# Fight Club

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## Fight Club

by **Eilit**

### Summary

Everyone has a secret vice. Even the stodgy, uptight, by-the-book Chief Operating Officer of Baratheon Industries has a dark secret no one knows about, one connected with Kings Landing's shady, high-stakes, underground gambling rings. Stannis Baratheon likes to fight.

### Notes

Here's a gift to the Stansa ship fans. It's an idea I've been toying with for a while now.
Chapter 1

Ring ring. Ring ring. The crappy little prepaid cell phone rang twice, then stopped. 7:15 PM. Fifteen minute warning. Stannis sent a few last minute emails, packed up his laptop and exited his top floor office for the executive elevator. 7:18 PM. Twelve minutes. Looking across the marble-tiled hallway, he could see that his brother's office was dark. Actually, it had been empty for hours now, as Robert had left after lunch to play golf with his old school buddy, Ned Stark.

Ding. The cherry paneled elevator opened out directly onto the executive level parking garage. 7:22 PM. Stannis wasted no time in striding quickly to his black S-600 Mercedes, located in the number 2 slot. Number 1, his brother's parking spot, tended to be vacant more often than not. Attracting no attention, he smoothly drove out of the garage and made his way through the downtown financial district towards the freeway. The evening rush hour had come and gone, and the street traffic was relatively light. He needed to be well away from the Baratheon Industries Tower before 7:30.

7:29 PM. Stannis pulled into an empty parking slot underneath a broken street lamp, just one block away from the freeway on-ramp. Retrieving a small notebook from his pocket, he also retrieved the prepaid cell phone and waited, pen in hand.

7:30 PM. Ring Ring. "Yeah." He never said anything else on these calls.

The voice on the other end sounded like it had been run through a filter. "Next Thursday, 10:00 PM. 210 North Branch Street." Click.

He wrote down the address and time in the notebook, then drove onto the freeway, heading for the Garden District and his brownstone townhouse.

Once home Stannis trotted up the well worn granite steps to the large heavy oak door. Inside he disabled the security system and headed straight to his second floor bedroom. The meticulously renovated brownstone fit his needs for privacy perfectly. Although located in the gentrified Garden District, most of the residents of the neighborhood lived relatively anonymous lifestyles, and as far he could figure, none of his neighbors knew that he was the COO of Baratheon Industries, the largest privately held corporation in Westeros.

Robert and Renly, on the other hand, lived far more public lives than their quiet middle brother. When he'd married Cersei Lannister, Robert had built a huge estate on the edge of Kings Landing, complete with a guarded gate and groundskeeper's quarters. Frequent parties attended by the city's high society also attracted paparazzi and social bloggers. Renly, the public relations officer for the company, lived in a penthouse near the booming downtown. A patron of the arts, he attended every major arts and theatre event possible, and held season box seat tickets to the Metropolitan Opera and the King's Theatre. Both brothers made the tabloids on a regular basis - Robert for one sex scandal after another, and Renly for his alternative lifestyle.

However, their extensive schmoozing and people skills worked to the benefit of the company, enabling Stannis to stay out of public scrutiny and focus his efforts on running the corporation. A harsh taskmaster, Stannis nonetheless was very fair and upfront in his handling of the company's daily affairs. He also proved to be one of the toughest negotiators in Westeros, and incredibly savvy in handling financial matters. Between his business acumen, Robert's people skills and Renly's charm, the three brothers made an unlikely, yet very effective team that had created the most successful private company in the country. The corporation also held zero debt, at Stannis' insistence, meaning it was beholden to no one, and not subject to any outside influence or corruption. Considering the strength of the crime syndicates within Kings Landing, that in itself turned out to be
a major accomplishment.

As soon as he reached the bedroom Stannis stripped and stepped on the scales. 235 pounds. Nine
days to make weight. Nine days to gain five pounds. That should be easy enough to do. At 6 feet 4
inches tall, putting on five pounds would be a simple matter - stop running and throw in an extra two
protein shakes each day, and he'd be at 240 on time.

The large walk-in closet contained an entire row of bespoke suits, all black, as well as several sets of
custom-made shoes and shirts. The back of the closet held a small locked chest. From within that
chest Stannis pulled a stained gym bag, well worn construction boots, frayed jeans, plain black t-
shirt, dirty baseball cap and battered leather jacket. He also grabbed an old wallet and a keychain.

Thus dressed, Stannis went back to the kitchen, guzzled down a high protein meal-replacement
shake and left the brownstone via the alley. Walking two blocks, he tossed his gym bag into the bed
of a battered old Ford pickup that he kept parked in a nondescript lot. It was registered to one Stefan
Esterman, the same name on the driver's license that he kept in his alternate wallet. In fact, nothing
on his person or in the truck could be connected back to Stannis Baratheon at all.

As he drove the truck towards the warehouse district and the docks, Stannis reflected on the events
from five years ago that had eventually led him to seek out his current, unusual and somewhat
dangerous hobby.

*********** 5 Years Earlier ***************

"Stannis, I'm leaving. I'm going to Asshai, with Mel." Stannis looked up from the boat engine he was
working on, hands, shirt and jeans covered in grease. He'd been on the water for the past four days,
and had just returned that afternoon. He hadn't showered or shaved since before he'd left, and figured
he probably smelled, based on her expression. His wife sneered down at him, pinch faced and sour,
arms crossed.

"What are you talking about, Selyse?" His mind hadn't quite made the connection. He thought
perhaps she had decided to go on some sort of spiritual trip - Mel had encouraged Selyse's interest in
alternative religions.

"I filed for divorce. I don't want to be married to you anymore. I have far more in common with Mel
than with you, and frankly, she's a lot more fun to be with. We've been sleeping together for three
months now. I'm leaving. Here's the paperwork, and my lawyer's card." With that, Selyse tossed an
envelope stuffed with papers on the driveway, jumped into her Volvo, and drove away. Stannis
didn't even get a chance to speak.

"Huh." Stannis looked at the envelope, and then at his house, the one he'd had built to please his
wife. A large four bedroom structure in one of the nicer suburban neighborhoods, it featured a huge
fenced yard, very nice pool and patio for entertaining. Their seven year old daughter Shireen was
spending the next month with her grandparents, the Florents, in the coastal town of Brightwater. At
least she won't see this mess unfold, he thought.

Thirty one years old, newly appointed COO at his brother's company, and already getting a divorce
after only eight years of marriage. Even Robert and Cersei had managed to stay married for the past
sixteen years, but he was sure that wasn't a testament to love, just her unwillingness the leave the
wealthiest man in Kings Landing and the lifestyle her marriage to him offered.

Changing his shirt, Stannis got into the big truck he usually drove only when towing the boat, and
started driving. Not feeling, not thinking, just numb, he drove on and on. He didn't know where he
was going, but shortly after sunset he spotted a cowboy bar outside of a small town. He'd been
driving for nearly two hours. A beer and some depressing country music suited his current state of mind perfectly. His greasy jeans, old ball cap and scruffy beard helped him blend in with the crowd of ranch hands and oil workers.

Six shots of whiskey and four beers later found Stannis alone in a holding cell of the local Sheriff's Office, slumped against the wall. The other cell held five men arrested at the same bar, who all refused to be located in the same cell as Stannis. They all sported various cuts and bruises on their faces and knuckles, and they all swore he went loco during the fight that broke out. Two other men had been taken to the hospital with broken jaws and cracked ribs.

Deputy Morgan started cataloguing the personal effects of the prisoners. When he recorded the information off from Stannis' driver's license, he swore to himself. "Holy Shit! Is he related to Baratheon Industries somehow? Hey Pete, check this out." Morgan had looked up Stannis on Google, and found a number of pictures and articles pertaining to him, his brothers and their company.

Pete, the other deputy on duty, looked over Morgan's shoulder at the computer screen. "We'd better call in Sheriff Myer. If this gets out it'll be huge."

Stannis awoke to the sound of familiar, yet very unwelcome laughter. Bleary-eyed, he could see two tall figures standing on the other side of the jail cell. It was 1:00 AM.

"Stanny! Haha! You're a Baratheon after all - I knew you had it in you, little brother!" Robert stood outside of the cell, checkbook in hand. Renly, who had accompanied Robert, just snickered. This incident was too good to pass up.

Deputy Morgan unlocked the cell to let Stannis out. "Little brother? You call him little?" Staring at the three large Baratheons, the deputy thought that if one of them took out seven men in a roughneck/cowboy bar, drunk, what would the three together be capable of? At 6' 3", 6' 4" and 6' 6", they made a terrifying trio. He didn't want to know.

Renly and Robert bundled Stannis into Robert's SUV. They drove to the bar, where Renly hopped out to drive Stannis' truck back to the city. Once alone, Robert managed to turn serious.

"What happened, Stannis? You've never done this before. You've always been the one to bail me out of jail, not the other way around." For once Robert sounded both sober and sincere.

"Selyse. Filed for divorce. Out of the blue, bam. She's moving to that freaky place, Asshai, with that woman." Stannis turned his face to the window and closed his eyes, hoping the pounding in his head would go away.

"Huh. Oh well. Women. Tell me one thing, Stanny. Did you get a kick out of it, getting drunk and fighting in a bar?" Robert could be so infuriating sometimes.

"Not so much. And don't call me Stanny," Truth was, he'd really gotten a rush out of the whole experience, especially knowing he'd taken out seven men by himself, but he wasn't about to admit that to Robert.

************************************************ 5 Years Later - Present Time ************************************************

9:00 PM. Stannis pulled his truck into a parking slot near Fury Road, the boxing club down by the docks he'd joined five years ago, right after his divorce. Unlike the upscale, franchise style boxing clubs located in the better parts of town, this one was gritty, old, dirty. The real deal. It'd been running for nearly fifty years now, and had a reputation of training some of the best amateur fighters
in Kings Landing. Best of all, none of the 'pretty people' of Kings Landing, the wealthy high society types, came anywhere near this part of the city. No one recognized Stannis here. Even so, he still used an alias. As far as these folks were concerned, he was simply Stef, a cold, brutal, silent fighter who'd been winning steadily for the past few years.

Inside, he quickly changed, wrapped his hands and started warming up on the bag. Bear, his trainer, came over to spar.

"Stef, did you get your call?" Stannis nodded once, not speaking.

Bear had been the one to get Stannis involved in the underground circuit fights. He'd seen the potential Stannis exhibited, his calculating, emotionless method of fighting, and figured the circuit could use fresh blood. He'd been right. The fighter known as Stef had risen quickly through the ranks. In last year's circuit, he'd made it all the way to the semi-finals, where he'd been beaten on points by a younger fighter called the Hound.

This year, he'd fought seven matches, including one against the Hound, and had won every time. Next Thursday's match was the semi-final. If he won that, he'd be in the final fight of the season. All the crime bosses and shady businessmen in Kings Landing showed up to watch and bet on these last few fights of season, and the winner tended to walk away a much wealthier man. Stannis didn't fight for the money - he fought for the adrenalin rush and the tough competition.

The need for secrecy was paramount - that's why he used an alias, and carried a cheap prepaid cell phone. Nearly all the fighters did. There was no set pattern for scheduling the dates or locations of the fights - they were random, and never held in the same place twice. The circuit fights were highly illegal. Half of the men funding the operation were mobsters and wanted by the police. Throw in the high stakes betting made by the spectators, and they had the makings of some serious organized crime.

Bear chatted in between their sparring rounds. "Word is there's a new fella bankrolling the finals. It's that smarmy little hedge fund manager that's been on TV so much this year. Petyr Baelish, who started The Mockingbird hedge fund."

Stannis did nothing more than grunt an acknowledgement. Inside though, his mind started churning. Baelish! He and Robert were scheduled to meet Baelish in two days' time. Evidently Baelish wanted to invest part of his fund in Baratheon Industries. Stannis had never met him in person, and with this knowledge, had no intention of attending that meeting, or allowing a penny of Baelish's money to be invested in their company.

After they finished their training Bear had one more tidbit of information. "Word is, the grand prize this year includes something more than money. It's something special, they say, something that Baelish himself treasures."

Driving home, Stannis thought long and hard about his 'hobby'. He'd managed to maintain his anonymity on the circuit for all these years, and had also managed to remain ignorant of all names associated with the operation. Plausible deniability. But now, he realized that this had to be his last year in the circuit. Two more fights, and then he'd be done. Baratheon Industries clean reputation mattered more than his need to fight.
Chapter 2

Stannis didn't step off the elevator at the top floor of Baratheon Tower until 7:55 the following morning, which for him was nearly unheard of. Normally he arrived at the office before 7:00 AM, and usually worked steadily for at least ten, usually eleven hours every day. But when he'd gotten home from the gym last night, he'd spent nearly two hours researching Petyr Baelish, and had only slept fitfully after that. He hadn't found nearly enough information during that time to satisfy his curiosity or the warning signals firing off in his brain. Outside assistance would be required.

Unsurprisingly, neither Robert nor Renly had shown up yet, for which Stannis was grateful. Normally irritated with his brothers' lax (to him) work habits, this morning he relished the quiet time. He needed to contact Davos and get the dirt on Petyr Baelish quickly.

Stannis and Davos had met at Kings University, where they had been roommates for all four years. Even though they grew up in very different families and circumstances, they had bonded and become lifelong friends. Stannis did not easily become familiar with many people, and appreciated Davos' patience and even temper, which balanced his own shortcomings in both areas.

After they graduated from the university Davos joined the Kings Landing Police Department, while Stannis traveled overseas to get his Masters Degree in Business. Davos' humble background, extensive contacts and friendly temperament suited him well to his profession, and he had quickly been promoted. He'd been a detective with the force for years now, leaving the blue uniform and beat cop duty behind for long term investigations.

While he waited for his email inbox to load, Stannis pulled out his smartphone and called Davos, who answered almost immediately. "Hey Stannis, what's up? You normally text me."

"Davos, I need information on someone ASAP, and I would prefer to not have anything digital or traceable associated with the request. Are you available to meet me today?" Stannis had never asked Davos to use his position as a law enforcement officer for questionable purposes before. He knew Davos would probably hesitate, and certainly ask for more details first.

"What's it about, Stannis?"

"Petyr Baelish. It is imperative that I know everything you can find on him, and fast."

"Seriously? Stannis, I can't access confidential records and pass on the information to you - it would get my ass fired. I've got seven kids ya know."

"Please, Davos, this is important, and I do not wish to explain over the phone." His old friend sighed audibly on the other end of the line. Not one for social graces, Stannis never said please or thank you. He simply demanded, and almost always got what he wanted.

"Fine, only because I've never heard you ask politely before. But you're gonna owe me big time, pal. Tonight's our normal thing, right? I'll see you then." Click. Every Wednesday night the two friends met at a burger place not far from the financial district. It was Stannis' one attempt towards socializing, and only because Davos insisted.

He perused his email while trying to decide whether he should tell Davos about the circuit fights. No one knew that he fought, not even his best friend. He quickly negated the idea - no one could know. Ever. Their safety would be compromised if his identity and link to the fights ever leaked out.

Stannis quickly sorted through his copious email messages. One email concerned a new intern
working in Renly's department (delete), several referenced quarterly reports (file), another came from Robert's secretary detailing the agenda for tomorrow's meeting with Petyr Baelish. Stannis decided to avoid attending the meeting in person, as he would still be able to dial in for remote participation. Under no circumstance could he allow Baelish to meet him face to face. If Baelish recognized him later at a fight, then the Baratheons could be influenced under threat of blackmail.

A small commotion diverted his attention to the hallway, right before Robert burst through his door, uninvited. He appeared most jovial, and not too hung over.

"Stannis, come on out here! Ned's little girl is all grown up, and has taken the intern position in Renly's department! Come greet her, brother!" Not bothering to wait for a reply, Robert disappeared back out the door again, leaving it wide open.

Stannis huffed, and then walked to the door as Robert obviously was not going to close it.

He had no intention of wasting his time greeting some young intern (few could handle working for him, so he had stopped hiring interns into his department years ago), until he caught a glimpse of her long red hair. She looked familiar to him. The slender young lady was conservatively dressed, yet not churchy, and held herself confidently, with poise and grace. She stood next to both Renly and Robert, smiling and chatting easily, as if she had known them for years. Then Robert's comment made sense to Stannis, coupled with the email he'd deleted. Ned's girl. Eddard Stark's very beautiful daughter, Sansa Stark.

Stannis hadn't realized that he had been standing there, just staring, until Robert's booming voice broke through his reverie. "Stannis! Don't just stand there, come over here!" Caught, he assumed his 'polite businessman' expression and strode over to greet the Stark girl, who had turned and gifted him with a small, shy smile, but still managed to meet his gaze.

"Miss Stark, welcome to Baratheon Industries. I understand you're to join us as an intern in the public relations department. Are you attending Kings Landing University?" Stannis thought that this girl was rather young to be hired as an intern - he'd make a point to find out how old she was from Robert later.

Sansa replied with dignity and confidence, which he found impressive. Most young people found his size, presence and brusque manners unsettling. "Thank you, Mr. Baratheon. I'm really looking forward to the opportunity. I will only be working here part-time, as I'm in my second year at the university. My degree plan requires me to combine classes with business experience - it's a hybrid approach."

"Excellent. Have you worked as an intern at any other company?" He wanted to see if this young lady had the mettle to work in the brutal corporate world.

Sansa answered quickly, perhaps a little too quickly for his liking. "Yes. Last semester I worked at the Mockingbird Hedge Fund." An uncertain look entered her expression, and she looked away for a moment.

Time to push. "That must have been an exciting opportunity for someone as young as yourself, and yet now you choose to work for a much more traditional business. Why leave?"

Robert jumped in. "The Mockingbird Fund? Ha! Imagine that! Petyr Baelish will be here at the office tomorrow - I'm sure he'd love to see you again. He and your mother's family go way back, if I recall. Renly, bring her by while Baelish is here."

Stannis watched Sansa's reaction instead of his brother's. One thing he'd learned over the years was
how to observe and analyze even the slightest changes in expressions and body language. That was one of the reasons he had the reputation for being the most successful business negotiator in Westeros. Her eyes and posture showed insecurity and even a bit of fear, but she managed to maintain a small smile anyway. Robert could be so clueless sometimes.

"Thank you, but no, I have to meet with my adviser at the university tomorrow. Besides, I work here now, not for Mr. Baelish." This time Sansa clearly looked to Renly, as if appealing for intervention.

Renly, not as dense as their older brother, took over then, as she fell under his department. "Enough interrogations, both of you. Let me get Sansa settled down in the Communications division. This way, Sansa, and I'll introduce you to your new supervisor." Renly escorted Sansa to the elevator.

Following Robert into his expansive office, Stannis shut the door rather forcefully. "Robert, I want you to reconsider this Baelish meeting. I do not trust him, and we agreed a long time ago this company would not be beholden to outside interests. The Mockingbird's investment model is extremely risky, and he personally seems far too slick for my comfort level."

"Geez, Stanny, don't be such a lemon. Besides, you know I can't just cancel this at the last minute. That's not good for our reputation. I haven't made up my mind about him either, so we'll listen to him and tell him that we like to take our time. Just for once, try not to scowl." Robert threw himself into his expansive chair and started up his own laptop.

"I won't be here tomorrow, Robert, so you will not have to worry about my appearance scaring him off. But, I will teleconference in remotely. Do NOT make any promises or agreements with that man. I will have more information for you before our meeting."

Stannis walked to the wall where Robert had numerous photos hung up. One pictured a much younger Robert, Ned, and a teenage girl who looked just like Ned. She must be Ned's sister. Several included all three brothers, including one from the day Robert had named Stannis Chief Operating Officer. All three men sported beards, and continued to do so, unusual in the upper levels of most corporations. A much more recent photo featured the three of them on the cover of GQ magazine, when a piece had been written up on the company and the Baratheon brothers within the past year. In fact, Stannis hadn't had his photo taken without a beard since Selyse had left him. An idea sprang to mind, but he was distracted by Robert, who now stood right behind him.

"You were a scrawny thing that day, brother. When did you get so big?" Robert had his hand on the frame of the photo from Stannis' appointment to COO. He'd weighed maybe 200, which at his height meant he'd had a rangy, unfinished appearance. Back then his exercise was primarily running, and he never did any weight lifting.

"I work out and lift weights, Robert, you know that. And you are hardly one to talk." Looking pointedly at Robert's much expanded girth, Stannis started to open the door, but was prevented by Robert's meaty hand holding it shut.

"She's only 19, Stannis, barely half your age, and she's my goddaughter. Sansa's off limits, period." Scowling and looming large, Robert could actually appear intimidating when he wanted to. Regardless, Stannis stood his ground, having faced far worse than his older brother.

"I have no idea what you are referring to, Robert."

"Oh, I think you do. I saw how you looked at Sansa, Stannis. NO."

"Well, as you just stated, my name is Stannis, not Robert. I leave the skirt chasing to you. Now excuse me, I have a company to run." A harsh glare proved sufficient to back Robert off, and he
Stannis found concentrating on his tasks difficult for the remainder of the day, as images of a blue-eyed, red haired beauty kept popping into his brain. Giving up, he left the office at 4:00 in the afternoon, and went home to work out before meeting up with Davos.

Since Selyse had left him, he hadn't sought out any female companionship beyond a few one-night stands. He also hadn't seen his daughter in months. She opted to remain in Essos with her mother, and only visited him during the holidays and summer vacation. Unwilling to admit his loneliness to anyone, especially himself, he buried himself in work. At first, joining the Fury Road boxing club allowed him to vent his frustration by participating in extreme physical exertion and sanctioned violence in a safe environment. But then, when Bear had brought him into the underground fight scene, the excitement levels went up a number of notches. Now he was addicted to the adrenalin highs he got from the tough competition and the no-holds-barred violence participating in the illegal fights gave him.

Casually dressed in jeans and twill shirt, Stannis arrived at Joe's Burgers & Beer a few minutes early, and ordered a whiskey sour while he waited for Davos. Davos showed up about 10 minutes later than usual, manila envelope in hand. Stannis frowned, as his friend normally called if he couldn't make it.

"Sorry, Stannis, I just got assigned to a RICO investigation. This one's been going on for nearly three years now, and they need fresh eyes to cover it. Our briefing went way long." Davos slid into the booth and ordered a beer.

"Oh? Tell me." Stannis hoped that Davos' new assignment would not cross paths with the circuit fights, but deep down he knew that they were intertwined far too closely with the racketeering world.

"Money laundering, gambling, human trafficking, drugs and weapons, you name it, they do it. I might end up going incommunicado for a time. We're going to try to take down the whole shebang, straight from the top. Infiltrating the gambling ring seems to be our best option to crack this thing wide open."

"That does sound dangerous. Watch yourself, Davos. Now, tell me what you dug up on Petyr Baelish."

"Well, his adult life has been squeaky clean, no arrests or investigations. However, I did find out that he had a juvenile record."

Stannis did not like to be kept waiting. "Tell me, Davos."

"Apparently he has a juvenile rape conviction, plus a separate restraining order that had been placed on him, both within the same family. The Tullys. Records show that he raped Lysa Tully when he was 16, and attempted to rape Catelyn Tully as well, but failed. Brynden Tully, their uncle, caught him and nearly beat him to death. A restraining order had been placed upon Baelish, but he never served any time in an adult prison. In fact, his records were expunged when he turned 19."

"Catelyn is married to Ned Stark. And I know Brynden somewhat as well, as he operates a small import firm near Riverrun." Stannis was certain that Sansa's parents were ignorant of her previous internship at Baelish's hedge fund. The Starks were highly protective of their children, and in his mind, would not have allowed Sansa to work there if they had known. "Anything else?"

"Yes, actually. Have you ever heard of Dr. Jacob Qyburn? He's a psychiatrist/pharmacist, who had his medical and pharmaceutical licenses revoked due to some questionable experiments. However,
his company is still in operation. Baelish controls Qyburn's pharmaceutical company through the hedge fund." Davos fell silent for a moment, then looked intently at Stannis. "Under no circumstances can you ever reveal how you learned this information, Stannis. Ever."

"I've never had a problem keeping my mouth shut Davos, you should know that." After that the two men ate their meal and discussed various events and family - Davos mostly talked, and Stannis listened. A low whistle garnered Stannis' attention as he was paying the bill, and he caught a flash of red hair out the corner of his eye.

Several men were commenting on what must have been some pretty young ladies walking past the restaurant. "Did you see them girls? Gorgeous, eh? Young too." A few other rude remarks also were uttered aloud by some patrons. Frowning, Stannis gestured to Davos, indicating his desire to leave.

Just as they left the restaurant a scream sounded from down the sidewalk. A pack of 5 or 6 young men were harrassing the two ladies who had passed by just a few moments earlier. Reacting quickly, Stannis ran towards the scene, Davos just a step behind him.

The first man Stannis encountered tried to punch him. That was the fellow's first and last mistake, as Stannis easily dodged the man's fist and delivered a succession of quick blows to the gut, kidney, spleen and ribs. The thug doubled over and collapsed, wheezing for air and coughing up blood. The next assailant landed a hit on Stannis' ribcage, but he barely felt it as he caught the man's arm in an elbow lock and promptly broke it with a tremendous downward strike. This man also dropped to the ground. Davos cornered two other men who gave up without a fight when he displayed his police badge.

The fifth man had cornered the red haired lady and was attempting to steal her purse. He evidently was not yet aware of the fate of his fellow assailants. This man was larger than the others. Stannis grabbed him from behind and tossed him away from the girl, but the fellow quickly rolled to his feet and charged. Grinning, Stannis could feel the adrenalin kick in. He met the challenger and they tussled to the ground. Rolling on top, Stannis punched the guy in the face and head, rendering him unconscious. But he didn't stop hitting the now unconscious man until two newly arrived police officers pulled him off.

"Stannis, enough!" Davos spoke with firm command, trying to break through the fog. Stannis paced back and forth for a few minutes, shaking off the excess energy. He felt the buzz running through his system and could not stay still.

The arriving police officers took the other witnesses statements and arrested the assailants, although 3 of them were loaded into ambulances to go to the hospital.

"Mr. Baratheon?" A scared young woman's voice broke through his daze. He turned towards the owner of the voice, one that he recognized from much earlier that day. The red headed girl who had been attacked was none other than Sansa Stark, accompanied by her friend.

"Miss Stark - Sansa Stark? Are you alright? Did they hurt you?" Attention focused on her now, Stannis approached the two girls. "And you miss, you are - ?"

"Margaery Tyrell. Thank you, Mr. Baratheon, for what you did just now. We couldn't get away from them on our own, there were too many." The other girl, a pretty brunette, looked to be the same age as Sansa, perhaps a year older. Both girls were crying a bit, and appeared to be very shaken up. The police officers had already taken their statements, but they seemed too scared to leave yet.

Sansa spoke up as well, with a sweet voice that sounded like music to him. "Thank you, Mr. Baratheon." However, she jumped back a little when he stepped closer to her, obviously nervous and
afraid. He stopped, sighing.

"I apologize for frightening the two of you. However, I will not apologize for stopping them from hurting you. Rest assured, Miss Stark, Miss Tyrell, that I mean you no harm." Davos came up next to him then, but stopped out of range.

"Stannis, they need to take you to the station."

He whirled, confused. "What? Why? I did nothing wrong." Davos looked both concerned and upset, although Stannis could not fathom why. "I prevented a mugging and assault on these two women. Am I under arrest too, for preventing a violent crime?"

"Not yet. But they have to review the witness statements and interview you and I separately. The prosecutor will have to decide whether or not to charge you with assault, as you used excessive force in stopping those men."

He could not believe what he heard coming from his friend. Incredulous, Stannis spoke out. "No. I know my rights. They either arrest me now or let me go. They've already taken my statement."

Davos looked ready to argue, which just made Stannis angrier. He got right into Davos' personal space, looming several inches over his oldest friend. "Do you really think that I am a flight risk, Davos? For something as simple as assault on some criminal thugs as they tried to mug my brother's goddaughter? Seriously? I am leaving."

Stannis turned to walk away, missing the nod Davos gave to three attending police officers. They surrounded Stannis, and one pulled out his handcuffs. Stannis stopped suddenly, and tensed up. Davos could see that he meant to fight - he'd seen that reaction many times over the years.

"Stop, Stannis, and think. If you lash out now, you'll be charged with resisting arrest and assaulting a police officer, as well as any other charges the prosecutor decides to throw at you."

Stannis closed his eyes, nodded, and sank to his knees, placing his hands behind his head. He'd fought earlier this evening for the right reason, a just reason, not for his own pleasure. And now it appeared the old saying was true - no good deed goes unpunished.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains a bit of a Stannis character study - not much action, but lots of backstory and conversation. Yup, he has issues, and can be ethically challenged.

Lots of important details that will be relevant in future chapters are here.

Stannis chose not to speak after he felt the cuffs snapped onto his wrists. In fact, he said nothing at all for the next 18 hours, through the following afternoon when the prosecutor decided not to press charges and ordered him released from the city jail. During the first few hours in custody he had been strip-searched, forced to give blood and urine samples, had his mug shot taken, and height and weight recorded. The entire experience could be chalked up as the most humiliating event in his life. He did, however, get a jolt of satisfaction listening to the booking officers discuss him.

"Jesus, he's a big sonofabitch. I've never seen a rich fella, corporate type built like him before."

"Yeah. Did you read the tox screen on those 3 thugs he put in the hospital? They were hyped up on Spike. That's the latest street drug, used only by males. It makes men super aggressive and violent. But the witnesses said he cut them down as easily as a hot knife through butter. It's like they were nothing to him. He put a serious hurt on those guys."

"Witness statements, including Detective Seaworth's, indicate that Baratheon's reactions show that he has been trained to fight. The detective is his best friend, and even he didn't know Baratheon had those abilities. Scary, man."

The mention of Davos brought Stannis' blood to a boil - he seethed with anger and rage, all directed at his 'best friend.' He started pacing back and forth in his cell, feeling less and less like corporate executive Stannis Baratheon and a lot more like the fighter Stef Esterman. Angry and aggressive, he wanted to go beat on something, or someone. Anyone. When Davos came by to talk, Stannis just glared at the detective through the bars. He felt completely and utterly betrayed.

"Listen to me, Stannis, I was just doing my job. If I showed favoritism towards you, it would compromise my integrity as a police officer. It would also compromise the integrity of the department if an uber-wealthy corporate exec like you was given special treatment. The department has to demonstrate that there aren't two sets of laws and procedures, one for the rich, and one for everyone else. We have to do this by the book." Stannis remained angry and mute, refusing to speak to Davos. So I'm being set up as an example, due to my financial and professional status.

Too pent up to sleep, Stannis exercised by doing sets of pushups, dips and crunches off and on throughout the night and into the next day. Eventually reaching muscle failure, he was reduced to pacing back and forth across the holding cell. 5 paces forward, 3 to the left, 5 back. Repeat. He went over the scenario in his head again and again, trying to find an alternate course of action. Each time he did Sansa Stark's image popped into his mind, looking at him after he had dispatched the last thug with a mixture of fear and admiration. He vowed that the girl would never have cause to fear him.

By noon the next day there had been no outward sign that Robert or Renly had contacted the family attorney, Barristan Selmy. His one phone call had gone straight to voicemail, and the police chose
not to grant him any special favors. Or a second phone call. Alone and unrepresented, Stannis' only
defense at this point was silence. He wondered if his brothers were even aware that he was sitting in
jail. No one had spoken to him, he hadn't been questioned, nothing. For defending Robert's
goddaughter and Renly's partner's sister, Stannis was locked up like a common criminal, with no one
to support him.

Quiet, focused and introverted to the point of broody, Stannis knew his personality was the polar
opposite of his two gregarious brothers. Although they had managed to work together to build up
Baratheon Industries, he clashed with both of them in and out of the office on a regular basis, and
they tended to avoid him outside of work-related venues. The avoidance was mutual. But he never
criticized them publicly, or let them down during their various public scandals. He had stood by
Robert during the divorce from Cersei, and defended Renly vociferously when it came to light that
his younger brother was gay. But now, alone in that jail cell, knowing his best friend ordered his
arrest and certain that his brothers had abandoned him, Stannis had never felt more isolated in his life.

Late in the afternoon the police finally released Stannis. "Baratheon, you're free to go. The
prosecutor has opted not to file any charges against you." Stannis signed for his phone, keys and
wallet, and walked through the double doors into the lobby. He hadn't thought about what to do,
whether he should bother contacting anyone or where to go - perhaps the liquor store might be a
good first stop. Self-medicating himself into a stupor would be far more preferable to feeling the
continued ache of loneliness. He hadn't gotten drunk since the day Selyse left him, but now it seemed
like a fantastic idea.

"Stannis, it's about time they let you go! Barristan and I have been here for hours! The police
wouldn't let us see or speak to you. Rotten bastards."

Stopping dead in his tracks, totally surprised, Stannis saw his younger brother and the family's
attorney get up from some hard plastic chairs and stride quickly towards him. Renly had dark circles
under his eyes - it appeared he hadn't slept much the night before. Barristan Selmy only looked
marginally better. As the two approached a very still Stannis, Barristan began to explain what had
occurred.

"I found out what happened late last night, Stannis, when Robert called me. He did get your
voicemail, and the Stark girl's parents contacted him as well. I tried calling the judge and the
prosecutor all night, but they wouldn't speak to me. Evidently there has been an effort to clean up
Kings Landing, and part of that effort is to demonstrate that the laws are applied to everyone, rich
and poor, equally. They wanted to use you as an example of their impartiality and charge you with
aggravated assault, even though you were not the aggressor. But once the tox screen results came
back on those thugs, it became evident that 'excessive force' was the only way anyone could have
stopped them. Additionally, I made sure they realized that criminals would only become emboldened
to continue their violent assaults if every Good Samaritan ended up being prosecuted to the same
extent as the assailants. At that point the judge and prosecutor agreed not to file charges."

Numb, all Stannis could do was nod his head, even though he hadn't processed half of what Selmy
told him. Renly seemed to realize that his older brother was a bit shocked by it all, and came to stand
next to him.

"Stannis? Come on, brother. Let's get you out of here." Renly's gentle nudge to his shoulder pulled
Stannis out of his dazed state, and together the brothers walked out of the station.

"You should know, Stannis, that Robert was here too, until he had to go to the tower for that
meeting. I thought they were going to arrest him this morning for disorderly conduct, he was so loud
and angry. After what you did for Margaery and Sansa, he couldn't believe that they took you into
custody. He was furious."

Just past the police station Stannis asked Renly to stop at a convenience store for a moment, then they continued on their trip. Not until the car pulled into the driveway of a stately old home did he finally pay attention to his surroundings again. He had been lost in thought, trying to reconcile his (wrong) feelings of abandonment with the obvious fact that his brothers hadn't let him down after all. It was only then that he realized Renly hadn't brought him to his brownstone, but to the Stark residence. Robert and Ned were already outside when they arrived.

Ned greeted Stannis first and shook his hand, relief evident on his face. "Stannis. Thank you for what you did last night. Who knows what might have happened to Sansa if you hadn't intervened. Frankly I am astounded that you were arrested; it doesn't make any sense."

Robert came over and slapped him on the back, red face indicating that he had already started drinking. "I'm proud of you, brother. Those were some serious bad-ass moves, from what the girls said." For the first time that he could remember, Robert had actually given him an honest complement.

Finally engaging with the people surrounding him, Stannis spoke. "Is Sansa unharmed? Is she here?" He was tired of being the center of attention. Her safety and well-being mattered to him far more than his own, even though he didn't really know her. Before yesterday, the last time he had seen Sansa she had been just a little girl playing on a swingset.

The men moved inside the house, to the expansive kitchen. Ned answered. "She's fine, but shook up. Jon and Robb took her to the university for her afternoon classes; they all should be back soon. Those two refused to let her go to the city unaccompanied after last night's assault. And I agreed."

Stannis hadn't been to the Stark's house in years, but he did see Catelyn and Ned from time to time, usually at Robert's place. Catelyn greeted him with a kiss on the cheek and a hug when he entered the kitchen. He practically froze, totally unaccustomed to so much positive attention.

"I'm sure Ned said this, but thank you again, Stannis, for defending our daughter."

"I, uh, um, it was no problem, Catelyn, I just acted on instinct. I hope Sansa will be alright, that's the main issue."

Hell, he needed a drink! Ned, sensing Stannis' discomfort, poured a double shot of bourbon and handed it over. He downed it immediately, hoping to settle himself.

Stannis reflected briefly on his initial meeting with Sansa the previous morning. His initial impression had shown her to be a confident and capable young lady, full of grace yet very no-nonsense. A rare combination. Yet just the mention of Petyr Baelish's name had been enough to break that poise and confidence, and allow her fear to show through. A jolt of protectiveness surged through Stannis as he ruminated on Sansa's reactions. He felt a strong need to protect her and keep her safe, even though he didn't have that right.

He also had to convince Robert to back off any potential partnership or business arrangements with Baelish. Petyr's proposal, along with Stannis' knowledge that Baelish would now act as the financial backer to the illegal fighting and gambling rings, were far too conveniently timed to be coincidence. Petyr was probably unaware of Stannis' involvement in the fights, but that would not last. Baratheon Industries was practically the only large corporation free of corruption and beholden to no one. The mobsters would not rest until ALL corporations within Kings Landing were under their influence. If Baelish got involved, the integrity of the brothers' corporation would be jeopardized. Especially if it came to light that Stannis was one of the highest ranked fighters in the circuit.
Unwilling to admit to Robert what he had been doing all these years, Stannis thought he could use his knowledge of Petyr's convictions to sway his brother instead. And if they could get Sansa to speak up about what might have occurred during her stint at the Mockingbird Fund, he was certain that Robert would sever any potential business arrangements with Baelish. But he had to steer the conversation to make it appear that Catelyn and Ned would bring up the past. His knowledge of what happened to the Tully sisters could not be revealed.

They moved to the back study, where he decided to discuss Petyr Baelish now before Sansa showed up. But how to bring him up without being obvious?

Stannis spoke to his brother, but watched the Starks' reactions to his words. "Robert, how did the meeting with Petyr Baelish go today? I was obviously a little, indisposed at the time." Ned and Catelyn both froze and tensed up, but Robert didn't notice. Renly excused himself to go give Loras a call.

"Well enough, Stannis, but we didn't discuss any specifics without you there. You're the walking spreadsheet, not me. He did say that he wants to team up our defense contracts with his pharmaceutical interests. Something about helping veterans suffering from PTSD, and how this would be really good PR."

"No. Baelish's pharmaceutical interests are not clean. He has partnered up with Dr. Jacob Qyburn. Forget about it, Robert." Stannis suspected that Dr. Qyburn might be involved in this proposal behind the scenes. One more thing. "Tell me you kept the knowledge of my arrest out of that meeting."

Robert nodded. "You worry too much, Stannis! Renly kept this incident out of the news, thanks to his contacts, so Baelish doesn't know what happened." Relieved that Robert hadn't blabbed, Stannis' respect for his younger brother also just went up a notch or two.

Then Robert gave him the perfect opportunity. "You know, Ned, Petyr only had glowing words of praise for Sansa. He said she was one his best and brightest interns he'd ever employed at his hedge fund; he tried to get me to convince Sansa to go back to work for him, at least part time. Kept going on and on about how much she reminded him of Catelyn, and how close the Tully's and Baelish's were back in the day. Beautiful mother, beautiful daughter, isn't that right, Stannis? Ha! He seems to think she could be a liaison between Baratheon Industries and the Mockingbird Fund if we sign a contract. I think that could be a great opportunity for Sansa, don't you, Ned?"

Stannis thought his teeth might shatter as he listened to Robert prattle and watched Ned and Catelyn grow more and more tense. Robert, as usual, didn't have a clue. Now he was positive that Robert remained ignorant of the true history between Baelish and the Tully ladies, and he was certain the Starks had been unaware of Sansa's internship at the Mockingbird Fund.

Catelyn spoke up. "That's impossible, Robert. Sansa worked on campus last semester. You must be mistaken, we never would have allowed her to work for Petyr Baelish. Not under any circumstances." She appeared both angry and worried.

Clueless, Robert responded accordingly. "All I can say is that Baelish went on and on about family ties, and how close he'd been to you Tullys back in the day. And Sansa did say she worked for Baelish's hedge fund as an intern. He kept singing her praises during my meeting."

Ned and Catelyn looked at each other as if coming to a silent agreement. Then Ned addressed Stannis. "Stannis, will you excuse us for a few minutes? We need to talk to Robert about something." Nodding in acquiescence, Stannis quit the room. His bid had payed off.
Twitchy, nervous and at loose ends, Stannis paced around the living room looking at the various pictures on the wall. Most were fairly recent, and the Stark's many children figured prominently. Even his own daughter, Shireen, showed up in a few photos. *When was that taken?* Several were taken many years ago, when Ned was a teenager. Robert, and even a young Renly showed up in a few, as did the girl who Stannis thought was Ned's sister. But he had never met her, and didn't even know her name. He paused at a copy of the photo that Robert kept in his office.

"Her name was Lyanna. My sister." Ned's somber voice came as a surprise. "She and Robert loved each other, did you know that?"

"No. I was probably 11 or 12 when this picture was taken, judging from Robert's age. He looks like he was 18 or 19. What happened to her? Robert has never mentioned her to me."

Ned choked up. "25 years ago, on Lyanna's 18th birthday, she disappeared. We thought she just ran off, because she always had been a little wild. But then a week later, they found her near the railroad tracks in Kings Landing, not too far from the warehouse district. She'd been...beaten. Raped....strangled."

Ned took a shaky breath. "We never found out who did that to her. It damn near broke all of us. Especially Robert. He went mad, I think, for a time. So did my brother Brandon. He ended up dead from an OD the following year. That was a tough time."

Stannis nodded, remembering that last summer when his parents had still lived. "I remember a little bit of that time. I was 12 when my father sent Robert away, but I never knew where or why. He was gone for 6 months."

"Like I said, that was a tough time, for both our families. Robert really went out of control after Lyanna was killed. He flunked out of college, drank, fought, and couldn't keep a job. Your father sent him north to work in a logging camp in the remote woods - he thought the hard work might straighten Robert out. It did, to some degree."

"Maybe. Shortly after he returned our parents were killed in a plane crash. Two weeks later he sent me away to a military boarding academy, and that was that."

What he didn't mention to Ned was that Robert had kept Renly at home, and never sent their youngest brother away. Stannis gave up coming home for the holidays and vacations when he was 15 - his presence wasn't wanted or welcomed. Robert had just married Cersei, and had paid the school the extra fees to board him over the long breaks.

Catelyn and Robert entered the living room then, both appearing somber. Robert finally agreed with Stannis. "You were right Stannis, about Baelish. He is untrustworthy, and we will not be doing any business with him or his hedge fund. I need a beer." Robert left for the kitchen.

Stannis took the opportunity to address Ned and Catelyn. "Concerning Sansa's internship with Baelish's fund, I think you need to speak with her." Leaning forward, he made sure he had their complete attention. "I think Baelish might have acted inappropriately towards Sansa while she worked there, at his fund. Yesterday she seemed a bit nervous around strange men, including me. And when Robert mentioned Petyr Baelish by name, she froze up. I could tell she was trying to hide her fear when his name was spoken. Tell me, has she changed in any way since last autumn?"

Ned looked at Stannis with renewed respect. "As a matter of fact, yes. She used to date somewhat, and went out with her friends all the time. Then about 4 or 5 months ago all that stopped, and she refused to date anyone, or go out on the town, or even to the movies. She either went to her classes or stayed here at home. I think last night was the first time she'd gone out with her friend Margaery in
months and months. And we know how that turned out."

Catelyn frowned. "Stannis, how did you know something might be bothering Sansa? Yesterday was the first time you'd seen her in years."

"I observe people, Catelyn, that's all. It is easy to pick up the signals if one pays attention."

A cacophony of several voices, including Robert's and Renly's, carried to them from the kitchen. Stannis could see that Sansa had returned home with her older brothers, and the younger Stark children all crowded into the kitchen as well. Everyone laughed and teased each other. Renly ruffled the younger boys' hair while Robert swooped up Sansa in a giant bear hug. Catelyn went in to supervise the younger three kids and greet the older siblings. As an outsider, he watched the scene play out with a mixture of longing and regret, coupled with a definite pull of attraction towards the beautiful young woman.

Unaware of Ned's sympathetic look, Stannis walked through the kitchen, telling Renly that they needed to get going. In truth he was exhausted; but also, he felt suffocated, trapped, empty. Empty he could handle, he had for well over 20 years now, even during his marriage to Selyse. He just didn't need any more reminders of that which he could never have. The longer he remained inside, the worse it would get. Certain his brothers remained oblivious, Stannis escaped (how else would he describe it?) to the front porch, fresh air and familiar solitude.

The still night air delivered a melodic voice straight to his soul. "Stannis?" Seated on the front step, he could not help but turn around, to answer that siren song. Sansa sat down next to him on the steps, loose red hair streaming behind her. "I'm really glad you came by. I was worried about you."

Worried about me? Why? Silent, he waited, frowning quizzically down at her.

"I wanted to thank you once again, for defending me last night. And, I'm so sorry too. It's my fault they arrested you. If I hadn't been out there, those creeps wouldn't have tried to mug us, and none of that would have happened." She ducked her head, appearing most distraught as she continued to speak. Stannis could not even begin to understand her reasoning.

"Sansa, I assure you, you are not at fault for anything that happened last night. You did not provoke those men. They made the choice to mug you and your friend." He spoke rather sharply, annoyed at her faulty logic. "Do not be ridiculous - you did not ask for them to attack you, and you are certainly not to blame for my arrest."

She started to sniffle a bit. "Still, if I had stayed at home, none of this would have happened, and you wouldn't have been..."

Oh great, now she's going to cry. Stannis spoke sternly at that point, hoping to get through to her. "STOP. I do not like to repeat myself Sansa, so listen now. I only speak truth. I said you are not to blame for any of what occurred, and I did not lie. Enough. No one expects you to cease living your life - everyone else continues to live theirs, after all. A pretty young girl like you should not be hidden away from the world."

She bit her lip and looked away. "Petyr said the exact opposite. He said I was too special to be out in the world - the world and the public didn't deserve to see or know me. I think he wanted to coop me up, like a rare prized macaw or something. He almost got away with it, too."

Feeling fiercely protective now, and increasingly aggressive, Stannis felt his control slip. Even though he'd never met Petyr Baelish, the thought of beating the slimy man into a pulp made his blood burn with a desire for violence. He had to close his eyes and take several deep, shaky breaths to quell
the reactions that Stef would normally make, and come back to himself. *Your name is Stannis. Stannis, not Stef. Always in control.*

Once certain his control was restored, he reached out slowly to tilt her chin up to look at him, gauging her reaction to his gentle touch. That she didn't show fear or flinch was a good sign - she'd obviously decided that he was not longer a 'strange man' who should not be trusted.

He spoke gruffly. "Hey." So a little Stef remained anyway, but business-speak probably would not break through her shell. "Hey, girl, you don't think on him now, y'hear?" He tilted his head towards the door. "Comeon. Let's get you in."

Eyes wide with wonder, Sansa gripped his hand, sniffed and smiled. "Thank you, Stannis. For listening, and not pushing."

At that moment Renly and Ned stepped outside. Sansa squeezed Stannis' hand, gave him a quick peck on the cheek, and ran inside. He stood and watched her re-enter the house, oblivious to the looks her father and his brother were lobbing his way.

Renly clapped him on the shoulder, paused and whispered in his ear. "You'd better forget about her. Robert will kill you, you know, if you pursue her. Trust me." Then Renly sauntered over to his car.

Ned came to shake Stannis' hand once more, gripping perhaps more firmly than normal. "Stannis, I can see that Sansa trusts you now. That's a good thing. But I'm not blind. You will not hurt my daughter."

Surly and defiant, Stannis had to respond. "After last night I would think that goes without saying."

"She thanked you for not pushing her, concerning Petyr Baelish. I'm saying respect the 'don't push' request in all areas."

Giving Ned a curt nod, Stannis jumped in Renly's car and quickly dozed off on the ride. He dreamed about a red haired young lady all the way home.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

When Stannis switches into his 'Stef' persona that's how he'll be referenced in the story, and you'll see his speech patterns change dramatically. Think of Miami Vice, when Sonny Crockett became Sonny Burnett, or more recently, Sean Bean in Legends as Martin Odum, FBI undercover agent.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next morning Stannis woke up at his usual 5:00 AM, exercised, and walked through the doors to his office promptly at 7:00 AM. The sooner he put himself back into his normal regimen and schedule the better. The past four days had been a roller coaster ride for him psychologically speaking, and he recognized the need to resume his structured routine.

By 9:00 Stannis realized that neither of his brothers would show up to the office, but since it was Friday, that was not unusual. He had enough correspondence from his department heads to keep him occupied through the remainder of the day without being distracted.

That evening he followed his normal Friday night routine as well. Protein shake, change, drive the truck to Fury Road. The only hiccup in his routine came right when he got in the Ford. He opened the glove compartment in search of something but came up empty. Twitchy, it took the remainder of the drive for him to fully enter into 'Stef' mode. Once there, though, he focused solely on the grueling exercises that Bear pushed him through.

One of the younger, more inexperienced members of the club who was at the gym that night decided to challenge Stef to spar. This fellow, Gary, was in his early twenties, slightly shorter and about 20 pounds lighter than Stef. He also ran his mouth almost constantly. Stef occasionally agreed to spar with other boxers on Friday nights, but had avoided clashing with this particular loudmouth.

"Hey Old Man, whats up, you too afraid to spar with me?" Gary got right in Stef's face, belligerent and possibly hyped up on some sort of stimulant. Stef tried to ignore him and continue to work the bag, but Gary would not leave him alone. He swung the bag hard against Stef, attempting to provoke a fight. Stef felt the stirring of his hot temper flare deep within.

Stef spoke up at that point, annoyed. "You don't want none of this, Boy."

Bear came over to intervene. The fighters respected Bear, and most of the younger ones were also intimidated by him. A very large man, the retired boxer didn't take crap from any of the club's members. He also had a vested interest in keeping Stef in prime condition through the end of the circuit's season - for every fight Stef won, Bear received a small cut of the proceeds from the gambling till. The past few years had proven to be most lucrative for Bear.

"Gary, back off. You want to spar, do it with one of your buddies. Stef is off limits right now."

Gary didn't get the message, and became more physically and verbally belligerent. Feeling increasingly temperamental, Stef decided to put the punk in his place or else this would just occur the next time he came to the gym. "Bear, I'm good." To Gary, Stef pointed at him and scowled. "Let's go, boy. In the ring."
Both men wore full gloves and protective headgear in the ring. They circled each other, and took a few experimental jabs. Gary constantly danced and jumped around the ring, yelling and posturing. Stef just quietly circled and waited for his opportunity. He didn't feel the need to unnecessarily burn energy. Keeping calm would be an asset right now while facing a hot-blooded opponent. When Gary swung wide Stef landed a hard blow to the younger fighter's midsection, followed up with an offhand jab to the face, and then pummeled him hard in the kidneys, ribs and gut. Each successive strike felt better than the last, as he transferred his energy from his whole body through his arms and fists, straight to his opponent. Smirking and practically high, he paced and watched with something akin to pleasure as Gary dropped to the mat, doubled up and gasping for air. Inflicting pain was never the goal; the goal was to win, to defeat his opponent through skill and strength. The whole sparring match was over in less than 2 minutes.

Stef exited the ring, feeling both relaxed and energetic. Winning the short, quick conflict made him feel good. Really good. He removed his gear and walked around the gym for a moment to settle down, then spoke to his trainer. "Hey Bear, you ever heard of Spike? I thought all dope was off limits here, but dipshit over there don't seem right in the head."

Bear frowned over towards Gary, who had finally picked himself up off the mat and stumbled out of the ring. "Yeah, I hear it's getting a lot of use by guys who go around mugging people - gives them an extra kick, ya know?"

"What's the source?" The information may come in handy in the future.

"Beats me. All know is that it isn't made here in Kings Landing. Street punks say the shipment comes in every two weeks, but the method varies." Bear paused and stared intently at Stef. "Don't you get any ideas, Stef. Any fighter caught using Spike in the circuit will find himself dumped in the bay. Mark my words."

Stef glared right back. "I don't need dope to fight, Bear. You know I'm clean. I was just wondering, 'cause Gary was acting extra stupid tonight."

Bear relaxed. He had trained Stef for five years, and knew he spoke truthfully. "From what I hear anyone on Spike stays aggressive and violent for at least a few hours. Gary's not on that stuff, he's just a young hothead."

After considering his opponent's youth, Stef felt the need to tell Bear he would be done. He owed the man that much, anyway. "That punk got something right, Bear. I'm no youngster. This is my last season, and I aim to win."

Bear grunted, but shook his head. "Stef, you keep that to yourself. You haven't seen the competition; your next two fights, assuming you win next week, will be the toughest you've ever had. You had best keep your head and wits about you, like always. Be back here tomorrow night at 7:00. We're some techniques to work on. And don't forget to eat more. You gotta make weight."

By the time he'd driven home, showered and put his gear away, Stannis had regained his usual equilibrium and dropped the Stef persona completely. He sent off an email to confirm that Shireen would Skype with him on Sunday morning as usual, and went to sleep. The rest of the weekend passed uneventfully, as he kept up his normal routine.

Monday also started normally, with Stannis conferring with his secretary, Anna, about his scheduled meetings for the week. An older lady who had once worked for the Marine Corps, she handled Stannis' martinet mannerisms and stern demeanor with unflappable calm. Her workstation, along with Renly's secretary Mika, was located in the open atrium just outside his and his brothers' offices - only Robert's secretary had a private office. Then Renly strutted over to her desk, not bothering to
wait for them to finish. The headache started almost immediately.

"Stannis! They say prison changes a man, but really, brother?" Snickering and grinning like the Chesire Cat, he tossed a green and black round tin on Anna's desk. She used a ruler to scoot it off the papers, nose wrinkled up, a look of distaste written on her face. "You left that in my car the other night. Since when did you, Mr. Perfect, start using that?"

Pinching the bridge of his nose in a futile attempt to stem the now pounding headache, Stannis snagged the tin and slid it in his pocket. He'd been searching for it in his truck the other night. "Renly..."

"Using what?" Robert's booming voice echoed across the open room. Trust Robert to be nosy. Trust Renly to run his mouth.

Renly smacked Stannis on the back and smirked. "Snuff. Stannis has gone all blue collar on us, Robert."

With a glare and flick of his wrist, Stannis shooed Renly's hand off. "I fail to see your point, Renly. Go away."

"I will when you answer me." Renly could be so infuriatingly immature.

Fine, he'd answer Renly just to get rid of him. "Since I felt like it. Now go be useless somewhere else."

Robert, of course, wouldn't let it go. "Damn, Stannis, your little street brawl and stint in jail did rattle you after all. Mr. Stoic no more. Ha!" Unlike Renly, his slap on the back nearly knocked Stannis off-balance.

Pointedly ignoring both of his brothers, Stannis grabbed the printout from Anna's desk and stalked back to his office, slamming the door shut with resounding force. Still, Robert's echoing laugh carried through the walls anyway.

Once in his office Stannis strode over to his desk and tossed the tin in the drawer with his car keys. He would be sure to put it in the truck that very evening. He only used snuff on nights he went to Fury Road or fought; it was one more method that helped him slip into the role of Stef. He honestly didn't care if they knew that he used the substance, he just preferred to keep his private habits private.

No, what bothered him was Robert laughing at his supposed reaction to getting arrested. And in truth, Stannis had been rattled by the whole experience, and still was to some degree. Not that he would ever admit that to either brother. The street fight and arrest had caused him to solidify his resolve concerning his participation in the circuit fights. He simply had to get out at the end of the season, not only for the sake of the company's reputation but also his own health and sanity.

He had not been this anxious since the time he'd been caught up in a police raid of a lower level circuit fight three years earlier. Stannis had managed to surreptitiously snag his fingerprint card when the police released him and a dozen other fighters and bookies that night, so even though there might be a police file labeled Stef Esterman somewhere, nothing in it could be linked to him. Or so he hoped.

Stannis recalled back to those few weeks after the police raid, when he had almost decided to quit the fights. Then, his anxiety levels had gone through the roof, and his doctor had nearly put him on blood pressure medication. But when the next call came in, the pull towards the action and violence proved too strong to resist. At the beginning of the next bout he had managed to turn the fear and
anxiety into anticipation and enjoyment, and that was when he truly became hooked on participating in the illegal fighting. That was the pivotal moment when Stannis truly sank himself into the role of Stef, and also when he started to steadily win more and more fights. More than that, nobody at Fury Road or in the circuit judged or criticized him. The alter-ego enabled him to vent his frustrations in what he knew was a societally unacceptable manner, but was the only manner that had allowed him to realize any fulfillment or acceptance without attached scorn or conditions.

Pushing those thoughts aside, Stannis turned his attention to his schedule for the week. Frowning, he sent Anna a terse email, reminding her that he would not be working Thursday or Friday, then left for his weekly department head meeting.

It was nearly noon before Stannis finally adjourned the meeting. As he crossed the mezzanine overlooking the bustling employee lounge, he spotted a familiar auburn headed figure sitting alone in a sunny corner. He frowned. She shouldn't be alone.

Many of the company's interns and younger employees spent their breaks and lunchtime in this lounge. Stannis rarely came near the place - it was too noisy and crowded for his taste. Plus his presence tended to make the younger workers skittish and nervous.

Stannis would only be lying to himself if he did not admit that Sansa had occupied a high percentage of his thoughts over the weekend. While he was not consumed by mindless lust for the young woman (he refused to behave like Robert), he definitely felt the pull of attraction towards her. She was smart, young, poised, slender and graceful. In short, Sansa Stark was absolutely beautiful. His brief encounters with her convinced him that her calm, gentle demeanor belied a strength of character hidden just beneath the surface. He was intrigued by her, enough so that he wanted to speak with her again.

Without any conscious decision that he could recall he descended the open stairs and walked towards the young lady. Several spooked young employees had to jump out of his way, but as far as he was concerned they had to make way for him, not the other way around. He was so focused on the girl that Stannis barely took notice of the minor chaos his passage created, not even when one IT intern tripped backwards over a chair in his haste to scamper clear.

Coming closer he took note of the few items scattered on her table: a phone, a handbag, and two snack packages from a vending machine. She was currently bent over the phone, completely engrossed in reading whatever was on the screen.

Recalling that she might still be wary after the attempted mugging, Stannis paused several feet away and cleared his throat, intending to gain her attention without startling her. "Sansa."

Sansa jumped in her seat anyway, clearly surprised. "Oh!" But as her wide blue eyes met his own, she visibly relaxed and settled back in her chair, smiling up at him. "Hello, Stannis."

"I spotted you from the mezzanine, and thought to see how you are faring." Privately he cursed his ineptness at casual conversation, but she did not seem to mind.

"I'm well, thank you. I came over here straight from the University. There's a new employee briefing I have to attend this afternoon."

Once again Stannis frowned and scoured his brain for information. He never attended the new employee briefings, so he usually deleted any emails associated with them straight away. "That is not until 1:30, nearly two hours from now. Please do not tell tell me that Cheez-Its and Oreos are your lunch, Sansa. There are a number of restaurants within walking distance that serve real food."

Once again any other person might have missed the flash of insecurity and fear that flitted across
Sansa’s face, almost immediately replaced by a well-practiced smile of gratitude. "No, no, I'm good, really. I’d rather stay here.” Stannis immediately realized that Sansa still held a fear of being out in the streets alone after last week’s incident. Once again the desire to both protect this young woman and beat anyone who threatened her surged through him. Taking a deep breath, Stannis quickly regained his center.

Still, he persisted. He was stubborn that way. "I have some time, Sansa. Come with me - there's a tolerable Italian restaurant right around the corner, Tuscano Trattoria." Stannis knew that Tuscano Trattoria was the finest Italian restaurant in the city. He hoped to entice Sansa out of her shell (and hopefully learn some useful info on Baelish), and saw lunch as an opportunity to start that process. He was not disappointed.

Sansa’s blue eyes lit up, and her face became extremely animated with excitement. "Really? Tuscano Trattoria? That's the hottest restaurant in town, and I love Italian food! But I've heard they're so busy you have to have reservations, even for lunch."

He smirked. "Not to worry. I have a standing agreement with the manager. A table will be ready for us, I assure you." He gestured with his head towards the doorway. "Will you come?"

Sansa hesitated for only a moment, then decisively stood up and threw the snack packages away. "Yes! Yes I will, thank you." She smiled and closed the short distance between them. Stannis was so stunned that she actually said yes that he just stood there, staring at her, evidently long enough for Sansa to speak again. "Stannis, shall we?"

Shaking his head to clear it, Stannis nodded, and escorted Sansa through the increasingly crowded lounge to the front lobby. He paid no attention to the number of heads that turned to watch their progression through the lounge, although his ears did register a whispered "Jail bait" come from a gaggle of interns. Sansa obviously heard it too - her face turned beet red and she ducked her head in embarrassment. Furious, Stannis glared in their general direction and then watched with grim satisfaction as the entire group scattered like cockroaches. He intended to have a stern word with Renly later about the unacceptable chatter.

Maintaining a neutral façade, inwardly Stannis seethed. But he also admitted that the image they presented certainly filled a very neat, clichéd stereotype. He, the older, divorced corporate executive and she, the beautiful, young teenage company intern. Even if it was just lunch. Robert's stern voice echoed in his head - *She's only 19, Stannis. NO.*

Once out on sunny sidewalk Stannis slowed his long stride to allow Sansa to keep up with him, and positioned himself between Sansa and the road as they walked towards the corner. He felt the need to address what they had heard inside. "Ignore them, Sansa.” Beyond that, though, he didn't know what else to say.

She nodded and lifted her head again, clearly intending to put the hurtful words behind her. In comfortable silence they walked two blocks and turned onto Market Avenue, a cobblestone street closed off to vehicular traffic. Cafes, restaurants, art galleries and nifty shops spilled out from the old brick buildings onto the street. Free of cars, people freely walked up and down the middle of the lane. Stannis glanced over at Sansa, pleasantly surprised at the delight written across her face. Clearly she had never been here before, and constantly looked left and right, trying to take in everything at once.

Tuscano Trattoria was every bit as busy as Sansa had expected it to be, even though it was the middle of a workday. The restaurant had seating both outside along the street and inside, plus a small enclosed courtyard in the back. The hostess recognized Stannis immediately, and graciously welcomed him and Sansa. "Mr. Baratheon, welcome! Please follow me.” He noted the sour
expressions of patrons who were waiting to be seated, but honestly didn't care. He owned the entire
building - being landlord granted him a few privileges that he only occasionally took advantage of.
One of which was an immediate table of his choosing. Sensing that they were being observed,
Stannis placed his hand protectively across the small of Sansa's back as they followed the hostess to
the courtyard located behind the restaurant.

The brick courtyard had a small bubbling marble fountain located in the center, with arbors covered
in grapevines lining the walls. Tables were widely scattered beneath the arbors, giving diners a much
greater sense of privacy than they would have in the main seating area. Recalling his manners
Stannis held out Sansa's chair for her. He waved off the bottle of chianti when the waiter offered it,
sticking with lemon water instead, and ordered Crostini di fegato as an appetizer. Sansa looked all
around with wide-eyed wonder, obviously enthralled with the location.

Her curiosity got the better of her. "How did you get us in here so quickly? Had you already planned
to come here for lunch?"

He shook his head. "No. I own this property. I make sure the building is well maintained; in return,
they seat me immediately when I come here for lunch. It's a fair arrangement."

As they sat there in the dappled sun of the courtyard, Stannis let Sansa do most of the talking,
interjecting short comments or questions here and there. His goal was to get her to relax and open up
more. Last week she had trusted him enough to touch on the Baelish issue briefly, which was more
than she had done even for her parents. In between the courses of antipasto, cured meats and
cheeses, soup and salad, they (she, mostly) discussed her classes at the University and possible career
goals. She became particularly animated while describing her theatre class, but he certainly couldn't
contribute anything meaningful. Theatre was Renly's forte, not Stannis'. Still, he listened and gave
Sansa all of his attention.

Eventually he steered the conversation back towards the university career office and internships,
hoping to get her on the topic of Baelish. "Sansa, you're in just your second year at University. What
made you pursue corporate internships so soon?"

"It was an accident, I think." Sansa looked down, frowning. When she looked back at him, he could
see she was troubled. "When I went to the campus career office, all I was looking for was a simple
on-campus job to help pay for some of my non-tuition expenses. They took my application and
resume, and then told me to return two days later. When I did, the counselor told me that a 'great
opportunity' for a woman majoring in business had just opened up. It was an internship targeted
specifically for women interested in finance. The counselor told me that the businessman sponsoring
the internship had selected me based on my application, and wanted me to interview straight away. I
agreed, and she sent me to the Mockingbird Fund. I was so excited. A real internship at a high profile
hedge fund! For me! It was for me all right, but not in that manner. I just didn't see the dark side at
the time." Sansa paused then, bitterness and shame warring for dominance.

Anger flared within Stannis. "Baelish. I think we both know it was no accident, Sansa."

