you up was just a good excuse,” he said, drawing her up against him.

Heavy snow had been falling since last night and there was no place urgent to be this morning. Snug and naked together under the covers, he was perfectly content to keep Sansa warm all day. He could spent all winter here and never once complain.

_Besides, it makes the bad dreams go away._

He’d woken early with that panic bordering on hysteria. Blood in the snow, knives in the dark. But this time it didn’t feel like it was Sansa in danger. He’d been dreaming of his mother. She’d hidden him in a cupboard and told him it was a game but she’d been shaking and he was afraid of the dark.

“I don’t want to, Mum,” he’d cried.

“Shhh, sweet boy. Be quiet as a mouse and we’ll have a treat later, hmm?”

A rapping knock at the door and the landlady who forever stunk of cigarettes saying in her raspy voice that she was sorry but she didn’t like trouble. Then, he’d heard the sound of his mother quietly crying, making his tummy hurt as fat tears ran down his cheeks in the dark cupboard beneath the sink. They’d be moving again.

“Shhh, Jon. It’s alright.” Sansa had been holding him. He’d clung to her like a child until his heart had stopped pounding so hard. “How old do you think you were?” she’d asked as he played with her silky soft hair.

“Young. Five at most. We wound up at Flint’s Ranch not long after.” How could he remember something from so long ago?

“Good memories, ones that make a lasting impression, can stick with us…but so do traumatic ones.”

Once the dream had started to fade and he’d relaxed, his mind and body had been ready for more pleasant pursuits.

A discrete knock at the door made him jump. Perhaps the fear from his dream hadn’t vanished altogether.

“Jon? Lyanna? Breakfast is ready if you’re hungry.”

“We’re coming,” Sansa answered. Davos walked down the hallway and she started to rise. He grabbed her round the waist and pulled her up close. “Jon.”

“Just a kiss.”

“A kiss,” she laughed. “A kiss…another kiss…and another. Is that enough?”

“Just one more?”
She rolled her eyes and his phone started ringing. He groaned and reached for it as she slipped some clothes on and left their bedroom to wash. He rubbed his face and cleared his throat to answer.

“Sam?”

“Hello, Jon.”

“Any news?”

“Yeah, loads. But first, that posting you mentioned…I looked. I think it’s definitely something.”

His guts started to clench up. It’d be so easy to grow too comfortable here. But at some point, he knew they’d have to make a move. Was that the reason for the dream?

*Blood in the snow, knives in the dark.*

Complacency could get them captured or killed. He couldn’t hide from the reality of their circumstances forever. Neither could she. His pension wouldn’t last indefinitely and he’d either be forced to find work as Jon Stone or live as Jon Snow again.

“Jon?”

“Alright. Tell me everything and then we’ll talk about options.”

There were days when Brynden wondered if the younger generation had made it their mission in life to kill him. He stared incomprehensively at the small screen and the photo. Random little messages kept appearing and disappearing. There was some halfwit actor’s face obscuring part of the screen, too. He squinted. He probably should’ve brought his reading glasses that he swore up and down he didn’t need.

“Here,” Lady Myranda said, tapping on the phone and suddenly Sansa’s picture was larger, the same one he’d seen from the advertisement in the paper except this was on the internet.

*Mother, Maiden and Crone.* Her hair was dark and long but he could see his Little Cat’s face there. *Surely to gods, no one would recognize her right off who wasn’t looking for her or knew her well,* he prayed. He wasn’t too sure of that.

“What the fuck does @lemoncakes even mean?”

“It’s her username.”

“Say again?”

“It’s what she goes by on the site. I made this post and…”

“Gods, be good. Explain it to me like I’m a kid. Scratch that. Explain it to me like I’m an old fart who doesn’t know shit about this stuff, alright?”
He listened as patiently as he could. Well, he wasn’t all that patient. He may have gotten a bit surly.

“I just thought she should know you’re looking for her! She deserves to know someone who cares and isn’t Mr. Baelish is out there looking!”

She was a good girl. She cared about her friend who she still believed was named Alayne. But she’d posted her bloody picture online where any idiot could see it. Baelish and his goons might see it. Or Cersei, her spy master or one of his little minions perhaps.

“Not just any idiot,” she huffed. “It’s a private blog.”

“Yeah, right. I may not know that much about this sort of thing but I’ll tell you something, my lady…there ain’t nothing very private in Westeros these days. Delete that.”

“But I…”

“Delete that post. If the wrong people see that picture, it’d be a bad thing.”

“Why?”

Why? That seemed to be the girl’s favorite question. He was probably being a suspicious, crusty old shit not sharing more with her than he had but then again, being suspicious was what had helped him live long enough to be a crusty old shit.

“Look, I’d like to tell you, my lady, but I’m going to ask you to trust me just a bit longer. I’m glad Alayne’s got a friend like you…” Even if I’d like to tear that phone out of your hand and stomp on it right now. “…but, we’ll need to do things my way if we’re to keep her out of harm’s way.”

His phone started ringing and he scowled at the number. Lady Myranda threw up her hands in exasperation and left the room. He didn’t recognize who was calling and he started to slip it back in his pocket but the prefix was unfamiliar, maybe somewhere in the Reach. Might be worth answering even if it wound up just being some solicitor.

“Yes?!” he answered gruffly. Usually, solicitors hung up when they heard that tone.

“Um, hello. I’m trying to find…” A man’s voice, a bit on the timid side from the sounds of it. Gods. “I’m looking for some…lemoncakes…for a friend.” Well, fuck me.

Myranda tromped outside into the snow. It was bitingly cold but refreshing in a way. Her father had left for a business trip this morning and she’d not expected Mr. Blackfish to come back again so soon. And, how was she to know the post might cause Alayne more problems? The internet was a good way to connect with people, wasn’t it?

Among other bits and pieces, he had said Alayne had a sister looking for her and that they’d been separated since before she’d left Kings Landing.

“A half-sister?”
The old man hadn’t answered that and just told her to contact him if she heard from her. “Keep it quiet though. Mr. Baelish doesn’t want them to reunite but it’d mean a lot to the girls. Can you do that, my lady?”

“Of course, I can.”

Myranda nervously twirled her hair. She shouldn’t’ve made the post without checking with Mr. Blackfish first.

She wandered out to the stables to soothe her jangled nerves. She shouldn’t have left a guest sitting in the parlor alone but he’d had a phone call and she’d figured he’d want his privacy. Plus, he’d been quite churlish with her earlier. Even a girl as easy-going as Myranda had her limits.

Their stables were small. Her father had stopped keeping horses years ago. He’d talked of knocking them down and putting in a swimming pool. She was very grateful now that he hadn’t.

“Lady,” she cooed, stroking the mare’s muzzle and patting her withers. “Do you miss her, girl? I know she’s missing you. Do you think she misses me?”

Lady and three of Mr. Baelish’s horses had become their temporary tenants. And by temporary, Myranda meant permanent. The others had been given to other families to care for until such time Mr. Baelish might want them back. Likely never.

She wasn’t much of a rider but she’d give the girl a home and all the sugar cubes she liked. “I’ll even ride you if you like. Or perhaps you’d like Mya better. I tend to jerk at the bit too much because I get nervous. I wouldn’t ever want to hurt you, sweet girl. I’d never hurt her either.”

Thinking of her friend out there somewhere and possibly in danger hurt. Her eyes started to cloud up.

“She’s with Jon, Lady. I know she is. He loves her, I’ll bet. Who wouldn’t? He’s taken her away from Mr. Baelish. Mr. Blackfish said he’s not really her father and that he’s trying to keep her from her inheritance. I’d believe it, don’t you? He’s such a foul little man and I’ve never liked his countenance. I’ll bet Jon would take her home to her sister or lead her to Mr. Blackfish if he could. Please, say I’ve not fucked up, girl.”

The horse said nothing. Well, she did snort and toss her head once.

“I’ll take that as an agreement.”

She chuckled to herself and heard someone approaching. Perhaps Mr. Blackfish had finished his call and come looking for her.

But when she turned, it wasn’t Mr. Blackfish. It wasn’t Mya, the girl they’d hired to care for the horses, nor one of the servants either. She knew him though. She’d seen him many times at Mr. Baelish’s house. She’d even flirted with him once or twice. He wasn’t bad looking even with his hooked nose. And, he had that bad boy vibe she couldn’t quite resist. What was he doing here?

“Osney?”

“Hello, my lady,” he said sweetly as he reached into his jacket.
“My prince?” The girl was touching his face, her eyes fearful. What was her name again?

She jumped and he knew he had not dreamed that thunderous knocking a second ago. Aegon groaned. He’d been fast asleep. What time was it? He wondered how long they’d been knocking.

“Who is it?”

“Hightower, my prince.”

He groaned again. Ser Gerold Hightower was one of his father’s men. Tenaciously loyal and an experienced fighter, he’d fled with the family years ago after his grandfather’s assassination. A bull of a man, he’d intimidated Aegon from a young age though he likely didn’t mean to. He also seemed to have a knack for showing up when it was terribly inconvenient.

He glanced at the clock by his bed. Already past noon. His father would probably rail at him for it. Maybe he wasn’t home. Mother would never say a word about him sleeping in after a party.

“Stay put, my sweet,” he told the girl before rolling out of bed and limping to the door.

He opened it to find the man standing there with a bottled water in hand. “You look like all seven hells rolled into one,” Hightower grinned before chugging him on the shoulder.

Aegon winced at the roughness of the contact and he very much felt like shit. “What’d you want, Ser Gerold?”

He didn’t answer. He glanced at the bed and smirked.

There’d been several people invited last night and who was Aegon to hide out in his bedroom when a party was happening? The Dornish Red had been flowing freely along the Arbor Gold. Aegon had drank his fill and for the first time since the shooting hadn’t needed his pain medication to fall asleep.

The girl had appeared sometime near midnight when he was well into his cups. Big blue eyes and bigger breasts, a very short skirt, dark red hair and wine dark lipstick. He’d not been thinking much of sleeping then. He half remembered them staggering up the stairs. She’d been quite lively. At the moment though, he was regretting his excesses all around.

“Who is she?” Hightower whispered.

Aegon’s brow furrowed. He could’ve sworn he’d seen Hightower speaking to her at one point before she’d come over to say hello.

“A young lady I met last night.” A dubious look. “Alright, she is not exactly what polite society would deem a lady but she is quite sweet really and…”

“Get out,” he barked at the girl. Aegon’s mouth fell open. “Your father sent me to talk to you.”

His fists clenched but he bit back his anger. His father had slept around plenty but never under this roof. He’d accused Aegon more than once of bringing trash near his mother. “I’m afraid we’ll have to meet again some other time, my sweet.”
Both men repaired to the sitting area of his suite as the girl hastily searched for her clothes to dress, her mortification palatable. He hated that he’d caused that. ‘You’re an ass!’ rang in his ears. She’d been right.

His father still treated him like a child. So had Connington and so did Hightower.

Well, you are nearly twenty-six, still living with your parents, drinking to excess whenever it suits and bedding any pretty girls who catch your eye. They may have a point. You’d have made her a poor husband.

He frowned and shook his head. He had to stop thinking of her.

Once the girl was gone, Hightower handed him the water. “Drink, my prince.” He guzzled the water down and smacked his lips though it was tepid. His mouth tasted foul. Or was that the water? “Better?”

“A little.”

“Good. Now, I’ve been trying to clear up a few things regarding your recent trip to the Vale. I need to ask you some questions.”

“Questions?”

“About the party at Baelish’s.”

“Oh, I…alright.” His heart seemed to sink towards his stomach and his pulse picked up its pace. Why did he feel so nervous? There was nothing for him to be worried over. He’d done nothing wrong.

“When did you last see Lady Sansa?”

“Sansa Stark? Poor girl…if she was really Lady Sansa. She’s probably dead.” His heart was already pounding harder. He scrubbed at his face and told himself not to panic. “I…in the house right before Connington was shot.”

“Yes.” Hightower took out a notebook and pen.

“Are you taking notes?”

“I am. What else can you recall?”

He recounted their dealings with each other as faithfully as possible up until he’d been shot. He repeated the tale he’d told others once he’d returned to Dorne and was conscious again. At least, he thought he was repeating the tale. Things felt a little swimmy.

“And who carried you out of the house?”

“I told you…Connington carried me out.”

“That’d be quite a stunt seeing as how his remains were found inside the house.”

“He must’ve went back inside after.”

“Why would he do that? You were shot. He was shot. Why would he go back inside?”

“Maybe to save the girl and…”
“Sansa Stark was not his to protect. You were. He wouldn’t have left you outside alone.”

“I don’t remember. It’s all rather foggy.”

“Of course. And who bound your leg before the paramedics arrived?”

“What? Uh, no one. It must’ve been the paramedic who…”

“One of our men said your leg was bound before the paramedic started working, bound with your own jacket.”

“Oh, I guess I did that or…maybe Connington did. I’ll need to beg your pardon, Hightower. I feel a little woozy.”

“It’s just the medicine.”

“I didn’t take any.”

His lips curled into a smile. “You’re rather loquacious when you drink, Aegon. Did anyone ever tell you that?”

“What?”

“My princess fled her tower. She didn’t want me. She kissed Jon.”

His blood ran cold and he felt the bile rising in his throat. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“Your words, my prince. You said quite a bit last night once the girl came along. She’s a pretty whore, pretty red hair but not so pretty as Lady Sansa from the sounds of things.”

“I’m sure I don’t…”

“Cut the act, Aegon. Where is Sansa Stark? Who carried you out of that house? Was it this mysterious Jon person?”

“Why do I feel sick? Was there something in the water you gave me?”

“Nothing that will do you any lasting harm, my prince. Now…let’s go through this again, shall we?”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry there wasn't as much Jonsa in this chapter but I figured they had quite a bit the past two chapters and needed to give some of our other players a turn.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Brynden leaves the Vale as Jon and Sansa prepare to leave White Harbor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She was no longer hysterical but Brynden could tell she wasn’t faring so well. She was trembling as she clutched the bag he’d had her quickly pack to her chest. He regretted he’d had to leave her alone this long while cleaning up. The adrenaline had bled off to be replaced by this.

He started the engine but paused at the sound of her stifled sob. He was a hard ass but not that big of one. “You gonna be alright, girl?”

She nodded shakily, likely out of habit. She wasn’t alright and he knew it. Comforting a frightened woman wasn’t something that came easily to crusty old shits like him.

“You-you k-killed him,” she stammered.

“I’m afraid so, my lady.”

“He…he was going to kill me.”

“Yes, he was.”

It’d been a near thing. He’d finished his very interesting but brief conversation with the friend of lemoncakes and sought out his hostess. He’d been harsh with her earlier and he’d wanted to make amends. He’d wanted to let her know that despite the foolish risk her online post had been, it may have yielded a positive result.

He’d heard her scream just as he’d reached the stables. Luckily, the younger man hadn’t expected her to have any aid coming her way and he’d been distracted. Kettleblack already had the garrote around her throat when Brynden had cut his with the tactical knife he always carried.

The marks around her neck were red and angry looking but it wasn’t the mess Kettleblack had been. There was a still a little blood on her face from the spray. Brynden pulled out a handkerchief and started dabbing at it. They were lucky they’d managed to avoid being seen by the servants.

“What would he do that?” Her question came out as a high-pitched whine and it broke Brynden’s heart.

Because you drew the wrong sort of attention to yourself. He didn’t say it though.

“Come on now, girl. I need you to hang in there for me.” He finished his wiping and pulled her into a brief, one-armed embrace. It turned out not to be so brief nor one-armed as she clung to him like he was her favorite old uncle. He’d been someone’s favorite old uncle once upon a time so he
decided he didn’t mind. He patted her back and was wiping away tears instead of blood this time. He straightened when she was reduced to hiccups. They needed to get going. “Fasten your safety belt now.”

Her hands were shaking and she couldn’t manage it. He reached over to do it and she gasped at the sound of the click. He wondered if this was a mistake to take her along.

No, it’s not. She’s got no training for something like this and, if Baelish was bold enough to send one of his guys to off her during the day, she’s not going to be safe here anytime soon.

“Wha-where are we going?”

“You’re taking a little trip out of town. We’ll have you call your father once the shock has passed and tell him about some old friend you decided to visit. Drink this,” he said, reaching into the cooler he kept in his backseat.

“What is it?”

“Just a soda, my lady. A little jolt of sugar for the shock.”

She slurped the sugary drink and started tugging at her clothes and brushing out her hair as she became calmer. “Where are we going?” she asked again a little later.

“We’re going to meet someone who is fond of lemoncakes.” I hope.

“Then asking was like a knife to the heart.

Jon started scrubbing at his beard but managed to meet his eye. “Three days from now.”

“You just came home.” He sounded like a broken man. Maybe I am.

Jon inhaled sharply and his eyes reflected his own misery. “I never meant to hurt you again.”

“You haven’t.” You have. “You said it’d be temporary before you came.” I just didn’t want to believe it. A thought struck him. “What’ll you do for money?” No one would last long on the run without money and Jon would never let her live on the streets like he’d done as a teen when he ran away before the authorities caught him.

“I need you to withdraw a good portion of my pension for me.”

“It’s your money.”

“And it’s in your name, thanks to Sam.”

He huffed a bitter laugh. “That money’s supposed to help support you when you’re an old man like me.” It was a feeble argument but he would make it. Still didn’t change the fact that they were going and he could not stop them. “You could stay a while longer. I’ll find you honest work. No one would know you down at the fishery. Everyone keeps their heads down around there. A crew
can be like a family...like us.”

“Davos…”

“Lyanna can stay home with me or I’ll help her find something if she likes.”

“No, there’s unfinished business we have to see to.” His wife’s mysterious business.

“Is that why Lyanna was crying last night? Because you’re going?”

“It was.”

He would’ve rather heard the more usual sounds he did his best to ignore coming through the connecting wall than the sound of the girl weeping. But in a way, it was a strange comfort to know she didn’t want to go either.

“I’m sorry, Davos.”

“You don’t have to say sorry. You can always come back.”

The briefest flicker of a smile and a hopeful nod. That was the most he could ask for from Jon.

Despite the cold day, Jon had asked him to step out back with him. Davos had thought it might have to do with his old truck. He wished it’d been that.

Lyanna had been humming in the kitchen as she prepared the fanciest version of linguine and clams he’d ever seen. It smelled amazing and he’d been salivating in anticipation of tasting it. Now, he had no appetite. He wanted to be angry with Jon for taking that away from him. He couldn’t muster the strength to be angry.

“Where’re you going?”

“I…I’d rather not tell you.” His temper flared then and Jon must’ve seen it on his face. “I trust you with my life, Davos. I trust you with hers which is even more precious to me but, if I don’t tell you, at least you can honestly say you do not know our whereabouts if anyone comes here looking for us.”

“I can lie,” he said sullenly. He knew Jon was right but he did not like it.

“Aye, I’m sure you can. But there are ways of getting the truth out of even the most stalwart of men. I don’t believe that will happen. I would take you with us if I thought there was anything more than the faintest chance of it but it’s not impossible.”

Davos felt vaguely queasy at the thought of what Jon suggested but told himself it was hunger.

Jon put his hand on his shoulder, his chin tucked and his eyes growing wet. Jon was not easily given to tears and it made Davos’s flinty outlook crumble.

“Come back,” he heard himself whisper.

“If there’s any way at all, I promise you we will. Or if we settle somewhere else, maybe we come back to take you with us if you like.”

Marya and their boys were gone but Jon and his wife were alive. Davos liked to think of them settled someplace and safe. He liked to picture himself there with them. He liked to picture grandchildren even. Was that too much to dream of? His experiences should tell him it was but his
heart would not listen.

“I’d like that very much if you’re willing to put up with me.”

“You put up with my sullen arse. You’re the only father I’ve ever known. You’d better believe I’d put up with you.”

Davos was too old to be ashamed of the sob that escaped when Jon pulled him into a hug.

This taste of having a family again after so much time alone, it almost seemed crueler in a way. But when had the gods ever been anything less than cruel?

However, when Lyanna poked her head out the backdoor to call them both in for their meal a little later, he knew the joy of having them was worth the pain of them going.

——

Petyr smiled as he hung up the phone. The news was disappointing and perhaps a little alarming but smiling was better than grimacing. Emotional displays were for lesser players. It helped to keep ones friends and foes confused, too.

“Now, where were we?” he asked the knight seated across from him.

“Your daughter…Alayne.”

His face became a mask of grief. He would not willing give an inch to Rhaegar’s man without it being worth his while. “What about her?” he croaked.

“Where is she?”

“Is that a serious question?” he gasped in a suitable display of offense.

“We have reason to believe she’s alive.”

“You come to me in my convalescence to feed me false hopes? To mock my sorrow?”

“Come on, Baelish. Her name has stayed out of the news reports. If she was truly dead, there would’ve been no harm in having a bastard girl’s name listed. Where is she?”

The man was a better player than Petyr had expected. Craftier than Connington at least. “What makes you think she’s alive?”

“Because the last time Aeg…I mean, Griff saw her, she was very much alive and in the arms of a young man named Jon before they climbed into a white van and drove away.”

_In the arms of a young man named Jon_. The rage those words invoked…it simply was not fair. He had loved her as he’d loved her mother. He had cared for her and watched over her for over two years. Longer than that in truth. He’d hired Jon Snow to be her bodyguard, not to steal her from him. Were all Tully girls so faithless?

He had to keep emotion in check. “Griff told you this?”
“He did.”

“Seems like he waited a while to share this blessed news with anyone.”

“The prin…the young man has been healing from his own injuries. He needed a little persuading, too.”

Petyr smirked. He wondered what method of persuasion a man like Rhaegar would allow for his son. “And, what does your employer want with me? He has made his displeasure with me rather well known since the fire. Not so much as a polite note to wish me a speedy recovery even.”

“His High-…my employer regrets his earlier remarks. He would wish to assist you in finding your daughter to make up for it.”

“He still wants the match?”

“Very much. The North is…”

“A vast region and will never be brought to heel by an outsider.” Hightower nodded. “Naturally, I am most concerned with my daughter’s welfare but what about my recompense?”

“The same offer.”

That was well enough…perhaps. “Tell me, has something else motivated this sudden reversal of feelings?”

“I’m not sure what you…”

“I am in far less of a position to help than I was and my daughter has not been seen since the fire. Even when I had her under my roof, there was a good deal of hesitancy on your employer’s end. Why the renewed interest in Alayne? There’s something else, isn’t there?”

“The man she fled with…”

“What about him?”

“My employer would like to know more about him.”

“Why?”

Ser Gerold stiffened and Petyr could tell he wasn’t permitted to say more. Or perhaps he didn’t know any more. Why the interest in Jon Snow, the bastard bodyguard? Now, Petyr had something new to consider.

His guest left soon after with a few scraps of information to whet the would-be king’s appetite. Petyr would string those scraps out and see a dukedom and a cabinet position out of the man if it was the last thing he did. It might just make up for what he’d suffered.

Assuming Rhaegar wins.

The Dornish support and forces from Essos were alright but the Targaryen faction would not hold the love of the people, not after Aerys. Rhaegar’s position would be tenable at best even if he managed to launch a military strike which he had not done thus far. He needed a foothold in another one of the Seven Kingdoms. The Reach might be in talks with him but Petyr knew they had friends amongst the Lannisters and Baratheons, too. Therefore, Sansa Stark who might very well bring him the North was still needed.
Cersei’s position was not as strong as she believed and Stannis was planning a move of his own. So many pieces that could disrupt the plans. But, when did things ever go as planned?

The best players anticipate the unanticipated.

Something Ramsay Snow had never learned.

Petyr had spent a lot of time in Braavos and had some excellent connections in the Iron Bank and among other lesser-known organizations. Roose really couldn’t have sent his bastard to a worse place if he hoped to allude capture. Perhaps Braavos was Ramsay’s idea though and Roose sent him, likely glad to be rid of the nuisance.

But without money, Ramsay would have a hard time remaining there. And if the Faceless Men found him first? Well, that would suit Petyr fine. Unlike Cersei, dead was good enough for Petyr without a spectacle or torture.

He would bide his time and wait to see how the coin landed.

On a less happy note, Osney had apparently failed him since he’d failed to check back in.

Silence one girl. How hard could it have been?

But Lady Myranda was still alive and ‘out of town’ at the moment according to her staff and Osney had not been seen nor heard of since the day she left.

He hoped Lothor would check in tonight. He should’ve finished his little side trek to White Harbor by now and Petyr desperately wanted some news. He wanted to find Sansa more than ever with this development.

He stared at his phone, willing it to ring. He considered picking it up to call but did not. Lothor would call when he had something worth telling. He was loyal and he would not let him down.

Petyr suppressed a groan when the burly male ward assistant came in to bathe him and plastered on his best smile. What else could he do for now?

Lothor Brune watched the boys filing out of the Home on their way to school. Tall boys and short boys, dark-haired or blond; some of them wore pants that were too large for skinny waists and some that were too short for growing legs. Each one reminded him of himself at that age in their shabby clothes and second-hand shoes as they trudged along the snow-covered sidewalk. They had the unkempt appearance of the unwanted, something Lothor knew about as well. His kin at Crackclaw Point had not wanted him and everything he’d achieved in life had been thanks to his own blood, sweat and tears. He supposed that he shared that with Jon Snow.

Forty-eight hours in White Harbor and he’d nearly given up finding anything of interest. He didn’t mind the delay since he suspected Winterfell would be a dead end as well. Dead, as dead as she might be. He didn’t share his employer’s certainty that she had lived though he wanted to believe.

However, something like a maybe had come of his hunt today. He’d check it out for the sake of
being thorough. He had a reputation for being thorough.

He stared at the address he’d managed to get out of the Home’s administrative assistant, a lonely middle age woman serving out her days at a thankless job in a bleak environment. All it’d taken was a smile, a polite word or two and the apple from his coat pocket to get her talking.

He should report in. He should. He knew it. The boss wanted to find her, wanted to protect her. At least, that’s what Lothor had told himself these past two years.

He’d always prided himself on his loyalty to Petyr Baelish. No, his hands weren’t clean but Lothor’s never would be either. But Alayne mattered to him, too.

*Sansa, her name is Sansa.*

He’d call in after he checked out the lead. He’d call in and tell Petyr he’d found nothing and was headed to Winterfell.

Thirty minutes later, his jaw hung open as he watched Jon Snow walking out of a small house in a lower class neighborhood of White Harbor with a well-used suitcase in hand. Lothor closed his mouth and slouched down in his seat when those sharp grey eyes started scanning the area before the young man put the suitcase in the trunk of an older model car.

He fingered his P30 but it was more out of habit than intentional. Did he really want to kill Jon? He probably should considering he’d killed some of Petyr’s other men that night. Jon would likely kill him if given the chance. But deep down, a queer twist in his guts whispered that he didn’t particularly want to.

Lothor shook that off. The job was the job. Baelish was the boss. Snow had to go. But, he’d have to tread lightly. Snow could be armed and he already knew he was deadly.

*The rifle.*

Right in his backseat, tucked under a blanket. Lothor was a good shot with his rifle. He could take Snow out, wade into the house, deal with the old man it belonged to and, if Sansa was here, he’d take her back to Petyr, back where she belonged.

But before he could so much as turn to retrieve the rifle, she walked out of the house on the arm of the old man. His chest swelled with emotions that he’d told himself he shouldn’t allow. It was too dangerous in this line of work. But he did. He cared about this lost little girl and he’d feared her dead for weeks and now he knew she was alive.

She’d cut her hair and it was redder than it had been. He pulled out his field glasses. She was crying but not the way he was used to seeing her pretty face when she cried. The old man appeared close to tears as well. They embraced like father and daughter might. How long had she known him? How could she have known him except through Jon?

Snow joined them on the sidewalk, putting an arm around her waist as she leaned against him. Everything about them spoke of a couple, of intimacy, and Lothor had never been more sure of anything.

“*He seemed to care about her,*” he’d told Petyr.

Petyr hadn’t wanted to hear it. “*He could never care about her the way I do.*”

*What if he does? What if he cares even more than you ever did? What if he loves her with*
Lothor felt heartsick and part of him wished he’d never seen them but he couldn’t unsee this either. He couldn’t betray the boss, could he?

But when Jon opened her door and helped her in, kissing her hand before waving good-bye to the old man and pulling away, Lothor stared at the phone lying beside him in the seat of his car and the conflicting loyalties were crushing him. How could he kill Jon Snow knowing how much it would hurt her? How could he take her back where she clearly wouldn’t want to go? How could he face the boss again if he didn’t?

*Follow them. See where they go. Decide what to do later. Call the boss later.*

He threw the car in drive and pulled out, keeping a discreet distance at first and wondering where they were headed but even more which side of loyalty he might wind up on in the end. And when they turned North, he had a good feeling exactly what that answer might be.

He gulped and wrapped both hands around the bars of the motel’s headboard after she’d shyly asked. She could ask for anything she wanted. “Like this?”

She nodded, smiling like a minx as she straddled him. “Keep them there until I say.”

“Fuck.”

He threw his head back as she sank downward to take him in with a hiss of pleasure. He bit his lip and watched her riding him at a pace that was designed to kill him, every rise and fall of her hips a sweet torment as she moaned and ground against him.

Her eyes were still red-rimmed from her earlier tears, making the blue stand more than normal.

Leaving Davos had been harder than he’d imagined and the fact that Sansa was so affected left him even more shaken. The drive had taken most of the day to get here and she’d cried a good part of the time as they’d headed towards Cerwyn. He’d wanted to cry, too.

“How can we just leave him?”

“We’ll go back if we can,” he’d promised her just as he’d promised Davos. “*But you’re not going to spend your whole life hiding or running.*”

“You’re not going to either.”

It was the knowledge of where they were headed and who they might see that had given them the strength to go.

*One step at a time. Find her family and then find a way to let everyone know the truth.*

He’d wanted to kiss away her tears when they’d stopped for the night. Sansa had had other plans once they’d checked into their room.
At least, they were both in a better frame of mind now.

“Mmm, Jon.” She played with her breasts as she continued teasing them both with this slow grind.

“Good?”

“So good,” she nodded, tossing her head forward until her hair was covering her face.

“I want to touch you.”

“I know you do.”

“This is torture.”

An impish smile. “Is it?”

“Yeah…but the best kind.”

She laughed and without warning started moving more urgently, slamming downward rapidly, a rhythmic dance of sorts. He really needed his hands on her.

“Sansa,” he whined. He’d beg if he must.

“Just a little…bit…ahhh…Jon!”

Her wail of pleasure became a shriek of delight when he let go of the headboard and rolled them swiftly to start pounding into her. She was still climaxing. He could feel it as his peak washed over him.

“Someone let go before I said,” she pretended to pout as she nestled against him afterwards.

“I’ve been told I’m a bit impatient.”

“No doubt.”

“What can I say? I am an animal when it comes to you.”

“My animal.”

Her stomach growled. “You hungry?”

“I’m alright.”

“I’ll go fetch you something if you like.”

“No, don’t leave. I want you here. I can wait for breakfast.”

He wanted to be here, too. He didn’t like the thought of leaving her alone now that they were on the road again.

Too bad this place doesn’t have room service.

She’d barely touched a bite of her food when they’d stopped for a late lunch. Jon hadn’t ate much either. Something hadn’t been sitting right with him and it hadn’t had anything to do with leaving Davos. Something had felt…wrong.

Paranoid much?
Even paranoids have real enemies.

That feeling had faded as the miles wore on and on. He kept checking his rearview mirror and had not noticed anything but traffic was heavy and he’d had to focus more on what was in front of him. He should’ve asked Sansa to drive so he could watch. She’d have liked that though she would’ve been worried if she’d known his reason why.

“I’ve been thinking,” she said quietly as he started to drift.

“Yeah?”

“About your plan for tomorrow…”

“What about it?”

The argument, if one could call it that considering how handily she’d won, took no more than fifteen minutes. Their anger had evaporated and apologies had been made for which he was grateful but he was too keyed up to sleep now.

He tossed and turned to get settled and he could hear her huff of irritation.

“Sorry.”

“It’s alright. I’m having trouble, too. Turn on the television.”

They didn’t need to stay up late watching TV but endless fretting over tomorrow wouldn’t help either. The distraction might help soothe his nerves.

They gasped in unison at the news bulletin flashing across the screen: Rebel forces under the command of Stannis Baratheon invade Kings Landing.

For so much of her young life, Sansa had been forced to sit still, watching things unfold before her with absolutely no say over most of it, no matter how horrifying parts of it had been.

What else could she have done?

Joffrey and his cruelties, her father’s trial and execution, her miserable life in Kings Landing… she’d been in someone else’s power all that time. The only option that had allowed for her survival had been to sit, observe and wait for a chance that might never come.

When her chance had come at last, it had not exactly been the answer to her prayers. Her abuser and father’s killer had died but it was no triumph. It had not brought her freedom nor had it returned her to her family. She’d only found herself sitting, watching and waiting once more. In fact, her position was unchanged in the essentials as she was still a prisoner. She could not leave him when he’d made a murderess of her in the eyes of everyone else. And so, she’d been forced to accept his protection even though he was just a new version of the old scene.

But now?

She was free. At least, freer than she’d been since she’d gone south as a child. Free to walk down
the block and enjoy a slice of pizza if she was hungry. Free to get behind the wheel and drive somewhere if she liked. Free to love, too. After the little Northern girl with all the songs in her heart had them ruthlessly ripped from her, she’d wound up finding happiness in a place she’d least expected it. She’d found a man worth loving, one who loved her back. He’d come to her gilded cage and helped her find her way out at last.

She was happy and she could’ve spent the rest of her life in White Harbor as Lyanna Stone if necessary. She would’ve done it for Jon if he’d asked it of her. But he loved her too much to not try and give her everything and everything meant giving her back her name, absolving her of the false accusations and finding whatever family remained to her.

And now it seemed that Jon’s friend Sam had made contact with her great uncle who was on his way to meet them.

Jon had adamantly not wanted her to come today. Their argument was not pleasant but even in the heat of debate, she’d never once cringed or backed away from him. She could express herself with Jon and she wondered if he knew what that meant to her. It was another example of the freedom she had now, just like the freedom to be the dominant one in bed, even if it was short-lived, because she’d wanted to try it.

“If everything checks out, you’ll see him soon enough.”

“But I want to go with you. Why do you have to meet him first and go alone?”

“Because I’m protecting you.”

“You’re not my bodyguard anymore.”

“No, you are my wife and, no matter my title, I’ll always protect you.”

“I appreciate that but we watch out for each other, don’t we?”

He’d smirked but she could also tell he’d been touched by her words. “Aye, we do.”

“You trust Sam. Sam arranged this. I want to see him.”

“It could be some trap.”

“And if it’s a trap, that means they’re already on our trail and likely know where we are. Do you think they’ll have that much trouble finding me if they manage to take you?”

“They won’t take me, not alive.”

“Don’t talk that way!”

“I’m not risking your life!”

“But you’ll risk yours? I watched my father die, Jon. I saw my brother and mother’s bodies on the evening news. Petyr told me my siblings were all dead and the rest of my family was scattered. You are my…I cannot bear the thought of losing you. Please, let me come with you. Let me have a say in this. He is my family. Don’t I deserve the chance to see him for myself?”

He’d conceded to her wishes then and not uttered a single complaint since, only bade her to do as he said once they arrived.

They’d arrived early and she’d done her best to conceal her nerves but it wasn’t easy. Perhaps she
should’ve given in to his wishes. What if something went wrong and she slowed Jon down? What if she panicked? Jon would never leave her side but that’d only mean he was condemned, too.

“What if Stannis overthrows Cersei? What might that mean for me?”

“I don’t know.”

“My father had told me once that Stannis was…”

“Shhh,” he warned her. She’d been whispering but they weren’t alone either.

Sansa chewed at her lip and kept wondering what might be happening in Kings Landing. The news made it sound as if Cersei was safe and the rebels were being rounded up but the news was controlled by Government. What if he wins? What if she’s dead? What if…what if?

She felt jumpy. She’d sat for so long. How was she expected to sit still any longer?

“You’re drawing attention to us,” Jon chided gently when she started pacing. She closed her eyes and exhaled slowly to hide her irritation and impatience. She felt his hand touching hers. “I know it’s not easy to wait.”

Jon knew because he’d experienced it. He’d told her much of his time with the Nights Watch and when he’d been undercover with the Free Folk. Lots of waiting and uncertainty. He knew exactly what she was feeling today. He was just better at hiding it.

She sat back down on the little loveseat they’d commandeered on the second floor overlooking the main entrance. She laid her head on his shoulder, hoping to find some comfort to calm her flustered spirits.

Someone nearby cleared his throat, a sound of condemnation. The older man was giving her a look that made her recall Mr. Luwin at his absolute sternest when her siblings misbehaved during lessons.

Will he box our ears? Does he think we’re about to start groping each other in the reference section?

She reluctantly raised her head again but not before Jon whipped around to take note of their audience.

“Piss off,” Jon growled at the interloper.

Sansa was tempted to start giggling as the man’s eyebrows shot up and he moved elsewhere. “You’re drawing attention to us,” she teased.

“There’s plenty of grouchy assholes out in public. I can be one, too. Now, put your head back on my shoulder, darling.”

They’d driven to a public library which Jon had chosen based on its ease of access to two different roads, its abundant places to conceal oneself and its multiple exits. However, the drawback of the library was that everyone was expected to keep relatively quiet and still. Sansa had never imagined she’d hate sitting still this much.

I wish I’d brought my sketchpad.

Just as she started to yawn, Jon tapped her thigh. “Looks like we’re not the only one who’s early.”
Her eyes searched the entry below and she spotted him. She’d not seen him since she was little girl but that rugged face and those blue eyes could belong to no one else…at least she hoped not.

Like something from a movie, he seemed to feel them watching him. “Uncle Brynden,” she murmured when their eyes met.

Chapter End Notes

It took me a while to get this one done. I worry about getting too plotty and making no sense but I hope you enjoyed the chapter.

It’s been difficult writing with the season airing but our long slog towards indifference and disappointment is almost done and hopefully my writing can pick back up :) On a positive note, Episode 2 was definitely my favorite of this season.

And, thank you for sticking with this story!!
Sansa could barely see between the bright sunlight reflecting off the snow and the tears in her eyes as they ushered her across the street, leaving the library behind for the nearby park. It was cold out and no one was there but them. Even if someone decided to take their dog for a walk or go for a run, she supposed a weeping girl at a picnic table might draw less attention than the one who’d launched herself into her great uncle’s arms right in front of the circulation desk after flying down the steps from the second floor.

She’d been beside herself to see him, to embrace a family member again but that wasn’t what had prompted this breakdown. She thought she’d cried herself dry yesterday when they’d left Davos. She’d been mistaken.

“It’s alright. It’s gonna be alright now, you’ll see,” Brynden said, his gruff old countenance reassuring as he patted her back.

Jon returned from the car and placed a bottled water on the table in front of her. “Drink, darling.” Crying oneself dry was not just an expression. He passed her some tissues as well.

She didn’t fail to note the look that Brynden shot Jon’s way at the endearment before he was back to comforting her. She would make things clear for him soon.

After blowing her nose and gratefully quaffing down the water, she gave them both a shy smile. “I’m sorry to be so emotional.” Jon shook his head. He wouldn’t want her to apologize for her tears. Uncle Brynden waved her apology away as well. “I’m just amazed. I wanted to believe but knowing…I was overcome.”

Arya, Bran and Rickon were all alive and living with her Uncle Edmure in Riverrun. They had been there for a while now. That fleeting hope she’d cherished was real. She had younger siblings who were waiting for their big sister to return.

Brynden said he’d make a phone call tonight and let her speak with them. She couldn’t wait to hear their voices. She was also nervous at the prospect. Would Rickon remember her at all? Would Bran really? And Arya…how would that go?

They’d fought a good deal as girls. Things had been particularly strained between them in Kings Landing after Lady’s death. Arya had been angry and couldn’t understand why Sansa had demurred about Joffrey’s role in it or why she’d admonished her for criticizing their Crown Prince. Arya had only been a child. So was I. But she’d been the one betrothed to Joffrey and had been learning the narrow line she must walk to keep her prince appeased. They’d never properly made up before their father’s arrest and Arya’s disappearance.

What happened to them all? Where have they been? What have they seen? Are their tales as sad as mine or even worse?

She buried her worries for the time being as her great uncle continued speaking.

“But there’s a code we use when I call.”

“A code?”
“Yes. They’re in hiding, too.”

Of course. They might not be wanted for regicide but they were Ned Stark’s children, Robb’s little brothers and sister. Government would wish to have ‘custody’ of them if they were found.

Just yesterday, she’d thought if Jon had asked her to remain at White Harbor as Lyanna Stone forever she’d have happily done so. Now, she felt differently. Her family deserved better. They shouldn’t have to spend their lives living in Uncle Edmure’s attic, talking over the phone in code or being taught at home by Aunt Roslin because it was thought too dangerous to send them to school. They were Starks. They shouldn’t live in fear because of it. They deserved a real home.

Her eyes turned northward at the thought. It wasn’t so far from here. She ached to see Winterfell. What had become of it after Robb and Mother’s death? As far as she knew, it was still standing. Were there soldiers living there? Or another family perhaps? Or were there only ghosts there?

Sansa remembered the bright parties her parents had hosted when she was a child. The couples would dance and everyone would be laughing and talking. She would sit on the stairs in her nightgown, listening to the music and longing to be swept up in the magic of the night before she’d be discovered and sent to her bed. She pictured their home now filled with nothing but the shades of the fallen and shivered. Would there ever be music and gaiety at Winterfell again? Could it truly be their home again?

One thing at a time.

Even if they could return, Winterfell would have to wait. They were in Cerwyn and her siblings were in Riverrun. Either Sansa would be going south again or they would have to leave the safety of Edmure’s and venture north. She could not endanger them.

“I need to be with them. Can you take us there?”

“We’ll figure that all out soon,” Brynden said. She could see the hesitancy on Jon’s face. She did not blame him. His priority was her safety. Going south, crossing the border again would be a risk. It was still worth it to her. “Do you have a place you’re staying in town?”

“No. We only took the room we stayed in last night for one night,” Jon answered. “We weren’t certain how things would go today. We were prepared to move on if necessary.”

The car had all their possessions packed in it. If Brynden had not shown today, they would’ve driven onward although they’d not completely made up their minds as to where yet. They’d pinned a lot of hope on him showing up. She wasn’t sure where to go from here and Jon wasn’t either. She silently hoped Brynden might have some ideas.

“I’ve got a place we can all stay. We’ll let you talk to your siblings tonight and then we’ll start working on a plan of what to do next.”

“Oh, thank you. That will be…”

Brynden held up a hand. “First, there’s something else I need to mention.”
Brynden had rented a mini-suite at an extended-stay hotel about forty-five minutes away from the library. It wasn’t anything grand. Jon thought the chain might cater more to traveling salesmen of the middling sort. It was still nicer than most of the places Jon had lived in his life.

On the way there, Sansa had chosen to ride with her great uncle. She’d wanted to continue catching up while Jon had followed them in the used car he’d bought back in White Harbor with part of his pension money before they’d left. He hadn’t blamed her for wanting to spend more time with him but Jon hadn’t liked being parted for the drive either. He was so used to them being together constantly and when Brynden would occasionally speed ahead, Jon would close the distance rapidly, not wanting them out of his sight for even a minute. That feeling of unease he’d had yesterday was still with him.

He’d had to restrain himself from rushing up to embrace her the second they’d parked. He had his arm around her as soon as possible and sighed contentedly when she laid her head on his shoulder while they followed her great uncle to the room. The older man cast a glance over his shoulder at them. Jon had not missed the look he’d given him in the park earlier either.

Once they were inside, Sansa’s attention was diverted elsewhere. The two young women were alternating between hugging each other excitedly and chattering away at an inconceivable rate. Jon was glad for Sansa to have her friend even if the circumstances that had brought Lady Myranda here were not ideal.

“Osney, huh?” he murmured to Brynden.

The two men were in the small sitting area next to the kitchenette. The ladies were visible through the doorway to one of the suite’s two bedrooms but far enough away to have privacy for their chat. And privacy for this one.

“She said that was his name. I recognized him as one of Baelish’s goons.”

One of Baelish’s goons. Alright then.

Sansa had said her great uncle had been in the military at one time but she wasn’t certain what else he’d done. Sam had told him Brynden Tully was widely reputed as a crafty guerilla-style fighter in his day and was wanted by Government for questioning regarding his actions during the North’s rebellion.

The older man was leaning back into the armchair with one eye closed. Jon was not fooled by the easy posture. Men like him didn’t live to have so many grey hairs by being quick to trust. Jon knew this but maybe they could talk, one professional to another.

“Mr. Baelish had several men working for him of varying skill levels. Osney wasn’t the best nor was he the least capable of them.”

“He still let this old fart get the drop on him.” Jon smiled at that until Brynden continued. “But perhaps I should apologize for killing a friend of yours?”

“He was never my friend. And, considering I killed his two brothers the night of the fire, before they could kill me mind you, I don’t think we ever would’ve been friends. Mr. Baelish hired me to protect her but I’m not working for him now.”

“Guess not since you made off with his prize.”

He didn’t like the man referring to Sansa as a prize even in jest. He didn’t like having his motives questioned either but he understood it. “She’s not an object or a prize. Baelish thought of her that
way but she’s not. She wanted away from there and I wanted to see her free.”

“That’s kind of you.”

“You think I have interests beyond seeing her safe? Is that it?”

“Five million dragons is a lot of money.”

“I would never turn her in,” he swore vehemently under his breath, not wanting Sansa to overhear them.

“Oh, you’ve convinced me then.”

Jon was used to people assuming the worst of him since he was a kid. In this instance, he could hardly blame the man. It also pissed him off. “I don’t expect you to believe every word out of my mouth when we’ve only just met but I have no interest in the queen’s five million dragons.”

“There’s more than Cersei who wants her.”

“And none of them will have her either if I have any say in the matter. Nothing I’m doing for her is about money. But I guess people from money tend to think everything is about money, huh?” That jab made contact. Good. “My loyalty has been to her and only her for a long time now. Before I even knew her real name, I put her safety and her wishes above Baelish’s or anyone else’s.”

“Uh huh.”

Jon scowled at the skepticism he could hear in those two syllables. “I had the drop on you that night you came snooping around the estate. I had you in my sights outside the stables. I only had to squeeze the trigger.” Those shaggy eyebrows were raised in curiosity now. “She told me not to shoot you so I didn’t. I didn’t particularly want to shoot you anyway but…”

“So, you’re her man then and no one else’s?” the older man chuckled.

“Aye.” In more ways than one.

“That wasn’t one of my finer moments getting spied by those two dolts.”

“No, it wasn’t. Umfred and Bryen? They were the absolute worst of us goons.”

“Well, thanks for adding some salt to that wound, you cocky shit.”

“You’re welcome and I killed both their worthless asses. Do you think I’d have run the risks I ran or killed my fellow goons if not for her?”

“I don’t know. Seems to me when it’s kill or be killed, it’s not so hard of a choice. I don’t know you, Jon Snow. I got an earful on the way here about you…and about how much she loves you.”

A sharp look and Jon rubbed his suddenly sweaty palms along his jeans. This wasn’t just one professional questioning the motives of another. This was her great uncle. “I love her, too…more than anything.”

“How precious. She’s nineteen. You’re how old?”

“She’ll be twenty next month and I’ll be twenty-six before long. Six years between us. Was there an age range you preferred? I still love her. We’re…well, we’re going to get married officially someday.”
He looked down at the band he wore. Davos had given it to him yesterday before they’d left.

“I can’t take that.”

“Sure, you can. Marya would like you having it. I want you to have it. Obviously, I’ve been wearing it to keep all the spinsters and widows in the neighborhood from beating down my door but I think you might as well wear it instead.” He’d given him that wry smile with his brown eyes twinkling.

Jon smiled at the memory despite the pain of parting. When he looked up, it was blue eyes staring at him. Those eyes were difficult to read and he supposed the jury was still out on Jon Snow.

“That day I approached you both in town, what was going on with her?”

He rubbed his tired eyes, recalling that day. There’d been so many secrets back then but Jon liked to think there’d been a significant shift between them in that 24 hours. From the morning when she’d cut her finger and he’d bound it, to their trip to Olyvar’s and the ice cream parlor and then, to that evening when they’d played cyvasse by the fire in her room and she’d later asked him to watch her fall asleep, their relationship had already started evolving into something more than that of a bodyguard and his assignment.

“She’d had a panic attack. She was still recovering from it as I was walking her back to the car.”

“That something that happens often?”

“No, but it can happen. She’s…there’s plenty of reasons for them to happen and I’ll let her share more about it with you if she wants to.”

Alright.”

“I was trying to get her safely away from town when you came along.”

“You kept yourself between me and her. You tossed me a stag.”

“I wanted rid of you but needed to focus on her. Something looked off about you. Your haircut was the first thing I noticed.”

Brynden cracked a smile. “Good eye. Most people don’t look too close at vagrants. Very few are that observant.” I think I just passed a test. “I didn’t see you drive off with her.”

He grimaced. “Uh, no. She insisted we stay and, um…pick up my suit.”

“You suit?”

“It was for a…your great niece can be very persuasive. I knew I shouldn’t have let her talk me into staying after her…”

“It’s alright,” Brynden snorted. “I always had trouble telling her mother no and I was her uncle.”