She nodded. "Yup. He was so smooth, so smart, so charming, I ended up practically living at the
Mockingbird offices within two weeks of starting the internship. Every spare moment I had I devoted
to that place, to him. He said all the right words, gave me all the perks - fancy private office, exciting
projects - so much so that I thought I really did have talent in that world. He even started to take me
out to dinner on a regular basis, once I began working later in the evenings. That's when he would
talk about how bright of a future I had, we had, he and I. Even then I didn't heed the warning signs,
because I thought I was some hot shit intern. It wasn't until Petyr started talking about my mother, his
missed opportunity, that I began to realize something was wrong." Sansa looked away then, clearly
too ashamed to continue speaking.

Again Stannis had to take deep breaths to control his rising temper. This was why he had taken her to lunch, to get her to open up and trust him, after all. If he lost control of his anger he might frighten her. "Sansa, have you told your parents any of this?"

She shook her head. "No. They would be ashamed of me if I told them everything. I don't even know why I'm telling you this. You must think I'm some naive, stupid little girl now."

"Hardly, Sansa. Perhaps you were naive when you started at the Mockingbird Fund, and you are certainly still young, but definitely not stupid. It takes courage and wits for a young lady to extricate herself from a master manipulator. For that I commend you. Come on. It's time we returned to the Tower." Standing, Stannis pulled her chair out so that she could stand with ease as well, and guided her back through the restaurant to the street. He knew Sansa had not told him the whole story, but she would, in time. Of that he was certain.

Sansa seemed to regain some of her humor and upbeat mood by the time they stepped out onto the sunny cobblestone street. She smiled up at Stannis once more. "Thank you Stannis, for a wonderful lunch. That really was much better than eating Cheez-Its and Oreos in an empty corner."

He scoffed, but inwardly was quite pleased. Sansa trusted him more, and even seemed to enjoy his company somewhat. That alone was enough to lift his own normally dour mood.

Walking back towards the Tower Stannis once again felt the sensation of being watched. Subtly closing the small gap between himself and Sansa as they ambled up the street, he also swept the entire area with his eyes, seeking out any unusual people or activities. Nothing obvious stuck out, but he hadn't survived in the fight scene for so long, or become such a successful negotiator without developing keen observation skills. Unfortunately the number of people milling around made it difficult for him to pinpoint any one individual.

One man did grab his attention, however. A younger, handsome blond fellow was drinking coffee at a café, seemingly reading a college textbook and scrolling through his smartphone at the same time. Stannis watched the man subtly shift the phone to track his and Sansa's path. Stannis let his gaze sweep past the man without pausing so as not to tip him off. Instead he opted to point out an outlandishly welded scrap-metal art piece, supposedly of a dragon, displayed in the middle of the street to Sansa. She laughed and agreed that it didn't really fit in. As they walked past it though, she couldn't resist pulling out her smartphone and snapping a photo of the ridiculous sculpture.

Thankfully Sansa did not notice his heightened awareness, as he had no intention of giving her any cause for alarm. Convinced now that they were being watched, Stannis remained extra vigilant during the short walk back to the office, only half-listening to Sansa at this point. Even though he took pride and confidence in his size, strength and abilities, he did not take them for granted. He refused to relax his guard until they had passed through the front lobby and approached the elevator. While waiting Sansa once again turned and gave Stannis a smile of earnest thanks.

"Thank you once again for lunch Stannis, and more importantly, thank you for listening, not pushing and not judging. That means a lot to me." Not knowing what to say, Stannis merely inclined his head, and tried not to scowl. She got on the elevator when the doors opened, but he declined as a loud collective murmur of gasps coming from the employee lounge caught his attention.

Choosing to investigate, Stannis walked into the back of the lounge only to see a group of twenty or thirty younger employees crowded around a table. "Wow!" "Play it again!" "He gave them a serious ass-whooping! Who knew?" "Can you put it on the big screen?" No one had noticed his approach, so he decided to stand in the shadow of a pillar and observe the proceedings. Evidently the large
screen mounted on the wall had some sort of wi-fi connection. Renly had tried to explain it to Stannis once, but he had ignored his younger brother. All he cared was that it worked, and did what he needed it to do. Configuring it was someone else's job.

The screen flickered as it made connection to a website, and then a video, obviously recorded from a cellphone, began to play. Stannis tensed up, immediately recognizing the scene as the street where he had stopped the three would-be muggers. He watched blurry images of Sansa and Margaery run down the sidewalk, chased by the pack of thugs. His anger only grew as he watched himself chase down and literally thrash three of the five muggers. He didn't realize that he had approached the rear of the large group of watchers until he started hearing their comments.

"Holy shit! Is that Stannis Baratheon? Like, our COO?"

"Dumbass, where have you been? Someone posted this video to Liveleak a couple of hours ago. Everybody in the building has seen it by now. It's all anyone is talking about."

"Damn, I thought he was scary already, but this brings it to a whole new level."

"Fuckin A, man, they arrested him! Dude!"

Stannis must have growled, snarled or something because the entire group collectively turned and gasped when they saw him standing there. Other than a muttered "Oh fuck" no one said a word. He glared at them for a good thirty seconds, trying to remember how to speak coherently.

"SHUT. IT. DOWN." Stannis spat out each word as if they offended him, and he had to rid the phrase from his very core. Not bothering to verify their obedience, he stalked back to the elevator, and literally bared his teeth at an employee who thought to enter the elevator with him. He punched the number for the top floor and impatiently waited for the ascent to finish. Renly had better have an answer for this.

Stannis honestly feared for the company and the Baratheon brothers' reputation now. If Baelish or anyone associated with the circuit fights saw this video, they may recognize him in the upcoming match in three days time. He also feared for Sansa's safety. She had been seen with him today, of that he was certain. Seen and noted by someone with less than honorable intentions. Coupled with this video, Stannis now realized that she could be used as a pawn to blackmail him, if the wrong people were to identify Sansa or himself. Fortunately the video's picture quality was grainy, but his employees had clearly and immediately recognized him.

Mika and Anna were crowded around the receptionist's desk when Stannis burst out of the elevator onto the executive floor. All three had guilty, shocked looks on their faces when they saw him. Too angry to speak, he simply snarled as he stalked directly to Renly's office, as Robert's light was off. He did not expect both of his brothers to also be intently watching the video of his violent fight on Renly's large screen TV. The image of them viewing the conflict for their own personal amusement caused him to lose his temper completely.

Stannis exploded at his brothers. "What the FUCK?! Do you two think this is some sort of joke, or entertainment? The whole fucking building is watching this video! I thought you had this under wraps, Renly. I do NOT fucking need this shit right now!"

Renly and Robert were rendered speechless by the words that left Stannis' mouth. He never cussed. In fact, Robert had once joked that Stannis must have been a secret Septon instead, he spoke so cleanly and properly. Not today.

Finding his brain, Stannis lowered his volume marginally while simultaneously giving his
dumbfounded younger brother clearer instructions. "FIX THIS, Renly. I want that video scrubbed off the 'Net. Use your goddamned useless fucking contacts and fucking FIX THIS!"

Leaving Renly's office Stannis returned to his own space, once again slamming the door shut. Tossing his suitcoat on a sofa he kept in the office, he paced around the room like a caged tiger for several minutes, desperately trying to concoct a solution to his dilemma. Too worked up to think, he eventually dropped to the couch and hung his head in his hands. How the hell did this escalate so fast?

He felt the couch shift as his older brother sat down next to him. "You broke your door again, Stanny." Robert's low voice, normally mocking and flippant, sounded somber and sincere to Stannis. For once the hated nickname didn't even phase him.

Not looking up, he heard the clink of glass on the low table in front of him. He then smelled the unmistakable odor of single malt scotch whisky as Robert poured two glasses. It's only 1:30 in the afternoon. Monday. At work. Fuck it. Stannis dropped his hands and reached out for the fuller of the two tumblers and drained half of it at once, simultaneously grimacing at and savoring the smooth burn. Only then did he straighten his back and look to his brother seated next him. Strangely, there wasn't a trace of derision in Robert's expression, only admiration and a hint of worry.

Robert reached over and clapped Stannis on the shoulder. "Lighten up, Stannis! You did good, and you kicked some serious ass. There's nothing to be ashamed of." If you only knew, Robert. Nodding, Stannis stood and paced a bit, sipping the whisky. He normally would not have touched alcohol during work hours, but he appreciated Robert's gesture.

Stannis could not bring himself to speak on his real fears, so he glanced at the door instead, hanging wildly on just one of its hinges. "I'll have Anna call facilities to repair that. They can deduct the cost from my expenses. It wouldn't be the first time."

Robert walked back towards the door. "I don't know why you're so uptight, Stannis. But regardless, Renly has already started working his magic. He has some very deep contacts in cyberland. The video will be purged shortly. Don't worry so much!" Laughing once again, Robert dodged the precarious door and quit Stannis' office.

Stannis finished the last of the whisky in his glass and returned to his desk. He still had reports to review, and they would not go away.

Late in the afternoon Stannis' energy and concentration had both reached their limits. Once again he found himself thinking of Sansa Stark. Their lunch together had certainly turned into a positive development. He was gaining her trust, and she had started opening up to him about Petyr Baelish. That was his main goal - he needed as much information about Baelish as possible. It had become increasingly clear to him that Baelish had originally planned something sinister for Sansa. Unfortunately he could not shake the suspicion that Baelish had someone watching Sansa, and perhaps he, Stannis, as well. Knowing that Baelish now funded the circuit fights gave Stannis additional cause for alarm. Would he try to coerce Sansa once again? Would he try to blackmail Stannis, or Baratheon Industries, if it came to light that Stannis was a fighter in the circuit?

Regardless, he felt it was now his responsibility to keep Sansa safe and clear of the ugly world that he had found himself wrapped up in.

As he drove home that evening thoughts of Sansa caused him to feel fiercely protective towards the young woman once again, yet now he felt as though he did have the right to do so. But for the first time thinking of her also caused arousal to flare within him. Robert's voice echoed in his head - No, Stannis. Smirking, Stannis shifted in his seat to readjust his quickly hardening cock, and thought, Yes, Robert. Yes.
I can't claim any originality for the Cheez-Its and Oreos as a meal prop. I got the idea from watching an episode of Longmire. If you haven't seen it it's a great show.

As always, please leave comments! Thanks!
Chapter 5

********** Monday Morning **********

When Sansa found out that her 10:00 Business Ethics class had been cancelled, she decided to take the earlier street-car connection from campus to the financial district, to give her plenty of time to eat lunch before the new employee briefing. She had felt nervous walking the three blocks from the station to Baratheon Tower alone, but it was mid-morning and many people were out and about. Ever since last week's mugging attempt she had opted to get a ride with either of her parents or her brothers from the family's home to campus, but today no one had been available. Sansa had no choice but to start taking the commuter train again. Later in the morning, taking the street-car from campus to the financial district had seemed far less daunting and Sansa had relaxed, rationalizing that thousands of people took the train and street-cars every day without incident.

Once she arrived at the Tower Sansa set herself up in a sunny corner of the employee lounge. She didn't know any other interns yet, so she opted to sort through her school assignments on-line. But soon her thoughts wandered off, and she found herself recalling meeting Stannis Baratheon last week. She had met him a long time ago, of course, but she had only been a child then. Unlike Robert or Renly, Stannis never spent much time at the Stark residence, and Sansa had always been too young to go to the various social functions where her parents might interact with him and the other Baratheon brothers. Growing up, though, she had heard Robert talk about Stannis too far too often, and never in a good way. So last week when Robert called Stannis out of his office to greet her, Sansa had tensed up with trepidation, wondering if the middle Baratheon was every bit the horrible, harsh, hard-ass cactus prick his brother had previously described. Still, she had straightened her spine and greeted him with what she hoped was a confident smile.

********** Previous Week **********

Stannis did not at all resemble the cactus skinned monster Robert had described. Sansa had immediately been drawn to his deep storm-blue eyes, stoic mannerisms (much liker her father), and absolute professionalism. Unlike Robert or Renly, Stannis kept his receding hair and beard trimmed very short. Although he looked nothing like his brothers, Stannis still had a rugged, worn handsomeness to his features that Sansa found both intriguing and attractive. She could not believe how heavily muscled he was in comparison to the other brothers, either. Unlike Robert, Stannis had a trim waistline, and very broad, well muscled shoulders. He also did not ogle her body like so many young men on campus were likely to do, nor did he speak to her with patronizing condescension like many older businessmen had so often done (in addition to ogling her long legs); instead he had treated her with respect. Right after meeting Stannis Renly had bundled her off to meet her new supervisor, back down on the third floor.

Renly had laughed in apology on the elevator. "I apologize Sansa, for having to deal with that. Stannis can be such a bore."

Sansa had felt puzzled. Stannis did not seem like a bore to her at all. In fact, she really hoped to interact with him again soon, preferably without Robert present. "I didn't think he was boring at all, Renly. Just intense and focused."

Renly laughed again. "Intense and focused, yes. Admittingly he is the best person to run Operations, but honestly, the man is as boring as a wooden post. My brother is such a killjoy." Sansa decided not
to contradict Renly, but promised herself that she would speak with Stannis Baratheon again.

Her next encounter with Stannis had shown Sansa an entirely different, decidedly *roug\-\er edge to the man. When the pack of five thugs had started chasing Sansa and Margaery, she had feared for her life. They had cornered her and Margaery, and had immediately started groping both ladies and trying to steal their handbags. But as suddenly as the mugging had begun it had ceased, as a large man had brutally accosted and subdued three of the five thugs. The violent manner of the counter-attack had frightened Sansa, as she wasn't sure if he would then attack her and Margaery. Only after Sansa had given her statement to police had she recognized the man was Stannis Baratheon.

When Sansa called out to him Stannis had turned and approached with such alacrity and predatory focus that she jumped back. In truth she had been a tiny bit of afraid of him, as she had just watched him violently neutralize three street criminals without any perceivable effort.

She had watched him pace impatiently back and forth on the sidewalk for several minutes, not pausing once. He appeared irritated, restless and confined, full of excess energy yet trapped like a circus lion. He seemed so *itchy* in his manner of walking and interacting with the interviewing police officer. Never once did he stop moving.

Sansa had been shocked when the police arrested Stannis, and had tried to argue on his behalf but the detective refused to listen. A mixture of defiance and defeat were plainly written on Stannis' face as he sank to his knees, and she felt awful that he underwent such an unjust humiliation. Still, this encounter had left her with a mix of fear and awed respect for him. He had been fast, strong, wild and violent while subduing the criminals.

Sansa's third encounter with Stannis occurred on the front porch of her family's home, shortly after he had been released from police custody. Sansa had been so worried about his fate at the police station, and felt terrible that he had been arrested on her behalf. He looked utterly exhausted and worn out. Yet Stannis still took the time to listen to her, and reassure her that he not only did not blame her at all for the mugging or his arrest, but also encouraged her to keep living normally and not hide herself away. Talking to Stannis out there on the dark porch was so *easy*. Even speaking to him of Petyr Baelish came without much effort. This particular version of Stannis neither resembled the professional businessman nor the wild, furious fighter. Sansa found herself inexplicably drawn towards the man, intrigued by all the different facets of his personality that she had so far encountered.

Not knowing what came over her, giving Stannis a kiss on the cheek seemed to Sansa the best way to show her gratitude. Embarrassed at her own presumption, she then ran inside, unwilling to look her father or Renly in the eye as she slipped past them.

Later that night the unmistakably stern knock of her father sounded on her bedroom door. Unlike Arya, she could not simply yell at him to go away, or throw a book at him should he keep bothering her. "Come in, Dad." She didn't really want to talk to him or her mother, but she couldn't really send him away, either.

Ned slowly entered Sansa's room, looking both regretful and worried. She didn't understand why he might seem so subdued. He sat down on the edge of her bed, looking at her with tired, worried eyes.

"Sansa, how are you holding up? You haven't talked much, and your mother and I were beginning to worry about you."

"I'm fine, Dad, really. Last night was scary, but I'm really grateful that Stannis intervened. Thanks to him Margaery and I didn't get hurt or robbed. That's the important thing."
Ned turned away for a moment and rubbed the back of his neck, which had strangely turned red. When he looked back at her Sansa could tell he was rather uncomfortable for some reason.

"Sansa, concerning Stannis...I heard you speaking with him out on the porch earlier. You and he have only just met again after many years, yet you told him more about Petyr Baelish than you've told me or your mother. And honestly, I've never heard the man speak so much in my life as he has tonight. Before you came home he asked after you. I think he was concerned for your well-being."

Ned stood and started pacing.

"Dad, Stannis was just...easy to talk to, I guess. He didn't seem judgmental or anything, he just listened. I really needed that. Honestly, though, I don't know why he would worry about me; he knew I was safe. In fact, I thought he blamed me for the whole incident instead. But now I know he doesn't." Sansa did not understand why her father wanted to talk about Stannis.

Ned uncharacteristically paced around her room; it was clear now that he wanted to tell her something which bothered him. "Sansa, you can tell me or your mother anything, you know that, right?"

She nodded, but was still unable to open up to him about her time at the Mockingbird Fund. She felt so ashamed, she wished she could turn back time and make it disappear.

Ned sighed. "Sansa, don't attach too much meaning to your interactions with Stannis. He is 36, much older than you, very moody, intense and private. He is a dedicated loner, and generally a very impatient man. He somehow managed to stay extra polite tonight, how I really don't know, probably because you're an intern at the brothers' company now. I imagine he will simply want to put this incident behind him. Best that you stay out of his way." With that Ned patted her leg and then left the room, leaving Sansa more confused than she had been before.

**********  Monday  **********

Sitting in the employee lounge, Sansa ruminated on her father's advice. Unfortunately she could not put Stannis Baratheon out of her mind. She found herself strongly drawn towards the man, and admitted that she was attracted to him. But if her father had been correct, Stannis would undoubtedly avoid her company. Considering she was a lowly part-time intern, and he was the COO whose office sat on the top floor, she figured that she probably would rarely see the man again anyway. So she jumped in shock when she heard his deep, rumbling voice speak her name.

Lunch at Tuscano Trattoria with Stannis had been absolutely perfect. Sansa couldn't help but imagine that Stannis actually held a little bit of honest attraction for her as well. Asking her to lunch was certainly going far beyond showing simple, casual concern for her well being. Stannis had treated her as if she were a true lady, behaving in a chivalrous manner yet not overbearing, going out of his way to point out a few sights, and patiently listening to her throughout their delightful mid-day meal. When they returned to the Tower she secretly hoped that he might ask her to lunch again sometime, and perhaps eventually more.

Only later, after the employee briefing, did Sansa learn what the other interns meant when they referred to her as jail bait. By this time everyone had seen the video of the mugging and Stannis' intervention, plus his subsequent arrest. At first Sansa had felt mortified, but when a few friendly interns asked her about the experience, she opened up and told them what had happened. After that she could see their respect and admiration for Stannis grow enormously.

Monday night found Sansa obsessing over the silent, broody and wildly unpredictable middle Baratheon. She really looked forward to Wednesday, her next day at the office. She told herself that she would go out of her way to meet with Stannis again somehow. She hoped to connect with him
and perhaps confirm their mutual interest in each other. And hopefully get a second lunch date with
him.

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**Bzzz Bzzz. Bzzz Bzzz.** Stannis reached over to his nightstand in the dark, seeking his buzzing
phone. Grabbing it, he glanced at his clock. 2:07 AM. *This better be good.* He had only managed to
settle down enough to sleep shortly before midnight.

His phone did not indicate who had sent the text message. When he swiped the screen to open it, all
that appeared was a picture. His jaw clenched, shoulders stiffened, and his hand gripped the phone
so hard his knuckles turned white. All traces of sleepiness vanished, as he looked at a photo of
himself and Sansa walking through the Italian restaurant. Whoever had taken the photo must have
been behind them, as it depicted Stannis and Sansa from the rear, with his hand resting lightly on her
lower back. Stannis recalled clearly having felt the sensation of being watched at that moment, which
had prompted his protective gesture. He had been right. But who sent this, and how did they get his
cell number?

Stannis stared at the screen for several seconds, wondering about the implications of this message.
Then the screen flickered, and the photo disappeared. His phone's screen went back to the main
menu. *What the...?* He tried scanning his photo stream, call log and text messages, to no avail. All
traces of the photo had disappeared, and he knew he hadn't deleted it himself.

Stannis found himself suddenly dry-mouthed and very thirsty. He drank some water and lay back
down, closing his eyes. Wide awake and disturbed, he nonetheless recognized the need to rest his
eyes, even if he did not get any more sleep that night. He lay there wondering who might be stalking
Sansa, and why they had sent him the photo in the middle of the night. Was it a warning, or a threat?

Regardless of the possible threat to Sansa, Stannis realized that he was developing a very real
attraction towards the girl. It was not just a mild curiosity as a family friend, smart young intern or
pretty girl he just happened to save from muggers, but an honest physical and emotional attraction.
He already acknowledged to himself that he found Sansa sexually appealing. She had a beautiful
face, gorgeous slender body, and her *hair* - he imagined what it might feel like to run his hands
through the thick red strands, to feel it draped across his chest.

From what he could tell of their encounters (had it been 4 already?), she had certainly interacted with
him in a very open, honest manner. He had not detected any superficial politeness or false courtesies,
both of which he absolutely loathed. And the fact that she had truly appeared to enjoy lunch with
him certainly didn't hurt. He had searched his mind hard, trying to recall any details that might show
duplicity on Sansa's part - and came up empty. The absolute innocence and joy she had displayed on
the market street had been genuine, and he took no small bit of satisfaction knowing that he had
played a role in bringing that joy to her.

Still, Stannis had no way of knowing if Sansa felt the same attraction towards him. The dichotomy
could not be more clear; he was the large, brooding older executive, and she such a young, innocent
intern within the same company. Even though they had family ties, and she didn't fall under his chain
of command (Renly's department did not report to Stannis at all), he would have to tread carefully to
avoid intimidating Sansa. He had vowed never to give her cause to fear him, and he meant to keep
that vow.

Stannis gave his pillow a few half-hearted punches in frustration. He was confounded by the
complexity of his problems, and his inability to just *talk* to people. Short of just telling her outright,
he did not know how to inform Sansa of his interest in her without scaring her off (or worse, her
passively accepting his advances only because she felt she had no other choice). Furthermore, he felt
stymied by the fact that someone may be stalking Sansa, and he could neither prove it nor prevent it at this juncture. No matter what she felt towards him, though, he would do everything in his power to protect her.

Beep Beep Beep. 5:00 AM. Stannis groaned and struck out at his alarm clock, sending it tumbling to the floor. Evidently he’d fallen back asleep after all. Seeing his phone on the nightstand caused Stannis to sit straight up and grab it. No longer sleepy, he scanned his phone’s text messages, call log and photo stream once again. And once again, there was not a trace of the text or photo that he had received.

By the time he walked into his office later that morning Stannis had half-convinced himself that he had imagined the entire incident. Texts and photos simply do not delete themselves. Or perhaps he had simply spent too much time daydreaming about a young red-headed lady who had suddenly entered his life and turned it upside down.

Late in the afternoon Stannis figured he could probably tolerate speaking to his younger brother without throttling him. He had thought about the video leak all day, and needed to know if Renly had any success in getting it pulled from the major websites.

Renly was actually working at his desk, ignoring the early evening news that played in the background on the large wall-mounted television. Stannis found Renly’s habit of always leaving the TV on terribly annoying; how his younger brother finished any meaningful work with the background distraction was incomprehensible to Stannis. The sound had been muted, but as the screen flashed the topic for the afternoon’s investigative report Stannis suddenly found himself wanting to listen. He picked up the remote control and turned up the sound, causing Renly to startle somewhat.

"Hey! Stannis, knock next time, will you?” Stannis smirked. Renly never knocked, so he was simply returning the favor.

Stannis didn’t even glance at his brother. "Be quiet. I want to hear this.” Renly huffed in petulance, but refrained from speaking as he evidently found the topic at hand more interesting. The report detailed the ever-growing use of the stimulant drug Spike throughout King’s Landing.

"Our top investigative report team has spent weeks studying the ongoing scourge of the drug known as Spike throughout King’s Landing. We have interviewed police officers, emergency medical personnel, prison convicts, police informants, low level drug pushers (identities concealed in exchange for their candid interviews) and Spike users themselves to bring our audience the most detailed, informative view possible. And what we have discovered is both disturbing and terrifying.”

"First, some background. Spike falls within the same class of illegal drugs generically known as Speed. It rapidly increases the user’s energy, drive, physical strength and mental focus. But it also causes a tremendous amount of adrenaline and testosterone to be produced over a period of 2 to 6 hours, causing the men who take it to become extremely belligerent, violent, and physically and sexually aggressive. This is one of the other aspects that is unique to Spike; it only seems to affect men. Forensic chemists working with the police have not yet ascertained all the ingredients used to manufacture Spike or why it only affects males."

"Spike first appeared in our city approximately 18 months ago. Police noted increased violence and aggression levels in people committing street crime, especially muggings, robberies, and assaults. Known non-violent offenders suddenly became violent and aggressive, and tended to take on much riskier crimes when they were high on Spike. As the drug’s access throughout the city expanded, violent crimes, assaults and rapes increased rapidly. Now, only 18 months after first appearing here, these violent crimes have nearly tripled in number. Police believe this is a direct result of the usage
of Spike, which is extremely cheap and easy to procure."

"One other detail that has contributed to Spike's rapid spread is the ease and variety of ingestion. Spike users and medical personnel informed us that the drug is taken in many forms and methods. It is available in powder form, which can be snorted or mixed into a liquid and drank. It can also be injected intravenously, taken in pill form, or added to various tobacco products. That seems to be the easiest and most widespread method, as tobacco itself is legal and widely available. Police cannot confiscate every store's wares or a private citizen's property without due cause. Because of this, Spike can easily be hidden in plain sight, in your neighbor's pocket or on the local convenience store shelf."

Stannis muted the TV, and turned to ask Renly about the leaked video. Renly, however, just started laughing. "Ha! So that's your problem, Stannis! Since you went all blue-collar on us, that would explain why you mowed down those street thugs last week. You're certainly more aggressive than most MMA fighters. Maybe somebody "spiked" your snuff! Ha!"

Once again Stannis felt a headache flare up, along with his anger. Renly turned everything into a joke, regardless of the subject matter. He snarled at his brother. "ENOUGH. My toxicology screen came back clean - you were there when Selmy got the news." Barristan Selmy had later informed Stannis that if he had tested positive for any illegal substance, the prosecutor would have pressed charges regardless of his actions in saving Sansa and Margaery.

Renly held his hands up in supplication, grin mostly gone. "All right, all right. You just need to grow a thicker skin, Stannis. Accept a joke without taking it so damn personally, geez."

Stannis paced away from Renly for a moment, angry at himself for rising to the bait. Then he remembered the conversation he'd overheard at the police station, focused on the problem and quickly walked back to his brother. He spoke urgently. "I was clean, but those three men I took out were not."

"I don't follow you, Stannis."

"Those men that attacked Sansa and Margaery were high. I overheard the police officers that booked me at the station discuss the others' tox screens. They said the three I took down all tested positive for Spike. Yet that area of King's Landing is still considered very safe. Violent crime, especially drug-induced, never occurs there. Until last week, anyway."

Stannis was starting to suspect that the attack on the girls was not random at all, but he couldn't pinpoint why he felt that way. He did not wish to air his concerns with Renly or anyone else yet. He had to be certain first. He also suspected that the filming and posting of the video may not have been a random act, either. He needed a copy for his own examination.

"Stannis, you're just being your paranoid, suspicious self now. That was a random act, nothing more."

Stannis ignored the statement entirely. He wasn't about to divulge his suspicions to Renly now; obviously his brother would not take them seriously. Instead he changed the subject, returning to the original reason he had sought out Renly in the first place. "Tell me Renly, did you use your contacts and get that video pulled?" Stannis figured it was a mostly futile effort, but he still had to know.

Renly rolled his eyes. "I got all the major sites to remove it, but honestly, Stannis, it's out there all over the web. That video will always lurk somewhere, you must realize this."

Stannis breathed in and out several times. He was angry, but not at Renly. His brother had tried to
help and had stood by him at the police station. Instead of yelling (Renly was clearly surprised), he sat down in front of Renly's desk. Stannis unlocked his phone and slid it across the desk to Renly. He was absolutely convinced that Sansa was the target of a stalker, or worse. His next question would probably sound ridiculous to his tech-savvy, digitally inclined younger brother.

"Renly, can text messages or sent photos automatically delete themselves or disappear?" Stannis was certain he sounded like a technological idiot. He could tell from Renly's expression that his brother thought the same thing.

"Where have you been, brother? Stuck in a timewarp? Of course, it's called Snapchat. And it looks like it's been installed on your phone. Huh. I thought you didn't know how to install apps. Did someone send you a picture that disappeared?"

Stannis let the little insult slide. "Nevermind that, just fix my phone. Make it so that if any message or photo is sent to me, it will not disappear." If he could keep a digital trail, perhaps eventually the police would be inclined to listen to him, but he wasn't ready to go there yet. He drummed his fingers against Renly's desk over and over while he waited, still full of pent-up energy.

"Easy. Done." Renly slid the phone back to his scowling older brother, and gave him a sly grin. "Now you can keep those naked women pics for future access."

Ignoring his brother's jeer, Stannis frowned and headed back to his office, pausing only to give Renly one more order. "Send a copy of that video to my home e-mail address. And do not even try to tell me you don't have a copy, Renly, I know better." Seeing his brother's face turn red in chagrin confirmed Stannis' suspicions.

Wednesday found Stannis stuck in a meeting with the Human Resources senior staff until nearly noon. Even though he had no reason to do so, Stannis altered his route back to the elevator so that he crossed the mezzanine overlooking the employee lounge. Scanning the corner where Sansa had been seated the other day, he told himself he just wanted to see how she fared in light of the video leak.

At first glance he almost missed her as the area where he had met her before was empty. But then a flash of auburn caught the corner of his eye, and he turned to watch Sansa walk across the floor beneath him towards the same table. He just froze, gripping the rail, mesmerized by her long loose hair that swayed with each step. Sansa stopped suddenly, not very far from the mezzanine, and turned suddenly to look up at him. Her face had been somber and serious looking, but she lit up with a smile (for him!) and turned back to stand underneath rail he leaned upon. Stannis hadn't realized he was holding his breath until he tried to speak, but all he managed was a cough. Sansa laughed.

Straightening up and putting on a stern expression, Stannis turned to descend the stairs, but Sansa was already coming up the stairs towards him instead. She was fishing something out of her handbag. An apple. "See? No Oreos today." She gave him another cheeky grin, one that he would normally associate with disrespect, but on Sansa it looked so right. At least when she directed it at him.

He scoffed. "No wonder you have the bones of a bird. That apple is not enough to feed a sparrow for the day." This auburn bird, however, was one he longed to hold in his hand, in his arms. But how?

Sansa laughed again and rolled her eyes. "And before you ask, yes, I ate a proper lunch, thank you very much. I have systems training here that starts in 15 minutes, so I ate early."
Then Sansa turned serious. "I'm glad I saw you though. I worried about you, what with that stupid video getting posted. I know it must have really bothered you to have your privacy invaded like that, especially here. I'm sorry, Stannis."

Stannis sighed and shook his head. "Don't be. Sansa, you are no more responsible for the leak than you are for the original incident. No more of this." The last sentence he spoke too sharply, as Sansa visibly flinched and looked away from him. But she quickly squared her shoulders and looked back up, no apprehension visible. Good. She's resilient, and adaptive.

"I heard you broke your door the other day. They say you were really angry."

"They, whoever they are, should talk less about me and more about their jobs."

"People will always talk about someone or some incident, Stannis. This week it's our turn to be the subjects of hallway conversations. Next week it'll be someone else." She sounded somewhat bitter to Stannis' sensitive hearing.

"Sansa, has anyone here at the Tower bothered you over this? Say the word." He growled at the end, angry on her behalf. She didn't need to be the brunt of office rumors.

She shook her head. "No, no one here has bothered me at all. If anything all I've heard is admiration for what you did. People talked about it, and a few of the other interns I work with asked me what happened, but certainly no one views this negatively. I think they were just surprised."

Stannis grunted quietly, but otherwise remained quiet. Her bitter tone alerted him to some inner turmoil she may still be harboring from her time at the Mockingbird Fund, but he elected to let her set the pace on that discussion. Still, his own turmoil concerning this girl rumbled just below the surface. Sansa brought out his urge to lose control, much as he allowed himself to do when he went to Fury Road or fought. She had already seen that dark side of him unleashed on the street, and even now did not shy away from him.

As they stood next to each other, Sansa looked down at their hands resting next to each other on the rail, close enough to touch if one shifted just a little. He followed her gaze. Her hand was so fine, dainty and graceful looking - long, slender fingers and soft smooth skin, free of all blemishes. In comparison his own much larger, somewhat battered hand displayed a few scars as well as dark bruises where his fist had repeatedly connected with thug #3's jaw. His knuckles were somewhat larger than they used to be, permanently enlarged from the repeat abuse he had subjected them to through boxing. Padded gloves and wrapping only protected them so much. Ruefully he thought they more closely resembled a dock worker's hands than those of a corporate exec. He didn't like to think about how much they ached on cold rainy days, either.

Sansa gasped, and gingerly covered his hand with her own. "Stannis! I didn't realize you injured your hand last week. This looks terrible! Does it still hurt?" She gently rubbed her fingers across his bruised knuckles, frowning in consternation all the while.

To Stannis, her tender, compassionate touch was something unique and unexpected. Clearly she felt genuine concern and perhaps even remorse that he had possibly been hurt while helping her. It took nearly all his control to keep from flinching or jerking his hand away. There was no pain, but the sensation of her gently massaging and stroking his hand was so novel he didn't know how to process it. The only prolonged physical contact or touch he had given or received in years involved rough handling, pain and violence.

Stannis gently disengaged his hand, but not before giving hers a surreptitious, soft squeeze. "It's fine, Sansa. But now you have training to attend, no?"
Sansa nodded an affirmative, but looked regretful at having to leave, too, almost as if she wanted to say something else. "I'll see you later, then."

Stannis watched in baffled silence as she quickly walked across the mezzanine, staring even after Sansa slipped through a conference room door to her training class.

Befuddled, besotted, bewitched, or perhaps all three, Stannis didn't know. What he did know was that he longed to feel her gentle, tender touch once again. Stannis could scarcely comprehend the warmth and easy compassion she freely offered to him, not once but twice; no one else had even tried, not since before his parents had died. Sansa had awakened a need, a deep-seeded longing he had thought long dead and buried behind him. What to call it he could not say.

As Stannis waited for the elevator door to open, Renly suddenly appeared at his side. They entered together, not speaking until the doors closed and the elevator began its ascent.

"I really don't want to attend your funeral, Stannis. But he will kill you. Just so you know."

Stannis didn't have to ask Renly who he was. Robert. He chose not to answer Renly, instead just shot him a withering glare. Soon the elevator doors opened and they exited onto the executive floor, each brother breaking off towards their respective offices. Once inside he shut the door quietly, lost in a slew of emotions.

Renly's snide comment also irritated him to an unreasonable extent. Robert would have no say in whether he opted to pursue Sansa. Stannis strode over to his desk and yanked open a drawer, the one he kept his keys in. Dammit. He remembered tossing the tin in it the other day, but then recalled he'd put it in the truck that same night. Just as quickly he slammed the drawer shut. Twitchy and irritable, nonetheless he still had several hours of work to complete, and he could no longer allow himself to be distracted by these dark thoughts. Shoving them aside, Stannis dove into his work.

Stannis wrapped up his tasks shortly after 5:00 when his phone buzzed with an incoming text message. "Burgers tonight?" Davos. Stannis deleted the message without answering it. He still felt betrayed, and couldn't even fathom going back to their easy routine so soon. As it was he had an important fight tomorrow night, and needed to rest and concentrate on strategies for winning.

The sun had just set when Stannis pulled out of the Tower's parking garage for the last time that week. The sky turned a peculiar shade of pink, orange and purple, giving the buildings a strange, eery color. But the long red hair of the girl walking towards the transit stop absolutely glowed. Stannis couldn't believe his luck. He pulled over to the curb and put his passenger window down. The city air hung heavy and still over the streets - today had been unusually warm and humid for this early in spring. Sansa's shirt clung to her torso in places where she had sweated, giving him a nice view of some very interesting curves through the fine white fabric. Loosening his tie and top button, Stannis leaned over to call out the window.

"Sansa, do you need a ride home?" She startled, and then approached his Mercedes, leaned down and gave him another breathtaking smile.

"Stannis! No, you don't have to do that. I can catch the train. That's how I normally commute anyway."

Eyeing the young men shambling towards the transit stop, Stannis opted to push. "I insist, Sansa. It is nearly dark, and I can get you back to your parents' house in less than half the time. Hop in."

Glancing at the transit stop, Sansa then nodded and got in his car, smiling gratefully. "Thank you, Stannis, I really appreciate it. I would have to wait another 20 minutes before the next street-car
showed up."

Before Stannis pulled back out into the street towards the freeway, he turned on the radio to listen to the local traffic report. "There's been a multi-vehicle accident near the intersection of Highway 12 and Route 128. Right now all outbound lanes from downtown to Route 128 are at a complete standstill. Seek an alternate commute home, travelers."

"Now what?" Sansa asked. Her family's home was located in the suburbs several miles beyond the accident's location.

"Now I take you on the scenic route. I know this city's streets well, Sansa. Don't worry." As Stannis drove through the city he opted to keep the windows down, enjoying the fresh albeit somewhat muggy air. They rode in comfortable silence for about 15 minutes, until they reached a gas-light district near the bay lined with independent shops and street vendors. Sansa gasped and pointed across the road, clearly excited by something she saw.

"Look Stannis, that's Gianni's Gelato! They make the best ice cream and sorbet in the city." Stannis looked at the gorgeous, sweaty girl sitting next to him, and then at the clock. It was only 6:00. Why not?

Without answering he pulled into an empty parking space just past the shop, ditched his tie and rolled up his sleeves. Then he got out of the car and opened her door for her. She looked puzzled for a moment. "What are we doing?"

He arched a brow. "Getting gelato, of course. The night is certainly warm enough for it." Sansa's happily surprised expression did wonders for Stannis' ego. Obviously she found their impromptu stop a plus.

Stannis escorted Sansa across the busy street and up the gas-lamp lit sidewalk towards Gianni's. A short line had already formed at the window, but he didn't mind. At least not with Sansa by his side. He did however, shoot some warning glares at the few men daring to leer at Sansa. Her presence at his side had awakened his possessive streak, and he once again stepped close to her side, close enough that their arms brushed together. While they waited Sansa discussed her training for the day, basic systems familiarization every new employee had to complete. Apparently the interns had nicknamed it 'Death by Powerpoint.'

Once they received their orders - he got lemon sorbet in a cup, and Sansa got raspberry gelato in a cone - they started walking along the wide plaza behind the shops towards the water. A number of people were out, and the city lights glowed across the calm bay. They stopped and leaned against the rail, looking out over the water while enjoying their treats.

Stannis breathed in the fresh, salty air. He loved the sea, and everything that came with it. The salt air and lapping waves always calmed him, even when he felt deep turmoil or anger. To him the sea stirred his blood, called to him. Even though this bay stretched for many miles inland, it still carried the sounds and smells of the ocean. Sansa's melodic voice brought him out of his reverie.

"You love the sea, don't you? I can tell - you're calmer here by the water." For such a young lady she missed very little. She looked up him, blue eyes full of compassion.

He nodded. "My mother was raised on Greenstone Island. Every year until my parents died we all would spend three months there every summer, staying with my grandfather. He taught me to fish and swim; my uncle taught me to sail. The sea is in my blood." Stannis turned back towards the water for a moment, melancholic. He could not yet bring himself to discuss those years following his parents' deaths. Perhaps someday, if she became a part of his life.
Although he was perfectly content to just stand quietly, he glanced over at Sansa to take in her reaction to his words. Then he chuckled, deep and low in his throat, at the image she presented him. The tip of her nose was covered in raspberry ice cream.

Her puzzled frown and wrinkled brow as she looked up at him just made her image all the more tasty. Without thought Stannis reached out and swiped the ice cream off her nose with his thumb, and realizing he had no napkin, promptly licked it.

"Hmm, raspberry and salty sweat. I don't think that flavor will find a buyer's market." Sansa giggled at his statement, clearly full of mischief herself.

"Have you ever tried raspberry lemonade, Stannis? It's really good, you know." As she finished speaking Sansa continued to lick at her cone, painting her lips a most interesting raspberry color. She tilted her head up toward him and raised her eyebrows, allowing him to view her perfectly slender neck and collarbones, skin currently covered in a fine sheen of sweat. His experience with young women was next to non-existent, but even he could see an invitation.

"No, I haven't tried it, and I don't know." He took a bite of sorbet. "Perhaps I should find out?" Tilting his own head to the side he leaned down, feeling the first tinglings of passion stir deep within his soul. Still, he hesitated for a moment, seeking silent permission by meeting her own beautiful blue eyes with his own. Sansa nodded, and Stannis stopped hesitating.

Stannis captured her raspberry flavored lips with his own, and savored the mixed tastes that met his lips and tongue. She tasted divine - sweet raspberry, tangy lemon, even her salty sweat did not detract from the sensations or tastes as he explored her soft full lips and, after a moment, raspberry tongue. Without breaking contact he set his cup down and wrapped one arm around her waist, pulling her close to his body. The other hand he wrapped in her glorious thick hair behind her neck, supporting her head as he deepened their kiss even more. He wanted to drink her all in at once, taste and smell and touch. Their tongues frolicked and cavorted as he explored her lips and mouth, and she did the same most enthusiastically. The fact that she did not pull away in revulsion, but instead eagerly returned his kiss and pressed into his embrace encouraged him even more. Eventually though, they had to breathe.

Stannis leaned his forehead against Sansa's and gave her a soft nudge, caressing her side all the while. "Hey, girl, you OK?" His voice came out raspy and low. His control balanced precariously close to the edge. That rough, base part of his soul longed to take her into a dark corner and claim her as his own, then and there. He reeled it in, reminding himself of her youth and innocence. He would have to take it slow, to avoid spooking her like a skittish filly.

Sansa smiled, breathing heavily. "More than OK, I think." Somewhere in the midst of their kiss she had lost her ice cream cone, and had wrapped one arm around his waist and pressed the other hand against his hard, broad chest. Then she giggled and pulled her head back, just a little.

"Well? What do you think of raspberry lemonade now?"

"If it always comes to me in this form, I think I would find it most agreeable." Bending down he captured her lips once again, just to remind himself of her absolutely delightful taste.

As they drove towards her home Stannis pondered how to speak to Ned, and when. But mostly he could not believe his incredibly good fortune on this day; not only had he identified a girl that he wanted to pursue, but she had enthusiastically accepted his advances. Sansa told him that she had been secretly hoping that he would ask her out to lunch again, and maybe something more.

When Stannis pulled into the Stark's driveway he wrote his personal cellphone number down on a
business card and gave it to Sansa. "Here's my number."

Remembering his good manners, Stannis got out of the car first and held the door open for Sansa. As it was quite dark in their driveway he stole another kiss from her, but kept it gentle, even though he wanted to ravish her against the car right away.

She spoke softly. "Can I see you again soon? I really enjoyed lunch with you on Monday, and really enjoyed this evening. Was this technically our first date?"

Stannis harrumphed, deep in his throat. "I don't know what to call it. Perhaps a discovery of our mutual interest?"

She laughed. "First date it is. That's easier."

He thought about his upcoming fight, and realized he would look rather rough for a few days afterwards. "As far as when can we see each other again, not before Sunday. I will be away until then, and won't be accessible via cellphone before Saturday. Text me your number, and I will call you Saturday night. But I also need to speak to your father, and I would rather do it in person."

She grew stiff in his arms. "You do NOT need his permission to date me, Stannis. I'm 19, a legal adult, and fully capable of deciding who I want to see without my Dad's approval."

It pleased Stannis to see that Sansa had a strong opinion, and a strong backbone. He nodded. "I agree, Sansa. But the proper thing for me, as a man, to do is to inform your father of my intentions to court you. I would prefer to be upfront with him, and so I may come over on Sunday to speak with him. Until then I ask that you not speak of this with your family. It needs to come from me, I believe."

She nodded in acquiescence. "OK. But just so long as we get to spend some time together afterwards?"

"Yes, definitely."

********************************************************************************

Stannis arrived back at his townhouse full of determination. In the space of one short week his entire outlook on life had changed, and he could perhaps see a future beyond the underground fights.

First though, he had to get himself ready for tomorrow night's fight. Bear had told him to rest, eat well, and arrive at Fury Road by 6:00 PM Thursday. Stannis had just under 24 hours to sleep well and get his mind firmly switched into fighting mode. That meant setting any tender thoughts of Sansa aside, and allowing those darker, aggressive currents to rise to the surface.

Staring at himself in the bathroom mirror, Stannis sneered as he thought about how much he'd like to bust Baelish's head open. Considering what Baelish may have done to Sansa just made Stannis' blood boil, but this time he let it simmer, and did nothing to quell his rage. Scratching his itchy beard, he recalled that Baelish may recognize him at the fight tomorrow night.

Stannis rummaged in a drawer and pulled out his electric clippers. Soon clumps of short black hair littered his sink as the beard disappeared from his face. Once the clippers had removed most of the facial hair, he lathered up and used his razor to give himself a smooth shave. Looking in the mirror Stannis realized that shaving off his beard had shaved years off his looks as well, but his hair still stood out on his head. Once again he pulled out the clippers, and once again black hair quickly covered the sink.
Once he put the clippers away he looked at the face in the mirror once again. The smooth shaven face and closely buzzed head resembled those of a prison convict. As he imagined once again exactly what he'd like to do to Baelish, he sneered, growled and snarled in rage, and looked straight into the cold, murderous eyes of Stefan Estermont. He was ready.

Chapter End Notes

As always, please feel free to leave comments and feedback. If you haven't joined the comment-fest, please jump in! Reading through and responding to your feedback helps me to refine (and hopefully improve) the story as it goes forward.
Chapter 6

Stef parked the old Ford pickup next to Fury Road shortly before 6:00 Thursday evening. The sky had already turned dark, yet the previous day's heat still lingered in King's Landing. Especially here by the bay, the air hung oppressive, humid and still, clinging to his skin and causing sweat to break out on his brow. Stef breathed slow and deep from the belly, taking in the heavy, fishy, salty air. Fighting on nights like this always worked to his advantage; the sultry atmosphere helped his muscles stay loose and prevented them from tightening up.

A CLOSED sign hung in the window of Fury Road, but the door itself remained unlocked. Stef let himself into the dimly lit gym and locked the door behind him. Tonight, all of Bear's coaching would be centered solely on Stef and the semi-final match. Both men had reputations riding on tonight's fight, and Bear also stood to bring home several thousand dollars cash if Stef prevailed. Stef too, would be awarded several thousand dollars, but he had never accepted any monetary winnings. He refused to explain when questioned, and eventually the circuit organizers had dropped the matter.

"Stef? That you?" Bear's rough voice carried from the rear of the gym.

"Yeah, Bear." Stef slowly walked to the poorly lit corner where Bear sat at a worktable, re-rolling long bandages. In just a few hours' time the many yards of cloth would be wrapped around Stef's hands and wrists.

Bear glanced up, took note of Stef's newly shaven face and closely shorn hair, and grunted approvingly. "Good. That'll make it easier for me to take care of any cuts you get tonight." Bear had taken emergency medical training years ago, and was quite adept at stitching up the cuts his fighters inevitably acquired during their matches.

Without word Stef sat down and started rolling another long strip of bandaging. During training Stef normally wrapped his own hands, but on fight nights he trusted Bear to do the job. In fact, on these nights Stef shut down entirely, placing himself completely in Bear's care. He emptied his mind in preparation, and simply followed Bear's directions in the hours leading up to the fight.

The two men worked together for the next 30 minutes, the silence punctuated only by sounds of Stef continually drinking water. He needed to stay hydrated; fighting on such a hot night would suck all the moisture out of his body.

Once they completed the task at hand Bear told Stef to change into his gear. Afterwards, he starting warming up lightly with the jumprope and then shadow boxing. Stef concentrated solely on his movements and footwork. He had emptied his mind of all thoughts, even all aggression. He had learned early on in his fighting career that if he worked himself up too much too soon, he would expend all the adrenaline before the fight even began. That had led him to feeling shaky and weak, and he had lost his first three fights due to the extra stress. Now he thought absolutely nothing, and just listened to the familiar, rough tone of his trainer directing him through his initial warmup.

For several minutes only the sounds of feet scuffing on the mat penetrated the damp, still air of the gym. Then Bear's gruff voice broke through Stef's concentration. "Time to go. Drink this on the way." Bear handed Stef a large bottle of lukewarm water as they exited the gym.

Following the pattern they'd established nearly three years earlier, Stef rode with Bear to the fight's location instead of driving separately. He rested and visualized his movements while Bear drove. Bear lived in an apartment above Fury Road. After most circuit fights, Stef was generally too exhausted to drive, and he usually ended up sleeping on Bear's couch. Tonight would be no
It took Bear nearly 45 minutes to drive to 210 North Branch St. The old warehouse was situated in a separate, once abandoned manufacturing area on the west side of Kings Landing. Stef perked up and started paying attention to his surroundings as the vehicle slowed down. He had driven through the area himself several days earlier, just to familiarize himself with the location.

Cars and people lined the streets for several blocks in each direction. The fact that a dance rave was being hosted by the city's most popular DJ was not an accident; the fight would be held in the cavernous lower levels far below the dance floor. With so many people and vehicles coming to the rave the fight attendees will never be noticed slipping through the building. The rave would undoubtedly continue until dawn, long after the fights were finished and the circuit venue dismantled. No one would ever know what will have occurred in the bowels of the old building this night.

As soon as they entered the outwardly dilapidated structure Stef felt his entire head throb to the pounding beat of the rave music. The heavy bass echoed throughout the building and shook his entire skeleton. Even his heart tried to keep up with the beat. A number of odors assaulted his nose - sweat, piss, vomit and alcohol being the most pervasive. Evidently the partying had started early. The scents of acrid ozone, greasy food and various smokes permeated the air as well. The fighter and his trainer dodged the few high-as-a-kite glowing rave dancers who had apparently gotten lost, and entered a hidden stairwell to go down to the lower basement. Stef noted every dark corridor, every open door, every turn from the moment he entered the building. If anything went awry, he needed to be familiar with all possible escape routes. Bear did the same. He too had once been caught up in a police raid, and did not care to repeat the experience.

As they descended deeper and deeper into the basement the bass eventually faded off until he could detect only a dull, far away thumping. Still the sound did not disappear entirely. Stef understood the reason behind holding the rave on this night - it provided the necessary cover for the fights.

At the bottom Stef followed Bear through a long corridor whose darkness was only punctured by dim, metal caged lightbulbs widely spaced along the ceiling. Water dripped down the dank walls and puddled in low spots along the floor. Even the cement footing was slick and damp in spots. Eventually they reached an open cavern where tables, chairs and benches had been set up in a circle around a raised boxing platform. Elevated bleachers and box seats had been erected around the periphery of the room as well. Stef knew full well that those closed box seats contained close-captioned video feeds of the fight, as well as security screens linked to hidden wireless cameras placed throughout the entire facility. Should any unexpected incidents occur, the wealthiest attendees - the sponsors - would have enough warning to be evacuated, leaving the fighters, low level bookies and floor spectators to fend for themselves.

Bear led Stef to one of the makeshift changing rooms that had been set up for each fighter and started wrapping Stef's hands.

Bear's hands never wavered even while he spoke. "Listen up, Stef. There are four fights scheduled tonight. First the lightweights will hold their semi-finals. There ain't no need for you to watch them - you and me will just hang out back here. Then there will be some sort of 'entertainment'. After that come the heavies, with your match first. You can watch the second one if you want to stay. You'll get a feel for your competition if you win tonight."

"I'll win," Stef growled. He swapped hands as Bear reached for yet another roll of bandaging.

"Don't get cocky, Stef. You weighed in at 242 tonight, a little above your target. Even so, tonight's opponent, and the ones in the other fight, all still outweigh you by 5 to 10 pounds each. Remember
that." Stef just grunted. The extra weight on his opponent may translate to a little more force, but it
would probably also slow the other man down. But he had to acknowledge that he was fighting at a
heavier weight than he was accustomed to as well.

Noises and voices filled the air all around Stef and Bear. Soon the lightweight fights would begin.
While Bear dodged in and out of their room several times, Stef stayed put, simply resting and/or
lightly working each muscle group to stay loose. Bear stood as a firewall between him and the rest of
the fight organization - Stef refused to speak or interact with anyone on the circuit. Fighting required
no words, only strength, skill and determination.

"Stef, the lightweight fights are starting. Try to ignore the noise." Bear walked around behind Stef,
who had stretched out across a bench, and began kneading the younger man's shoulders, back, neck
and arms - pulling, stretching and working out knots. Stef blocked out all external stimuli save for
that, and let his muscles relax under the steady hands of his trainer.

90 minutes later Stef entered the ring opposite his rival. Both men wore boxing shorts and boots,
light MMA-style gloves and mouthguards. Their chests and heads were bare, and sweat already
poured off their bodies to drip onto the mat. Stef's much younger opponent, Jared, stood 6' 2" tall,
and outweighed him by 8 pounds. This would be the first time these men would meet in the ring.

A short, slender man with a pointy goatee entered the ring. Stef had never met him, but recognized
the man immediately as Petyr Baelish, the new sponsor of these fights. Immediately he felt his anger
and aggression rise to levels he had rarely experienced. Stef snorted and growled, never taking his
eyes off the well-dressed Mockingbird. Not yet.

Baelish addressed the crowd briefly, then turned to speak with the fighters. "Gentlemen, such as you
are, the prize for each of the semi-final winners tonight is $10,000 cash, plus the opportunity to fight
in the final match. The winner of the final match will walk away with $25,000 cash, plus something
far more precious. I will not reveal it until after the final match, but that particular prize is a rare gem,
unseen and...unspoiled. This particular prize I value above nearly all other things, but alas, I cannot
make use of it. But one of you most certainly will." Baelish's voice carried a certain hint of mockery
in it, especially at the end of his little speech.

As he finished speaking Baelish turned his eyes towards Stef, who had kept his own expression
stony and cold. Still, Stef could see the hint of confusion and doubt briefly flash across the
Mockingbird's face. Good. The change in his appearance had been enough to throw Baelish's
confidence into question, meaning that his own identity had not yet been confirmed.

Baelish left the ring, and then the referee repeated the few rules of the fight to Stef and his opponent.
No hitting below the belt, no kicking, no wrestling. The fight lasts for 12 3-minute rounds, unless
one of them gets knocked out.

DING. The 1st round began, and Jared bounded out of his corner towards Stef. Stef remained calm
and focused, held his hands up in a block, and bided his time. He kept his stance loose and relatively
straight, not wasting precious energy on bouncing or deeply bending his knees. Even so, Stef never
stopped moving. He could see that Jared leaned slightly forward of his center of gravity, and always
led with his left foot. Strategies continuously developed and modified in his head as the two men
clashed.

Step-slide. Block, jab. Slide, duck. Jab with the left, upper cut with the right, follow up with a body
blow. Keep the abs tight. Slide, turn, feint with the left, kidney blow from the right. Block, side step.
Tap him on the head. Maneuver the action back to your corner towards the end of the round. DING.
Sit down. Sip water.
The second, third and fourth rounds continued much as the first, with neither man striking any decisive blows. By the end of the fourth round Stef could see that Jared's energy flagged, as his bouncing step had turned into plodding. Still, the younger fighter started mouthing off to Stef during the break between the fourth and fifth rounds, raising Stef's ire considerably.

DING. The fifth round began, and Stef exploded out of his corner, ready to finish Jared off. In doing so, he allowed his temper to get the better of him, and even as he struck a heavy blow to Jared's torso the other fighter landed a cross across Stef's forehead, opening up a deep 2-inch cut above his right eyebrow.

Both men were knocked back by their respective blows, but quickly came together again. Stef engaged Jared in a clinch hold on the rail, giving each fighter a few seconds rest. In that time he tightly pressed his forehead against the other fighter's shoulder, stemming the blood flow that would otherwise stream into his eye. The referee separated the men, but they quickly came back into a clinch hold again, this time initiated by Jared. He leaned into one side, obviously still reeling from the kidney blow Stef had landed. Stef pulled Jared back so that once again they wound up close to his own corner, and when the bell rang he quickly sat down.

Bear already had his first-aid kit ready, and was wiping the blood and sweat off Stef's brow even as he sat down. Then he applied pressure with an adrenaline soaked gauze pad directly to the cut with one hand to constrict the blood vessels. A chilled enswell was simultaneously pushed just above the cut to reduce swelling. Bear applied the blood clotting agent Avitene directly to the cut, then smeared the area around the cut with vaseline. All this occurred in less than 60 seconds. Then the bell rang again, starting the sixth round.

Stef reeled in his temper and approached this round somewhat more slowly than the previous rounds. Although the area around the cut throbbled dully, at least he wasn't bleeding. Still, he realized Jared would target the same area again. Fight promoters liked to see long fights, but Stef was tiring, and wanted to put this one to bed. He intended to knock Jared down for good. This round finished without any harsh blows delivered by either fighter. They needed the rest.

During the next break Stef snuck a glance at Baelish. The smarmy Mockingbird's expression had been focused intently on Stef, and he appeared quite pleased with the injury. Strangely the image of a girl with red hair briefly flashed through his mind. The combination of her image in his mind and Baelish smirking right in front of him was enough for Stef to stoke his anger to new heights. Round 7 began, and Stef channelled all that rage directly into his punches.

With renewed energy Stef launched a flurry of hits at Jared. Seeing Baelish gloat had kindled the fury he so rarely allowed to burn. He allowed his rage to build; focusing all of it squarely at Jared, who stumbled into the ropes at the furious onslaught. Stef's ears did not register the crowd screaming in excitement, nor did he feel the ineffectual blows that landed on his torso, nor was it Jared's face that he saw before him. Stef wanted to completely dominate and destroy his opponent, his enemy. Again and again he struck fast and hard, pounding, until he saw the moment when his opponent's core abdominal muscles relaxed just a little. Then, holding his left hand near his face in defense, Stef landed a blow to the lower ribcage and felt it crunch beneath his fist. As Jared bent over, Stef quickly followed with a left uppercut delivered directly to his opponent's face. Jared's nose exploded in a shower of blood. Reeling back, Jared left himself open, and Stef landed the knockout blow with a right cross to the rear corner of Jared's jaw. The other fighter collapsed in a heap to the mat, and did not move. Stef had prevailed and won the match.

Sansa practically skipped all through her family's home Wednesday evening. Her dreaded commute
home had turned into the start of something completely new and exciting. He kissed her! Stannis Baratheon, the cold, "boring", aloof COO, had shown not only serious interest in her but also surprising passion and spontaneity. She couldn't believe her good luck - her sudden, surprising attraction towards a most unlikely man had been returned. And, boy could he kiss!

"Hi Mom!" Sansa greeted Catelyn as she breezed through the kitchen, dumping her bag before helping her mother with dinner preparations.

"Sansa, we thought you might be really late, due to that awful wreck on the highway. The news reports said that all traffic had been backed up, and even the commuter trains were affected."

Sansa wondered how much information she should share. Stannis had simply asked her not to divulge the start of a relationship yet. A ride home was innocent, right? "Actually, Stannis offered me a lift home when he saw me walking towards the metro stop."

Ned and Bran walked into the kitchen at that moment. "What's that, Sansa? Did I hear you say that Stannis gave you a ride home? Robert's brother, Stannis Baratheon?" Ned looked faintly incredulous.

Sansa rolled her eyes at her father. "Dad, it's not like we know any other person named Stannis. It was really hot walking towards the metro stop, and when he saw me he pulled over to give me a ride home. I'm really glad, too. There were some creeps at that stop, and it was starting to get dark."

"Interesting. Robert told me Stannis was rather irate over the release of that video. So much so that he broke his office door again. I figured he would want to forget about anyone and anything associated with the incident."

"Well, he was nice enough to me. He even stopped at Gianni's down by the waterfront just because I noticed it. He was very polite and kind to me, and certainly didn't seem angry or impatient."

Catelyn dropped her knife on the floor with a clatter, and Ned appeared most surprised. He spoke first. "Wait a minute. He drove you through the gas light district, and stopped for ice cream on a whim? Stannis plans out his entire day, week, month, year, life. That man does not make any decisions on the spur of the moment."

Sansa set the table for dinner. She felt that her father was judging Stannis rather unfairly. "Oh come on, Dad. I've spoken with him several times now. I don't think he's as bad as Robert describes. In fact, it's just the opposite. And yes, we did stop for ice cream, on a whim no less. And it was really good, too! Even so, he still got me home faster than the commuter train would have. So it was a win-win for me."

Catelyn added her opinion. "I don't think you should inconvenience Stannis again, Sansa. He lives in the Garden District, clear across the city - bringing you home probably added an hour and a half to his commute tonight. I imagine he just offered you a ride out of some sense of obligation."

Sansa had promised Stannis that she wouldn't 'kiss and tell'. "Well he didn't seem to mind at all."

As she hustled through the kitchen helping to prepare dinner Sansa missed the significant, worried looks that her parents gave each other.

After dinner Sansa hurried to her room. Before starting on her classwork she wanted to send Stannis a quick text so he would have her number. But when she pulled out her phone, she hesitated. He probably doesn't use texting shortcuts, she mused. Finally she composed a message that she deemed mature enough to send.
Hi Stannis, this is Sansa. I want to thank you again for the ride home tonight, and give you my number. Not sure of what else to say, she typed in her phone number (in case he didn't have a smartphone, you never know), and then hit 'Send'.

After five minutes of watching her phone not light up with a response, Sansa finally pulled out her textbook. Business Ethics class was certainly a bore, but she had to pass it to continue on to the advanced courses. Still, she tried to concentrate for nearly an hour without success, as she waited impatiently for an answer from Stannis.

The phone chimed at 9:30, and Sansa practically pounced on it in her eagerness. But it was only a text from Margaery.

MargieRose: Hey girlie, whatsup?

Nothing, just studying. Or trying to.

MargieRose: Trying to? U R the best student at KLU! There is no try with u, only do.

Just distracted, I guess.

MargieRose: Wait. I know. U meet a guy?

Crap. How did Margaery know? Maybe.

MargieRose: OMG! U haven't seen a guy, a REAL guy, in forever! Is he dreamy? Cute? Smart? Is he at school? Does he have a brother? ;)

We only just met. I'm not telling anybody anything yet. We have to get to know each other better first.

MargieRose: Oh comeon! Just a hint?

Nope. I'll tell you when I'm ready, and only if it seems to work out. Promise. I gotta go study, or something.

MargieRose: Well, don't let me keep u from staring at your phone waiting for him to txt u. Bye.

Ugh! Was it that obvious? Sansa scrolled through her text messages, but he hadn't responded yet. Giving up, she threw it back on the bed. Maybe he's at the gym, she thought. He's certainly well-built, and evenings are probably the only time he can work out. She daydreamed for a moment, thinking once again about him holding her with those muscular arms, kissing her on the waterfront with such passion. A tingle shot all the way down her spine, and she stretched in slight embarrassment at the arousal those thoughts brought on, even though she was alone. She'd never reacted this way to a man before. Was she really that hot for him already? YES.

Sansa felt nervous and out of sorts for most of the next two days and nights, as Stannis had not yet responded to her text. By this time she had convinced herself that he regretted his actions on Wednesday evening, and would choose not to answer her at all.

Friday evening Sansa stayed home to watch Rickon and Bran, as Ned and Catelyn were going out on their monthly dinner date. Sansa popped popcorn in preparation for their own in-house movie night - she, Arya and the boys were going to watch Ghostbusters - and watched her mother scurry around in search of the proper shoes to go with her dress. Ned and Catelyn always dressed up when they went out, to keep the dates extra special, according to Catelyn.

"Where are you and Dad going, anyway?" Sansa hadn't heard them mention a restaurant yet. Every
month her parents went to a different restaurant, so they were constantly trying new foods and dining experiences.

Ned showed up, Catelyn's shoes in hand. They had ended up in his closet for some reason. "We're going to the new Italian restaurant, Tuscano Trattoria. I had to make the reservations two weeks ago."

"Oh, I love that place! Their food is heavenly! You should try to get a table in the courtyard." Sansa realized too late that perhaps she shouldn't have said anything, based on her parent's surprised reactions.

"Sansa! Since when have you been to the Trattoria? It's extremely expensive, and reservations normally have to be made weeks in advance." Catelyn frowned as she awaited Sansa's response.

"Oh, well, um, Stannis took me to lunch there last Monday." She could feel her whole face flush red and hot, and turned back to the stove to tend the popcorn. Anything was better than seeing the confused looks on her parents' faces.

"What!? How did that happen?"

"I don't know, it just did. Monday I guess he saw me in the employee lounge, and came over to talk. He said he wanted to check on me after the mugging attempt, to see if I was alright. Then he asked me if I wanted to go to lunch, and of course I said yes. Who wouldn't?"

"I cannot believe Stannis Baratheon would just take an intern out for lunch at the most exclusive Italian restaurant on a spur of the moment fancy. Even he would require reservations."

"Actually Mom, Stannis owns that building, so he has standing reservations. If he shows up, they seat him."


Sansa ignored their incredulous looks. "Anyway, he treated me as an adult, like a lady. He's very patient and kind, and listened really well. Stannis is very much the gentleman. And the food there is really good."

Ned excused himself to get the car ready, but Catelyn lingered a moment, looking both worried and supportive. "Sansa, is there something you want to tell us? Is anything going on?"

Sansa shook her head and smiled. She had learned from her mother how to hide behind a smile, and used that skill to her advantage now. "No, Mom, nothing is going on. Stannis has simply been kind to me on a few occasions, that's all. Now, aren't you going to be late? Trust me, you don't want to give up those reservations!"

Sansa shooed her mother out the door, then carried the big bowl of popcorn to the den where Rickon, Bran and Arya had already started watching the movie. They all laughed, but Sansa was so preoccupied with her own thoughts that she didn't really pay much attention to the screen. Instead she thought once again about strong arms and storm-blue eyes and raspberry flavored kisses. She had it bad. Still, she wondered if Stannis would ever respond to her text. She didn't want to send him another one, as that would come off as desperate and nagging. So she waited, and tried to distract herself by watching the movie.

After the movie finished Sansa went back to her room in an attempt to get a little more studying in. She had nothing else to do, and needed to distract herself somehow. And she knew she wouldn't be able to sleep, just as she hadn't slept the past two nights, due to her confusion and muddled emotions.
At 10:00 PM Friday night the phone lit up, indicating a new message. Sansa fell upon it even before it had stopped buzzing. Stannis had finally responded to the text she had sent two days ago.

Sansa, it was my pleasure to give you a ride home, and no inconvenience at all. I will contact you Saturday evening to discuss Sunday plans. -SB.

Sansa grinned. Suddenly all her fears seemed silly and inconsequential - he did want to see her again! His text came through just as she had expected, complete and grammatically correct. Still, she had to answer him again, to see if she could draw him out a little more.

I hope you found raspberry lemonade agreeable enough to want to try it again.

The phone lit up immediately. Yes, definitely, but only with the person who introduced it to me.

She giggled, knowing it sounded completely immature, but too happy to care. Stannis could flirt, after all!

She responded, trying to mimic his own manner, just for fun. I think I could arrange that, if you like.

Another text came in. Indeed I would like that. Now I must go, it is late. I will talk to you Saturday. Good night, Sansa. -SB

Good night Stannis.

Stannis' method of texting did not differ much from his manner of speaking - very stiff and formal. Except, of course, when he had kissed her. And that time on the porch, when she had spoke to him a little about Petyr. It was almost as if there were two different versions of Stannis; one stiff and formal, the other loose and gruff. She found herself equally attracted to both sides of the fascinating man. She couldn't wait to talk to him again on Saturday, and see him Sunday.

Happy that he had answered her and that he still held definite interest in seeing her again, Sansa was able to finally finish her studies for the night. She laid awake for a little while though, thinking about what they might do together on Sunday, before finally drifting off to sleep, imagining his strong arms wrapped around her.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Difficult conversations with Ned

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stannis pulled into the Starks' driveway right before 11:00 Sunday morning. He'd be lying to himself if he did not admit to being nervous. He had no idea how Ned would react to the news that he wished to explore a romantic relationship with Sansa. He had dressed very casually in jeans and untucked shirt with the sleeves rolled up, to avoid displaying the assertive corporate image. A canvas ballcap served to hide the fifteen stitches snaking across his brow. Unfortunately nothing could soften the harshness presented by the four days' growth of heavy black stubble sprouting across his face and head.

A younger teenage boy with red-brown hair and a slight limp answered the door shortly after Stannis rang the bell. He searched his mind for a name, but came up empty. He couldn't keep track of all the Stark children - he just knew there were many.

"Hello. I'm Stannis Baratheon. I've come to speak with your father if he is available."

"Hi, I'm Bran. Huh. You don't look a businessman." Bran grinned and walked off, yelling, "Hey Dad! Robert's brother is here to see you."

Robert's brother. Must he always be referenced in terms of his brother? Stannis briefly clenched his jaw in frustration.

He waited impatiently by the front door, giving in to the urge to pace within the confined entryway.

Ned showed up a few moments later in dirty work pants, looking as though he had just mowed the lawn.

"Stannis! This is a surprise. What can I do for you?" Ned stuck his grass-stained hand out to shake hands with Stannis in greeting.

"Hello Ned. I've a matter to discuss with you, preferably in private." Stannis cursed his inability to smoothly conduct even a simple conversation. At least Ned knew to expect bluntness from him.

Ned led Stannis through the house to the kitchen, where a small television was currently playing one of the many Sunday political talk shows. King's Landing would be holding local elections for city mayor and city council in a few months, and all the candidates made as much use of the free media exposure as possible. Catelyn looked up from the newspaper she was reading just as the two men entered the room.

"Hello, Stannis. Can I get you anything?" Stannis shook his head in declination.

He just wanted to speak with Ned, but Catelyn continued to speak. "Do you watch these political buffoons as much as Ned does? This jerk wants to cut funding to the public safety division by 15%!
Hasn't he seen the news? The crime rate in our city keeps getting worse! You saw that first hand! What do you think of this year's upcoming election?"

"I don't pay attention. My day is full enough as it is." Stannis was growing increasingly uncomfortable with the conversation, and hoped Catelyn would drop the subject, but no such luck.

Catelyn looked rather put out. "How can you say that, Stannis? Thousands of people work for you and your brother - your corporation is directly affected by whatever happens politically at both the local and national level. Don't you vote?" Evidently she was every bit the political junkie she accused her husband of being.

"No," Stannis barked rather sharply. He had no intention of explaining himself to her right now.

Ned fortunately jumped in, saving Stannis from embarrassing himself. "Cat, enough. Stannis came over to discuss something with me, not get politically harangued."

Ned gestured for Stannis to follow him to the back deck, stopping long enough to grab a beer for himself, and after a polite refusal, bottled water for Stannis. Leaning on the rail, Stannis watched the youngest Stark boys play at sword-fighting with whiffle ball bats. He could feel Ned's unspoken question.

Ned's gray eyes never wavered even as he took a pull from his bottle. "You didn't drive all the way out here to discuss elections or voting."

"No."

"Well, then, what brings you to the Stark residence?"

"Sansa."

"Ah. I see. You seem to have made quite the impression on my oldest daughter, Stannis." Ned placed a rather strong emphasis on the word daughter. "Sansa has confided in you, trusting to tell you of an experience that she won't even talk to us about yet. You took her out to lunch at the most popular restaurant in King's Landing. On another night you gave her a ride home, stopping for dessert in the gas light district. She's somehow managed to drop your name no fewer than a dozen times, as best as I can figure. Perhaps you can enlighten me."

Ned's tone remained neutral and light, as if he were just discussing the evening news. Stannis was not fooled. The underlying mistrust was quite evident.

Stannis took a long swig of water, seeking a moment to gather his thoughts. Then he pushed his ball cap back so that Ned could see him clearly. A man ought to look another man straight in the eyes, his father had once said. Even so, he was nervous, and felt himself scowl at Ned's dance with words.

"Sansa has made quite the impression on me as well, Ned, so much so that I intend to spend more time with her, and get to know her better. She and I have found a mutual interest in each other, and an attraction if you will, to one another."

Ned choked on his beer, but never pulled his gaze from Stannis. In fact, his expression turned stony and unreadable. Still, Stannis held the man's gaze with determination. He would not meekly slink away in defeat.

"Let me get this straight. You, the COO of Baratheon Industries, my best friend's brother, are attracted to my nineteen year old daughter?"
"Those were my words, yes." Stannis thought he'd spoken plainly enough.

"I can only assume you mean to ask my permission to date my daughter?" Ned still spoke with a frosty, unwelcoming tone that did nothing to ease Stannis' mind.

"No, Ned. I do not require your permission to date Sansa. I came here merely to inform you, out of respect."

"Even so, Sansa is very young, much, much younger than you. At nineteen she is too young, I should think, for a man your age. How do I know you aren't pressuring her somehow? How do I know she isn't merely displaying some hero-worship after what you did for her last week, and you're simply eager to accept the attention? Any man would be, in your shoes."

"While I am well aware of the age difference, that has not been an issue when we have been in each other's company. I am not pressuring Sansa, but only you can decide whether I speak the truth. If you don't believe me, ask her." Stannis had not expected this to be an easy or welcome discussion, but he had hoped the conversation would go a lot more smoothly. "Perhaps you have enough trust in your daughter to take her at her word."

Ned's expression changed to one of chagrin, and thoughtfulness. "Touché. Say I believe you. Now tell me why you are attracted to Sansa. And don't tell me she's beautiful - everyone knows that. Why Sansa?"

Why, indeed? Stannis glanced down at his bruised hand, and remembered the previous week when he and Sansa had briefly met on the mezzanine. That day when she had showed him such compassion. That same day when she had later accepted his advances, and his kiss…

Stannis whirled back to face Ned. "Although young, she is mature beyond her years, and from what I have seen, she has handled difficult situations with grace and intelligence. Sansa is tough and resilient, Ned, but at the same time compassionate. Moreover, she seems to welcome my company."

Ned nodded his head in agreement, and a bit of respect came back to his eyes. He spoke his next words softly, without vitriol, yet they stung all the more sharply anyway. "Forgive me if I find myself somewhat sceptical of your intentions towards Sansa. Stannis, you are an unknown entity to Sansa, but not to me. That hot Baratheon blood still runs in your veins as surely as in Robert's. I don't consider such an ill-tempered man as yourself good enough for my daughter."

Stannis sighed in resignation. "I know." He turned away, removed his cap and scrubbed at the itchy stubble growing back across his scalp and face. "I know it, Ned. No man is good enough for that girl. No man is good enough for any father's daughter. But that doesn't mean I don't want to be - won't try to be...good enough for Sansa."

In truth that's all he had ever wanted his whole life. Not necessarily to be the best, but at least good enough. The fight scene had been the only place where he'd ever found that acceptance, his 'good enough'.

Stannis heard Ned sigh, then felt the man's hand clap him on the shoulder. Looking back, he could tell that Ned's views on the matter had changed appreciably. Still, Ned had a few more words for him, spoken sternly.

"Sansa is very young, and although she is mature, she is still quite innocent as well. You will not hurt my daughter. You will not bring my daughter to harm."

Stannis nearly growled. "I gave you my word last week, was it not 'good enough' for you then?"
He wanted to challenge Ned then and there for Sansa, but reined in his irascible temper. Control must be maintained.

Ned's flinty eyes actually softened a bit. Evidently he had passed some sort of test, although Stannis couldn't fathom what that might be.

"For whatever reason you have earned Sansa's trust and confidence. Wait here."

Ned's footsteps faded away, and soon Stannis heard the sliding door open and close. Shortly thereafter he heard the angry, raised voice of Catelyn Stark carry through the open windows. Unwilling to eavesdrop, he left the deck to explore the Starks' expansive backyard and flower gardens. Mostly though, he simply could not bear to sit still, and succumbed to the urge to move and pace about for the better part of twenty minutes.

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Most Sunday mornings Sansa could be found practicing the piano or a flute in the basement studio of their house. Her father had built the music studio with special sound muffling panels fitted to the walls and ceiling. These performed a dual function - they effectively kept the sound from carrying through the rest of the house, and also kept the music from echoing throughout the studio itself.

Sansa loved to play piano and sing. In fact, music had become a central part of her life very early on, with her starting voice and piano lessons when she was only six years old. She had started learning to play the flute only two years later. Learning folk songs and older piano tunes had occupied her studies lately, and she devoted hours of her spare time to practice. Sansa's major at King's Landing University might be Business (it was practical, according to her parents), but she also minored in Music, as she loved it so much.

This morning Sansa was surprised when her father entered the studio without warning. Normally her family left her alone to practice her music, so as not to interrupt her concentration. One look at her father's somber face told her something was really bothering him.

"Dad?"

"Sansa, can you come up to the kitchen please? There's something that your mother and I would like to discuss with you."

Apprehensive, Sansa followed Ned upstairs to the kitchen, where her mother appeared to be angrily hacking at a hapless pineapple with a butcher knife. Juice and bits of pineapple peel covered the counter.

Catelyn looked up long enough to give her daughter a disappointed look, glanced out the window, then went back to ineffectively hacking away at the pineapple. Sansa had no idea what she had done to earn her mother's obvious disapproval.

"Sansa, do you remember last week, when I told you that you could trust me with anything, tell me anything?"

Sansa nodded, confused.

"Why didn't you tell me that you and Stannis Baratheon have developed an attraction for each other? He's here now, and just told me of his intent to date you. He was rather adamant about it, actually." Ned sounded somewhat offended, as if he should have a say in who Sansa saw.

Catelyn chopped at the pineapple so violently that half of it went flying onto the floor.
"I really like him, Dad. He's kind, gentle, patient and considerate. And he really seems to like me, too." Sansa smiled, intrigued by the idea of Stannis asserting his desire to take her out.

Catelyn interjected, obviously displeased with Sansa's interest. "Sweetling, he's so much older than you! Stannis is cold and calculating, and certainly not interested in building any relationships. He rarely sees Shireen, doesn't get along with his brothers, and is a workaholic. And he doesn't even vote! Doesn't that man know his civic duty? Disgraceful."

Ned spoke again, before Sansa could respond to her mother. "Are you sure you're not projecting some attributes you wish to see, because he saved you from those criminals? No one has ever described that man as kind, gentle, patient or considerate before. Your mother and I have interacted with him off and on for years, and his brothers certainly do not paint a pretty picture either. I can confidently describe Stannis as stiff, cold and rude."

Sansa grew upset. "No, Dad, I am not projecting! Nor am I crushing on him because of what he did for me and Margaery! I met him at the office before then, and thought Renly and Robert's negative descriptions of him all these years weren’t fair. I was determined to get know him better even then. When Stannis took me out to lunch last Monday, he treated me like a lady, not a stupid girl. He listened patiently, didn't act bored or disinterested, and showed true empathy. Same thing on Wednesday night. I already told you he gave me a ride home, and stopped at Gianni's by the waterfront on a whim, simply because I pointed it out. We actually had a really good time together."

Ned appeared to be taken aback by her vehemence. She rarely argued with or contradicted him.

Catelyn chimed in, agreeing with her husband’s original assessment of Stannis. “Your father is right, Sansa. Stannis has never behaved in a congenial manner. The man is downright antisocial, utterly lacking in any social graces. And like I said, he works so much it’s no wonder that he’s been alone all of these years.”

“I guess you wouldn’t have recognized him then, Mom, because that’s not how I would describe Stannis at all. And maybe he works so much only because he’s been alone. You and Dad have always trusted me to use my own judgment when dating before, so why are you suddenly so determined to keep me from seeing Stannis?”

Ned replied, "Sansa, you must know that Stannis is as much a Baratheon as his brothers and his forebears. He carries that famous, furious temper in his blood. Even my sister Lyanna, independent and headstrong as she was, found Robert's wild ways too much for her to handle.” He wore a sad, faraway expression on his face. “Stannis outwardly appears to be Robert's polar opposite, but I assure you that hot blood burns in his veins too. I cannot bear to see history repeated."

"Dad, Stannis doesn't even begin to resemble Robert. They are nothing alike! Stannis is calm, rational and controlled. You've always told us that Robert is brash, temperamental and prone to emotional decisions, whereas Stannis has always been the logical brother. Why have you suddenly changed your opinion towards him? Why are you so worried?"

"I've watched him from a distance over the years. That man walks a fine line, very close to the edge. He has been known to lose his temper repeatedly. Frankly I'm surprised that he and Robert haven't actually come to blows yet, but I fear that it's only a matter of time. And did he seem calm, controlled and collected on the street when those muggers accosted you? I watched that leaked video too, Sansa, so answer me honestly."

Sansa thought back to her initial reaction towards Stannis' fury-filled attack on the criminals, and recalled the fear that she had held. But she had dropped that fear soon enough, especially after he had spoken kindly to her and listened when she had confided in him the following night.
"I know Stannis seemed really fierce that night, Dad, but he did what needed to be done. I think there is far more to Stannis than you or even Robert can imagine. And he seems genuinely interested in me, too. Moreover, you've known him for years. Do you really believe that he would deliberately hurt me?"

She knew she had her father when he rubbed his hand through his hair and then reached out to give her a hug. Pleased that her dad would not reject her, Sansa gratefully returned his embrace.

"No, Sansa, I know the man well enough to believe that he doesn't mean you any harm. But, you'll be careful, right? You are so young - don't let him walk all over you, Sansa. Stannis is an intense man. I won't interfere unless he hurts you in any way, but if he does I will make him regret it."

"I'll be careful Dad, I promise, but you won't have to worry." Sansa smiled at her father. "Where is Stannis? Is he still in the house somewhere?"

Ned made a vague gesture out towards the back deck. "Out there, somewhere. He's tall. I'm sure you'll find him."

Sansa hugged her father, whispered, "thank you," and ran out the back door in search of Stannis. She had waited five days to see him again, and couldn't contain her excitement any longer.

Chapter End Notes

A very big thanks goes to Sarah_Black for beta-reading this particular chapter and helping me to clean it up - thanks, Sarah!

I decided to split this chapter in two, and leave their afternoon outing for the next chapter. These conversations with Ned, while difficult, were rather important.

As always, comments are most welcome!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

We get to see a hint of Stannis' "rude unpleasantness", although it isn't directed at Sansa. He really doesn't like police very much.

Stannis wandered throughout the treed area of the Starks' backyard, irritated by Ned Stark's hostile interrogation. He had expected resistance from Sansa's father, but had not anticipated the harsh questioning and even harsher judgment lobbed his way. Although he and Ned had never called each other friends, they had certainly regarded one another with respect over the years. Or so he had thought.

That respect was what led Stannis to initiate the conversation in the first place. He would never date Sansa without her parents' knowledge. To learn that Ned held him in so little regard stung sharply. Deep down, Stannis also felt that he could never hope to be a good enough man for Sansa, yet he could not help but to try anyway.

"Stannis?"

Sansa's voice interrupted his melancholic musings, and Stannis promptly forgot all his resentment as he watched her approach him at a trot from across the yard. The brilliance of the midday sun caused her auburn hair to absolutely shimmer with each step. Her sleeveless gingham shirt allowed him a brief glimpse of her midriff, and the jean shorts fit close enough for Stannis to appreciate her curves and long, slender legs. He could not breathe, could not move, could not even think, he was so captivated by her very movements.

Even as she approached Stannis stood stock still, thinking that this youthful Siren might disappear like a mirage if he should so much as blink. Not until Sansa flashed him a brilliant smile and kissed his cheek did Stannis stir again.

"You shaved. I really liked your beard."

The mischievous little pout just made Stannis want to pull Sansa out of sight of the house, push her against a tree, run his hand up those tantalizing legs...once again he reeled himself back in.

"It'll grow back soon enough."

Mindful of the probable eyes watching from the house, Stannis gave Sansa a quick, chaste kiss, then pulled her behind a tree anyway to greet her properly.

Unlike their first kiss, this time Stannis did not hesitate. He wrapped one long arm around her waist and tugged Sansa close to his chest, kissing her deeply all the while. Even as he longed to dominate the encounter he pulled back, just enough to allow Sansa to set the pace. She started slowly at first, but emboldened by his body's enthusiastic reaction quickly allowed their tongues to joust and tangle as surely as his hand tangled in her hair. By the time they came up for air her face was flushed red, lips slightly swollen and eyes dazed. She positively glowed.

"I've missed you! Five days seemed like an eternity!"
Stannis chuckled and kissed Sansa again, even as she smiled back at him. Knowing that she missed his company certainly did wonders for inflating his ego.

It had actually only been four days, but Stannis decided that he could live with that imprecision. Sansa's smile was so carefree and happy that Stannis' heart swelled with...pride? Happiness? He couldn't really be sure. That she directed it at him was all that mattered.

After taking a moment to catch their breath and composure the pair ambled back towards the driveway. Stannis did not, however, pull away when Sansa took his hand in her own.

Stannis had no desire to interact with either Ned or Catelyn again, at least not today. Annoyance with Ned's judgmental words still pricked at his pride.

"Tell me, Sansa, will you still come out with me this afternoon? I do not wish to drive a wedge between you and your parents."

"They'll get over it. Besides, Mom was mostly yelling about 'civic duty' and how much older you are. Dad kept on muttering about Lyanna and wild Baratheon blood and history repeating itself. But he promised not to interfere."

Stannis bristled at the thought of Ned comparing his actions to those of Robert's, or thinking that he may drive Sansa away with his admittedly volatile temper. Regardless, his behavior did not even remotely resemble that of his inconsiderate older brother - Sansa's happiness and well-being came first.

He had never considered that Ned might somehow hold Robert responsible for Lyanna's behavior or her death. Not that either man thought Robert had committed the crime. Perhaps she had felt pressured by Robert, and had run away just to escape that pressure? No one would ever know. Ned still mourned the loss of his sister, and now apparently feared that his daughter may end up lost to him as well.

Stannis figured that Robert would hear the news within the hour, and then he would receive at least an earful, if not a fistful of fury from his older brother no later than tomorrow.

Her silken voice interrupted his musings. "Where are we going, anyway? And do I need to change?"

Stannis shook his head. "If you have no objections I'd like to take you to Pembroke, a small town up the coast. You don't need to change. But do grab a sweater or light jacket, as we will be returning after dark." He hoped that Sansa would enjoy the trip.

The festival that Stannis had discovered was located in a small town about an hour's drive away from the Starks' home. While Stannis drove along the winding coastal highway, Sansa regaled him with tales of Margaery's latest vehicular mishaps. Evidently Margaery had not developed much in the way of driving skills, as she had just recently totaled car number three. Her father, Mace Tyrell, would simply pony up the money for the fourth new car in two years.

Stannis resisted the immature urge to roll his eyes. "I know Mace Tyrell; he is a glutton and a spendthrift. Margaery will never learn financial restraint from him."

Sansa giggled, which oddly did not grate on his ears as it would coming from any other woman. "I know, but she's still my best friend. Did you know that Mace is running for a position on the city council? He's been on the talk shows a lot lately. Mom doesn't like his positions on any issues."

Not this again. Stannis tried to keep his tone neutral. "I do not pay attention to politics, Sansa. My influence lies within Baratheon Industries, not the voting booth."
"I don't know why Mom kept going on and on about you not voting. She seems to think it's a big deal. So why don't you vote, anyway? I thought everyone voted. King's Landing has the highest voter participation in the whole country."

Stannis scowled as he parked the car on a little side street in town, close to the beach. They had arrived.

"Learn that in Civics class, did you?" He barked. She nodded solemnly, eyes wide with surprise.

Stannis sighed and shook his head, regretting his sharp retort. He hadn't wanted to cover this, but she deserved to know. Building trust had to work in both directions. He might as well let this particular skeleton out of the closet right now.

"What else did you learn about voting, Sansa? Eligibility, in particular." He spoke quietly, without heat, but certainly without any enthusiasm.

"You have to be age eighteen or older, vote in the district where you live, be a citizen of Westeros, and not ever have been convicted of a felony offense. Convicted felons can never vote again, even if they don't go to prison."

Stannis intently held her gaze with his own and watched her expression change to surprise as understanding finally dawned.

"How? When?" She squeaked.

Once again he sighed. He had no wish to drag up unpleasant memories. "You did know that I was married once, yes?"

Sansa nodded.

"A little over five years ago Selyse served me with divorce papers without warning, and left. That same night I got drunk in a country bar, started a fight and was arrested. Robert and Renly bailed me out of jail."

"Oh. I never knew that. But Robert's been arrested for the same thing too, and he never cared. Dad has bailed him out before."

"Robert possesses a particular gift of persuasion and charisma that I lack. And while he has never hurt anybody, they said I put two men in the hospital with severe injuries. I don’t remember much. The prosecutor charged me with assault and aggravated battery, which is a felony. I pleaded no-contest in court, and was sentenced to a year of probation plus a fine. Now I carry the lifetime label of convicted felon."

Stannis preferred not to think about, let alone speak of that rather miserable time in his life. Dwelling on it just brought the shame back full-force.

Stannis got out to open Sansa's door for her, and to judge her reaction. As she turned away from him to face the sea, he feared that she would wish to return home immediately, and be done with him.

Surprisingly Sansa turned and pressed herself against his body, reaching one hand up to cup his cheek. Unused to that sort of gentle touch, even though he had longed for it since their impromptu first date, he nearly pulled away.

"You don't have to define yourself by other people's labels, Stannis." Her eyes held no scorn, only warmth and compassion.
He leaned back against the car, pulling her with him, and bent down to capture those lovely full lips with his own. Who knew that a simple kiss, a soft touch and one short sentence could ease his heart so?

Stannis deepened the kiss, pulling Sansa tight against him even as he felt heat and pressure build low in his groin. He growled and nibbled along her neck as she ground against the sudden hard bulge in his jeans. Thankfully the heavy fabric prevented him from fully 'tenting'.

With a husky tone he spoke, in between nibbles. "Perhaps...we should...explore the town..."

What he really wanted was to explore Sansa's body, but he didn't know how much sexual experience she had. That thought alone brought him partway back to his senses, as her wriggling, adorable and maddening as it was, told him she was experimenting with certain sensations and his reactions.

Sansa leaned back a bit, but still maintained contact, just enough to tease him as she brushed herself oh-so-lightly against his groin. Stannis groaned, nearly mad with ache by this point. What was this girl *doing* to him? Regretfully he nudged her a few inches away from his groin, so that he might not completely lose control. It was shortly past noon, many people walked the streets, and he was cognizant of a few dirty looks lobbed his way by passers-by.

Sansa pretend-pouted and nibbled on her lower lip in such a tantalizing manner that he wanted to taste her again. "Well, if you say so..."

She kissed him playfully once again before moving to stand at his side. "What is happening here, today? It appears to be really busy for a Sunday."

Stannis closed his eyes and tried to visualize the most unappealing, off-putting images possible in order to quell his suddenly overactive libido. It would simply not do for him to walk through the busy town with his cock standing at full attention. Imagining Olenna Tyrell wearing a bikini to the beach did the trick.

Taking her hand, he tugged Sansa onto the sidewalk in the direction of all the activity.

"Come on. I remember last week you mentioned studying traditional music. That happens to be the focus of this festival. I thought you might find it interesting."

Stannis had neither any knowledge nor interest in music or singing, but Sansa's happy exclamation indicated that he had made a great choice.

The pair walked towards the town square, dodging people along the sidewalk. Stannis had never been fond of crowds, but it seemed less oppressive with Sansa at his side. She constantly looked from side to side, expressing amazement and wonder at nearly everything she observed. He knew Sansa was well traveled, yet this sort of small town festival experience appeared to be an entirely new venture for her.

Early on Sansa joined up with an informal group to sing some old folk songs, in both the common language and the old tongue. That had been the highlight of Stannis' day. Sansa's clear, beautiful singing voice practically entranced him. After that he had accompanied her all over the festival, watching and listening to many folk bands, sampling traditional foods and exploring the vendors' wares.

Late afternoon found Stannis leaning against a tree, nursing a bottle of black porter and watching Sansa dance in the first reel of the day. He had mostly humored her wishes all afternoon, going along with whatever she wanted to see. But he drew the line at dancing, no matter how much she
attempted to cajole him into it.

"No," he stated firmly. "I don't dance. I'm far too large and ungainly for this sort of thing, trust me."

Still, Sansa tried to convince him with extraordinarily unfair measures.

"Please?" She whispered seductively in his ear as she also nibbled and kissed along his jawbone, stretching up on her toes to do so. Her plea nearly undid him, but he would rather hear her say 'please' when they were alone. Still, he maintained control, and got his way too.

Stannis disengaged her arms gently, and reiterated that under no circumstances would he dance. "Go on, though, Sansa. Dance for me. I'll get a drink and watch you instead. That's enough for me."

While Sansa joined the other participants to learn the steps of the reel, Stannis got in line at the beer tent to get a porter. He hadn't noticed until now how people tended to make way for him, as he had grown accustomed to it at the Tower and never thought much about it. But as he walked back to his vantage point under the tree, Stannis became increasingly aware of the apprehensive glances many people cast his way. Uncomfortable with the odd scrutiny, he leaned against the tree and took a long pull from his porter. Soon enough he relaxed and once again focused his attention on the lithe red-headed girl dancing in the square.

A stern voice interrupted Stannis' comfortable daze. "Excuse us, sir, but we would like to have a word with you." Turning, Stannis noted two police officers standing to his left, and another two located a few paces further away.

Stannis frowned, as he knew he hadn't broken any laws, but answered them steadily. "Is there a problem, officers?"

A portly, sweating, beady eyed police sergeant contemptuously addressed Stannis. "Sir, we have had complaints of a large, unkempt, possibly dangerous looking man that appears to be stalking a minor and loitering around the square. You appear to fit the description given to our patrol team. Can you tell us why you are here?"

Stannis' opinion of the town's law enforcement officers dropped several levels in those few seconds. They were judging him based on his appearance! He couldn't help his size, and as for unkempt, most men attending the festival looked no different than he. They wore hats and loose comfortable clothing, and many were unshaven, just as he was. It was the weekend, after all.

"I most certainly am not loitering, any more than anyone else out here. Nor am I stalking anyone. I'm enjoying the festival with my girl. She's the redhead dancing in the reel over there." My girl. Did he feel that possessive already?

The police officers glanced at Sansa, then back at Stannis, disdain and disbelief clearly written across their faces. Stannis straightened up and prepared himself. This encounter could easily turn violent, and yet he had done nothing to provoke it. The fat sergeant in charge looked to be on the verge of reacting when Sansa's voice interrupted him.

"Stannis? What's going on?" She walked straight up to Stannis and placed a hand on his free arm, then turned to smile brightly at the police. "Officers, is something amiss?" Sansa, his angel, bless that girl for her gentle way with words and people.

The officer smiled at Sansa in a greasy manner that made Stannis itch to wipe the smarmy grin off his face. "No miss, we are just conducting random ID checks. Can you both please produce an ID? I need to make sure that you are of legal age, miss, and that this man can identify himself."
While Sansa hurried to produce her ID for the officer, Stannis bided his time, drinking from his porter while glaring at the officer examining Sansa's ID.

After the sergeant reviewed Sansa's ID and returned it to her, he gave her another slimy smile.

"This looks good, Miss Stark. Clearly you are of age." As the officer focused his attention on Stannis his expression and tone of voice turned decidedly frosty.

"As for you sir, please provide me with your ID. Now." Again the other officers stood ready for action, but why, Stannis did not know. He had no intention of striking out at them, but he did nothing to hide his annoyance at becoming the target of baseless harassment.

Stannis held the officer's eyes while he drained the bottle. Setting it down, he pulled out the can of snuff from his pocket and took in a good sized dip. Only when he was satisfied did he hand his driver's license to the impatient police officer and crossed his arms. Stannis' ears registered that Sansa had been speaking to him, but he was so focused on the sergeant that he couldn't process her words.

Snatching the ID, the sergeant's eyes grew wide as he examined it.

"Stannis Baratheon...", he exclaimed in wonder.

No longer quite so belligerent, he showed the ID to the other three officers, who immediately started muttering amongst themselves. One of the other officers pulled out his smartphone and typed something, then displayed the results to his partners. They collectively looked back at Stannis, then nodded their heads.

The sergeant returned Stannis' ID with poorly disguised insincerity.

"My apologies, Mr. Baratheon, we can never be too careful with these kinds of complaints. Clearly this was a misunderstanding; I will inform the dispatch team that you are not a suspect."

Stannis was not fooled by the man's fawning. Obviously someone had complained to the police, and the sergeant had approached Stannis hoping for an altercation and subsequent arrest.

Glaring, he nodded, then spat at the sergeant's feet, smirking when tobacco juice spattered on the sergeant's shiny shoes.

Grabbing her hand Stannis led Sansa through the square until they reached a sidewalk lined with glass-fronted shops. Then she tugged on his hand to stop him.

"Stannis, wait! What was that all about?"

He heard both the confusion and rebuke in Sansa's voice. Confusion he could handle, but he would not accept a rebuke of any kind.

Stannis snapped. "That idiot sergeant thought he would get himself an arrest by confronting the big, 'unkempt' man on the square, and he used a trumped-up excuse in an attempt to provoke me. They approached me with the supposition that I was up to no good, solely based on my appearance. I don't have the patience to deal with foolishness or injustice, Sansa. What you witnessed was a clear example of both. I will not tolerate that sort of treatment. Do you understand?"

Furious, he spat on the sidewalk and paced for several moments, trying to quell his anger and sudden restlessness.

Sansa opened her mouth as if to speak again, but censored herself at the last minute, Stannis could
tell. Still irritated by both the confrontation with the police and her misunderstanding, he nonetheless opted not to push, as he didn’t want to destroy whatever good rapport they had built during the day. After all, she had shown up at just the right moment to prevent him from turning an uncomfortable confrontation into a complete disaster.

Stannis stopped pacing and spoke quietly. "Sansa, by interrupting when you did you kept me from completely losing my temper, and probably prevented me from going to jail as well. I should not have snapped just now. I am certainly not angry at you."

The return of Sansa's smile was enough to dispel any remaining irritation Stannis harbored.

He turned to continue their walk along the sidewalk, but paused for a moment to regard their reflections in the storefront glass.

Sansa’s hair glowed almost fiery red in the late afternoon sun, and of course her clear young face beamed with exuberance and happiness. Although tall for a woman, her head did not even reach his chin. Next to his own hulking frame she appeared both slender and delicate.

In comparison he felt his own appearance could not be more different. Very tall and broad-shouldered, there was nothing delicate about Stannis reflected in the glass. First and foremost was his age. He would soon turn thirty-seven, and nothing could mask the age difference between them. Noting the heavy black stubble, deep set eyes, permanent frown plus the bruise on one cheek, Stannis began to realize his grim countenance had been enough to cause people in the square to steer clear of him. Over the past five years he had changed so much that he barely resembled the man in the photograph on Robert’s wall anymore.

Just what did Sansa see in him?

"Stannis, are you ok?"

Sansa’s calm voice and tug on his hand broke through his funk, compelling him to focus on her instead of his own depressing thoughts. As always, her honest smile raised his spirit out of the gloom he often found himself in.

“I am now.” Feeling his stomach rumble, he sniffed the air. “Are you hungry?”

Sansa nodded enthusiastically, as she had missed lunch completely.

He bought them both an early dinner consisting of grilled lamb kebabs from one of the many food vendors lining the street. Stannis ate all of his, then finished off the half of the kebabs that Sansa couldn't eat. She laughed. "How do you stay so trim and fit, Stannis?"

He harrumphed, but was inwardly pleased that she appreciated his physique. "I devote two to three hours a day to intense exercise, more on most weekends."

After eating they walked along the beach, watching the last rays of sun change the water's color to a mixture of gold, orange and pink. Sea lions could be heard barking in the distance from the rock quay jutting out from the shore. The sand still held the day’s heat, but the breeze blowing off the water had turned chilly, and Stannis could see that Sansa had started shivering. She had left her jacket in his car, and now her bare arms were covered in goosebumps.

Not wanting to go back to the car just yet, Stannis sat down in the warm sand, pulling Sansa down to sit in front of him in between his legs. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close so that her back leaned into his chest. She snuggled even further into his arms, burrowing for the warmth he was all too happy to provide.
"Better?"

"Mmm hmmm."

They sat like that for half an hour, just enjoying the sounds and smells of the ocean, and each other's body heat, until the sky turned fully dark. Stannis stuck his nose into her hair and inhaled, breathing in her unique scent - part strawberries, part sweat (strangely not unpleasant), part woman, all Sansa.

Curious, he started lightly stroking the inside of her wrist and forearm, just to gauge her reaction to his touch. At the same time he nibbled on her lovely ear and caressed the sensitive, soft dip on her side, right at her waist. Sansa's responsive reaction astounded and encouraged Stannis. She stretched against his body, arched her neck and back and then turned her head to grant him access to her jawline, neck and face. As he continued his ministrations she turned sideways so that he could see her better, and she could kiss his jawline as well.

At the same time Stannis started stroking Sansa's bare belly and flank, right along her lower ribs. Her skin there felt so smooth and taut, and she again responded to his touch with a moan and turned to kiss him. Once again he felt heat and pressure build as her enthusiastic reactions to his touch drove his libido and arousal into overdrive. But as his hand wandered up under her shirt, she grabbed it and pushed it down to her navel just as he started to stroke the smooth soft skin under her breast.

Sensing her reticence, Stannis paused for a moment, and tilted Sansa’s chin up so that he could see her face clearly. Her face was flushed and lips parted, obviously turned on by his touch. However, excitement and anxiety warred for control as well - he could tell that she was simultaneously experiencing several conflicting emotions. At the same he detected a certain shyness that was far too honest to be coy. Understanding finally clicked in Stannis' brain.

He spoke gently, so as not to spook her. "Have you ever lain with a man, Sansa?"

Once again Stannis cursed his blunt speech as she blushed, shook her head and looked away.

She stuttered and spoke unevenly. "I'm sorry...I just, I don't know..."

"Shush. You have absolutely nothing to apologize for, Sansa. I'm the one who went too fast without giving you the chance to establish any boundaries. The fault is mine alone."

She looked so vulnerable at that moment that he wanted to encircle her with bubblewrap. His arms would have to do.

"Hey, co'mere, girl."

Ardor cooled, he gathered Sansa into his arms, grateful that she accepted his embrace without hesitation. For some reason she was shaking though.

Stannis spoke soothingly to her, in low, gruff tones. "Hey, hey, you're fine girl, fine."

She snuffled and relaxed in his arms as he rubbed slow, warm circles on her back. "I didn't want to admit it to you. Because you're older, I thought you wouldn't be interested in me if you knew I wasn't...you know...experienced."

Stannis tipped her chin up so that he could see her face clearly, and vice versa. "Nothing could be further from the truth. Sansa, I am interested in all of you."

He paused to try and organize his thoughts into meaningful words. "I will not deny that I want you, desire you, that should be obvious. You're beautiful, smart and tough. And unless I'm mistaken, you
are also interested in me."

Sansa smiled and relaxed as she looked up at him. "Well, yeah, to quote a guy I know, that should be obvious."

He frowned as he attempted to dredge up the right words to convey his next meaning clearly.

"I... I don’t use words well, Sansa. Believe me when I say that I will not push you in any way. You tell me where to go, and when to stop. Deal?"

Her brilliant smile reflected the moonlight off her perfect, brilliant white teeth. "Deal." And then she sealed the deal with another kiss, which Stannis was all too happy to return.

After that Stannis pulled Sansa to her feet and guided her back up the beach towards the street, one arm draped around her shoulders. He liked to think that it was more than just the cool air that caused her to reciprocate the gesture with her arm wrapped around his waist. It felt so right to have Sansa by his side.

When he pulled into the Starks’ driveway at 8:30 Sunday evening, Stannis was not surprised to see Ned sitting out on the front porch. Sansa had texted her parents when they were thirty minutes out just to let them know approximately when she would be home.

Stannis glanced at Ned with a bit of trepidation as he opened Sansa’s door for her, but she smiled and whispered, "don’t worry so much." Unabashed, she openly held Stannis’ hand as they approached the porch and her father.

"Hi Dad! We went to the Pembroke Music Festival! It was unbelievable!"

Ned Stark’s eyebrows lifted in surprise, but he gifted his daughter with a small, pleased smile. "You can tell me all about it in a little while, Sansa, but I’d to speak with Stannis for a moment, if you don’t mind."

Sansa looked up to Stannis, grinned and squeezed his hand. "I had a great time, Stannis. See you soon, I hope?"

He gave her his version of a smile and a quick kiss. "Absolutely. Goodnight, Sansa."

She dashed up the steps, whispered something to her father, then disappeared inside the house.

"Ahem." Ned’s pointed throat-clearing redirected Stannis’ attention. Bracing himself, Stannis tried to put on his most neutral expression and waited for Ned to speak.

Ned stood and approached Stannis. "My daughter is obviously very relaxed and at ease in your company, Stannis. I can see that she truly enjoyed this day with you."

Not knowing how to answer, Stannis merely nodded curtly instead.

"I am entrusting you with Sansa’s welfare whenever she is with you. Don’t disappoint me." With that, Ned offered his hand to Stannis. The two men shook in silent agreement.

Once he got home Stannis realized that he was still wiped out from both the fight and the long day at the festival. However, he felt really good and upbeat, encouraged by Sansa’s honest affection and her own enjoyment of the day.

Tomorrow he would have to face reality and return to the office. Hopefully Robert would not deem
it necessary to add another cut requiring stitches to his face.

Exhausted, Stannis had just about drifted off to sleep when his cellphone buzzed. He had to crawl out of bed to retrieve it. He assumed it was either a quick text from Sansa or a threat from Robert, but he was wrong.

His knuckles turned white and all drowsiness disappeared as he looked at the picture on his cellphone. It had obviously been taken earlier that same day, in Pembroke. The photo depicted Sansa smiling as she danced happily in the square, red hair flying.
A surprise awaited Stannis when he exited the elevator onto the executive floor early Monday morning.

“Stannis! Where have you been, brother?” Renly, wearing a baggy flower print shirt and loose white pants, intercepted Stannis before he could even reach his office.

"Renly, what are you wearing?"

“We've switched over to summer business casual wear, thanks to the early arrival of summer. You're going to regret wearing that suit. The power company has asked all corporations within King’s Landing to conserve energy. Didn't you read your email? And seriously, like I said already, where have you been? You were incommunicado all weekend!”

Renly did have a point. The air in the office felt warm and stifling, and Stannis could already feel sweat trickling down the back of his neck.

"I took time off. I'm sure you're familiar with the concept. What’s going on, and where is Robert?"

"Essos. He flew out to Astapor yesterday. They moved up the negotiations timeline by two weeks. That's why we're all here this early, thanks to the three hour time difference.”

Renly walked over to stand in front of his brother. A rare frown marred his handsome face as he examined Stannis.

"You look like shit, Stannis. It's pretty obvious that you've been in a fight, and you don't look like you've slept in days."

Stannis actually hadn't slept at all last night, worried as he was about someone stalking Sansa. He didn't acknowledge Renly's comments, though, instead focusing on the job at hand.

"Never mind that, Renly. What else?" He waited for the other shoe to drop. There was always something else.

"You and your team are flying to Astapor tonight on our Gulfstream. Robert needs you there tomorrow. You speak High Valyrian, and he doesn't trust their translators. Check your email, as there's a lot of information you need to review. Be at our hangar by seven tonight."

Fuck. His concern for Sansa's safety just skyrocketed, and he wouldn't be around to protect her. The news reports he had listened to on the drive in to work didn't ease his mind either. The incidence of violent, drug-induced crimes had increased astronomically, and this past weekend had seen more assaults and muggings than any time in the past thirty years.

He had already decided to call Davos later in the day, to find out what could be done about the possible stalking. That meant he needed to resolve the uncomfortable silence that had grown between them since the night he'd been arrested. Now he had very little time, and would need Renly's help.

"Renly, I need you to do something for me while I am gone."
"Oh? This is new, brother. Let me mark it on my calendar."

Stannis pushed his annoyance aside - Sansa's safety mattered more than his own pride. "I want you to personally drive Sansa home each evening after work. The Metro is no longer safe."

"Sansa? Why do you want me to....Wait. You didn't fuck her, did you? Robert will dump your body in Slaver's Bay if you did."

"No. Have some respect, Renly. You have heard the news reports, haven't you? The assaults are occurring even here, in the financial district. Promise me."

Renly put up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Fine, fine, I promise. But tell me something, Stannis. Are you dating Sansa now?"

Oddly, Stannis did not feel annoyed at Renly's prying, but prideful instead. He quirked an eyebrow, answered "yes", and quickly strode to his office. He had too much to do and no time to get it done.

After working through lunch Stannis called Sansa, asking her to come up to the executive floor for a few minutes. He knew that she would be working at the Tower all day. He would not leave her uninformed of his trip, but chose not to worry her about a potential stalker. Not yet.

A knock at the open door interrupted Stannis while he was perusing the latest changes to the week's agenda. Sansa stood in his open doorway, appearing gorgeous and put-together and absolutely perfect in her flowing summer skirt. He, on the other hand, had loosened his tie and rolled up his sleeves in deference to the heat, but still found himself sweating, uncharacteristically so.

"Hi." Sansa greeted him simply, and entered the office at a wave of his hand.

All the stresses of the day melted away at the sight of Sansa walking into his office. Stannis walked over to close his door and greet her properly. He pulled her into his arms and gave her a slow, deep kiss, breathing in her lovely, unique scent. Strawberries. They broke apart and he looked down at her brilliant yet mischievous smile aimed up at him. That look was enough to make him want to lay her over his conference table, but it was currently covered in stacks of paper and files. Another time.

"Hi yourself."

He led her over to his couch where they sat down, still holding hands. He noticed that a fair number of freckles had appeared across her nose and cheekbones, probably from all the sun she had soaked up at the festival. Unable to resist, he touched her perfect, freckled nose with one finger, just because he could.

She looked at him with an amused expression. "Did you call me up here just for a mid-day kiss and to mock my freckled nose?"

"I will never mock you or your pretty freckled nose, Sansa. But I may occasionally claim executive privilege if it means I get to kiss you during the work day."

Bringing her hand to his lips for a kiss, he sighed, then gestured to the mess occupying his conference table.

"You have probably heard by now that Robert is in Astapor, have you not?" Sansa nodded.

Stannis continued. "I have to fly there tonight as well, and I probably will not return until the
weekend. I thought you should hear it from me personally."

She squeezed his hand in appreciation, and kissed his cheek. "Thank you for telling me, Stannis. You know I'll miss you, right?"

There was no answer to that, other than to run his hand along her neck and pull her in for another long slow kiss. They sat like that for several minutes, not talking, just gently kissing and touching one another. He could feel heat begin to pool deep in his groin and his cock began to twitch of its own accord, suddenly realizing that he had a beautiful girl willingly sitting on the couch with him. Alone.

The twitching turned into full blown, hot-blooded throbbing as Sansa’s lips left his own to trail kisses along his jawline, then nibbled on his ear and down his neck. Stannis hissed as she rang a fingernail along the inside edge of his collar and playfully tugged on his already loosened tie.

Two could play, he reasoned. Stannis also nibbled along Sansa’s jaw, down her neck to her throat, sucking gently in that perfect hollow by her collarbone. His hand wandered down to gently skim along that soft, smooth dip in her waist, emboldened by her soft moans of delight. As he stroked up along her sensitive ribcage, she pulled back just a little, granting him a shy smile.

"Is this OK, Sansa?" He desperately wanted to touch all of her.

She worried her lip, then nodded with trusting eyes. He wasn’t quite prepared for her question in return, though.

Her eyes took a furtive glance at his very obvious erection, then met his own. "Can I touch you, too?" Her hands had already been all over his shoulders, arms and chest, exploring his muscles. He really wished that his annoying clothing wasn’t in the way.

What man didn’t want a girl to ask that?

Stannis had no idea if the garbled sound leaving his mouth made any sense, but his hips had suddenly developed a mind of their own. Even muted through the layers of fabric, his cock jumped as it sought more pressure, more friction in response to her first tentative touch. At the same time he moaned aloud. Sansa jerked her hand back.

"Oh! It’s so hot! Did I hurt you?"

"Mrmph...no." More. He needed so much more than a mere tickle, but his response may have spooked her a little. Stannis opened his eyes to look at the gorgeous girl somehow reclining beneath his broad chest, looking up at him with wide, trusting blue eyes. Don’t fuck this up.

"It’s fine, girl, fine." Stannis leaned down to kiss her again, pleased that she eagerly accepted his questing tongue and returned the kiss with equal passion.

He could have lost himself in time like that, but reality barged in through his office door.

"Ahem. Stannis?"

Renly's unwelcome voice interrupted his hazy bliss. Breaking off their kiss, Stannis could see that Sansa was blushing, but she grinned too. So she was embarrassed, but not so badly as to have lost her humor or her good mood. Giving her a slight smile, Stannis then focused an icy glare at his younger brother, who just stared at his older brother in mock horror.

"Can't you knock, Renly?", he ground out through clenched teeth.
Kissing Sansa had brought him such peaceful delight. Sighing, he pulled Sansa to her feet as he stood up from the couch. While he felt sweaty and disheveled, she didn't appear the least bit mussed.

"Oh good, you are Stannis after all. For a moment I thought you were channeling Robert. Anyway, your team is waiting for you in the conference room."

He stood behind her, hoping that Renly would not be able to see the still all too obvious bulge in his trousers. Go away. Olenna in a bikini, Olenna in a bikini... Once again, that seemed to work, and Stannis felt his heart rate slow down to normal.

As Renly turned to leave, Stannis called out to him. When Renly approached Stannis stood straight and tall over his brother, exhibiting assertive command.

"Remember your promise to me, Renly. Every night. To her door."

Then he turned to Sansa, and made sure he had her complete attention as well.

"Sansa, I want you to promise me something too. Do not use the Metro. I want you to get rides home from people you know and trust. King’s Landing is no longer safe - even the financial district has seen violent crime increase rapidly. Promise me this." Stannis stated the last sentence more forcefully than usual, as he wanted to impart the seriousness of his request.

She frowned up at him, ready to argue, but then nodded in agreement as Stannis held her attention with his own intent gaze and assertive stance. "I promise."

"Good. Renly will take you home on those days you work here. Right, Renly?" Stannis refocused his glare on his younger brother.

"Of course Stannis. It will give me a chance to find out what a pretty girl like her sees in you. I simply have to know." Giving Sansa a cheeky grin, Renly sauntered out the door.

Getting in one more kiss, Stannis escorted Sansa to the elevator. As the door opened with a chime, he gave her hand a surreptitious squeeze.

"Promise me, girl. No Metro. Deal?"

"Deal." Sansa blew him a kiss as the elevator door closed.

Stannis stood in the lobby for just a moment longer, reflecting on his less than chivalrous behavior with Sansa. He had felt his lazy arousal charge head first into full blown lust, and was somewhat doubtful of his ability to stop himself with Sansa, despite his promise to her just the day before. Although he had been annoyed with Renly, now he was thankful for his brother’s uninvited yet timely interruption. Not that he would ever admit that to Renly, of course.

Shaking his head, Stannis ignored the looks the secretaries and receptionist gave him, and strode to the conference room. He had work to do.

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Late that afternoon Stannis met with Davos at a café near the police station.

Meeting Davos was uncomfortable, as though they were missing something really important. He felt like they were Reagan and Gorbachev at Reykjavik, but he wasn't sure who was who, and would
one of them walk out in continuation of their own cold war?

Davos, however, showed no hesitation as he greeted his old friend with a familiar grin. While Stannis felt tense and irritable Davos was relaxed and carefree - he appeared genuinely happy to see Stannis again.

"Davos." Stannis greeted his friend coolly, still unsure of the current state of affairs between them.

"Stannis, I'm glad to see you again. I was hoping we could talk soon." Some regret filled Davos' voice, and Stannis could tell that Davos was not quite so sure about their relationship anymore either.

They sat at an outside table, ordered coffee and small snacks. Davos talked about mostly inconsequential happenings within the police force, and described how politics and the upcoming election had started to affect his own investigations. Apparently his RICO investigation had hit a dead end. Impatient, Stannis steered the conversation back to the reason he had called Davos.

"Davos, I have a problem." Davos nodded his head in agreement, but since he didn't know about Sansa, Stannis wondered why Davos would agree so readily.

"It concerns Sansa Stark."

"The red haired girl who was attacked by those thugs the night..." Davos trailed off, obviously unwilling to finish his sentence.

Stannis finished it for him. "The night you had me arrested, yes."

"You know I had no choice, Stannis. Would you have me compromise my integrity as a police officer?" Davos truly looked full of regret.

Stannis suddenly decided that he should bury this hatchet. What happened wasn't his fault, and it wasn't Davos' fault. He prided himself on doing the right thing, and respected Davos for maintaining his own integrity as well.

"I don't blame you, old friend. I was wrong to do so at the jail. I would never have you use your position to my advantage. Then we'd be no better than the crooks running this city, no?"

With that Stannis offered his hand out to Davos, and they shook on it, reforging their old bond. No one would walk out today.

Still restless, Stannis continued. "Regardless, that's not what this is about. I think Sansa is being stalked."

Davos turned serious. "That's a serious crime, Stannis. What makes you think this is happening?"

Stannis briefly described the two text images on his phone. Davos wanted to know why Stannis would be receiving these anonymous text messages.

Stannis looked away for a minute, recalled Sansa's smiles, then looked back to Davos. "We have started...seeing each other."

Davos broke out into a big grin. "Stannis, that's fantastic! It's about time you found somebody."

Then he frowned. "But why do you think you're the one receiving these messages? They are clearly a threat to Sansa."

"I don't know, Davos, except perhaps to warn me away from her? Regardless, I want to make sure
she's protected somehow, especially since I will be out of town all week. With these texts, plus the rapid increase in crime in the city, I'm worried for Sansa's safety." Davos nodded in understanding.

"Is there any way these messages from my phone can be traced to their source?"

"Not without a warrant from the court. And two anonymous texts aren't enough evidence, Stannis."

"Dammit! What can be done, Davos?" As they exited the café Stannis grew agitated once again, and reached in his pocket for his now constant companion. Davos frowned at the action.

"Nothing to do but watch and remain vigilant, Stannis. Have you told Sansa or her parents about this?"

"No. I didn't want to worry them yet."

"Think about this, Stannis. What if it was Shireen that was in Sansa's place? Wouldn't you be pissed if someone knew but chose not to tell you about it?"

Stannis paused and squinted at his friend. The setting sun seemed far too bright and it hurt his eyes, but he had left his sunglasses in the car.

He forced himself to focus on the conversation. Davos had a way of making him see the truth.

"I see your point, Davos. I'll swing by Ned's office on my way to the airport. I need to go now to get there in time."

The two men separated, but not before Davos gave Stannis a parting tidbit of information.

"By the way, Stannis, it turned out there was a fourth blood sample that tested positive, barely, for Spike that night. I thought you should be aware."

Stannis shrugged as he didn't really care. "I am not surprised. According to the news reports half the city is on that stuff, Davos. I’m running out of time now - we'll get together when I return."

Davos had a sad, resigned look to his face that Stannis didn't understand. "Yes we will, I'm sure of it. Good luck, Stannis."

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In Astapor Robert greeted Stannis with "What the fuck did you do to your face?"

In retrospect that turned out to be the highpoint of Stannis' week. The trip to Astapor turned into an utter fiasco, and ended without any deal or agreement reached between the Baratheon brothers and their potential client.

Their hosts nonetheless invited Robert and Stannis to attend an Astapori dinner at a large, exclusive restaurant in the old part of the city on their last night in Essos. Evidently some sort of traditional entertainment would occur after the meal.

Stannis grew uneasy as he and Robert picked their way through the narrow, dusty, high-walled alleys. They had taken a taxi as far into the old city as possible, but still had to walk another three blocks through the crowded, twisting narrow streets designed for foot traffic centuries ago.

Stannis did not spot a single Westerosi this deep into the city, only street beggars, merchants and locals garbed in the loose robes of the traditional tribesmen. He was conscious of every stare, feeling them bore into his back as they passed. The two Baratheon brothers towered over nearly every
Astapori they encountered by several inches, and could not possibly hope to blend in.

Eventually they reached the restaurant, marked only by two lanterns and a dirty wooden sign hanging askew above the dimly lit entrance.

Stannis did not want to enter the building, but Robert pulled him in. The hostess led them to a back room that was actually much larger than Stannis had envisioned. In fact, the restaurant seating was arranged in elevated circles above a sandy pit in the middle. Their hosts stood to greet them.

For the next two hours food, wine and conversation flowed freely across the table, but Stannis abstained from imbibing any alcohol and only ate sparingly of the unidentifiable offerings spread before them. He ate a few vegetables and a fair bit of grilled meat, which he suspected was probably donkey or horse meat. Ever one to bear discomfort in silence, Stannis opted to let Robert do all the talking.

Finally a gong sounded, indicating that the evening’s entertainment would soon begin.

"Are you sure about this, Robert?” Stannis felt increasingly nervous, and would have bolted for the exit if Robert didn’t clamp down on his shoulder.

"Lighten up Stannis, these people know how to have a good time. Let's enjoy the show! Or at least try not to look like you're constipated, Stanny."

The entertainment turned out to be a series of brutal, bare-knuckled fights.

Stannis began to feel faintly nauseated by the time the second fight had finished, barely thirty seconds into the first round. The loser was carted off unconscious while his blood soaked into the sand floor. The crowd had been chanting the victor's name, "Gorazz, Gorazz!" over and over.

As a participating fighter in King's Landing Stannis had never concerned himself with the crowd; yet as a spectator watching bloodlust overtake the observers he felt sick. He had never thought of anything but his own immediate pleasure, and now understood how utterly depraved it was to participate in the underground fights. He now realized that last week in the ring he had been in the same position as Gorazz, and young Jared had been the unfortunate loser, succumbing to Stannis’ own unrestrained violence.

 Barely keeping the contents of his stomach in place, Stannis convinced Robert to get up. They made their apologies and left, but not without Robert complaining. Stannis had to remind his brother that their flight left early Friday morning, so they needed to return to their hotel in short order.

As soon as they exited the restaurant Stannis fell to his knees and retched into the gutter, disgusted with himself and the scene that had just played out before him. He puked again and again, desperate to rid himself of wrongdoing he had perpetrated over the past several years. Wrung out, he eventually had nothing left to heave, and with Robert’s help pulled himself unsteadily to his feet. He ignored Robert's jeers all the way back to the hotel, too lost in the turmoil of his thoughts to take offense.

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The next day Robert railed at Stannis for nearly an hour on the plane trip back to King’s Landing. Evidently he felt that it was Stannis’ fault that the deal fell apart.

"Damn you Stannis, for being so uptight and persnickety about this. They had agreed to everything I asked! Then you had to come along with that pinch-faced number cruncher of yours, and point out a few typos. Where did you find that bean counter, anyway? He's even more of a cold fish than you
are. I should fire him for this."

"You will do no such thing, Robert. I have half a mind to give that man a raise instead. Also, you summoned me specifically because you didn't trust their translators."

Robert waved his hands as if this detail was inconsequential. His face still held onto the angry red flush that had arisen when he had yelled at Stannis.

"And for the last time, I told you they had deliberately mistranslated the contract paperwork. The Valyrian contract contained several provisions not included in our contract. The discrepancies were too numerous for me to discount. We would have lost tens of millions in revenue. They tried to cheat you, Robert."

That finally seemed to get Robert's attention. "No one cheats me, Stannis, no one! I have never cheated anyone in business, and I have never been swindled. I won't allow it!"

"Good. I will remind you of that the next time you choose to blame me for someone else's dishonesty."

Stannis thought it peculiar that Robert had not once mentioned Sansa all week. Perhaps Ned had opted not to broach the subject yet. He decided that the best thing to do would be to tell Robert himself, but waited until they were firmly on the ground in King's Landing and off the plane.

"Robert, before Renly arrives, there is something I need to tell you."

"What is it this time, Stannis? And stop pacing, you're making me nervous." Robert started tapping on his phone, not really paying any more attention to Stannis.

"It's Sansa. She and I - we've started seeing each other."

"Well of course you see Sansa, she's an intern at the Tower." Robert, clueless, went back to tapping on his phone. "Where the hell is Renly, anyway?"

"Right here, Robert." Stannis turned to the door to see Renly, accompanied by none other than a very happy Sansa Stark.

"It's about time! Sansa, dear, what brings your smiling, gorgeous self down here?" Robert greeted Sansa with a bear hug, which seemed to be his trademark with all the Stark children.

"Renly has been giving me rides home this week, and since you and Stannis were returning, I convinced him to bring me here to see you. And Stannis." Sansa walked over to stand next to Stannis, gave him a very brilliant smile and took his hand.

"Hi. Did you tell him yet?"

"Wait, what? Tell me what?" Thunderclouds started to roll across Robert's face as he began to understand why Sansa and Stannis stood so close to one another.

"I just told you, Robert, that Sansa and I have started seeing each other." Stannis braced himself for the inevitable impact, but none came.

Robert looked first at Sansa, then glared at Stannis, then frowned at Renly, who just shrugged. "Did
you know about this, Renly?” Renly shrugged again, but grinned at Sansa.

“I distinctly recall telling you no, Stannis. How dare you defy me on this, of all things.” Robert’s icy voice drove the north wind straight into Stannis’ spine. Still, he refused to back down. He struggled mightily to keep his temper under control, if only for Sansa’s sake.

“I don’t recall requiring your permission, Robert.”

Sansa’s outraged voice cut through the room. “I don’t need your permission either, Robert. Or my father’s! I get to choose for myself, you know. I can’t believe you would act like some sort of feudalistic baron or something.” Stannis whipped his head around to regard the fiery young lady in amazement, admiring her powerful outburst.

“There’s no way Ned would approve of this.” Robert started furiously punching numbers on his phone again. “Ned, did you know about this business between your daughter and my brother?”

“What?...Oh….Really?...Huh...Fine, I won’t kill him...Yeah, tomorrow...Ok, bye.”

Robert ended the call and looked out the window, anger visibly draining from his body. He slumped against the glass for a moment, and Stannis clearly heard him mutter “Lyanna.”

When he finally straightened and turned back to them Stannis was shocked by the regret and naked grief that shone through his older brother’s eyes. Stannis released most of his anger at once, realizing that Robert still mourned Lyanna’s loss after all these years.

Robert gave Sansa a sad half-smile. “Are you sure, Sansa? Did my brother pressure you?”

“Yes I am sure, and no, Stannis absolutely did not pressure me. I’ve been interested in him since the day I met him.” She stepped back and took Stannis’ hand again.

“Stannis, I guess you’re a Baratheon after all. Stark girls are impossible to resist.” Robert then got in Stannis’ personal space and wagged a finger in front of his eyes. “Don’t you hurt her. You know what will happen if you do.”

Stannis nodded but otherwise remained silent. Renly took Robert, leaving Sansa with Stannis. Once they drove away Stannis pulled Sansa into his arms.

“Hey girl.” He kissed her then, long, slow and deep, just savoring her unique taste and soft body leaning against his own. His rumbling stomach growled just then, causing Sansa to laugh.

“I guess that means you didn’t eat on the plane.”

“Mmm. I am hungry. What does your ear taste like?” With that he gave her ear a nibble, causing her to gasp and squirm more delightfully against him. Then she tugged on his hand, pulling him towards the door and his car.

“I’m hungry too, Stannis. Let’s go?”

Sighing for effect, Stannis escorted Sansa to his car. He had been on the verge of exhaustion, but her surprise appearance at the hangar had brought him a renewed surge of energy.

By the time Stannis had dropped Sansa off at her family’s home and returned to his townhouse his exhaustion had returned with a vengeance. He had not slept well throughout the week, and the previous night not at all. It had finally caught up with him.
Collapsing into bed, Stannis stayed awake just long enough to decide that he had to extricate himself from the fight scene as soon as possible. The previous evening in Astapor had demonstrated with remarkable clarity just how wrong he had been all these years. He didn't even know what he was fighting for, or against, anymore. It all came crashing down on him at once, and with a shuddering breath he acknowledged that he would need help, that he couldn't do this alone.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to Sarah_Black for pushing me to expand the couch scene - she asked great questions and provided valuable feedback!

As always, please feel free to comment and let me know what you think!
Early Saturday morning found Sansa wandering into the Stark's kitchen, following the smell of freshly brewed coffee. She poured herself a cup over ice and walked out on to the back deck, not surprised to find her father already seated with his own iced coffee. Saturday mornings were her favorite time of the week. She and her father arose early, before anyone else, and spent a quiet hour together out on the deck before the rest of their much noisier family members tumbled out of bed.

Even though the sun had barely cleared the horizon, the sky held that milky hazy hue that indicated the day would turn hot and sultry. The morning air was already warm and humid. Sansa sat down on the wicker couch next to Ned, who smiled at her in silent greeting. They quietly sat like that for a while, sipping iced coffee and watching the birds flit across the expansive back yard.

Eventually Sansa started thinking about the previous night at the airport, when she had met Stannis and Robert on their return from Astapor, and recalled Robert's reaction. She had a question for her father, one she'd never asked him before.

"Dad?" She wanted to gauge his mood first. After she and Stannis had spoken to Ned about their relationship, she had not been confident that her father would be open to any of her questions. He had barely spoken to her all week, and she had caught him gazing at her with sad eyes on more than one occasion.

"Hmm?" Ned smiled encouragingly at Sansa.

"What was Aunt Lyanna like?"

Ned drew in a deep, sudden breath and looked away, obviously startled by Sansa's question.

She hadn't wanted to hurt him, but she needed to know. Lyanna's name had been mentioned more times in the past week than in Sansa's entire life.

"Ah, Lyanna. She was beautiful, Sansa, and headstrong. Willful and wild too, she never chose the easy way. Our mother died when Benjen was born, if you recall, and Lyanna was barely two. Your grandfather never remarried, so Lyanna was raised in house full of boys and men."

"I didn't know that, that's so sad! I don't know what I would do, Dad, if Mom wasn't around. I can't imagine growing up without her." Sansa felt sadness for her late aunt, not ever knowing her own mother, and yet at the same felt so grateful that she still had both of her parents.