He glanced at Sansa in the next room. She was still deep in conversation with Myranda who still believed her name was Alayne. Her cheeks were bright red at the moment. Remembering past conversations the ladies had shared in his hearing, Jon had a suspicion of what the topic might be. He was grinning when he turned back to face Brynden again.

“I appreciate everything you’ve done to keep her safe.”
“Thank you. I’m glad we found you…or that you found us thanks to Lady Myranda. Sansa has been wanting to find her family for a very long time and worried everyone was lost to her. I’m happy for her to have found some.”

“Yes. Speaking of the ladies, Lady Myranda has that bedroom and I’ve got the other. I suppose Sansa can share with her and you can have this couch, Romeo.”

Jon rolled his eyes and started to let it go. But then he didn’t. He might be Sansa’s great uncle but they were not children. There was no reason for their relationship to be treated like a dirty secret either.

“That’s alright. Looks like this couch folds out anyway. Big enough for two even.”

He bit his lip to keep from laughing at the older man’s grumbling.

“It’s not really proper to…”

“Oh, pooh! After all the stories I’ve shared with you, I don’t even get a crumb? A speck?”

“I never actually asked for your stories. And, after everything you’ve been through the past few days because of me, you’d rather ask about our sex life?”

“Yes.”

“Myranda…”

“After everything I’ve been through the past few days, the only thing that will cheer me up is to know that at least one of us has experienced a really good orgasm recently.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Really good orgasms are serious business, Alayne.”

“What are you giggling about?” Jon asked as he laid down next to her at last that night.

She rolled to her side to face him. Her great uncle had graciously given them the other bedroom and volunteered to take the fold out couch.

“If I answer Myranda, may I leave it at that?”

“Gods, you may,” he chuckled, putting his arm around her.

“I wanted to tell her earlier. I hate pretending to be Alayne again.”

“I know. I can’t blame you. For better or worse, she’s involved but it’s better to keep it this way just for now, darling. We didn’t tell Davos for the same reasons we won’t tell her.”

She shuddered at the thought of Davos or her friend being questioned about them. “I hate that she’s
in danger because of me.”

“She’s in danger because she was asking questions and the man looking for you wanted her silenced. That isn’t your fault although I’m very grateful Brynden saved her.”

“Me, too. Even knowing all I know…I liked Osney. I guess I’m stupid to…”

“You are not. I won’t hear that,” he said gruffly. He kissed her nose and spoke more sweetly. “He was kind to you. You had no reason to dislike him.”

“His brothers tried to kill you. He would’ve tried to kill you, too. He was going to kill Myranda.”

“Yes, he was but I know they all spoke well of you from what time I spent amongst them before.”

“They were all nice to me but I they were all just my keepers in truth, holding the keys for Petyr. You never made me feel like that.”

“I’m glad. I’ll have to watch myself the next few days so I don’t let the cat out of the bag around Lady Myranda.”

“You didn’t slip in front of Davos.”

“I almost did.”

“Just that first time.”

“You’re kind to defend me.”

“Someone needs to,” she said, poking his chest for emphasis. Not enough people had defended Jon in his life. You protect me and I protect you.

He blinked and his eyes grew glassy. “I love you, Sansa.”

“I love you, too.”

Myranda would be returning to the Vale when they returned to the south. Brynden would take her back home after seeing there was some added security in place for her. Sansa hated to think of parting but she was not taking her friend to Riverrun. Myranda had her own life and her tagging along indefinitely while trying to leave her in the dark about certain matters would only complicate things.

“Are you happy? Getting to talk to them is not the same as seeing them but are you happy, darling?”

Arya was Nan and the boys were called the pups but all of them had been on the line tonight together.

Rickon had sounded like an excited pup to be honest. He was twelve. He told her he was already taller than Arya. Sansa could not picture it. He’d been just shy of four when she’d left home.

“I regularly kick Nan’s arse at video games, too.”

“You do not!”

“I do, too!”
“You don’t kick mine though,” Bran had said.

“That’s because you’re weird and probably have the bleeding thing memorized.”

Her siblings had started laughing while Sansa had quietly wept at their playful bickering. She’d missed so much. She’d missed them. She ached at all the time they’d been denied.

Bran’s voice had already changed. He was nearly sixteen. Did he have a girl he liked? Maybe not. Who could he meet in his uncle’s attic anyway?

Arya had been blunt for the most part but there’d been warmth in her tone, too. Sansa clung to that. They were sisters and they could mend the old hurts and move forward. They’d be a family once more.

“I’m very happy. What did you think of Arya?”

Jon’s face was inscrutable. “I only spoke to her for a minute or so but she sounded nice.”

Sansa had been more than a little surprised when her sister had abruptly asked to talk to Jon. “Put your fellow on the line,” Nan had said. She wondered where the real Nan was. Had she passed away? She should’ve asked.

“Brynden said she’d spent time in Braavos after she fled Kings Landing.” There was something odd about the way he said that. Sansa wasn’t sure why though. Arya had escaped at least and Braavos was as good a place as any to disappear, she supposed.

“He told me that, too.” He’d admitted he wasn’t really sure what all Arya had done during the years she’d been missing. I’ll find out though. We won’t keep secrets from each other once we’re together again. “I look forward to see them face to face.”

Jon grunted an agreement, apparently mulling things over so she hugged herself and imagined being reunited with them all. All the code talk of Roslin’s pies made her want to bake a lemon one and share it with them. They’d sit together in the attic, eating and talking until their bellies were full and their voices gave out.

Tomorrow, they’d turn back south. Sansa would go to Riverrun with Jon and Brynden would catch up with them once he saw Myranda back home.

And we’ll find a way to clear our names and go home again someday.

The official news sources said that the capital was secure and there were only minor skirmishes still being fought in the outlying areas. Less official sources said Kings Landing was under siege and Queen Cersei was tucked away in the Red Keep trying to outlast Stannis’s assault.

Sansa wondered what life was like for the people who lived and worked in the city at such a time. There were no catapults or archers, no boiling oil or fireships like in the history books. No cavalry waiting to storm the gates. No men-at-arms waiting to sack the city and unleash their bloodlust on the unwitting populace.

It’d be politicians posturing and the media used to disseminate information both true and false. There’d be tanks and other military vehicle parked outside the city walls. There’d be smart bombs and heat-seeking missiles aimed at tactical targets. Both sides would have those things. Either force might miscalculate, causing scores or even hundreds or thousands of civilian casualties with the push of a button as Jon pointed out.
A guerilla war between the North and South had been going on for years but now the war between contenders for the throne was heating up. Sansa was glad not to be in Kings Landing and hoped the fighting might end soon. Petyr had been right about one thing. The people of Westeros would want peace.

“If Stannis wins, Edmure will go to him,” her great uncle had said. “He’ll speak for all of you and see if the man’s reputation for justice is well earned like we hope.”

“He’ll have plenty of matters to concern him besides us.”

“Yes, but he will still lend an ear. We’re not the political power we once were but the Tullys of Riverrun can’t be completely dismissed either, no more than the children of Lord Stark. Stannis knows this. He’ll need allies, too.”

Sansa had been reminded of Petyr’s scheme to marry her to Aegon Targaryen. At least, Stannis was already married and had only a daughter younger than herself. Perhaps they could get him to listen.

*Only if he wins though. If Cersei wins, we’re right where we have been unless the Targaryens decide to make a move at last.*

Knowing Cersei as she did, Sansa knew she’d never surrender whether Stannis was outside her city or right outside her boudoir. Cersei would fight until the end. She’d win or she’d die.

She didn’t like thinking too much about Cersei. Today had been a good day. She’d found her great uncle. Her siblings were alive and she was going to see them. The man she loved was beside her. She wanted to lay her worries to rest for tonight.

“Jon?”

“Hmm?” he murmured sleepily.

She reached out, deliberately sliding her hand along his bare chest and downward. He grew hard in her hand within seconds as they kissed. She was panting when he rolled on top of her.

Brynden grumbled as he rolled over trying to find a more comfortable position. Fold out couches were shit. *Better than the streets. Better than under a bush,* he reminded himself.

One more night and they’d make their way south. The children’s voices when he’d told them he’d caught up with that actress he liked…his cheeks hurt from smiling so much. And Sansa’s tears of joy had been their own sort of reward. She looked so much like his Little Cat at that age. He would not call her more beautiful than her mother because he couldn’t favor one over the other but Sansa was undeniably a very beautiful young woman. Cat would be so proud of her brave girl, too.

He was satisfied with himself for tonight at least. He’d found the last of Cat’s children and he would see her to safety, bring them back together after so long apart.

But there was still much danger ahead of them. Brynden looked forward to the day when he could
lay down in comfort, shut both his eyes and not always be listening for an unexpected creak in the floorboards.  *Speaking of creaks*…

The walls were shit here as well but the creaking of bedsprings and quiet gasps from the other room had stopped at last. *Thank the gods.* They were young and in love. He just wished they’d be young and in love in silence.

At least, Jon Snow appeared worthy of her. Brynden had had his reservations. Sansa had said so much in his favor on the ride back that, like the taciturn old curmudgeon that he was, he’d been determined to dislike him for at least an hour or two. That had faded though. The young man loved her and had her safety and best interests at heart. That was what mattered.

*What would you think, Little Cat? Your daughter has a lover, a man who she calls her husband. There’s days I still struggle to remember you were a wife and mother of five. You should still be my little niece waiting for me to bring you candies and gifts from the places I’d visit but you were wed and a mother and you’ve been gone two years now.*

He wondered what Ned would think. He’d been happy for Cat to have him, a good man, a loving husband and father, protective of his family the way a man should be in Brynden’s opinion. *I found them for you, too. I failed that other time but I found this part of your family at least.*

Didn’t that earn him a night’s sleep with no worries or regrets for once?

“In this game, we’re quiet,” he’d warned her.

He’d left her on the bed with his belt binding her hands. She’d thought they were to engage in a little bondage. That might’ve been fun but he had someone he needed to meet if he wanted to get back to Westeros.

He hadn’t planned on killing her. He’d not even planned on playing any real games with her. He’d just wanted her money.

*“Sorry, love. I’m sure you’ve endured all manner of cocks and cunts to earn this much but I’m afraid I’m shockingly low on funds at present,”* he’d joked.

She hadn’t laughed. She’d opened her mouth and screamed.

He could’ve just run but the bitch had deserved it, hadn’t she? He’d told her to be quiet.

He’d slit her throat and took every last one of her strange square Braavosi coins before he’d heard the neighbor’s knocking and the sirens approaching. He’d had to use the window and fire escape to get away.

*Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock…*

He ran down the street, slipping on a patch of ice. Freezing rain last night and freezing fog following it. He hated this fucking city.
The Titan roared out to announce dawn. How did these Braavosi stand listening to that giant’s roar every day? It drove him mad.

At Ragman’s Harbor, he’d find the kindly old man with the hooded coat. He was one of the few who would speak the Common Tongue with him here. That was good. Ramsay sucked at talking foreign.

He’d said his father had sent him. He was leery but he’d been living on the streets for days now since the money had run out. What alternative was there?

He was waiting right where he said he’d be. Ramsay sighed with relief. He’d been afraid he wouldn’t make it in time to catch the freighter.

The Mockingbird would be leaving port very soon and Ramsay would make up part of its cargo. Home to his father whose promised dragons had never arrived thanks to Petyr Baelish’s interference with the Iron Bank. He’d pay for that. Home to Westeros where he’d find that man’s daughter, pretty Alayne, and also that bastard who’d blown Ramsay’s plans to shit when he’d nearly had her.

The clock struck the hour from the nearby plaza and pigeons flapped and fluttered. Ramsay took a seat across from the old man, putting the sack of money on the table.

“You have it then, my friend?”

“Every bit of it.”

The old man lifted the sack and smiled. “Very well.”

“Don’t you want to count it?”

“No need. Your cabin awaits.”

Ramsay huffed a laugh. It would be no cabin. That was alright. He’d endured worse in his life and he could manage a stuffy and cramped cargo hold to make his way west, back to his preferred playing fields.

The pair of them walked together towards the ship. It was bustling with activity, preparing to slip its moorings. Ramsay felt a nervous quiver of anxiety at the thought of being left behind. The fog was burning off but only the Mockingbird seemed to be awake this morning. He would be safely aboard soon.

“I almost feel bad taking this from you,” the older man said, indicating the sack of coins.

“You should. It was a small fortune.” But then again, I don’t feel a bit bad for stealing it in the first place.

“It’s almost as if I’m making you pay for something which has already been paid for.” Ramsay smiled politely not quite sure what the man meant. He spoke the Common Tongue but he was not Westerosi. Things might be lost in translation. “The money will help us help others though.”

Ramsay nodded and was ready to be shot of the old man’s company. He hoped to sleep the hours away aboard ship, no matter the discomfort. It’d been a days since he’d been able to rest. Hunted men are not allowed the luxury of rest. Ramsay infinitely preferred being the hunter to the hunted. And I will be the hunter again.
“Well, I suppose I should go aboard. I’ll bid you farewell.”

“Farewell to you, Ramsay Snow.” A crew member came up to them, likely to guide him where to go aboard. The old man stepped closer and smiled. “I wish you a good voyage…to hell.”

Ramsay barely felt the bite of the steel across his throat before he was being shoved off the dock, into the dark water below.

Sansa awoke and stretched. The light was filtering in from behind the curtains. Jon was snoring beside her. She lifted one of his curls off his face and received a whimper in response. They’d stayed up late the last two nights. She smiled and decided to let him sleep.

The shower was running and she left the bedroom after putting on her clothes to see who was up. Naturally, it was Brynden, the fold out already put away. Myranda would sleep until noon if they let her.

Sansa opened the small fridge and found bottled waters. She checked the cabinets and there was a bag of powdered donuts. Jon would be happy. *He’ll want coffee, too.* She wanted tea and maybe a muffin or pastry. There was the little café next door. They’d ordered take away from it last night but Sansa had been chatting with Myranda again when Jon had gone to fetch it.

Deciding to surprise them, Sansa took some money from Jon’s wallet lying on the counter, wrote a note and quietly slipped out to make a dash for breakfast.

It was cold and crisp out but the snow had melted some. She took care walking along the sidewalk not to slip.

The diner was bustling with activity. She smiled to herself to hear people chatting over their newspapers, the radio playing a favorite song, dishes clattering together and the waitress and short-order cook gossiping. She was in the middle of everyday life. She’d been enjoying the freedom of being out in public more and more after being tucked away for so much of the past two years in the Vale but this was the first time she was truly venturing somewhere without Jon beyond the hotel laundromat that day she’d found Ygritte’s picture. She felt quite brave.

But a special bulletin came on, interrupting the morning talk show as she was receiving her order and she gasped when she saw Cersei’s face. Next, there was a picture of Stannis Baratheon on screen. His eyes reminded her of King Robert’s but they were sharper, harder somehow. The television was muted. She couldn’t hear the report but she was starting to feel short of breath. She needed to get back. Jon would worry. She shouldn’t have left like that all for a rumbly tummy. He might be angry at her for leaving on her own. She’d bet her great uncle would be angry, too.

She walked down the sidewalk and hummed to herself to soothe the panicked feelings from a few minutes ago. She was almost back. No harm done. She carried the bag of bagels and pastries in one hand and the tray of coffees and tea in the other. They’d be pleased. More pleased than cross, she hoped.
She turned the corner to climb the stairwell up to the second floor where their suite was. She ran right into Lothor Brune.

“Alayne,” he gasped.

He seemed as surprised to run into her as she was to run into him but his presence couldn’t possibly be a coincidence.

He was talking but she only heard the name, the name of the girl she was not. He reached for her as she stumbled backwards. Sound became muted just like the television in the diner. She could not breathe. The world was getting dimmer. The coffee and tea would spill everywhere. Her surprise was ruined. Everything was. He was going to try and make her Alayne again.
"Valar Morghulis."

The words whispered through the telephone line and the room turned icy cold. The code. It was time.

Ygritte was still asleep. He debated about gathering his possessions in his ruck sack. He decided against it, only slipping his knife in his back pocket, the one Qhorin had given him with its axe insignia. He’d never asked what the axe signified.

When he turned back to check on her, she was awake and watching him. They had never stopped watching him.

“Who called?”

“A wrong number.” The lies came easier than they had at first. He still hated them. He put on his boots and was grateful she could not hear his heart pounding.

She pulled back the covers, exposing her breasts. “Where you going?”

He drew a ragged breath but his voice was steady when he replied. “To get you breakfast.”

“You sure you want to go out this early?” She licked her lips and cupped a breast.

Yes. Maybe. I don’t know. “You’ll need your energy later.”

She laughed, that full throaty laugh of hers. She trusted him. That was good. He also felt like shit.

“I want glazed. Not those powdered ones you like.”

“Glazed. Got it.” Guilt ate at him but he crossed the room and managed a smile of his own when he dropped a kiss on her bare shoulder.

She smirked and rolled over. “Bring coffee.”

“I will.”

He wouldn’t. He’d left her flat and never returned. The next time he saw her she’d be dying in his arms.

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Jon bolted upright and shuddered with relief when he realized it had only been a dream.

He reached for Sansa, seeking her comfort to clear the ghosts of the past from his mind. His heart
rate immediately resumed its frantic pace when his hand met empty sheets.

“Sansa?!”

He cursed himself. He had to remember to call her Alayne in front of Myranda.

He leapt out of bed and threw on the sweatpants and t-shirt he’d been wearing before they’d laid down. He exited the bedroom. He met Brynden coming out of the shared bathroom. The sitting area was empty.

“Where is she?”

A shrug and a scowl. “She was sleeping with you.”

Jon banged on the other bedroom door. Her startled yelp didn’t make him very confident of finding Sansa on the other side. He went back to their bedroom, tugged on his boots and grabbed his Glock. Myranda was standing in her doorway wearing a pink baby doll and looking half a sleep.

Brynden was holding up a note. A flare of temper shot through him but it was muted by tenderness. She was doing something sweet. She shouldn’t have to be afraid to go fetch breakfast for them. Unfortunately, she should also be afraid.

He tried telling himself everything was fine. She’d left a note. She’d be right back. But, the dream was still haunting him. He’d left and never returned. That had been his choice. Sansa might not have the same choice but the outcome could wind up the same.

Brynden was getting angry but Jon was already heading out the door. The old man shut up to put on shoes and follow him.

“Alayne! Can you hear me?! Shit.”

She blinked and stared up at the face hovering over her. The familiar squashed nose and square jaw. Not a handsome face but an honest one. Was she dreaming? Had everything else been a dream?

His mouth had never stopped moving but the sound had returned. “I just needed to know you’re alright. I just wanted…I told him I’d find you but…I won’t hurt you, girl. He wants you back but I saw you in White Harbor and I thought…if you’re happy…”

There was something warm and wet soaking through her jeans. The coffee or the tea.

She gasped and started scooting backwards across the landing of the hotel’s exterior stairwell away from him. He’d take her back to Petyr.

He looked sad and held out his empty hands. “I won’t hurt you, Alayne.”

“You’re fucking right about that,” a voice laced with cold fury said from above them both. Jon with his gun aimed right at Lothor’s chest.
“Wait!” she shrieked, not even sure why she was doing so. Her great uncle appeared behind him, a gun of his own in hand. Lothor would be armed but if he so much as blinked he’d be dead. She scrambled to her feet. “You can’t shoot him. It would draw attention.”

Jon’s lip curled into a snarl at her words. “Gun…nice and slow,” he barked at Lothor.

Lothor removed a pistol from the waistband of his pants and carefully placed it on the ground. Brynden moved swiftly to retrieve it, tucking it into his pants before patting Lothor down. “He’s clear.”

“Get on your knees, hands behind your head,” Jon instructed next before turning to her. “Are you hurt?”

“I fell but I’m alright.” She didn’t want to admit to the panic attack in front of the others.

She didn’t like seeing Lothor in this position either. It reminded her too much of something she’d rather forget.

“I, Lord Eddard Stark, do hereby confess…”

She grasped Jon’s left arm and he pulled her to him, his dark eyes nearly wild from fear or anger or some mix of those emotions. The gun was still aimed at Lothor.

“I don’t think he would’ve hurt me.”

“Maybe so…maybe not.”

She hung her head. Even if Lothor wouldn’t hurt her, he’d probably have hurt Jon given the chance. How could she defend him? Why was she doing that?

“Let’s take him inside for a chat,” Brynden said. “You here alone?”

Lothor nodded.

“What makes you think we can trust his word on that?” Jon asked her uncle sourly.

“Because I know his type.” Brynden stalked closer, looking Lothor in the eye. “Men like us, we work alone. Always alone, right?” Another nod. “You come along quiet and we’ll have a little chat. But one word from you and I don’t care about the noise, understood?”

Lothor rose to his feet as Brynden directed him towards their room. He kept his gun low. People might be stirring soon.

Sansa was shaking all over but stooped to pick up the bag of bagels and pastries she’d dropped. She felt Jon’s warm hand on her hip. She felt foolish and worried he’d be angry or disappointed by her actions.

“Jon, I’m…”

“Don’t leave like that again. Don’t leave without me knowing. Not until we’re safe.” She’d expected anger or disappointment. She saw neither. He was shaking worse than she was.

“I won’t. I promise.”

He kissed her temple, holding her close for a few precious moments. Then, they followed the other two men back to their suite.
“Valar Dohaeris, Your Grace,” Mr. Mopatis said as they all bowed.

His father bowed in return to the delegation from Essos. He was clearly pleased by the outcome of the negotiations. Aegon sat back and watched them all warily, his father most of all.

Hightower was leaning against the wall watching as well. He had returned from his meeting with Petyr Baelish the day before yesterday. Aegon felt like scowling at the man but kept his expression neutral. Being drugged without his knowledge and used to gain information was not something he would readily forget or forgive.

He thought of his Martell uncles and how they would react if they knew. Doran would plot and then Oberyn would strike. Aegon was only half Martell. But it’s the half that matters.

His father had said it was time for him to start acting like a crown prince. Thus, he found himself at this meeting.

“I’ve neglected your education for too long. Be my shadow, learn from me. Things may be changing for the better. When your time comes, I want you to know how to rule.”

All his life, Aegon had known what would be expected of him some day. Perhaps that was why he’d chosen to enjoy his idle lifestyle as long as possible. Today, he could not help but think he’d been idle too long but for reasons that were likely different than his father’s.

The Iron Throne, his father seemed to believe it was within his grasp even when Cersei Lannister sat upon it and Stannis Baratheon was currently laying siege to the capital to take it from her. He had to admit he did not understand his father’s certainty that they would ever rule anything more than the Water Gardens of Dorne again. And even those belong to my mother’s family.

What was that old saying about the Targaryens? Oh, yes…half of them went mad. His father wasn’t mad though, just power hungry and arrogantly convinced the throne was his birthright.

Once the visitors departed, his father summoned them to sit with him. The knight coughed and looked pointedly at him. In his eyes, Aegon had betrayed his father’s trust by keeping things from him.

Maybe I did. Can’t say I wouldn’t do it again.

“You can speak in front of my son, Ser Gerold. He is my heir after all. What did you learn from Baelish?”

“Very little. He suspects Lady Sansa may have fled to Braavos with the bodyguard.”

“And what did you learn about him?”

Hightower raised his eyebrows and shot another pointed glance Aegon’s way. His father nodded. “Jon Snow was in the Nights Watch prior to working for Baelish. He was discharged for medical reasons after the mutiny that made headlines about a year ago.” He pulled out a photograph. It was
Jon in a Nights Watch uniform, beardless and younger, likely when he joined up.

His father pulled his reading glasses out of his pocket and studied it. “The resemblance is striking.”

“The age fits and I’ll grant his looks are similar to hers but what made you think…”

“She’d argued for that name after I told her my decision…before she took off the final time. And once we knew she’d returned to the North, I should’ve figured Snow instead of Sand.”

“Jon is a common name.”

“And Aemon is not.”

“Dark hair and grey eyes, a common bastard name. It could be a coincidence.”

“It could be but I think not.”

“Excuse me but what in seven hells are you both talking about?” Aegon asked.

Thirty minutes later, Aegon was dismissed from his father’s office. He hoped he’d managed to play the role of the shocked but dutiful son well enough. The day Hightower had drugged him had been a reminder that his father was not afraid to play dirty. And today, he’d learned he had a half-brother. The Northern girl’s bastard was not a myth after all. He dreaded what else he might learn.

But if Jon Snow was his half-brother, he’d saved his life that night and only asked that he forget he’d seen either of them. Aegon had not forgotten. His father thought he’d let him down by keeping the truth from him as long as he had. He’d let Jon down by telling it. Could he really be his half-brother? And if he was, Aegon wondered if Jon would consider his mother’s half the half that mattered the way he did.

He probably shouldn’t choose a possible half-brother he’d known for a handful of minutes and Sansa Stark over his father. Choosing one might make him a king someday. Choosing the other could mean his head. Decisions, decisions. Doran would consider his options carefully. Oberyn would do whatever he pleased. And what will I do?

For now, he’d play the prince in training and obedient son, eagerly seeking his lost princess. He’d also call his uncles.

“What did you do to him?” Jon growled, his face right in Lothor’s as he held him by the collar.

“Nothing. I didn’t touch the old man. For all I know he’s still standing there watching you two drive away. I followed you.”

“Who did you call about him?”

“No one. The boss is the only one I talk to. I didn’t tell him nothing yet. Just said I’d come up empty in White Harbor and was going to Winterfell next like he told me.”

“You told him this, Lothor?” Sansa asked. Lothor was no fool and he could be cunning she
supposed but lying to Petyr took practice. She doubted he’d ever lied to him. Then again, Petyr would never expect him to.

“I waited to call when I figured he’d already be asleep and left a message. He called me back but I let it go to voice mail.”

“You can’t ignore him. He’ll know something’s not right.”

“Dead men tell no tales,” Uncle Brynden said ominously.

“I can tell him we ran into each other unawares and you struck first. Give me a lump on the head if you like. He’ll buy it. He knows you’re skilled. That’s why he hired you to protect her.”

“I’ll give you a lump alright.”

The steady hum of the highway had lulled her to sleep earlier. She stretched and glanced over at Jon. He was scowling at the road ahead.

“What time is it?”

“Late.”

“Are we going to stop for the night?”

“No.”

One word responses. He was still angry about the decision then. She didn’t think Jon had necessarily wanted to kill Lothor but he’d not been happy about letting him go.

“It complicates things,” he murmured as if he’d read her mind.

“I know.”

“But it was the right thing to do based on the information we had.”

“It was the right thing to do, period.”

The decision to let Lothor go had been simple in her opinion. They could either let him go or kill him. Killing Lothor wouldn’t have gained them anything except another dead body to hide. They didn’t have a van handy to push into a convenient river either. And they were trying to clear her name, not forever sully his.

“I just want to know that you’re happy, Alayne. I want to know this is what you want. That’s all.”

She’d believed him. Jon had not.

“He makes me happy. I love him and he loves me. Please, don’t tell him you found us.”

Lothor had accepted her response and promised not to tell. She’d told him she hoped she could count on him and grasped his hand. He’d squeezed hers in return. She wanted to trust him. She knew Jon never would.

He’d also been shocked to learn of Osney’s attack on Myranda. Her friend’s teary recount of her near strangulation and rescue by Mr. Blackfish would have him questioning his loyalties further.
That was good. Let him question. Petyr didn’t deserve a loyal man like Lothor anyway.

She did worry for Davos though. Lothor had found him through the Home’s records. If he could find Davos, who else might? But he’d not spoken to Davos and he’d said he would not return there. And who besides Petyr would be looking into Jon’s past?

Lothor did not know her great uncle’s real name. Myranda only knew him as Mr. Blackfish and no one would correct her. Much as she loved her friend, she knew better than to share too much at this point. Neither Lothor nor Myranda knew where they were going next. If Lothor had a change of heart and told Petyr later, what good would it do him? It’d only tell Petyr he’d concealed something from him which he was wise enough to know would do him little good. It’d cost him Petyr’s trust. It might also cost him his life.

It was also good to know more about what was going on with Petyr. The news reports told little of his condition and obviously nothing of who he was in contact with but Lothor knew plenty. He’d told them of Petyr’s condition and everything else he was privy to. Knowledge was a form of power, Petyr had always told her. She liked having some of that power.

So, Lothor was going on to Winterfell in his ‘attempt’ to find Alayne and would report in as directed. Uncle Brynden was taking Myranda home and would reunite with them in the Riverlands before they went to Edmure’s. And all she and Jon had to do was make it safely back across the Neck. She thought back on the incident at the crossing they’d passed going North. She prayed that would not be them this time.

A sign loomed ahead and she blinked. She didn’t realize they’d made it this far. A sweet interlude before tomorrow’s stresses would be welcome. A few hours of loving and forgetting all the rest was what they needed after today’s. “Jon, please…”

He’d seen it, too. A smile flickered and she knew he’d relent. “You must like the color peach,” he teased, the most light-hearted words she’d heard from him all day.

“And the mirror on the ceiling.”

“Wonder if your friendly clerk is reading another romance?”

Lemore. She’d been so kind. “I’ll ask her what she’s reading if she is.”

Chapter End Notes

This was a short, transitional chapter to set up heading into the final story arc but I hoped you enjoyed it. I should be posting the next chapter before long and thank you so much for continuing to follow this story :)
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Petyr is tired of leaving messages. The siege of Kings Landing ends while Sansa and Jon are heading South again. Misfortunes lead Hightower to stop for the night.

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning...a murder occurs off page.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“About time you answered.”

“Sorry, boss. Reception’s been sketchy up here,”

Petyr supposed that wasn’t surprising. The North was vast and wild with the cities few and far between. Probably short on cell towers, too. “No sign in Winterfell then?”

“No, boss. I got zilch up here except frostbite.”

Petyr rubbed a hand over his tired eyes. It had been a long shot. “Alright, then. Time to pool our resources, I believe.”

“With who, boss?”

“Friends from Dorne.”

A few beats of silence. Petyr started to wonder if they’d lost connection until Lothor spoke again. “Got it. I’ll head back at once.”

“No, I don’t want you coming back yet. You’re heading further north.”

“Castle Black?”

“Yes.”

More silence. Did the man need a new phone? Was he nodding off? “Sure thing, boss.”

“You may wind up with company up there.”

“Company?”

“Yes.” He’d explain that in a minute. Lothor preferred working alone but two heads are better than one sometimes. He could send Lothor to the Riverlands next but Rhaegar wanted to know whatever he could of Jon Snow and that made Petyr want to know more as well. “You’re going to
go to Castle Black and find out more about Jon Snow.”

“What do you want me to find out?”

“Everything. I want to know who he bunked with as a recruit, who he wrote letters to, who he
didn’t get along with. I want to know more about his time with the Free Folk and his reported lover
with them. I want to know who he admired in the Watch and who admired him. I want to know
who his friends were, if they’re still there and if not, where they are now.”

“Yes, boss.”

Lothor’s tone was flat. Was he bored? Did he still believe her dead and this a fool’s errand?
“Lothor…are you…” Still my man? After Roose’s betrayal and Osney’s failure, he had to wonder.

“Sorry, boss. I’m just beat. A night’s sleep will cure me and I’ll head up there first thing. I’ll check
in tomorrow night.”

“Very well.”

Petyr hung up and made another call. The person who answered wasn’t Hightower. He wondered
what that man was up to. He left a message. He was getting awfully sick of leaving messages.

When he finished that call, he decided to turn on the television. There’d been not a single blurb
about Ramsay Snow. No one would really care all that much about a thug like him but Petyr would
prefer Roose be left in that limbo of wondering rather than certainty for the time being. Petyr owed
him some payback as well but it’d been Ramsay who’d left him crippled.

And a more important game was unfolding at the moment.

The reports coming over the news made the outcome seem undecided but Petyr’s sources had other
reports and those disturbed him. This could potentially throw all his schemes out the window. He
had no standing with him. He’d never made an effort and he doubted any effort of his would’ve
been successful anyway. Robert’s brother had disliked him at first glance. The feeling was mutual.
The problem was, he was winning. He wasn’t supposed to win.

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The general passed him a pair of field glasses and pointed. “They’re surrendering. It’s done, Your
Grace.”

You would not be calling me ‘Your Grace’ if it wasn’t.

He gazed through the field glasses for a spell and then handed them back. Ten days. Stannis
might’ve smiled if he were much given to smiling. As it was, he sighed. The real work was only
just beginning. Ten days of besieging the capital he meant to rule. There’d be clean-up and
rebuilding to do. There’d be burials as well.

“Robert’s widow?” He didn’t like speaking her name.

“Dead, Your Grace. The Red Keep took a direct hit during the raid last night and she died within.”
“Her brothers?”

“Died with her.”

So much the better. “Well, now I know why they’re surrendering.”

If Cersei had still been breathing, they’d still have been fighting. Not because the people loved her but because she would rather they all die first before suffering the humiliation of a defeat.

The people did not love him either nor would they be eager to after the siege but he didn’t need their love. He would be a just king for them though. It was his duty.

“Estermont…Renly, walk with me,” he said, jerking his chin.

Renly startled when he realized he had been addressed amongst the crowd. His younger brother had sought to oppose him for a time but he had come around in the end. Stannis could not say he trusted him any further than he could throw him but he would be next in line after Shireen for the time being. A good king must always prepare for the day he would need a successor.

“Once their army has surrendered, secure the police force, press and financial institutions for me first, Estermont.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“We will enter the city this evening. No pomp or cheering. The city is in mourning. The bells shall ring for an hour tomorrow morning to honor the dead.”

“A generous gesture, Your Grace.”

“It’s not a gesture. It’s protocol. If I catch wind of any of our men looting or raping, I’ll see them shot.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Tomorrow, I’ll formally take the throne.”

“Very well. What of your niece and nephew?”

“They are not my blood but, assuming they are alive, Tommen and Myrcella will be our honored guests.”

“Prisoners, you mean,” Renly snorted.

“Honored guests. However, even as bastards, they will be treated far more gently than their brother treated Sansa Stark.”

“Hopefully, they won’t try and harm your daughter like she did Joffrey.”

Stannis scowled at his brother. “Hopefully, there will be no uprisings in response to our victory.” He’d already need to bring the North and Dorne to heel if they were going to end the fighting. The last thing he needed was trouble in the Westerlands.

“Perhaps they will be great friends with their new princess,” his brother suggested. Stannis grimaced. He didn’t want his daughter spending too much time with Cersei’s incestuous spawn. “There are those who don’t believe the stories, brother. Some will think Tommen should be crowned. Even those who despised his mother, might think him a better option than…”
“And some would rather see Rhaegar Targaryen on the throne,” he finished sourly. “Shireen can befriend them if she pleases.” She was only sixteen but her father had no advice to give her when it came to befriending motherless children who had been their enemies an hour ago.

A military vehicle approached, no doubt with an officer prepared to make his formal surrender. It was an armored vehicle though. It would be an egregious act to feign a surrender but one he wouldn’t put past Cersei.

“Go and meet whoever that is and accept their surrender on my behalf. You will do so more gracefully than I could manage.” Renly smiled at the imagined honor. He never quite saw the full picture. Before his brother went very far though, Stannis spoke again. “I should hope I will not hear any more tales of you communicating with Highgarden without my permission.”

He let the threat hang between them. No more plotting with Tyrells. They could serve him loyally or they could die.

Renly was no longer smiling but he nodded and turned to carry out his duty. Loyalty and duty was all Stannis would ask of his people. He’d give them duty and justice in return.

Five days they’d been on the road since their second night in the honeymoon cottage at the Causeway Inn. Lemore had been there again behind the counter. This time, Sansa had asked about her book. It was a different one than the one she’d been reading weeks ago but the couple on the cover had still reminded her of herself and Jon, a red haired woman and a man with dark, curly hair.

They’d stopped at a used bookstore and she’d found herself a copy just yesterday. Jon had talked her into reading some of the juicy parts out loud last night. She’d been blushing but did as he’d asked, watching his eyes grow dark as she read. He’d reminded her of a hungry wolf. Before long, he’d pounced, making her forget all about her book.

Her sketching pencils hadn’t been touched since their time with Davos. She hoped things would change at her uncle’s house. She missed painting but sketching would do for now.

She wasn’t fooling herself with these distractions. She knew they were in as much danger as ever. The moments of freedom she’d experienced in White Harbor and then Cerwyn had passed. Their near miss with Lothor had left its mark. If he’d not had a change of heart when it came to her, he could’ve easily taken her that morning in her panicked state. She might’ve been gone and Jon wouldn’t even know where to look. Jon had held her so tightly that night at the Causeway Inn. The oversized bed and mirror on the ceiling hadn’t erased his terror completely.

The next morning, they’d faced the anxiety of the crossing again but it’d gone even quicker than the first time. She couldn’t help but wonder if they were being lulled into a false sense of security again. It was hard to be vigilant all the time.

The border guard had been more chatty than the preoccupied one they’d dealt with the previous time but he’d waved Jon and Lyanna Stone through after ascertaining that promised jobs in Barrowtown hadn’t panned out and they’d be returning to Saltpans from which they’d come.
But we’re not. We’re going to Riverrun and I’m going to see my sister and brothers soon.

The bite of pancake started sliding off the fork where it had been hanging, still halfway to her mouth for the past two minutes.

“Let’s go back to the room.” Jon was tugging at her hand.

She gently pulled away. “No. We’re still eating.” She put the bite in her mouth to prove the point. The tough pancake had turned cold and the maple syrup tasted cloyingly sweet to her now.

The news reports would be airing non-stop, every channel must be broadcasting this and nothing else. Sansa wished they’d go back to airing the game show program that had been running when they’d come downstairs. As eager as she was for tomorrow, she’d wanted to enjoy their final hotel pancake breakfast together even if the pancakes weren’t very good.

Disappointment over the game show’s interruption and the sorry pancakes were as far as she could think. Her brain was still processing the rest of this development. Stannis Baratheon was king. Cersei Lannister was dead. Cersei was dead. Dead, dead, dead.

She suppressed a giggle that threatened to escape. Their fellow diners did not notice. They were all talking loudly or gasping or murmuring amongst themselves depending on their disposition. She tried to take another bite and choked on it. She coughed and hacked for several minutes until her face was splotchy and her eyes ran. No one paid her any mind but Jon.

“We’re done eating.” This time she did not resist the tug of his hand.

He led her back to their room at the Trident Motel where they’d spend the night. They’d be meeting up with Uncle Brynden again later today to make the final trek to Riverrun together.

Jon tenderly cupped her face as soon as the door to their room was closed. “Darling, are you alright?”

“It just went down the wrong way.”

“Sansa, I meant…”

“It’s almost check out time.” They’d slept late. They’d loved each other late into the night and slept late. There’d barely been any pancakes left when they’d come downstairs. Was that why they’d not been any good?

And Cersei had already been dead by then. When did she die precisely? Was it when Jon had been making love to her last night? Or early this morning as they’d been curled together in sweet slumber, unknowing and unconcerned?

How had she died exactly? Blown to pieces? Shot? Buried under rubble? Sansa didn’t really care to know. She hoped it was as horrible as Joffrey’s death. She felt sick for thinking such a thing. She died believing I killed her son. Sansa couldn’t say she cared about that either.

“Sansa, please look at me and tell me how you’re feeling about this.”

She shuddered and let him pull her into his arms. “I feel…it’s not quite real to me yet. How can she be dead? She’s the shadow that’s hung over me all this time, the wicked queen from my childhood fairytales come to life. She’s dead and I don’t know what this means for me. Honestly, that’s all I want to know. What does this mean for me and my family, Jon?”
“Do you want to know what I think?”

“Yes, please.”

“I think it means we’re one step closer but there’s still many left to go.”

“Me, too.”

“Your uncle will go to Stannis and perhaps he’ll listen.”

“And if he doesn’t? Will he hunt for me, too?”

“I don’t think Stannis Baratheon is going to be overly concerned with finding Joffrey’s supposed killer but I cannot say for certain.”

Her chin dropped. There were so many good things she wanted in her life now. She wanted to be Jon’s wife for true. She wanted a life with her remaining family and to maybe go home again. She prayed for children someday and maybe Davos might come and live with them. But to achieve those things, she wanted her name cleared and her family free of being persecuted by Government. It felt like every time they took another step closer to that goal someone moved the goal two steps further way.

“Hey, we’re not going to think the worst this morning. She’s dead so she can’t hurt you. We’re going to see your family tomorrow. Whatever happens, we’re doing this together, right?”

“Right.” She smiled as he caressed her cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you. This place’s pancakes sucked. How about we take a shower and get out of here to find some decent ones?”

“I’d like that…maybe the shower part more than the pancakes.”

“Now, you’re talking,” he said, waggling his eyebrows and drawing forth a laugh.

“He nodded, still half in awe. It was very grand, far more grand than any place they’d ever lived, he’d swear. Jon still thought it must be a castle. There were castles for lords and knights and such, too.
“Is this where we’ll be living?” He could already picture exploring. There’d be suits of armor and secret passageways. He’d promise not to get into mischief but he could look around, couldn’t he? He glanced at Ghost who was dozing with his head on Jon’s thigh. He’d like the castle, too.

“No, Jon. We won’t be living there. We’ll be staying nearer the stables where I can be close to the horses.”

“Oh.”

“And Jon?”

“Yes, Mum?”

“No sneaking up to the house,” she warned though her eyes sparkled as if she’d like to join him in some sneaking.

“Yes, Mum.”

Sure enough, they drove past the enormous house and down to the stables which were tucked away out of sight, almost as if they were a dirty secret to be kept apart from the rest of the house. Just like he felt at times lately, like a dirty secret no one was supposed to know about. His mum never ever made him feel like that but he’d overheard her begging their last landlady not to speak of her son if anyone came around looking for her.

“Please, he’s all I have in this world.”

It was true they had very little. He wished they could go back to Flint’s Ranch.

He’d heard the word bastard enough by now. He was starting to understand. His mother hadn’t been married to his father. He didn’t even know his father’s name and his mother wouldn’t speak of him except to say they were better off without him.

This was the furthest South Jon had ever been and he wasn’t sure he liked it. The people were not friendly the way they’d been on Flint’s Ranch. The head of the stables was not friendly at all.

“Keep the boy and that dog out of the way.”

“Yes, sir. Neither Jon nor Ghost will cause any trouble.” She glanced at him imploringly and he nodded. He couldn’t let his mum down.

But the castle was too much of a temptation and he’d snuck up one day for a closer look. Two boys had been playing outside. They’d not been much older than him and they’d started kicking a ball with him. He’d been lonely for children his age with school not in session. But when they’d asked his name and realized he was the son of a stable hand, they’d called him a dirty bastard and chased him off. If Ghost had been there, he might’ve bitten them. Jon halfway wished he would’ve.

He confessed to his mother what he’d done but she forgave him. In fact, she’d held him close and whispered sweet, loving things as her shoulders shook. He’d made her cry which made him feel worse. At least, the head man hadn’t learned of it.

There was no private cabin for them like at Flint’s Ranch. The horse’s stalls were finer than the barracks where the hands lived all together. All the other stable hands were men and his mother hung up sheets with clothes pins on a line to give them a bit of privacy. But every night, when they’d return to the sleeping barracks from eating, the sheets would be puddled in the floor, almost as if someone had taken them down. The men laughed that Ghost had tugged them down but Ghost
was a good dog and did what Jon said...mostly.

They’d only stayed a fortnight before his mother had said it wasn’t a good fit for them and they’d moved on. Jon got so tired of always moving on but he’d learned not to argue. He hadn’t liked that castle anyway.

“Someday, I’ll buy you a much grander house than that, Mum,” he told her as they were driving away. He had turned his head to watch the castle disappear from view.

He felt his mother’s hand drifting through his curls and he turned back around in his seat. “That’s very sweet of you, my love, but I don’t want a grand house.”

“Not at all?” he asked, dejected that she wouldn’t want the grand house he was planning to buy her.

“I’ve seen grand houses and been inside one or two. None of them mean so much to me as you.”

Jon wasn’t sure what she meant. He knew how much his mother loved him. He never doubted it. But just because she loved him didn’t mean she couldn’t live in a grand house someday, did it? He’d show her she could have both someday.

“Where will we go next?” he asked once the castle was completely out of sight.

“North again, sweet boy. North is where we belong.”

He’d find her a grand house in the North then. He preferred it there anyway.

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She’d been crying. He wished he hadn’t made her cry. He hadn’t wanted to cry either. “I think she was running from your father, Jon.”

“Maybe,” he said softly.

He’d barely considered it when he was younger but once Sansa had suggested it, it made sense, didn’t it? Part of him had thought his father must be dead but why would she constantly be running like that if not to escape someone? And if he was the reason they’d spent Jon’s childhood running and his mother had been forced to live that hard life to support them, Jon hated him more than he ever had, more than he had as an angry teen even.

He watched the afternoon sunshine sparkling on the waters of the nearby Trident and wiped away his tears. They’d gone to White Harbor next. His mother had been struck by a drunk driver on her way back home from her second job late one night six months later.

“Where was the castle? Do you remember?” Sansa asked, her fingers drifting through his hair, sending chills both bittersweet and tender through him.

“I’m not sure to be honest. We were there two weeks and I was just a kid but I remember us crossing the Trident.”

“And that made you think of it?”
“I…” His face grew warm and he thought he was that little boy again. “We’re going to your uncle’s castle in the South. It just reminded me of…”

“My uncle won’t make you stay down by the stables. I’m not even sure they have stables.” She was jesting but not making fun of his insecurities either. “You’re nervous.” It was not a question and he could not deny it.

“I am. This is your family and…”

“Jon, they’re going to love you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“They will. I believe it in my heart. And if they don’t right away, I’ll show them why they should.” She seemed so assured and it brought him comfort. “I love you. I want to marry you, Sansa Stark.”

She smiled so sweetly, sinking her fingers back into his hair as she nestled up closer. “I want to marry you, Jon Snow.”

“Snow.” He frowned and pulled away.

“No, don’t do that. I don’t care that you’re Jon Snow. And besides, if I can reclaim my name, I want to be Sansa Stark and…well, bastards who marry can take their spouse’s last name whether they’re a woman or a man.”

Her eyes were wide and worried as if she feared he’d tell her no or be angered. “You’d…you’d give me your name?”

“Of course, I would…if you’d like it.”

“Jon Stark,” he said, testing it. “I…Sansa, I…”

He could not speak the rest but she no longer looked worried. Her expression was tender and they kissed until they heard the tires of her uncle’s car on the gravel joining them where they’d been waiting for him. They were going to take her to her family. They could be my family, too.

“Do you believe in destiny, Ser Gerold?” Rhaegar asked, his voice low but not disguising the fervor of his tone through the telephone. “Do you believe that something that’s meant to be will always find a way to occur no matter what the powers that be attempt to do to prevent it?”

“Not especially, Your Grace.”

“You should. That’s what this is. A seemingly simple twist of fate that leads to a discovery like this…it’s meant to be.”

It didn’t really mean that much. He hadn’t found them. Still, Gerold could see why he was so
convinced.

He’d flown up to Castle Black and met Lothor Brune. Together, they’d turned up what they could regarding Jon Snow. He hadn’t cared much for Brune. He hadn’t trusted Baelish’s man and he’d not trusted him either. That part was alright. Trust had to be earned. It was a pity Rhaegar was willing to trust Aegon again so readily but he was his son.

As for his other son, Gerold still couldn’t believe Lyanna Knight had managed to allude them so well with a child in tow. She’d fallen for the prince down in Dorne with the stars in her eyes like the young girl she was. Those stars had disappeared rather quickly once she’d become better acquainted with him.

She’d tried to run while she was pregnant but they’d caught up with her. He’d thought once the boy was born, she’d accept things. A rich man’s mistress, the mother of his bastard. He’d offered her a lovely place down on the Mander. But from the moment she’d delivered, she’d been plotting to escape again. Rhaegar had been willing to let her go at first…until Aegon had fallen ill.

“A king needs an heir,” he’d told them coldly.

Rhaenys was his trueborn daughter and in Dorne, as eldest, she would’ve been the heir anyway. But in the rest of Westeros, crown princes were favored over crown princesses and bastards could be legitimized by royal decree, especially a king’s bastard.

His flight back from Castle Black had run into a blizzard and they’d been forced to land outside Cerwyn. Lothor was reporting back to Baelish before moving on to the next lead. Ser Gerold would prefer to beat him there. He’d rented a car but a flat on the causeway had brought travel to a halt for the night.

“Are you really a knight?” she’d asked with stars in her eyes.

“Yes, my dear,” he’d answered as he’d poured her a glass of wine.

"I am a knight but a soiled one, I’m afraid,” he told her body. You were far too old to be holding onto those stars, love.

He finished washing his hands before pulling his jacket back on. He quietly closed the motel door behind him. A lonely woman working alone at night. Anonymous sex and murder in a lower end motel. A mild titillation for the local police but not much else.

Fate or destiny? Whatever one called it, it worked in mysterious ways. If it wasn’t for the flat tire, he’d never even have stopped at such a place but clearly he was meant to stop at the Causeway Inn last night.

“I beg your pardon but do you know Lyanna?” she’d asked.

He’d been studying the photographs of Sansa Stark earlier, some of her with her red hair and Joffrey and one of her with darker hair as Alayne that Baelish had given him. That picture had been sitting on the stack of papers he’d carried into the motel office when he’d gone to ask about a room while his car was repaired.