"Lyanna followed Brandon everywhere. She emulated him and wanted to be just like him. We all did. She was a true tomboy, I suppose, but also a pretty girl who could turn all the boys' heads."
"Like Robert?" Sansa hadn't missed Robert's quiet lamentation last night at the airport. His obvious grief was part of the reason Sansa had brought up this discussion.

Ned nodded sadly. "Like Robert. He loved her. I think she probably loved him too, but she found herself pulled in two directions. Robert hasn't really changed his ways much, Sansa. Even when he was a teenager, a young man, he behaved in a wild and reckless manner. He may have loved Lyanna, but he certainly wasn't faithful to her while they dated. That's part of the reason she took off, I think. She didn't want to be tied to a man who couldn't stay true to her."

"What really happened to her, Dad? You've never told us everything." Ned had only told Sansa and her siblings that Lyanna had died shortly after her eighteenth birthday, but had never given them specific details.

Ned's eyes shone bright, but he kept his voice steady. "It's time you knew the truth, I suppose. You're not a child anymore, much as it pains me to admit it. Robert had arranged to meet Lyanna on her birthday, but he was late. So late that she drove over to his apartment. It turned out he wasn't alone. They had a fight and she took off. She came home in tears and told me and Brandon all about it. The next morning her car was gone. She didn't leave us a note or anything. We just assumed she wanted to get out of town for the day to clear her head, but she never came home. Her body was found near the waterfront four days later. Someone had found her, Sansa. They beat her, raped her, and...strangled her. Her murder has never been solved."

Ned surged to his feet and walked to the rail, and stood there with his head bowed. Sansa followed and wrapped her arms around her father. After a moment she pulled back to look up at his somber gray eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"You have such a good heart, Sansa. I wanted to protect you from the ugliness of such a tragedy."

Sansa shook her head. "Dad, I feel like Lyanna's ghost has been hanging over me this past week. Please don't be hurt by what I have to say. I'm not Lyanna, and Stannis is not Robert. Please don't...please don't project their sad history onto us. We have our own story to create, and I really need yours and Mom's acceptance. Please?"

Ned nodded reluctantly. "Sansa, in truth I was less than thrilled when Stannis approached me last week. I never envisioned that you would be attracted to a much older, serious man like Stannis, but I trust your judgment, and I know he is a good, honest man. He's already shown me that he holds your welfare above all else. It's going to to take your mother a little more time, I think, to come to the same conclusion. Try to be patient with her, OK? She'll come around."

"I will. Thanks, Dad."

Together they went back inside, where Rickon and Arya were arguing over who ate the last pecan roll. Sansa rolled her eyes and fished out another package from the cupboard, then retreated to her room to study for her upcoming mid-term exams.

Shortly after noon Sansa stood nervously outside the large oak door of Stannis' townhouse and tried to work up the courage to ring the doorbell. At her feet sat a small ice chest packed full of fresh food from the Farmer's Market. Stannis had told her he would be home all day.

She was concerned for him. Although he had relaxed upon her arrival at the airport, by the time they had reached the small café for dinner his energy had drained away, leaving his face slightly haggard looking. Even the lines around his eyes seemed to have been etched deeper during the past week. He
had been absolutely exhausted last night, and had barely eaten any of his meal. He had admitted to her that the food in Astapor did not agree with him, and had obviously not slept well all week. She hoped he would welcome both her impromptu visit and her care package.

Just do it. Sansa rang the bell twice, and waited. After a full minute, she rang the bell again, and for good measure, used the vintage heavy iron door knocker as well. This time she heard a thump and rustling, then the door opened.

"Sansa!" A bare-chested, sleep rumpled version of Stannis stood at an odd angle in the doorway, blinking rapidly against the bright sunlight. He had obviously been asleep.

“Hi.” Stannis still just stood there, looking for all the world as though he could not comprehend even a simple one-syllable word.

Sansa started to feel as though her visit might not have been a good idea after all. What if he wasn’t ready for her to see him at his home?

“Er, can I come in? I brought you something.”

Shaking his head, then nodding it abruptly, Stannis opened the door fully and gestured Sansa inside, then closed it against the mid-day glare. He rubbed his face and eyes as Sansa took a quick look around the entryway.

“Isn’t it a little early Sansa?” Stannis’ voice sounded rough and raspy. Sansa could tell he was a little grumpy in his sleepy state. Still, she laughed.

“Early in the afternoon, maybe. It’s nearly twelve thirty. How long have you been sleeping, Stannis?”

“Ugh...I don’t know. Why are you here? Not that I mind, but, what’s this?” Stannis waved his hand at the ice chest.

“Food. Real food. Point me to your kitchen, and I’ll take care of the rest. But kiss me first?”

“Mm hmm.” Stannis cupped her face and gave her a slow, languid kiss, and she found his beard no longer scratched her skin so roughly. He then led Sansa to the kitchen.

Sansa immediately fell in love with Stannis’ kitchen. Large, spacious and tastefully appointed with beautiful red oak cabinets and slate countertops, it looked as though he had never actually cooked in it. Knowing his work habits, she wouldn’t be surprised if that was indeed the case.

Sansa fished two small bottles out of her ice chest. One held a mostly clear liquid, the other held bright green juice. She handed the clear one to Stannis first.

“Here, drink this. You said you weren’t feeling well after eating that nasty Astapori food all week - this is ginger water. It will help settle your stomach. It has lemon in it, too.” She watched in amusement as he suspiciously sniffed the contents of the bottle, took a tentative taste, then greedily drank the rest down.

“Now drink this.” She handed Stannis the green vegetable juice. He viewed this with considerably more suspicion. “You need it Stannis, you’re exhausted. This has lots of nutrients. Please?”

Closing his eyes, Stannis drank all the juice down at once, face screwed up in a grimace. He obviously did not care for the taste.
Sansa took that moment to admire his bare torso. His broad bare chest was deep and well defined, without having the ridiculous pecs common of body builders. Abs were equally well defined, with black hair trailing in a thin line down below the waistband of his shorts. Stannis’ shoulders and traps were very muscular, and his arms displayed sinewy muscles devoid of body fat. *Gods, he’s built like Adonis.*

As Sansa’s eyes traveled back up the line of Stannis’ body, she looked up to see his own dark blue eyes, pupils dilated, watching her with both a bemused and intense gaze. She blushed furiously. He had caught her ogling his body when he thought he wasn’t looking.

Suddenly flustered and shy, Sansa busied herself with pulling vegetables, fresh eggs and assorted other items out of her ice chest. It was easy for her to feel confident when he was all business, or sleepy. But now, standing alone with a three-quarters naked, intently staring Stannis, she felt terribly off balance.

When she looked back at him Stannis had turned to face the counter himself, rubbing his now red neck with one hand while tapping on the countertop with the other hand, looking rather embarrassed himself. A quick glance at his groin showed her why.

“Stannis, I’m sorry I popped in without calling first. Do you want me to go?” She didn’t want to leave, but feared she may overstepped his boundaries of privacy.

His raspy voice had suddenly dropped at least an octave, and caused a shiver of delight to ripple down her spine. “No. Stay. I’m just going to go...go clean up.” He wouldn’t meet her eyes.

Sansa nodded and watched as he made an obvious retreat for the stairs. She smiled to herself, pleased once again that her mere presence had brought out such a reaction from the reserved man. Then she returned to her mission at hand.

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Stannis dashed up the stairs to the master bedroom, locking the door behind him. Shucking off his shorts, he spat in his hand and immediately wrapped it around his rock-hard boner. A cold shower would not cool his lust today, and with Sansa just downstairs in his house, he did not trust himself to remain in control. His nerves practically hummed with lust and desire for the beautiful girl.

Bracing himself against the wall, Stannis spread his legs and pumped his hips hard and fast into his hand. Within a minute he felt his balls tighten, then came with a guttural groan all over his hand. He rested against the wall for a moment to catch his breath, until he was confident that his wobbly legs would propel him to the shower without collapsing in a heap. At least he had taken the edge off, and would be able to resist the desire to have his way with Sansa on the kitchen island.

A short while later a showered and dressed Stannis trotted down the stairs, following his nose to the kitchen. A glance at the antique hallway clock told him that he had slept for nearly fifteen hours. He couldn’t recall sleeping for more than seven hours per night since he was a boy. The trip to Astapor had wiped him out both mentally and physically. During those four days he had subsisted on more cups of strong black coffee than he’d consumed in the past four weeks. Drained and strung out (traveling with Robert would aggravate and exhaust even the most stalwart road warrior), he had collapsed into bed last night. Stannis didn’t think he had moved once in those fifteen blissful hours of sleep.

He pulled up short in the kitchen doorway to observe Sansa at work by the stove. She had come over here on her own accord *just for him*. With her red hair pulled back in a swaying ponytail, her slender white neck just called him to kiss it. But as the stove burner was turned on, he didn’t want to startle
her.

Stannis approached to stand behind Sansa once she flashed him a pleased smile. Unable to resist, he swept back her hair and sniffed her neck, then nibbled on it.

“This smells good. Whatever you’re cooking smells tasty, too.”

Sansa squeaked and ducked her head. “Shoo! Go sit down, I don’t want to burn your breakfast. Lunch. Brunch. Whatever you want to call it. It’s almost ready.”

Stannis could not remember eating a better tasting omelet in his life. Or one quite so large. He tried to slow down enough to savor the taste, so he looked up at Sansa, who in turn regarded him with a hopeful expression.

“Do you like it?” She sounded unsure of herself.

“Absolutely.” In truth, Stannis caught his breath for a moment as he thought on Sansa’s selfless actions. She had gone to the trouble of shopping for him, driven all the way over here, brought him fresh juices and cooked a healthy, hearty meal to help him feel better. No one had treated him with such simple kindness since his parents had died.

A memory, unbidden, popped in his head. His mother had been standing in front of the large, copper range of the kitchen at Storm’s End as Stannis and his father Steffon walked in with a brace of sea bass strung between them. Steffon had taken Stannis fishing in the bay that morning, just the two of them. His mother had then baked the fish for his birthday dinner. That was the last time she had cooked for him, and the last time he had done anything with just his father. A month later they were gone…

“Stannis?” A gentle touch on his forearm brought Stannis back to the present. Sansa sat next to him with a worried frown pasted on her face. “Are you OK? You were lost in space there for a minute.”

He blinked and took the last bite of omelet, just so he wouldn’t have to reply right away. The bittersweet memory of his thirteenth birthday had caught him by surprise with its intensity, filling Stannis with melancholy and longing.

“I am fine, Sansa, just a bit tired still.” He wasn’t quite ready to share that private memory with anyone just yet.

After helping Sansa clean up the kitchen, much to her annoyance, Stannis led her to his living room. She wanted him to give her a tour of his neighborhood, but they both agreed to wait until later in the day, when it wasn’t so hot outdoors. They settled into a giant overstuffed chair that Renly had picked out for Stannis. Dark and well cushioned, Renly had said it suited both Stannis’ living room and his dark, overstuffed personality. Today he was grateful for Renly’s assistance, as it meant Sansa would be snuggled up close to him while they watched a movie.

Not one to usually waste time watching television or movies, Stannis occasionally would tune in to a classic film. When he saw that *The African Queen* was available, Sansa admitted that she had never seen a Humphrey Bogart film, but would be willing to watch this one.

Early into the film Stannis found that he compared himself to Bogart's rough boat captain. Like Bogart's character, Stannis spoke gruffly, and had acquired a less than savory habit. Sansa, kind and non-judgmental, had not taken him to task over it. During the festival last week she had simply informed him that she would not kiss him whenever he indulged in dipping snuff, and that was that.

Settling deeper in the comfortable chair with his legs stretched out on the ottoman, Stannis found the
combined effects of a full belly, dimly lit room and warm girl snuggled up against him too much to resist. He laid his suddenly heavy head back and stopped fighting the urge to close his eyes. Not until Sansa nudged him in the ribs, with the end credits rolling across the television screen, did Stannis realize he had slept through nearly the entire movie.

"Wow, that was a great movie! Maybe we can watch it together sometime?" Sansa's amused voice and golden laugh broke through his stupor.

"We were together, Sansa. I have not gone anywhere." Technically, this was true.

Sansa rolled her eyes and stretched across his body to reach for the remote control. In doing so, she rubbed her breasts all along his own chest, and when he met her eyes, she slowed down considerably, deliberately crawling up his body until she could give him a kiss. No longer sleepy, he turned that easy kiss into a passionate clash and tangle of lips and tongues and breathless moans.

Inhaling sharply, Stannis pulled one Sansa's legs over so that she straddled his waist as he lay down on his back. He wanted her to feel the effect she had brought upon him.

Her loose, airy skirt puddled around his waist, allowing Stannis easy access to her long bare legs. He skimmed his hands up the backs of her thighs under her skirt, just enjoying the smooth, taut feel all the way to her hips. Here he rested his hands, lightly tickling her right along the hem of what felt like lace panties. Feeling, but not seeing them caused his own hips to involuntarily buck up against her sweet spot. Sansa gasped with surprise, and started wriggling against his erection, even though a few layers of clothing separated them.

Armed with the knowledge that Sansa was still inexperienced and a virgin, Stannis knew that like last time, Sansa was experimenting with certain motions and sensations. Unlike the last time, he had no intention of stopping her. It obviously felt good to her, and for him it was extremely arousing to watch her pleasure herself against him. And of course the constant pressure and friction against his cock felt incredible.

Sansa paused to look down at Stannis with half-closed eyes, face displaying a combination of pleasure and concentration. She ran her hands up and down his chest, then tugged on the hem of his t-shirt.

"Take this off? I'd like to see you."

He hastily complied, eager to feel her soft, smooth hands on his bare skin. She did not disappoint - he fell back and closed his eyes, enjoying the gentle caresses as she ran her fingers along his chest and abdomen. This made him want to feel even more of her skin, and he lightly stroked her back and ribs under her shirt as she leaned forward, pausing when he realized Sansa was not wearing a bra.

Giving her a look that he hoped conveyed his next question, as he was not certain he was capable of coherent speech, Stannis ran his hands around to the front of Sansa's chest, just under the swell of her breasts, and waited. He didn't have to wait long. Sansa nodded, still rocking gently against him, then started to unbutton her sleeveless blouse.

**Perfection.** Her full, firm, perky breasts spilled out from the open shirt, and Stannis no longer seemed to be in conscious control of his wandering hands. He cupped each breast with a hand, and gently ran his thumb along the smooth, silky skin underneath. Then he rubbed each nipple in turn, hoping to get a new reaction.

Sansa gasped, and simultaneously surged her chest forward, seeking more contact while also trying to grind herself deeper against his groin. Encouraged, he continued to knead and rub while he bucked his hips up to match her rhythm. Sansa's head was thrown back, eyes closed, mouth half
open as she chased that pleasure that must travel from her nipples all the way to her groin. The direct, constant contact against his cock was driving Stannis half-mad with need. He recognized the importance of slowing things down, lest he lose himself entirely.

"Sansa, slow it down a minute." Stannis grasped her hips and stilled them, then moved her off him so that they both lay on their sides. His eyes flicked back and forth between her face and bare breasts, unable to decide where to look.

Breathless, she looked at him with a worried, yet still aroused expression. "Did I do something wrong?"

He huffed out, "No, girl. I just need to slow down. Remember, you tell me when and where to stop. Also, don't be afraid to tell me what you like."

With that Stannis encouraged Sansa to lie on her back while he propped himself up on one elbow, careful not to bring his achy groin in contact with her slender body. He also took care not to loom over her - he didn't want her to feel trapped by his own much larger frame. He went back to kissing her and caressing and fondling her breasts. Sansa had appeared embarrassed at first, then eagerly began to squirm and thrust up whenever he touched her. He wanted her to welcome and accept his touch without fear or reservation.

His lips left her own to trail kisses down her neck to that lovely, fine collarbone, and started to suck gently on the hollow of Sansa's slender porcelain neck. She gasped as he sucked a little harder, panting and moaning quietly. Trailing lower still, he rained kisses and licks down her chest until he reached one breast, and flicked his tongue ever so delicately across one nipple while kneading the other breast with his hand.

Sansa gasped again and surged against him, while her hips seemed to have developed a mind and motion of their own.

"Stannis, please...oh...I need more..." Her head was thrown back, and she was breathing rapidly, almost in time to her hips which had started moving of their own accord.

Stannis trailed his free hand down Sansa's ribs to her trim waist, and tickled right along the band of her skirt. His own breathing had increased, and he had to take several deep breaths to bring some oxygen to his brain.

"Sansa." He grunted out, and cursed himself for sounding like a caveman. "Sansa, I can help you with that, if you like." He ran his hand up under her skirt, along her smooth thighs again to trace the outline of her lace panties.

"Can I touch you here, Sansa?" He wanted to feel her wet heat so badly, but he stilled his hand, even though her hips had not ceased their desperate twitching.

The trust and pleading in her bright blue eyes nearly did him in. Sansa's own need appeared to have eclipsed his in intensity. "Yes, please, Stannis. Ahhhh..." She gasped and moaned as Stannis wasted no time once he received explicit permission, and he rubbed her through her panties, enough to feel that they were already damp.

Stannis reached under to touch her directly, watching her face for her reaction as he did so. He rubbed her nub back and forth, then slid one long finger along her folds to her very wet opening and back. Sansa moaned and thrust up to meet his hand. He tried long swipes and short circles, gauging which movement Sansa liked more. Circles and pressure caused her to move with wild abandon, encouraging Stannis to accommodate her all the more. Finding out what gave her pleasure was half
the fun, and he looked forward to more days of this sort in the future.

Alternating flicking his tongue lightly on her nipples and sucking on them, all the while rubbing circles caused Sansa to moan and thrash without conscious control. He grinned as her hip movements suddenly turned into one long thrust, and he felt her hot tight opening clench and release rhythmically around his finger, just barely at her entrance. Gently removing his finger, Stannis lightly rubbed Sansa and then withdrew his hand from under her skirt. She lay still with her eyes closed, breathing heavily. He couldn't stop watching her face, and gave her a kiss when she opened her eyes again.

"Wow. That was...I never...I didn't know..." Sansa seemed to be at a loss for words, and also started to appear embarrassed again. She nibbled on her lower lip and glanced at him shyly. Stannis realized that he had just given Sansa her first orgasm. *I did that for her.*

Feeling rather proud of himself, Stannis settled onto his back and pulled Sansa in for a hug, with her laying her head on his chest. His erection still throbbed with need, but her care came first. He rubbed her back slowly, feeling her breathing return to normal.

"Hey girl. You OK?"

Sansa laughed, but sounded nervous too. "Better than OK. I never felt that way before." Sansa pushed herself up off his chest to look at him. Her body had suddenly grown tense. She worried her lip again, and glanced at his obvious bulge and back to his face. "But what about you? I'm not ready for...to do, you know..." Stannis thought it rather adorable that she couldn't say the word. He was also pleased that she was willing to speak up for herself.

"Sex? It's just a word, Sansa, there is no shame in speaking it. I promised you, and I mean to keep that promise, that I won't push. I can wait." He felt her relax as she settled her head back down on his chest and traced lazy pathways through the hair that grew there.

"But surely you need, you know, help? I can help you, if you want. Like you did for me."

His hips bucked again. Who wouldn't want that? "Only if you want to, Sansa." She paused, then nodded her head.

"Can I see you, too?" She traced her fingers down to his waistband, and ran a fingernail underneath it, causing him to hiss in anticipation.

Stannis eagerly undid the button and zipper of his cargo shorts and pushed them down enough to free his rather engorged member, which in turn caused Sansa's eyes to grow quite large in surprise.

"Oh!" She gasped as he took himself in hand. "It looks so...angry. And how will it fit?" Stannis chuckled as he lazily stroked his cock, watching her watch him. He knew he wasn't small, but never dwelled upon that detail. A small, rational part of his brain told him to reassure her, that when the time came her body would accommodate his size, but the primitive center had taken over, and simply took pride in her exclamation.

She reached out hesitantly to touch him, then wrapped her small, soft hand around his cock. She gripped a little too tightly at first, then after he exclaimed loosened, and tentatively started to move it up and down, slowly at first, then a bit faster as his hips started to move in concert with her.

"You feel so hot, Stannis, and smooth, like velvet. Oh!" She appeared surprised when milky fluid started to leak, but he just reached down and spread it around to make her hand flow easier, and covered her hand with his to show her the speed he preferred. At this point Stannis could not have
stopped moving no matter how much he might have tried.

He felt that tightening sensation deep in his groin and balls, and knew he was close. "Sansa...move your hand, I'm about to come...Ahhh!" And then he did with a groan, all over both of their hands, before she had a chance to pull away.

Stannis lay there for a moment, basking in the boneless bliss, not caring a whit that he was currently exposed in a most unseemly position. Eventually, though, he opened his eyes and started thinking again when Sansa cleared her throat.

"Stannis?" She looked at him with a mix of wonder and anxiousness. "Were you in pain, because that looked really intense."

He huffed out what might be a laugh. "No. No pain, Sansa, just the opposite." How to explain it? He didn't know how to describe that point of pleasure that teetered on the edge of pain, or the intensity of it. He couldn't explain it to himself.

They got cleaned up and their clothing back in order, then resumed their comfortable snuggling in the big chair. Stannis grew somber and remained quiet, as he thought of Sansa's innocent reactions and questions. *Hells, she is so young. What are you doing, old man?*

"Stop it." Sansa's sharp voice broke Stannis out of his musings. "I know what you're thinking now, so stop it." She was sitting up now, and had pulled away a bit. Stannis frowned in confusion. Was he that obvious?

Yes. "Just because I haven't had sex before doesn't mean I'm a child. I chose this too, OK? Don't worry about our age difference - I'm not."

As he gazed into her beautiful blue eyes Stannis detected Sansa's fierce determination. Not trusting his voice, Stannis hoped a decisive nod and firm kiss would convey his answer more clearly. He was tempted, then, to just pull Sansa back down into the chair and repeat their previous activities, but she clearly had other ideas.

Sansa leapt to her feet. "Remember, you also promised me a tour of your neighborhood and the Garden District. Let's go!" Her enthusiasm was infectious, and so Stannis lumbered himself up out of the chair. The funky art-deco coffee shop down the street would be their first stop, he decided.

Stannis watched Sansa lightly skip down the granite steps while he locked up the brownstone. She flashed him yet another brilliant smile when he reached her side and took her proffered hand. "I'm really glad I came over today, Stannis."

"As am I." He would happily spend every afternoon engaging in exploratory activities with Sansa, given the chance. As they walked down the tree-lined street, Stannis realized that a brighter future beyond endless office doldrums and violent fighting awaited him, if he just reached out and took it, and he didn't have to go it alone. He wanted to pursue that future life with Sansa.

*Run with it. You might never get another chance.*

Chapter End Notes

Comments are always welcome and appreciated! If you haven't left a comment before,
please feel free to jump in!
Stannis huffed in exasperation as he hung up the phone in his office. Nancy, the Tower’s full-time Nurse Practitioner, had taken the day off. He needed someone to take out the stitches on his forehead and didn’t have time to go see his doctor.

After nearly poking himself in the eye twice while attempting to take out his stitches Stannis gave up, and went in search of his younger brother.

“Renly?”

As usual, Renly’s television had been tuned to a cable business channel, currently discussing the stock markets that had just opened for the day. Energy stocks had spiked higher due to the electricity crunch brought on by the searing heat.

“Renly, I need your help.”

“Two weeks in a row? This is a new record, Stannis.” Renly’s mocking voice grated somewhat, although he didn’t sound malicious or annoyed.

“Just...come over here. I can’t take these stitches out myself, and Nancy didn’t come in today. Will you take them out?”

“Fine. Sit down.” Stannis handed his brother the tweezers and tiny scissors, and Renly went to work. It pulled a little, but he did a better job than Stannis had been able to do looking in the mirror.

“Sit still, Stannis. Or do you want these scissors in your eye?” Stannis concentrated on remaining motionless, although he hadn’t realized he’d been moving.

“Why did you ask me, anyway?” Renly had paused, and was looking at Stannis with an unreadable expression.

“I told you, Nancy isn’t here, and I don’t have time to go to a doctor. Asking one our secretaries would be inappropriate. Asking Robert is out of the question - he is too rough and would badger me about this cut.”

Renly paced away, even though he hadn’t finished. When he turned back Stannis was surprised to see the hurt look on his face.

“Robert’s too rough? Or is it that because I’m gay you automatically assume I would be much more gentle, or effeminate enough, to handle something like this?”

Stannis could not recall ever hearing Renly sound so bitter before. He had never criticized Renly over his sexuality - that didn’t matter to Stannis at all.

“Renly, when I joined the Navy most of our medics were male, and we all had to learn advanced first aid. Gender or sexuality has nothing to do with this.”

Stannis had joined the Navy Reserves when he turned eighteen, and upon graduating from King’s Landing University had received his officer’s commission. He spent an additional eight years as a...
reserve officer, and had been activated to serve during the war with the Iron Islands.

“And besides, if you were me, would you ask Robert?”

“Ha!” Renly relaxed somewhat and returned to finish his task. “You’re right, I suppose. I wouldn’t ask Robert either. Now stop moving.”

Stannis rubbed the newly closed scar once Renly had pulled the last stitch out. It itched. He itched, everywhere and nowhere.

Regarding his younger brother’s troubled expression, Stannis could tell that Renly wasn’t done yet.

“Do you think our parents would be ashamed of me?” Renly, ten years younger than Stannis, and seventeen years younger than Robert, had only been three years old when their parents had died in the plane crash.

“For being gay?” Stannis was astounded when his younger brother nodded. Renly had never shown any interest in what others thought of him or his choices before.

“No, Renly, I don’t believe so. Our parents were exceptional people. They accepted and loved each of us as we were, and didn’t compare or judge us against each other or anyone else.” If only everyone behaved in such a manner.

Stannis stood and paced around the large table in Renly’s office, troubled. He had rarely discussed their parents with him - they had been split apart shortly after their parents’ deaths, so Stannis had had nothing to do with raising his little brother. Ruefully he reflected that Robert hadn’t really raised Renly either; he had simply hired a nanny to tend to the boy.

They hadn’t really started to get to know each other until after Stannis had returned from the war. By that point Renly was halfway through high school, and more interested in his music and friends than his distant, unknown older brother.

A touch startled him. “Stannis, what the hell is wrong with you?” Stannis, who by this point was standing out the window, jerked his head towards Renly, who was shaking his shoulder and looking at him with concern.


“I had to say your name three times and shake you before you responded. It’s like you were spacing out. You’ve been pacing and fiddling with everything in here. You haven’t been able to keep still at all - even when I pulled those stitches out you were fidgeting. If I didn’t know any better I’d say you were Jonesing for something.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I was distracted for a moment. Nothing more.”

Stannis walked quickly towards the office door, uncomfortable with both the direction in which the conversation had turned and the faint unease that had raised its head within him. He had more important things to focus on, including his weekly department head meeting and handling the fallout from the failed Astapor trip.

At lunch he thought about calling Sansa to join him, but then remembered she had an intensive seminar at the University, and would not be in the Tower all week. Grumbling, Stannis grew increasingly irritable and distracted as the afternoon’s work, and heat, progressed. He barely recalled the details of his three o’clock meeting with the Accounting VP, except that he had nearly lost his temper over some minor discrepancy.
Late in the day his desk phone rang. Renly. “What?”

“Come over here Stannis. You need to see this.” Click. Renly had not sounded joking or happy.

Annoyed, Stannis opened his desk drawer to grab his cellphone, and paused. A red labeled tin of snuff, the pricey brand he only used on nights he went to Fury Road, sat in there. He must have grabbed the wrong one. He could only buy this particular brand in a few small mom-and-pop stores in and near the warehouse district. Normally not inclined to indulge at the office, he thought of Robert’s lax habits where whisky was concerned. *Why not? Executive privilege.* He could use the boost anyway, and didn’t have any more meetings.

Stannis strode into Renly’s office without knocking, feeling more energized and alert than he had all afternoon.

“What is it?”

Renly merely pointed to his television screen and pressed a button on the remote control.

Stannis turned to watch the current topic airing on the TV. Freezing in place, his fists clenched until his knuckles turned white as photos of himself and Sansa, obviously taken in the Garden District just two days earlier, flashed across the screen.

*Has one of Westeros’ wealthiest and most reclusive bachelors finally found love?*

*That’s Stannis Baratheon you’re looking at, holding hands and exchanging tender looks with a gorgeous, very young redhead.*

*The number two man and COO at Baratheon Industries is somewhat notorious for keeping a low profile, leading many to speculate what sort of private life he may lead.*

*It will be interesting to see what effect, if any, romance will have on the man and his business!*

“Fuck.”

While he occasionally acquiesced to participate in television interviews on financial or business related topics, Stannis himself had never actually *been* the topic of any news program before, leaving that particular honor to Robert and Renly.

“It was bound to get out eventually, brother.”

Renly’s words did little to ease the anger welling up within him. He could not help but wonder if the stalker had something to do with this, or worse, Baelish. The mere thought of Baelish caused Stannis to clench his jaw with impotent fury.

“You better be prepared, Stannis, for more than just this. I guarantee they’ll have that video from Liveleak on the news later this week along with your mugshot. Once the paparazzi find out you were arrested last month, they’ll dig a little deeper and find your arrest and conviction from five years ago.”

Stannis seethed. He could not control the snarl that escaped as he whirled on Renly, even though his brother was nothing but an honest messenger at this particular point.

Renly took a quick step back, hands up in supplication. “Whoa, Stannis, don’t bite me, I’m just following this through logically. At least we’ve had some practice dealing with Robert’s...indiscretions...over the years. I’ll get some statements prepped ahead of time, just in case.”
“Sansa is not an indiscretion, she’s a human being, for fuck’s sake!”

Renly’s eyes grew wide with surprise at Stannis’ vehemence.

“And there is no way in seven hells that I am talking to the press. They need to back off. Got it?”

He stalked back to his own office, gathered his things and left the Tower. His temper had not abated, and as it was late in the day anyway, there was no point in remaining.

By the time Stannis walked into his brownstone the streetlights had come on and the day’s heat had cooled off somewhat. Not so his temper. He had managed to work himself into a livid state on the drive home. He wanted to fight. Or fuck. As the latter was currently untenable, he opted for the former, and took the stairs two at a time to change.

Soon Stef found himself pulling the battered Ford into the parking lot down on the docks, anxious to beat on a punching bag or a sparring partner, he really didn’t care which.

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Sansa alternated between looking at the clock and doodling in the margins of her notebook. Signing up to participate in the four-day Communications seminar had seemed like a good idea at the time. Margaery had begged Sansa to go with her to Dorne on their spring break, but Sansa didn’t like the idea of mingling with thousands of drunk college men (and women) ogling each other on the beach. As a Business Major who truly enjoyed interacting with people, she thought that by attending the seminar it would provide a great learning opportunity and perhaps acquire new skills that she could put to use at Baratheon Industries. She could not have been more wrong, or more bored.

Instead of intensively covering one or two topics during the week as had been promised, the seminar just provided basic overviews on nearly a dozen different skill sets. The first day had been devoted to covering basic public speaking and self presentation. Sansa had learned all that years ago while practicing and performing in her music recitals. The next three days of the seminar did not get any better or more interesting.

Now four-thirty on a Thursday afternoon, Sansa looked down to regard the doodles she had sketched along with her notes. Here a wolf poked its head out of a winter rose bush, there a stag stood on a cliff face overlooking the sea. In the upper corner she had drawn Winterfell’s fabled Weirwood tree. A dragon swooped and swirled its way around the bottom of her notes, wings encircling the last paragraph. Rickon would probably cut the wolf out and pin it to his bulletin board, given the chance. Maybe I should illustrate children’s books instead.

The other reason Sansa could not concentrate was that she was anxious to see Stannis again. They had talked and texted throughout the week but had not seen each other since Saturday. Late this morning he had texted her (he never called during work hours) with an offer to pick her up on campus once her seminar had finished for the day. Sansa had paid scant attention to the lecture after that.

As she packed up her books and exited the lecture hall someone spoke her name from directly behind her. The tone of it caused her spine to tense up.

“Hello, Sansa.” She recognized that voice, but had not seen its owner in months. Harry Harddyng. Sansa whirled and at the same time took a step back in a manner that she hoped did not convey alarm. She didn’t feel comfortable with Harry standing so close to her.

“Hi, Harry. I didn’t know you were in this seminar. I didn’t see you here at all this week.”
“I’m not, but Dr. Simon is my advisor, and I have an appointment with him in a little while. I got here early and saw you. I had to say hello.” Harry, blond hair flopping over his eyes, gave Sansa a carefree, boyish grin. “How’s the internship with Baratheon Industries, anyway?”

"It’s good. I work with some amazing people in the Communications department.”

As they talked the two exited the building and started walking across the large, shady green that was surrounded by the campus’ stately old stone structures. Sansa would be meeting Stannis near the large oak in the center of the expansive quad. She hoped Harry would buzz off soon and go to his appointment. Uneasy, Sansa shifted her backpack to her other shoulder to act as a buffer between them.

“What about you, Harry? Are you still working at the campus career center?” Sansa had been taught how to make small talk with pretty much anyone she encountered, but this apparently encouraged Harry to keep walking with her.

“Yes, I have to work there as part of my financial aid agreement. It’s not bad though, because I get to meet a lot of businessmen and network with them. You can never have too many connections, right?” Something about Harry’s tone set Sansa’s nerves on edge. He sounded too smooth, too rehearsed.

“I suppose.” Sansa could not help but wonder if Harry had been involved in getting her the internship with Petyr Baelish at the Mockingbird Fund. He had recommended the position to her, and had handled her paperwork and set up her interview. In retrospect Sansa realized that she did not fit in with the risky, fast-paced investment world, but by then Baelish had set his own eyes on her.

As they continued towards the center of the quad Sansa realized that Dr. Simon’s office was actually in the opposite direction. About one hundred feet ahead she could see a tall man leaning against the tree - Stannis. Sansa stopped at an intersection of walkways.

“Well, Harry, it was nice to see you again, but there’s my ride. And aren’t you supposed to meet Dr. Simon?” She was relieved to see Stannis straighten up and start to walk in their direction.

Harry stuttered. “Oh...oh yeah. Dr. Simon. Well, I best be going then. But I wanted to let you know that I got another job off campus, at the Blue Crystal. It’s a fantastic alternative club. I’m working there on Friday and Saturday nights - you should bring Margaery and come on down. We have a great dance scene!”

“Ok, Harry, I’ll think about it.” Please go away.

Harry’s greasy smile gave her no comfort, and he apparently thought to give her a hug but pulled himself up short as she backed away. His face blanched and his expression turned to apprehension and downright fear as his eyes flickered nervously to a spot just behind her. Stannis must be close.

“Sansa, is this man bothering you?” Stannis’ voice carried a hard edge and an unspoken warning for Harry.

Sansa turned to greet Stannis with a smile, who by this point was only a few steps away from them. She reached for his hand. “Stannis! No, it’s fine, I was just catching up with Harry here. He works in the career office. Harry, this is Stannis. Stannis, this is Harry Harddyng.”

Stannis took Sansa’s hand but glowered at Harry with cold, silent hostility as he squared his shoulders and drew himself up to his full, imposing height. Harry, considerably shorter and slighter than Stannis, got the message and turned to leave, but not before calling back to Sansa.
“Don’t forget, Sansa, the Blue Crystal! You’ll have a blast!” Harry turned and walked briskly away, but not in the direction of Dr. Simon’s office.

She turned back to Stannis, who was still glaring at Harry’s retreating back. “Phew! I’m glad you walked over here. Harry is creepy and wouldn’t leave me alone. I kept hoping he’d go away.”

When Stannis still did not pull his gaze from Harry’s distant form, Sansa tugged on his hand. “Stannis? Hellooo?”

Sansa was taken aback by Stannis’ serious, intense expression. More than that, even though the day was still bright and sunny, his pupils were dilated so much that his irises formed little more than thin blue rings around a deep black core. With entrenched scowl and flaring nostrils, he looked so fierce, almost feral, that Sansa thought he resembled a large lion stalking its prey.

“Are you ok, Stannis? You look like you’re ready to pounce on something.”

She tried to keep her tone light and joking, because this side of Stannis caused Sansa to experience a familiar tingle of not-quite fear shiver down her spine, much as it had done the night Stannis had intervened in the mugging.

Stannis closed his eyes and shook his head like a wet dog, taking in several slow, deep breaths before looking at her again. The fierce expression had disappeared, to be replaced with one of concern.

“Don’t you worry about me, girl. Any fool could see you didn’t want him around, and I don’t much like how he behaved with you. Did he hurt or threaten you? Say the word.”

The last sentence came out more like a growl, and Stannis’ Stormlands accent had grown increasingly pronounced as he spoke. The faint bit of fear left her, replaced by a thrill that this man would willingly act in such a protective manner towards her over any threat, perceived or otherwise.

She smiled at him, hoping he’d loosen up. “No, nothing like that. I just don’t really trust Harry, you know? He seems like he’s always been hiding something, even when we first met at the career office. I’ve avoided him ever since I left the Mockingbird Fund.”

Stannis grunted. “What is this Blue Crystal, and why did he want you to know about it?”

“Oh, it’s just some new dance club. He wants me and Margaery to come down there sometime. He’s working there now, and seems to think I want to hang out with him.”

“Do you?” Stannis asked with all seriousness and a hint of vulnerability in his normally stoic voice.

“No, of course not! Stannis, Harry doesn’t interest me at all, only you do. And if he really thinks I would hang out with him, then he’s positively delusional.”

“Good.” He grunted again, but this time sounded more relaxed and pleased with her statement. “I didn’t come over here to talk about some young punk. Let’s go eat.”

Sansa planted her feet and resisted his pull. She wanted something else first. “Uh, uh, I think you forgot something.” Putting on a fake pout, she tilted her head to one side and did her best to look put out. Unfortunately she couldn’t hold it together when Stannis looked at her with a mock frown, and she busted out laughing.

“Anything for you, girl.”
With barely a tug Stannis easily pulled Sansa into his arms without any real effort, and gave her a proper kiss in greeting. He started slow, but when she opened her lips for his questing tongue she felt as though the firehose had been turned on. He entwined one hand into her hair and held her waist close to his own with the other, never letting up while he practically devoured her with ardent, consuming passion. She felt heat pool deep in her belly, and realized that he must have been as intensely turned on as she was, judging by something hard pressing up against her waistline. Then someone whistled.

“Hot damn! The old man’s got some moves!”

They broke apart, Sansa blushing feverishly with embarrassment while Stannis furiously glared at the unknown spectator. Unable to find his target, he turned back to Sansa with a regretful expression, eyes still somewhat dilated.

“Sansa...I apologize for that...I got a bit carried away.”

“It’s ok, I don’t mind.”

Secretly Sansa was thrilled. If Stannis could get carried away with such a public display of ardent affection, it meant that he truly cared for her, and didn’t seem to mind if others witnessed his open broadcast of such desire. But she hoped he wasn’t a closet exhibitionist.

“Now that we’ve greeted each other properly, shall we go?” He canted his head in the general direction of the street near campus, and drew her in close as they walked to his Mercedes.

In the car Sansa thought back to how Stannis’ accent had changed on the quad, if only briefly. His Stormland accent sounded much more authentic. She realized that he normally spoke in a very restrained manner without much of an accent at all, much like a newscaster would. She wondered why.

“Stannis?”

“Hmm?”

Sansa hoped he wouldn’t be offended. He still tended to keep quiet, and she didn’t want him to think she was asking him something too personal.

“Back there, on the quad, you spoke with a...how do I say it...a much stronger, different accent, in a manner I’ve never heard you talk before. You sounded much more like a Stormlander than usual.”

He glanced at her, then back to the road in front of them. Traffic had grown fairly heavy, and they had slowed to a near crawl on the busy thoroughfare.

“I did grow up in the Stormlands, Sansa, so it is bound to slip out on occasion. I try not to, though.”

“I don’t understand. There’s nothing wrong with having a regional dialect. Even my dad still sounds like a northerner whenever he talks to Uncle Benjen.”

He grunted at the mention of Ned, then sighed, shoulders slumping.

“Try coming to King’s Landing at age eighteen and entering the Business school at the university, only to discover you’re the laughing stock of your classes for speaking with such a provincial, backwards, archaic accent. Even Robert and Cersei gave me grief for it. He started attending the Aerie Boys’ Academy at age ten, and they made sure everyone dropped their regional dialects, especially ours. Once I started classes at KLU I learned very quickly to suppress it, although even
now I still have to concentrate to do so.”

To Sansa he sounded oddly vulnerable, and...defeated, as if he had lost a part of himself.

Sansa took umbrage on his behalf. “That’s not fair! It’s as if the environment here forced you to throw away a piece of yourself. And just so you know…”

At this Sansa paused, then spoke more shyly than before. “...I really like your natural accent. You sound more relaxed, more open, more...more you.”

He glanced her way once again, eyes narrowed in skepticism. After a moment though, evidently satisfied with whatever he had discerned, Stannis relaxed in the driver’s seat and arched a brow in her direction.

“Oh aye, lass? That so?”

Sansa laughed out loud, delighted, even if he had laid it on a little bit too thickly. In reward Stannis awarded her with a small but genuine smile, and asked how the seminar had gone.

“Boring. It only covered really basic skills and ideas. I’m so glad it’s over.” Sansa had found the topics covered to be completely stultifying.

“Boring or not, did you learn anything new?” Stannis seemed to think this was important.

Sansa hesitated. Would he think poorly of her if she told him the truth? No...her father had once said that Stannis Baratheon respected truth above all else.

“Honestly, Stannis, I’ve come to the conclusion that I don’t want to major in Business. It’s not a good fit for me at all, and deep down I’ve always know that.” She looked at him askance and gnawed on her lower lip, trying to gauge his reaction.

“Hmph. Well, it’s better to discover that truth now than during your senior year. But why did you choose Business in the first place, if you knew you would be unhappy studying it?” Stannis did not sound disappointed in her, contrary to her fears.

“My mother refused to pay my tuition for what I really wanted to study, which is Design and Music. In her mind that’s foolishness. She said she’d allow me to minor in Music, but only if I majored in something useful. And to her, that meant Business. I know you’ll think I’m silly, but my heart is really with the Arts.”

Sansa dreaded the conversation she would eventually have to hold with Catelyn. She knew her mother would express deep disappointment, and may even yank all tuition support. Sansa would not be able to access to her trust account until age twenty-five, so she would not have any way to pay for her schooling without loans if her parents cut her off. Perhaps it would be easier to broach the subject with her father first.

“No Sansa, I do not think you are silly or foolish. You will only become miserable if you attempt to please everyone else at your own expense. Trust me.”

Sansa noticed that Stannis was staring straight ahead with a haunted look in his eyes, and he had gripped the steering wheel with far more force than necessary. She wondered if he spoke from personal experience.

Stannis took Sansa to a small, casual Braavosi restaurant in the gas-light district near the bay. After eating dinner on the lamp-lit patio, the two strolled along the waterfront, much as they had on the
night of their first kiss. She noticed that some small bronze statues had recently been installed along
the plaza.

“Look Stannis, these look just like that dragon statue over on Market Avenue, near Tuscano
Trattoria. I have to take a picture!”

Stannis waited with good humor while she took several pictures, but balked at her suggestion that he
pose with one of them.

“Sansa, do you still have the photo you took of that statue on your phone?”

“Yes, of course! I’m going to use it as a source for a painting I’m working on. Why?”

“Can you send it to me? Shireen likes to collect and look at all things dragon-related, so I’d like to
forward the photo to her.” Sansa thought it was sweet of Stannis to think of his daughter for such a
simple thing. For some reason, she treasured the small moments with her own father the most.

She flipped through the photos on her phone and forwarded the referenced dragon to Stannis. But
before she put her phone away, it buzzed with an incoming message.

Jon: Watch this video, Sansa, and make sure Stannis does too.

Sitting down on a park bench, Sansa called Stannis over from his vantage point near the rail and
clicked on the video link. She found herself holding her breath as the video played.

And now for more on a story we first brought to you earlier this week here on “Moneyline”.

That’s business mogul Stannis Baratheon strolling hand-in-hand through King’s Landing’s trendy
Garden District with a beautiful young lady. And now we know the name of his lovely companion.

Nineteen year old Sansa Stark is a second year Business major at King’s Landing University, and
an intern at Baratheon Industries. No word yet on whether that’s how the thirty-six year old COO
met the gorgeous young redhead.

But sources tell us their connection goes deeper than just office romance. It seems that the two are
practically related.

Stannis Baratheon’s older brother, CEO Robert Baratheon, is a long-time family friend of the
wealthy Starks and surrogate uncle to the Stark children.

From the heated looks and reported kisses these two are exchanging, they definitely don’t see one
another as family. Yet. We’ll be keeping an eye out for any potential “mergers.”

“Dammit!” Stannis jumped up, startling Sansa with his oath and sudden action. She was unhappy
with this breach of their privacy, but he appeared beyond furious. She watched with a mixture of
awe and dismay as he paced back and forth, scrubbing his hair repeatedly in obvious agitation.

Her father had warned her that their relationship would eventually attract the media’s attention. They
had watched the first news report the other night, and Ned had told her that it would probably get
worse.

“Stannis? Stannis, please, will you come sit with me?”

He stopped pacing immediately, and quickly sat back down and took her hand. While obviously still
angry, Stannis also appeared contrite.
“I’m sorry, girl, for all this mess. You deserve better than having the damn media poke its nose where it doesn’t belong.”

He wrapped his strong arm around her shoulder, and she leaned into his chest and just breathed in his familiar scent - a blend of subtle aftershave, lemon and something like leather. That comforting smell plus listening to his strong heartbeat gave her a sense of security; she would always be safe with Stannis by her side. They sat like that for a few more minutes, taking quiet comfort in each other’s presence.

A horrible thought occurred to Sansa and she bolted upright. “Stannis, does this mean we’re being stalked?”

The idea that someone had been photographing them last Saturday while they were on an innocent walk really bothered her. She didn’t want to be the object of some stranger’s attention.

Stannis sighed and shook his head. “As you probably know, both of my brothers have been the focus of media attention in the past, Renly most recently. They tried to get the media to go away, but it wasn’t until the paparazzi trespassed into both Renly’s condo building and the Tower’s lobby that he was able to get a restraining order in place. Them photographing us out on the street doesn’t qualify, as we were in a public place.”

“Oh. What can we expect next?”

“Steel yourself now, Sansa. I have enough of a history for them to gnaw on for several more nights. I just hate that some of my mud will splash on you.” Stannis sounded awfully resigned for someone who had been pacing with fury just a short while earlier.

“That’s not mud, Stannis, that’s your life. We can’t let their reporting get to us. Great-Uncle Brynden says in times like these we need to be like ducks. Their feathers are waterproof, and the water just rolls right off them. Be a duck, and just let it all roll right off you.”

“Hmph.” He tugged Sansa to her feet, and gave her a ghost of a smile. “So long as you don’t expect me to quack.”

Sansa giggled, and managed to get a short huff of a laugh out of Stannis as well. They headed back to his car in a much lighter mood, and she chatted as he drove to her family’s home.

It was nearly nine o’clock when Stannis pulled into the Stark’s driveway. Sansa was glad to see the porchlight of her family’s home lit up, but she was happier to find that no one was out there waiting for her. She wanted these last few minutes with Stannis to be private ones.

Like a true gentleman of old he opened her door and helped her out of the car, even though she didn’t need it. Glancing at the front door, he pulled her close even as he leaned against the car.

“Tell me girl, do you want to escape the heat of King’s Landing Saturday?” He leaned in to give her a slow, languid kiss. She could feel his fingers trace a path along her jaw, down her neck, and run lightly down her back to her waist. Sansa shivered against his long hard body with delight. His kisses always turned her muscles to jelly.

She leaned back to answer him, but could hardly concentrate as his hand buried itself under her hair at the nape of her neck, stroking her skin with gentle, regular motions. Sansa thought she might just collapse in a boneless heap at his feet.

Sighing, she laid her head on his chest as he continued his slow ministrations. Sansa felt all the stress melt away. She realized he had asked her a question, twice apparently, but she had lost track of what
he wanted.

She felt more than heard the low chuckle rumble through his chest. He reached under her chin to tilt her head up. Once again she thought she might melt, this time in the depths of his dark blue eyes. “I said, Sansa, would you like to go out on a boat with me day after tomorrow, and get away from King’s Landing?”

“Yes! That sounds perfect! Anything to escape the city’s heat.”

“Good. I will pick you up at seven Saturday morning. Bring a bathing suit, spare clothing, and anything else you think you might need. I will take care of the rest.” He sounded quite pleased.

They shared one more extremely heated goodbye kiss, which Sansa could tell had probably left Stannis with an uncomfortable ride home based on the way he kept readjusting himself. Regretfully she let go of his hand and trudged up to the porch to the door. Only once she was inside did he get in his car and drive off.

Sansa poked her head into the family room to greet her parents, who were in the middle of watching some mystery on public television, then went upstairs in search of Jon. She found him reviewing some paperwork in his room.

Ever since he was a teenager Jon had wanted to join the Rangers at the Wall with their Uncle Benjen. Having just turned twenty-one, he had recently passed both the entrance exam and his physical. He would be leaving for the Ranger Academy next month. Sansa was so proud of him, but would miss him terribly when he left. There had been a time when they were younger that they didn’t get along, but those days were long past, and Jon had actually become Sansa’s closest confidant after she left the Mockingbird Fund.

“Jon! I wanted to say thanks for giving me that heads up tonight. I appreciated it, and so did Stannis.”

Jon smiled and gave Sansa a hug. “Anytime Sansa. And you know you can always talk to me, right? Even when I’m at the Academy I’ll still have time for you.”

She smiled back. “I know Jon, and thanks again.”

Sansa retreated to her own room and emptied her bag. Looking over her notes and all the doodles penned in them, she realized that she would eventually have to hold an honest conversation with her parents about her education. She just hoped when that day came they would understand.

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Stef lurked in a dark entryway a half block down the street from the new dance club, the Blue Crystal. It was located on Dectur Street, right at the very edge of the bustling, party-like Old Quarter. Beyond that point the street lights didn’t work anymore, and the police seldom patrolled. The more superstitious residents of King’s Landing believed witches and warlocks practiced some manner of dark magic down in this neighborhood of potholed streets and half abandoned tenements perched along the brackish, mosquito infested back bays of the Blackwater Rush. Stef didn’t believe in magic, gods or spirits, nor did he fear the more mundane residents of the area. Thus he had parked his truck down an even darker, abandoned alley a few hours ago, found this shadowy doorway, and waited.

The city’s bars and clubs all had to shut down at one in the morning. At one-thirty, the last fellow left the Blue Crystal and locked its doors. Finally. His quarry walked right past Stef without slowing,
then turned into a dingy narrow alley that served as a shortcut to a small parking lot. Stef followed, having waited hours for this opportunity. His patience had worn thin.

The previous evening he had reviewed the photo of the dragon statue, blowing it up on his computer screen and zooming in to examine all the faces. Sure enough, his memory had not failed him. This blond punk, the one who had harassed his girl on campus, had been there taking pictures that day on Market Avenue. It was time to teach the boy a lesson.

The end of the alley had been blocked off by waist-high concrete barriers. Silently Stef crept up behind the blond punk. In a split second he had him bent over one of the barriers and held motionless. The blond fellow struggled briefly, but could not move with Stef’s strength and bulk easily overpowering him.

There was very little light, and the few streetlights that worked did little to illuminate the dark, slightly foggy streets. Stef was confident that Harry had not seen his face, as it was hidden in shadow under his ballcap. He put his mouth close to the boy’s ear and whispered in a rough, raspy voice.

“You, punk, will back off. The girl ain’t yours, Harry.”

Harry struggled futilely, and made “Mm hmph” panicky sounds, muffled against Stef’s hand.

A trickling sound and sour smell informed him that young Harry had pissed his pants. Exhilaration swept through Stef as he realized the punk was terrified of him. Good. He pressed his whole weight down hard against Harry’s back, and spoke again.

“That’s right, Harry, I know your name, and how to find you. She ain’t your master’s, either, got it?”

Harry nodded frantically, apparently willing to agree to anything at this point.

“Good boy. Remember Harry, I know who you are. Put your nose in your piss and stay there a good while.”

Stef shoved Harry’s face down into the urine-soaked pavement hard enough to put the young man in a daze, and set off down a different, equally dark alley. He listened for a moment, but heard nothing. Evidently Harry was wise enough not to try to call for help or the police. Not that it would do him any good. Satisfied, Stef returned to his truck and headed for home.

Chapter End Notes

A big shout-out to TommyGinger for coming up with the news stories for me - Thanks TommyG!
The Stark house was remarkably quiet Friday evening. Only Sansa and her parents sat down to eat dinner, as Robb was out of town visiting his girlfriend and Jon had taken the three youngest siblings to a concert. Not that Sansa would have noticed; she daydreamed about Saturday’s boat trip with Stannis, not paying any attention to her parents’ conversation until Catelyn tapped her glass with a fork.

“Wha...what?” Sansa jerked upright, startled.

While Ned looked on in amusement, Catelyn repeated a question with exasperation. “Sansa, what is with you tonight? You haven’t heard a word we’ve said, have you?”

“Sorry, Mom, I’m just really looking forward to tomorrow. Stannis is taking me out on the bay.”

“In a boat?” Catelyn sounded somewhat disapproving of the whole idea.

“Yes, Mom, in a boat. How else would we go out on the water?”

“Don’t you think you should be studying for your classes instead, dear? This little romantic fling might interfere with your plan to finish one semester early.” Catelyn’s lecture voice was fully engaged.

“My grades are fine, Mom. And for the record, this is not just a romantic fling.” Gods, can’t she just leave it alone? Sansa realized that now would definitely not be the time to bring up her desire to change majors. Would there ever be a right time?

“Cat, let her be. She already gave up her spring break to take that seminar, at your insistence, if I recall. Everyone needs a day off now and then. Plus I’m sure she and Stannis will appreciate the time together without worrying about newsies chasing after them.” Ned gave Sansa a wink while Catelyn looked away, mouth firmly set in a thin, tight line.

Catelyn huffed, clearly unhappy. “Fine. Sansa, dear, help me with these dishes, please.” Catelyn left the dining room, clearly displeased.

Sansa hugged her dad briefly. “Thanks, Dad. But I don’t understand - you weren’t exactly thrilled that Stannis and I are dating. Have you changed your mind?”

Ned sighed as he stood up to help clear the table. “I see how happy you are with him, Sansa. If you’re happy and he treats you well, then that’s good enough for me.”

When she and Ned entered the kitchen, Catelyn was simply standing still, staring at the small television mounted on the wall with her arms folded across her chest. Sansa found out why her mother was so uptight almost immediately, as the next news segment started playing.
Could King’s Landing have our very own version of Batman? A multi-millionaire businessman by day, vigilante crimefighter by night?

While not quite the story of Stannis Baratheon, the similarities are certainly interesting. Baratheon, pictured here with his brothers Robert and Renly on the cover of GQ magazine, may be known as a heavyweight in the negotiating room, but apparently he can throw his share of heavy punches in the mean streets as well.

This recent amateur video clearly shows the well-muscled Baratheon confront and brutally beat a trio of thugs who were allegedly trying to rob and assault two young women.

Though grainy, Mr. Baratheon can clearly be identified in the video. It has gone viral all over the internet and has racked up over two million views.

However, this “Dark Knight” did not slink back into the shadows once the bad guys had been taken down. Police reports obtained by this station indicate that Stannis Baratheon was handcuffed, arrested and booked into jail, where he spent that night in a holding cell. The city’s prosecutor declined to file charges, and he was released the next day without incident.

And in a strange coincidence, if it is coincidence, one of the distressed damsels he rescued has turned out to be Sansa Stark, the very same young redhead Baratheon has been seen kissing on more than one occasion since.

The old-moneyed Baratheons and Starks have ties that go back over twenty-five years. That’s when Robert Baratheon was engaged to the late Lyanna Stark, Sansa Stark’s aunt. Lyanna Stark was later found raped and murdered in King’s Landing, and to this day police have found no leads to her killer.

Apparently not everyone sees the middle Baratheon brother as a hero. Sources close to the Stark family tell us her parents are less than pleased to see their barely-legal aged daughter in the arms of a man nearly twice her age.

Sansa heard her father whisper “Lyanna” as his face took on an ashen hue. Catelyn whirled on Sansa before she was able to say anything.

“I told you nothing good could come from dating that man! He’s too old for you, Sansa, and is certainly well-known in the media circles. As long as you stay with him the cameras are going to follow you. And that video shows how violent he might act! What if he behaved that way towards you?”

Sansa, shocked by her mother’s outburst, took a moment to form a reply. She was growing quite angry at Catelyn, more so than ever before.

“Really, Mom? I don’t remember you having a problem the night Stannis beat those creeps off. I do remember how thankful you acted towards him. Would you rather that he hadn’t been there, and those crooks had gotten away with mugging me and Margaery, and maybe more?”

“No darling, of course not. We told you, though, that it was best to thank him that one time, and avoid him from then on. You should focus your attention on your business studies, not that man.”

Sansa rolled her eyes. “Mom, leave it! And what was that line at the end all about, anyway? Have either of you told anybody you don’t like me dating Stannis?”

Ned spoke up while Catelyn feverishly denied speaking to anyone. “Sansa, this is just sensationalism at this point. The news cycle is slow right now, and you and Stannis being seen together certainly
brings a fresh story to gossip about. Stannis is a well-known, extremely wealthy businessman. Anything he does that’s out of the ordinary is going to attract attention. I told you earlier this week to be prepared for more. This certainly won’t be the end of it. Are you sure you can handle it?”

“I’m positive, Dad. But what about you? They brought up Lyanna tonight. How much deeper are these people going to dig? And why?”

“Why? I don’t know. How far will they go? As far as they’re able, I imagine. Privacy means nothing anymore. Sansa, the pressure on you is going to be enormous.” Ned sounded sad more than angry. Not so Catelyn.

“I know how to make them go away. You, Sansa, can stop dating Stannis, and just concentrate on your studies. Then they’ll leave you alone.”

Sansa found herself growing upset with her mother again, but she bit back what she really wanted to say. “I guess we’re going to have to agree to disagree, because I will not stop seeing Stannis. Now I need to get ready, as he’s picking me up early tomorrow.”

Sansa retreated to her room to review the list she had made for herself. She needed to focus on something ordered and mundane to help her calm down.

Bathing suit? Bikini. Spare clothing? Check, including her favorite summer skirt. Sunblock? Got it. Toiletries, just in case? Absolutely. Sunglasses, phone and phone charger. Traveling art kit, if she could find time to sketch. No, she resolved to make time. Maybe she could sketch a picture of Stannis? She smiled to herself as she imagined creating her own picture of the man - perhaps while he was leaning against the boat’s railing with the ocean as a backdrop.

Calmer now, Sansa had just finished packing when her phone buzzed.

MargieRose: OMG! Why didn’t U tell me?

Tell U what?

MargieRose: UR dating STANNIS?! Even Loras knew! Just got back frm Lys, saw the news. Srsly?

Renly’s a blabbermouth. Yes, srsly.

MargieRose: Why him?

Why indeed? Sansa thought long and hard for a minute, because she didn’t want to just give a glib answer.

He lets me be me. He’s kind, a true gentleman, and he listens more than any other guy I’ve ever met. And he’s a great kisser. Sansa smiled at the last part as she hit send.

MargieRose: OMG! Details, girlie, give it up!

Nope. Told U enuf already.

MargieRose: Comeon! R U going out this wkend?

Boating on the bay.

MargieRose: Ooh la la! Better pack condoms! :)

Go away!
Sighing, Sansa tossed the phone on her bed and continued packing. Margaery had enough information for now, and Sansa refused to give her any more details. Even if she was her best friend.

Margaery’s joking did bring up something that Sansa hadn’t spent much time examining. After last Saturday, wonderful and fun and exciting as it was, she wasn’t quite sure if she was ready to go all the way yet. But she did know that for her first time, she definitely wanted it to be with Stannis.

Once packed, Sansa printed the pictures of both the large and small dragon statues, and started sketching. She didn’t want to think about school, classes, or business, nor did she feel like dealing with her mother again. Drawing always helped her relax and let her mind get away from whatever bothered her.

Later in the evening Ned came by Sansa’s room. He picked up a sketch of the large dragon statue, eyed it thoughtfully, then carefully placed it back on her desk. Ned always treated her artwork with respect. He paced around Sansa’s room for a moment, looking at her art and various design sketches.

“Dad?”

Giving Sansa a small smile, Ned came and sat next to her on the bed.

“Your heart isn’t in the Business school, is it?” Just like that. Sansa’s heart sped up. How did he know?

Ned laughed quietly. “How do I know, that’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it? No, I’m not a mind reader. I just watch people, Sansa, and you’re my daughter. Of course I can tell. I think I’ve known for some time now. Anyone who sees where you funnel your passion and energy should also see that you belong in the arts, not the corporate world.”

“She’ll hate me.”

“Your mother? No, lemoncake, she won’t hate you. She sees herself in you, and she doesn’t want you to miss any opportunities for success. You’re the only one of your siblings who has never argued or pushed back, so asserting yourself is something new to her.”

“I’m afraid to tell her. I know you two have already paid for a lot of my schooling, and a change like this will put me back at least a year. What if she says no?” Sansa suddenly felt very small, as if she were only five again and had just broken her mother’s Sothyrion vase.

Ned wrapped his arm around her shoulders as tears began to fall. Sansa didn’t know what to do, so she just leaned into her dad and sniffled.

“Shh, Sansa, it will all work out. And if you recall, I’m the one signing those tuition checks. If we weren’t as well off as we are, it might be a different story. But that’s a moot point. I understand how you felt pressured, and I probably didn’t help you any. I pushed business school on you, too. I can see now that we were wrong.”

Sansa nodded and wiped her face. “Thanks Dad, I really needed to hear that tonight. This week it’s all come to a head, I think. I almost can’t stomach the idea of returning to campus Monday.”

“Sansa, I will support you in whatever field you choose to study. But,” and Ned paused to make sure he had her complete attention. “But, you will finish out this semester. You’re enrolled in a full course of study, and I don’t want this time or money to have been spent for naught. Aren’t you taking marketing, bookkeeping and communications classes? Even if you change your major, those
business skills will prove useful in the future.”

Sansa nodded in agreement and smiled once again. She told her father goodnight, then fell asleep soon after, heart considerably lighter than it had been.

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The next morning Stannis arrived at the Stark’s home precisely at seven o’clock. Sansa had already set her small duffel bag and backpack of art supplies out on the porch, and was sitting on the front step when he pulled up. She knew he appreciated promptness.

After getting her bags stuffed in the trunk and giving her a kiss, Stannis got on the highway heading northeast, away from King’s Landing.

“Where are we driving to?” Sansa had been so eager to go out for the day that she hadn’t asked Stannis where the boat was. She had assumed it was moored at King’s Landing’s marina.

“Duskendale. The marina there is less crowded than King’s Landing and it’s also far enough away from the river estuary that the baywater is clear. It will take about two hours to drive up there.”

To Sansa’s ears Stannis’ voice sounded extra raspy this morning, and carried a certain weariness to it. She examined his face as he drove and realized that the shadows under his eyes weren’t created by his ballcap. The man looked like he had not slept at all.

“Stannis, please don’t take this as an insult, but you look really tired this morning. Are you sure about going out on the water?” She was really worried about his health, and hoped his lack of sleep wouldn’t affect his ability to pilot a boat.

Stannis scoffed. “Don’t worry about me, Sansa. I’ll be fine out on the bay, trust me. The sea is in my blood.” Then his face took on a more thoughtful expression.

“One more thing, Sansa. Do you get motion sickness?” Stannis sounded quite serious.

She remembered there had been one time driving to Riverrun when she got carsick. She’d been stuck sitting in the middle of the backseat between Arya and Robb when she had turned extremely queasy. Her dad had barely pulled over the car in time for her to retch out the door, almost puking on Arya in the process.

“I have once before, in the car. But that was years ago, and I was sitting in the back seat.”

He looked at her sharply, then tapped on the console separating them. “Inside this you’ll find a box of Bonine; it’s like Dramamine but it will not make you sleepy. Take one now. It needs to be absorbed into your system before you step foot on the boat.”

Unlike the rest of his car, house or office, Sansa found the interior of the small console to be cluttered and disorderly. She smiled to herself as she dug down through the pile, pulling out a small notebook, ibuprofen, protein bars, two tins of snuff (yuck), ‘curiously strong’ mints, napkins, antacids, a tollbooth EasyPass, his corporate ID on a lanyard and a phone charger before finally finding the unopened box of Bonine. There was still more stuff underneath that, but she didn’t feel like spelunking anymore.

“Ah-ha!” She displayed the trophy to Stannis, who watched with a frown as she haphazardly dumped everything else back in the compartment.

He grumbled without heat. “I had a system in there, I’ll have you know.”
Sansa nearly spat out her water and Bonine tablet as she struggled not to laugh. “Really? That’s the most unique organizational system I’ve ever seen, Stannis. Can you teach me?”