They’d struck up a conversation and he’d learned about Jon and Lyanna Stone, two newlyweds who’d stayed in the inn’s honeymoon cottage twice now.

“The first time, I think the poor kids were nearly broke,” she’d told him after he’d walked to the nearby package store and selected a bottle of wine for them to split. “I let them have the cottage for
“the cost of a single.”

“That was generous of you, Lemore.”

“It was nothing,” she’d demurred.

He’d told her that he worked for the boy’s father and that the girl had been promised to another boy so they’d run away to be together.

“That’s…that’s just like in the book I’m reading,” she’d said with a dreamy sigh while holding up her smutty novel.

She’d been rather infatuated with them both or the idea of them. She’d shown him the picture on the cover and then the one she’d snapped of them on her phone without their knowledge and shared it with him.

Did he have to kill her? No. Did he want to kill her? No. But loose ends like Lemore could be trouble. Who else might she show that picture to or share the story with?

Jon and Lyanna. The coincidences kept stacking up. How long had he chased Lyanna Knight and her son Aemon? But he’d never been Aemon except on the birth certificate down in Dorne. She’d had that changed as soon as she’d fled North by someone. Probably telling some tale of an abusive ex to a sympathetic female clerk.

Well, female clerks tended to notice things, Ser Gerold decided. Poor Lemore had. Unfortunately, it’d cost her in the end.

“They’re traveling as man and wife, Your Grace. I would hazard a guess that they’re acting on that.” The picture actually proved it. He wondered how much sap Lemore had been covered in from the enormous sentinel tree as she’d watched them through the cottage window. Better than reading a novel, I guess.

“So?”

“Well, I’m not sure how Aegon will feel about marrying the girl if she’s…”

“Aegon will do as he’s bid. And if by chance, my other son as left her with child it does not truly matter. It will still be my seed.”

Gerold grimaced in distaste at Rhaegar’s words but reminded himself he’d sworn to serve his king, not to judge him. “I had to do a little clean up to be safe.”

“That’s fine, Hightower. Just make sure you covered your tracks.”

“I always do, Your Grace.”

Chapter End Notes

I was nervous writing Stannis’s POV especially so I hope it was alright but I really love writing this story and I appreciate those of you sticking with it so much!
Stark/Tully reunion next chapter :) I'll update Skirling and A Match next though.
Thanks for reading!
Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in updates for this but it's a long chapter at least. I'm hoping I'll be able to get a little more regular with them again soon.

Quick word about this chapter—this is centered around the reunion of Sansa and her siblings but I hope it's not dull. Also, as someone who hated Season 7's Winterhell plot with a passion, I wanted to give a warning of sorts. There'll be a little drama between the sisters but it will be resolved. I think the books will handle Arya and Sansa coming together again far better than the show but I think it'd be unrealistic to expect every thing to be peaches and cream right away, too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The actual castle of Riverrun didn’t really exist anymore beyond three crumbling walls from the original keep and the walled-in godwood. The manor home that had been built beside it two hundred years ago was palatial enough though and stood on the banks of the Tumblestone and Red Fork. It wasn’t quite as old or large as the estate at Winterfell but every bit as grand or grander-looking perhaps.

She hadn’t missed the way Jon’s eyes had widened when they drove up the winding drive. She gave his knee a squeeze, hoping that would suffice as a promise that they would come to love him as she did. It was all she could manage with her own personal flurry of nerves.

The walk from the car seemed dreamlike but her heart was lodged in her mouth as she listened to the dying echo of the doorbell. It dipped momentarily when a woman she’d never met greeted them.

“Hello…” The woman paused uncertainly in the face of their little trio after the friendly hello but she didn’t seem surprised to see them and her eyes darted towards Uncle Brynden beside her. Perhaps she was trying to decide what she was supposed to call her.

“Hello, I’m Sansa. You must be my Aunt Roslin,” she said warmly and received an equally warm smile in return.

Close in age to Jon with soft brown hair and eyes and delicate features, Roslin Frey had married her uncle shortly before her father had betrayed Robb, inviting him and their mother to a parlay that was in fact a death trap. Brynden had told her that Roslin was a good woman though who loved Edmure and they had two young children together.

“I hope you won’t hold the machinations of her father and brothers against her, is what I mean.”

“Why would I?” Sansa understood very well what it was to be an innocent bystander blamed for the misdeeds of others.
“Yes, I’m Roslin and pleased to be your auntie though we’re not so far apart in age.” She offered her hand and laughed quietly. “I’m sorry. It’s lovely to meet you. I wasn’t sure if it was alright to call you Sansa or...”

“I can be Sansa here, can’t I?” she asked her great uncle while shaking her new aunt’s hand.

“You’re always Sansa,” he shrugged. She liked hearing that, knowing it was exactly the sort of thing Jon would say. “But for safety’s sake, there’ll be times you’ll be Lyanna Stone when anyone else is about.”

The necessary deception had to continue but her spirits recovered when Roslin called over her shoulder, “Edmure, they’re here! I’ll call the others down from their studies.”

Ushering them into the foyer, Roslin went to the wall and pressed a button that had certainly not been there when the house was built. Sansa spun around, trying to familiarize herself with the place. She’d not visited since she was little girl. The large tapestry of the river with trout leaping from the water she recalled.

She heard footsteps rapidly approaching and felt another fluttery bout of nervousness. It was only one set of footsteps though. She’d not seen him in ages, not since she was quite a young girl. It was like looking at an old photograph of her grandfather, she thought, when he strode into the foyer. Tall but stocky with a beard that was a more fiery hue than the auburn on his head and those Tully blue eyes, she couldn’t help thinking of Grandpa Hoster…and Robb.

And apparently, she brought ghosts to mind for him.

“Gods, your hair is darker but...you favor her so much. It’s like going back in time.”

When she was younger, she’d taken great pride in being told how much she resembled her mother as a girl. Loved by many and admired for her nimble mind, Catelyn Tully Stark had also been known to be a beautiful woman. The beauty part had mattered more to Sansa as a child and she’d longed for others to admire her that way.

However, that had changed after Petyr had taken her to the Vale with him. Being no more than seventeen and having him touching her face with his minty breath upon her while murmuring of his long-ago love for her mother were memories she’d sooner forget. Her pleasure in taking after her mother had been thoroughly tarnished by it.

But as she was enveloped in a warm, familial embrace by her uncle, the unpleasantness from the Vale was forgotten. This man was family, long lost family, and she was being welcomed home in a sense.

When they stepped back from their embrace, she motioned towards Jon to introduce him. “Aunt Roslin, Uncle Edmure, this is Jon Snow. He’s my husband.”

That had rolled off the tongue with very little thought and she almost cringed. Their hosts’ eyes widened a touch though they both smiled civilly in Jon’s direction and Edmure extended his hand. She decided the slip wasn’t the worst thing though considering she’d rather make their relationship plain than Roslin thinking she needed to prepare separate bedrooms.

However, they weren’t the only ones to hear the introduction.

“Husband?! Seven hells!”

She gasped as she caught sight of the petite young woman who had spoken, having silently joined
them. Her voice was a mixture of amusement and mild vexation. She was already at the bottom of the stairs with two boys at her heels.

“Arya.” It came out as no more than a breath. She wasn’t sure she’d be able to breathe much longer.


Her uncle’s well-meaning chatter was lost on her as she stared at the three of them, trying to drink in every detail, measuring how much they’d grown and searching for ways they might remain the same.

Her feet carried her the required steps to where they had gathered without conscious thought and tears had already started to spill down her cheeks unheeded. She gazed at each of them in turn. Rickon, who was twelve and taller than Arya as he’d said, smiled the brightest. Bran, who was already taller than herself and favored both of their parents, his coloring like their mother’s but his face bringing her father to mind, was the first to reach for her.

And Arya, who was a Stark through and through in looks, appeared the most guarded as Sansa had told her heart to expect. Nevertheless, when their eyes had met for a handful of seconds, they both smiled and their hug lasted the longest.

Years of separation and more heartaches than she cared to count between the four of them had not changed what mattered most. They were her family and she had found them at long last.

They’d left Jon and the others below so the foursome might have a little time to discover each other again. Roslin had mentioned luncheon being served in an hour or so. Sansa oscillated between feeling famished and having no appetite at all.

“Behold, the wolf den!” Rickon announced proudly as their heads cleared the rectangular opening in the floor after he’d led her through the secret door concealed within a bedroom wall and up the narrow stairs to this section of the attic.

She pasted on an impressed smile but inwardly it hurt to think of them living up here.

Edmure and Roslin had explained with no small amount of embarrassment that it’d been deemed safer for them to not keep quarters below where it would be harder to conceal that more than a family of four lived in the house along with their three long-term, live-in servants in case of unexpected raids.

Their children were young, too young to be trusted with the secret of their cousins who dwelt in the attic like mice. Arya was Nan, a part-time servant as far as the little ones knew when they saw her. They rarely saw the boys but when they did, Edmure had told his children they were the groundskeeper’s boys.
“We wish there was another way but…”

“They come frequently enough to cause us concern and…”

“She knows. I told her,” Brynden had said gruffly. Sansa suspected he’d made the suggestion in the first place when he’d found her brothers and brought them here.

It had sounded somewhat whimsical, bringing childish fancies like living in a treehouse to mind when her great uncle had told her. The reality depressed her. The attic had been thoroughly cleaned and it was fairly spacious but was still clearly an attic.

Direwolf banners, House Stark’s sigil from eons ago, hung from the rafters while posters of rock bands and action heroes covered the crude walls. Where had they found the banners? Had they taken them from Winterfell when they ran? Had her brothers ever attended a rock concert? When was the last time they’d gone to the cinema to see an action movie even?

Three areas had been partially screened off to create some privacy for their sleeping areas and there was a card table with four chairs. Was the fourth chair meant for me? I don’t plan on living in an attic. My brothers and sister aren’t going to live in one for much longer either.

The long, narrow room had one window that overlooked the river, the only natural light. The other side was a clapboard wall that separated it from the rest of the attic. By the window, there were four desks like what Sansa recalled from her school days before she’d been tutored privately at home and later at court.

“Isn’t it cold?” She could nearly hear the howling wind whipping outside.

“Not really. We’ve got a space heater. It’s comfortable enough,” Bran said.

“It can grow sticky during summer though,” Rickon groaned.

“And you’re up here…all the time?” She hoped her tone didn’t convey her dismay at the thought.

Arya’s frown suggested that she’d failed.

Rickon didn’t seem to notice. “Oh, there’s no bath up here beyond a washstand so we use the one in the bedroom we passed through. We occasionally eat downstairs in the kitchen but mostly we like it here.” He was obviously pleased by their abode. She wondered if there was a sense of security to it for him. The little wolf missing the safety of our den.

“No one locks us up or anything,” Arya said a touch defensively. “We can come and go.”

“You can come and go. It’s not as easy for Rickon and I. And, we all must take precautions when visitors come unannounced,” Bran added cryptically.

She thought of her little roost, the attic studio where she’d painted back at Petyr’s manse. She’d liked it but she’d had a large, comfortable bedroom and private bathroom of her own. Still, she’d enjoyed her private space above where Petyr rarely troubled her.

“I had something similar where I lived with Petyr.”

It seemed odd to call him Petyr in front of her siblings, the intimacy of a first name making it sound as if she hadn’t minded living with him. Did I mind? She had but she’d thought it was the only refuge available. We’re wonderfully capable of adapting when we think our survival depends upon it. And the longer I remained Alayne, the easier the lies became, even the ones I told myself.
“I painted in the attic and…it was my little studio, a place I could just be me.”

All three smiled and nodded. They might not fully understand how hard she’d struggled to hold onto Sansa during those times and what painting had meant to her but they could appreciate having a place to be herself.

“What would you paint?” Bran asked with a sweetness that made her heart ache.

“Anything…memories mostly. I have…” She dug through the satchel she’d carried up with her and pulled out her sketch pad. “Since Jon and I left the Vale, I’ve only been able to draw but…”

Rickon led her to his bed and the four of them gathered upon it to look at her drawings. Joy seemed like too small a word to describe how she felt sitting close with them and sharing something of herself.

They fell into easy, companionable chatter as Arya slowly flipped through the pages for them all and they talked of things she’d drawn, memories of the past and some of what they’d survived. They chose their topics carefully but she felt like some progress was made in getting reacquainted with each other.

“Gods, Sansa…are those real?” Arya asked, pointing to the scars on Jon’s chest from the sketch she’d started back at Davos’.

She nodded but said nothing else. The scars were part of him but she’d not meant to expose him quite this way, not even to her siblings.

“Are you really married to him?” Rickon asked.

“Well, to be honest, we are not legally married. We were posing as a married couple but we do plan to marry for true…once we can.”

“He’s quite handsome,” her sister said next, her finger tracing the outline of his jaw. A pleased flush rushed through her at the compliment. He was handsome. The other side of that flush was recalling how handily he’d distracted her from finishing that particular sketch. “Are you pregnant?”

“What?! No! What makes you think that?”

“Why else would you get married?”

She stared at her sister, not sure what to think of such a question. Couldn’t people get married simply because they were in love? Didn’t her sister know that?

“Because, I love him, Arya.”

“Brynden said he was hired muscle.”

“That was why Petyr hired him but we fell in love.”

“When?”

“I don’t know. Early on maybe though it was not planned. It crept up on us both, I believe.”

Rickon made a face and Bran snorted but she didn’t mind. They were just boys and teasing, she knew. It was Arya’s opinion she was curious about.

“He’s not…unkind to you?”
A wave of affection for her sister filled her. “No, he’s the very opposite of unkind.” _He’s as far from Joffrey as any man could be._

“And he makes you happy?”

“Very happy.”

Arya nodded, apparently satisfied with her response. Distracted from the sketch pad for a time, they continued talking until Rickon flipped back to one of the earlier sketches. “Who’s this?” he asked.

“That’s my horse. Well, she was my horse until we left. I guess she’s Myranda’s now,” she said, feeling a bit melancholy. She missed her girl though she was better off at the Royce’s.

“What’s her name?”

“Lady.”

Arya’s head jerked up sharply at the name and Sansa felt queasy again. Memories of the ugly rows they’d had after Joffrey had had her dog shot surfaced. She knew Arya was thinking the same.

“You had a horse named Lady?”

“Yes, I…”

“Of course, you did,” Arya laughed though it wasn’t a kind sort of laugh. “Of course, you’d name your horse after the dog Joffrey killed while you stood there crying.”

She gasped, the pain of the memory overwhelming her along with feelings of unfairness all around. Her sister’s eyes turned hard. “We saw pictures of Baelish’s estate on the news from before it burnt to the ground. Goodness, Sansa, how did you ever survive in that dreadful place? It must’ve been awful adapting after palace life.”

Bran and Rickon’s eyes were wide as saucers but they didn’t interrupt.

“You don’t know what…”

“It’s just typical really. Princess Sansa. You’re the fugitive but we’re the ones who were living on the streets. Do you know how many times our little brothers went hungry while you enjoyed four-course meals or whatever? Do you know how many times I had to fight, tooth and nail, to avoid getting raped in some flop house when I was barely fifteen while you were snug under your eiderdown duvet? Do you know what it’s been like hiding out in a fucking attic for nearly a year?!”

“Stop it, Arya!” Bran said sharply. It did not stem the angry flow.

“Oh, it must’ve been so hard for you, poor little Sansa, with only an art studio to pass the time until the handsome bodyguard came along to fall in love with you. How’d you convince him to help you run away when you finally grew tired of living with Petyr in his enormous house, I wonder?” Her suggestive smirk told her exactly what she believed.

“That’s not…”

“Have you changed at all? Are you going to tell me all the ways that Petyr was actually quite kind and that I don’t understand just like you did with your golden prince?”
Arya jumped off the bed, letting her sketch pad fall to the floor with a thump. “Never mind. I need air. It’s suffocating up here all of a sudden.”

She hurried down the back staircase, swift as a deer and quiet as a shadow, dashing frustrated tears from her eyes. Things had been going rather well. Years apart and so many questions but, for a precious hour, the surviving children of Ned and Catelyn Stark had been together and enjoying a peaceable reunion.

She hadn’t meant to ruin it but the distances between them and the questions had kept lurking in the back of her mind and then it had only taken a spark to ignite her anger and the bitterness had taken over from there.

All those childhood memories of from when they were younger came to her; the petty disputes and cutting words, all the ways they’d struggled to see eye to eye and the wretched feelings of inadequacy whenever she would look at her perfect older sister.

Then, there’d been the mounting tension all around and the looming unease in Kings Landing whenever Joffrey or Cersei entered the same room as them, followed by the horrible day when she’d been forced to choose between fleeing towards an uncertain fate and remaining at their mercy.

It had been terrifying living on the streets from the age of fourteen, separated from her family and struggling to reconnect only to be hampered at every turn. First Father had been killed and then Mother and Robb. She’d thought the boys lost, too.

And, when she’d occasionally see Sansa’s face on the television or in the papers before Joffrey’s death, she’d wondered if her big sister ever thought about her and what she did just to survive in between her dress fittings.

In Braavos, she’d started to understand a little better and realized that Sansa’s choice to remain hadn’t truly been a choice at all. She thought she’d let go of the anger she’d harbored when she’d finally understood how Sansa’s situation was different than hers but just as undesirable.

But that had been with Joffrey and Cersei. What had happened after she’d escaped from Kings Landing? Arya had imagined being wanted for regicide couldn’t possibly be easy. Fancy manor homes, riding stables and handsome bodyguards falling at her feet however didn’t sound all that bad to Arya compared to an empty belly, lousy clothes and more death than any girl of seventeen should know. The bitterness had reared its ugly head again.

She knew what her parents would’ve expected of them as girls when they would fight, whether it was taunting words or pulling hair. They would’ve told them to go apologize to each other and make it right again, that their family’s strength lied within each other. Her heart twisted painfully and part of her wanted to do just that…but part of her still wanted space for a little while.

When she reached the first floor, she listened for footsteps. Slipping past her uncle and aunt, their children and the servants was easy for her. Slipping past Uncle Brynden was not but luck was with
She left the house via the patio doors of Uncle Edmure’s library and raced down the dirt path that led from the house towards the old barn. A hundred years old and nearly covered over with ivy and weeds, it was not used for anything these days except as Arya’s favored refuge when she wanted out of the house, away from her brothers for a bit…and to practice her training.

She’d oiled the hinges on the side door so they no longer creaked. The smell of dry rot, dried out straw and old manure greeted her but she was used to it. There were worse smells, Arya knew.

She grabbed her stick, climbed to the loft and started walking across the beam that traversed the building. She closed her eyes as she passed beyond the section over the loft to where only the dirt floor of the barn twenty feet below was under her, a tightrope act of sorts with no net.

“Quick as a snake, calm as still water, strong as a bear, fierce as a…”

She stopped murmuring the words and held her breath when the larger barn door opened unexpectedly with a hideous screech. No one ever came down here. No one but me.

She wondered if Sansa had chased after her but she wouldn’t know where to come. She didn’t know the house or estate the way Arya did. She wondered if Uncle Brynden would seek her out. For some reason, that brought back memories of her father trying to play peacemaker for the pair of them in Kings Landing. Those bloody tears were coming back now and that was ridiculous while she was perched up here above the barn floor with only a beam three inches wide to hold her.

Her eyes narrowed as she observed Jon Snow entering and looking about. He hadn’t noticed her, she decided. People rarely looked directly above them.

They’d barely had more than an introduction earlier but she’d spoken to him the night Sansa had called and she’d seen the sketch. Those wounds were not the sort one just walked away from.

A former member of the Nights Watch and a bodyguard, she hadn’t expected much initially. She might’ve been wrong to make that assumption. She’d been warned about making assumptions before but old habits die hard even when you’re still seventeen.

He crossed to the old workbench beneath her and pulled out the rusted stool. Curious as to why he was down here and curious about him in general, she remained quiet. She could observe this man that Sansa had fallen in love with without him ever knowing.

He was carrying a small bag and pulled out a cloth, some small rods and rag. He then set two handguns on the bench. He was going to clean his weapons.

He was methodical and took his time as though he was using the exercise to think some things through. It’s what she would do as well. She knew plenty of them but didn’t have a great deal of experience with guns. Most of the fighting she’d been taught was hand-to-hand and knife work. It was quieter and, given her size, stealth was her friend.

Her legs started to cramp where she was perched. She grimaced and told herself she’d gotten soft. He would never know she was there if she could just hold out a little longer.

“You can come down if you like. I won’t bite.”

Her mouth fell open. She was more than a little annoyed that he’d discovered her.

“I saw you when I entered. Blind spots include above you, right?”
A grin spread across her face against her will…or maybe not against her will. “Is that a Glock?” she asked after she’d spun and leapt from the beam to the loft and then shimmed down to where he sat.

“It is.” He rubbed the lightly oiled cloth across it with loving care. Did he love his guns the way Sansa loved her drawing pencils and paintbrushes? “They are only necessary tools which must be kept at the ready,” he commented when he saw her watching his movements. Not love then, just a professional. “Did you want to try this one?” He held it out towards her, handle first.

She shook her head. “It’d be heavy to me. The Sig though…”

He nodded with approval. He’d had his own little test for her. He handed over the Sig and she cradled it carefully. She was not an expert but she knew how to point and fire. She wasn’t afraid to fire one either. That was the basics, wasn’t it?

“Have you used them much?” she asked next.

“More than I care to think about.” There was a heaviness in his tone. A professional perhaps but not a stone-cold killer, not in his heart.

“Did you follow me down here?”

“I did. I saw you running off.”

“You should’ve gone to Sansa instead of chasing after me. It’s what a good husband would do.”

“I mean to be the best husband to her that I can be. I will go to her but I was curious about you.”

“I should go apologize.”

“What did you do?”

“I said some things that were not kind…nor fair.”

“She’ll forgive you, I know.” She half expected a chastisement but he said no more of it. “Your great uncle said you were basically living on the streets from before your father’s arrest until you came to him several months ago.”

“I was.” Although I had a home in Braavos for nearly a year though it certainly wasn’t any easier than the streets.

“That cannot have been easy.” She fought not to roll her eyes. He couldn’t possibly understand. “I was orphaned at eight and placed in a foundling home with other bastard boys and those who’d never been claimed by anyone. I hated it. I ran away when I was eleven.”

Perhaps he did understand. “That’s younger than I was.”

“Well, I didn’t last very long. In fact, I got hungry enough within five hours to swallow my anger and go back.”

“Oh. No, you didn’t last very long,” she laughed in spite of herself.

“But when I was nearly sixteen, I ran away again when my foster parents were…” He stopped and scowled at the gun in his hand. She was not to hear of them or what they might have done yet apparently. “I was on the streets for several weeks before the authorities caught me. It was a very hard life. It seems like it might’ve been even harder for a girl.”
“It was. I was fourteen and...it was hard.” She gulped and told her heart to stop beating so hard at the memory of several pairs of feet chasing her and the sinister hoots, whistles and laughter that hounded her in her sleep still at times. *Fear cuts deeper than swords. The memories cannot hurt you.*

“The streets were full of men and women looking to use a naïve boy like me but I made two friends, boys with stories not very different than mine. There was a girl with us for a time. She was caught when I was. I remember her crying and begging them not to take her home. I was...I wished I had a home but maybe I was glad not to have one like hers.”

Arya could well imagine. “I made a few trusted friends. They were all very different than me if you looked at their backgrounds but they were like me in the way that mattered most.”

“How so?”

“They were survivors.”

“Aye, we’re all that in our way, aren’t we? My friends and I looked after each other.”

“It was the same for me. I learned who I could trust to watch my back while I slept and I’d watch theirs in return. It was...a little like family,” she finished wistfully.

She handed back the Sig and he began cleaning it. They were both quiet for a time and her conscience was bothering her more and more. She would go and beg Sansa’s pardon and they would work towards learning each other all over again. The bitterness would not keep her good company at night the way a sister’s love and friendship could.

Jon’s thoughts were on Sansa as well. “The streets are very hard but at least we had a few friends. Your sister had no friends at court. After putting her in a position to receive blame in Joffrey’s death, Mr. Baelish took her away and kept her locked away on his estate.”

She didn’t like feeling stuck here in many ways but she knew they meant well and she knew if she told them she was going, they wouldn’t stop her. Mr. Baelish didn’t mean well and he would most certainly have stopped Sansa from leaving if he could’ve.

“She managed to make one friend in the Vale but the lady still doesn’t even know your sister’s true name so I’m not sure how much of herself Sansa felt she could really share.”

“I had to use false names as well.”

“Ah...something you both have in common then,” he winked. She started grinning like a ninny. Not a charmer but charming in his own way. “I’ve always been Jon Snow but since I’ve met your sister I’ve got to experience having an alias at last.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, now I’m Jon Stone according to the ID I carry.”