He narrowed his eyes and mock-glared at her, then “harrumphed” and turned his attention back to the road. Sansa giggled. She had managed to tease Stannis Baratheon and get away with it. The rest of the drive passed by uneventfully, with Stannis pointing out historical landmarks and their significance along the way.

The boat turned out to be a fifty foot Marquis 500 with a sport bridge. Sansa gasped when Stannis pointed to the gangway to access the boat. The side had a small “BI” painted on it with the leaping stag logo stenciled below, and the name “Argella” painted on the stern.

“Do you own this boat, Stannis?”

Stannis followed behind, carrying her bags and his own small duffel. “No, it’s actually registered to the corporation. We make it available for use by all the senior staff.”

A marina staff member greeted Sansa and Stannis in the stern of the luxurious boat. Sansa immediately started exploring the salon and upper bridge while Stannis spoke with the staffer. When she came back the man was gone, and Stannis was inspecting the main bridge and pilot area.

“Stannis, this is gorgeous. Look! They stocked the cabinets and refrigerator.” Sansa opened every cabinet and exclaimed at all the fresh fruits, salad fixings, cold meats, cheeses and bread.

“There’s enough food for an army in here! How did you manage all this?”

She reached for his hand and stretched up to kiss Stannis, excited about the all the possibilities. Stannis pulled her close to his body in return, if only briefly.

“Does it meet with your approval? I called the marina early yesterday morning to set the boat up for us. All we have to do now is start the engine and go.”

Tugging on her hand, he led her up to the fly bridge, on top of the boat. She could sense his eagerness simmering just beneath the surface of his calm façade.

The air felt cool and refreshing against her face as they motored out of the marina and picked up speed in the bay. All the nasty heat and humidity disappeared. Sansa loved being on top of the boat. Apparently so did Stannis.

Stannis appeared awake, aware, and totally relaxed. Sansa had never seen him look so carefree. She couldn’t see his eyes, hidden behind sunglasses, but his face was free of scowl or frown lines. Once they reached cruising speed he looked over and actually smiled at her, the first time she had ever seen him look so happy.

The next two hours passed by in a blur, as Sansa just sat back and enjoyed the ride. She could see cargo ships in the distance, and more than once they had to cross the choppy wake of one of the large vessels. Many cruisers, sailboats and speed boats were also going up and down the bay. Apparently anyone with access to a boat used it to escape the heat on land. Soon, though, Stannis slowed the boat down as they approached the flower and vine covered cliffside of a small island.

“Where are we going?”

“Watch.” Stannis pointed to a large break in the cliff-face, approximately fifty meters wide. Sansa gasped with wonder as he guided the boat through the break into a large, secluded, circular cove with crystal clear blue water.
“Wow! What is this?”

A small sandy beach could be seen at the far end of the cove, backed by a steep, vine covered cliff. The sides of the cove appeared to be almost perfectly circular, rising up about two hundred feet above the water. Sansa looked over the side to see colorful coral covering the bottom. She hoped they could break out the snorkel gear she had seen stowed away earlier.

“It’s a collapsed cinder cone. This was once part of a volcanic chain that stretches from here up past Dragonstone. There are several more like this hidden beneath the bay. This one was active nearly a million years ago, but the fault line has moved hundreds of miles since then.”

Geology lesson concluded, Stannis slowed the boat to a crawl, then stopped the engine as they approached the beach. He descended from the bridge and deployed an anchor to keep the boat in place. Although the water appeared calm, he explained that the tide would eventually push the boat up against the rocks if he didn’t set the anchor.

Sansa peered over the edge to look at the water below. To her it seemed as though the water was very shallow - she could see the bottom quite easily.

“How deep is the water here, Stannis?”

He shrugged. “About thirty feet, if I recall correctly. Come with me, and we’ll get an exact measurement.”

He led her to the interior bridge and started pushing buttons on a small screen, about the size of a GPS receiver. He was serious, confident and all business as he explained the controls to her, clearly right in his element.

“This is a sonar, GPS navigator and depth finder combined. It tells me that we’re currently in twenty-eight feet of water. It also has chartplotting programmed into it, so if we approach a submerged rock or reef it will alert me ahead of time. When I served in the Navy we had access to similar tools, but we had to master plotting by paper charts first.”

Sansa wasn’t aware that Stannis had served in the military. But before she was able to ask him about it, he took her hand and tugged her towards the lower stairs.

“Do you want to swim, Sansa?” Stannis appeared almost in a rush, as he kept looking longingly out towards the water.

“Yes! And I really want to try out that snorkel gear too.” Sansa couldn’t wait to get in the water.

“Good. I brought your bags down to the master stateroom.”

Stateroom? Not knowing the term, Sansa eagerly followed Stannis down the stairs into the lower level of the boat, watching Stannis hunch his tall form and duck his head as he passed through a low doorway. Beyond that she saw a beautiful bedroom - this must be the stateroom - complete with galley windows, built-in shelving and drawers, recessed lighting and an extra long bed. Her bags had been set on the floor in a corner.

He opened another door, revealing a small but beautiful appointed bathroom. “This is the master head.”

Head? She had heard that term before, but she preferred to use familiar words. She squeezed past Stannis to peek at the lovely glassed-in shower, then returned to flop backwards onto the bed. It felt so perfect.
“I’ve never slept on a boat before. What’s it like?” She shut her eyes and stretched her arms out behind her head, concentrating on feeling the boat’s gentle motion through the bed. Contented, she let a small sigh, but jerked her eyes open when she heard a strangled growl from Stannis.

“Stannis?” He had walked away and was facing the doorway. He stopped to speak over his shoulder, still sounding stressed.

“I’ll let you change, Sansa, and meet you up on the swim deck.” With that he quickly closed the door as he left the stateroom.

She sat upright but didn’t move for moment, contemplating what she might have done to make him angry. No, not angry, she thought. Upset? Unsure, she decided to change quickly into her bathing suit, so as not to leave him waiting. *Maybe he’s just anxious to get in the water.*

She put on her bikini, a new one that sat low on her hips, with a blue and green batik print. Margaery had convinced her to buy it last month, before she had backed out of the spring break trip. Then Sansa grabbed her sunblock and headed up to the deck. She would need Stannis’ help to get her back covered. The thought of those strong brown hands rubbing lotion on her back made her shiver with delight. Maybe he would let his hands wander? A little?

Rushing up the stairs to the salon, Sansa looked around but could not see Stannis. She walked to the outside sitting area just above the swim deck and sat down to wait. A moment later she heard water dripping and draining behind her. She turned quickly to watch Stannis pull himself gracefully out of the water and in one smooth motion turn himself around and sit on the edge of the teak swim deck, legs dangling in the water.

“How’s the water, Stannis?”

His head jerked up at the sound of her voice. Sansa couldn’t tear her eyes away as she watched the water droplets flow down his muscular frame, causing his skin, much darker than her own, to glisten in the sun. She descended to the swim deck, sunblock in hand, and sat down next to him.

It was then Sansa realized he hadn’t seen quite so much of her bare skin all at once, and she grew suddenly apprehensive as his eyes traveled up and down the length of her body. For a fleeting moment she wished she had worn a cover up. She liked seeing the hungry look in his eyes, especially knowing that she had put it there, but she wasn’t sure if she was ready to take that next step just yet.

“The water is fine.” Beyond that, he seemed to be at a loss for words, so she waved the bottle of sunblock in front of his face.

“Will you spread this on my back? I can’t reach, and I’ll look like a lobster and peel like an onion if I don’t get it everywhere.”

“Mm hmm.” Stannis took the bottle and gestured for Sansa to turn. She gasped at first when he began to massage the cool lotion into her skin, but soon relaxed and enjoyed the sureness of his hands as they made their way down her back.

Soon though the innocent slathering of sunblock took on a much more sensuous turn, as Stannis’ hands started to move slower, deliberately skimming her sides with slow, sure strokes.

His voice rumbled low and earthy in her ear. “You have to wait fifteen minutes before you go in the sun. What shall we do to pass the time?” At the same time she felt his lips start to kiss and nibble that tender spot directly behind her jaw.
Sansa laughed, delighted to see this playfully forward version of him. “We’re already in the sun, Stannis.”

She turned to face him and kiss him full on. She loved the way his water softened beard and mustache tickled her skin, and how his tongue skimmed her lips, then made it’s way into her mouth to dance with her own. His hands moved everywhere, and she leaned eagerly into his touch. But at the same time she could feel his impatience and desire build rapidly, when she wanted to take things a little slower. She placed her hands flat on his chest, pushing back just a little.

“Stannis, slow down, please? I’d like to go swimming first.”

His ears must have been full of water, as Stannis did not appear to have heard her words. He continued to kiss her, more ardently than before, and his hands started wandering up her ribcage to fondle her breasts. She enjoyed his touches, but wasn’t prepared for the rapid pace. Sansa decided to cool if off now, but didn’t want him to think she was rejecting him, so she turned it into a game.

“Catch me if you can!” She leaped into the water and immediately set into the crawl, her best swimstroke. After a minute she stopped and looked back at the boat, about one hundred feet behind her. Stannis wasn’t on the deck, nor did she see him in the water.

“Stannis?” Sansa paddled in a circle trying to find him. It didn’t occur to her to look down into the perfectly clear water until he was swimming directly up at her from underneath, making her think he was something like a dolphin. He exploded through the surface of the water right next to her.

“Did I neglect to mention that I’m half sea-turtle? You can’t outswim me, girl.” To demonstrate, he suddenly dropped below the surface of the water. Sansa watched as he swam all the way to the bottom, reach out with his hands for something, then return to the surface. Hr placed something hard and resembling large clams in her hands.

“Here, Sansa, I’ll show you how to shuck these oysters when we get back to the boat. If you’re lucky there may be a pearl inside.”

“A pearl? Really?” Sansa’s mother had a gorgeous string of pearls and matching earrings that she wore on formal occasions.

“But what do we do with the oysters?”

“Let’s go find out.” Stannis took the oysters and swam at a leisurely pace back to the boat. Once they were both aboard, he went in search of an oyster knife, and showed Sansa how to properly shuck them.

He pried one open at the hinge, then slid the knife in between the shells to pop it open. After tossing the top shell away, Stannis again slid the knife between the slimy looking insides and the bottom shell so that the goop slid around easily. Sansa thought it was rather gross, like slimy yet congealed snot. But she didn’t see any pearls.

“So how do you know if there’s a pearl?”

“Normally you would see a bump in the flesh. This one is pretty smooth, so I don’t think it has one.” Sansa was disappointed. She sort of wanted to bring home her very own wild pearl. “What do you do now - throw that out?”

Stannis simply arched a brow and swallowed the oyster, slime and all, then tossed the empty half-
shell into the water.

“Ew, that’s gross!”

“Don’t knock it until you try it. They’re good with a splash of lemon juice too, but I prefer them straight from the sea. Do you want to try shucking the other one?”

Sansa was all for adventures, but only safe, clean ones. She didn’t care for handling anything dirty or slimey.

“I’ll pass, thanks.”

Stannis repeated the procedure, and once again struck out in terms of finding Sansa a pearl. He slurped the second oyster down, pointedly ignoring her horrified exclamation. Then he regarded her thoughtfully.

“You’re a strong swimmer. Who taught you?”

“Great-Uncle Brynden taught me at Riverrun. I was seven or eight the first time we visited, and I was really afraid of the water. Of course Arya, Jon, and Robb teased me, because they could all swim and I couldn’t. Uncle Brynden took me aside and taught me separately. After that he convinced my parents to let me stay with him for a few weeks every summer. It was always my favorite time of the year. Thanks to his instruction I qualified for the swim team in school and competed through my senior year.”

Sansa missed those summer weeks spent with her great-uncle. He always made extra time just for her, even when he visited the Starks at their home in King’s Landing. She hadn’t seen him since the winter holiday, and hoped to visit Riverrun again during the summer.

Stannis spoke while he pulled out the snorkel gear and carried it back to the swim deck. “How about the swim team at KLU? Did you try out for it?”

Sansa sat back down next to him and hung her feet in the water. “I did, and I qualified too. But I needed to put my energy into my studies, so I opted not to join.” That wasn’t the whole truth, but Sansa didn’t want to discuss her mother, so she busied herself with getting the fins strapped on instead.

“Sansa.” There was something oddly vulnerable about the way he said her name, causing her to pause what she was doing and give him her full attention.

“I know why...why you jumped in the water a few minutes ago. I find it easy to let go, to get carried away when I’m with you. If you don’t want...me...just...” Again he paused, and Sansa could see the fear of rejection etched clearly in his face as he looked down at the water. This was exactly what she didn’t want him to think.

She reached her hand to his face, running her fingers along his bearded jaw. She liked the way the soft hair felt again her skin.

“I do want you, Stannis, only you. I like you a lot, and more than just like, I think. I really enjoy it when you touch me - how wanted, special and turned on you make me feel. This is all new, so I just need you to go a little slower with me, please? Like last week.” Sansa felt a tingle between her legs just thinking about his touches and the orgasm he had given her last week. She wanted to do that again, here on the boat, but she didn’t want to rush it.

Understanding dawned in Stannis’ eyes, and his expression brightened immediately. He nodded and
reached out to cup her face, kissing her softly, slowly, eliciting a toe curling thrill that made Sansa shudder with delight. She could kiss him like this all day.

He deepened their kiss briefly and she felt his fingers skim lightly along her ribcage, again causing her to lean into his touch. But then Stannis broke it off gently, leaned his head against hers and took an unsteady breath.

Regretfully, or so it seemed to her, he started putting on his own swim fins. “I promised to take you snorkeling. If we don’t get in the water now we might not at all. Let me show you the best area to watch the fish.”

They swam and snorkeled around the cove for nearly an hour. Sansa liked the shallower areas best, as she could see the colors of the fish and coral more clearly. What she didn’t like, however, was diving deep beneath the surface. She felt the pressure in her ears, and to her it felt far too claustrophobic. Stannis would dive down to the bottom and pick up various shells or rocks for her to view at the surface. She really appreciated his gestures and thoughtfulness.

When they swam back to the boat Sansa was both hungry and worn out. She hadn’t spent that much time in the water in a few years. They climbed up to the salon where she collapsed in the shade. If it wasn’t for the loud rumbling sounds coming from her stomach she could fall asleep. Stannis, meanwhile, pulled out a closely woven net bag from one of the compartments.

“Do you like lobster, Sansa?”

“So I do! Yes! I love lobster, and crab too!” Sansa loved living in King’s Landing if only for the ample fresh seafood available.

“Good. If I’m lucky that’s what we will eat for dinner. I’ll be back shortly.” Stannis immediately leapt back into the water and swam towards the rocky side of the cove, net trailing behind him.

Sansa decided to put on a loosely woven sleeveless shirt and airy white skirt over her swimsuit and get lunch prepared. She didn’t feel comfortable sitting down to a meal wearing just a bikini. In just a few minutes she had put together a green salad with cold chopped chicken, fresh bread, sliced cheeses, and fruit for dessert.

Stannis returned with a dozen more oysters and three decent sized lobsters, which he explained hid beneath the rocks in the cove. It had been a simple matter to pull them out. He picked up a hatch recessed in the floor to reveal a holding tank full of sea water, and carefully emptied the lobsters into the tank. He did the same with the oysters, but kept four out which he shucked and ate right on the spot.

“Appetizers.” Stannis grinned at her wrinkled up nose while he slipped a shirt over his head.

Sansa loved eating on the boat. The air felt perfect, with a light breeze blowing through the open salon displacing any heat or humidity. She could hear the waves gently lapping against the sides of the boat, and smelled both the salty fresh air and heady scent of the spring flowers blooming on the cliffside. A few seagulls shrieked far overhead. She had not relaxed this much in ages.

“Maybe I should get a houseboat. Then I wouldn’t have to listen to Arya complain or Rickon argue. Being out here makes everything else just disappear.”

Stannis nodded in agreement. “I feel as comfortable on or in water as I do on land, probably more so. There’s a peace to be found out here, I believe. I would spend all my time on the water if I could.”

Sansa frowned. Stannis was extremely wealthy, so why did he even work? “Why don’t you, then?
It’s not like you need a job.”

He sighed and looked away, out at the water, eyes distant.

“Duty. Family obligation, I suppose. Robert hasn’t got the skills that I have, and could not run Baratheon Industries effectively. I started working for him as soon as I completed my Master’s degree in Braavos, about thirteen years ago. Tywin Lannister had helped him get started with loans and advice, and was pushing for more control over what had been our father’s corporation. I refused to allow that to happen. Once Robert divorced Cersei that last link the the Lannisters was severed, and it didn’t come soon enough.”

Sansa remembered when Robert and Cersei got divorced. Robert had lived with the Starks for a short time until it was finalized, and of course the divorce had been all over the news.

“Oh. I have to say I didn’t miss Joffrey after their divorce. One day he was at school, the next day he was gone, and never came back. Dad told us all about the DNA tests, and that none of Cersei’s kids were actually Robert’s. I guess Cersei took them all back to Lannisport. Joffrey was wrong in the head, you know? He was really cruel to all the underclassmen. He tried to get me to go out with him all the time, saying that his parents thought we should get married and join our families. I couldn’t stand him - he was so greasy and fake. He wouldn’t leave me alone until Robb and Jon beat him up one day. After that he spread vicious lies about me. I could handle those because once the truth came out about his parentage, everyone forgot about me.”

Sansa did not like to think about those dark months during her junior year of high school, but telling Stannis about them didn’t hurt in the least.

Stannis growled and pinched the bridge of his nose in disgust. “Robert, my brother Robert, wanted you to marry my worthless ex-nephew Joffrey? The nerve. This is not the dark ages, dammit. You don’t try to marry off children to each other to forge some sort of familial connection. Unbelievable.”

Sansa noticed that just like the other day, as Stannis continued speaking his Stormlands accent slipped out again, especially when he displayed anger. She found it rather cute and endearing. She couldn’t help but smile, and of course he noticed.

“What?” He barked a little bit, but she didn’t take it personally. She realized he was not angry at her.

“Nothing. I just like how you get all righteously indignant on my behalf. But you don’t have to worry, as Joff is long gone and forgotten.”

“Hmph.” Sansa could tell that Stannis was still annoyed at his brother, so she thought to distract him with a question.

“So you don’t need the salary as COO. If you didn’t work at the Tower, what would you do, ideally? Anything at all, what would it be?” Sansa was really curious. She and her siblings always talked about ‘what if’ scenarios.

“Ideally?” Stannis sat stone still for a moment, obviously deep in thought. “I haven’t ever considered it, to be honest. I’ve never been able to see the point of wondering what might have been. It only breeds resentment, and I’ve dwelt on that far too much as it is.”

She could tell she had struck a nerve, though, as he got up and started rummaging intently through a bag nearby. She watched as he pulled out a small green can of snuff and walked to the rear of the boat without speaking. Understanding that he was rattled by her question, although unsure why, Sansa chose to clean up the dining area to give him some privacy.
After she had put the last of the food away Sansa walked back to stand next to Stannis, who leaned on the rail looking over the water. The sunny deck warmed her bare feet. She wrapped an arm around his waist and waited. He would speak eventually.

“Ten thousand. That’s how many people work for Baratheon Industries. Do you understand what that means, Sansa? At last count, employees plus their dependents numbered thirty-three thousand. Thirty-three thousand people count on me to keep the corporation running smoothly. Renly’s too young and irresponsible to run the company, and he lacks the skills anyway. Robert is too drunk most of the time now to do anything beyond talk on the phone and schmooze with people. I cannot leave; I cannot even entertain the notion of doing anything else, don’t you see?”

To her his voice had sounded heavy and resigned, and utterly lacking in enthusiasm. Her heart ached for him as she knew without a doubt that Stannis did have dreams and desires, even if he would never willingly acknowledge them.

Stannis leaned over and spat into the water. Sansa watched a number of fish immediately strike the surface where it had landed. Fish aren’t very smart.

She felt as much as heard his sigh, then he straightened and turned to pull her into his arms.

“What about you? You have your whole life and the whole world before you. I already know you don’t want to work in the corporate arena; think as big as you like. What would you do, ideally?”

Stannis appeared most curious in her response - he wasn’t just humoring her.

She had given this a lot of thought. Hours. “There’s so much! I really want to get into both design and art illustration. I’ve actually thought about illustrating children’s books. I know that sounds silly, but that would be my dream hobby. For work, you know, Uncle Brynden has started renovating and repairing the old castle at Riverrun. I’m actually really interested in period revival and design. I would love to work on a project like that. Do the historical research, plan the restoration of a manor house or castle, design the gardens, really bring those old estates back to life.”

He scoffed without rancor. “Those old manor estates fell into disrepair for a reason. They sucked the owners dry without return. Even Storm’s End is in maintenance mode now - it hasn’t fallen apart but the estate is no longer in operation. We just have a skeleton crew to keep up the house and grounds.”

“I’ve thought about that, too. Those old estates don’t have to be money pits. They can be revived, become self-sufficient and provide jobs for dozens, maybe even hundreds of people each. Sustainable agriculture, preservation, cottage and high end crafting, tourism, events, education, the list goes on and on. If owners only used the estates for their personal entertainment, then yes, they’d lose money. But if they ran the estates like proper businesses, then there could surely be a very different outcome, don’t you think?”

“Hmph.” Some of the tension drained from Stannis’ shoulders and humor returned to his face. “You have given this thought, haven’t you? You may not be interested in the corporate world, Sansa, but I think you do have a head for business ventures.” She heard genuine respect in his tone, and smiled happily in return.

She suddenly wanted to tell him about her talk with her father. “I told Dad what I told you the other day. I was so afraid to tell him, but he understood. I don’t look forward to telling my mom, but at least I know I have Dad’s support.”

Sansa felt sleepy, and could not suppress the wide yawn that took her by surprise. She wanted to take a nap, but didn’t want to sleep inside. Stannis said he had a solution. While she went downstairs to freshen up and take off her bathing suit, he must have been busy. When she came back up the
seating area where they had eaten had been converted into a bed. He came up the stairs right behind her, having swapped his swim trunks for a pair of loose cargo shorts slung low on his hips.

“No shirt?” Not that Sansa minded. She liked looking at his broad bare chest and watching how his muscles rippled underneath the skin.

They laid down on the converted bed and he settled back on the pillows. “Out here on the water? Not if I can help it. I’d rather feel the fresh air.”

Sansa laid her head on his chest and felt his arm wrap around her shoulders. She ran her fingers through the coarse, wiry hair that grew on his chest, marveling at how different its texture felt from his beard. His hand traced slow lazy circles up and down and her back, causing her to feel increasingly sleepy. Yet she could feel the tension in his muscles under her hand and her head, and knew that he lay wide awake. His words had caused her to ache for him; the responsibility of keeping the corporation running must be soul-crushing. An idea came to mind. Maybe she could help him relax?

Feeling emboldened, Sansa started to slowly stroke Stannis’ side, and pushed herself up so that she could pepper his neck and upper chest with small kisses. She felt him respond immediately as he took in a quick breath and his legs twitched a little wider. Encouraged, she continued to run her hand down his chest to his lower stomach, exploring those muscles right along his waistband. She stretched up to nibble and lick her way up his long neck to his right earlobe, wondering if he was as sensitive to touch there as she was.

Evidently he was at least as turned on by the sensation as she would have been. He hissed and bucked up, tangling his hand in her long red hair, pulling her against his chest for an ardent, demanding kiss that refused to take no for an answer.

She gasped when Stannis suddenly flipped her over so that she lay on her back instead, and settled his body down over her own. Her hips grew a mind of their own as she bucked up against his bulge that was nestled right up against her own sweet spot. She decided that she really liked his warm comfortable weight as he rocked slowly back and forth atop her, making her crave more contact. She was also surprised at how easily she could handle his bodyweight - she thought that he might crush her but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“Mmm. This feels good, Stannis. You’re not that heavy after all.” Stannis was currently sucking gently on the hollow of her throat, reciprocating her earlier actions, causing her to buck up against him again and again. He chuckled softly.

“No? Try this.” Suddenly she couldn’t breath as he collapsed entirely on top of her, if only for a moment. Then he raised himself back up on his forearms to relieve the pressure on her chest. For some reason he thought it was amusing.

“I was wrong.” She mock-gasped for air. “You aren’t heavy. You’re really heavy!”

“Are you calling me fat, woman?” Stannis stopped sucking on her throat to give Sansa a frown, although she could tell he was playing along.

Fat? “Not hardly, you’re too muscular. I can even see your abs, or some of them. And even if you don’t have a six-pack, you probably have a four-pack.” She giggled at the thought. “That's ok, gourmet sodas come in four packs.”

Stannis’ eyebrows raised up in consternation and confusion. “Four-pack? Gourmet soda? Like what, cream soda or root-beer?”
“I don’t think so, those are too sweet. Something like the better ginger-ales. You have more bite.”

“Hey!” Stannis exclaimed in fake outrage, then his brows knit together as his eyes took on a decidedly predatory gleam. “More bite, indeed. I’ll show you more bite, girl.”

And more bite he did show, or nibbles, in any event. Sansa threw her head back as Stannis nibbled her neck, throat and collarbone with slow, soft nibble-kisses. That new sensation, doubled with the soft fuzziness of his beard, completely sensitized her skin. She squirmed against him as he continued his ministrations, pausing with a hand on the top button of her shirt.

“Is this ok, Sansa?” She nodded, pleased that he seemed to be much more in control of himself than he had a few hours ago. She wondered if she would soon to be ready to allow him to lose control with her, and where it might lead them.

Slowly, Stannis unbuttoned her shirt, giving each newly exposed section of skin a thorough kiss-nibble-tickle with his lips and beard as he made his way lower and lower. Not until her shirt was completely open did Stannis make his way back up her belly to flick a tongue over each erect nipple in turn, causing her to once again grind her hips upward. She loved how his hands cupped each of her breasts as he kissed them, then continued to flick and suck on them as his hand moved to stroke her inner thigh.

She barely noticed that he had shifted his weight off from her until he sucked on one nipple. She wanted to grind against him, but he wasn’t there. She needed more, and reached down to rub herself through her skirt.

“Let me touch you instead.” Stannis’ voice sounded smooth, very much in control and in command of himself, and Sansa readily nodded.

“Please, Stannis, more.” She was almost embarrassed by how needy she sounded.

She watched him grin at her when his probing fingers discovered that was not wearing any panties, then she closed her eyes and just allowed herself to feel all of it. The sensations of his sure fingers rubbing her increasingly wet folds made her want to move with him. Over and over he rubbed circles on her nub in time to the flicks of his tongue on her nipples. She thrust up, she ground against his hand, she wanted more.

Her eyes flew open when she felt one long finger probe, then push slowly inside her. It didn’t hurt at all, and everything felt slick and wet, but it surprised her nonetheless. Stannis stopped moving his hand for a moment to give her a chance to examine the new sensation.

“Relax, girl, this won’t hurt. I’ll move slow, ok?” True to his word, Stannis moved his hand slowly, finger in and out, giving her the chance to get used to the tight feeling. She decided she really liked it when he started sucking on her nipples again, causing wonderful little jolts of pleasure to zip from her breasts to her groin and back.

“More?” It felt so right that she wanted to feel more of it. Stannis must have been happy to oblige, as Sansa felt a second finger join the first. Again he moved his hand slowly, but she was tired of slow. It felt tight but so right, and she started to thrust her hips against his hand, faster and faster. She could feel something building but couldn’t quite get there, so she just grabbed his hand and pushed hard against it while his fingers were buried deep inside her. She suddenly felt hot and thrust hard against the palm of his hand as pleasure exploded from her groin. She clenched around his fingers from the inside as her back arched, and she couldn’t hold back the moan escaping from her throat.

When awareness returned Sansa opened her eyes to meet Stannis’ own deep blue eyes gazing down
at her with a rapt yet satisfied expression. He looked very much like a cat that had lapped up all the cream. She squirmed a little, as she realized that he had yet to move his hand or remove his fingers from her. It felt nice to have that pressure there, but she was too sensitive to chase another orgasm so soon.

“Hi.” She wasn’t quite sure what else to say at that moment, she felt so boneless, so good.

“Hi yourself.” She felt his fingers slowly slip out of her, and she realized that she felt rather empty down there.

“Wow, Stannis, that was...wow.”

He settled back on his pillow and stretched an arm up behind his head. “That good?” Stannis appeared most pleased with himself.

She laid her head back on his chest for a moment, cognizant of the rather obvious tent in Stannis’ shorts. She thought back to her original intention, before he had turned the tables on her. Would he let her? Margaery said guys loved it when they got blow jobs, and she wanted to help him feel as good as she did.

Once again feeling bold, Sansa worked her hand to the waistband of Stannis’ shorts, then started stroking his bulge through the fabric. She watched his eyes close in obvious pleasure, and he spread his hips a little.

Encouraged, she fiddled with his button and zipper, tugging on the shorts to free his member. Stannis looked on momentarily, then obliged her by lifting his hips and pulling the shorts down. Sansa was again surprised by the size of his very erect cock. But she didn’t feel intimidated this time.

At first she wrapped her hand and gently started to stroke, just like he had shown her before. Stannis lay back and slowly thrust in time to her movements, obviously not in a hurry. But she wanted to try something new for him.

Watching to make sure his eyes stayed close, she leaned forward and licked his cock, from the base all the way to the head. He felt warm and velvety, and tasted like salt from the seawater.

“Hells, Sansa, yes.” Politeness evidently had left Stannis, as he placed his hand on the back of her head. She decided to do what Margaery had described, and started to suck on the head of his cock. It was quite large, and had started giving off a bit of clearish liquid. She sucked slowly, up and down, pretending it was a lollipop.

Stannis wanted more, she could tell, by the pressure he exerted on her head. She gagged once when he pushed her down too far, and she had to shoo his hand away. He resorted to grasping the sheets instead as his hip thrusts turned more powerful and more erratic. She continued to lick and suck the head while her hand wrapped around the base of his cock. Stannis made the most interesting sounds as she could tell he came close to finishing.

He moved faster, wanting more. Sansa obliged as best as she could, but she was unable to take all of him in her mouth. She was conscious of a strong musky smell that came from his groin region as she continued to go down on him. Suddenly his hips thrust straight up and Stannis let out a strangled shout. Sansa felt his balls contract, his cock pulse and a thick fluid spurt into her mouth. She sputtered and pulled away. His orgasm had taken her by surprise.

Mouth full, Sansa dashed to the sink and spat out the viscous white fluid, then rinsed her mouth with water. She really didn’t like the taste. Then she went back and lay down next to Stannis, who didn’t
really appear coherent. Eventually he roused himself enough to pull his shorts back up.

“Sansa, that was...incredible. And unnecessary. You didn’t have to do that for me.”

“I know, but I wanted to. It felt good, right?”

He huffed out a laugh. “Beyond good. Way beyond good.”

Sansa laid her head down on his chest and closed her eyes. Soon she drifted off to the sound of his slow steady heartbeat, satisfied knowing that he also would rest easy.

An alarm sounded, causing Sansa to jerk upright. Stannis jumped up and grabbed his phone, which he had evidently set as an alarm at some point so they wouldn’t sleep too late.

“Wow. I needed that nap.” She sat up and rubbed her eyes, and looked out at the water. The sun was still relatively high in the sky, but had changed position.

“What time is it, Stannis?”

“Time for me to fire up the engines. We slept for over two hours. I’ll turn the boat around, and if you want to get a short swim in you can. We need to leave within the hour, though, in order to get back to Duskendale by dark.”

He walked up to the controls and went through the motions to start the boat engines, but at first nothing happened. Stannis frowned, worked a different control, and tried again. This time they heard a noise come from the engines, but not what they expected. A loud pop sounded and a small puff of smoke filtered up from the engine compartment. Then nothing.

“Fuck.”

Stannis’ oath surprised Sansa. They looked at each other in alarm, then Stannis tried the engines again. Nothing but a clicking sound came through. They were stuck.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to TommyG for the news segment and beta-reading!

Comments are always welcome, thanks!
Dread momentarily flooded Stannis when he heard the popping sound and smelled smoke. Then he relaxed minutely. The sound and smell made him think the problem was electrical in nature, rather than an issue with the engines themselves.

Still, he was angry that anything had gone amiss at all. The marina was supposed to run a full check up on the boat anytime someone requested its use. That meant it should have been thoroughly inspected yesterday.

“Stannis, what does this mean?” Sansa sounded worried, but at the same time he heard the utter trust in her tone as well. He just hoped he could live up to it.

“I don’t know yet. I’ll have to examine the engine room first. Please go around the boat and ensure that all electronics, lights, and anything else that requires electricity is shut off. I don’t want to drain the battery.”

Trusting Sansa with her task, Stannis slipped on his rubber-soled boat shoes (it was never wise to work on electrical equipment barefooted) and hastened to the rear deck. The smell of smoke was stronger back here. Pulling up the hatch, he climbed down the ladder into the engine compartment. The sunlight streaming down illuminated a faint haze of white-blue smoke. Fortunately it already appeared to be clearing, meaning that whatever electrical short and fire that occurred had been extremely short-lived.

Stannis had to stoop low to keep from banging his head on the ceiling of the claustrophobic engine compartment. Before opening the electrical panel, Stannis first reviewed the engine room’s maintenance log. The engine hadn’t been serviced in over a month. Cursing, he turned to the electrical portion of the checklist and began his own diagnostics.

Sweat dripped down Stannis’ face and hunched back as he continued to work. The air within the compartment remained stagnant and stuffy. The room quickly grew sweltering, and the floor became slick from the sweat that dripped off his body. Stannis ignored the heat as he pinpointed the problem. He’d worked in far worse conditions than this.

Having determined that several wires had corroded and the starter had failed, Stannis rummaged through a cabinet where spare parts were stored. Luckily he found all that he needed. For good measure he decided to check the spark plugs on each of the engines as well, even though he would have to spend considerably more time doing so.

Sansa’s concerned voice floated down to him from the hatch opening. “Stannis, is everything alright?”

“It will be, once I’m done. This will take me a few hours though.”
Stannis leaned over the first engine as he began to dismantle the cover plate. One bolt remained stubbornly fixed in place, even as he exerted far more force than should have been necessary.

“Can I help?” The soft voice at his elbow caused him to jump, as he’d been so engrossed in his work that he hadn’t even noticed Sansa descend the ladder. Stannis jammed his hand into a strut and bashed his head against the low ceiling hard enough for the room to echo from the collision.

“Fuck!”

His head throbbed and his knuckles ached. Blood dripped from a small cut in his hand, making the already wet floor that much more treacherous.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Sansa sounded worried, but Stannis didn’t have time to mollify her. “I didn’t mean to startle you. Can I help?”

“No!” He barked without thinking, irritated with the pain, the heat, and the situation in general. He missed the hurt, confused look that flashed across her face as he bent to retrieve the wayward wrench.

“Just...just let me be. This room is too cramped for me alone, nevermind two people. And unless you know your way around tools and engines you’ll just be in my way.”

Sucking on the small cut, Stannis fished a can of WD-40 out of the toolbox and used it to coat the stubborn bolt. After a few minutes he managed to work the bolt loose. Once again preoccupied with his work, he failed to notice Sansa’s departure.

By the time Stannis finally climbed out of the engine compartment, covered in grime and sweat, the sun had dipped nearly to the horizon. He had been working on the engines and electrical wiring for the past two hours.

A slight movement from the outdoor table captured his attention. His eyes immediately focused on Sansa, who had curled up on the bench and was hunched over a pad of paper. She appeared to be drawing, brows furrowed in deep concentration.

Stannis took a moment just to study Sansa’s profile - the soft angle of her jaw, strands of red hair tucked behind a beautifully shaped ear, high cheekbones shining as they caught the last bit of sunshine. Her hair glowed fiery gold where the fading sunlight caught it.

Once again Stannis found himself in awe, wondering if he was experiencing some sort of cruel joke or fanciful dream. Surely this beautiful young lady, so full of life and talent, would not really want to waste her affections on him.

All irritation and annoyance faded away as Stannis approached his girl. He needed to touch her, feel her touch on him. After so many years of living alone, her soft touches and gentle affection had fully re-awakened feelings and desires he thought lost for good long ago.

Stannis stretched out his aching hand, but stopped just short of of touching Sansa’s shoulder. Her brow was wrinkled in a deep frown, one he found foreign on such a beautiful face.

Sansa glanced up at him briefly, then quickly returned her focus to the drawing. She did not smile.

“Is it fixed?”, she asked dully.

At first Stannis thought she must be deeply engrossed in her own work, but he realized her dull tone masked some other emotion, but what he could not identify.
“Yes.” Stannis seated himself gingerly on the bench. His whole body felt stiff and ached from the awkward positions he’d been forced to work in. He wanted to touch Sansa, hold her close, but her aloof posture acted as an effective barrier against intimacy of any type.

“Good.” Sansa still did not look at him, focusing solely on her drawing instead.

“Sansa, I don’t want to cause problems, but it will not be safe to cross the bay at night. The cargo ships won’t be able to see us, or us them. We will have to stay here until morning.”

“Oh. I see.”

Frustrated by her monotone responses and lack of engagement, Stannis rose abruptly and went to the bridge to test the engines. They started perfectly. He raised the anchor, wondering all the while where he’d gone wrong with Sansa.

Unable to puzzle it out, he told her to secure her belongings. He piloted the boat just far enough outside the cove to get a good cell phone signal, then set the engines to idle.

“Sansa, if you need to call home now is the time.” He knew she didn’t require her parents’ permission, but a courtesy call would probably be appreciated.

For his part Stannis called the marina and tersely informed them of what had occurred. He remained in the bridge for a few moments longer to give Sansa privacy, then wandered back aft when he was sure she had ended her call.

Sansa stood still, gazing west at the swiftly setting sun. Her face lit up with enthusiasm at witnessing the sight before her, then she quickly started snapping pictures with her smartphone. He had to admit that the red-gold light reflected off the water made for an impressive sight. But that faded away whenever he looked at Sansa.

“Recording this for later?” Stannis kept his tone light and casual. He hoped to draw Sansa out of her shell, and thought the scenery provided an easy, neutral topic to open with.

“Yes, I want to use my pastels when I get home. These colors are exquisite!”

“So are you.” Stannis spoke quietly, surprising himself. Did he say that out loud?

She flashed him a quick, brilliant smile, obviously pleased with his compliment. But just as quickly she shied away, and the smile was replaced by confusion.

“You didn’t seem to think so earlier. Are you still mad at me?” She twirled her hair nervously around one finger, gnawed on her lower lip and looked at him askance, appearing even younger than she already was.

Why does she think that I was mad at her?

“Mad? I’m not mad or angry with you Sansa, nor have I been. Why do you think that?”

“Earlier, you seemed really angry when I offered to help. You basically ordered me out of the engine room because I caused you to hurt your hand.”

Sansa appeared to be on the verge of tears. Stannis instinctively knew he was the cause.

“No Sansa, never. I wasn’t angry at you. Just upset that the marina didn’t inspect the boat as promised. This little cut isn’t your fault - my hand slipped.”
“Oh, but...you still didn’t want me down there.”

“Sansa, I…” Stannis paused and looked away, casting about in his brain for an answer that wouldn’t hurt her feelings. It was true - he hadn’t wanted her down in the engine compartment while he was working. The space was cramped and confining, and he had needed to focus only on his mission of getting the boat operational again. Her presence would have been distracting.

He noticed that her artwork still lay on the table, momentarily abandoned. He also recalled that she had a special music studio where she practiced playing piano without interruption.

Inspiration struck. “Sansa, when you are involved in painting, drawing, or practicing your music, do you like it when someone stands over you, watching everything you do?”

She grimaced. “No, I can’t stand it. Arya used to do it all the time just to bug me. It’s really distracting, actually, because then I can’t concentrate...”

Understanding dawned, and the hurt look disappeared from Sansa’s beautiful blue eyes. “Oh! It’s the same with you, right?”

Not trusting his voice, Stannis nodded and finally stepped close to Sansa, fairly certain she wouldn’t reject his touch or presence now.

Sansa placed a hand on his chest. “Why didn’t you just say so?”

“Didn’t I?” He thought he’d been clear enough.

“You basically told me to go away, and you were really angry.” She once again looked down, as if afraid to watch his reaction.

“Do you remember that night on your front porch, right after the police released me? I told you two things. One, I do not like to repeat myself. Two, I only speak truth. I mean what I say Sansa, and exactly what I say. There are no hidden messages. I speak very bluntly, and I am not good at using soft words.”

He sighed. “Perhaps we can both learn from this and from each other, no? I will try to temper my responses, Sansa, but I cannot change my nature.”

Sansa nodded and reached for his hurt hand. The cut was small, but the underlying bruise covered much of the back of his hand. He wouldn’t be hitting the bag for at least a week.

Stannis closed his eyes as Sansa gently rubbed and massaged his aching hand and wrist, much as she had done weeks ago on the mezzanine at the Tower. His tight, sore muscles relaxed under her tender ministrations. Her gentle touch communicated so much more than words ever could - she forgave him his blunt, coarse outburst.

“It’s getting dark.” Sansa’s soft words caused him to open his eyes. She was correct. The sun had just disappeared beyond the horizon, leaving the sky awash in a riot of glorious pink, orange and purple hues.

“Time to return to the cove.”

By the time Stannis had re-deployed the anchor inside the cove the first stars had appeared overhead. Night always fell quickly on the sea.

“Did you speak to Ned or Catelyn?” Stannis shut down the engines as he spoke.
“No, they’re out to dinner and a show. I spoke to Jon instead. It’s just as well, because Mom would probably pitch a fit.” Sansa sounded more amused than anything else.

Stannis grunted, not trusting himself to comment on Catelyn Stark’s obvious disapproval. Just then his stomach growled quite loudly.

“Speaking of dinner, are you ready for some steamed lobster?”

Her face lit up with excitement. “Yes! Tell me what to do, and I’ll get it started.”

Sansa started walking towards the kitchen area, but firmly stopped Stannis with a hand to his chest when he moved to follow. Her nose wrinkled up in clear distaste.

“I’m sorry, Stannis, but you’re really dirty, and...you smell bad. Actually, you reek. I’ll tend to the food while you go get clean. Please?” Her last word was spoken softly with a shy smile.

Stannis couldn’t refuse her kind request, and frankly, he couldn’t blame her. He did stink. Spending two hot hours in that engine compartment had caused him to sweat profusely. He smelled like sweaty workout clothing left in a closed-up gym bag for a week. He gave her brief instructions on preparing the lobster, then retreated to the swim deck. Eager to escape his own noticeable stench, Stannis stripped off his shorts and leaped into the dark water.

As a boy Stannis had spent most of his summers swimming and bathing in the bay near Storm’s End or the waters around Greenstone Island. His mother lamented ever getting him to take a proper bath or shower in the summertime. Stannis scrubbed at his body while he thought on those simple, innocent days of his youth, long gone.

Without the sun shining down the waters of the cove felt cooler and more invigorating. Stannis spent a few more minutes lazily floating and swimming slowly around the boat, relaxing his tired muscles. Once satisfied with his state of cleanliness he returned to the boat.

When he climbed out he was pleasantly surprised to find that Sansa had set out a towel and clean clothing for him. She didn’t have to do that. Ruefully Stannis recalled that Selyse would never have taken the time to do something like this on his behalf. Sansa’s simple gesture kindled a deeper, complex emotion within his soul.

Brushing aside unpleasant memories of his former marriage, Stannis pulled on the clean shorts and made his way to the kitchen area. Sansa flashed him a pleased smile from the counter space.

“You look, and smell, much better.” She was wearing a loosely woven sleeveless blouse and an airy knee length skirt that did nothing to hide her shapely legs. Desire for this beautiful girl flared up again.

Stannis’ empty stomach’s demands faded away in deference to his rising ardor. He pressed his water-cooled bare chest against Sansa’s back and kissed her slender neck while his hands wrapped around her slender waist, earning himself both a giggle and a swat.

“Stop that! I need your help, Stannis, with those lobsters. Will you pull them out of that tank? One snapped at me. I don’t want to get bit. Or pinched. Or whatever it is they do with those monster claws.”

Huffing in mock rejection, he fetched two of the lobsters and placed them gingerly in the steamer basket, carefully avoiding the snapping claws. Setting the timer, Stannis then proceeded to shuck and eat several of the remaining oysters, failing to entice Sansa into trying one.
“No thank you. I don’t like to eat food that’s still living.” Stannis didn’t push, but he had hoped he could sway her into trying just one. Perhaps another time.

The simple dinner of steamed lobster, rice pilaf and green salad tasted far better than any Stannis had eaten in the finest restaurants of King’s Landing. Maybe it was the fresh air, or the fact that he harvested the lobster himself, but more likely it was due to the beautiful young lady choosing to accompany him. Either way, he tucked into the meal with gusto, listening intently as Sansa spoke excitedly about what she’d like to do once the semester was over.

“I think I’d like to apprentice myself with Uncle Brynden’s designer over at Riverrun for the summer. She’s one of the best historical renovators in all of Westeros, and really understands the need to maintain historical accuracy on projects like that. I could learn from the best and escape King’s Landing’s miserable heat at the same time.”

Stannis felt a pang of anxiety overtake him. If she spent the summer in Riverrun he wouldn’t see her very often. The thought of spending those long weeks alone held no appeal for him.

Sansa didn’t seem to notice his consternation. “I have you to thank, Stannis. If we hadn’t ever talked I wouldn’t have the courage to tell my Dad that I want to study something more creative, something that fills me with joy and interest instead of dread. And I could get out of King’s Landing during the worst part of summer.”

“Hmm.” Stannis kept his tone noncommittal as he gazed across the dark water. In truth he didn’t know how to respond. He wanted Sansa to explore her own dreams and visions for her future, but he hated the thought of her being so far away from him, even for just a few short months.

He felt a warm, soft hand cover his own sore one. Looking at Sansa, he could see that she seemed to know what was on his mind.

“It’s a five hour drive, Stannis, but only three hours by the express train. We could still see each other every weekend.”

“Not could, girl. Will. We will see each other every weekend, I promise you.”

“You know, Stannis, you’re the first person who hasn’t laughed at or dismissed my ideas. Everyone else told me I was unrealistic to think I could make a living in arts and design. Even Uncle Brynden, as kind as he is, doesn’t think I could make it work. And Dad has only now started to accept that I want to follow my own path.” Sansa’s smile left her face, and she grew thoughtful.

“And Petyr, he never really listened to a word I said. I see that now. I think I was more of a toy or a wall decoration for him. He started taking me to fancy restaurants, but we always ate in a private room. He didn’t even want anyone to see me. Eventually he convinced me to come to his mansion a few times. We always ate perfectly catered meals according to a set schedule. I never saw anyone else there besides serving staff and Petyr’s security chief. It always felt as if that guy was some sort of guard. He scared me.”

Stannis felt his blood boil at the thought of Petyr Baelish locking Sansa away.

“Sansa, you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to. But know that I have friends in law enforcement. Did Baelish hurt you, or try to force you to do anything against your will?” Stannis didn’t want to ruin the mood or use blunt words like rape or abuse. Not yet, and hopefully not ever.

She shook her head. “No, he didn’t try to force me into having sex or anything, if that’s what you’re asking. But I think he might have eventually. He started acting really creepy, telling me I shouldn’t
be out and about in public, that no one else deserved to see me, that he would take care of my every
need. The last time I saw him he took me out to the garden behind the Mockingbird’s offices. It’s
really secluded, even though it’s near a major boulevard. The sun had just set and Petyr started
kissing me, but there wasn’t any emotion behind it, only, I don’t know, perversion somehow. I didn’t
like it. Then he called me by mother’s name. Cat, he whispered…”

Sansa’s face went blank and her eyes grew distant, clearly lost in the very unpleasant memory.
Stannis desperately wanted to rage, but Sansa needed his support more than he needed to act on his
aggression. Baelish’s time would come.

Stannis reached and squeezed Sansa’s hand, bringing her attention back to the present. “But you got
out. Tell me how.”

“I slapped Petyr and pushed him into the Koi pond. I ran back inside the offices, grabbed my bag
and left. I caught a cab on the street just as the creepy security chief came charging out the front door,
but he was too late.” Sansa straightened her shoulders. “I got myself out.”

Stannis had never felt so much pride for someone as he did just then, and smiled at Sansa. “That’s
my girl. Never let anyone tell you that you can’t do something, or shouldn’t be out in the world
following your own path. Not even me. You’re smart and you’re strong.”

“Go to Riverrun this summer, Sansa, and learn all you can. We’ll still see each other every weekend,
I swear it.”

Sansa smiled in total agreement at his vehemence, and Stannis could tell she felt much better for
having gotten that unpleasant memory off her chest. He started to help clean up but Sansa insisted
that he rest.

“Let me take care of this, Stannis. You spent hours down in that cramped, dingy engine room getting
this boat operational again. Relax.” Sansa gave him a kiss and a gentle push towards the darkened
rear deck of the boat.

Stannis asked Sansa to save the leftovers and crumbs, then walked to the back of the boat, pausing
only to to grab a tin of snuff from his bag. He’d recently fallen into the habit of dipping every night
after dinner, as it helped him relax after long days of dealing with Robert. He absently noted that he
had snagged his red can by accident, the stronger blend he usually used only on fight nights.
Looking back toward the lit-up kitchen, he thought perhaps he should give up this habit, as he now
had a pretty girl who probably didn’t appreciate it. She never once complained though, and he knew
that he had found an exceptional companion in Sansa. Lover? He hoped so.

Settling back against the rail to gaze at the starry sky, Stannis started naming the constellations that he
recognized. He and his mother had played this game at Storm’s End from the time he was a small
boy. He had never taken the time to teach them to Shireen - work had always come first, and then
she had moved across the sea with her mother. Perhaps one day he could rectify that.

Soon Stannis found himself listening to Sansa sing an unusual tune in the Old Tongue. Her clear
voice carried easily across the water, the haunting notes causing goosebumps to rise on his arms. He
didn’t understand the words, but he found himself drawn back to other days of his youth, fishing
with his uncle. Perhaps a trip to Greenstone Island would be in order soon. He hadn’t seen Lomas in
a few years, and suddenly felt the urge to introduce Sansa to him.

Right afterwards, though, he started thinking of Petyr Baelish once again, and grew increasingly
restless and angry. How dare that smarmy little worm try to subdue Sansa’s spirit, take her away
from all she loved? Baelish had taken advantage of an innocent young girl to feed his own perverted
desires.

Stannis stewed and grew increasingly agitated, much as he had when he had gone out the previous
night to warn Harry off. A thrill of victory shot through him as he recalled the manner in which he
had subdued Harry. He had taken vicious pleasure in it, and didn’t feel the least bit guilty.

Thinking of Sansa, Stannis forced himself to pay attention to her beautiful singing instead of his own
dark ruminations, although they didn’t go away entirely.

After several minutes had passed seemingly without notice, Stannis realized that Sansa had stopped
singing and was nearly finished with her task. He spat one more time into the water, then trotted
downstairs to brush his teeth and clean up. His eagerness to continue the evening with Sansa by his
side had grown quickly.

Somewhat calmer, Stannis returned topside, and saw that Sansa had already made her way to the rear
deck. He flicked on a light switch that illuminated the water underneath the boat and went to fetch
the leftover bits of dinner. Returning to her side by the rail, together they leaned over to observe the
fish darting in and out of the lit-up water.

“Watch this.”

Stannis started tossing out bits of leftovers into the water, a little at a time. Within a few minutes they
had an ever changing school of fish swarming below them. The water churned with their frantic
activity as the thrashing and splashing sounds echoed across the still, dark water.

“Let me try!” Sansa seemed delighted in the simple activity of feeding the wild fish. Her face glowed
as she laughed enthusiastically at their antics in the water. He pointed out different species as they
approached, earning a look of interest and respect from Sansa.

“How did you learn all this, Stannis?”

“My grandfather and Uncle Lomas taught me on Greenstone Island.”

“So you have an uncle that taught you too. That’s something else we have in common.” Sansa
looked back down at the water and her face grew animated.

“I could bring you to Greenstone sometime, if you like.” Stannis wanted to introduce Sansa to the
rest of his family, what little bit he had left.

“Really? I think that would be great!” Sansa seemed excited at the prospect, and Stannis felt his own
excitement growing along with hers. He had so much he wanted to share with this girl. His girl.

“Look! What’s that big fish?” She pointed to a large, striped fish eagerly gobbling up the floating
morsels.

“A sea bass. Good eating. If I had thought to, I would have dropped a line and hook in the water.”
Stannis paused, and then continued, deciding he could share a few memories with Sansa.

“My father took me fishing on my thirteenth birthday. We caught several sea bass just like this one,
and my mother baked them herself, even though we had a full staff at Storm’s End.” Stannis smiled
faintly at the memory, nostalgic but strangely not melancholic.

“That memory is really important to you, isn’t it?”

He nodded. “It was the last time my father and I did something together, just the two of us.”
“Thank you for sharing that with me, Stannis.” Sansa gave his arm a soft squeeze, then reached over to flip on a radio. Soft music filled the air and carried across the water. Normally not one to listen to pop music, Stannis found he didn’t mind it at all in Sansa’s company.

They stood there quietly feeding the fish and listening to the music until a familiar song started playing. Sansa perked up and tugged on Stannis’ hand.

“Dance with me, Stannis? After all, the song is Moondance, and the moon is just starting to rise.”

Sansa looked at him shyly but hopefully as she began to sway with the music. Stannis found himself pulled in without conscious effort. He knew how to dance, of course, as his mother had insisted he take lessons for years and his boarding school maintained that all young men should be comfortable in formal dance environs. But that didn’t mean he would willingly dance in public. This, however, was just the two of them.

Soon Stannis found himself leading Sansa into a modified version of a swing dance. She laughed and danced perfectly, and he quickly relaxed into the old familiar rhythm. Sansa’s long red hair draped freely down her back, swinging slowly from side to side. He wondered what it might feel like if she were to swing that hair across his bare chest. The sway of her hips and drift of her skirt did nothing to cool Stannis’ rising libido, and every time they touched he felt heat rise. He wanted her. Badly. He wanted to replace her bad memory of Baelish with a good one of him.

Sansa laughingly avoided his attempts to kiss her as they danced through the song. Soon it became a game to her and a challenge for him. Even within the small confines of the boat deck Sansa managed to keep her dance steps steady yet flirtatiously avoid his kissing pursuit. Instead of feeling put out, it just excited him that much more. He’d catch her lips soon enough, and they’d taste all the sweeter for the chase.

Stannis gave up pretending as soon as the song and their dance finished. With an effortless tug he pulled her lithe, soft body tight against his own, grinding his hips against her as he did so. She gasped, full red lips parted in surprise and desire. Sansa panted slightly from either the dance or excitement, turning him on even more.

“You’ve avoided my kisses long enough, girl. I’m done being patient.”

Growling slightly he bent and captured her mouth with his own, giving her no time to speak. With a clash of teeth and tangle of tongues he devoured her, drinking in her essence like water as they deepened and prolonged their kiss.

Sansa responded eagerly and kissed him back without hesitation, running her hand up the back of his neck and lightly scratching her nails against his skin. Stannis bucked against her and moaned deep in his throat. He’d had a few sexual encounters over the years since his divorce, but no one had burned his blood like this girl. Her easy total acceptance of him, even of his rough mannerisms, ignited his soul and released a pent-up passion from deep within his gut.

They broke off for air, but Stannis started sucking almost immediately on the smooth skin in the hollow of Sansa’s throat, right by her collarbone. She moaned in response, and pushed her body against his own, increasing their skin to skin contact.

Stannis felt all tingly and hyper-sensitive, yet still he needed more. Every little rub against his erection caused sharp surges of pleasure to shoot up and down his spine, more than he’d ever experienced before. It almost made him lose his balance, but he kept rubbing anyway. She smelled so enticing, tasted so salty sweet. Even her moans and breathy utterances of “mmm, don’t stop” chimed encouragement in his ears. He barely processed their meanings, as the sounds of her
breathless voice and excited moans caused his brain to buzz and skin to tingle from pleasure and absolute arousal. Sex had never felt this good, and they hadn’t even gotten there yet.

He pushed Sansa back against the table and hiked one of her legs around his hip, giving their groins more direct access to each other. Even through the layers of clothing he felt his cock rub against her sweet notch, causing them both to buck up and hiss against each other with wild rocking. Stannis went from sucking to biting down on that spot on her throat, eliciting both a gasp and a moan from Sansa, but no complaints. She tasted of the sea, smelled of fresh ocean air and even a hint of familiar strawberries. He sucked hard, barely cognizant that it would leave a mark come morning.

While Stannis allowed his hands to wander under Sansa’s shirt, stroking her smooth soft skin just below her breasts, he grew half-aware of the lyrics playing in the background.

*Girl, you'll be a woman soon,*

*Please, come take my hand*

*Girl, you'll be a woman soon,*

*Soon, you'll need a man*

Instinctively Stannis knew that tonight he would make Sansa a woman, his woman. He didn’t resist the notion, just grew more aroused and aflame with desire, if that were even possible.

*I've been misunderstood for all of my life*

*But what they're saying girl it cuts like a knife*

"The boy's no good"

These words ignited a passionate fury within Stannis, even as he continued to stroke, caress and kiss the willing girl pressed up to his own body. So many times he’d been judged and found to be lacking, lacking in what he didn’t know. "No, Stannis." Or worse, "not good enough." Stef, aroused by both passion for the girl and fury at those who would put him down, started to awaken within him.

How dare they judge him? She accepted him rough or refined, tired or fresh. She always offered her comfort and sweet touches unconditionally. Her amazing responsiveness to his own touches this evening urged him on.

Growling, he kissed her deep and full on the lips, pulling her suddenly to her feet at the same time. *Fuck them. She thinks I'm good enough.*

*Well I've finally found what I'm a looking for*

*But if they get their chance they'll end it for sure...*

*Girl, you'll be a woman soon,*

*Please, come take my hand*

*Girl, you'll be a woman soon,*

*Soon, you'll need a man*

They broke their kiss and Sansa looked up at him with wide, lust-glazed, trusting eyes. He absentl...
felt her hands stroking his neck and back, causing little jolts to shoot from his groin to his head.

“Sansa,” Stannis huffed out breathlessly. “I need you, want you. All of you. Let me be your man tonight.”

Stannis waited on edge while Sansa took a moment to gaze out at the moonlit water. The ocean breeze stirred the hair that stood on end along his arms, and he shivered slightly. Not from the chill, but from anticipation. But he knew he had his answer as soon as she met his eyes with her own. They showed no hint of uncertainty, only desire and absolute assurance. Sansa nodded her head.

“Yes.”

A torrent of relief and energy flooded through Stannis. She said yes! He wanted to take her right then and there, she was so damn beautiful, so eager. He could feel her quiver slightly beneath his hands as he pushed up her shirt, impatient to fondle her high, firm tits.

“You turn me on, girl. Tonight will be one to remember.” He spoke huskily, only half-aware of what he was saying as he tugged on Sansa’s shirt, but a firm grip on his wrist brought him partway back to awareness.

“Stannis, wait! Not here.”

What? She just said yes. Didn’t she? Confused and befuddled with arousal, Stannis frowned down at Sansa. He couldn’t stop rubbing his groin against her own, no matter her words. His need for sex nearly overwhelmed his entire thought process. He belatedly realized that a growl had escaped from deep in his throat.

“Downstairs? Please? A bed is a lot softer than this table.” Her soft voice called like a Siren’s song as she padded towards the stairs, glancing back over her shoulder with shining blue eyes.

Somehow the red-headed Siren led Stannis down the narrow stairs to the master stateroom.

The room was dimly lit by recessed lighting behind the shelving and a bit of moonlight shining in from the windows set just below the ceiling. Seeing the sheets already turned back did Stannis in. He swooped and picked up Sansa in his arms in one motion, and tossed her none-too-gently on the bed. She squeaked in delight as he stalked on all fours up the long bed to cover her lithe body with his own substantial frame.

He pinned her down with his weight, settling hips to hips, one hand supporting his upper body while the other gathered her wrists over her head.

“Now I’ve got you, girl, right where I want you. What am I gonna do with you?” He mock growled as he bent to capture her lips once again with own, sucking on them just enough to bring them to a deeper shade of red. Sansa responded eagerly, spreading her hips to accompany his own and arching up to meet his lips and body with equal intensity.

Stannis sucked and licked her neck, rocking along her body all the while. Stymied by the fabric of her shirt, he let go of her wrists. He wanted to touch, taste, smell, and see all of her.

“I wanna see all of you, all of your body.” Barely remembering that it was still her choice, Stannis’ hand hovered shakily over the top button of her shirt, then he pulled it away and sat up.

“You do it. Show me.” He wanted to watch her undress for him, to willingly expose herself to him.

His nostrils flared as he drank in the sight of her languorous movements. Sansa flicked her hair back
and slowly came up onto her knees, coyly glancing up at him through long eyelashes while she undid the buttons. One by one they opened up, exposing inch after inch of creamy perfect skin.

After the last button came undone Sansa held her shirt partly closed, looking at Stannis with both excitement and perhaps a bit of uncertainty. He saw her hesitation, and reached out to push a strand of hair back from her face. He ran one finger along the edge of her jaw slowly, trying to convey reassurance.

“Hey, girl, it’s me. S’alright.”

He lay back so as to appear less intimidating, although it was hard to restrain himself. Stannis kept a hand on Sansa’s leg though, slowly stroking her thigh in an effort to calm the both of them, as he could not bear to lose all physical contact.

He watched with quickened breaths as she abruptly made up her mind and quickly removed her shirt. Her creamy body and perfect breasts hovered close over his body. As she bent over her hair swept tantalizingly lightly across his chest and stomach, exciting and awakening pleasurable sensations all along his body. Sansa smiled shyly once again, apparently happy with whatever she saw in him.

Stannis had been patient long enough. With Sansa kneeling over him wearing nothing but an airy short skirt, he felt as though he’d been transported to some tropical island a hundred years back in time. Intense need flared through him, much as the hunger to fight sometimes overwhelmed him on certain nights.

With a sudden move that took Sansa by surprise, judging by the wide-eyed stare she gave him afterwards, Stannis pulled down her skirt and flipped her over on her back in one smooth motion, quickly covering her naked body with his own. Now only the fabric of his shorts separated them. Stannis kissed her ardently, savoring her taste with his tongue while he stroked the hollow dip just above her hip. Her skin there felt so soft and smooth that he wanted to relish the sensation forever.

He felt a tug on his shorts. Soft, smooth hands, teasingly caressing him right along the waistband, scratched his back lightly, nearly causing him to lose his mind.

“Turnabout’s fair play, Stannis.” Sansa’s eyes regarded him with her own desire clearly reflected.

She was right, it was only fair that she should get to see him naked too. Stannis didn’t waste any time in removing his own shorts, nor did he feel shy about allowing her to see his very aroused state. Her eyes widened in surprise as she regarded him, and he could tell she felt rather exposed. Still, he took his time looking her up and down, savoring her slender neck, perfect round breasts and perky nipples, narrow waist and lovely full hips. Sansa’s burnished hair spilled out across the white sheets along either side of her head and shoulders. Beautiful. And his.

Settling himself alongside her body, Stannis ran his hand up and down her flank, then started to knead her firm breasts. He kissed her, then trailed kisses down her neck and chest until he reached one firm nipple. Slowly, so slowly he twirled his tongue around it again and again as he tweaked and gently pulled on the other one. Sansa rewarded him with a gasp and one hand pressing against the back of his head.

“Gods, Stannis, this is....wow…” she sighed breathlessly. She clearly enjoyed his touches.

She stretched and arched against him in obvious pleasure. Stannis concentrated on containing himself, settling with rubbing his cock against her thigh, seeking heat, friction and relief.
He continued to suck on her tit while he trailed his other hand down her belly. Sleek and slender, yet soft in all the right places, his hand crept lower still until he found her mound and warm folds. He bucked hard as he realized she was already wet and eager for him. Still, he wanted to give her a night to remember.

Grinning in anticipation, Stannis started making his way lower and lower, using his lips, tongue and whiskers to sensitize Sansa’s skin along her belly. She twitched and turned beneath him, stretching and wriggling as he passed over ticklish spots. She still hadn’t figured out where he was going until he gave her clit a quick lick. She gasped aloud and nearly bolted upright.

“Stannis!” She squeaked, clearly embarrassed and surprised. “What are you doing?”

He sat up enough to push her gently back down. This was obviously all new to Sansa, but he was confident she’d come to love it almost immediately.

“Doing for you what you did for me earlier. Relax and enjoy it. Trust me.”

Stannis settled back down between Sansa’s legs, and stuck his nose down close to her sex. He inhaled deeply, taking in her musky, heady scent to the fullest. That scent, the scent of his woman, aroused and ready for him, nearly did him in.

Tamping down his desire just a little bit, he spread her legs and took another lick, more deliberate this time. Then, holding her legs apart as she squirmed and bucked, he set to work, mapping her folds, licking circles and hard laps around her excited nub again and again. Her excited gasps just egged him on, and he alternated between licking and sucking.

The taste and smell of Sansa’s womanhood, of her arousal, drove all conscious thought from Stannis’ brain. He loved how she tasted - earthy, salty, unique. The scent filled his nose and his head, and her moans and gasps as he thrust his tongue deep inside her opening gave him an incredible sense of pride. That he was the first to give her this experience seriously boosted his ego.