“Wow, that’s quite a change. It must’ve been hard adapting to that name,” she said drily.

He chuckled in amusement and she couldn’t help smiling wider. “What did you do in Braavos, Arya Stark?”

“I learned things,” she replied evasively. “What did you do in the Nights Watch, Jon Snow?”
“I learned things.” His smile was infectious and her cheeks were starting to hurt. He finished cleaning his guns and put away the cleaning kit. “Are you going to show me what you can do with that stick now?”

“Not today,” she smirked. “I need to go see my sister now.”

Jon had come back down at last a half hour ago to get ready for bed. They’d been put in the bedroom where a hidden door led to the children living in the attic above. It was very strange but Jon had dealt with his share of strange. Brynden and Edmure had said it would make it simpler for them to dash up to the attic in case Government paid a call.

“How often do they come?”

“It used to be more often but now a month or more may pass and then they’ll turn around and come back the next day. They highly suspect I know something. They have good reason to believe Uncle Brynden is in communication with me anyway. I’ve reached out to Stannis but only left a name with a secretary. I’m waiting to hear back.”

That was good. If Edmure Tully was a man that the new king of Westeros would be willing to meet with, it could go a long way towards resolving some of their problems.

“Do they bother your wife or the children?”

Edmure had nodded, fear and rage at war upon his face. “They question Roslin and I both, sometimes asking the same thing ten different ways. They make us pull the children from their beds no matter the hour they come. They keep them in the room with us and have an armed guard standing over them while they question us. Our boys are only two and four.”

An unmistakable threat. Jon’s rage had boiled to hear it and he hoped that Stannis would prove to be a very different ruler than his predecessor.

“But they’ve never discovered the secret attic room?”

“They’re not very imaginative beyond frightening little children.”

It was rather clever. Sealed off from the rest of the attic, one would have to take out a measuring tape to realize the readily assessible part was not as big as it should be in comparison with the size of the house. Plus, it helped that the true attic was filled to the brim with old furniture and trunks.

He had just laid down when the hidden door cracked open. His heart swooped to see her sunny smile. “We decided we’re all nearly hoarse from talking and ready to get some sleep at last.”

She padded into the bathroom to brush her teeth before pulling off her jeans and changing into one of his t-shirts for bed. He wrapped an arm around her as she nestled up close.

She kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”
“For what?”

“For getting me here, for speaking with Arya earlier.”

He smiled in the dark. “Your uncle helped get us here and I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She tickled his ribs lightly. “Yes, you do.”

He was tempted to tickle her back but that might lead to other things and he wasn’t sure if the kids would be coming down to use the bathroom as well. “She reminded me of my younger self a bit. She’s nearly grown but I remember how I was back then. So much anger, it was hard to keep it all inside sometimes even when I wound up taking it out on the wrong person. She loves you though.”

“I know. I love her, too.” She got quiet and he thought she might’ve drifted off. “I can’t believe you and Bran and Rickon ate all of the pie I helped Roslin bake.”

“It wasn’t going to eat itself,” he shrugged, earning him the sweet sound of her giggles.

It had been too good to resist, nearly as good as watching the four of them laughing and talking together in the attic once everyone else had retired, nearly as good as when they’d asked him questions or included him in their banter.

It was like he was part of them in a small way. It was like having little brothers and a sister maybe. He’d never thought of what it might be like to have siblings. Sam was his brother in a sense and he felt protective of him but they were the same age. This was different. These were Sansa’s siblings and, if he meant to protect his wife, he meant to protect them, too.

Whatever his relationship with the three Stark children was or would be, he liked it so far. It was more than he’d ever thought to have.

“Thank you for being you,” she murmured sleepily as they both began to doze at last.

He kissed her brow and hugged her close. “Who else would I be, darling?”

He was already deep, deep down when he jolted awake as a door burst open. The lights clicked on overhead but he felt his fingers wrapping around the Sig he’d placed by the bed earlier. Sansa sat up and shrieked while he was already taking aim.

“Sorry…bathroom,” Rickon mumbled, only half awake. He whimpered and covered his mouth. “Too much pie.”

“Seven hells,” he said shakily, lowering the gun with his heart thundering in his chest as Sansa sprang from the bed to see to the sick boy.

This was going to take a little getting used to.

Chapter End Notes
Next chapter, I'll dive back into the wider world of this verse and we'll see the Targaryen kiddos talking with their Martell uncles :)}
Chapter Summary

Petyr moves out of the rehabilitation center. Aegon will be making a trip with his father. Ser Gerold is doing surveillance work.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“I am exceedingly grateful to your family, Ser Lyn, for allowing me to stay here until my new home is ready. It’s a pity your father is so ill.”

The churlish young man nodded and it was plain every word he uttered pained him. “Of course, Mr. Baelish. You’ve been an invaluable business associate and friend to my family. My father said it was the least we could do, especially considering that we are in your debt.”

*You are most certainly in my debt.*

The Corbrays’ abilities when it came to the stock market were not equal to their love of lavish living. They were lucky to have a friend like Petyr Baelish, weren’t they? They might not like him all that much but Ser Lyn’s father would house him and get him out of the damned rehabilitation center at least.

He would finally be able to return to the game he hoped even if the playing field had changed on him. *If only I can get her back. If only I can find Jon Snow.* That would be quite the coup for a man thought all but finished by some of his more foolish friends and enemies. *Here’s the bride you wanted for your son, Your Grace…and the young man you’re quite eager to find while I’m at it. A relative? A bastard perhaps? It was not impossible given what he knew of Rhaegar.*

“Is there anything else you might need in here?” his host asked with a politeness that was about as genuine as a plastic fern.

“No, I should be quite cozy, thank you. I do have a man coming by to visit me shortly, an old business associate, a Mr. Gallant.”

“I’ll have our butler show him up when he arrives.”

“Thank you.”

The door closed soon after and Petyr would bet Corbray was as glad to quit his company as he was to see the back of him.

He called Lothor and received an update before settling to await his guest. Mr. Gallant was an alias but he was an old business associate of sorts. None of it was Corbray’s business anyway.
He had known Oswell Kettleblack longer than Lothor. He’d known him since he was a boy back before he’d ever left the Fingers even and, though their paths had not crossed all that often in the past fifteen years, they had never lost touch.

He’d found employment for Oswell’s three sons. Unfortunately, those three sons were gone now. He didn’t know what had become of Osney exactly but Jon Snow had likely killed two of them just as he’d taken Petyr’s ‘daughter.’

However, Oswell was not a man to be overruled by his passion or drive for revenge. If Lothor was struggling to find anything useful, it was just as well to bring a new man in. And money always talks, especially to Kettleblacks. He’d arranged things for Petyr in Braavos after all.

Speaking of what had happened in Braavos, Roose had reached out yesterday. Petyr was biding his time about calling him back. Just as it was for Petyr, Stannis taking the throne was not welcome news to Roose. Stannis had always taken a very hard stance against crime and corruption and the leader of the Northern Syndicate’s crime lords would be a target for the new king. They might do better under a different king, a silver-haired one.

Petyr prided himself on how well he had managed to separate personal feelings from business most of the time. Cat, and later her daughter, had been his only true slips into sentiment.

So, could him and Roose work past their little riff perhaps and reestablish that mutually beneficial relationship they’d once shared?

Petyr looked down at his ruined leg.

Not fucking likely.

Aegon combed back his hair which was its natural silver once more and scowled at his reflection. He’d grown used to the blue. The silver made him look older than his twenty-six years. It had been silver since the day he’d been born.

They all said he was the spitting image of his father, a true Targaryen, and, once upon a time, he’d not minded that. He minded it now.

Jon Snow was lucky to have taken after his mother. It would’ve been hard to remain hidden if his eyes had been violet or indigo and his hair had been silver like his own.

The bedroom door opened without so much as a knock but he heaved a sigh of relief when he saw it was only Rhaenys. Like Jon, she did not favor most of the descendants of their ill-fated house in looks.

Their grandparents were dead along with their Uncle Viserys who’d been a small child at the time of the rebellion. Rhaenys and himself along with their father were the last three legitimate Targaryens in the world.
His father was still capable of fathering children as far as Aegon knew but their mother was not capable of giving him more. His birth had nearly killed her. To take a younger wife, Rhaegar would either have to divorce his wife… or worse. Aegon shuddered to think about it. He didn’t think his father would do such a thing at least. Some affection remained between the pair despite the pain he’d caused her over the years and he was only still breathing thanks to Elia’s brothers. No, Rhaegar said he’d be content to be a grandfather someday along with being king. Aegon knew which of those two options was less likely to happen.

But if Rhaenys married, she’d take her husband’s name and the Tyrell heir was not going to change his last name even for his princess. The marriage had been one of his father’s favorite pet schemes to aid his quest for the throne, just like his plans to have Aegon marry Sansa Stark.

It would be down to Aegon to pass along the family name. Unless Jon was made a Targaryen, too. Was that why his father wanted to find him now? To increase the chances of continuing their line? Or was it simply that he’d never wanted to let his Northern girl and his bastard son go in the first place and he hated losing? You ought to be getting used to defeat by now, Father.

Coming to stand behind him, Rhaenys’ eyes met his through the mirror and she reached over his shoulders to adjust his collar. “All set to meet your lost princess?”

“I’ve already met her and I don’t think I’ll find her in Pentos.”

His father was taking him along to meet with a handful of his most important backers in Essos. Stannis was already firming up his hold on the capital and Rhaegar had finally decided he’d better make a move if he wanted any shot at all. He held an awful lot of confidence that he would achieve his objective. It made Aegon wonder if he had some trick up his sleeve and if Stannis had someone reliable watching his back.

Drawn back to Rhae’s question though, he smiled as he recalled Sansa, his so-called lost princess. “You’d like her, Rhae.”

She shrugged. “Northern girls all seem rather stiff to me.”

“How many Northern girls have you known?”

“Well, not very many to be honest,” she admitted with a light laugh.

“Is Oberyn still angry?”

“Of course, he is. They both are.” The private little discussion amongst the Martells with none of his father’s spies around to take note had been eye-opening for them to say the least. He wished he could go and comfort his mother but he was expected at the airport soon.

“Yes, but Uncle Doran will never show that he is angry.”

“No, that is not his way. Mother is worried.”

“I know.”

“I’m worried.” He turned and she took his hands in hers, nervously chewing at her bottom lip. “I don’t like you going with him, Eggs.”

She’d called him Eggs since he’d been born. She’d been four and struggling with her speech pronunciation at the time. From around the age of nine, he’d pretended he hated being called that. He didn’t hate it at all.
He’d been very sickly as a baby, he’d been told. Off and on through his first five years, his family had feared that he would never live to see his tenth birthday. Such a strain was hard to conceal and Rhaenys had followed her mother’s example, fretting often as a small child over her little brother. She’d done whatever she could for him and to help their mother.

“Eggs is cold, Mummy. Give him my blanket.”

“I made this for Eggs.”

“Eggs wants his sissy.”

“May Eggs stay in my room, Mummy?”

She’d started chewing on her lip as a child to express anxiety. That habit had not gone away despite the passage of time.

She still wanted to protect him, take care of him. He loved her so much for that but he wanted to protect her, too.

He’d heard the stories about their grandfather. His father never repeated such tales but his uncles would. The one that enraged him the most personally involved his sister.

When Rhaenys had been born and presented to her grandfather at Court, he’d peered down at the child his son had been cradling in his arms and declared the girl ‘terribly Dornish and clearly of Martell stock’ with a sniff of disdain. Terribly Dornish and clearly of Martell stock. Dark hair, dark eyes and olive skin. That’d been Aerys Targaryen for you, racist and xenophobic on top of mad as a hatter.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be alright. I’m better off with Father than Hightower.”

“Oberyn’s declared he’s going with you.”

“Father won’t like it.”

“He won’t tell him no either.” That was true enough. Without his Martell in-laws, Rhaegar would’ve been reduced to a beggar years ago if he’d even managed to escape the rebellion alive.

“Doran will remain here though?”

“You know his pains. Travel does not suit him.” Rhaenys eyes flickered away when she said it.

“What are you not sharing, sister?”

“Areo may be taking a trip soon.”

Areo Hotah was to their Uncle Doran’s faithful bodyguard and privy to all his plotting. He would not dream of taking a trip anywhere unless instructed to by Doran. “Where might he go?”

“His destinations were not shared with me.”

“Jon is not our enemy, Rhae. He’s our half-brother though it’s very doubtful he knows it. He’s not to blame for our father’s sins.” They had to understand that.

“No one’s saying that but they want to find him. They’d like to get ahold of him before our father can.”
“Why didn’t they say as much to me?”

“They probably figured you’d object to them seeking him at all.”

“We’re still children to their eyes, aren’t we?”

“Always, I’m afraid.” They were both amused and vexed by it.

The Martells had been angered to learn that the Northern girl’s son was no myth and that Rhaegar was still searching for him, possibly seeking to place him over his own trueborn daughter in the line of succession as it had once been rumored he’d intended. The line that doesn’t even matter when we don’t have a bloody throne to our name.

However, their wrath when they’d learned of Hightower drugging Aegon had been both frightening and oddly sweet, too. They love me at least, I can never deny that they do.

“Take care of Mother while I’m away,” he implored his sister.

“I will, I promise. Shall I tell Areo to bring us back a half-brother and you a bride if he can?”

“Telling him to be wary of Hightower might be wiser.”

From the side of the road, Ser Gerold discreetly watched through his binoculars as another delivery truck enter the estate’s grounds. He absently dug into the paper bag at his side for the last of his chips. He’d been watching on and off for two days now.

He didn’t think driving up and knocking on the door would be advisable here. For one thing, the Tullys were still under close surveillance by Government as far as he knew and Ser Gerold would not wish to be discovered by them either. A known supporter of the exiled Targaryens, he’d be hauled in for questioning in a trice if his fake ID didn’t pass muster and it was likely that someone would purposely misplace the key if they learned his true name.

He’d place the odds on them coming here around 30%. He wasn’t sure where else they might go but the pair of them had obviously spent some time on the road since fleeing Baelish’s so who could say? Money would probably be the main factor there. But Edmure Tully was the girl’s uncle and she might seek out the last of her living relatives with all the Starks dead.

The delivery truck was already leaving again. Tully’s wife rarely left the estate with her children, it would appear. Hightower watched it rumble back down the road as the postal van approached.

He mulled over the other options available to the pair of young lovers. Following the money was usually a good place to start and he’d learned that Jon Snow had no bank account. That was curious. He’d have a pension from the Watch. Where did that money go? Had he blown it all? That didn’t seem likely. So, where was it? Who had he entrusted it to? He’d need to have one of the eggheads look into that for him. If the money went into someone else’s account, Ser Gerold would definitely want to make that person’s acquaintance.
He’d also gone back through his notes from his time at Castle Black with Brune. Baelish’s man had asked about Snow’s friends there. The new Lord Commander’s right hand man had been one of them. They’d questioned him over a few ales. More than ale to be honest though Brune hadn’t known that. Snow had been fairly popular before his time away with the Free Folk and the mutiny. There’d been one man in particular that whose name had come up…Tarly. Maybe he’d call there next if he turned up empty here.

He hoped to have something before Rhaegar returned, preferably Jon Snow and Sansa Stark to hand over. The king was flying to Essos with his son. Darry and Whent would accompany them…as well as Oberyn Martell. Hightower did not care for that. The Red Viper of Dorne as he’d been labeled in his youth was not as malleable as his older brother. He’d been very vocal in his criticisms of Rhaegar at times in defense of his sister. Ser Gerold could not blame him for feeling an allegiance to his blood in one sense but it did not put those who devoted their lives to serving their king at ease.

The postal van pulled back out and he dug for another chip, only to come away disappointed. It was hardly much of a breakfast. Or was it lunchtime already? He laid down his binoculars, deciding he’d have to come back here tonight and see if he could take a closer look.

An old truck he’d seen leaving the estate earlier drove past, headed back to the estate. It appeared to be the groundskeepers’ with three workmen in it. He grabbed his binoculars to take note of the plates to be safe.

“Go slow, Tom,” Brynden instructed the groundskeeper in a gruff whisper. “The blue car there.”

“I see it.”

“Recognize him?”

Jon had the collar of his jacket raised and a ballcap on. He was slouched low but his eyes took in every detail he could of the man sitting behind the wheel of the car in question. “No. Not anyone I saw around Baelish’s.”

“Think you picked up a tail somewhere on the way?”

Jon scowled, giving the older man the side eye. “No, but maybe you did.”

Brynden snorted as the truck made its way down the estate’s long drive towards the shed where Tom kept his tools. “Well, he ain’t bold enough to follow us onto the grounds anyway. We’ll take a another look later maybe.”

“Yeah, alright.”

“You still going for a run?”

“No, I’ll stick close to the house to be safe.”
Jon had awoke aroused this morning with Sansa in his arms but her period had started last night. He’d told himself to be content with kisses, knowing that was just as well. The kids had a knack for coming down the attic stairs anytime he got notions in his head. In other words, fairly often. He wouldn’t complain if Sansa wanted them all to live together forever someday but he’d definitely insist on everyone having their own bedrooms…with locks.

He’d gone to wash his face (and calm down) and, sure enough, he’d found Arya lying next to Sansa on their bed when he’d come out again, the pair of them whispering together. Despite his unquenched desires, it had filled his heart with joy to see them both so obviously happy in each other’s company that way.

“I’m going for a run.”

“Bring coffee up to us when you get back,” Arya had told him. “I take it black but Bran will want cream along with sugar and Sansa will want…”

“Tea, I know. I know exactly how she likes it, too,” he’d said, though he’d only been mildly piqued by the marching orders.

Sansa had smiled sweetly and wished him a good run, her hair still fanned across the pillow and her dewy soft skin still pinkish from sleep. He’d need that run to burn off the urge to tell Arya to go back up to the attic and wait for her coffee or go fetch it herself…and take an hour coming back with it.

He’d been stretching when Brynden had found him. “Might have an uninvited guest lurking.”

Thus, the impromptu trip into town in the groundskeepers’ truck for bags of mulch that weren’t really needed today had happened.

“Who could it be?” Sansa asked after the Starks, Jon, Edmure and Brynden had gathered downstairs upon their return to the house. Roslin had the little ones practicing their alphabet in the nursery to keep them out of the way.

“Government more than likely,” Edmure grumbled.

“No. The car was a rental, not a government vehicle. And why would he be sitting on the side of the road and just watching when you say they come whenever it pleases them?” Brynden nodded with approval and Jon supposed he’d passed yet another of the old man’s tests.

“One of Baelish’s men? He could’ve hired new men,” Arya suggested.

“I wouldn’t doubt it. Lothor can’t be everywhere at once even if Petyr continues to trust him. He’ll hire more men.”

Jon thought Sansa and Arya were likely right. Who else would be looking for them? All the same, Jon couldn’t say why the stranger had caused such an uncomfortable gnawing sensation in his belly when he’d seen him but he certainly had. He’d been an older man, close to Brynden’s age. Or Davos’. Thinking of Davos doubled that uncomfortable feeling. He needed to call him.

“Has there been any reply from Stannis, Uncle?” Bran asked.

“Yes, this morning in fact. I received a call from his personal assistant. I’ve been invited to the capital to meet with His Grace.”

“Invited or summoned?” Jon asked.
“He’s the king now. It’s one and the same, I suppose, but I’ll take comfort in the fact that it was issued politely. I’ll be leaving Friday. I need to speak with Roslin so please don’t tell her anything until I do.”

They all nodded, allowing Edmure the chance to prepare his wife. Going to see Stannis might be a very promising thing for them all. It could also be a disaster if they’d misjudged the man. Jon didn’t know him enough to say either way.

“What will you tell him, Uncle?” Rickon asked, his eyes wide. Jon didn’t want the boy to be afraid but he wouldn’t insult his intelligence by telling him there was no reason to be. There was. He longed for the day he could tell Sansa and her siblings they were safe. He also wanted to tell Rickon not to stumble into their room in the dead of night without knocking again. He’d still get shaky at the thoughts of what might’ve happeed that first night.

“I’ll tell him what I must to gain some trust but I’ll play our hand carefully, Rickon,” Edmure said uneasily.

That made Jon uneasy, too. Edmure was a good man with a good heart but he didn’t strike Jon as all that adept at playing games. Then again, everything that was said of Stannis made it seem that he was not a man for games either. How would Edmure fare against Baelish though?

The conversation circled back around to their mystery snoop. “I want to see him.”

All eyes turned her way. “No, Arya,” Jon was saying before anyone else could say it. At least, he’d thought others were going to say it.

“Why not? Because I’m a girl?”

“No, not really. Because it could be dangerous and we know nothing about the stranger. And, because you’re seventeen and Sansa’s little sister and I have no idea what your skills are above being good at balancing on a beam. So, no for all the reasons above plus three more I’ve not thought of yet.”

She rolled her eyes and looked ready to tear him a new one. He didn’t care. He wasn’t planning to back down in this instance.

“You can come.”

Jon’s head whipped around to Brynden, unable to believe the words had just come out of his mouth. “What the fuck?”

“She’s been chomping at the bit to prove something to me. She can prove to me that she knows how to be quiet and follow orders when we go take a peek tonight, agreed?”

Arya nodded, shooting a smug grin his way, and Jon decided to let it lie though he did not like it. He hadn’t known her but a few days whereas Brynden had known the girl her whole life. He wasn’t the one to give her permission or whatever. She wasn’t his little sister. But she’s starting to feel like one to me.

He glanced at Sansa who was clearly less than pleased by her great uncle’s edict. He’d take a little comfort in that anyway.

The discussion broke up after that. The boys returned to their attic and Arya wandered down to the barn, casting a glance over her shoulder at Jon before she headed out the door. That had been an invitation to join her and maybe he should take it and learn some things about what all Arya Stark
might be capable of. He decided he would…after he talked to Sansa alone.

“I want to call Davos and check on him,” he said without preamble when he shut the bedroom door behind them.

“Good. I’m worried about him. I wish he could come here and be with us.”

That house in his mind with all the bedrooms with locking doors got a little bigger and he loved her with all his heart. “I know. I’m thinking of checking in with Sam, too. It’s been several days and maybe he’s found some more stuff for me.”

Sansa’s worried look didn’t lessen but she nodded. He tugged on her hand, pulling her to the bed.

“We can just lie here, can’t we?” he asked when she smirked.

“Of course, we can.”

Sam had been checking into all sorts of things for them. He’d finally let Sam in on the truth regarding Alayne, all of it. He’d made sure Sansa agreed to that first. He trusted Samwell Tarly with his life and, though he held her life somewhere above his own, he would trust him with her secret.

Sam, being Sam, had only expressed mild surprise over Jon managing to meet, fall in love and run away with the young woman wanted in connection with the murder of King Joffrey by pure happenstance. However, he’d immediately grown excited at the prospect of solving their various problems and figuring out the best ways to help them clear Sansa’s name while checking every angle and every step they’d taken to see where danger might lurk and what dangers they’d not thought of yet.

Having a man like Sam on their side was invaluable and, although the thoughts of bringing Sam trouble worried Jon, he knew Sam would be hurt if Jon continued to keep things from him and shield him, the same as Jon would feel if Sam held back when he needed his help.

“I’ve been thinking…” Sansa said as he held her, his hand drifting through her silken hair.

“Yes?”

“What if Stannis wishes to meet with me?”

“No.”

“We may not have much choice.” He grimaced, knowing she had a point. “If he does want to meet with me, I’m not sure I want to bring him here. I don’t want to expose my siblings or place Edmure’s family in any danger.”

“Let’s wait and see what your uncle says when he returns, alright?” He didn’t like thinking about her going to Kings Landing. Maybe a neutral spot but what neutral spots were there for a wanted woman meeting a king? “If you were to go meet with him, I’d be coming with you.”

“Of course, you would. I couldn’t go anywhere without my bodyguard, could I?”

“Your bodyguard, huh?” He rolled her to back, earning a delighted gasp. “Is that all I am to you?”

She giggled as he started nuzzling at her neck. “Oh, no. You know that you’re much, much more to me but Stannis doesn’t have to know.”
He didn’t reply to that. He lowered his mouth, inch by inch, towards hers, loving the way her eyes widened and then grew darker at his slow pace.

The boys were just up the stairs but they weren’t doing anything but lying here really. He should probably get up and call Davos and Sam. He should go down to the barn and talk with Arya. He didn’t do any of those things just yet. He was too busy kissing his beloved at the moment.

The unlisted number flashed on his mobile phone. Sam hated sitting still and staring at it until he’d hung up and hoped Jon wasn’t in any immediate peril. Then, he tapped on his laptop and called him back on the secure line. It was a precaution he’d decided on after Edd’s call.

“I didn’t feel right after we finished talking,” Edd had told him.

“You mean because you shared things about Jon?”