Stannis could tell that Sansa was approaching her climax when she started grinding against his face. He really enjoyed this part. Not slowing down, he looked up to see her breasts heaving and head thrown back as she let out little moans. That sight caused him to practically hump the mattress, it excited him so much to see her let go in her pleasure. Her hands pressed down on the back of his head as she bucked and ground hard against his face, and she practically shrieked as she went over the edge.

He slowed down his licks until he was sure Sansa had come down off her high. Then he wiped his face on the sheet and crawled up over her body until they were face to face once more. He felt her breasts, soft and full, push against his own chest. He rubbed his chest around a little, enjoying the sensation of skin against skin. Sansa appeared to like it too. Stannis smirked as she opened her eyes, lust filled and almost sleepy with pleasure. He’d done his job well.

“Gods, Stannis! That was incredible! I…” Now she turned a little shy. He thought it was cute, and still a turn-on at the same time. “I really liked that.”

Stannis had positioned himself so that his cock kept bumping up against ready folds. He could feel her heat and wetness coat the head of his cock. He desperately ached to bury himself inside her. But he needed to be sure she was ready.

“Are you sure, girl? You don’t have to say yes right now.” Stannis breathed unevenly, hoping that Sansa would still let him take her. He wasn’t disappointed.
“I’m sure, Stannis. I want you to be my first, and I want it tonight. I need to feel you in me.” Sansa seemed a little embarrassed, but totally sincere. She wanted him!

He wasted no time in guiding himself to her entrance, and eased into her partway. He watched her face for clues, but so far she hummed in pleasure. He only pushed in slightly less than halfway, then pulled out again, agonizingly slowly. Sansa seemed to really enjoy that. Then he pushed forward again, a little further this time. Hells, she was so hot, so wet, so tight.

Once again he eased out and then back in, pushing until he met resistance. Sansa gasped, and he did what he could to reassure her. What he really needed though, was to be able to plunge in fully. Stannis wasn’t sure how much longer he could last.

Staying right where he was, Stannis kissed Sansa, tongue teasing her lips and her own tongue, making her relax once more. “It’s alright, it’s just me. Spread your legs wider, and pull them up some. That will make this easier on you.”

Sansa complied readily, eagerly even, gazing up at Stannis with trusting eyes. He waited until he felt her relax, then took the complete plunge, setting himself firmly in her heat, straight to the hilt of his cock. He moaned long and loud at finally reaching that hot, tight bliss.

Sansa cried out, but this time there seemed to be a bit of pain in her voice. Stannis could feel her tight folds clamp down on his cock again and again, making him think her body was trying to get rid of him. Not yet. Now you’re mine.

“Did I hurt you, girl?” He knew some pain was to be expected, but he hated the idea of harming or hurting Sansa under any circumstance.

Sansa shook her head, but he knew that wasn’t quite the truth. “I’m ok, Stannis. Just let me get used to the feel of you first. You’re so big, you fill me up.”

He couldn’t help but take pride in her statement. But more than that, the need to move started to build again, very quickly. Her tight wet heat clamped down repeatedly, putting him in a tizzy of pleasure. He had to chase it.

Stannis started moving gently at first, then slightly increased his speed and strength as the sensations built. He hadn’t been with a woman in nearly a year, and that hadn’t been nearly so satisfying. Sansa was his, and his alone.

Images from the past several weeks popped into his mind, sending him into a possessive state as he continued his slow but powerful thrusts. The memories of Baelish smirking at him during the fight and Harry accompanying Sansa across the University green brought Stef fully forward. Stannis did not resist.

She ain’t yours, Harry. Or your master’s either.

Stef levered himself up onto his hands and started thrusting with more powerful, deliberate strokes. His whole body grew aflame with power, possession and lust. Gazing down at the beautiful girl beneath him, the one who was his now, just made him want to lose himself in her entirely.

“I’ve wanted you practically since we met, girl. You’re made to be with me, by my side.”

He needed more, and needed to get deeper. Smirking, Stef pulled out and flipped Sansa over and pulled her hips up off the mattress, unaware that his strong hands would leave marks on her skin. Her cute little ass begged for a pounding.
Without further hesitation, he plunged his cock back into her tight wet heat, all the way to the hilt. He gripped Sansa’s hips tightly and started snapping his pelvis hard and fast.

Stef couldn’t help but talk some. “You’re made for me, girl. I never had a time like this. Fuck, it’s good. Best I ever had.”

Her gasps and moans just turned him on more, encouraged him to fuck harder and faster than he’d ever done before. Stef recalled the fights with Gary and Jared with exhilaration, remembering how good he’d felt to defeat them. His climax came suddenly with the massive build up of possession, aggression and lust overwhelming his every sense. Stef came with a shout as he buried himself deep inside his woman.

They both collapsed to the mattress in a gasping heap, Stef sprawling half atop Sansa. If this was what it was like to be high he never wanted to come down. Boneless and floating, he felt all his blood and body awash with intense pleasure. He’d never had sex like this before. Brain in a fog as though he were mind-wrapped in a warm dark blanket, Stef let himself slip away into the black void of euphoria.

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Stannis awoke with a start, coming out of the throes of an intensely erotic dream. Images of him fucking Sansa on the boat played out like some wild and dark fantasy, the type he would never allow himself to act on in real life. He would never allow himself to lose control in that manner.

Confused, he blinked the film from his eyes as he looked around his bedroom, momentarily disoriented. The walls weren’t right, the dim light seemed different, the bed rocked....like he was on a boat.

“Sansa!”

Stannis bolted upright and flicked on a light behind the bed. He lay alone in the master stateroom of the boat. Shoving back the covers, he got to his feet and looked around, stumbling in shock when he looked back at the bed. The sheets were liberally smeared with dried blood and semen. Looking down, he could see the stains on his own cock, thighs, and lower belly as well.

Falling to his knees, Stannis supported himself against the bed while he regained his composure.

“Seven Hells, what have I done?”

Chapter End Notes

The song quoted is "Girl, You'll Be a Woman Soon", written and sung by Neil Diamond. I am rather partial to the version by Urge Overkill, which is on the Pulp Fiction soundtrack.

Green can = plain tobacco
Red can = tobacco + Spike. Stannis has no clue.

As always, comments are most welcome!
Sansa sat on the bench near the back of the boat, gazing out at the moonlit water. She had wrapped a blanket around her shoulders before she came up from the stateroom. She wasn’t sure if she needed it to ward off the cool night air or the unease within her heart. Regardless, she shivered as she replayed the evening’s events over and over again in her head.

One thing Sansa was certain of; her first sexual encounter had turned out to be both more thrilling and more terrifying than she had ever thought possible. She remembered wondering earlier what it might be like if Stannis lost control with her, and where it might lead them. Now she knew. She almost wished she hadn’t found out.

Margaery had told her that sometimes a guy could get carried away in the moment, and perhaps get a little wild during sex. Sansa was pretty sure that Margaery had never envisioned that any man would let himself go as completely as Stannis had, though.

So much had occurred that Sansa wasn’t sure how to process it all. The day’s activities of swimming, snorkeling and early afternoon exploration of each other’s bodies had been perfect, and perfectly paced. And dinner on the boat had been so romantic. She smiled as she thought how she had managed to even get Stannis to dance with her. In spite of his protests a few weeks ago she realized that Stannis could dance with both competence and grace.

As the evening progressed she had grown more turned on than she had ever imagined, and knew that Stannis was too. He had grown insistent, yet careful, and his touches had been both arousing and gentle at the same time. She smiled and shivered, not from any chill, when she recalled what it felt like when he used his tongue on her. She had no idea anything could feel so good. It felt sinfully delightful.

At first, Stannis had been slow and gentle, asking her if she was ok with his actions. Sansa sighed as she recalled his concern and consideration. Stannis had been carefully restrained up until that moment when he started moving. After that, it was as though Dr. Jekyll had been replaced with Mr. Hyde, and she hadn’t known what to expect.

When Stannis really started moving his expression had turned so fearsome, his thrusts so forceful that Sansa had started to feel afraid. And it hurt. A lot. She had called out to him to slow down but he hadn’t heard a thing. He had been completely consumed by his own pleasure and lust.

She needed to talk to Stannis, find out what his thoughts were, share her own. But he did not stir. Even though they had just taken part in what should have been the most intimate night of her life, Sansa had never felt so alone. She couldn’t help but wonder if she had done something wrong.

Sansa wondered if he would even remember what he had said, and did he mean it? Did he really mean she was meant for him, to be by his side? Or was that just empty chatter spoken during the heat of the moment?

She hadn’t understood how sore she was until she showered and got dressed in cotton shorts and a tank top. Her legs shook, and she had a hard time walking straight as she climbed the stairs to the deck. Sansa had cautiously sat herself down on a pillow on the bench and wrapped herself up in the blanket. It was only then that she started shaking.
The peaceful surroundings belied the complex feeling gurgling within her. She desperately wanted to talk to Stannis and feel his gentle touch, but at the same she had no idea how she might react to his presence and she couldn’t fathom what she might say.

Shivering, Sansa bundled the blanket more tightly around herself. She told herself that she would not cry, even though it felt like she might fall apart any second now. Stannis, she was fairly confident, did not like tears.

A loud rattle caused Sansa to whirl and gasp, forgetting her train of thought. Stannis barreled up the stairs wearing nothing but his shorts and a wild-eyed expression. For a split-second Sansa thought he might want to continue exactly where he had left off earlier. She huddled deeper into her corner without thinking about her action or what sort of message it would convey.

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The sight of Sansa scooting away from him in obvious alarm nearly did Stannis in. He pulled himself up short and stopped several feet away from her bench. He could hardly blame her for fearing him after his treatment of her in bed. Would she hate him now?

Stannis slowly sat down on the bench opposite Sansa, fighting his instinct to take her into his arms. Even though the night air felt warm he could see that she was shivering. She looked so small, so fragile wrapped up in that big fuzzy blanket. Speaking proved difficult.

“Sansa.” His voice sounded rough, even to his own ears. Stannis tried again. He had to find out if he had somehow injured her.

“Sansa, are you...did I hurt you? I have to know.” He spoke quietly, but inside he was shouting at himself. Of course you did, you damn fool! Look at her.

She looked at him with less alarm and more confusion, then shook her head.

“No. I...I don’t think so.”

Sansa looked down then, fiddling with the blanket. But the slight wince as she shifted told him the truth. He felt terrible at seeing her in any discomfort or pain caused by his lack of control.

“I’m so sorry, girl, for behaving like that. I lost all control, Sansa. I never have before...I never meant to...shit...I wish I could start over, take it all back...”

“All of it?”

Her sharp retort pulled Stannis out of his pity party.

“No, not all. Just the part when you got hurt. Hurt by me, by my loss of control.” He forced himself to look Sansa in the eye. “But all the rest, no, I wouldn’t lose that. You are important to me, Sansa. I know I spoke coarsely, but I meant every word I said.”

Those must have have the exact words Sansa needed to hear, because she stretched her hand out to him just as her face crumpled. Stannis did not hesitate then to take her into his arms.

Stannis gently stroked her hair for the several minutes that Sansa huddled against his chest. He felt fairly certain that he’d burn through all seven hells for his behavior in bed. He must have said something to that effect out loud because Sansa mumbled something he couldn’t make out. She picked up her head and gave him a small smile.
“You won’t go to hell, Stannis.” Sansa’s eyes were slightly red, but she seemed to have regained her equilibrium.

Stannis scoffed, still not really believing that Sansa even allowed him to touch her. He didn’t deserve her kindness.

“Sansa, I’ve never allowed myself to let loose with anyone. I am so sorry for that. I wanted to make this trip out here special for you.”

“Stannis, it’s ok, really. Last night I didn’t know what to expect, and even though I do wish you had been slower and gentler, you also made me feel wonderful. This trip is very special to me. You went out of your way to show me this place, and spend all this time with me alone. But I’m curious, what made you choose to come out here?”

“This cove, Sansa, it’s a little refuge for me, quiet and protected. I wanted to share that with you and only you. I have never brought anyone out here before. There has been no one that interested me, not until I met you.”

Sansa gasped. “You’ve been alone all these years?”

He grunted an affirmative.

“That’s so terrible! No one should be alone for so long.”

She paused for a moment, clearly troubled by something else. “But, does that mean that you haven’t...haven’t, you know, been with anyone either?”

Stannis sighed. They really should have had this conversation before sex, not after. It was only fair that she knew his sexual history.

“I haven’t been in any romantic relationships, but there have been a few one night stands over the years. None of them meant anything to me. Not like you.”

He felt her stiffen against his chest. “Stannis, um, please don’t be offended but...were you always safe?”

He huffed in annoyance and drew back slightly. No one had ever asked him that question, but the unspoken query was far more offensive. *Have you ever contracted a sexually transmitted disease?*

“Stannis, please?”

Sansa chewed on her lower lip and twirled her hair. He relaxed, assured that she had spoken her question out of genuine uncertainty.

He grunted, then sighed. “I always used condoms, Sansa. Furthermore, my brothers and I go through extensive medical examinations every six months as part of our insurance requirements. I am clean. No diseases, no illegitimate children.”

He felt as much as heard Sansa gasp against his chest. “Stannis! You didn’t use one last night! What if I get pregnant?”

Stannis’ heart started racing. *Shit.* Had he just drastically altered the otherwise bright future of this engaging young woman?

“I honestly never thought about it, Sansa. And I can only assume that you do not take any birth
control medication, correct?"

“No, I’m not supposed to, not that I ever needed it before now. Mom has a genetic disorder that increases her risk of blood clots. I inherited it from her. I don’t think I’m at a point where I can get pregnant, but my cycle isn’t always regular.” Still, Sansa’s voice wavered.

Would a baby with Sansa be such a terrible thing? No. He felt guilty at realizing he would not feel remorse if Sansa did end up pregnant. The idea of becoming a father again tugged at him, enticed him, even called to him.

Stannis looked out across the peaceful water, then down at Sansa’s shining blue eyes. It was clear that she needed his reassurance.

“I’m not going anywhere, Sansa. If you are pregnant I will stick by you no matter what you choose. But know this: I would happily raise a baby with you.”

He rubbed Sansa’s back and threaded his other hand through her thick silky hair, gently massaging her scalp and neck. Protective now, Stannis sought to bolster her trust in him. He would not fail her.

“But what if I am? What will the news people say? What will my mother say?”

A wave of possession and anger flooded through Stannis as he considered how much influence other people had exerted on Sansa’s self worth. The belligerent fighter within him stirred to respond, overcoming his normal sense of restraint.


Sansa jerked her head up to stare at him.

“Really?”

“Remember my words, girl. I say it, I mean it. Now, get some sleep. You’re not alone.” You’re mine.

Stannis shifted so that Sansa could stretch out and lay her head on his chest. He continued to massage her neck and scalp, and eventually felt her breathing slow down as she fell asleep in his arms. He held no hope that he might get back to sleep, nor did he try.

Staring out across the still water, Stannis thought long and hard about where he had gone wrong. Try as he might, he knew something was missing from his analysis. Maybe it was time to call his uncle, to hear that gruff steady voice and honest wisdom. He hadn’t spoken with Lomas Estermont in many months, perhaps a year or more. It had been nearly five years since they had last seen each other, and Stannis knew that was a shortcoming on his part.

Tomorrow he would contact Davos. His oldest friend, a seasoned street cop and detective, often proved invaluable when given a situation to unravel. They had grown apart, and Stannis realized with a sharp pang that this too was his own fault. He had slowly isolated himself from the people that meant the most to him. Why? Deep down he knew: Fighting.

Sighing once again, he lay his head back and closed his burning eyes. In spite of the inner turmoil sleep eventually overtook Stannis. He didn’t wake until the sun started shining in his eyes.

Sansa stirred against his chest as he shifted. She blinked blearily up at him and offered a small but genuine smile.

“Good morning, Stannis.”
“It is indeed a good morning.” He found no fault waking up to this pretty girl laying in his arms, even with a crick in his back. He traced a path along her nose and cheek with one tan finger, intrigued by the slight changes the sun had wrought to her pale skin.

“You have more freckles. Fascinating.”

“Not again! Mom will just give me more grief now, just like she did a few weeks ago.”

Sansa altered her voice to speak in a derogatory, slightly screechy manner. “Stay out of the sun! Freckles are so gauche. You’re a Tully and a Stark, not a dirty Frey.”

Stannis huffed. Damn that Catelyn! The more time he spent with Sansa the more he realized that Catelyn had tried to turn her daughter into a spitting image of herself, at the expense of Sansa’s happiness and self-worth. To him the slight freckles were a reminder of that carefree afternoon they had shared in Pembroke, and the most enjoyable day they had spent together out on the water.

“There is nothing wrong with your skin Sansa, with or without freckles. They are a part of you and I rather like them, despite what anyone else says. And right now I think I’ll play connect the dots.”

With that he bent down and traced a path between her freckles with his tongue, eliciting a squirm and a giggle from Sansa, followed by a playful swat.

“That tickles!”

“How about this instead?”

Moving his mouth down to capture her soft lips with his own, Stannis enjoined Sansa in a long, slow languid kiss. He felt heat pool deep in his belly, and moaned even as he reluctantly broke it off. Sansa sighed as she laid her head down, breath tickling the hairs on Stannis’ chest. He wanted nothing more than to remain out on the water, but time ticked forward relentlessly. They needed to return to Duskendale and then on to King’s Landing.

Sansa volunteered to make breakfast so that he could shower. As she stood up and stretched the blanket fell to her feet, revealing the dark hickey he had left at the base of her neck and a few bruises disappearing below the waistband of her soft shorts. His hands had left marks around her waist where he had gripped her so strongly. Stannis turned away and hurried below deck before Sansa could see his grimace.

Entering the master stateroom only furthered his self-recrimination as he spotted the stained sheets on the bed. He had behaved like an animal last night. With haste he stripped the sheets and bundled them into a bag - he did not want Sansa to see that grim reminder. He made a mental note to remove them from the boat and throw them away at home.

During the return trip to Duskendale Stannis piloted the boat from the lower bridge as the water had grown choppy and the wind increased in strength. Incoming clouds heralded an approaching storm, and the first raindrops began to fall just as they reached the dock, a little over three hours after he had first awakened.

He turned to Sansa, who had sat by his side for the entire trip without displaying any signs of seasickness.

“The Bonine seems to have worked for you, Sansa. That water was rough.”

Sansa smiled happily and shook her head. “I didn’t take any this morning. I guess maybe I have sea legs after all!”
“Mmm.” He swung her in his arms after he cut the engines off. “Maybe I should sell everything and buy a big yacht. I’ll kidnap you like a pirate, and then we would sail the seven seas for the next twenty years. Leave the mainland far behind and not tell a soul.”

She laughed, clearly entranced with his fanciful scheme, even as a peel of thunder rumbled overhead.

“Well, with your black beard and menacing scowl you look like a pirate already. Stannis Stormraiser. That would be your outlaw name.”

Stannis had never liked nicknames, least of all the one his brother used far too often. Yet Sansa’s rebranding did not bother him, but only cause him to grow introspective. He recalled the times his uncle came to visit Storm’s End and the summers he spent on Greenstone as a boy. Lomas always said a stormcloud hovered over his head whenever Robert called him ‘Stanny’. Several moments had passed without notice when Sansa tugged on his arm.

“Stannis? Are you alright?”

Nodding, he replied with a question of his own. “Sansa, how would you like to visit Greenstone Island with me? There’s someone that I would like you to meet.”

“That sounds lovely! Who lives there that means so much to you?”

“My uncle, Lomas Estermont. He taught me nearly everything I know about the ocean. And he was always one to listen. Uncle Lomas is like a second father to me.”

“I would love to meet him! I wonder if he’s anything like Uncle Brynden?”

Stannis had met Brynden Tully on a few occasions in the course of various business deals. The parallels between Sansa’s relationship with her great-uncle and his own relationship to Lomas were too obvious to dismiss. Her mention of Tully just strengthened his resolve to rekindle the neglected relationship with Lomas Estermont, the only family member he had left that didn’t make him grind his teeth in frustration.

“I imagine they have a great deal in common. I’ll set it up, and we’ll go down there next month.”

The drive back to King’s Landing passed by quickly, with Sansa occasionally asking Stannis questions about boats and sailing. He was quite pleased when she asked him if he could teach her how to sail. That simple request solidified his intent to make Sansa a permanent part of his life, and buoyed his hope that she desired a shared future with him as well.

All feelings of contentment fled from Stannis when he saw Robert’s SUV parked in the Stark’s driveway. He hadn’t realized how hard he gripped the steering wheel until Sansa placed her hand over his own and squeezed gently.

“Don’t let his being here get to you, Stannis.” Her soft voice and gentle touch helped him relax his grip, but he still felt unsettled.

“It is best if Robert and I limit our interactions outside of the office. We do not get along and have nothing in common. We never have.”

Stannis did not want to breach the real reasons behind their lack of brotherly affection; Robert would never acknowledge his harmful actions and Sansa couldn’t begin to understand. She had spent her whole life surrounded by a loving, supportive family who had never shunned or isolated her. Robert had done all that to him and more after their parents had passed away.
“Why do you hate him?”

Stannis sighed. “I don’t hate my brother, Sansa, it’s just...there’s nothing there.”

“It’s not too late, you know. Uncle Brynden and my grandfather didn’t speak for almost thirty years, but they managed to reconcile before Grandpa died. After the funeral Uncle Brynden told me he wished he could turn back the clock, and not waste so many years resenting his older brother.”

“I’m not Brynden and Robert isn’t Hoster. Just leave it be, Sansa. Please.”

Sansa nodded, and kissed Stannis’ cheek as she laid a gentle hand on his tense arm.

“I’m right here by your side too, Stannis. That works both ways, right?”

Her simple touch and confident voice did much to allay Stannis’ worries. Own this.

In retrospect Stannis was proud of himself for not losing his temper. As soon as they entered the kitchen - which seemed to be the Stark household’s main gathering place - Robert started in on him.

“Aren’t you a little old to play the old ‘broken down engine’ game, Stanny?” Robert waggled his bushy eyebrows, as if he and Stannis were in on some lurid secret together.

“Oh, for the gods’ sakes, Robert, seriously? Give Stannis some credit. And me too, for that matter. He’s not that crass and I’m not that naïve.”

Sansa stood with her hands on her hips, glaring at Robert. Stannis noted that Ned had turned away to hide his own broad grin.

Robert backed away, hands up in mock supplication. “Fine, fine, it was an oversight. And I’m sure my brother gave the marina the benefit of the doubt, and let them off easy.”

Stannis felt that he had been restrained when speaking to the dock manager. He only threatened to buy the marina and fire the lot of them once.

“Sansa, is that you?” Catelyn’s voice carried from the hallway. Stannis felt another headache forming. He hoped she wouldn’t bring up the damn election again.

Catelyn entered the kitchen carrying an old photo album. She greeted them with a smile for Stannis and a hug for her daughter, but quickly became distracted by the Sunday morning political show. The current topic covered the skyrocketing crime in the city and how the guest candidate would solve the problems should he become mayor.

“It’s not too late to register to vote, Stannis. The election is still a month away.”

Catelyn’s casual invitation sounded like a trap. He clenched his aching hand and ground his teeth in silent frustration as Robert started laughing from the other side of the room. Stannis nearly left the room when he felt Sansa’s familiar hand covering his own. He looked at her and then over at Ned, who hadn’t missed his daughter’s gesture. Locking eyes with Stannis and then giving him a slight nod, Ned shut the TV off.

“I’m sure Stannis has experienced as much election fatigue as everyone else, Cat. I know I have. What’s this photo album?”

Distracted, Catelyn opened up the worn album. Smiling, she pointed out a particular page to Sansa and Stannis.
“I found these photos from one of Renly’s birthdays. We’ve spent so much time together at one house or the other over the years that our families are practically one. Renly is like a big brother to the kids. There’s even a picture of the two of you. Look Stannis, I think you were about Sansa’s age then.”

Stannis groaned when he saw it. In the photo his nineteen year old self looked like a tall, gangly boy with thick black hair. He was standing waist deep in Robert’s swimming pool, awkwardly holding a redhaired baby girl. Stannis realized with a shock that the baby was Sansa.

“Let me see!” Sansa snatched the photo from her mother.

“Wow, Stannis! What a difference. You looked so young, and you were really skinny.” She reached over and squeezed his biceps with a smile. Then a mischievous look grew on her face.

“I’ve got a new picture to compare this to!”

Sansa pulled out her smartphone and opened a photo she had taken of the two of them just that morning. Stannis had convinced her to take one last swim with him. After they got out of the water she had snapped the photo before he realized what she was doing. He didn’t understand why anyone took selfies.

“I was wearing a blue bikini both times. We couldn’t have planned this any better!”

The new photo showed a dripping wet Sansa tucked up close to Stannis with his arms wrapped around her. She was smiling at the camera, but he had been gazing at her instead. Stannis suddenly felt self-conscious, and wished that no one else had seen the picture. He wanted to keep that memory for himself. Too late.

Ned and Robert had also been looking at the pictures when Sansa pulled out her phone. Robert choked. Ned blanched and quickly walked over to the liquor cabinet to pour three drinks. Stannis realized that the age difference became abundantly clear to everyone when faced with a photo of his late teen self holding baby Sansa. And then, eighteen years later, he ended up having sex with the girl.

“Whisky, Stannis? I know I need it.”

Ned obviously was more bothered by the age difference between his daughter and Stannis than Sansa was. In truth, Stannis still felt self-conscious about it - was he the lecherous old divorcé taking advantage of an innocent teenage intern?

Ned offered a shot glass to Stannis, but his eyes were trained on his oldest daughter, happily flipping through the photo album and pulling choice pictures out of their protective sleeves.

Stannis downed the proffered shot in one swallow, but shook his head at a refill. He needed to keep his wits and temper about him. Catelyn huffed and left the room, muttering something about men, Sundays, and bad habits.

Ned sighed, then seemed to make a decision. “Will you stay for lunch? The grill is hot, and there’s plenty of food.”

“Uh, no thanks, Ned, I really ought to-”

Sansa’s voice at his elbow interrupted Stannis’ automatic refusal.

“Please, Stannis? Stay?”
How could he say no to her?

Lunch was an informal affair out on the Stark’s deck, but Stannis still felt like an outsider. Thankfully Catelyn was occupied with the younger Stark children and Robert mostly chatted with Ned, leaving Stannis to eat in peace with Sansa.

“Stannis.”

Lost in thought, Stannis looked around and noticed that he and Ned were alone in the corner of the deck. He recalled Sansa saying something about the boys, but honestly didn’t remember her leaving the deck.

Ned sat down across from Stannis, face a cold mask. Stannis could almost envision Ned wearing the mantle of the old kings of winter. Here it comes.

“I know you slept with my daughter last night, don’t deny it. I can tell by the way she looks at you and you at her. I thought you were better than this. Was it a trick, the boat engine failure?” Ned’s angry eyes bored into Stannis’ own.

“No, Ned it wasn’t a trick. The damn wiring shorted out.”

“But you did have sex with Sansa. Sex with my daughter. You’re more like Robert than I thought. I entrusted you with my daughter’s care and well-being.”

That stung. And to Stannis it felt totally unwarranted.

“Yes. We had sex. Together.” Angry at the interrogation, Stannis practically bit the words out one by one.

“I didn’t trick or coerce Sansa, Ned. She’s a woman grown and free to choose. I am not my brother to carve a notch in my belt and move on. And more than that, I care for her. Deeply.”

He took in deep breaths, desperately trying to keep calm. If Robert showed up Stannis knew a fight would erupt. Thankfully his brother was nowhere to be seen.

Ned wasn’t finished. “Did Sansa tell you that she can’t take regular birth control pills? You better not get my daughter pregnant, Stannis, or there will be hell to pay.”

“Why? Do you think I would cut and run? Try to buy her or you off, like Robert has done on countless occasions with other women? Fuck, Ned, Sansa has come to mean something very special to me. I am in this for the long haul. And if she does get pregnant…”

Stannis drifted off, looking out where Sansa played with her youngest brothers and a neighbor’s small child. Her carefree actions with the younger children seemed so natural and organic to Stannis. Nothing about her joy was forced. He watched with awe and some melancholy as Sansa bent down to help the neighbor’s little girl tie her shoes. Then Sansa held the child’s hand and led her over to the swingset. How differently Shireen’s childhood might have turned out if she’d had a mother like Sansa. Momentarily forgetting Ned, he felt a small smile tug at the corners of his mouth. Any children with Sansa would not be a burden, but a gift.

A small cough caused Stannis to turn back to his interrogator only to find Ned’s arctic expression had melted, to be replaced with one of wonder.
“You love Sansa, don’t you?”

Stannis blinked, off guard. He hadn’t even allowed himself to think that word, let alone use it. But hearing it, watching Sansa smile as she walked back made him realize the truth.

“Yes.”

Ned sighed, and stood up slowly, gray eyes full of emotion, but no longer angry. “You’ll do after all.” Then he disappeared around the corner, just as Sansa came up to Stannis.

“What’s alright?” Sansa asked as she wrapped her arms around Stannis’ waist, heedless of any eyes that might be watching.

“It is now. Your father and I have reached an understanding.”

“Good!” Sansa smiled. “Will you stay for the afternoon?”

“No. I have to get ready for tomorrow and try to call Shireen before it gets too late.”

Sansa nodded in understanding. Taking his leave of her with a regretful kiss, Stannis walked to the driveway, hoping to avoid everybody else. Unfortunately Robert appeared to have been camping out in the driveway next to Stannis’ Mercedes.

“Brother!” Robert’s smack between the shoulder blades nearly bowled Stannis over. So did his whisky infused breath.

“I’m not sure whether to be proud of you, Stanny, or hit you.”

Stannis disengaged himself from Robert as surreptitiously as possible, and opened the driver’s door, using it as an impromptu divider between himself and his unsteady brother.

“And why is that, Robert?”

Robert leaned over the door, getting right in Stannis’ face. He did his best not to flinch at the overpowering smell of whisky.

“I know you punched Sansa’s V-card, Stanny. I can tell. I can always tell. Like I said, I’m proud of you. But as Sansa’s godfather, I ought to defend her honor for good measure.”

As if Robert understands honor.

Stannis restrained himself and bit his tongue. Robert was too drunk to really hurt him, but Stannis could seriously injure Robert if they got into a fight right now, and he didn’t want to do that.

“Sansa is an adult, Robert, and honor has nothing to do with this. I am not having another word on this matter with you. Go sober up.”

Stannis got in the car and drove home, leaving Robert standing alone in the driveway. If he keeps this up he’ll always be alone, trying to live a shadow life through Ned.

Once he arrived at his brownstone Stannis seemed at a loss for direction. He couldn’t think straight, and felt both angry and confused at himself. He paced back and forth without focus for close to an hour, trying to come up with a course of action. Finally he pulled out his phone and tried to call Davos, but it went straight to voicemail.

Stannis hesitated, then ended the call without speaking. What would he say, anyway? I need to talk
to you Davos, but I haven’t the slightest clue why?

All he knew for certain was that his recent actions did not follow any of his normal patterns. Threatening Harry? What had prompted that? And completely losing control on the boat with Sansa? How could he possibly have allowed himself to act in that manner? Even on campus the other day, he had come so close to beating Harry right there on the green, and he had no idea why those aggressive urges nearly overtook him.

Frustrated, Stannis tossed his phone aside and went upstairs. He did have one surefire method of purging his restless energy and simmering anger. Changed into his grungy old jeans, Stannis grabbed the keys to the Ford truck and slipped out into the back alley. A tough sparring session with Bear was in order.

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The two large men circled each other in the ring, trading heavy blows. They both wore padded gloves and protective headgear, but still struck out at each other after nearly an hour of steady sparring.

Bear could tell that Stef had nearly reached his limit, as the younger man’s arms shook with muscle failure, and his bouncing step had transitioned into slow plodding. Bear landed more blows than he usually did when they sparred, testament to Stef’s exhaustion. Yet every time he struck a solid hit to Stef’s torso the younger fighter seemed to relish the blow.

Bear understood the science behind this. Various hormones were released during intense activity, more so during a fight. With the pain of each blow also came something akin to pleasure. He had experienced it himself. The excitement and adrenaline rush was part of the reason so many men chose to box. Yet Stef’s drive tonight seemed to be bent on self-punishment. He wanted Bear to hit him.

Realizing this self-destructive push, Bear called a halt to their session. Stef collapsed against the wall and slid to the mat, too tired to even lift his hands.

Worried, Bear squatted down and removed Stef’s headgear, gloves and bandages, as the younger man’s arms were shaking too much.

“What’s got into you, Stef?” The older trainer realized that Stef was deeply troubled, but doubted that he would learn the reasons behind it.

Stef just shook his head and grunted, but didn’t speak.

Exasperated, Bear tugged Stef to his feet without resistance.

“Up. You’re crashing here tonight. You’re in no shape to drive.”

Bear guided Stef upstairs to his apartment above the gym. Stef collapsed onto the old familiar brown couch, the same one he normally slept on after taking part in a circuit fight. Bear let him be. Within minutes he was snoring softly, sound asleep.

Once Stef started snoring Bear switched on his television, keeping the volume low. He absently ate some leftover Chinese takeout, paying scant attention to the Sunday night news broadcast. He perked
up when it started a new segment about one of the wealthiest businessmen in the city.

Bear nearly choked on his Lo Mein noodles when the name “Stannis Baratheon” was paired up with a photo of the man who was currently snoring on his couch. Making sure Stef was still asleep, Bear watched the rest of the segment without tearing his eyes away.

Good evening everyone and thank you for joining us.

Tonight we begin with a look at how one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Westeros may be hiding a dark underbelly.

Stannis Baratheon, middle brother of the three who helm the powerful Baratheon Industries, has been known for years as the least social of the brothers and the one with the hardest nose when it comes to negotiating a deal.

But does he also have the hardest fist when it comes to throwing a punch? KKKL's exclusive investigation has turned up this arrest report dating back five years ago. In it, the then thirty-one year old Baratheon was charged with aggravated assault and battery after brutally beating two men in a bar fight. He pled no contest to the felony and walked away with just a ten thousand dollar fine and a year's probation. According to the police report, at the time of his arrest Baratheon had a blood alcohol content of more than twice the legal limit.

Bear glanced back at the couch where Stef still slept. He couldn’t believe it! His prize fighter, Stef, was actually the famous business exec and multi-millionaire Stannis Baratheon. As he turned back to the news program Bear wondered how the man had managed to keep this secret for so many years.

And the violent tendencies may have only escalated. This now-infamous internet video shows Stannis Baratheon taking on three men in a street brawl just last month. And as you can see, he put them all down with bloody, bone-crunching brutality.

Though slapped into cuffs and sent to jail that night, Baratheon was released the next day without any charges being filed against him. Is this another example of King’s Landing’s dual justice system - one for the rich and powerful, and another for the rest of us? When contacted by this station, the prosecutor’s office refused to comment.

As you can see in this recent amateur video, his run-ins with police appear to be on-going. Stannis Baratheon was reportedly questioned by police during a music festival in Pembroke a few weeks ago. Our sources say he was not detained and left without incident, but notice the young redhead in his arms here at the festival and later that same day in these more "intimate" embraces taken during a visit to a nearby beach. If she looks familiar, that's because she's the same girl you saw him rescue during that street brawl last month.

The young lady has been spotted with Baratheon on numerous occasions since that dramatic rescue, often sharing intimate moments. We've identified her as nineteen year old Sansa Stark, daughter of wealthy businessman and well-known philanthropist Ned Stark, whose family traces its heritage back thousands of years to the original Kings of Winter.

Sources say the tight-knit and conservative Starks are not pleased that their oldest daughter is seeing a man nearly twice her age, a man who also sports a felony conviction for a violent offense.
Sources within Baratheon Industries say there is also tension between the three brothers ever since Stannis started seeing the young Stark lady.

As the corporate giant is privately owned, there are no shareholders to answer to, but one has to wonder if the erratic behavior of the company's number two man will have an effect on any of the ten thousand jobs the Baratheons provide all over Westeros.

In addition to raised eyebrows and family tensions, all this attention on Stannis Baratheon and his teenage girlfriend has also reminded everyone what happened the last time a beautiful Stark girl was loved by a Baratheon.

It's been nearly twenty-five years now since the rape and murder of teenager Lyanna Stark. That horrible crime remains unsolved to this day. At the time of her death, the eighteen year old was dating Robert Baratheon, Stannis Baratheon's older brother. The similarities between the two young Stark women has had all eyes looking back to the past and one of modern Westeros' most notorious crimes. Join us next week when we take an in-depth look at the life and death of Lyanna Stark and whether her young niece may be following in her tragic footsteps.

Bear turned at the grunting sound that came from the couch. Stef's - no, Stannis Baratheon's - stormy dark blue eyes bored into his own.

“How you know.”

Chapter End Notes

Big thanks to TommyGinger for acting as my sounding board and beta-reader!
Chapter 15

After Stannis left Sansa managed to avoid her mother for most of the day. She took the time to soak in the tub, empty her bag and just unwind.

Taking advantage of the relative solitude, Sansa uploaded the pictures from her phone to her computer to view them on the large screen. Translating the photo of the previous evening’s sunset to an oil pastel drawing absorbed her concentration and distracted her from thinking about Stannis.

After she was done, she closed out the sunset photo, but the selfie she had taken of the two of them remained blown up on the screen. As her fingers traced the shape of his face on the screen she noted the slight crinkles at the corners of his eyes, and the upturn of his mouth into a small but genuine smile. But mostly she studied his piercing blue eyes, which had been intently focused on her.

She found herself wishing for Stannis’ quiet companionship already, even though he had only been gone for a few hours. So much had happened over the last twenty-four hours, and her emotions had swung like a pendulum from one extreme to the other. But one thing was certain; she didn’t like being away from him.

“That’s a good picture of you two.” Ned’s voice startled Sansa.

“Oh! Hi Dad. Yeah, I don’t think Stannis realized I was taking it, otherwise he never would have let me.” Stannis had resisted all of Sansa’s attempts to take his picture - he thought it far too vain.

His eyes drifted back to the computer screen and the selfie Sansa had taken.

“I’d never seen a look like that on Stannis’ face before this afternoon. Never. You put that there, Sansa.”

His words jumped out Sansa as rather odd. “This afternoon?”

“I wasn’t entirely sure Sansa until today, when he and I talked. But now I know just how important you are to him. And he is to you.”

Ned crossed the room to stand right behind Sansa’s chair, giving her shoulder a quick squeeze before sitting down. He coughed and turned bright red, clearly bothered by something. Sansa quickly figured out why.

Ned pointed to the hickey on her neck and frowned darkly.

“What’s this? Did Stannis do that?” Ned practically barked. He never spoke like that to her.

Sansa bristled and rolled her eyes, annoyed. “Dad....” What could she say, anyway?

“A gentleman wouldn’t do that, Sansa. Was Stannis...pushy?”

Sansa knew exactly what her father was asking. Did Stannis force her to have sex? Face hot, she shook her head, unable to meet his eyes right away. She didn’t want to have this conversation with her parents, and certainly not with her father. Embarrassed, Sansa wanted to burrow under her bed.

“No, Dad! Stannis treats me really well. He’s kind, gentle, and fun to be with. Can we just not do this? Please? You have to let me grow up sometime.”
Wistful regret flitted across Ned’s face as he regarded his daughter.

“Ah, Sansa, it’s hard for me to acknowledge it. I know you’re nineteen now, and I trust your judgment. But I remember being your age too, and living for the moment. Stannis is much older than you are, and I know how much you mean to him now. Still, I expect him to treat you like gold. Don’t let him do anything less.”

Sansa smiled and hugged her father. She just wished her mother was as supportive.

Straightening up, Ned walked to the door, but turned to address her with a stern countenance.

“One more thing. I told Stannis he’d better not get you pregnant. I’m not ready to become a grandfather just yet.”

“Dad!”

His expression relaxed into a mixture of fondness and regret.

“I just want you to be careful Sansa. And more importantly, I want Stannis to be careful with you. And safe. I’m not...ready for this, but I guess I have to be. That’s all I’ll say on the matter, I promise. But if you don’t hide that mark on your neck your mother will go ballistic.”

Blushing, Sansa nodded and ducked her head, embarrassed. She just wished her Dad would just leave it.

Ned’s words did bring up a potential problem that Sansa had avoided thinking about. What if she end up pregnant? She loved spending time with babies and young children, and had often found summer jobs babysitting. But was she ready to become a mother so soon? Stannis had reassured her that he would support any decision she might make, but Sansa didn’t think that she could discard something that was a part of them both.

Still, she fretted for several minutes. She knew her mother would rail against both herself and Stannis, assuming she did end up pregnant. She recalled Catelyn cautioning her against the possibility of pregnancy months earlier, even though she hadn’t been dating anyone at the time.

“I started having children too soon, Sansa, and I don’t want you to miss the opportunities that I missed.”

Sansa had been confused. “But I thought having a large family was yours and Dad’s dream.”

Catelyn sounded wistful. “Yes, but I always wanted to have a career and chance to make a name for myself first. But I didn’t even finish college before I became pregnant with Robb. I want you to have the chance that I never had. I need to see you build your own name and business career independent of anyone else.”

Pacing, Sansa worried about her mother’s inevitable disappointment if she were pregnant. Then she worried even more about what the media and news reporters would say. Undoubtedly Stannis’ good name would be tarnished if the newspapers disclosed that he had gotten his young teenage girlfriend pregnant. What would he do if a scandal like that caused his family’s business to suffer?

One thing was certain. She wouldn’t know for days yet, and sitting here avoiding her mother
Sansa had found a collared shirt, let her hair down and artfully applied some foundation to her neck in order to hide the hickey. Luckily Catelyn never noticed. The evening was going well until the Sunday night news show started playing. She watched the hit piece on Stannis play out like some bad dream, feeling both angry and personally violated.

Catelyn was less than pleased, mouth set in a firm, thin line.

“I knew something was off! Did you know about this, Sansa? Did you know Stannis has a criminal conviction?”

Inside, Sansa seethed at her mother’s judgmental tone, but decided to play it cool.

“Of course I did, Mom. He told me all about it on our first date weeks ago. Who cares? It happened years ago. Besides, you don’t complain about Robert. He’s been in numerous scandals and bar fights over the years. What’s the difference?”

“The difference is you are dating him! A man with a violent felony conviction in his past. This doesn’t look good for our family.”

Arya poked her head into the room. “Big deal. Gendry got arrested last month for trespassing. And a year ago for stealing a welder. They still let him enroll in trade school, and we’re going to the movies this week.”

Cat whirled on Arya but she had already skipped out of the room. Sansa felt a surge of affection for her often-difficult younger sister - Arya had butted in at the perfect moment.

Ned became the next target of Catelyn’s wrath. “Don’t tell me you knew too, Eddard Stark.”

“Of course I did, Cat. Robert told me all about it when it happened. Cut the man some slack; it was over five years ago, and his wife had dropped divorce papers on him without warning.”

Ned turned more pensive. “I’m more concerned about who’s behind these hit pieces. They keep bringing up my sister, too. I’m afraid the focus is going to shift now, and they’ll probably delve into Brandon’s downward spiral and overdose. And who knows what else. It’s as if someone is deliberately trying to smear both the Baratheon and Stark names.”

“I still don’t like any of this,” Cat muttered.

“There’s nothing we do, Cat, until they start overtly stalking Sansa or telling outright lies. I’ll call our attorney in the morning, though, to get some advice.”

Sansa returned to her room to call Stannis. She needed to tell him what had been broadcast, and find out what he thought about it. Mostly, though, she just wanted to listen to his gruff yet comforting voice.

Unfortunately Stannis didn’t pick up the call. Sansa left him a voicemail, then tossed the phone aside in favor of sketching.

She pounced on the phone when it rang a short while later, but it was only Margaery. She had seen the news broadcast as well, and wanted to give Sansa some encouragement. Sansa refused, however, to give Margaery any details of what occurred on the boat. That was still too private, too new, too...much.
It was nearing midnight and Stannis still hadn’t called her back. Sansa knew he wasn’t attached to his phone like she and most younger people were, but still she worried. What would he think of the news piece and revelation? How would he react once he found out?


Stannis pinched the bridge of his nose in yet another futile attempt to stem the oncoming headache. He had been swamped with meetings for nearly the entire day. Not only did he have his own responsibilities, but he had to stand in for Robert at client meetings as well. His older brother had not come to the Tower at all. Stannis knew why. That damned news program.

Robert had drunkenly called him in the middle of the night, shortly after he returned home from Fury Road.

“Schwear to me, Stanny, Schwear that you’ll keep her safe.”

Stannis didn’t have to ask who Robert was referring to: Sansa.

“You know I will, Robert. Now go to sleep. You are obviously too drunk to think or speak clearly.”

“Don’t you fail. I failed her, Stanny. I failed Lyanna. And then she died, got killed, ‘cuz of me.”

“I assure you, Robert, that I will always protect Sansa. I am hanging up now. Go to sleep. Good night.”

“Lyanna…” Robert’s voice trailed off drunkenly, then the call had ended.

Mollifying Robert had been the least of Stannis’ concerns. Dealing with Bear’s knowledge of his true identity had taken more time. The old fighter had a certain built-in integrity, and had been someone Stannis had come to trust over the years. Last night he had put that trust to the test.

The older fighter had a few questions. “Why?”

“I needed the challenge.” His other motivations for fighting were too private, too personal to divulge.

“What do I call you now?” Bear shifted nervously, uncharacteristically so. Was it Stannis’ real-life position and wealth that made him uncomfortable?

“Stef. Always. That’s who I am here. No need to change.”

“This is risky, Stef. You set yourself up for blackmail. Me too, if anyone finds out that I know the truth. Now I get why you’ve been making noises about getting out.”

Bear had frowned then, perturbed. “They postponed the final match until after the elections. I don’t see how you could fight without getting recognized. Your face is all over TV now.”

Stannis had started pacing, his earlier exhaustion wiped away by a surge of adrenalin.

“Baelish already knows, Bear. I’m sure of it now. But he’s keeping quiet, don’t know why.”
Stannis thought he did know why, and why the hit piece had been aired, but hadn’t wanted to give Bear any more information. The less Bear knew the safer he would be. And if Stannis had his way, that final match would never occur.

“Now what?”

“Now I go home. I’ll still be here to train, same as always. And you’ll still treat me as Stef. We don’t change anything.”

Late Monday afternoon Stannis met with Renly, who had also stood in for Robert at some client meetings that Stannis couldn’t attend. The brothers compared notes for nearly an hour, amazingly enough without argument. He thought that perhaps Renly was finally growing up and taking his position seriously.

“Did you see that hit piece on TV last night, Stannis?” Renly eventually asked, oddly thoughtful, his tone lacking the usual snark.

Stannis had hoped Renly would just let it be.

He nodded. “Sansa doesn’t deserve this.” He had wanted to keep her free of his tarnished past.

“You couldn’t hope to keep your conviction a secret forever, Stannis, or your relationship with her either. You might as well take Sansa someplace big and open now. Let the paparazzi get their thrills and be done with you. Once the novelty wears off they’ll find someone else to focus on.”

Renly’s words caused him to remember something Sansa had said, in reference to Baelish. *He said I was too special to be out in the world - the world and the public didn't deserve to see or know me. I think he wanted to coop me up, like a rare prized macaw or something.*

He would not be like Petyr Baelish. As possessive as he had come to feel about her, Stannis would not allow himself to treat Sansa as anything less than an independent being who deserved to live her life in the world. Reckless energy surged through Stannis.

“You are correct Renly, and you will help me.”

Earlier Stannis had noticed the envelope from the King’s Landing Metropolitan Opera sitting on Renly’s desk. Recalling Sansa talking about the Opera billing they had seen at the coffee house, he outlined his intentions to his younger brother.

“No way Stannis. I already promised Loras that he and I would go on opening night. You’ll just have to use the box a different night.”

“I don't think so. This is the first time I’ve ever had reason to use our family’s box seats. I’m taking priority for once. Like you said, I should make a big splash.”

Renly snatched the envelope, then paled and backed away as Stannis stalked towards him.

“These are mine…” Renly jumped when his back hit the wall, but he had nowhere to turn. Stannis put him in a tight headlock with little effort. He intended to assert himself for once, and if Renly wouldn't give them up willingly, oh well. It wasn't until much later that he would realize how abnormal his aggressive actions towards his brother really were.

As big as he was, Renly lacked the skill or strength to struggle free from Stannis, who outweighed
his younger brother by at least thirty pounds and held him motionless with an iron-tight grip.

“You were saying, little brother?”

Renly squeaked, voice somewhat muffled against Stannis’ ribs. “I was saying yes, of course you can have the box seats for opening night at the Opera.”

“Good lad.” Stannis released his brother, appropriated the box tickets and left Renly’s office for his own.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Renly’s uneven shout followed him out the door. “You owe me, Stannis, big time!”

Energized, Stannis dismissed Renly from his thoughts almost immediately as he reflected on the whirlwind weekend. Sansa had wormed her way into his heart as no other woman ever had. She had really taken to the sea, boating, and, dare he say it, himself. Her total acceptance made him want more than ever to give her something special in return.

On the boat he had really hoped to find a few pearls for her, just to see her face light up. Stannis remembered back to the time his father had taken him to a private jeweler in King’s Landing. The Baratheons had patronized the exclusive shop for generations. Steffon had been shopping for a gift for Cassana’s birthday, and had brought Stannis along for the experience. He decided to make an appointment with them in hopes of finding Sansa some pearls.

The attendant on the phone at first told Stannis that the first available appointment was several weeks out, but changed her tune when he mentioned his name, and scheduled him for a viewing that very same evening.

Before driving to the jeweler Stannis gave Sansa a quick phone call, apologizing for not calling earlier. She fretted about the news program, but at this point he told her there was nothing they could do about it. He asked her if she was free to attend a formal event with him the following Friday, which she confirmed immediately, then arranged to meet her for dinner Wednesday night. He wished she could be at his side every night. The hustle and troubles of everyday life seemed to fade away whenever they were together.

The shop’s staff ushered Stannis into the large back room where most of the actual sales and viewing took place. They offered him champagne, which he refused, and a comfortable seat while they notified the owner of his arrival. Restless, Stannis couldn’t stay seated for long, and paced as he waited for the shop’s owner to appear.

The jeweler, Mr. Binksman, briskly introduced himself to Stannis after just a moment’s hesitation. Stannis did not miss the slight pause. “Is something amiss?”

The old jeweler regarded Stannis with a familiarity that didn’t seem warranted.

“For a moment I thought time had turned backwards, and Steffon stood before me instead. You are the very image of your father, Mr. Baratheon. He patronized this shop quite often when seeking gifts for your lovely mother. It’s been years since a Baratheon has entered my store.”

Cersei had used her own jeweler, Renly and Loras had different tastes than Binksman’s wares, and Stannis had never felt the need to give Selyse jewelry before, as she generally did not wear any at all.

But with Sansa, all that changed. He wanted to give her something meaningful to them both, and pearls fit the bill. Plus he wanted to see her wear something he had given her, something that showed
that she was his.

“I’m looking for pearls for a special young lady. Show me what you have, please.”

As the jeweler sent his assistants scurrying with instructions, Stannis glanced around the opulent showroom. His eyes lingered momentarily on the case of diamonds. Not yet.

Mr. Binksman showed Stannis several different strands of pearls, some white, some pink, some silver. All were exquisite but seemed fairly ordinary, not quite what Stannis had in mind. He wanted something special, something unique for his girl.

Stannis dismissed them all with a wave of his hand as he rose to explore the showroom. A display cabinet stood alone in a dim corner, its shiny dark occupants snaring his attention.

The jeweler nodded. “Of course, I should have realized this immediately. You have the same tastes as your father. Come, look.”

Stannis found himself enthralled by the simple double strand necklace of natural smoke black pearls. They seemed to glow darkly, iridescent with hints of azur, violet and emerald green. He envisioned himself clasping them around Sansa’s perfect neck. Mine.

“These are natural oceanic black pearls, evenly graded and perfectly matched by size and color. Very rare. This necklace and the matching bracelet is a one of a kind set, Mr. Baratheon.”

“I’ll take them.”

Stannis didn’t blink at the exorbitant price, nor did he haggle. He had found the perfect gift, one he knew for certain would please Sansa. Her wearing them would be a statement for all of King’s Landing to see when they went to the Opera. Sansa belonged to him.
Early Tuesday evening Davos was interrupted by a knock at his office door from a uniformed police officer. He was trying to put his notes on the gambling ring and circuit fights into some semblance of order.

“Pardon me, Detective, but we arrested a subject in Flea Bottom today that you might be interested in.”

Not looking up, Davos continued transferring his written notes into the computer.

“Oh? What’d he do?”

“He’s a bookie who runs a small gambling table in Flea Bottom. He was taking bets on some fight when we arrested him. My sergeant says that you’re the one working the investigation on those illegal fights - he figured you might want to talk to this guy.”

“Maybe. What’s his name?”

“William Sanders. Goes by Billy.”

That got Davos’ full attention. Billy was one of his informants from Flea Bottom.

“I’ll see him. Move him to Room 2.”

A short while later Davos entered the interrogation room where Billy was being held. A short, slender man with a thin face and close set eyes, Billy looked up and gave Davos a lopsided grin in greeting. He slouched back in his chair, and kicked his feet up on the table.

“Detective D, it’s been a while.”

“Hello, Billy. What have you been up these days?”

“Oh, you know, the usual.”

Davos sighed. He always had to warm Billy up to get him to talk. Something out of place caught his eye.

“Nice watch, Billy. The only people I know that wear a watch like that are far above my pay grade. Where’d you get the money to buy that?”

Billy grinned. “Business has been good lately. Really good.”

“Huh. I bet. Isn’t it your business that landed you in here today?”
“Maybe. What of it?”

“Seems to me you and I had an agreement, Billy, if you recall. You help me; I help you. So help me out. The arresting sergeant said you were taking bets on some fight. I remember telling you last time we met up that I needed information on those fights, yet here we are, and you haven’t told me anything. I might just have to send your paperwork over to the Prosecutor’s office. I know you don’t have your own attorney - you’d have to rely on the public defender.”

Billy swung his feet off the table and sat up. He huffed.

“Fine, have it your way. I made a fair bit of cash on the last fight. What made it sweeter is that I actually got to see it. The semi-finals, man, and it was freakin’ awesome!”

"Is that so, Billy? I'm so happy for you, I'm sure that must have made your week. But if you don't provide me with some useful information, I don't think you'll be quite so happy with me. I need a bit more than 'it was freakin' awesome.' So tell me where this fight occurred."

"I dunno. They put a hood over me in the car. Anyway, don't tell nobody, because we wasn't s'posed to bring in a camera phone, but I managed to record some of that fight. It was intense. And it was packed. Felt like we were watching those Roman gladiators - the crowd was nuts."

Davos stepped out and asked the officer on duty to bring him Billy’s belongings. Snagging the bookie’s smartphone, he re-entered the interrogation room.

“Show me.”

“Check this out. They call the bigger fighter Silent Stef. He’s the reason I made so much money.”

Billy started playing a video he had recorded. The venue was dark, but Davos could tell that hundreds of people had been in the audience, cheering and waving their arms. He focused on the fighters themselves. He couldn't see their faces clearly, but both men were quite tall and solidly built. One moved in a manner familiar to Davos.

“Forward that video to my phone, Billy.” The man acquiesced, and a moment later Davos’ phone buzzed indicating the file had been received. Then Billy started playing the video again.

"This is the good part. That young guy, his name’s Jared, I know him from Flea Bottom. Anyway, he hit Stef real hard above the eye. Bled all over the place. The big guy got real mad after that, and he knocked Jared out cold. They say Jared had a concussion, broken ribs, busted nose and jaw and a burst spleen. It's been over three weeks and they say he's still in the hospital. Stef fucked him up."

“Which hospital, Billy?”

“I heard he was over at Research Med Center. I dunno how Jared can afford that med bill, ‘cause he ain’t worked in months. Place he worked at went bankrupt and let everyone go.”

“Tough times, Billy, tend to breed desperate men. Now show me the rest of this video.”

Davos watched the rest of the recording which included the brutal conclusion to the fight. He winced as he watched Stef hit Jared three times in quick succession. The low punch on the ribcage must have been how Jared ended up with a burst spleen and broken ribs. The next two punches delivered powerful blows to the head - the first broke Jared’s nose and snapped his head back. The second strike behind the jaw sent the younger fighter crashing to the mat where he lay unmoving, face covered in blood.
Davos clenched his jaw as the winner of the fight paced around his prone, defeated opponent. Stef’s aggressive, dominant posture demonstrated his satisfaction in delivering such a horrific defeat to the younger man. The raw violence of the fights had to be put to an end, Davos thought. Too many young men like Jared would end up paying a terrible price if the circuit fights continued.

Davos got right in Billy's face, scowling. He was done playing nice.

"Billy, tell me everything you know about this Stef fellow."

"I don't know much, Detective D, I swear. I ain't ever met him. Jared is the only one I ever knew that fought, and I didn’t even know it 'til that night when I saw him in the ring. I just arrange small time bets, that's it."

Billy's eyes had grown wide, but Davos knew he was holding back at least some information.

"Oi! You can do better than that, Billy. Do you really want to head over to County?" Davos nodded his head towards the door of his office, indicating the holding cells down the hall.

"Now, tell me everything."

Billy's pale blue eyes reflected honest fear. "OK, here's what I know. They call him Silent Stef. He's older than the other fighters and he don't talk to no one. He's fuckin' cold, man, cold. It's like this guy fights just because he likes it. He gets his kicks out of it, they say. But ain't nobody seen him smile or laugh."

"Where does he train, Billy? Who's his trainer?"

Davos might have found his one big break, if he could get Billy to open up just a little more.

"No way, Detective D, I can't tell you that. I'd be floating in the bay."

"Tell me or head to County. You think they won't know that you've been talking to me, Billy? You won't be safe in County."

Billy shook his head, sweating. But Davos knew he had him. "Fury Road, man, Fury Road. The owner is called Bear. That's all I got."

“Are you sure about that, Billy? When’s the next fight?"

“I dunno, I swear. There’s no set schedule for these things. Usually the word gets out less than a week before it happens. All I know is that Silent Stef is gonna fight in the big finale. There’s a lot of money riding on that last fight, and right now the odds on the street are in his favor.”

“What else do you know about the finale?"

Billy bit his lip and looked away for a moment, frowning. His shoulders hunched in, and his voice was quiet.

“I heard that it’s going to be worse than the regular fights. Bare-knuckles. Supposedly it’s really rough. No separate rounds, no rules, no one can tap out. It’ll just be one long fight until one of them is unconscious. Or dead. And there’s some that got money ridin’ on Stef delivering a deathblow.”

I have to stop this, somehow. With this information the investigation into the circuit fights just became Davos’ number one priority.

“Who is financing these fights, Billy? There has to be someone with deep pockets behind them.”
“I don’t know any names, just something about a bird. That’s it, honest.”

“Well, that’s a start. Good job, Billy, good job. I'll be sure to clear your paperwork. See you around.”

As he turned to leave the room Davos paused and looked back at the young street bookie.

“One more thing, Billy. The instant you hear word of the final fight, you tell me, got it? You give me the break I need, I’ll take care of you. That’s been our agreement, and I won’t go back on it.”

Davos returned to his desk and his stacks of files. The only name he had to go on was Stef. It had to be an alias, and a shortened one at that. It would take him some time to find any reference of a fighter named Stef, but it was the only solid lead he had. That, and Fury Road. A visit to the club might be in order, but he wanted to find any files and references pertaining to this Stef fellow first.

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The next morning Davos searched all of the police department’s databases, computerized arrest records, and digitized files, but only found one reference that might pertain to his subject. A cross-reference in the computer record on Fury Road included a list of the gym’s members, one of which was Stefan Esterman.

He could not find any other record of Stefan Esterman. Not even a driver’s license or birth certificate. The next step was to order all physical files pertaining to the illegal fighting from the archives warehouse. It could take days for him to review all those boxes of files, but he had no other choice. The only reason a complete computer record of Stefan Esterman didn’t exist must have been due to clerical error.

The first delivery of files, some ten boxes worth, would arrive at the station later in the day. Davos opted to take a break from searching computer databases and visit the hospital. Sometimes old fashioned boots on the ground detective work trumped digital searches.

By the time Davos reached the hospital he had already learned some useful information concerning the young fighter named Jared. His full name was Michael Jared Grayson, age twenty-one. The young man’s mother had died when he was only sixteen, forcing him to drop out of high school to work. He had one arrest for petty theft but no other criminal records.

At the hospital Davos approached an acquaintance in the accounting department. Joe used to work in Records at the police station, and had often helped Davos with information searches.

“Hey Joe, I need some help on case, but I’m pretty sure privacy regulations would prevent your manager from giving me the info I need. Can you help me out?”

Joe glanced around first to be sure no one was listening. From what Davos could see, the office was largely deserted.

“You’re in luck, Davos. Everyone went out to a going away party. I’ll help you, but this is strictly off the record, or I’ll get fired. I know you wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t pertinent to a case. What do you need?”

“Tell me how a destitute young man from Flea Bottom, lacking a steady income or health insurance, could possibly afford medical treatment here, at the most elite private hospital in King’s Landing. It doesn’t make sense.”

Joe entered Jared’s information into his search screen, but shook his head.
“This is weird, Davos. Whoever arranged for his care and payment is anonymous; all we have is a private account number from the Iron Bank in Braavos.”

“Well, we both know that’s a dead end. Braavosi banking laws prohibit the sharing of client or account information with anybody. Thanks for the help Joe. Here’s a couple of tickets to the KLU basketball tournament this weekend. Marya and I can’t go.”

Joe took the tickets gratefully, and gave Davos one last tip. “I don’t have any other info, Davos, but go see my friend Manny in Admissions. I think he could help you out. I’ll let him know that you’re on the way.”

Manny in the admissions department gave Davos a little more information, but none that could lead him to the underground fight circuit.

“Why wasn’t Jared brought to City Hospital? Isn’t that the public hospital? That’s where most people from Flea Bottom go.” Davos himself had spent a few nights in that hospital’s ER during his impoverished youth.

“Mr. Grayson was originally sent to City Hospital, Detective, but in addition to his other injuries he also exhibited signs of brain trauma. Once an MRI confirmed intracranial swelling, they transferred Mr. Grayson to our location as we have an advanced neurosurgery unit.”

Davos felt alarm creep in. “Does Mr. Grayson suffer from brain damage now?” Please say no, please say no.

“Beyond symptoms of a severe concussion, no. In fact, we released him last week. A home health care group sends nurse practitioners to his apartment once a day now to check on him, deliver his meds and meal shakes. They may be able to tell you who has arranged for that aspect of his care.”

“And one more thing, Detective. I helped you out as a favor to Joe. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention me as the source of this information.”

“You got it. Thanks again, Manny.”

Relieved, Davos left the hospital and drove into Flea Bottom. He reflected on the blatant hopelessness of the residents as he drove through the narrow, pothole ridden streets of his former neighborhood. The contents of sidewalk trash barrels spilled over onto the pavement below, and more than one rat could be spotted scurrying along the gutters. A few businesses seemed to be open, lights on behind the iron grates protecting the windows. Many other storefronts had been boarded up, as their operators had simply run out of cash.

Fans sat in windows of the many apartments on the upper floors of the old wood and brick buildings. The heat and humidity hung over the streets like a heavy blanket, accentuating the stench of the nearby landfill, but most folks could not afford air conditioning. Men and women sat sweating on doorsteps in grungy tank tops, smoking cigarettes or sharing drinks from bottles hidden in brown paper bags. Some stared vacantly at his car as he passed. No one smiled or laughed.

Davos turned down an even narrower side street and parked near a closed-down café. Then he just sat for a moment, collecting his thoughts. If hadn’t busted his ass in high school to earn a scholarship to KLU, he might still be living here in Flea Bottom. No doubt he’d be scraping for odd jobs much as his uncles had done, maybe working small time bets like Billy. Or even getting into the underground fight scene like Jared.

That scholarship and his improbable friendship with Stannis Baratheon were what had propelled
Davos out of poverty. He recalled the miserable summer between his sophomore and junior years. His uncles and cousins had needed extra help for a cargo shipment they were unloading, and promised to pay him well. What they hadn’t told him was that they had smuggled the goods illegally. When the police busted them at the docks he and his relatives were all arrested. For his one phone call, Davos only knew of one person he trusted. Stannis.

Stannis hadn’t asked Davos any questions, he just sent a lawyer to the station. Davos didn’t even know the cost of the legal fees; all he knew was that Stannis’ lawyer had kept him out of prison and got him off with just a misdemeanor. For that alone Davos would be forever grateful; thanks to Stannis his future hadn’t been squandered.

Moping would not help him find answers. A glass door on the left opened to a dimly lit stairway leading to the apartments above. Davos looked at the list just inside the door, then trotted up the dirty stairs to the second floor. Jared’s apartment was located right over the front of the café.

He knocked on the door and waited. A moment later a young man opened the door just a crack, leaving the security chain in place.

Davos displayed his badge through the narrow opening. “Michael Jared Grayson? My name is Detective Seaworth, with KLPD. I’m conducting an investigation and would like to ask you a few questions. May I come in?”