Edd had been one of their best friends with the Watch. He was the only one of their friends who was still there serving. He didn’t have much else place to go and, after the mutiny, the Watch and the new Lord Commander had desperately needed a loyal man like Edd.

With a dour nature, one might not always think that Edd would be the talkative sort but if he was in a mood, he could talk quite a bit, especially after he’d had a few.

“Well, yes and no. I didn’t want to tell those buggers nothing ‘bout Jon but they kept asking and the new LC seemed keen to make them happy. But other than that, I also felt sick and swimmy-headed after they left.”

“Sick?” That hadn’t seemed like Edd. Sam couldn’t handle too much of the stout ale favored up at Castle Black but the far thinner Tollett could quaff three pints of it without so much as a sigh. “What did you tell them?”

It hadn’t sounded like very much but Sam’s name had been mentioned and that made Sam a little nervous now that he knew everything. He had a Gilly, Little Sam and a baby on the way to think of beyond himself.

“Sam?” he answered before the first ring finished.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t answer right away. I’ve had to make some adjustments to the phone line.”

Jon caught on quick. “Has someone said something to you? Are you in trouble?”

The concern in his voice was heartwarming to be honest. He knew Jon cared about him in a way very few people cared about Samwell Tarly. “I’m not in any danger but I’m not so sure that you aren’t. I’ve got news.”

He could hear his sharp intake of breath and what sounded like a door closing. Jon was readying
himself for bad news. Sam didn’t know if it was bad exactly but probably not welcome anyway.

“Alright. Whatcha got?”

Not a lot honestly but the fact that two men had been asking Edd questions about Jon’s friends with the Watch and other things was concerning. Obviously, they were likely looking for Lady Sansa and hoping knowing more about Jon would help. They were right about that.

Still, some of the questions regarding Jon that Edd had recalled had seemed terribly odd to be asking. His mother was long dead and Jon hadn’t spoken much of her. Why had one of the men been rather keen on asking about her? And his father…Jon was a bastard, a Snow. Everyone knew it and he’d made no secret of the fact his father had not been part of his life but he’d only shared with a few of his closest friends that he hadn’t even know his name.

“From what Edd relayed, it sounds like these two men were working together but not exactly working together.”

“I see.”

“It’s possible Mr. Baelish sent two men to ask questions.”

“There was only one of them when we had our little run-in back in Cerwyn.”

“Run in? You didn’t tell me about that!”

“Don’t worry about that right now. I’m…I’m not sure what to say, Sam. It sounds like we’ve got someone else looking for us.”

“Yeah, I’d say so.”

“Did Edd give you a description?”

“Yeah, he did.” He gave it and Jon was quiet. Gilly popped her head into his study and made a motion like bringing a spoon to one’s mouth. “It’s time for dinner here. I’m working on some ideas for you both but I don’t have anything concrete yet. Can I give you a call back?”

“Of course, go eat with your wife and son. How are they? How’s the baby?”

“They’re both good, thanks. Baby’s doing well. We’re, uh…it’s a boy, they’re saying.”

“That’s fantastic, Sam. Congratulations to you both.”

Sam wondered if he’d want to know they name they’d chosen. He’d probably be embarrassed by it but Gilly hadn’t had any objections. It was the first name that had come to mind when Sam had learned he’d have another son, another Jon and Sam except they’d be blood brothers, half anyway.

He bid his friend farewell and hung up, rising to head to the kitchen where they typically ate as a family. He’d like to think that maybe sometime they could have Sansa and Jon come visit them and maybe share a meal together.

There was a knock at the front door and he called towards the kitchen that he would answer it. He answered and immediately felt ill. He didn’t know the man standing on his doorstep but intuition had its moments. Sam was nearly certain he’d just given a description of this man to his dear friend.

“Samwell Tarly?”
He nodded shakily with his heart thumping loudly in his chest. He had to protect his wife and son. They were innocent and knew nothing about the things he’d been looking into for Jon.

“I’d rather we do this outside,” he said, stepping out his front door and closing it securely behind him. It would lock and they’d be safe…he hoped.

“Do what?” the plain-faced man asked. If he was pretending to be puzzled, he was doing a good acting job.

“Whatsoever you’ve come to do to me.”

The man didn’t give his name. “I was just hoping you might be able to pass along a message to Jon Snow for me is all.”

“Jon Snow? Never heard of him.” The man shook his head and laughed. Sam had never considered himself much of an actor. He’d need a different tactic. He sucked at tactics. “Assuming I could reach him, why would I pass along a message for you, Mister…”

“Brune. And, I’m trying to help him and her as well, alright?”

“How exactly?”

“Because I figured they might want to know who’s looking for them and that he’s getting closer to finding them.”

Chapter End Notes

I swear all these plot threads will be starting to come together soon (fingers crossed) and thank you so much for bearing with me on that :)

If you read my other stories, I'll be updating the new Western by Sunday and try to update every 3 days or so while I can manage it. I'm also trying to plot out where I'm going with the smutty one shot that's become a multi-chapter...lol!

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Jon and Arya keep watch together. Aegon is trying to remember his High Valyrian and get Oberyn to share information with him. Sam shares some information with Jon before Riverrun has unexpected guests.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I mean, we could just kill him.”

“No way that’d draw any unwanted attention, right?”

Arya shrugged at his sarcasm. “It wouldn’t if we were careful. Sansa told me about those guys from the estate you handled the night of the fire.”

He could tell Arya’s tone was one of admiration but he grimaced, recalling Sansa’s face as the van had disappeared into the river. “Don’t be asking your sister about things like that. It bothers her.”

“I know but she does like talking about her hero.”

“I’m no hero.”

“You are to her.” He grinned despite himself but quickly shook it off as Arya continued. “He’s got his own car and there’s a handy river nearby.”

“We’re not killing him…not yet.”

“He’s looking for you and Sansa. He’s got this close. He’s no friend of ours.”

“I’m aware of that.” She was right in a way but he wanted to know more before they acted. “We’re sitting tight.”

“Fine,” she huffed, clearly impatient with waiting. Her impatience worried him. He was prone to it as well but they needed to be careful.

Half-frozen and exhausted, Jon covered a yawn. Arya had not yawned once. He found it mildly irksome. Side by side on the ridgeline, they continued their vigil of watching the rental car below. This was his third night out here. Brynden was likely snug in his bed and Jon kind of hated the old man at the moment.

“I’ll let you two freeze your arses off tonight. I’ll be ready when there’s something to do besides sit and watch.”

Last night, Hightower had only got out of his car for a few minutes. Tonight, he’d been sitting
He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, deciding to return to their earlier conversation.

“How’d they wind up recruiting you?”

She was silent for several beats and he wondered if she’d answer. “They didn’t, not actively. I was fifteen and on the streets and happened upon one of them who needed help. I didn’t know who he was or what. He was just a guy who was about to die for reasons that didn’t make sense to me and I just helped.” Jon smiled to himself, thinking the sisters were more alike than different in the ways that mattered. “I figured out what he was and he told me if I ever needed a place to go, I could come to Braavos. He gave me an address for a particular temple there and one day I knocked on its door.”

“But you didn’t finish the training?”

“No, not completely. I…I realized it wasn’t me.” He was glad of that. Arya Stark wasn’t born to be a cold-blooded killer no matter how tough she tried to act. “So, we’re not killing him yet. What would you call this up at the Watch? Surveillance? A stakeout of a stakeout?”

“I don’t know. Surveillance, I guess. We weren’t cops exactly. What would you call it?”

Arya took a sip from her tumbler of the coffee Sansa had prepared each of them before they’d left the house tonight. “Research,” she said at last.

“Alright, we’re doing research.”

He leaned back from their vantage point, trying to ignore the damp and cold. Even in the Riverlands, winter was winter. He wished he’d worn a heavier jacket. It’d been too long since he’d done this sort of thing, this sitting and waiting.

Brynden had said Arya could come along this time but that Jon was in charge. Honestly, he was glad of her company at the moment. He was having trouble staying sharp but he’d been loath to admit it. He’d not slept well since Sam had called him back the other night, his mind playing everything over on a continuous loop anytime he tried to shut his eyes. There was more going on than he’d thought and they had enough going on as it was.

Baelish was out there and the threat of Government loomed along with the potential threat of the Boltons still for all he knew. Hadn’t that been enough?

But now they had Ser Gerold Hightower looking for them on orders from Rhaegar Targaryen, the son of the former king and another so-called claimant for the throne. Jon had hoped that Griff or Aegon or whatever name the blue-haired jackass went by would not mention them after Jon had saved him from the fire but apparently he had. Was Targaryen still trying to find Sansa to marry her off to his son in some bid for a foothold in the North?

If that’s the case though, why was his man asking so many personal questions about me? About Mum? And how’d Brune end up on Sam’s doorstep?

Maybe they figured finding him might be the key to finding Sansa and they’d be right but deep down in his gut he felt like there was more to it.

Whatever the case, it was troubling. He didn’t want anyone he cared about in danger because of him. If Brune had found Sam and if Hightower was here where they were, even if he didn’t realize it yet, what else could they discover? Who else might they find? He needed to get Davos somewhere safe. Brune had walked away from him choosing to pursue Sansa but would this
Hightower guy? Jon didn’t think so.

The knight didn’t look all that dangerous, Jon thought, as he gazed at him again through his binoculars a few minutes later but looks could be deceiving. Older then Brynden maybe, greying and not being terribly inconspicuous at the moment. Maybe he didn’t really believe they were here. Maybe he thought they’d be complacent. Or maybe it was some more of that overconfidence Jon had seen with certain sorts of bodyguards and security personnel. Maybe Ser Gerold had never developed the same brand of instincts Jon had had to develop in order to survive amongst the Free Folk either.

_Or earlier even._

His mind kept wandering back to his mother and every little thing he could remember of his childhood. He’d blocked out a lot of the less pleasant memories from when he was a boy during his teen years and later with the Watch but they’d been resurfacing bit by bit ever since he’d met Sansa.

The constant moving from place to place, the fearful moments where they’d play the quiet games, the way she’d hold him close some nights and whisper things he didn’t understand in between her tears, his mother had been running from someone and he was nearly convinced it was his father now. But who was his father? Was he still alive? Could he possibly still be looking for Jon Snow? And how could he have lived nearly twenty-six years without being found if that was the case?

_“That’s what I’d like to know,”_ Sam had told him before they’d ended their conversation last night. _“And I’ll do my best to find out for you.”_

He laid down the binoculars and rubbed his eyes before closing them for a couple of minutes. It might have been more than a couple of minutes. When he opened them, he was alone.

“Arya?”

His pulse spiked. Where the fuck had she gone? Had something happened to her? Where was Hightower?

_Talk about overconfidence, you idiot! You fell asleep watching a potential enemy! If you were still with Qhorin, he’d kick your ass. If Brynden finds out, he might do the same. He’ll never let you forget it anyway._

“Arya!” he hissed louder. He reached for his binoculars and they weren’t where he’d laid them.

“Looking for these?” She was beside him again and dangling them by the strap.

“Where the fuck did you go?” he growled. “You’re not supposed to leave unless I say.”

“You fell asleep and I had to pee, alright?”

He chuckled despite his frustration. “My faceless assassin had to pee?”

“Fine. I had to take a piss. Is that better?”

“No. I’m…shit, I’m tired. I’m sorry I fell asleep and of course you can go pee. Why’d you take the binoculars?”

She looked down at her sneakers. “I also went in for a closer look.”
“Son of a bitch. I told you...”

“I’m sorry, alright? I won’t do it again.”

“Do you think he saw you?”

“No. He was too busy observing someone new.”

“What?!“

“Big guy driving another rental, drove right past me when I was down by the road.”

“Down by the road?”

“I wanted to get close.” Her chin was jutting forward stubbornly.

“Shit.”

“The new guy drove off and then Hightower followed him. It’s nearly 2 and I think he’s probably done watching the estate for the night. What?”

“You don’t listen so well.”

“Well, you wouldn’t know shit if I didn’t tell you considering you fell asleep!”

That definitely stung. She was also annoyingly correct. “Fine, our friend is gone. Let’s go back to the house and get some rest.”

The pair of them trudged back through the woods discussing their new stranger until they reached the manicured lawn and then moved quick as shadows under the fading starlight to the entry in Edmure’s study.

“Do me a favor...”

“Don’t tell Brynden you fell asleep?” she asked with an arched brow.

“Yeah.”

“You’ll owe me.”

"Fine, I’ll owe you.”

“When are you marrying my sister?”

“As soon as I can.”

“And you’ll take us with you?”

Her voice was so hopeful and young, such a contrast from their playful banter a minute ago. She was just seventeen and she wanted a steady home with her family, a place she didn’t have to hide anymore. He remembered what that was like. Well, part of it anyway.

“If we can get her name clear, we’ll take all three of you with us. We’ll find a home.”

“Or take back ours?”

Winterfell. He knew that was where Sansa wanted to be, too. “If we can, yes.”
She surged forward but he was ready for it. Arya was cautious and restrained when it came to being physically affectionate. Considering everything, he couldn’t blame her. But some clue in her eyes or maybe just the bond that seemed to have developed so easily between them told him she would hug him.

He held her tightly and kissed the top of her head. He had Sansa who would be his wife. He had Davos who was the closest thing he’d known to a father. He had a little sister and two little brothers now. The man who’d died during the mutiny at Castle Black and been brought back to life on the operating table had not had nearly so much to lose. It frightened him in a way but he knew it wouldn’t stop him from doing whatever was necessary to protect them.

Reaching the bedroom at last, Arya headed up the stairs to the attic with a wave before he laid down next to Sansa, curling his body around her to absorb some of her warmth. She murmured groggily but he told her all was well as he sought some real rest. He had to be rested if he was going to be any good to them. He’d sleep until ten tomorrow if allowed.

If only that was the case…

The dream was all wrong. Even his subconscious mind knew it. This wasn’t any place or memory of his youth. His mother looked just as she had when he’d been a boy but he thought he might be an adult in the dream. He was taller than her for one thing.

“That man there,” she whispered shakily. “You must be careful. You need to leave before he sees you.”

“Is he after Sansa?”

“Yes and no. It’s you he wants most of all.”

“Why? And what about you?”

“I’ll slip away, sweet boy. He’s not caught me yet.”

“Why is he following us?”

“Your father sends him.”

“My father? Why?”

“He’ll never stop hunting for you. I had to run away. I couldn’t let him control our lives like that. He’d have shut me out. He’d have kept you from me if I didn’t do what he said.”

“Who is he? Who is my father, Mum? Why does he chase us?”

Before she could answer, the knight turned and looked right at him as if he’d been expecting to see him all along.

I can take him, Jon thought but his mother was desperate and pleading, shoving him and telling him to mind her.

“Go now!”

“Come with me, Mum.”

“I can’t! Run, Jon! Run and don’t look back at him!”
The dream was already fading but his heart was pounding as he ran down the stairwell of one of the run-down apartment complexes they’d lived in when he was a boy. He kept wondering why he was fleeing from this old man but his mother’s fear had seeped into his bones.

*Run and don’t look back at him.*

He awoke in a panic, his arms wildly seeking Sansa beside him. He came up empty and the sickening fear from the dream doubled. But then he heard the toilet flush and he covered his eyes in relief. It was five in the morning. The house was quiet as she padded back to the bed.

“Did I wake you?”

“Not really. I…just sort of work up.” He hesitated to share his dream with her. She always listened when he did but he hated to disturb her rest. “Are you alright?”

“Yes.” She burrowed up against him and he wrapped an arm around her, grateful for her closeness after the dream. “I woke up from a dream.”

Her tone told him very clearly it had not been like the one he’d just had. “A dream, huh?” Her hand began caressing his chest and he felt the corners of his mouth turning upward.

“It was a good one.”

“How good?”

“I could show you,” she answered and then slipped beneath the covers.

His eyes closed as she tugged his boxers down. “The kids…”

“They’re fast asleep. Unless Arya’s still…”

“No, she came in when I did. He left.” He’d tell her rest later. He didn’t want to divert her attention from whatever she had in mind, especially if it was what he hoped she had in mind.

“I wish the world would leave us alone,” she murmured.

“Me, too.”

He could feel her breath ghosting across his hip. His stomach muscles were tensing in anticipation. She’d never done this before. He wasn’t about to stop her. There were no knights hunting him in his bed at the moment. Just Sansa and her sweet curiosity.

“Oh, fuck…” he moaned as she took him into her mouth for the first time.

She hummed in response before lazily licking her way up and down. He fisted the sheets to keep from grabbing her hair, to keep from bucking into her mouth the way that baser part of him wanted to.

He wasn’t above begging some though. “Can you…more?” He lifted the covers.

She shifted up onto all fours. “Are you going to watch me?” she teased.

He reached for the bedside lamp. Yes, he was definitely going to watch.

Her head bobbed up and down more rapidly as she hollowed out her cheeks to suck him harder. He gave into temptation and slid his fingers into her hair, the soft, cool silk of it a lovely contrast to her
hungry, hot mouth. They’d not had sex in days now and he suspected his urge to hold out and enjoy this as long as possible would lose the battle against his desire for release.

She was straddling one of his legs and he brought his knee up for her to grind against if she wanted. She did so with a moan. She wanted him as much as he wanted her.

“Come up here. I want to…”

She shook her head. “Period’s not quite finished,” she reminded him and he groaned in disappointment. Then, she took him back in her mouth and he just groaned. Her eyes were wicked when one hand darted upwards to pinch his nipple.

“Fuck!” he hissed, bucking into her mouth. She huffed a laugh and ground down onto his knee harder. “Pull your shirt off. I want to see you.” In one sweeping movement, the t-shirt which was his anyway flew over her head and landed across his face. He chuckled and tossed it aside. “One way or another, I’m getting you off after,” he promised. Her eyes widened in delight before she continued.

“What’s wrong, Uncle?”

Oberyn had been on the phone earlier and this was the first chance he’d had to approach him with no one in the immediate vicinity. He was turned away from him but Aegon could tell by his posture something was off. Oberyn always stood tall and proud, perfect posture. If that hadn’t made him suspect something was off, his uncle’s expression would’ve told the rest. His uncle always seemed to have a smile playing about his lips even when he was pissed. But here, his uncle had only grown more and more morose as the days drug on.

They’d taken a little break from the ongoing negotiations. They were close to some sort of agreement about how these men from Essos planned to help his father retake Westeros but Aegon hadn’t quite caught all that was said. His High Valyrian wasn’t what it could be. One of the men kept talking about fourteen flames which had his father’s full attention. Aegon only remembered the Fourteen Flames from his history lessons about the Doom of Valyria.

_Really should’ve paid better attention to those lessons, I guess._

With his frail health when he was little, his mother had been unwilling to risk sending him to school on top of the fear that he might be discovered by some Government agents and murdered just for being the grandson of Aerys. But his tutors had been reluctant to displease or contradict his parents and he’d grown into an indifferent pupil at best. And once he’d hit puberty, school had taken a backseat to just about everything else that could turn a boy’s head.

His uncle took a long drag of his cigarette before putting it out and disposing of the butt as he seemed to consider his reply. “Nothing urgent. What’s happening here is more important anyway. I think it’s about time for us to go back inside.”

Aegon grasped his sleeve before he could turn away again. “Don’t lie to me. I told you everything
back in Dorne. Why do you keep things from me?"

Oberyn appeared pained by his words. “I do not wish to but Doran thinks…”

“Doran is not here. You are. Are you only a mouthpiece for your older brother?”

He felt nervous confronting his uncle like this. Oberyn could break him in two if he wanted though he knew he never would. But he was frustrated at being kept in the dark. He wanted to make Oberyn angry enough to speak his mind.

“You would be wise to heed Doran’s patience and wisdom, Aegon. He is doing what he can but… I fear things may already be far out of our control at this point.”

“What things?”

His uncle cupped his face in his hands. “We want to protect you and your sister. That’s all we’ve wanted all these years.”

“I know that. But I’m here and part of things and I’m not a little boy anymore.”

“You will always be a little boy in some ways to me. Especially here,” Oberyn said, pulling Aegon’s hand to his heart.

Aegon loved him very dearly but he would not be deterred. “You’re afraid, aren’t you? Please, tell me why.”

“What did you think of Jon Snow?” That was not what he feared, Aegon could tell. It was something anyway.

“I told you. He saved my life.”

“And you want to help him?”

“I do.”

“You do not think he would harm your sister or yourself? You do not think he would harm your mother?”

“No. I… I spent less than five minutes in his company but… I do not believe that. Have you… has Doran done something?”

“No, but Areo has not called in since the day he arrived in the Riverlands.”

“Hightower.”

“That’s what Doran thinks but he can’t rule out Snow.”

“Jon wouldn’t know anything about Areo even if he’s there.”

“True, but we have every reason to believe he killed some of Baelish’s men to escape with the lady.”

Regardless of why Areo had not checked in, and that could only mean he was dead for the man would never not check in with Doran, he would try again and make his Martell uncles see that his father’s bastard was not a threat to their sister or niece and nephew.
Before he could though, a page came through calling everyone who’d been smoking and talking out on the sweeping veranda overlooking the harbor back inside.

When they walked back in, his father was talking with Mero, the arms dealer and Mopatis. They were all smiles and Aegon suspected that whatever final details they’d needed to agree upon had been worked out while everyone else was dismissed from the room.

“My lords and gentlemen,” Mopatis said. “His Grace has agreed to our solution at last.”

Several of the attendants clapped but Aegon noticed more than one shooting worried looks at their neighbors. His uncle’s face was inscrutable.

“Stannis won’t know what hit him,” one man chuckled.

Another raised a hand in objection. “But the loss of life…”

“I have considered it all very carefully, I assure you,” his father said gravely, speaking at last. “It weighs very heavily upon me but if we are to win back Westeros, if we are to save it from its current state of corruption in the hands of these usurpers and return it to the prosperity and freedoms it knew under my grandfather, we must not balk at getting our hands a little dirty.”

His eyes flickered towards Aegon. He’d never truly feared his father until that moment. His indigo eyes had never been so unsettling as they were now with the shining fervor he could see in them.

“Our collaboration will bring prosperity to the Free Cities as well as my country. It will be worth the bloodshed in the end for the future generations who will benefit from what he have agreed to here today. Gentlemen, I was born to rule Westeros. I know it in my soul. My children were born to lead after me. It’s unfortunate but this…solution, as Mr. Mopatis calls it, is our best chance.”

“What solution?” Aegon whispered in his uncle’s ear.

“The Fourteen Flames.”

“I don’t know what that means,” he said, angry to feel like a fool due to the language barrier but already reluctant at what Oberyn was going to say next.

“ICBMs.”

His blood ran cold. The gooseflesh was spreading across his body. “But…that’s…missiles?”

“Fourteen strategic hits. Goodbye, Kings Landing as well as any military strongholds not in his hands. Goodbye to anywhere else that opposes him…if Stannis Baratheon doesn’t capitulate to their terms.”

“If?” he murmured, his head spinning. *If Stannis Baratheon didn’t capitulate to terms? If?!* “But he’d be killing the people he means to rule. He’d destroy half our country. He’d be worse than my grandfather. It’d be…it’s unthinkable.”

Voices were raised around them, some in praise and others in concern when Oberyn looked him in the eye and asked, his own dark eyes glittering dangerously, “Your father believes it’s his destiny to reclaim what was once your family’s and he means to take it by any means necessary. What were the Targaryen words of old again? Back when the great houses had words?’

Aegon knew them. He thought he might vomit.
Sansa woke early on Saturday morning, stretching to find the other half of the bed empty. He’d left a note saying he’d gone for a run but would bring her breakfast when he returned.

He’d slept better the past couple of nights after speaking with Davos and convincing him to go and visit an old friend from his smuggling days, a Lysene man named Sal who’d retired to Ramsgate six years ago.

She washed her face and dressed before heading upstairs to the attic. Bran was playing video games with his headset on. He grinned at her but continued his gaming. Rickon was still snoring and so was Arya. She’d kept watch with Brynden last night but Ser Gerold had not returned as far as she knew. The other man that Arya had spied hadn’t either. Maybe they’d moved on. Sansa hoped so. Jon told her he didn’t trust it but he was always worrying. She wanted to believe the best.

Edmure had left yesterday for the capital to meet with Stannis. He’d called last night to say he’d arrived but wasn’t sure when the king would receive him. She didn’t want to get her hopes up too high but maybe things would work out. Maybe he’d believe them. Maybe her name could be cleared.

And maybe we could go home.

She knew in exchange for that Stannis would expect her to help settle the North. She would do what she could as long as his terms were not unreasonable. It shouldn’t involve any talk of marriage at least. She could not turn her back on everything that had happened since her father’s execution and Robb and her mother’s murders after all. Her family and their people deserved better. They deserved some independence. But how much would Stannis be willing to give?

You act as if you have a leg to stand on to demand such things when you don’t.

Deciding not to let that depress her, she carefully sat down on the edge of Arya’s bed. Her sketchpad was sitting by her sister’s bed. She seemed to enjoy looking at her sketches which pleased Sansa. She liked thinking Arya appreciated them. She observed her sister as she slept, thinking she’d like to sketch her next and wondered if Arya would agree.

“Where’s Jon?” Arya murmured, catching her off-guard.

“Running. I thought you were asleep.”

A saucy grin appeared. “That’s what I wanted you to think.” She sat up and rubbed her eyes and noticed that Sansa had pulled the sketchpad into her lap. “Are you going to draw?”

“I was thinking of it. May I draw you?”

“Why would you want to draw me?” Her sister’s tone was suspicious but she could hear the hopeful lilt underneath.

“Because you’re my sister and my sister’s pretty, much prettier than those two,” she said, jerking
her thumb over her shoulder towards the boys.

“Hey!” Bran said in protest.

“You’re weren’t supposed to hear that with your headphones on.”

“I hear everything. All master gamers develop the skill,” Bran said, raising one of his headphones from his ear and winking.

Sansa felt her cheeks getting hot, hoping he couldn’t possibly have heard her and Jon last night. No, that’s silly. You can’t hear anything below up here.

She turned back to Arya whose cheeks were flushed more than her own. “You wouldn’t want to draw me.”

“Yes, I would. Why wouldn’t I?”

“I dunno.” She self-consciously ran her fingers through her hair. “Could you…would you draw Winterfell, Sansa?”

Sansa’s breath caught on the sudden lump in her throat. “Winterfell?”

“Please, do.” Bran had taken off his headphones and moved away from the monitor.

“I’ve not seen it in so long. I wasn’t any older than Rickon when I left it for the last time.”

“You remember, Sansa. I know you do. You have a good eye for details and…please.”

She could hardly say know to them and it was only a sketch, wasn’t it? “I’d…I’d be happy to.”

And so she began a task both bitter and sweet, recalling her childhood home with her siblings. Rickon woke and joined them, talking of gargoyles shaped like wolves.

“I don’t remember those, Rickon.”

“There weren’t any…but there will be if we ever go back. I want wolf gargoyles.”

“How about some wolf statues instead?”

Rickon shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

It was chilly in the attic if you wandered to the corners but that morning Sansa thought it very warm as they sat together and bickered and reminisced over what was once theirs.

“It will be again,” Bran said. “I know it.”

She wished she could share his faith. She certainly wanted to.

Before she could finish the sketch, the trapdoor from below opened and Jon emerged. “Knock, knock.”

The boys cheerfully greeted him but Sansa felt a chill of apprehension sweeping over her the second their eyes met. Something was wrong.

“I’ll finish later,” she said. There were complaints from the other three but she rose from the bed and walked over to Jon. He was distressingly pale. Something was definitely wrong. “Did you
bring me up some breakfast?"

He shook his head. “Roslin said for you all to come down today instead. The little ones are with
their nanny in the nursery.”

The boys took off with a whoop but Arya was studying him as closely as Sansa was. He subtly
jerked his chin towards the trapdoor and Arya followed, accepting his dismissal for the moment.

“What is it?” she asked as soon as they were alone, wrapping her arms protectively around him.

“Sam called.”

“And?”

“He thinks…you’re not going to believe it. I don’t believe it. I don’t want to believe it anyway.”

“Gods, Jon. What is it?”

“He has a theory about who my father is.”

She probably stood there gaping like a great fool for several minutes after he told it all. Then, she
took him by the hand and led him below to their room and locked the door. Never before had she
seen Jon this shaken. She wanted to remind him this was just a theory. Sam had admitted as much.
But there were some pieces of the puzzle that definitely fit based on things Sam had uncovered.

“And you knew you were born in Dorne?”

“Yes but I never thought much about it. My mother was from the North and we always lived there
from what I could remember. I’ve always been a Snow…at least as far as I know I have. I don’t
know.”

“And Sam believes the old picture could easily be your mother with him?”

“He said so. I’ve not seen it. I don’t much want to see it.”

He seemed withdrawn and adrift by turns but most of all so confused. She was worried but she
couldn’t really blame him either. Having your identity turned on its ear in such a manner was not
something to be easily brushed aside.

And if it were true, what did it mean for Jon?

What did it mean for them?

The irony struck her that Petyr had wanted to marry her off to Aegon. Betrothed to one prince, then
promised to another and now sleeping with yet another. It was like something out of a fairytale.
She could almost laugh at how preposterous it sounded but this was no laughing matter.

“All that time she spent running, all the times we went without and…” He choked up and couldn’t
finish. She held him close but kept quiet, letting him work through it as he needed to. “Aegon
would be my half-brother.”

“You saved his life.”

He looked torn between wanting to laugh and wanting to weep. “I tied his jacket around his leg.”

“You dragged him from the fire and he could’ve bled to death if you hadn’t done that.”
“Because of you. You wanted me to do something so I did. I only wanted to get you away. Sansa…” Words failed him once more and she felt so terrible for him. This changed things but in what way? And for better or for worse?

Ser Gerold Hightower had been awfully close to finding them. She had a feeling he wasn’t finished looking.

And Petyr. You cannot forget about him. He’d like for you to but that’s precisely when he’d turn up again.

She stroked Jon’s face, running her fingers through his beard and wiping away his tears. “Let’s go downstairs and eat a bite, hmm? I think better with something in my stomach.” He nodded slowly, still dazed, and followed her to the door.

They didn’t make it to the kitchen. Brynden met them on the stairs.

For the second time this morning, she had that sinking feeling coming over her just by looking at another’s expression.

“What is it?” she asked her great uncle.

“There’s eight tactical vehicles coming up the drive.”

Jon’s head snapped up at that, his focus back. “We’ll hide. Get the kids upstairs and Sansa and I will…”

"We’ll try, Jon, but I don’t know with this lot. Half the government’s fucking Elite Forces by the looks of ‘em."

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, Rhaegar is not a good guy in this in case you were still wondering...
Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for the delay in updating this. I hope you'll enjoy the chapter anyway and many thanks to those of you sticking with this story. I'd like to say there's only about 4-5 chapters left but we'll see.

Quick note, the meeting between Roose and Petyr in the first section is taking place the night before Jon and Sansa are captured. I was going to write it as a flashback originally but decided to do it in Roose's POV.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The winter winds were cutting here in the Vale as they blew down from the mountains. Not as cold as the North but still enough to make a man long for his hearth. That’s where Roose would prefer to be this evening. It would beat sitting on the side of the road listening to the wind howling outside his town car.

Still, he wanted answers from Petyr and he needed him more than he cared to admit. He’d made enemies in his own backyard, more than he’d intended. Some of that was Ramsay’s fault, some of it was due to his own moments of hubris. Petyr had said over the phone that all great men had their moments of that and he was no exception.

The play to capture Alayne Stone had been a chancy one. Ramsay wouldn’t shut up about the girl at the bank and Roose had wound up having Walton look into her a bit more. He’d been surprised by what he’d learned. Ramsay had never known the whole truth about her, only that his father had wanted to make a move on Baelish. But in truth, having Sansa Stark in his possession might’ve gained Roose back some of those allies he’d lost after Robb Stark’s death…not that he’d ever admit any role in that.

Unfortunately, Ramsay had botched it and Roose had been left with no Stark girl in his possession, a son on the run who would soon go missing and another enemy he could not really afford. Even if Petyr had had Ramsay killed, he’d have to make amends. It was necessary no matter how the expected courtesies he’d be forced to speak might secretly make his stomach twist. Someday, another opportunity might arise and maybe he could twist a knife in Petyr’s gut instead. But today…here he was.

Tucking his scarf inside his dress coat, he tugged on his gloves as another car rolled up to where Roose’s men waited. He’d brought some of his best guards. If Petyr had anything up his sleeve, they’d be ready. There was a private yacht waiting at the harbor if he needed to retreat.

Petyr had only come in one car. That was surprising. He’d expected more of a show of force but then again, Petyr’s idea of power had always been a little different than his.

“Thank you for coming all this way,” a familiar voice said as the back door to the Corbray’s limo
was opened.

Only through years of perfecting his poker face did Roose manage not to express any sign of shock. The wasted looking man awkwardly being assisted into a wheelchair by his driver looked so different than the spry and hearty business associate he’d known.

“It was no trouble. Shall we…” He’d been on the verge of suggesting a walk and bit his tongue. He gestured down the lane. The chair could roll along well enough.

“As long as you don’t mind my driver coming along.”

The white-haired man with the hooked nose gave him a smile. Roose shrugged and they walked down the lane a ways, exchanging vague pleasantries and probing for what the other man really wanted.

The whirl of rotors in the distance were masked by the winds at first but once he heard them, he knew that Petyr had not come alone at all. He’d come with something far more imposing than some hired guns in sleek town cars, too.

“My apologies, Roose, but I need to be in His Grace’s good graces more than yours, you see,” Petyr told him, tossing aside his blankets and rising awkwardly from his wheelchair. “The head of the Northern Syndicate seems a decent initial offering to make a king. And by the way, it was me who had your son killed. I’m sure the Braavosi fish have had their fill of him by now.”

Roose could hardly summon any sorrow for Ramsay. He could only curse himself for being outmaneuvered by this wretched little man.

“Your hands’ aren’t clean when it comes to me and you,” he warned him.

“No, they’re not but I’m hoping I’ll have more to offer Stannis than a mere criminal soon.”

“The girl? I thought you’d lost her.”

“I have but I was thinking of something else. I always say, knowledge is power.”

Riverrun was Roslin’s home and she’d bravely told them she would stall her unexpected guests as long as she could. But she had her children and servants to protect as well. No one person was going to stop those men from entering the house for long. Jon prayed no harm would come to her for trying to give them a few extra minutes head start.

Rickon had wanted all of them to hide in their attic. He’d been grasping at hands and crying even as the precious seconds slipped by until Bran finally pulled him roughly up the stairs to their uncertain hideout. Part of Jon had wanted to follow the boys but Brynden had believed that this raid was different than any previous raid and said being trapped in an attic went against the grain. Plus, if they ran and were noticed, maybe the boys in the attic would be overlooked at least.

Out in the woods where they’d watched Hightower together, with the raised voices of strangers
getting closer every minute, Brynden had declared they would need to part ways, saying Arya would go with him. Jon hoped they’d got clear. Together, they could watch each other’s backs and maybe find out some more information to help Sansa and all of them.

Arya had reluctantly followed Brynden at last, melting away through the trees like sugar in the rain after a whispered plea to her sister. “We’re supposed to be together. I don’t want to be on my own again.”

It had nearly broken his heart and Sansa had been choking back sobs all while they’d made their own final mad dash towards the road, hoping to catch a ride with a benevolent stranger…or steal his car since Jon was armed.

But, they hadn’t made it very far despite his skills. Sansa was not in proper conditioning to run very far or fast over uneven terrain. She had no training for this sort of thing. And he was not about to leave her behind.

In a strange way, it was a relief to lay down his gun and stop running at last. Come what may, they were together. At present, they were sitting side by side in the helicopter which had taken them from the back of the tactical vehicle and were heading towards the closest airstrip where a plane waited to fly them to the capital.

Surrounded by armed men, Jon allowed himself to relax. If they’d just wanted to kill them, they already would have. They were Stannis’ forces and they were being escorted, in admittedly strong-arm fashion, to meet with the king. He would be patient and observe things, wait and see what happened before he determined his next step, fight or flight or something else.

And I have bigger things to reflect on.

Could he really be the son of Rhaegar Targaryen? Naturally, this was the question that plagued him all during their trip, making his stomach knot up every time he ran across it in his mind. It was like the rough part of a stick that you couldn’t seem to leave be even with the threat of getting a splinter from it.

All those times he’d wondered who his father might be as a child and as he grew to be a man, never would he have guessed this. Who else might’ve guess it though?

He covertly looked at their guards. All of them were military men like he’d once been, soldiers trained to take orders. That was just as well. None of them would likely think her bodyguard might have a secret of his own.

Her hand reached for his and he grasped it, suddenly concerned that in his reflections over his own affairs, he’d been neglecting her. She’d been parted from her siblings again most cruelly and they were facing an uncertain future. She might be on the cusp of a panic attack. He would hardly blame her if she was.

But that wasn’t it. Sansa was reaching for his hand to offer him comfort. “I’m sorry I wasn’t faster,” she whispered.

“Don’t be sorry.” He knocked his shoulder against hers in an almost playful fashion. “Guess I should’ve been nudging you out of bed to go running with me in the mornings instead of letting you lie in. That’s on me.”

She smirked. “I’ve never run except when chased.” He shook his head in silent laughter at her. “We’re together at least.”
“Aye, that we are.”

“We’re going to be together again, I think. Someday, we’ll all be together in a house somewhere. Big or small, I don’t care so long as we’re safe and no one comes to bother us anymore. Us, the children, my great-uncle if he likes and your dad.”

He smiled though an ache filled his chest. There was only one man he’d call his dad and it was not Rhaegar Targaryen. “It’s a sweet dream,” he murmured.

She laid her head on his shoulder and he put an arm around her, doing his best to ignore the raised eyebrows of the soldier sitting opposite them. “Better to think of sweet dreams than nightmares.”

How well he knew it. “Sansa, all of my sweet dreams include you.”

The helicopter touched down and they were left sitting while the squad’s commander went to see if their plane was ready. He knew a moment’s panic when he overhead one of the subordinates ask another, “We’re not taking him, too, are we?”

He gripped her hand tightly. He could not be parted from her. He saw the panic swelling in her own eyes.

But it was only a passing scare for the other replied, “No, he’s coming, too. We were told to bring any man that was with her along.”

Somehow, those words didn’t bring him a great deal of comfort.

The little diner in Pinkmaiden was like a dozen little diners he’d visited throughout Westeros. Most everyone was intent on their coffee and their business. His eyes kept a busy scan going from behind his newspaper all the same. Her eyes were red rimmed from lack of sleep last night but busily scanning, too.

“It’s gonna be alright. I’m sure we’ll find a way to…” Brynden trailed off in response to her glare. “Alright. What in seven hells do I know? It may all go to shit and we may never see them again. Is that better?” He wasn’t exactly known for his patience.

“No!” She folded her arms across her chest and her glare only grew fiercer. He couldn’t blame her really. She’d been growing quieter, more withdrawn all day, well before they’d stopped for a long overdue plate of eggs and bacon. It was a defense tactic to keep from breaking down, he knew.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“Do you think Edmure said too much?”

Brynden sighed. It was possible. He knew his nephew wouldn’t have meant to if he did but he had planned on bringing Sansa up to Stannis eventually. If he’d mentioned her last night after his arrival, it was conceivable that he’d wound up being interrogated and the tactical squadron could’ve been dispatched to Riverrun overnight. Elite teams forces were supposed to be at the
ready 24/7 after all.

“I don’t know. If he did, I know he was only doing his best. And to be honest, it’s more reassuring if they learned of her being there through him then some unknown person.”

“Or maybe a known person. What if that Hightower guy tipped them off? Or what if Baelish thought she might be there?”

“It’s possible.”

“I want to find out.”

He nodded. They were on the run but that didn’t mean they couldn’t do some digging. “Well, the rental plates on his vehicle were from here. Maybe Hightower’s closer to where we are than we think. We can start here.”

She seemed pleased by that and sipped her coffee. “Jon’s friend works at the Citadel. We could go there if we can’t find him.”

“Yes, Mr. Tarly. That is true.” He finished his coffee and urged her to eat what she wanted. “We need to get back on the road soon. Need to find another car, too.”

He’d stolen one from town after their long and weary walk this morning. They’d need a replacement if they were to stay ahead of the authorities.

She pushed her eggs around her plate and nibbled at her toast.

“Ain’t you hungry?”

“I want to know if Bran and Rickon are alright.”

“I know. We can’t call yet.”

“I didn’t want to go back to the attic but now…”

“You almost wished you’d stayed.”

“Yes.” She fidgeted with her jacket. “Jon said we’d all live together after things were settled. Sansa did, too.”

_We want lots of things. We don’t always get them._ “I know they want that to happen.” He gave her hand a quick squeeze. “Come on. Let’s go see if we can find our snooping knight.” It would be better to keep Arya busy and maybe they’d discover something useful.

_Or eliminate one of our problems anyway._

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“Are you packed already?”
Aegon nodded in response, still hovering in the doorway. He never went to his father’s rooms in Dorne so why should he at Mr. Mopatis’ estate? This felt odd. He’d spent much of his life avoiding his father. He didn’t much wish to seek him out this evening either. Especially now that I see you for what you are.

Nevertheless, he’d determined that he would. Millions of lives were at stake. Aegon had never considered himself particularly brave but he had to try.

“Father,” he said, shutting the door. “I was wondering if I might speak with you about this decision.”

Rhaegar smiled sadly and beckoned him nearer. “I promise this is not something I want, Aegon. And if there’s anyway to avoid such loss of life, I will do my best to take that path.”

“But if Stannis won’t surrender, you’d really use missiles on our country? Our people?” He’d lived in Dorne for much of his life. He’d barely seen Westeros outside of Dorne other than his little trip to the Vale. He still considered it his country and the people as his. Did his father still think the same way? How could he be so cavalier with their lives if he did?

“Like I said, we must sometimes make grievous choices for the greater good.”

“But, Father…”

“It’s our destiny to rule, Aegon. It’s not like I want it. It’s a calling. I can’t escape it. It may be yours as well.”

May be. Wasn’t that an interesting choice of words. Regardless, that fervor was shining in his father’s indigo eyes again like at the meeting where they’d spoken of the Fourteen Flames. They’d be leaving tomorrow, returning to Dorne for a brief spell so his father could issue his ultimatum with promises of Fire and Blood if Stannis didn’t capitulate.

If the lives of a million strangers didn’t matter to him, maybe the life of one man would. “What about Jon, Father? We don’t know for certain where he is. What if he’s close to one of the strike zones? He could be in Kings Landing for all we know.”

“No, Hightower is searching for them in the Riverlands. There’s not any military strongholds there right now.”

“Has Hightower found them?”

“No.”

“Then, you don’t know. He could be…”

“It would be lamentable.” He grew quiet and for a moment Aegon thought he’d made a dent. “But if it is Jon’s fate to die during the liberation, that is for the gods to decide.”

When had his father completely lost his mind? Despite all the time he’d spent avoiding him, how had he missed this?

Aegon rose, disheartened. He’d tried and now he would put his faith in his uncles. Rhaenys and his mother would understand, he hoped.

As he reached the door, his father spoke once most. “Petyr Baelish has figured out who Jon Snow is. He still wants that cabinet position. If Hightower doesn’t succeed, I think Baelish might.”
Aegon turned, shaking his head. Did his father actually trust Petyr Baelish?

*A madman and a fool both. Worse, a madman and a fool with weapons of mass destruction in his hands.*

Once after they’d quarreled quite fearsomely as girls and caused a rather unfortunate scene during a formal dinner in the capital, Father had lost his temper and punished them both rather severely… for Father anyway. He had no doubt been under a great deal of pressure by that point though his daughters did not know it.

Sansa had taken her tongue lashing and accepted her confinement to her room and loss of privileges like a lady of fifteen should, she’d thought. Admittedly, she’d brooded over the unfairness of it for a long while. Perhaps she could’ve avoided provoking her sister but it was Arya who’d behaved like a hoyden in front of the king’s honored guests.

But Arya had run away from the palace, causing an even greater uproar than when she’d dumped her pudding on top of her sister’s head at the height of their noisy debate.

When she’d been found, she’d been filthy but excitedly shared her adventures with their father that night in his offices. Sansa had had to bite her tongue to keep from screaming that he shouldn’t be chuckling so indulgently over his wild girl’s recklessness and bitterly resented that her good behavior for the course of her punishment amounted to nothing in his eyes apparently compared to Arya’s stories.

“You’re both safe and that’s all that truly matters to me,” her father had said gently though when he’d noticed her standing to the side and no doubt looking hurt.

It was then that she’d moved from her corner and welcomed her sister back with an embrace, only secretly glad she was not wearing one of her favorite blouses when Arya’s smudged but happy face rested on her shoulder.

So, it seemed amusing in a way that Sansa Stark should be returning to the Red Keep for the first time in over two years looking more like the bedraggled waif Arya had resembled that night than she’d ever appeared when she’d lived here as a girl.

Racing through the woods had left her hair a tangled mess and her jeans muddy. She’d been given a camouflage jacket by one of the soldiers to wear over her thrift store sweatshirt which had been pricked by numerous thorns but she was hardly dressed for court.

Her stomach growled loudly as they were escorted through the grand hallway she’d walked along many times before towards the throne room. They’d never had their breakfast nor lunch either. They’d been given bottled water and a pack of peanut butter crackers on their flight. She’d never cared for peanut butter but she’d gobbled the crackers down all the same. They’d had nothing since and she was headachy and feeling ill-tempered. *Probably not in the best mood to meet our new sovereign.*
Deciding to ignore her deplorable state of appearance, she looked at Jon. He’d made the same run through the woods but to her he looked perfectly at ease and fairly well put together. All the same, when she looked closely at his eyes, she detected the strain and worry there. He could’ve gotten away if not for her. No one would even be after him more than likely if not for her. And the horrible shock he’d received this morning on top of everything else, it simply wasn’t fair at all.

She’d spoke truly in the helicopter. She wished they could find their little home somewhere and live in peace. Would they ever be allowed that? She hoped Stannis might give them that someday. She highly doubted Jon’s father, assuming Sam was right and Rhaegar was his father, ever would.

That brought to mind another concern. What would Stannis do if he learned that he might hold the son, albeit the bastard one, of Rhaegar Targaryen? That could be a very bad thing for Jon. She doubted Jon would bring such a thing up though and she certainly didn’t plan to.

Her heart was already pounding hard but, as they neared the throne room, the tempo increased. Her palms were sweaty and that skittery sense of panic started to well up again like earlier when she’d feared they’d be separated. She thought she could handle anything so long as they were together.

But at the last second, they were ushered into one of the antechambers. There was a light spread of cold dishes, sodas and bottled waters on the table that dominated the room.

“Eat,” one of their guards told them. “You have an audience with His Grace in forty-five minutes. Eat and then we’ll allow you a place to freshen up and change into something more suitable.”

They both nodded, only hesitating for a moment before they greedily filled plates. If Stannis Baratheon had had them brought all this way just to poison them, she’d eat her hat. However, when she considered Joffrey had been poisoned, she couldn’t bring herself to laugh at her feeble jest.

They sat down together, putting together sandwiches between bites of fresh fruit and pasta salad. They drank soda and then water, both of them feeling parched from the flight and the long day. She wanted to hold his hand but they were both preoccupied with eating.

Once they’d had their fill, she was shown into what was still called the lady’s retiring room. A plain blue dress was laid out along with a brush. Jon was not allowed in with her, probably taken into a more basic office to change.

Her guard stayed by the door so she made use of the restroom further within and then changed and washed her face and hands, doing what she could with her hair. The dress was rather dowdy for a girl on the cusp of twenty but she didn’t care. If Stannis wanted her dressed as a lady, she would not object. She was in better spirits since she’d eaten at least.

When she left the retiring room, she expected to see Jon. She saw her uncle instead.

“Are you hurt?” he asked, embracing her. He whispered in her ear, “I swear, they seemed to know as soon as I arrived that you were there.”

“I’m not hurt. Roslin and the children?”

“Perfectly fine. He’s not Cersei.”

“No, I didn’t think he was.”

“My wife says the pups have been fed and are snug in their bed but Nan’s off tonight.”
She could’ve kissed him. All day the anxiety had been with her over the fate of her siblings. The boys were still hidden. And if ‘Nan’ was off then that probably meant he didn’t know Arya’s whereabouts and there was a good chance she and Brynden had got away.

“That’s good to know,” she said, squeezing his hand. “Have you seen Jon?”

“No.”

They’d barely muttered a ‘see you soon’ when she’d been led into the other room. She’d not touched him since they’d left the plane. She told herself not to worry. He may have had his own call of nature to answer. He’d need to wash and change too perhaps. She wasn’t sure which room they’d taken him to. He’d rejoin her soon. They’d be together before long.

But when the guard said, “It’s time for your audience, my lady,” Jon was still absent and Edmure was told to wait.

Desperately concerned for Jon and nervous over what awaited her, she followed the guard into the throne room with her head held high, refusing to let them see how frightened she was. Just as she had done in the past when a different king had sat upon the throne, she would endure this and do her best to protect those she loved.

Chapter End Notes

***Author's Note 12/9/19*** Taking a break from posting on this. I’m sorry but I think I’d rather finish it first to make sure I cover all the plotly points I want to cover beforehand. I certainly plan to finish it in the new year and thank you for understanding :)

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