The man studied his badge, nodded, then undid the chain and opened his door fully. Inside Davos could see that his apartment was basically one large room, with an efficiency kitchen lining one wall and a small table tucked up under a window. Meal replacement shakes and several bottles of prescription medications were scattered across the table’s surface. Jared retreated to his couch and sat down gingerly. Picking up a notebook and pen, he started writing.

JAW WIRED. CAN’T TALK.

Davos studied the healing man. A fading green and yellow bruise still cast a shadow across a portion of his face and jaw. He wore no shirt as the apartment’s air was absolutely stifling, even though a fan blew air from the window. Purple, green and yellow bruises liberally dotted Jared’s torso. An incision on his left side indicated the spot where doctors had removed his spleen.

“That’s all right, Jared. Do you mind if I call you Jared?” The injured man shook his head.

“Very well. Jared, my name is Davos Seaworth. I’m a detective with King’s Landing Police Department. No need for alarm, you aren’t in trouble. I’m just hoping that you can help me.”

Jared tapped the paper in annoyance as he regarded Davos with a scowl.

“I know your jaw is wired shut; I don’t need anything but a few answers. Can you do that for me?”

Jared looked at Davos for a moment, then nodded.

“Good. Just look at this picture for me.”

Without saying anything else Davos displayed a still photo of Stef taken from the grainy fight video. He simply wanted to gauge Jared’s reaction.

Jared did not disappoint. His eyes grew wide and sweat immediately started to drip down his face.

“Is this the man that put you here, Jared?”
Jared looked at Davos and then looked out the window, unwilling to answer. Davos reached out and gently gripped the young man’s shoulder and made sure he paid attention. He spoke softly, with sympathy and understanding.

“Jared, I know about the underground fights, and why you were there. It’s tough to pay the rent when jobs are hard to come by. I know; I grew up in Flea Bottom too, and my own Da couldn’t always find steady work. I’m not investigating you, lad, and nobody will know that I’ve been talking to you. But I need to know. Is this the man you fought in the circuit? Is he the one that inflicted these injuries on you?”

Jared held Davos’ eyes and nodded decisively. Davos felt his own pulse rise. “Can you write his name for me, and describe him?”

Looking down Davos watched as the young man printed out the letters one a time.

STEF.

More words appeared.

TALLER THAN ME, A LOT OLDER TOO. BUZZED HEAD. DARK BLUE EYES. DARK HAIR. GASH OVER EYE, PROBABLY HAS A SCAR NOW. TRAINER STITCHED HIM UP.

Davos was about to take the notepad when Jared continued writing.

NOT HIS FAULT. MY CHOICE TO FIGHT. NO JOB AFTER SHOP WENT UNDER.

“So you’d rather work an honest job?”

Jared nodded, and pointed to another table that Davos hadn’t noticed before. Exquisitely crafted, it looked out of place in this dingy studio apartment.

“You’re a carpenter? That’s some fine workmanship. You have real talent.”

Getting up, Davos made to leave when the mess on the main table drew his attention. He turned back to Jared.

“How are you getting those meal shakes and meds, Jared? You can’t travel yet, can you?”

NURSES VISIT EVERY DAY.

“That’s good to hear. But who pays for that? And how about your rent and expenses?”

Jared shrugged his shoulders. RENT PAID FOR 6 MONTHS. DON’T KNOW WHO DID IT.

Davos handed Jared his card.

“Keep my contact info. If you need anything, text or email me.”

Davos returned to the police station, determined to put the pieces of his puzzle together. He reviewed the notepad of Jared’s written conversation, just to keep it fresh in his memory. Jared’s description of Stef stood out. Dark blue eyes. Buzzed head. Gash over eye. Stitches.

Another memory came to mind, unbidden, of Stannis meeting him at the café a few weeks ago. His friend had a bruise on his cheek and stitches above his right eye, and only a few days growth of beard. His hair also had been cut close to the scalp by clippers.
Keeping that day in mind, Davos sent the video of the fight to his computer and watched it in high definition on the large screen. The absolute brutality exhibited in the ring sickened him as much as it had seemed to excite the crowd. With each heavy blow the spectators cheered louder.

He focused his attention on the larger man, Stef. Again and again Stef landed heavy punches on Jared. Each time the younger man was knocked back Stef seemed to gain strength and energy. Davos couldn’t see his face clearly, but the older man’s rage became evident after Jared had landed the punch above his eyebrow, causing blood to flow freely down Stef’s face and onto Jared’s shoulder. The noise of the crowd drowned out all other sounds.

Near the end Davos noticed something that he hadn’t paid attention to during his first viewing with Billy. A split second turn of the winner gave Davos a good view of Stef’s face in profile. The picture was still grainy, but clear enough to make Davos hit pause and study it.

Davos did not like what he saw, but it was all starting to add up. Jared’s description of Stef, the video of the fight plus Stannis’ facial injuries were too much of a coincidence. He desperately wanted to doubt himself and what he had seen.

It tore him up to think that Stannis, the man who had pulled him up out of a hellhole existence, might now be involved in the violent criminal underworld. Stannis, who had arranged for an attorney and kept him out of jail. Stannis, who had paid for the rest of his tuition when KLU revoked the scholarship. Stannis, who had written a glowing recommendation when he applied to the police department. Stannis, who had been his best friend for half his life, yet now was suspect in a criminal investigation.

His friend had been under increasing pressure for the past few years, but somehow he had missed all the signs. Then the blood test at the station came back positive for Spike. Davos had swapped the results, hoping it was just a fluke in the test, refusing to believe his best friend had resorted to illegal drug use. But when he and Stannis had met at the café a few weeks ago he had recognized the classic symptoms of withdrawal in his old friend - irritability, inattention, inability to sit still.

The confirmation came when Stannis had started dipping tobacco. His old friend had always frowned upon people’s use of tobacco, yet now he himself used it. And the way his eyes had dilated even though it had been sunny had been another sign that the snuff delivered more than just nicotine. Why would Stannis start using Spike? And did he even realize he was taking it?

Davos also worried about Stannis’ growing romantic interest in Sansa. He had seen enough men hopped up on Spike to know they behaved very aggressively, and unfortunately women often felt the brunt of the drugged men’s actions via assault and rape. Stannis himself had shown signs of aggression. Davos was no fool; he knew that Stannis had the capability and strength to injure nearly anyone. He feared that Sansa might inadvertently be in danger from Stannis himself. Davos’ duty to protect the innocent meant that he needed to confront his friend, and soon.

Before any confrontation, Davos had to dig through every file, every database, every sheet of paper referencing the circuit fights. Regretful yet resolute, he started to dig through the boxes of files piled up in his office.

Late that evening Davos finally opened the last box of files. The manifest on the outside, like all the other boxes, did not indicate any subject with the name of Stefan Esterman. This box’s manifest, however, did indicate that files for both Fury Road and a subject named Bear were contained within. Davos hoped he would find something of value.

As he dug through the files, Davos reviewed each of the photos, fingerprint cards, statements and notes contained inside. No one captured in this particular sweep from three years ago had been
particularly cooperative. After he reviewed and replaced the last file, Davos noticed that a file had slipped down so as to lay flat in the bottom of the box.

Unlike the other files, this one did not contain a fingerprint card. Inside lay a single sheet of paper with three photos stapled to it and the name ‘Stefan Esterman’ printed at the top along with a birthdate. Underneath the name was a handwritten note to find the subject’s fingerprint card. One photo was a full length picture of the subject. The other two were classic mugshots, one a side profile and one full frontal.

Davos caught his breath as his best friend’s haunted, angry eyes stared back at him from the three year old photograph.

Making sure his door was closed, Davos slipped the file containing Stannis’ photo into his bag and then slumped down in his office chair. He rubbed his burning eyes and just sat there for several minutes, looking at nothing.

Eventually his gaze rested on a photo of himself and Stannis. It had been taken the day they graduated from King’s Landing University. With arms around each other’s shoulders, black caps askew, both men grinned without reservation for the camera. Would that he could turn back time to that happy day.

Blowing his nose, Davos grabbed his bag and departed for home. A conversation between them was paramount. Not only did they need to discuss the fighting, but Stannis’ apparent drug use as well.

Davos sat behind the wheel of his car after he parked, barely registering his arrival at home. Somehow he had missed all the signs of anger, loneliness, and alienation in Stannis. He leaned his head against the driver’s side window, wondering if he would be able to save his friend or their friendship.

Chapter End Notes

Big thanks to BlueCichlid for beta-reading this chapter!
Chapter 17

On Saturday morning Stannis met Davos at a coffee shop within walking distance of Stannis’ brownstone. Even though it was not yet 8:00 AM, the air held a sultry quality that hinted of the approaching heat and humidity.

Itchy, Stannis didn’t really want to stay at the café. It felt too confining and he disliked being near strangers anyway.

Davos seemed to sense Stannis’ restlessness. “Let’s walk over to the park. There are trees there, and we can talk in relative privacy.”

Stannis grunted in agreement. He kept on thinking of Sansa, who had spent two nights with him this past week, including the past night, and paid scant attention to Davos’ small talk as they made their way two blocks to the spacious park. He’d rather be sprawled next to her soft warm body in bed.

After the (to his mind) disastrous night on the boat, Stannis had wracked his brain trying to find a way to ease Sansa’s possible anxieties concerning sex. Last night’s simple cuddling in the chair had quickly progressed to kissing and fondling, and before they knew it he had carried Sansa upstairs where they found themselves naked on his bed. Her body quivered with want and arousal, but as he started to cover her body with his own a flash of apprehension appeared in her beautiful, dilated blue eyes.

Stannis had stopped his momentum abruptly. He recognized the hesitance, and had felt remorseful that he had brought it about. Kissing Sansa, he pulled her with him as he flipped over onto his own back so that she was above him.

“You drive,” he’d told her.

He let Sansa set the tempo, and with her on top, she had complete control. He wanted her to enjoy their lovemaking at her own pace without feeling dominated by his much larger form. They both reveled in her newfound sense of assertion, and she quickly lost both her apprehension and reticence as pleasure took over.

In the morning he woke up with her long lithe body wrapped around him, arm flung over his chest, and one smooth leg intertwined with his own. Her silky hair covered his chest and abs like a blanket. His own hand had automatically found a perfect resting spot along the smooth dip of her waist, and had started stroking her there seemingly of its own accord. He’d felt so relaxed, peaceful even, in the company of the one woman, the one person who accepted him as he was without hesitation.

Stannis had wanted to stay in bed with his sleepy-eyed beauty, but the annoying alarm clock had other ideas. When he’d asked Sansa if she wanted to go with him to meet up with Davos, she demurred with a smile and a gentle hand to his chest. “You go, I’ll stay here if that’s ok. He’s your best friend Stannis, and you need to see him. I’ll be here when you get back.”

Grateful for Sansa’s generosity and understanding, Stannis had left his brownstone with a light heart. The morning had gotten off to a perfect start.

Now he and Davos walked through the park along a broad, tree lined path. A few people were out jogging or walking, but it wasn’t crowded yet.
“It’s been a while, Stannis. Is everything alright with you?”

“I’m fine, Davos, why wouldn’t I be? I have simply been more occupied lately.”

“Oh, I don’t know. You got arrested, your picture has been plastered all over the news, and now you’ve found a lovely young woman to spend your time with. That’s a lot.” Davos led the way to an empty park bench under a large blooming cottonwood tree and took a seat. Stannis followed, sipping an iced coffee.

“I can handle the negative attention, Davos. It will pass, in time. I’m fine.”

“And Sansa? How is she and her family taking the increased public scrutiny?”

Stannis sighed. Catelyn Stark was still a problem. “Sansa is remarkably level-headed and resilient. She managed to get herself out of an ugly situation at her previous internship. She’s bounced back from the mugging on the street, and hasn’t let any rumors about us dissuade her from our relationship. Her mother is far less accommodating. Catelyn is convinced that I will derail Sansa’s college path. She’s so blind she can’t see that Sansa is miserable following the route her mother planned out for her. Last night Sansa said Cat practically pitched a fit when she found out Sansa was staying with me for the night.”

“Parents sometimes try to control their kids too much, and I’m no saint in that regard. Marya keeps telling me to back off my oldest boy, let him make his own decisions. It’s not easy to let them grow up. Speaking of college, take a look at this. Do you remember that day? We were little more than kids ourselves.”

Davos pulled up a picture on his phone, one of the newest smartphones with the huge screen.

Together they looked at the photo of them on graduation day. Stannis had a copy of the same photo on the wall of his study. He smiled slightly, remembering how good it felt to finish university. How simple life had been, back in those days when he had actually taken time to just have fun. What an alien concept now.

“Hmph. I had more hair then. And it was still all black.”

This morning Sansa had playfully observed that his newly regrown beard now contained a bit of silver, concentrated on his chin and corners of his mustache. She seemed to think it gave him a regal appearance. He thought it just highlighted the age difference between them.

“Ha! You were a skinny bastard too. Now you look like Raging Bull, only taller.”

“Time, I reckon, changes us all. Better this than to go Robert’s route. At least I’m in good shape.”

Stannis thought it odd that Davos would bring up a reference to a boxing movie. A faint sense of unease began to build within him.

“You did not wish to meet me just to inquire about the Stark’s reticence or my well-being, or to reminisce about our university days.”

His friend seemed to be fiddling with a file in his messenger bag. Stannis recognized it as a suspect folder, recalling an identical one the police had created on him just last month. He had noticed officers within the station frequently carrying files just like it in the station.

Davos reached into the bag and pulled out the slim brown folder. “Do you remember last time we met I told you that my case had reached a deadend?” Stannis grunted an affirmative.
“Well, since then I’ve met up with one of my Flea Bottom snitches. He’s a small time bookie down there, and had a first hand account of the latest illegal fight.”

“Oh?” Stannis couldn’t keep his eyes off the brown file.

“He showed me a dark, grainy recording of the last part of the fight. It was brutal, violent, and bloody. The loser ended up staying in the hospital for two weeks with severe injuries. That kid’s lucky to even be alive.”

Stannis sincerely hoped that Jared, the young man he’d beaten so decisively in the ring, would be left out of the investigation entirely. He struggled to maintain a calm exterior, but inside he churned at the thought of Davos having seen him - seen Stef - fight on video. Or worse, had seen him inflict such devastating injuries upon Jared.

“Hmph. Will the kid get charged?” He tried to keep his tone light and conversational, but had to concentrate to keep his voice steady.

“No, he’s just a boy from Flea Bottom trying to get by. The District Attorney is only interested in bringing down the fight’s organizers and financial backers. I visited the kid this past week to see how he was doing and question him about the fights. He’s the first person I’ve found that actually participated in them. He and that bookie gave me another lead.”

“Why are you telling me all this, Davos? Aren’t the details of a current investigation confidential?”

Deep down Stannis knew the answer. He wished Davos would just get on with it.

Davos tapped the file in his hand, and held Stannis’ gaze intently even as he began speaking. Stannis felt his heart speed up, and tried to school his features into his ‘businessman’ expression.

“Both men indicated that the big fighter, the one who won the match, is known as Stef. I found a reference in one of the files to a Stefan Esterman. I searched and searched, but couldn’t find anything on the subject anywhere, so I assumed it had to be an alias. Eventually I found this single little file in the bottom of an archived records box.”

Davos pushed the file into Stannis’ hands. “Open it.”

His friend’s easy, open demeanor had disappeared, to be replaced by the detective mask. Stannis took the file without breaking eye contact, jaw clenched. When he finally looked down he noticed that his hands had nearly crushed the file.

Without speaking, Stannis opened the file. He knew what it contained before looking, but followed through anyway. It would be cowardly not to. His cold eyes looked out of a stark angry face seemingly chiseled in stone. He barely recognized himself. Did he look like that now?

He stood abruptly and walked several steps away, stiff and fuming. Stannis couldn’t look at his best friend. He was angry at himself for getting caught. For getting involved in the first place. For putting Davos in an impossible position. He felt sick to his stomach, sick that his secret had been found out. Just as he had last week, when Bear had discovered his true identity, Stannis blurted out the obvious.

“Now you know.”

A mixture of shame and relief flooded Stannis. Shame that he had been participating in such a dark, illegal activity, and relief that now he might be able to break away from it for good.

“No, I don’t know. I don’t know why my best friend has developed an alter-ego and started breaking
the law. Hell, after eighteen years, it’s clear I don’t even know you at all! What on earth possessed you to follow this road, to start fighting?”

Stannis felt Davos’ accusing question as keenly as he had felt punches in the ring. He turned around. Davos’ brown eyes bore into his own, seeking an answer that made sense. Stannis didn’t know that he could provide one.

“You remember when I got into that drunken bar fight, the day Selyse left me? Nobody there knew who I was and nobody cared what I looked like, talked like, or dressed like. But they sure as hell gained respect when I took them all out. Hells, even Robert showed a little admiration.”

“You joined the circuit fights five years ago?” Davos regarded Stannis as if they were strangers. And in some ways, now they were.

Stannis shook his head. “That’s when I found Fury Road and learned to box for real. I enjoyed it. Seemed like a natural fit. I got bigger, stronger, faster. Then Bear introduced me to the circuit about three years ago. I liked the challenge, the high stakes, and the tough competition.”

Stannis paced back and forth, arms and legs practically crackling with potential energy. His stomach roiled, and he couldn't stay still.

The simple recitation of events wasn’t enough for Davos. “Why, Stannis? It’s illegal, not to mention dangerous.”

The words tumbled forth. “I had nothing else, Davos! No outlet, no connection. Nobody.”

“What about us, me? You and I have been friends for years, and you’re always welcome at our house. But you’ve pulled yourself away. You didn’t have to, you know.” Davos’ voice betrayed his own pain at the loosening of their once-tight bond.

“And be the third wheel? My Robert to your Ned? I won’t impose on your family life, Davos, just because I don’t have one of my own. Selyse left me shortly after I became COO. That’s when Robert threw everything in my lap. There was no time. No time for you, no time to visit Shireen half a world away. Fuck, I don’t even know my own daughter anymore!”

Usually contained, Stannis’ longing for familial connection flared up suddenly, much as it had that night at the Stark residence, right after he’d been released from jail.

“Everywhere I turned, there was a box I had to squeeze into. ‘Stannis, review this. Stannis, negotiate that. Stannis, hold down the company. Stannis, lose that accent. Don’t be such a lemon, Stanny. Lighten up.’”

His felt his throat choke up and spoke brokenly, voice thick and uneven. Davos visibly recoiled as the vitriol spewed out, but Stannis couldn’t keep it in.

“How the fuck can I lighten up when I have to hold the company together? Lighten up, when Robert dumps all his work on me? When Renly won’t learn how to manage his own damn division? Lighten up, when every day they make sure to show me that my natural self is unacceptable to them? Lighten up, when we have ten thousand people depending upon our management? My management?” Stannis rapidly thumped a stiffened hand against his chest in time to his words.

Throughout his tirade Stannis had been stalking back and forth in front of Davos, who remained seated on the park bench. Now he stood still, breathing heavily, lungs burning, nostrils flared. The sweet scent from the flowering cottonwood tree hung heavy in the air even as white petals drifted lazily down around the men. Squirrels hopped around, and numerous birds sang and chirped in the
dappled trees overhead. Stannis wished it would rain.

“But you know what? In the ring nobody judged me on anything except my abilities. And I got good.”

“So good you nearly killed a destitute young man! And you’ve put his health at risk for the rest of his days. How many other young men did you permanently injure? Do you know, or even care?” The sharp words stung.

Stannis looked away from the accusation in Davos’ eyes. Still his anger flared.

“They knew what they were doing! They chose to be there, same as I did.”

“Really, Stannis? Is that how you justify what you’ve been doing? Jared Grayson took to fighting to make ends meet. You fight for pleasure. You said it yourself, you enjoy it. How...how can you do this?”

“I need the challenge of the fight, to feel the excitement, the adrenaline rush. I…”

Stannis turned in a circle, hands on hips, and looked out on the soccer field where two teams had just completed a match. He watched the teams all gather around each other - young men mostly - giving each other high-fives, jumping and hugging. Their laughter and shouts rang out across the field. No one was left out.

“In the fight scene I’m accepted as I am. No judgment, no expectations. In the ring I can let go. I can let it all go. No pretending, no restraint. There, I am good enough. And then some.”

Even as he spoke Stannis realized just how hollow his excuses really were. He could see Davos’ rejection as his friend shook his head. Still, it was the only reason he could give voice to.

He paced back and forth under the towering tree, jerking his head left and right, startled every time someone appeared along the path. When two police officers pulled up along the curb Stannis felt his heart speed up. He stiffened and backed away from his friend, deeper into the shade, breath coming in short, rapid bursts. Sweat dripped down his forehead, stinging his eyes.

“What is this? Did you intend to arrest me after all?”

Davos remained seated on the bench, annoyingly calm and composed. He briefly regarded the two officers walking in a slow, relaxed manner along the path, then turned back to Stannis.

“No Stannis, I didn’t, and I won’t. Those officers are just on regular patrol. But haven’t you ever thought about how this would end? Did you really believe that you could just fight one last match and be done, with no one ever finding out? Honestly Stannis, watching you now, I don’t think you would ever have willingly walked away. You’ve got a problem.”

Stannis stopped pacing. Did Davos just suggest...

He spoke slowly, carefully, never breaking gaze from the honest brown eyes of his friend.

“Are you implying that I have an addiction problem?”

Stannis resumed marching back and forth with quick, jerky steps as he pulled an unopened can of tobacco from his pocket. Sansa didn’t care for it when he dipped or chewed tobacco, but she never criticized and she wasn’t here. He didn’t understand the sudden look of alarm appearing on Davos’ face or why his friend leaped to his feet.
“Stannis, stop!” Davos forcefully grabbed his wrist before he could open the can to dip.

With a snarl he easily jerked his arm out of Davos’ grasp, keeping an iron tight grip on the small can.

“What the hell, Davos? Are you now my personal D.A.R.E. officer too?”

Davos took a step back as he held his hands up, palms out, almost in supplication. “Easy. Wait a moment. You just want to use tobacco, fine. I’m not one to judge, and I don’t blame you with all the stress you’ve been under. But tell me the truth, Stannis. Is that how you take Spike?”

The accusation struck Stannis as so ridiculous that he laughed out loud. “What are you talking about? I do not use Spike, or any other illegal drugs.”

“Your blood test says otherwise. So do your actions. For the past several months you’ve not been yourself - you’re either twitchy or aggressive. I couldn’t figure it out, but now it’s obvious. Every time we’ve met up you were either high or in withdrawal.”

Davos’ distressed voice transitioned to an accusatory tone, and his eyes narrowed. “Shit, Stannis, why on earth would you start using Spike? Haven’t you seen what it does to men, what it makes them do?”

Stannis couldn’t believe it. Wouldn’t believe it. “I don’t do drugs, Davos. Never! And the blood test? It came back negative!”

Stannis watched as Davos ran his hands through his hair and looked away. The man actually looked guilty.

“That’s because I switched your test results.”

“What? I don’t believe you. You’ve never compromised your integrity. Not even for me, that night on the street.” In the back of Stannis’ mind their previous conversation started playing in his head. Fourth blood sample...tested positive, barely...for Spike.

“I didn’t believe it either. And you did the right thing that night, stopping that mugging. That’s why I swapped out your test results, so the prosecutor wouldn’t charge you unjustly. But you were so violent, so aggressive that night, it all makes sense now.”

“No, Davos, it doesn’t. Nothing you’re saying makes any sense!” Once again Stannis started to open the tin of snuff.

“Please put that away for a minute, and hear me out before you use it.”

Growling slightly - when did he start to sound like an animal? - Stannis scowled but put it back in his pocket. Facing Davos, he crossed his arms and glared.

“Is Sansa still at the brownstone?”

Stannis nodded, frowning.

“Do you really want to risk coming home to Sansa while you’re high on Spike? A drug that removes inhibitions, makes any man physically combative and sexually aggressive? Stannis, you’d be putting Sansa in danger, in danger from...you.”

“Impossible!” Stannis turned in place, rocking to and fro as he ran his hands through his damp hair. “I will do anything to keep her from harm, at any cost! I’m big enough, strong enough, and certainly
skilled enough to keep Sansa safe. I’m her lover, her protector, not a...a violent thug. I’d never hurt Sansa, Davos. Never. But all this is moot. I don’t use drugs!”

“I know you would never willingly or purposefully hurt her, Stannis. But think about it. Have you done anything that later, upon reflection, you couldn’t fathom why you acted the way you did?”

“No! No, of course not, I…”

Stannis stopped and looked away from Davos. The sky seemed unusually bright, even though clouds had rolled in and thunder started to rumble. He pinched his nose and closed his eyes, as the reasons that had driven him to Bear last week came to mind. Threatening Harry, getting in Renly’s face, taking Sansa so...forcefully.

All around him he could hear the rising wind rustling the leaves, the thunder rolling overhead, the cacophony of street noise assaulting his ears. He jerked away, hand on his chest. There was no air in the air - he could not breathe.

He didn’t realize how tightly he’d wrapped his arms around himself until he felt a familiar hand on his shoulder. He flinched.

“Stannis?”

Davos’ low, rough Flea Bottom voice sounded very far away, but no longer held recrimination, only concern.

He straightened up, and took a deep, shaky breath. Now was not the time to dwell on suppositions. He had to deal with the current reality. Davos’ investigation and his participation in the illegal fights.

“This investigation, Davos. I will not ask you to protect me or break the law for my benefit. But please,” and he paused. Stannis did not like to beg, but for one last week with Sansa, he would get down on his knees if necessary.

“Next Friday I’m taking Sansa to the Opera. Can you give me that time?”

Davos shuffled. “Stannis, you’re asking an awful lot of me. Right now you are my only lead. I can’t go a week without reporting something. Is there any information that I can follow up on? I can buy you this time, but only if you give me something worthwhile to pursue.”

Stannis recognized the negotiation tactic well - he’d used it himself in countless business deals. Fair enough. If he was going down, so would the Mockingbird.

“Baelish. Last month I found out that Petyr Baelish is the money behind the circuit fights.”

“Ah, so that’s why you asked me to look him up.” Stannis nodded.

“Does he know that you fight?”

“I think so. I hadn’t ever seen him before my last match, but he showed himself that night. And Davos, there’s something else. Sansa worked directly for Baelish as an intern last year. But she quit after he got too touchy-feely, and started talking about ‘keeping her away from the world.’ Evidently he kept projecting Catelyn onto Sansa, referring to Cat as his ‘missed opportunity.’ Sansa figured out then that something was wrong.”

Stannis proceeded to share the details of Sansa’s revelations to Davos. He felt like he was breaking her trust, but also recognized that the information could be relevant to Davos’ investigation.
“Why didn’t you tell me this sooner, Stannis? Between that information and the anonymous stalking
texts you received…” Davos gasped. “Sansa is in danger! You should have realized this by now,
Stannis! They can use her as blackmail to influence you. Shit.”

Davos continued. “This just really turned up the priority on my case. I need more Stannis. When’s
the next fight? Where?”

“I don’t know! All Bear said was that the fight has been postponed until sometime after the election.”

“Hmm, that means we’ve got close to a month, maybe longer.” Davos questioned Stannis as surely
as he would any suspect, pushing for details. “How do you find out when and where to go - this
Bear? How deep into the organization is he?”

“Bear just trains people, and usually only has one fighter at a time in the circuit. I’ve been it for three
years now. As for scheduling, I’ve got a little prepaid cellphone Bear gave to me a few years ago. I
don’t even know the number, but I always keep it on me. The number of whomever calls to pass the
fight venue and time to me is blocked, and the voice is run through a filter. There’s usually a week to
ten days between that phone call and the actual fight.”

“That gives me a little bit of time, knowing the fight’s been postponed. I can give you a week, and
tell my Captain that my source is skittish. Baelish has already been on the radar for some other
related investigations - drug and human trafficking. I might be able to get with those detectives and
blow this thing wide open. But I have to warn you, it will get ugly. You think the media exposure
you’ve had up to this point has been bad? That’s nothing compared to what’s coming.”

He sighed. “I know it. My brothers, the company, Sansa…”

_Sansa._ He had to convince her to leave King’s Landing before the investigation went public. Keep
her as far away from the media coverage as possible. Perhaps Riverrun...

“Stannis, I need your word that you won’t run, and that you’ll fully cooperate with the investigation.
Eventually you’ll have to submit to an interview with the police department and possibly testify
before a Grand Jury.”

Stannis growled out a particularly foul curse. “Of course I won’t run, Davos! What sort of man do
you take me for?”

Davos glared right back and spat out, “I just don’t know anymore.”

Stannis had to look away from Davos for a moment, unable to look his friend in the eye as he felt his
face turn red. He bit his lip and traced a line across an ant-path in the dirt, watching them reroute
around the makeshift sand barrier and resume their route. Davos did have a valid point.

Finally meeting Davos’ eyes, Stannis spoke slowly and clearly. “I’ll not run. Not today, not
tomorrow, not next week or next month. You have my word.”

“And the Spike? Tell me you’ll stop using it Stannis.” Davos’ harsh expression melted away to be
replaced with concern. But his presumption just made Stannis angry again.

“I already told you, Davos, that I don’t take drugs! I remember what you said several weeks ago
about a fourth blood sample. _Tested positive, barely._ Isn’t it possible that my snuff just got
contaminated before I bought it? I don’t go looking for drug dealers in dark alleys. I’m not using it!”

Davos sighed, and his shoulders drooped.
“Fine. You’re not using it. How about you come by the station some time next week and we’ll take another blood test, and I’ll be satisfied. I’ll even make sure it’s anonymous - I’ve got a buddy that can draw blood.”

Stannis’ first instinct was to say no, but what did he have to lose? Just get it done and get Davos off his back. Nodding, he reluctantly agreed. “Next week. Let me know exactly when - I’d rather not have a huge audience.”

“One more thing.” Davos held his hand out, gesturing. “I’ll get my lab monkeys to test that at the station. Then we’ll know for certain.”

Stannis slapped the small green tin into Davos’ hand with enough strength to make a loud smacking sound. “Be my guest. Test it. I’ll just stop by the store over there and buy another one.”

With that Stannis strode away, towards the chain convenient store across the street. Davos called out to him, but he didn’t listen and he didn’t stop.

As he walked home, Renly’s previous words played in Stannis’ head over and over again, like a broken record. If I didn’t know any better I’d say you were Jonesing for something. Jonesing...

Preposterous.

Stannis also realized at that moment that this may be his last week to fully enjoy Sansa’s company. Once the investigation went active, his entire life would change, and so potentially, would hers. He stood to lose everything that had given his life any meaning - his job, his hobby, his freedom, and now, his lover.

Of them all, his relationship with Sansa mattered the most. She had shown him that a life beyond endless work was possible. She had shown him that he himself was worth something. She had offered him empathy and compassion, and an easy companionship that he had never enjoyed with a woman before. She had given him her love without restraint. And he had rewarded that love with silence and dark secrets. When this investigation broke open, he knew their relationship would become tainted, probably destroyed. More than the consequences looming over his own head, Stannis hated that he would be the agent of Sansa’s heartbreak.

The thunder continued to rumble overhead. Yet no rain fell.

Chapter End Notes

Big thanks to BlueCichlid for her amazing beta-reading help!
Harry waited impatiently outside Mr. Baelish’s executive office at the Mockingbird Fund’s building. He’d been there nearly thirty minutes, and still had not been called in to report. Normally Petyr took him in immediately.

The receptionist took note of Harry’s impatience and dialed Petyr’s office again. Harry was glad; he didn’t want to miss another class at KLU. Still, he had important information to share with Petyr, and needed to deliver it in person.

“Harry, my boy, come in, come in.”

Petyr Baelish gestured from the now open doorway of his executive suite. Harry entered and sat in an uncomfortable gray metal chair across from Petyr’s wide glass topped desk. The office was all grays and browns and stark angles, harsh metals and shiny glass. Harry didn’t think it contained anything soft except for Petyr’s chair cushion. He squirmed under the man’s amused inspection.

“Harry, you’ve been completing your assignments quite satisfactorily, I believe. The photographs that you’ve provided have proven most...provocative.”

Harry brightened upon hearing the praise.

Petyr sat back his chair, hands steepled together below his chin.

“However, Harry, I need you to explain something to me.” Petyr’s sugary smooth tone belied the predatory gleam in his eyes as he impatiently tapped on the desk with a pen. “Why did I have you follow Miss Stark and take those pictures for me?”

Harry’s heart beat faster. “Um, because Sansa doesn’t work here anymore?”

“True, true, she did choose to leave me, leave her internship. Why else?”

“I failed to get her interested in me.”

“That’s right. I got you that job in the career office for a very specific purpose. Gain Sansa’s trust and friendship, keep it, and make sure she took the internship at the Mockingbird Fund.”

“But Mr. Baelish, I did get her to apply for that internship, and she did work for you. For nearly six months!”

“Yes, you did very well, Harry. And you were amply compensated. Did I not pay off your gambling debts? But you still failed to attract her to you.”

“She’s not like most other girls. What worked on them didn’t work on Sansa. She just wasn’t interested in me. Besides, she became awfully fond of you in a hurry, so what difference does it make?” Harry spoke sullenly. He’d been genuinely attracted to Sansa, but it had seemed that only Petyr existed in her mind.

“My plans, Harry, my plans depended on Sansa’s continued availability. And now she has eyes only for Stannis Baratheon.”
“Yeah, but I’ve still done what you asked me to do. I followed her around, took those pictures and sent them to you. I even met up with her on campus to invite her to the Blue Crystal. I think she might have agreed, if he hadn’t shown up.”

That garnered Petyr’s attention. “Oh?”

“Baratheon was there on the campus green, waiting for her. She and I had walked out of the building together. But he wasn’t happy to see her talking to me.”

Petyr leaned back, sardonic grin in place.

“Would you say he acted jealous, perhaps even possessive?” Petyr’s eyes gleamed when Harry nodded his head.

“Totally. He had this really intense look on his face. It wasn’t natural, and I thought he might deck me if I didn’t leave.” Harry looked back out the window as he recalled the incident in the alley the following night. He hadn’t slept straight through the night since.

“I sense something else is bothering you. Is there more, Harry?” Cold one moment, warm and caring the next, Harry could never tell when Petyr was sincere in his solicitations.

Harry frowned, then pushed up the sleeve of his T-shirt to expose the wide dark bruise ringing his bicep. A similar bruise marked the opposite wrist. His accoster had hands of iron.

Petyr slouched nonchalantly in his chair. “Oh, Harry, how did this happen? I’ve warned you to be careful down there at that club.”

“Some big guy did this. He took me by surprise in the alley after I locked up the club. Bent me over one of those concrete barriers.” Harry felt sweat drip down his neck.

“Were you harmed, Harry? Robbed?”

“No, but he knew my name!”

“Oh? Do tell me more.”

Slowly, in spurts, Harry recited the events of that night to Petyr. Petyr probed with various questions, trying to get Harry to remember any strangers, anything odd about patrons he had seen at the club or on the street.

“Now, do you remember anything this man said to you? His appearance, size, or manner of speech?”

Harry gulped. “He said, The girl ain’t yours, Harry. That’s right, Harry, I know your name, and how to find you. She ain’t your master’s, either, got it? ”

He recalled the shame of pissing his pants, but didn’t share that little detail with Petyr. Uncomfortable and far too aware of the narrow seat’s armrests encircling him like pliers’ jaws, Harry tried to stand. Two hard hands clamped down on his shoulders, forcing him to remain seated.

Twisting around in surprise, Harry realized that it was Petyr’s security chief, the ex-cop, who held him down. When did he get in here?

“Mr. Baelish…”
Petyr waved the brutish man away. “Stay a little while longer, Harry. I still need to know every detail about this man that accosted you. Everything you can remember.”

Nodding, Harry settled back down in his chair. “It was foggy and dark, so I couldn’t see his face. He was big though, and really strong. Heavy too, because he used his weight to pin me down. I couldn’t move.” The security chief grunted what might have been a laugh.

“What was he wearing, Harry? Did you see if he had on running shoes, boots, office shoes? Short sleeves or long? Hat?”

“He wore a dark baseball cap. I remember his shoes, too. They were tan construction boots, pretty beat up. And his arms were bare.”

“Good, good. Now, did you notice anything else about him that was distinctive? Manner of speech, smells, facial hair?”

“Um. Let me think.” Harry brought back the instant when the man had started speaking. His mouth had been right up to Harry’s ear. He remembered how rough the guy’s skin had been.

“Beard. He definitely had a beard, but it was short enough to be scratchy.” Harry rubbed his neck and face in memory.

“And he talked like a typical construction worker too. He didn’t sound educated.”

“You’d be surprised, Harry. People wear many faces, even the rich and famous. What else?”

A sudden memory popped into Harry’s head, one when he was little, climbing into his grandfather’s lap for a story.

“He smelled like my grandfather. It was faint, but I definitely smelled tobacco.”

“Cigarette smoke?” Petyr was paying more and more attention now, but Harry had long since figured out that Petyr always paid attention.

“No, Grandpa didn’t smoke. He chewed. That’s what it smelled like, chewing tobacco, just not as strong.”

Oddly, Petyr smiled.

“Well done, Harry. I have one last task for you, and then your assignment will be complete.” Petyr handed a business card with a coffee shop’s logo and address to Harry.

“What’s this?”

“I want you to go there this Saturday. Be there by seven thirty, and sit someplace open. Remain at the café for at least two hours.”

“And do what?”

Petyr smiled. “Whatever you like, Harry. Drink coffee, eat breakfast, take pictures, study, talk to pretty girls. In fact, here’s some extra cash.” Petyr handed Harry enough money for Harry to eat for a week. “This is your last task for me. Enjoy it.”

The security chief opened Petyr’s office door. Confused, Harry stood, but didn’t leave just yet.

“Do you want me to come back next week?”
“No Harry. You’ve done very well, but after Saturday I will no longer require your services in these matters.”

Relief flooded through Harry. Free… “Does our agreement still stand? Will you still pay for the rest of my tuition?”

Harry had no other way to pay for his schooling short of taking out expensive student loans. Mr. Baelish had been very generous in his offer to not only pay off the gambling debts but also fund Harry’s university tuition.

“Of course, Harry, of course. A deal is a deal. Now you better get back to campus; I wouldn’t want you to miss your next class.”

Harry didn’t hesitate to leave the office. He paused outside of the now closed door, though, long enough to listen to part of Petyr’s conversation with the security chief.

“Your contacts at the station have proven most valuable. How did they manage to glean the news about the detective’s meeting Saturday morning?”

“The detective was careless - left his office door open while talking on the phone.” The security chief chuckled in a manner that made Harry’s skin crawl.

“That gives us an opportunity to clear up more than one problem. It’s clear that my current tactics have not discouraged Stannis Baratheon from pursuing Sansa. If anything, he’s just grown more protective of her. And she in turn appears to welcome his attention.”

The ex-cop’s rough voice carried through the door. “Do you think he knows what’s up?”

“No. But Stannis Baratheon is a smart man with extensive resources. I have no doubt that he will dig deeper. However, we both know that he cannot go to the police - not even his best friend. His alter ego and participation in the circuit would be exposed. As would his other…problem. He’d lose the girl and risk jail time. Baratheon won’t come forward, I guarantee it. But in the end his part will destroy the Baratheon Brothers’ reputation for good anyway. And at that point the Mockingbird Fund’s ample resources will step in to rescue their company.”

“Speaking of other problems, Mr. B, the scientist was here earlier. He said he’d managed to increase the strength of his product.”

“Ah, good. We can put that part of the plan into motion immediately.” Petyr sounded doubly pleased with the news, but Harry didn’t understand the security chief’s cryptic message.

The security chief spoke once again. “And the boy?”

“I have no doubt that it was Baratheon who roughed up young Harry. As such, his usefulness is nearly at an end. Still, I have a few tasks for you as well. Tomorrow night Baratheon is taking Sansa to the Opera - their first truly open outing. As I said, we have an opportunity, and I mean to take advantage of it.”

“Are you sure about this? I thought the girl meant something to you.”

“Choices have been made, bridges have been burned. And just like her mother, Sansa has made the wrong choice.”

Footsteps echoed from the hallway, and Harry could no longer risk eavesdropping unnoticed. He scooted down an adjacent hallway and left the building unhampered.
In his car, Harry started to reconsider the deal he had entered into with Petyr. The money had been good, and the promise of a paid-for university education too much to ignore. But the underlying threat he felt from the security chief plus Petyr’s words at the end frightened him. Sansa hadn’t really meant anything to him, but he didn’t want her to get hurt. More importantly, he didn’t want to get hurt. Would anyone believe him if he squealed? And if he did go to the police, who would protect him from Petyr? Or Stannis Baratheon, for that matter.

Harry drove back to the university, unsure of who he feared more, Petyr Baelish or Stannis Baratheon.

Chapter End Notes

The Opera date is coming up next - just a few days!
“Mom, can you help me with this?”

Sansa’s worried voice echoed down the stairwell into Ned’s office where he and Catelyn were seated. Ned could hear both the excitement and consternation in Sansa’s tone. He smiled at his wife and tilted his head towards the door. Cat had already left the couch and was moving that way.

“Cat, I thought she was all dressed and set to go.”

“Oh, she is, but she’s nervous because she wants to look perfect for Stannis. We didn’t have any time to get something formal made for her, so it’s a miracle Margaery spotted this dress at that consignment shop. It was a near perfect fit, and just needed to be taken in a bit. Wait until you see her, Ned - she’s so beautiful.” Catelyn was all smiles as she talked about their daughter.

Ned hummed, not caring where the dress came from. He was more interested in Catelyn’s enthusiastic attitude.

“Your support means the world to her today, Cat.”

“I still don’t like the idea of her dating Stannis. She’s our little girl, and he’s so much older than her, and so gruff. But Sansa is so excited and happy about tonight, it’s hard not to get caught up in her joy. And I don’t want to dampen that.”

Ned relaxed, certain Catelyn wouldn’t treat Stannis rudely when he arrived. He didn’t want anything to ruin this night for Sansa.

Cat continued. “All week she’s been trying to figure out where Stannis is taking her. Have you managed to get any hints out of Robert?” Cat shot an acerbic glare back at her husband, as if it was his fault they hadn’t figured out the secret.

“Robert doesn’t have a clue, Cat. You should know that by now. And do you really think Stannis would tell him?”

He heaved a sigh and waved his hands towards the door when they heard another shout of “Mom!”

“You better go before Sansa has an apoplexy.” Ned glanced at his watch. “Stannis will be here shortly. That man is a stickler for time.” Catelyn hurried out the door even as a third call of “Mom…” rang throughout the house.

Ned looked out the window at a large live oak, whose broad crown created a haven of shade over the side yard. The old tire swing still hung from its branches, swaying in the soft breeze. It seemed like only yesterday that he had been out there pushing his little girl with red pigtails on that tire.

“One more time, Daddy!” she always begged. “Not right now, Sansa, I can’t.”
Eventually she had stopped asking. When the other children started to grow, so did the demands on his time. Sansa never acted out, making it easy for him to concentrate on the younger brood. Had his chance for “One more time” passed by? His daughter was all grown up and had become a woman without him seeing the change.

Lyanna too had changed from girl to young woman overnight, but never outgrew her independent streak or contrariness. Then someone had taken advantage of her independence and she was lost forever. Sansa had just started exploring her own independence. Had he sheltered her for too long?

A quick flicker of light flashed out the corner of his eye, forcing Ned to shut down his bleak train of thought. Stannis’ shiny black Mercedes had just pulled into the driveway, reflecting the late afternoon sun into the window. A glance at his watch told Ned that Stannis was two minutes early. As expected.

Ned nearly tripped on Sansa’s small blue suitcase sitting in the middle of the foyer. *Not a little girl anymore...* Sighing, he set it next to the door just as the doorbell rang.

Stannis was impeccably groomed; custom tailored black tuxedo, simple vintage gold cufflinks, neatly trimmed beard. *So it’s not a private affair. I wonder...*

Ned greeted Stannis with a firm handshake and ushered the larger man inside. He nearly missed the slight wince that Stannis quickly repressed, and wondered what had caused it.

“Ned.”

“Hi, Stannis. Sansa has been scurrying about all afternoon making herself presentable, and isn’t quite ready. She’s bursting with curiosity, and has been trying to figure out where you intend to take her.”

Stannis’ only reaction was a slight, quick lift of his brows and the hint of a smirk.

Ned led them to the den off the kitchen. “Whisky?”

“No, thank you though.”

Stannis set a jewelry box down on a side table and started to flex and rub the knuckles of his right hand. *He’s in pain*.

At that moment Cat breezed in from the kitchen. “Stannis! You look marvelous this evening.”

Catelyn smiled as she greeted Stannis with a light kiss to the cheek. Stannis’ ears turned a peculiar shade of red and he sputtered a simple “Hello, Catelyn” in return.

Ned was pleased that Cat treated Stannis with civility, especially after the latest hit piece had aired on television. She had turned uncharacteristically vehement in her opposition to Stannis after she learned of his old drunken bar fight and conviction, even though it had been an isolated incident.

“Sansa will be down in a few minutes. She’s dying to know where you two are going tonight.”

“Renly suggested that I ‘go big or go home.’ So, I -”

“Dad? Did the doorbell ring?”

Sansa’s voice cut Stannis off. Like a hawk intent on its prey, Stannis whirled towards the sound of her voice. Even though he had not yet seen Sansa’s dress, Ned chose to watch Stannis’ reaction when Sansa walked into the room. He was not disappointed.
Stannis stood motionless. His darkened eyes grew focused and intent, and if he had been a dog his ears would have been turned forward towards Sansa as well. Ned smiled at his beautiful daughter, but she only had eyes for Stannis.

Sansa looked like one of those elegant movie stars straight out of the nineteen forties. Her off-the-shoulder charcoal dress hugged her body but still reached the floor, lacked sleeves but wasn’t strapless, exposed her neck and upper chest but wasn’t revealing. He couldn’t describe it except to think it was classy and timeless, and found himself in awe of his beautiful daughter.

Gone was the innocent teenage girl in sneakers and t-shirts; in her place stood an elegant young woman.

Stannis set his shoulders back and swallowing thickly, spoke with an old-fashioned formality. “Good evening, Miss Stark, how do you do?”

Sansa smiled in delight and extended her hand to Stannis. “I am well, thank you.”

Not missing a beat, Stannis took her hand and with startling grace bent over to kiss it, like in a scene straight out of an old film. Sansa giggled as Stannis lingered over her hand a little too long.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Mr. Baratheon?”

Sansa stood primly before Stannis, nearly shaking with anticipation.

“I have acquired box seats for tonight’s grand opening of The Magic Flute. Would you honor me with your company this evening?”

Sansa’s hands flew to her mouth, then she threw herself into Stannis’ arms, abandoning the formal etiquette completely.

“Oh Stannis, yes! Opening night at the opera, I can’t believe it!”

For a moment Ned saw Sansa as an excited little girl once again. He remembered Lyanna as a young teenager, jumping into their father’s arms when he had gifted her with her first horse. Lyanna had been just as giddy as Sansa was now.

Stannis held Sansa in his arms with his head bent to hers. He caressed the hollow of her bare neck while muttering something too low for Ned to make out.

Gently disengaging, Stannis reached for the box. “I have something for you.” He spoke low, his voice having acquired a rougher, raspy tone, one Ned had never heard before. Watching them interact so intimately made him feel like an intruder.

The two stood before a mirror in the den. “What is it?” she asked, but Stannis merely opened the box. Sansa gasped, the surprise in her eyes reflected back from the mirror.

When Stannis stepped back a double strand of smokey pearls encircled Sansa’s neck, glimmering darkly with iridescent tones against her pale skin. Stannis ran a finger along her skin under the necklace, eyes rapt and focused solely on Sansa. Sansa belongs to Stannis now, whether she knows it or not.

But even Catelyn exclaimed when she saw those pearls around Sansa’s neck.

“Stannis, those are exquisite! Are they your mother’s pearls?”
Stannis furrowed his brow briefly. “No. My mother’s jewelry remains in the vault at Storm’s End. These I bought for Sansa, and they are hers to keep. Speaking of which...”

He reopened the case and pulled out a shorter strand of matching pearls and gestured to Sansa’s wrist. “May I?” Stannis spoke much more softly, the usual harshness gone from his voice.

Sansa hadn’t spoken, but smiled while she held her wrist out for Stannis to clasp the bracelet around it. Afterwards she brushed her fingers over the dark pearls encircling her neck until Stannis reached around to clasp her hand and pulled her back against his chest. He buried his nose in her hair, inhaling audibly. Ned had to turn away and cough.

“Stannis, what time does the opera start?” For once Ned was appreciative of Cat’s interruption. When he looked back his daughter and Stannis had separated, and both of their faces had turned slightly pink.

“Eight o’clock. Time to go.” Stannis offered his arm to Sansa. “Shall we?”

Ned and Catelyn escorted the couple out to the porch and watched as they drove away. Ned sighed wistfully.

“She’s so graceful, so happy. Sansa looks like a princess tonight.” Images of his father’s princess spilled into his head. “Gods, Cat, she reminds me of Lyanna sometimes. Sansa’s still so young, so pretty, so damn innocent...”

“I know, Ned. She glows when she’s with Stannis. I just wish she’d found someone else to be her prince. Someone younger, more stable, less driven. I fear we’ve lost her to him.”

Ned turned in surprise. “It’s not a contest, Cat. Just because Stannis has gained her love doesn’t mean we will lose it. Sansa is our daughter, and always will be.”

“No, Ned, he’s taking her away from us. Didn’t you see his face when he put those pearls around our little girl’s neck? He might as well have buckled on a collar with a tag - Property of Stannis Baratheon. And Sansa didn’t even realize it.” Cat’s voice took on an aggrieved air.

Ned put his arm around Cat’s shoulders. “Catelyn, she’s no younger than you were when we got engaged. She’s in love. We have to let Sansa live her own life now, follow her own dreams.”

Muttering under her breath, Catelyn went back inside to prepare for dinner, but Ned lingered outside, his thoughts slipping back in time, back towards Lyanna. She had been driven away by Robert’s infidelity and paid the ultimate price. And now his daughter was intimately involved with another temperamental Baratheon.

Thinking of Robert reminded Ned that they had agreed to meet for breakfast the next morning. He hoped Robert wouldn’t be hung over. All this talk of Lyanna had dredged up painful memories, memories that cut fresh wounds across both of their families. Robert had been hitting the bottle especially hard over the past few weeks; Sansa had told Ned the eldest Baratheon had not shown up at the office for three days straight, forcing Stannis and Renly to take his place during client meetings. Ned worried for his oldest friend, even as he acknowledged that Robert had done this to himself. It was time to talk, really talk, about Lyanna. And try to get Robert to realize he had a problem.

Shortly after dinner Ned heard Arya calling from the family room. “Mom, Dad, come here! Sansa’s on TV!”

Ned hurried to see what Arya was talking about.
“And who is this stunning couple approaching? Oh! Is it? It IS! That is none other than Stannis Baratheon, the COO of Baratheon Industries and arguably the wealthiest bachelor in King’s Landing. He looks absolutely magnificent in his Thomas Fordham tuxedo. I never realized Stannis was so tall.”

Another female voice chimed in. “Or so built. We rarely see him in public. I guess it takes a beautiful redhead to pull the reclusive executive out into the open.”

The first talking head spoke again. “Speaking of which, Mr. Baratheon’s companion is none other than nineteen year old Sansa Stark, daughter of Eddard Stark, whose family descends from the Winter Kings. Her charcoal dress is vintage Adrian - and with those matching smokey black pearls she is beyond stunning. We may have found King’s Landing’s newest royal couple.”

The second voice gasped. “The pearls around her neck - I believe those are the famous pearls of Rhaenys Targaryen! We had heard that Binksman Jewelers had sold them, but Mr. Binksman refused to divulge either the buyer or the price on grounds of privacy. However, Mr. Baratheon was recently spotted leaving Mr. Binksman’s shop. It’s safe to assume he paid a handsome sum for the rare pearls.”

“You mentioned royal couple. We have our own truly royal couple right here. Sansa Stark is descended from the Winter Kings, as you mentioned earlier. But Stannis Baratheon is one of only three directly descended Targaryens still alive, along with his two brothers. King Aegon the Fifth, our last ruling monarch, was their great-grandfather. It’s only fitting that Mr. Baratheon would purchase his distant ancestor’s famous pearls.”

“The photographers are clearly getting their fill of our newest celebrity couple. They make such an amazing pair - he is the classically tall, dark, imposing aristocrat, and she is so ethereal, so elfinly beautiful. They’re a study in contrasts, yet they look so right together. We are definitely keeping an eye on these two in the future.”

Ned watched in amazement as his daughter soaked up the attention in front of the television cameras and paparazzi. Her smile, laughter, and glowing face said it all - she was ecstatic about attending the opera with Stannis.

Stannis, however, maintained his stoney, aloof expression. He glared at the photographers for a moment, but then his narrowed eyes roved back and forth, scanning the area for hidden threats. At the same time his hand drifted to the small of Sansa’s back. Still, when Stannis turned his head to gaze down at her he gave Sansa a brief smile, and as they walked off screen Stannis held her hand in his own.

Departing for his study, Ned recalled the day several weeks earlier when Stannis had warned him about the possible stalker. Both men had agreed to keep the information from Sansa, but perhaps he and Stannis had made a mistake. From here on out Sansa would attract news and entertainment reporters, and maybe even get harassed by paparazzi. A stalker could disguise himself as a freelance photographer out to score a sensational picture. Ned resolved to speak with Stannis as soon as possible on the issue. Sansa should learn of the potential stalker from both men.

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Sansa’s voice acted as a Siren call in Stannis’ head. When she flowed into the den Stannis forgot the pain in his hand. He forgot what he had been telling Catelyn. He forgot all his carefully rehearsed words. For the moment he froze, drinking in the beautiful sight before him before she disappeared in the mirage of heat and thirst concocted by his besotted brain.

Stannis somehow managed to spit out the old-fashioned greeting he’d once heard his father use, welling up from deep within the recesses of his addled brain. When she responded in kind he finally recalled the courtly manners his Targaryen grandmother had drilled into him as a boy.

He nearly lost his composure, though, when he bent over to kiss her hand. Her scent prompted a scandalous image from the prior week to come to mind, when he’d been whiffing his way down her bare torso, tickling her with his whiskers. Stannis couldn’t resist doing the same to her silky smooth hand, eliciting just a hint of a well muffled giggle from his girl before he straightened. It wouldn’t do to ravish Sansa in front of her parents.

Whatever Sansa said after “Oh Stannis, yes!” was lost. Again, scenes from the previous Friday night insidiously wormed their way into his head as he recalled how he brought her over the edge, calling that same phrase out loud in bed. His trousers grew uncomfortably tight, but happily for Stannis she launched herself into his arms.

Stannis leaned his head in close to Sansa’s and wrapped one arm around her waist, breathing in her tantalizing, strawberry-fresh scent. Her smile blinded him.

“Why, Mr. Baratheon, you look extraordinarily handsome this evening.” Her voice was lower pitched than normal and suspiciously flirtatious. He belatedly recalled that he should say something in kind.

“You are beyond beautiful, girl,” he muttered softly, for her ears alone.

Sansa’s free, easy smile, directed towards him alone, for him alone, was all the response he could ever want. He ran his right hand through her thick hair, flowing in perfect auburn waves down her back. Somehow the silky texture eased the ache in his battered hand. Glancing down, Stannis stroked the tantalizing hollow of Sansa’s bare neck. Something was missing.

“I have something for you.”

Sansa’s face lit up even as Stannis gestured for her to stand in front of the large mirror. He wanted to watch her reaction when he put the pearls around her neck.

Stannis stood close behind Sansa and opened the box. She gasped and lifted her eyes to meet his own in the mirror. He gulped as he found his breath catching. The joy she directed at him - no one had ever looked at him with such love.

Love. Could it be?

He had to concentrate to fasten the necklace, struggling to work the tiny gold clasp with uncooperative fingers. His right hand, which had been troubling him for several months now, hadn’t gotten any better since he had smashed it against the boat’s bulkhead. In fact, the alternating pain and numbness had recently worsened. The years of beating on both bags and men had taken their toll, and in the past few weeks his dexterity had diminished to the point that Stannis didn’t trust himself to hold a razor anymore. Scowling at the recalcitrant clasp, he finally secured the necklace about Sansa’s neck.
The pearls sat flawlessly, twinkling their message with iridescent sparkles. She is mine, and now all the world will know it.

Stannis caressed Sansa’s skin beneath the pearls. The texture of her skin felt so smooth, so soothing, so fascinating that he found himself entranced until Catelyn spoke, asking Sansa to display the new gift.

He bit his lip to conceal the animalistic snarl welling up within him - let no one try to take her from me - and tried to answer Catelyn’s follow up question without letting her see his irritation. Catelyn’s surprised gasp gave Stannis a certain sense of righteous satisfaction. She’d damn well better understand I’m not going away.

While Stannis hoped to eventually give Sansa some of his mother’s jewelry, this first gift needed to come from him and him alone. But one day, he intended to make Sansa his very own Lady, Lady at his ancestral home. More and more often Stannis reflected on his childhood, when his father and mother had run the estate together. Storm’s End and the surrounding communities had thrived under his parents’ careful and nurturing management. He wanted to give that life, share that life with Sansa.

Once Stannis finished the ritual, clasping the matching bracelet around Sansa’s wrist, she ran that same hand all along the pearls draped across her neck, slowly touching each and every one. With each successive pearl her smile grew wider and wider until she laughed in delight.

Giving in to a sudden need for contact, Stannis reached around to clasp Sansa’s hand in his own and pulled her back his chest. All he could think of was the warmth and sense of belonging that this incredible young woman had given to him, had awakened within him.

Nuzzling Sansa’s ear, he spoke so low that only she could hear his words. “Know this, Sansa: I am yours and yours alone.”

She turned in his arms just enough to look him in the eyes, mere inches apart. Sansa’s face turned serious, and she gnawed on her lower lip while trying not to ask her obvious question out loud. Stannis found himself studying her irises, windows that spoke volumes to his own soul. Ringed in dark blue with a bright blue interior, they contained tiny flecks of green-gold that he’d never noticed before, too small to be seen from afar. Right now they flickered with uncertainty.

“Aye,” he whispered, tasting her velvety soft ear at the same time. “I am yours. Always.” Speaking the words solidified them in Stannis’ heart as well.

Sansa’s delighted smile and sinuous squirm against his body caused more than just Stannis’ heart to jump. For the second time in less than ten minutes he could feel the stirrings of arousal, and had to take deep breaths to send it back to sleep. Not now. Not when Sansa’s parents stood not five feet away. He was both annoyed and relieved when he heard Ned cough and Catelyn speak, obliquely reminding them that it was time to go.

As soon as he handed the car keys over to the valet at the opera house Stannis felt his shoulders tense. The area leading to the opera house entrance teemed with people, and a gauntlet of spectators had formed along the roped off walkway. Just as Sansa’s hand closed around his, so too did the oppressive heat and humidity clamp down around the both of them. Sweat trickled down the back of his neck; he resisted the urge to stop and scratch at it like a dog chasing an itch.

A murmur carried through the crowd as they approached the opera house entrance. Onlookers had gathered to get glimpses and hopefully autographs of celebrities; he was under no illusion that they
were interested in himself or Sansa. Still, he heard whispers of ‘Baratheon’, ‘pearls’, ‘teenager’, ‘gorgeous’, and ‘sugar daddy’. Stannis clenched his jaw and marched forward, purposefully ignoring the crowd and keeping his hand encircled firmly around Sansa’s all the while.

They were obliged to pause under the hot camera lights while the photographers got their fill. Stannis’ temples throbbed under the flashes of light bombarding his eyes and the cacophony of voices assaulting his ears. He didn’t know which way to look until Sansa’s arm wrapped around his waist. Her exuberant face, smiling for both him and the cameras, bolstered his own courage. If this young girl could handle the attention, then so could he.

Once inside, he paused to get his bearings. Renly had mentioned something about being obligated to rely on the ushers. Stannis snorted; he knew where the box was located and was perfectly capable of getting there on his own. Before he could approach an usher, though, Sansa needed to use the restroom.

A large group of women clustered near an ornate archway on one side of the room. He started to walk with Sansa in that direction but she put a hand to his chest, stopping him.

“It’s okay, Stannis. I’m just using the restroom. I’ll meet you back out here.” Smiling, she confidently walked away, leaving Stannis standing alone, adrift in the middle of the crowd.

Once again that uncomfortable tingling sensation jolted up his spine. He walked towards the archway Sansa had disappeared through, pretending to study the hideous wall art while actually watching the crowd for Sansa’s return.

“She is quite stunning, isn’t she?” The soft voice came from behind Stannis. A voice he recognized from the fight some weeks earlier.

Stannis whirled around. Petyr Baelish stood just a few feet away, studying a ridiculous painting of brightly colored squares.

Immediately images and sensations from the fight flashed through his mind. The same shit-eating grin, the same mocking expression. The same need to lash out, to destroy his enemy. The overwhelming urge to protect his red-haired girl. He growled.

“You don’t look at her. You don’t talk to her. You don’t even fucking think of her.”

The slender businessman smirked. “I am simply stating the obvious. You have a reputation in the corporate world for maintaining remarkable restraint under pressure, Mr. Baratheon, yet I have apparently touched a nerve. But then again, who am I talking to, Stannis Baratheon or Stefan Esterman? It’s so hard to tell these days.”

Stannis surged forward within inches of Petyr, snarling at the pencil-necked little man. He clenched his fist and started to draw it back, stopping only when he heard someone gasp nearby. It would be so easy to eliminate the threat. Scoffing, he took fierce satisfaction as the smaller man took a hasty step backwards.

“The girl’s not yours, Mockingbird. Never was. You lost.”

Petyr glided away, one, two, three steps, smiling once more. “Perhaps, perhaps. But does she know that you consider her your personal property? With Rhaenys’ pearls around her neck, all of King’s Landing certainly knows. And how will Sansa react if she discovers your alter-ego, or your, shall we say, unusual hobby. Who loses then?”

With a mocking bow Baelish turned and disappeared into the thick crowd, leaving Stannis wishing
he had permanently wiped the grin off the man’s face. Huffing, he roved back and forth along the gallery wall, constantly looking back towards the archway.

As he paced Stannis thought on Baelish’s words. “Stannis Baratheon or Stefan Esterman?” Who indeed? Stannis pushed that dark train of thought away, and instead focused on the practical implications of the Mockingbird’s revelation.

He was no longer concerned that Baelish knew his secret identity. Clearly Baelish was counting on Stannis doing everything to keep from being discovered by the police; Stannis smirked to himself, as that situation had already come to pass. He would cooperate with the authorities to bring Baelish and the whole ring down.

Just then his phone buzzed, derailing his analysis. Stannis assumed it was Sansa, as she had been gone for several minutes.

It was Sansa. Or rather, it was a picture of Sansa, taken from behind, walking along an empty hallway somewhere within the opera house.

Stannis inhaled sharply, jerked his head up and immediately cast his eyes back and forth across the bustling foyer. There were so many people, so many black tuxedos and black dresses. They all blended together. The chatter overwhelmed his ears; he could hear everything and nothing. Stannis turned in a circle once, twice, three times, desperately seeking a cascade of long red hair. He found none.

He pushed through the crowd, dodging ushers and guests alike until he ducked through the archway, barely pausing before deciding to barge into the ladies restroom in his search for Sansa. A hand on his arm belated that move.

“Are you alright, Stannis?”

The soft voice and familiar touch pulled him back. He looked into Sansa’s concerned eyes, so full of worry, worry for him. Heedless of the people streaming past them, Stannis wrapped his hand around her waist and pulled her close. He had been the worried one. If she hadn’t come back ...

Stannis dropped his head to hers and took several unsteady breaths, repeatedly clenching and relaxing his shaking hand. It took him a moment before he could speak.

“I’m fine. Where did you go?”

“The line was really long, so an usher pointed me to a side hall where there’s another restroom.” She placed a hand to his chest. “Stannis, your heart is beating a million miles an hour! What’s wrong?”

Stannis decided that Sansa need not learn of the anonymous texts he had received or his encounter with Baelish. Let her enjoy the evening without worry. “Nothing, girl, nothing. I just don’t like losing sight of you in such a crowded place.”

Mischief danced in her eyes as she playfully stroked his beard. “Well, I’m right here now, aren’t I?”

She was, and she was his. Not Baelish’s, not ever. Stannis suddenly had a different excuse for his elevated heart rate as he sought to kiss Sansa’s impertinent lips, but she placed a finger to his own mouth at the last moment. “I’m wearing lipstick, remember?”

“Mmm.” Bypassing her lips, he bent even lower to nibble on Sansa’s neck, eliciting a moan from her even as she pressed against his body. Desire to reclaim her intensified, control faded away, and time stood still until a deliberate cough distracted him.
Stannis straightened abruptly. Sansa had turned an endearing shade of red, not quite masking the small mark he had left low on her neck, just above the pearls. He glared at the nearby guests who had stopped to watch them, then turned around to address the intruder.

“Ahem. Mr. Baratheon, if you will please follow me, I will escort you and your companion to your box.” An usher turned and walked to the nearest carpeted staircase without waiting to see if they would follow.

Sansa remained unfazed by the usher’s brusque manners or Stannis nearly creating his own show.

“Stannis, this is incredible! The red carpet, the people, the opera house…”

She gazed all around the beautifully restored lobby, pausing to smile at a few onlookers giving her curious glances. Her youthful exuberance loosened the knot in his shoulders; he’d fretted that she might not appreciate such a public outing. He needn’t have worried, but should have known better than to hide his own continued unease from her.

“I know you didn’t like all that attention out there. Thank you for taking me here. That you’re willing to put up with all this means the world to me.”

Sansa gripped his arm a little tighter than necessary as they climbed the stairs behind their escort. He didn’t mind. One advantage to having a certain fiery reputation was no one hindered their progression. Stannis couldn’t help but smirk a little when some patrons hastily sidestepped out of his way.

Pride filled Stannis, pride at being accompanied by such an amazing young lady, pride at her poise in such an intimidating setting, pride that she chose him.

Stannis tipped the usher after they had been shown to their box, closed the ornately carved wooden door behind them, then spoke. “For you girl, anything.”

Once the lights dimmed and the orchestra started to play, Stannis spent most of the evening watching Sansa watch the show. He barely registered the transition from one scene to another, so focused was he instead on Sansa’s face.

Sansa had become captivated by the actions and drama occurring on the stage. With every new suspense, each parting of the would-be lovers, each new trial she gasped, lips parted, eyebrows raised in anxious awaiting, hoping the protagonists would prevail.

“Poor Pamina! She’s convinced Tamino has abandoned her! And he’s bound to silence and can’t tell her the truth. I can’t imagine falling in love only to later think one’s lover has left them. No wonder she’s lost the will to live.”

Sansa’s eyes were brimming with unshed tears. His heart clenched - would that Fate strike him down before he brought such sorrow upon his girl. Stannis tucked a wayward tendril of hair behind Sansa’s ear and stroked the back of her neck, enjoying the silky fine hair and soft skin. She leaned into his touch and gave him a soft smile, then rummaged in her purse for a tissue.

“I’m sorry,” she sniffled. “I’m not sad, I love this story. I just get so involved when watching romances like this.”

He squeezed her hand softly. He found her kindness and soft heart such an enigma that some days he wondered how it could be real.
After the show ended Stannis drove them back to his townhouse, listening to Sansa gush happily over the ending of The Magic Flute all the way.

“You know, Tamino and Pamina are the perfect pair. Even though they didn’t do anything wrong, Pamina was still targeted, maybe because she was so innocent. But then Tamino showed up and together they persevered through all sorts of trials.”

He grunted. “It’s not like that in real life. I’ve found that conspirators like Monostatos usually get away unpunished. The good guys seldom win.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way. There are still good, honest people willing to fight for the right thing.” Sansa’s statement carried the convictions of an unsullied youth.

She was so innocent, his girl. Stannis dreaded the day that Sansa’s pure, positive view on the world would surely get turned upside down.

“And even Papageno, imperfect as he was, still deserved to be loved. Everyone does, don’t you think? It was so sad when Papageno thought he had lost Papagena, convinced that he was unworthy. What if the spirits hadn’t stopped him from hanging himself? He would have died in despair, convinced he wasn’t worthy of anyone’s love.”

Not for the first time Stannis wondered if he was worthy of Sansa’s affection. Not for the first time Stannis found himself wanting.

Stannis led Sansa inside his brownstone, dark save for the dappled street light coming through the windows. He walked to the opposite wall to re-enable his security system, turned back towards Sansa, and froze.

She stood there in the foyer with alternating shadows and streaks of pale light streaming across her body, vying to trick his eyes, to make him believe she was nothing more than a fey spirit sent to torment his soul with want. Voracious craving overtook Stannis, an intense, gnawing hunger to see the rest of her body, to see and taste and touch the treasures hidden beneath her floor-length dress.

Time marched forward. So did he, his steps tapping out a counter tune against the tick-tock echo from the clock down the hall. He stopped, scant inches from Sansa, close enough to hear her breaths.

Her hair had swept forward, hiding her face. He stepped even closer, their arms brushing together, his leg warm between her own. With one hand he pushed the auburn curtain back, fingers lingering on her collarbone. The little goosebumps tantalized him, providing a fascinating contrast to her silky smooth skin. He bent forward, exploring her collarbone with his tongue, grinning as Sansa squirmed between him and the wall. Then his stomach growled.

Sansa laughed. “Did you forget to eat?”

Stannis just pulled Sansa tighter to him. “Not at all. Dinner is right here.”

He kissed her properly then, not caring about where her strawberry flavored lipstick might get smeared. Lips to lips, groin to groin, legs entwined, Stannis pushed Sansa against the wall as his hips developed a mind of their own. The heat they generated encouraged him; he wanted more.

They broke apart, breathing heavily. Sansa looked up to the top of the stairs, then back at Stannis with a shy smile. “Let’s go upstairs?”

His heart jumped, but Stannis resisted the urge to throw Sansa over his shoulders like a caveman. He instead held her hand and led her up to the darkened second floor landing, flipped a light switch for a
small table lamp, and then swept her into his arms. Sansa whooped with delight.

“Allow me, my dear lady.”

Stannis carried Sansa into his spacious bedroom and deposited her on the edge of the bed. He knelt in front of her, reached just under the edge of her dress and removed her high heels, one with each hand. Stannis took his time, caressing the back of each stockinged calf in deliberate yet unhurried strokes. With each pass his hand inched higher under the dress, past her knees, until he finally found the scalloped edges of the stockings encircling Sansa’s smooth thighs. He looked up - Sansa was leaning back on her hands with her head tilted up. Her eyes were closed, lips parted in a semi-smile.

He hooked three fingers around the edge of each stocking and slowly pulled them down. Stannis trailed his free fingers down her bare skin, reveling in the smooth sensation even as he wondered what sights were hiding beneath the folds of her dress.

Sansa shivered when he reached her ankles, and made a little pouty sound when he stood up and pulled the stockings completely off her feet. She wiggled her toes then, just barely peeking out from the hem of the dress.

“You could do that again if you like.”

Sansa had tossed her head back, and was looking at Stannis askance, maximizing his view of her slender, pearl-encircled neck. He took in a shaky breath; as much as he wanted to re-explore her still-hidden legs, he had a different scenario in mind.

“Take my hand.”

Stannis pulled Sansa to her feet, and couldn’t resist running his finger along the soft edge of her jaw, stopping when she kissed the back of his hand. That kiss sent a wave all along his arm and spine. His hand spasmed, opening and closing involuntarily. He took a step back, and gestured for Sansa to turn around. She did so willingly, but looked back to gaze over her shoulder at him. Her eyes - normally bright blue - had turned dark, and she blinked them languorously even as she ran her tongue over her lips. Stannis shuddered.

With one long stride he surged forward, snapping his hand up to - slow down. Sansa had gasped softly, but the absolute trust he saw in her expression nearly did him in. Focus on her. Only on her, not yourself.

He nibbled on the back of her neck, eliciting yet another giggle and gasp. Goosebumps emerged beneath his fingertips, and Stannis couldn’t help but explore them with both fingers and tongue, fascinated by the contrasting textures of her skin. Sansa’s giggles soon turned into soft moans. He toyed with the gown’s zipper, flipping it up and down a few times before tugging at it.

“May I?”

She nodded her assent, and Stannis began to slowly, almost arduously unzip Sansa’s dress. He traced his free hand along her exposed back, reveling as the dress divulged its riches inch by inch. At last the dress puddled around Sansa’s feet. Beneath the dress she wore only a strapless charcoal bra and matching panties. And her pearls.

“Lie back.” Sansa did so, although she lay propped up on one elbow and twirled her hair around one finger while she watched Stannis go through his own ritual of undressing.

First he draped her dress over the back of his valet chair. Then he undid his cufflinks, one by one, putting them back in their case. After that off came his jacket, tie, waistcoat, suspenders and shirt. He
could feel Sansa’s eyes on him even though he had turned away from the bed. Finally he was down to just his boxer briefs, and turned around.

She had come up onto her knees, and started to reach up to undo the necklace around her neck. Stannis held up his hand.

“No,” he rasped. “Leave them on.”

Stannis lay on his back, propped up on a few pillows, and gestured for Sansa to lay next to him. He felt the stirrings of arousal reappear as she crawled, cat-like, along the mattress until she snuggled up to his side. She started sucking on the corner of his jaw, just below his ear. That sent little shocks straight to his groin, which had started thrusting into the air in a search for contact.

He hissed, kissed her, and pulled her atop of him. He wanted to feel all of her - her skin against his, the heat, her hair draped along his sides.

Sansa was as eager to straddle Stannis as he was eager to have her there. She tucked her feet under his legs, and started to move against his groin. Her hair shone like burnished copper in the dim light. He ran his hands all along her sides, skimming her ribs, resting lightly in the dip of her waist. Her skin was especially smooth there, and he couldn’t resist stroking it repeatedly.

Sansa threw her head back as she laughed and moaned at the same time. He wanted more.

“I think we’re both wearing entirely too much clothing. Allow me?”

He reached up to unfasten Sansa’s bra. She nodded eagerly, and he wasted no time in removing the offending article. Her breasts tumbled right into his hands - soft and full and firm all at the same time. Stannis used his open palms to rub circles on her nipples, enjoying how they perked up, how she arched her back, how she ground herself against him while also pushing her chest forward. Sansa had closed her eyes, and was moving purely on instinct now. As she bent forward he took one perky nipple in his mouth, tonguing it, licking it, sucking it. Sansa moaned and pushed even faster against his erection. The heat, the pressure, her impromptu sounds - it was intoxicating.

She pouted when he stopped sucking on one breast.

Stannis chuckled low. “I don’t want the other one to feel neglected. That would be unfair.” He resumed his licking, fondling, and suckling on the other breast, and Sansa immediately resumed her little moans and wriggles. Stannis was sure he was in heaven. He had no intentions of stopping anytime soon, not when she clearly enjoyed his ministrations.

She sat up fully then, minutely rubbing against his erection. He never wanted that friction to go away, but Sansa had something on her mind.

“Stannis,” she began, then paused. Sansa bit her lip and suddenly blushed, looking once again like a shy teen.

“Hmm?”

“Would you, um...” and she blushed again, so he nodded in encouragement. “Would you do what you did that first night? With your tongue?”

Stannis grinned, ecstatic. His hips bucked up in equal excitement.

“Of course. It’s perfectly fine to tell me what you like, Sansa.” With that he flipped her over and started to mark paths down her chest with his tongue. Sansa gasped, but that gasp turned into little
moans as he traced circles around her breasts. He loved her responsiveness to his touches - they drove him into an even more enhanced state of arousal, something he wasn’t sure was possible before.

Once he reached her waist he tugged on her panties with his teeth, but decided against ripping them, and instead used his hands to slowly slide them off. Sansa lay before him, naked save for her cloak of copper hair and the glimmering pearls. He took a moment just to reflect on the image, searing it into his memory.

“Stannis,” she breathed. Sansa’s hand drifted near her groin and her hips twitched. He wanted to hold off for a minute to see what she might do, but she practically mewed his name. “Stannis….” Her eyes were closed, and she panted slightly.

“Mmm. As you wish.”

Lick and flick. Lap and map.

Up and down his tongue and fingers worked in concert, bringing Sansa to the edge of ecstasy. Her scent filled his nose and nearly short circuited his brain. But he remembered how little circles had brought her to climax before, so he held off on that motion until Sansa was grinding hard against his face, keening with need. Circles then, drew out Sansa’s keening and moaning into full on screaming of his name.

What man didn’t want to bring his woman over the tipping point? What man didn’t want to join her? Stannis quickly removed his briefs and positioned himself over Sansa, aching with his own arousal, but she put a hand up to his chest.

“Wait. Condom?”

He had nearly taken her again without protection, because he’d gotten so carried away with his own lust. They had been lucky the first time, and Sansa’s period had arrived right on schedule. He knew he couldn’t risk it again. With a moan Stannis rolled over and grabbed the box of condoms he’d left on the nightstand. He spilled three or four out on the floor in his haste to get one.

“Do you need help?” Sansa giggled. “Let me. Lie back.”

Impatient but curious, Stannis did as she asked. Sansa stuck her tongue out, concentrating while she opened the package, positioned the condom over the head of his cock and slowly rolled it down, giving him tantalizing little squeezes all the way. With a cute little grimace she wiped her hands on the sheets.

“Com’ere, girl.” Stannis stayed on his back, hoping she would ride him like she had the previous week. But Sansa shook her head and lay down next to him instead.

“It’s your turn to drive, Stannis.”

His heart skipped a beat. After their first night, he wasn’t sure she would want to take that position again. He wasn’t sure he could trust himself.

“Are you sure? That first night...I.I apologize, Sansa, for getting carried away. I-”

“No.” Sansa put a finger to his lips, effectively silencing his careful speech. “No more. Don’t apologize for being yourself, Stannis.”

She sat up and placed a hand on his chest. Her eyes were focused on his, and she held her brows in a
rare frown.

“You are you. Don’t hide yourself away. I fell in love with all of Stannis Baratheon. The meticulous planner. The gruff Stormlander. The fierce protector. The wild man with such deep passion. You don’t have to hold yourself back with me anymore, Stannis. I love you, all of you.”

She loved him? She loved him! He cupped Sansa’s cheek and kissed her, long and deep, and covered her body with his own. He would show her all that she meant to him, and swore he wouldn’t lose himself in the process.

He paused before entering her, just to be sure, but Sansa nodded her head and gave him an encouraging smile. Slowly but firmly Stannis pushed in all the way without stopping, closing his eyes in bliss. Still so tight. So hot. He opened his eyes to make sure Sansa was okay. She was humming and smiling, and wrapped her legs around his waist. That spurred Stannis to start moving.

And move he did, slow and steady at first, rocking in and out as he tried to find what Sansa enjoyed. From what he could tell she liked it all. The condom dulled his sensations just enough to let him last a while longer, but once Sansa started to squeeze him from the inside he was nearly done. She grinned, and he knew she did that on purpose.

“You can go harder, you know. It’s okay.” Her nails scratching across his shoulders sent sparks of pleasure down his spine.

Stannis needed no more encouragement than that, although he tempered his drive into a rhythmic pattern. The buildup came suddenly, and after one, two, three powerful thrusts, hard enough to bang the bed’s headboard against the wall, he came with a muffled shout.

Stannis collapsed on top of Sansa, his head buried in the crook of her neck. He took a lick. Salty sweat. She giggled.

“Stop that. I’m ticklish.” She squirmed and batted ineffectively at Stannis, but he just kept on licking and nuzzling her neck. Her wriggling beneath his larger body felt so good even though they had both just climaxed.

“Stannis!” Her laughing was so strong that he felt his softening cock summarily ejected from its happy warm spot.


He snorted, knowing full well she could breathe just fine, as he had kept most of his weight supported on his arms. But they were shaking, so he rolled over on his back and closed his eyes. He felt all floaty, warm, and drowsy.

Stannis felt the bed dip. Then he sneezed. Something was tickling his nose.

“Aren’t you going to take care of that?”

He opened one eye. Sansa leaned over him, hair swinging forward across his face. She pointed to the condom, which threatened to slide off.

“Oh.” Puzzled, he frowned up at her. Something was missing. Then it clicked in his foggy brain. “Where are your pearls?”
“I already cleaned up and I put them away. I didn’t want the necklace to come undone while we slept. Speaking of which, you had nearly fallen asleep just now.”

“No I didn’t. I was just resting my eyes.”

“Oh huh. Go clean up, please? And come back?”

Stannis stood on unsteady legs and made his way to the bathroom.

When Stannis returned to bed, Sansa immediately lay her head on his chest. This girl had turned his life upside down, flipped the box he had walled himself into over on its side and dumped him out of it. How else could he describe it? He was finally able to see beyond that box, and all thanks to her. He let out a deep sigh, but it was one of contentment, not consternation.

“Are you okay?” Sansa’s eyes showed concern.

“Very much so. Just amazed. At you. You taught me how to laugh, how to smile. You’ve shown me a future, Sansa, when all I could see were the walls of my box. Most importantly -”

How to say it? He’d never felt it before, never said it to anyone. Three short words. Terrifying. Freeing. His pulse quickened.

“Stannis?”

He sat up then, and with two fingers tilted Sansa’s chin up so that she would meet his eyes. He couldn’t look away, not now.

“Most important of all. You opened up my heart, girl, just when I had convinced myself I had none.” Stannis bent his head to touch hers, still keeping eye contact. He was sure he’d lose himself in those endless blue depths. He was sure he wouldn’t mind if he did.

“I love you.”

Her delighted smile, caress to his cheek, and soft kiss were all Stannis ever needed in return. She had already opened up her heart to him. This acceptance of his love was a gift he would cherish always.

Sansa traced lazy circles on his chest, hair draped across his body in a silken blanket. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that-”. Stannis paused. His blood hummed. His heart beat in sync with Sansa’s. He took a deep, heavy breath, feeling the wonderful weight within and without. Then he knew.

“This is real.”

Chapter End Notes

Big thanks to TommyGinger for the beta-read!

Katharine Hepburns's dress from 'Woman of the Year' is the inspiration for Sansa's
dress. Another thanks to TommyG!

link (I hope): https://www.pinterest.com/pin/214484000973548058/
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Sorry for such a long delay! Real life has thrown a number of curveballs my way over the summer and fall. Thanks to everyone for sticking with this story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Stannis woke with a start, eyes instinctively seeking the clock. Six-thirty. He settled. It was Saturday and the alarm wouldn’t sound off for another half hour. Relaxing, he focused on the more immediate sensations surrounding him.

A warm, soft body stretched along his own. Smooth legs intertwined with his, thick soft hair draped across his chest, and the faint scent of strawberries filled his nose. Sansa. Her slow, even breathing told him that she still slept.

Loath to disturb her rest, Stannis lay still and reflected upon the previous evening. With the exception of Baelish’s brief appearance, their date at the opera had been perfect. If it weren’t for her dress draped over the chair, he would have thought that it had all been a dream, nothing more than wishful thinking. But the truth lay right in his bed, right in his arms.

He stretched in contentment as he recalled Sansa’s words. *I love you, all of you.* Stannis had reciprocated in the only way he knew how. He gave himself fully to Sansa, even as she gave him the gift of himself, to be his unrestrained self. He knew then that he loved her as he had never loved before.

He settled his hand along the captivating curve just above her hip. Stannis couldn’t help but stroke his fingers back and forth along that enticing, silky smooth spot. He relaxed even more as the rhythmic motion put him into a state of half arousal, half sedation.

In some ways these gentle caresses still confounded him; affectionate physical contact had eluded him for so many years that the first time Sansa touched him he had nearly pulled away in confusion. Now he couldn’t get enough.

The pink and orange rays of the newly risen sun streamed across his bed, causing Sansa’s hair to glow fire-red against his own darker skin. The early morning light also informed him that he needed to get moving - he and Davos were going to meet for coffee soon. And talk about the investigation into the fight circuit.

Stannis got dressed quietly, pausing when Sansa stirred in the bed. He didn’t want to wake her just yet, instead taking the opportunity to study her soft face, looking even younger than she did when awake, and in such utter peace. He envied Sansa her innocence, and wondered when he had lost his own. Although Stannis wasn’t sure that he had ever been as innocent as she still was even now.

“Hey. Stannis.” Sansa’s voice broke through his reverie. Her beautiful blue eyes regarded him sleepily. “What’s wrong?”

*How could she tell?* “Nothing. Why?”
“You were so far away. I had to say your name three times. And you’re frowning.”

“According to Robert I was born with a frown. I suppose this is just my default expression.”

She shook her head. “I’ve seen you relaxed and happy, so what’s bothering you?”

Stannis made up an excuse about how he and Davos were just going to discuss the mugging from a few months ago. He couldn’t tell Sansa the real reason. Not yet. And if he could swing it, not ever.

Sansa yawned. “How long will you be gone?”

“A few hours at most. Get some more sleep, girl. I’ll take care of the alarms downstairs.”

Kissing Sansa with more than a little regret, Stannis watched her snuggle under the covers, hugging his pillow while she appeared to fall straight back to sleep. Youth.

He set the security alarm and walked the few blocks to the café, feeling as though he had an itch he just couldn’t scratch. A white delivery van was parked just down the street from his townhouse, the driver talking on the phone while simultaneously looking at a map. Dismissing him as lost, Stannis kept walking. At least it wasn’t paparazzi. He constantly looked across the street, behind him, and glared at any vehicles that drove too slowly past him. After last night’s attention at the opera house, he hated leaving Sansa alone. But he couldn’t hold the upcoming conversation with Davos in her presence either.

Davos had kept his word - he had given Stannis the extra week with Sansa before pushing the investigation. But that respite was over.

Petyr Baelish’s words kept haunting him, taunting him. “...Stannis Baratheon or Stefan Esterman? It’s so hard to tell these days.” Mocking as they were, the words rang with a hard, unpalatable truth. More and more often Stannis found himself wondering the same thing.

And Sansa, how could he keep the truth from her? Her gift to him - I fell in love with all of Stannis Baratheon - how could he accept it in good conscience? Problem was, Sansa didn’t know quite all of Stannis Baratheon. Would she love that darker part of him, personified as Stefan Esterman?

Additionally, were Baelish’s parting words a threat to tell Sansa the truth about Stannis’ double identity? If she found out from anyone other than Stannis himself, their relationship was doomed. But Stannis hadn’t the slightest idea of how to tell her. He would prefer to never let her find out.

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Saturday morning Ned pulled into his usual parking spot outside the old midtown diner, in between two police cruisers. Years ago Robert had declared that if this little diner was good enough for King’s Landing’s police force, then it was good enough for Robert Baratheon. Ned knew the real reason - Robert liked their generous helping of steak and eggs.

Inside Ned found Robert already drinking coffee and flirting with a passing waitress. Ned sighed as he sat down in the booth with its old red vinyl seats and formica countertop.

“She’s never going to say yes, Robert.”
“Never say never, Ned. I’m not dead yet!” Robert gestured for more coffee once Ned had settled. After she poured the coffee he shot a grin at Ned and whispered something in the woman’s ear. She gasped with wide eyes, then swatted him goodnaturedly with a menu.

“Robert Baratheon, there’s no way you could pull that stunt if you keep eating those double stacked plates. Your belly will get in the way.” With a wink for Ned their longtime waitress left to tend to other customers. Robert just laughed.

“See? She’ll say yes eventually, I know it.”

Ned wondered if Sansa had been mistaken about Robert’s repeated absences and drunken spells, as he didn’t show any signs of being hungover. His eyes were bright, face animated, speech clear and unslurred. He must have gotten laid last night.

“Gods Ned, but Sansa looked like a model on TV last night! She’s a natural, handled the press and photographers better than Cersei ever did!”

“You can thank Catelyn for that. She made Sansa participate in I don’t know how many beauty pageants when she was younger. I never liked the idea of putting such young girls on display, but her mother insisted. And Sansa enjoyed it. She loved practicing formal etiquette and dressing up and all the other stuff that comes with those pageants. The exposure seems to have paid off.”

Robert waved his hand. “Bah! Cersei tried to make poor Myrcella get into that scene, but ‘Cella didn’t want any part of it, and only went to one. She fumbled her speech so badly Cersei never made her do it again. That whore of an ex-wife was so embarrassed she took off to Lannisport for a month afterwards.” Robert chuckled. “I promised Myrcella she and I would go get ice cream together if she flubbed it up. Worked like a charm.”

Ned laughed - trust Robert to get one over on Cersei. Robert continued to ramble after the waitress took their orders.

“I had no idea Stannis was taking Sansa to the opera. Never thought I’d see the day when my brother would seek the limelight. But with a pretty girl like Sansa at his side, I guess even Stannis isn’t immune. Hah! That explains why Renly was such a petty bitch yesterday. Stannis took the day off and left Renly in charge of all the Operations meetings. Renly whined and moaned all damn day.”

Ned shook his head in amusement. “Sansa didn’t know anything either. Stannis only told her last night when he picked her up.”

Robert started to grumble. “Well, I’m glad Sansa had a good time, but I don’t see why Stannis had to take the whole day off. He’s a lot more efficient than Renly.”

“He’s not a mule, Robert, but you treat him like one. Stannis has been loyal to you, but if you keep loading him up with your and Renly’s duties, he’s bound to get tired of it. And like a mule, once he’s done, he’s done for good.”

“What? Ned, you don’t really know my brother, do you? Well, let me tell you something. Stannis loves to be in charge of everything. He’s a workaholic. I gave him the responsibilities because he likes it. What else would he do? And why are we talking about my brother, anyway? Tell me about Robb and the rest of the kids.”

Ned opted not to point out that Stannis chose to take Sansa to the opera. And several other impromptu dates as well. Any further mention of Stannis would derail the conversation he really needed to hold with Robert. Ned talked about Jon, Robb, and the rest of his family instead, knowing
Robert only half listened while he inhaled his huge plate of steak and eggs.

*****

Stannis was so wrapped up in his gloomy thoughts that he walked right past the café’s outdoor patio and Davos without noticing them. Davos hailed to him.

A few customers regarded Stannis with mild curiosity as he stepped over the low wall onto the patio, but soon turned back to their own affairs. Good. He sat down at Davos’ table in an isolated corner of the patio, far enough away from any other customers that they wouldn’t be overheard.

“Morning, Stannis. You made a hell of an entrance at the opera. Did you know your pictures are plastered all over the tabloids today?”

Stannis grunted. He didn’t need any more reminders of the publicity he and Sansa had garnered. “What do they say?”

Davos waved his hand dismissively. “Just the usual crap - sugar daddy, rich bad boy, you get the idea.”

He then leaned forward and spoke with a little more concern. “You don’t need me to tell you that more people in that fight circuit will recognize you now. I wish you hadn’t made such a public showing last night.”

Stannis huffed. “What difference does it make now? The news pieces on my previous arrests were probably enough to get their attention. As it is, Baelish already knows. He said as much to me last night.”

His friend’s eyes grew wide. “That’s bad. If he knows, so do others. But why would he tip you off?”

“I don’t know.”

The road next to the café hummed with activity. The white van he had seen earlier drove past them, then turned at the light back down his own street. Construction had blocked off the normal two way traffic. Stannis absentely wondered where it was heading.

“I’ve seen this before. It behooves Baelish to keep you in the circuit - my street contacts says there’s a lot of money riding on this upcoming fight. And he probably thinks that you won’t go to the police, because then you’d be exposing yourself.” Davos laughed. “We’re ahead of him.”

He continued. “But the bigger question is this - what does Baelish personally have to gain by it? He’s a hedge fund manager and multi-millionaire, not a petty gambler. There’s something else at stake, and we’ve got to figure it.” Davos stopped suddenly, staring at Stannis’ hands.

“What are you doing?”

Stannis looked down at the shredded pieces of paper that had been his napkin. He couldn’t keep still in his seat, and desperately wanted to walk, to run, to scratch. A sip of coffee helped. A little.

“Stannis.” Davos’ sharp voice redirected his attention.

Davos sighed. “There’s more than one subject to talk about. Listen to me - it’s important. Your
tobacco we tested came back negative. It wasn’t tainted with Spike.”

Stannis let loose a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “So it was just a mistake then, the first blood test?”

His friend shook his head, sad and serious all at once. “The blood sample we took from you this week contained a high concentration of Spike - one of the highest my tech had ever seen.”

“Impossible!” Stannis hissed through clenched teeth. “You just said the tobacco tested negative.”

“That can, yes, was negative. So now I have to ask - how are you getting the drug?” Davos looked Stannis dead in the eyes, daring him to lie.

“I’m not! There has to be a mistake, maybe my blood sample got switched in the lab, or contaminated, or...I don’t know, but I do know I’m not buying Spike.”

“Stannis, I had physical custody of your sample from the time we drew your blood all the way through the test procedure in the lab. I promise, there is no way anyone’s sample got mixed up with yours. The drug was in your system. A lot of it.”

“Do you really think I would have consented to a blood test if I knew it would come back positive?”

He didn’t realize that he was leaning half way across the table until Davos leaned back, hands up in supplication. Frowning, Stannis dropped back in his chair and pulled his hat further down. For a brief moment he’d wanted to throttle his friend. Why, he didn’t know. He started sorting the little shredded pieces of paper into neat piles arranged by size, avoiding Davos’ gaze.

Davos spoke quietly, thoughtfully. “I believe you Stannis. But I also believe the results of the blood tests, and I can’t discount your changes over these past several months.”

How could it be him, the stable one, taking drugs? Renly’s words once again echoed in his head. Jonesing. Another way of saying an addict was craving a fix. He shook his head - Robert was the one with an addiction.

*****

Just as Ned finished his own breakfast a young couple walked past his and Robert’s table, holding hands and giggling. They couldn’t have been any older than Sansa.

Robert scoffed. “Hmph. I can’t imagine my brother holding hands and acting like that kid. Too bad for Sansa - she’s missing out on her own youth, dating Stannis.”

Perversely, Ned felt the need to defend Stannis. Mostly to defend his own daughter’s choice.

“You should have seen Sansa last night, Robert. She lit up like a Christmas tree - she practically glowed when Stannis picked her up. He treats her like gold. She reminded me so much of Lyanna. You remember, don’t you, how happy she was? Lyanna found excitement in everything. That was Sansa last night.”

Robert groaned quietly. “Lyanna.”

He looked out the window, and then down the aisle towards the young lovers. His eyes were
hooded, round face pulled long in grief.

“Gods Ned, that girl was so wild. Roller coasters. Speeding along the highway with the top rolled down. Drag racing on the strip. She loved it all. I still think about her. Every single god-damned day. I wish I could take back that night.”

Ned knew exactly what Robert was referring to. He looked down. His coffee cup was blurry, even though it sat right in front of him. Ned blinked a few times and rubbed his eyes, then looked up at his oldest friend. It was time to put the past to rest.

“That night, her birthday…” Ned took a shaky breath, and tried again. “You know Robert, I was really angry at you when she told us you had another girl at your place. But what happened after that - well, you didn’t make Lyanna run off, and you didn’t kill her. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. It’s not your fault.”

Robert slumped in his seat, as much as a man his size could slump, and covered his face for a moment. His eyes were suspiciously shiny.

“Hells, Ned, how can you say that? She was your sister. And if I hadn’t fucked up that night, Lyanna would still be here.”

“There’s no guarantee of that. Lyanna was every bit as wild as you were, just in a different way. Part of me believes that she wasn’t meant to be on this earth very long. If it wasn’t that murderer on that night, it would have been something else.”

Robert banged the table with his fist, causing their empty dishes to rattle. “No! I don’t believe that! I would have protected her!”

“We can’t keep everyone we love wrapped up in a bubble. Look Robert, I’m worried about you. I’m worried that the booze is keeping you from moving forward. I’m not blind; your drinking has gotten worse since the media has dug up everything about Lyanna again.”

Robert crossed his beefy arms and leaned back, hardened scowl firmly in place. “You drink too. What’s the big deal?” At that moment his stormy expression reminded Ned of Stannis.

“I don’t drink everyday and I don’t drink to get drunk. You’re not going to find peace in the bottom of a bottle. It’s been hard for me, too. But Robert...you can’t do this to yourself anymore. It’s killing you, slowly but surely. Lyanna has been dead for years. It’s time to finally let her go.”

Robert shook his head and closed his eyes, anger draining away as quickly as it had flared up. He took a great, shuddering breath that could have been either a sob or a laugh. But when he opened his eyes all that showed was grief and confusion.

“I don’t know how, Ned. I just don’t know how.”

*****

“Maybe there’s another explanation.” How could Davos stay so calm?

“And what might that be, Detective?” Stannis didn’t look up or stop sorting the little pieces of paper.
“Someone is slipping the drug to you when you’re not looking. Think, Stannis. You live your life according to a set routine. Do you stop for coffee at the same place every day? See the same people? Eat lunch or dinner at the same place and time, or subscribe to a delivery service? Where do you buy your chew? Do you ever leave it where someone could access it?”

Davos’ rapid-fire questions pelted Stannis with such an intensity that he flinched.

“Coffee - during the week I just get it at work, from the same pot everyone on the executive floor uses. Food - I have a meal service for my house, you know that. But they are bonded and insured, and I’ve been using them for many years. Sometimes I get lunch delivered from the company’s cafeteria, sometimes I eat out. It depends.”

“Ok, so that rules out your food and drink. What you’re doing is too random for anyone to compromise. Hmm...You’ve gotten really big over the years from lifting - do you take prescriptions, vitamins, supplements? Especially anything customized just for you?”

“No, yes, yes, no. The vitamins and supplements I take are just what you can buy off the shelf. They’re in my kitchen. You want to test them, have at it.” Stannis emphasized his last words with a sharp flick of his hand, scattering the neatly piled paper bits all over the table and the floor.

Stannis just slumped deeper into his chair and rubbed his eyes.

“Listen. We’ve ruled out everything but the most obvious vector - your tobacco. It’s the most common and most effective means of delivery anyway. First, when did you start dipping, and why?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes. I need to establish a timeline. Just humor me, please?”

“Fine. About three or four years ago. I noticed that a lot of the other guys at the gym dipped. I figured it would help me blend in, look more like the blue collar contractor I pretended to be. Plus it gives me a boost and helps me get in the mood to train.”

“So you use it as a prop.”

Stannis shrugged.

“Where do you get it most often? Do you have one particular store you go to? One particular brand? Any changes over the years?”

“Mostly down on the docks. I don’t know the brand - it’s just got a red label. I buy another kind here uptown. Sometimes at that corner shop down the street, sometimes at the gas station.”

Davos sucked in a breath and looked at Stannis with laser focus. “Wait, you just said red label. The can you gave me last week was green. Why didn’t you tell me about the other? Where do you buy it?” The last sentences came out partly pleading, partly accusing.

“I told you - a little store at the docks. What difference does it make, Davos? I’ve been buying it down there for nearly four years now. Spike hasn’t been around that long - I saw that special on the news.”

“The news special was wrong. We have evidence that Spike first showed up in King’s Landing over three years ago, not 18 months.” Davos tapped the table to get Stannis’ attention.

“But now, learning that you also use a different brand, one you didn’t give me or tell me about...If I
didn’t know you I’d think you were stringing me along, that you had been buying and using Spike knowingly all the while. And frankly I don’t know you anymore.”

Stannis slammed his clenched fists on the table and met Davos’ accusing eyes straight on.

“Dammit all, Davos! I thought you were my friend, not judge and jury. I didn’t fucking lie! If I’ve been taking Spike I sure as hell didn’t know it!”

Davos leaned back, looking oddly satisfied. Stannis scowled. There was nothing satisfying about their current conversation.

“I do believe you. So now I think either someone’s spiking your snuff or making sure what you buy is already loaded. Think about it - you’ve been going down to the docks to train for years. That’s a shady part of town - it’s even more crime-infested than Flea Bottom. You buy your snuff at the same place down there. Once you developed a predictable pattern it would have been easy to ensure you bought Spike.”

Stannis huffed. “Now what?” He couldn’t believe it; he couldn’t discount the evidence.

“Now I do my job. The obvious questions are who and why. Do you have any enemies? What about your brothers? The company itself? This sets you up for blackmail, even without your involvement in the fight circuit...Maybe that’s it, a way to keep you in the circuit. Because now I’m convinced that whoever is distributing the drug is involved in the fighting and gambling rings. And you’re the connection between the two.”

“Great.” Stannis scratched his bearded jaw and looked around the café, the street, anywhere but at his friend. Sansa. What will she say, what will she think? She deserved a younger man, free of issues.

“Stannis,” Davos’ voice was softer now. “I am your friend, and I’m worried about you. I know all this is stressful, and you’ve got a lot on your mind. Will you consider getting professional help? I know of several providers that exercise complete discretion.”

“No.”

“Please? At least think about it?”

“Forget it, Davos. I don’t need a shrink and I don’t need rehab - I’m not a junkie.”

Stannis pushed his chair back and made ready to leave. This had been a complete waste of time.

*****

“Lyanna has been dead for years, Robert. It’s time to let her go, let her rest. Both of us. Holding onto my sister has affected my relationship with Sansa. It’s hurting me and it’s hurting her. Seven Hells, I couldn’t even look at her last night without thinking about Lyanna. And it doesn’t make sense because Sansa is nothing like Lyanna, not in looks, temperament, or behavior. But I still think about my sister every time I see my daughter.”

“Why?”
“I don’t know. She’s my oldest daughter, and such a sweet, innocent girl. I vowed that I wouldn’t lose her too. I suppose I’ve had a need to protect her from all the evil in the world, to keep her from following Lyanna’s path. And Sansa has always been so compliant. She never complained or rebelled. But now I realize we’ve sheltered her too much.”

“And then she went and worked for Petyr Baelish without telling you or Cat. That’s a rebellious act, trust me I know.” Robert laughed, utterly without humor. “And who was the first person she told? My brother. How did that happen?”

Ned rubbed his face and shrugged. “She was sitting next to Stannis on the porch, and just started talking—”

Robert cut Ned off. “Not that. I mean - everything. How did your daughter fall for my dour brother? One of the prettiest young girls in King’s Landing falls in love with a man twice her age. And Stanny isn’t exactly a player.”

“You think I haven’t been asking myself the same thing? Why Stannis, instead of a boy her own age? I know I haven’t been the most present father to her. She’s the one that never rebelled or acted out, so I’ve given the other kids far more attention. And now she’s in the arms of a man nearly as old as I am.”

“What are you going to do about it? Do you want me to tell Stannis to leave her alone? I will.”

“No, you won’t. She loves him and he definitely loves her. The problem is mine.” Ned paused to gather his thoughts. He wasn’t sure what Robert would think of his next admission, but maybe it would help his friend to see a little more clearly.

“Actually Robert, all this media coverage of Stannis and Sansa and all the dirt they’ve dug up on both our families’ pasts has really brought Lyanna’s ghost to the forefront. I haven’t gotten over her death yet either, and I’ve been seeking a replacement for her in Sansa. I’ve been wrong. It isn’t fair to Lyanna’s memory and it certainly isn’t fair to Sansa. And so I’ve started seeing a therapist for counseling.”

Robert laughed out loud. “What? You’re seeing a shrink? You aren’t crazy, Ned. What do you think their psycho-babble is going to do for you?”

Ned sighed. “No, I’m not crazy. But I need an outside perspective, and this counselor I’m seeing is helping me with that. It’s time to move forward, and I think you could use some help to do so. I know I do.”

“I don’t need to sit on some crackpot shrink’s couch and talk about the past. Like you said, Lyanna’s dead. What’s there to tell?”

“You won’t find Lyanna in the arms of a stranger or at the bottom of a bottle. You don’t have to live in the past, and you don’t have to be alone. She’s gone. But we’re not. You still have brothers. You’re basically an uncle to all my kids. Move forward Robert, please. At least think about it?”

“Bah! I thought we were going to have a decent breakfast and maybe go play a round of golf, not dredge up the past.” Robert stood up suddenly and pulled out some cash to pay the waitress, pausing only when the policemen’s radio behind them started sounding off with an alert dispatch code.
A few laughing girls walked past Stannis and Davos, looking and gesturing inside the open air café. Both men turned to look at what caught the girls’ attention - a young man talking on his cell phone, smiling and waving at the girls. They giggled and waved back while they walked on.

Stannis frowned and stared at the young man, all intentions of walking out abandoned. He looked familiar - the oozing smile, slicked back blond hair…

“Harry.” Interrogation and irritation momentarily forgotten, Stannis growled out the boy’s name. “What’s he doing here?”

“What are you talking about?”

He nodded towards Harry, still chatting on the phone. “That boy, Harry Hardyng. He was hitting on Sansa over on campus.”

“So? Any young man would hit on her - she’s beautiful. You’re going to have to get used to that, but don’t worry so much. Remember, she chose you. Not some young punk.”

“It’s not just that. Do you remember the anonymous photo texts I got a few months back? I’m certain that he took those pictures of Sansa. And he worked at the campus employment office. I think Harry is on Baelish’s payroll. How else would Sansa, while only a freshman, have gotten that internship at the Mockingbird Fund?”

“How can you prove it?”

“I have a picture of him taking our picture over on Market Street, right here on my-” Stannis paused and checked all his pockets. No phone.

“Dammit. I left my phone at the townhouse. But I’ll get it to you. You need to watch that kid, Davos. He’s connected to Baelish, mark my words.”

“I can’t just investigate anybody on a whim, you know that. I need-”

The sound of breaking dishes distracted both men. Harry had dropped his cup, and was busy both apologizing and trying to leave the café at the same time. His focus was directed out on the street, not, as Stannis first thought, on him. Harry was no longer smiling, nor laughing, nor looking at the pretty girls. A white van turn down his street. That’s the same van.

Harry was walking quickly in the opposite direction, phone once again glued to his ear.

No phone. Harry here. Harry rushing to leave. Same van…

“Sansa!”

Stannis knocked over their table as he jumped up, leapt over the low wall and dashed across the street, dodging honking cars and traffic cones. He ran and ran, ignoring Davos’ calls behind him. Stannis could not dismiss the warning bells clanging in his head. Sansa was in danger. His lungs burned, his heart thumped, his feet ached. Still he ran. Sansa was in danger, he was sure of it, and he wasn’t there to protect her.

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The police officer’s radio blared loudly, loud enough to stop Robert’s diatribe.

“10-31, possible 10-31 Garden District. Address forthcoming.”

Ned looked at Robert. “Stannis lives over in the Garden District. I thought that area was really safe.”

Ned’s stomach roiled as more codes were rattled off. Then a street address was provided. The cops in the booth answered the dispatcher, but did not leave. Other units were closer. Ned didn’t catch the whole address but the street sounded familiar.

“Doesn’t Stannis live on that street?”


“Sansa is with him.”

“They’re fine, Ned. Stannis has already shown that he can take care of himself and anyone that bothers her too. Don’t worry so much. Besides, it’s probably at a business, whatever it is.”

Once again the radio blared out its message, including the street address. Robert jerked his head around, then back at Ned, laissez-faire attitude gone. Both men recognized the number.

“That’s Stannis’ place.” “Sansa!”

Robert threw a handful of bills on the table and they both ran out of the restaurant and jumped into Robert’s SUV. As Robert raced past red lights Ned prayed that his little girl was safe.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to TommyGinger for the suggestions and pre-update review/beta read!
WARNING! This chapter contains a somewhat violent and psychologically disturbing scene including assault and intent to rape. No rape actually occurs, and the chapter itself is not explicit, except perhaps in some dialogue. I have updated the story tags with 'Attempted Rape/Non-Con' and am putting this note here as well. It is not for sensational purposes - this chapter sets up an extremely important chain of events and decisions for Stannis.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa woke to the muffled sound of a closing door. Stannis had been gone for a while - perhaps he was back?

Stannis’ dress shirt hung on the valet chair next to her own dress. Sansa smiled as she climbed out of bed and padded across the luxurious Essosi carpet to the corner, toes sinking into the deep soft fibers. What would he think?

She ran her fingers over his shirt, marveling at the way the smooth weave flowed under her skin. Without thinking she drew the shirt up to her nose and sniffed, long and deep. It smelled just like Stannis. Giggling, Sansa pulled the big shirt on and buttoned it, then rolled up the long sleeves. Even rolled up they still hung nearly to her wrist. Stannis’ shirt fell to mid-thigh. She posed in front of the full length mirror - it was long enough to act as a dress. Almost.

The iridescent black pearls glimmered in the corner on Stannis’ nightstand, right next to his cell phone. He must have forgotten it. But since he was only down the street and would be back soon, she didn’t worry.

Humming, Sansa fastened the pearls around her neck and stood before the mirror once again. Too many buttons. She unfastened one more button so a little more skin showed - and the pearls. Would he like it?

Last night had been magical. Stannis had treated her to a night only princesses in fairy tales experienced. His chivalrous greeting, darkened eyes, fervent attention - all focused solely on her. Arriving at the opera, the red carpet greeting, a private box seat, all of it a dream. Sansa smiled, still giddy. If it weren’t for the pearls draped around her neck she would not have been certain last night’s fairy tale date hadn’t been a dream.

But when they returned to the townhouse, Stannis’ ministrations had been nothing short of mindblowing, erotic, sensual, loving. His hands, his eyes, his deep raspy voice, all communicated his unrestrained love. Sansa shivered in remembered delight as she recalled those hands and that tongue working magic across her body.

Another rattle echoed up from what sounded like the kitchen. Sansa walked out of the bedroom to the stairway landing.

“Stannis?”
No answer. Sunlight filtered through the front door jamb. Sansa trotted down the stairs and pushed the door all the way closed. Stannis must have thought it had shut behind him.

“Stannis, where are you?”

Perhaps she could surprise him. What would he do when he saw her wearing nothing but his shirt and the pearls? The kitchen island was about the right height...

She walked down the hallway as she called out for him. A warm breeze, at odds with the cool air of the bedroom, blew through the narrow passageway, ruffling her shirt against her bare bottom. It was humid and the smell reminded her of a landfill. Was Stannis taking the trash out to the alley dumpster?

Sansa entered the kitchen and stopped cold. Two men, both thin and greasy-haired, leered at her. She shouted and tried to run. But a much larger man blocked the way. Where had he come from? Shaking her head, looking every which way for an escape, Sansa backed up as fast as she could. Until she ran into something - someone - who grabbed her arms and pinned them to her side. His body pressed up against her back and rump.

“He ain’t here, sweetheart. Just us. And we’re going to have a good time, aren’t we?” Sansa didn’t remember saying anything specific. Had she yelled Stannis’ name?

The largest intruder approached Sansa, forcing her to back up. She arched her back, desperate to keep from touching the man holding her arms. But she also leaned away from the leader when he reached his hand out towards her face.

“No, no, no…” Sansa whimpered and pulled her head to the side. The man grabbed her hair and yanked her head back with a harsh jerk, exposing her neck. He pressed right up against her front, so she was trapped in-between the two intruders.

“Who are you? How did you get in here?” Sansa’s throat closed up around her, and she could barely breathe. Stall for time, make them talk, isn’t that what they always say?

“It don’t matter who we are sweetheart.” He ran his free hand along Sansa’s jaw and neck in a rough imitation of a lover’s touch. “As far as how we got in, well, we just opened the door and walked right in.”

“That’s impossible! The alarm...it’s silent, but I guarantee it’s gone off and the police will be here, you won’t get away with this.” I can be brave.

A sadistic grin spread across the man’s ugly face. “No. They won’t. You wanna know why? Because we shut the alarm off first. Ain’t nobody coming because nobody knows we’re here.”

“I don’t believe you.” Time, stall for time, anything...

“Take a good look, little princess.” He grasped Sansa’s jaw in a vice-like grip, and with a wrenching twist she faced the open back door.


Sansa’s heart tried to beat its way out of her chest and her lungs clamored for air.

With another wrenching twist Sansa once again stood face to face with her captor. Her chest ached
and her throat was so tight she couldn’t swallow. The man holding her laughed when she tried to pull free with her leaden arms.

“And the best part? The security company thinks your rich boyfriend disabled it himself.”

He touched the pearls and roughly traced a path between her breasts. Sansa whimpered again. Her skin crawled, like ants marching all over her. Her attacker stood nearly as tall as Stannis, and was at least as big.

“Is this how your big sugar daddy touches you, princess?”

This isn’t real, it isn’t real, it can’t be happening. Stannis, where are you? Any minute now, please.

“There’s no fancy knight in shining armor coming to save you. He’s out having a cup of joe with his cop buddy.”

Make them talk...

“How do you know where Stannis is?”

“Heh. That copper friend of his has enemies on the inside. They hear things, they share things. Information is money.” He grinned, but Sansa couldn’t see anything friendly in his face, only greed and lust. “Lots of money.”

She couldn’t bear to look the man in the eye for more than a moment. His eyes showed no fear, no remorse, no feeling whatsoever. The coldness terrified her. Sansa struggled to get free of her captors, but the grip around her arms tightened even more, so much so that her hands grew numb. She tried to wiggle her fingers but they refused to respond.

The large intruder shook his dirty, calloused finger in her face. “Ah, ah, ah, princess, the more you struggle the more it will hurt. My associates will make sure of that. And so will I.”

“Hey Boss, speaking of money, she’s wearing them dragon pearls. They’re worth a fortune.” The man holding Sansa stank of sour sweat and too many days without a shower.

He chuckled. “The pretty girl wears her sugar daddy’s pearls and his shirt. I bet he got a better view of what’s hiding under that shirt than I do. How about I fix that?”

The man ripped the front of Sansa’s oversized shirt wide open. Buttons flew left and right, making little pinging sounds wherever they bounced.

“Much better.”

Sansa looked away from his face, down at the floor. She didn’t want to see him ogling at her. His boots were made of old brown leather, stained with greasy dark splotches. The man’s pants were made of a sturdy dark canvas with reinforced knees, were covered in stains and reeked of rotting fish and diesel fuel. The stench overwhelmed her, and she gagged.

“Now look at me, little girl.” The ringleader spoke right in Sansa’s ear. She shook her head.

“I said, Look. At. Me.” The man wrapped his hand around Sansa’s jaw and forced her head up. Her chest hurt inside, like she’d held her breath too long underwater.

“You disobeyed me, princess. That’s gonna cost you.” With a sneer he twisted her left breast so hard Sansa’s eyes watered and she cried out. She gasped and heaved as the burning sensation and the
sudden sharp throbbing spread across her chest.

The boss hoisted Sansa up onto the kitchen island with enough force to knock the wind from her lungs.

“Hold her arms.”

Sansa struggled and pulled and writhed as the other man yanked her arms over her head. Her shoulders burned from the strain and her throat tightened even more - especially when the man jerked her hips down and spread her legs. Her back cracked, and she was sure her shoulders would pop out of their sockets. She could not move.

“I heard you call your man’s name, princess. You came sashaying in here wearing nothing but his pearls and his shirt - I know what you wanted. Not such a pretty princess after all. More like a pretty little whore.”

The attacker pounced on top of Sansa, his cold belt buckle digging into her stomach. He leaned close to her face, so close his nose touched hers. It was greasy, like the vinyl tablecloth of a cheap diner. She pulled her head back but he just got closer. So close, it had to be a nightmare - nothing could be this horrible in real life. He was everywhere, all over her, all around her. She twisted and tried to push him off with her legs. It didn’t work.

“I bet you wanted your boyfriend to take you right here on this island. Do you squirm like this for him?” Sansa couldn’t look at his face - it was the face of a monster. And that monster was a man.

“What’s this? The rich man likes to mark his girl?” He rubbed his finger hard against her lower neck. “Does it turn you on, little girl? Seems like he wants to show the world who you belong to. It’s my turn now.”

What? A wet sucking suction pressure pulled on her neck, exactly where Stannis had left his mark. A searing pain ripped across her throat. Sansa gagged and retched as her stomach tried to turn itself inside out. The man laughed.

“Did your daddy-man fuck you while you wore these pearls? Heh. I might want to fuck a pretty little princess who wears million dollar pearls, too.” I can get through this, it’s just my body, not my mind.

“Do you like it when your rich man fucks you, princess? He’s a big bastard, just like me. I guarantee my cock will fill you up just as well as his. You know what? I saw your boyfriend on TV throw those amateur muggers around like they weighed nothing. I’d like to go up against him. He’d give me a challenge. And after I beat him, I’d make him watch me fuck you.”

I can’t do this...Stannis, I’m sorry...

Sansa pushed back with her legs as best she could, but to no avail. The large intruder leaned against her once again.

The man holding Sansa’s arms spoke up. “Boss, take the pearls. We gotta make this look like a robbery. We don’t have time for games. The van will be here any minute.”

The leader shook his head. “We got time if I say we got time. And we’re not just taking the pearls.”

Sansa gasped. No, no, I can’t go with them, no.

“As much as I’d like to leave you here for your man to find you, we got other plans. See, we’re gonna dump your precious little ruined body down by the docks, right where your father’s beloved
sister Lyanna got dumped all those years ago."

"Lyanna? Keep him talking, stall, stall… “How do you know about Lyanna?”"

“Everyone knows about wild Lyanna Stark. Don’t you watch the news, princess? Read the tabloids? Or are you too good for that?”

“Heh. A Stark-whore dump, that’s where we’re going. What is it with you Stark girls and Baratheons? Wonder what will happen after they find you? Another bad-boy Baratheon responsible for another Stark girl’s death? He’ll go mad. His boozing brother will drink himself to death. They say the youngest brother has no business running a business. This will be a shitshow worth watching.”

“No! You’re a monster! No!”

Sansa tried to knee him in the groin, but he stood too close for her to make an impact. With a snarl the ringleader backhanded Sansa across the face so hard her head whipped to the side and her stomach churned, she was so dizzy. In the distance an animal growled, low and vicious. Is it going to bite me too? She was falling. And then, nothing.

****** Stannis ******

Stannis ran the several blocks back to his brownstone, whooshing air drowning out all other sounds. His chest ached and lungs burned from the extended sprint. The white van continued to gain ground as it sped past his townhouse some fifty yards ahead, careening from one side of the street to the other in its haste to reach some unknown destination. He wanted to chase it, but knew in his gut that Sansa was in danger - he had to get home.

One more block… He dashed across the last intersection, narrowly avoiding a gray sedan whose driver had slammed on the brakes. The car came to a stop right before Stannis crossed its path - so close that Stannis put his hands on the hood to steady himself. The driver’s hands clenched the steering wheel, and the sun reflected off the large signet ring on the man’s finger. A star, maybe. He didn’t have time for this. Stannis pushed himself off the hood and kept running. He focused on the landmarks in front of him, and with labored breaths leaped up the granite steps to his doorway.

His hands shook as he hurled his full bodyweight against the door, expecting it to stay locked. Instead the door opened easily and he half fell into his own house.

Stannis stood still, listening and looking. Only his heartbeat pounded in his ears, until a garbled shriek broke through even that, followed by the unmistakable smack of a fist connecting with flesh. His time in the ring had taught him to recognize that sound all too well.

Sansa! His girl was in trouble.

A shadow appeared, blocking the entrance into the kitchen. Stannis charged. He grabbed the greasy cretin and threw him head first into the closest wall. The man melted into a limp mass without a sound.

Stannis stepped over the intruder’s still body. He had to find Sansa. Entering the kitchen, three details jumped out at him all at once. One - the back door to the alleyway was wide open. Two - the light on his security console glowed green. Three - Sansa lay nearly naked upon the kitchen island, an ugly
red welt spreading across her face. Eyes closed, her head lolled limply to one side. Two men held her down, one stretching her arms across the countertop. The other was unbuckling his belt.

Those maggots dare touch his girl? An animalistic snarl ripped its way out of his throat and he lunged. The sound of snapping bones coupled with the little weasel’s girly screech ignited Stannis’ bloodlust further. He tossed the small whimpering man aside. The whining stopped.

In the silence the large intruder chuckled. “So the big hero has come to save the day. I was sort of hoping for this. Come on, rich boy, show me what you got.”

He yanked on Sansa’s ankle, causing her still body to slide off the island out of view. “Oops. Clumsy bitch.”

Stannis growled. “You’re dead.”

He leaped at the thug, forgoing a punch in favor of a grappling hold. Each man had an iron grip around the other’s throat. Round and round the men whirled, crashing into walls and cabinets, each vying to break the other’s grip. Stannis grew dizzy, like after riding one of Shireen’s favorite rides at the fair.

His lungs burned. Glass crunched and slid under his feet, causing them both to lose their balance. The vice-like hold on Stannis’ throat released. Gulping for air, he turned his head just in time to meet the freight train slamming into his jaw.

“Heh. Not so tough after all, are you? I actually thought you’d put up a fight. Guess I was wrong.” Shut up, motherfucker. “How can a sorry sad sack like you hope to fuck a fine piece of ass like that? She needs a real man, not some rich poser. And I was about to give her exactly what she needed.”

Stannis’ eyes watered and he tasted blood. A large shadow swam in front of him. He had to stop it, stop the animal that dared invade his house, dared lay a hand on his woman.

He swung but missed, and stumbled off balance. Why wouldn’t his arms work? Sansa needed him.

“Go low, too slow! What’s the matter, are you tired already? Did you forget to spike your Wheaties?” Stannis’ opponent stood tall over him, grinning. “Come on, Mr. Businessman, take a free shot! I need a challenge, and so far you aren’t giving it to me. I’m disappointed.”

On instinct Stannis slammed his shoulder into his opponent’s gut, propelling them both into the refrigerator. If he could just hold him there until Davos showed up…

Pain exploded between his shoulder blades and Stannis fell to his knees. A hard kick to the gut sent him tumbling over onto his aching back. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t see. He rolled and retched, but nothing came up.

“I got a good gander at those pretty red curls. Hot damn! Tell me, tough guy, is her pussy as tight as it looks? Shit, what would you know? You can’t even get up now, pretty sure you probably just plain can’t get it up period. What’s an old fuck like you doing thinking you can make it with a hot little number like her? You’re nothing more than her sugar daddy.”

Sansa is mine! Something dark and hungry grew within him. An urge - a need - to destroy this miserable subhuman that threatened his girl. He wanted blood. With a shout Stannis surged to his feet. And just as quickly his opponent threw him back down.

“Sorry to cut this short, tough guy, but my ride is waiting.”
The hard floor greeted Stannis’ face without pity. He hissed as his jaw throbbed in sync with the pounding in his chest. The man wrenched Stannis’ arm behind his back and spoke right in his ear, cruel and mocking. “Like I said, I’m disappointed. But look on the bright side. You get to keep the girl, for now. As for me, I’m going make a fortune betting against you in the final fight, Stef.”

By the time Stannis stumbled out to the fire escape Sansa’s attacker ran out of the alley and disappeared. The iron rail bit into the palms of his hands as he propelled himself down the stairs.

“Stannis! Come back!” Davos’ command voice stopped Stannis cold. The empty alley mocked him, invited him to keep running, to hunt down his prey. The pull was so strong. He turned his back on Davos, until his old friend spoke one more word. “Sansa?”

“Stannis, it’s done. She’s here, she’s safe. I hear sirens already. No need to chase after that guy. It’s Sansa that needs you - now.”

Sansa!

The fight was over, the chase a lost cause. Only Sansa mattered now.

She huddled on the floor behind the kitchen island, hands covering her head. But she was here, alive. Stannis’ rage and energy drained away, and he stumbled with faltering steps to his girl.

****** Sansa ******

Noises, crashes, yelling - a cacophony of sounds all assaulted her ears, but Sansa couldn’t see or feel anything. She had passed out once before, after donating blood. She remembered the dizziness, the rushing sounds, muffled voices, all sounding as if they were filtered through a roaring waterfall. She couldn’t tell - was she awake, asleep, passed out, dreaming?

Something hard and uncomfortable pressed against her spine. She reached behind her, surprised that her hands were free. The surface was smooth, slick even. She reached a little further to find a hard edge, but couldn’t identify it. Head reeling, Sansa dared to open her eyes.

She lay on the kitchen floor, back pressed against the lower cabinets. The slate tile provided cool comfort to her sweating face. Sansa blinked and picked up her aching head to look around.

A few feet feet from her lay a motionless body - one of her attackers. He moaned, and a sharp shout of “Freeze! Police!” set her head to aching again. Sansa whimpered in pain and wrapped her arms around her head, wishing the pounding would go away.

“Miss Stark? Miss Stark, please don’t move. Medical help is on the way.” The unknown voice spoke with assurance, but how did he know her name? And how could she trust him?

“Stannis! Come back!” The same speaker called out with command authority.

**Stannis? Is he really here?**

A thump, a rattle, a footstep - the noises set her heart beating faster. Sansa curled up into a tighter ball and squeezed her eyes shut.

The scuff of a boot, labored breathing, and another thump, much closer this time. Someone stood -
no, knelt - right next to her. Words spoken, gruff and low and right, utterances really, devoid of all meaning save one - Stannis had come for her.

Sansa opened her eyes. Stannis hovered close by her side. His chest heaved, and sweat ran down his face, mingling with blood in his beard. *He’s hurt!*

“You...Stannis...you...” Her throat closed up. Why couldn’t she talk?

Hands then, warm and familiar, smoothed back her sweaty hair. She tried to speak once again.

“You came.”

He laughed, a short, choked bark that ended with a lopsided little grin. “Aye, that I did.”

Stannis enveloped Sansa in his arms, cradling her against his chest. She tuned out the noises coming from all around them - police sirens, more voices, trampling of many feet. Instead she breathed in his familiar scent - subtle cologne, the hint of lemon, a whiff of sweet tobacco - the scent of warmth, of safety, of love. Stannis had come for her.

“Shh, girl, I got you.” And he did. “You’re safe with me.” And she was.

Chapter End Notes

Big thanks to TommyG for being my beta reader!

As always, comments are most welcome and appreciated!
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

So I know it’s been many moons since I last updated. Real life these past several months has been super crazy and rather unpredictable, but has finally settled down. Most importantly, I haven’t abandoned this story. Thanks to everyone who is sticking with it, I appreciate you very much!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was all wrong. Broken glass underfoot. So many times Davos had walked through a crime scene, only to have shards of glass crunch and slide beneath his shoes. It shouldn’t be here - hadn’t ever been here before. Not here, on the fine tile floor. Until today.

Sobs and sniffles of a young woman. He’d heard similar crying so many times that he’d learned to tune it out. Until today.

Bile in the back of his throat. Awful taste. It burned, made his eyes water. Even after all these years, some crime scenes still made him retch. Davos gagged at the thought of what nearly happened.

Shaking bodies, haunted eyes. So many times he’d seen survivors of violent crimes shake, their eyes empty and bleak. But not a single pair of those eyes had ever been those of his best friend. Until today.

Not here. It wasn’t right.

Backup support showed up within a few minutes of Davos calling in his request. In fact, they arrived so quickly he wondered if they had already been patrolling the neighborhood. He set them to secure the townhouse and take custody of the two incapacitated suspects sprawled across Stannis’ floor. Davos took one officer with him to clear the upper floors. Stannis would not appreciate a multitude of strangers poking around his bedroom. Once satisfied that the invaders had not gone beyond the main level he returned to the scene in the kitchen.

Davos fetched a blanket and approached Stannis and Sansa with care, stopping several feet away from the huddled pair to avoid spooking them.

“Stannis.”

Sansa jerked and tried to burrow her head even deeper into Stannis’ chest, curling her bare legs in even tighter. He muttered in low tones to her, fragments of words Davos could not make out. The words didn’t matter to Davos, only the haunted expression that turned towards him.

“Take this blanket. She needs it.”

Stannis wrapped Sansa up in the blanket without a word. It calmed her though, and she responded to Stannis’ touch with a whispered ‘thank you’.

More officers arrived to assist in collecting evidence. Davos kept them away from Stannis and Sansa for the moment, to give his friend time to gather himself.
“Detective, we found a tooth, and it has crown on it.” A uniformed officer held the object carefully in his gloved hand.

“Good find. Bag it and tag it. Hopefully the lab can find the dentist who did the work and lead us back to its owner.”

“Don’t bother. That’d be mine.”

Davos whirled back to focus on Stannis. Those were the first coherent words he’d spoken since they’d arrived on the scene. His friend’s voice sounded deeper, gruffer, more mature now, but the thick Stormlander accent was just the same as the day he and Stannis had first met so long ago. The same thick accent Stannis had worked so hard to suppress - been shamed into suppressing - for all these years.

A closer look revealed a subtle swelling along Stannis’ jaw and a darker shadow under his closely cropped beard. He must have taken a hard punch.

“We’ll follow protocol anyway.” Davos gestured for the police officer to continue.

He knelt down close to Stannis, kept his own voice low. “I have to do this by the book. No cutting corners.”

Sansa shifted in Stannis’ arms, causing him to tighten them around her even as his eyes narrowed.

“Listen to me, Stannis. I’m hardly impartial here. I’ll do everything I can to stay on the investigation, but I can’t guarantee it. My only chance is to follow protocol - to the letter. That includes getting Sansa examined by a medical team. And questioned.”

A growl. “No.”

Sansa opened her eyes, bright beautiful blue eyes, clear and intelligent.

“He’s right, Stannis. Let him do his job.”

Stannis smoothed back a lock of hair from Sansa’s bruised face with a shaking hand. Davos expected this - the adrenaline rush was fading. What he hadn’t expected were the tender gestures, the raw yet intimate words, or Sansa’s warm response as she leaned into Stannis’ touch.

“I won’t let anyone get near you, girl, what without your say so. No one, no how.”

“I know you won’t. But it’s okay. He didn’t...I wasn’t...” Sansa paused, then continued with firm conviction. “I wasn’t raped. You got here in time.” She looked at Davos. “And I have so much to tell you, while it’s still fresh and I remember it all.”

“Miss Stark, it can wait until you’re ready-”

“No. I want to. Now, please.” This was no wallflower.

“Very well. Let’s get a medic to check you first.” Davos gestured to a female medic to attend to Sansa. “You too, Stannis.”

Stannis shook his head even as he helped Sansa to her feet, still bundled from neck to floor in the blanket. “Not now. It’s nothing time won’t heal. No medic can change that.”

Sansa caressed Stannis’ jaw, brushing her fingers down his beard while avoiding the trickle of oozing blood. “You’re hurt.”
He leaned into her touch, just as she had moments earlier. "They mirror each other.

"Don’t you worry about me, I’m fine."

Davos refrained from mentioning the obvious - Stannis was anything but fine. Yet his friend was stubborn that way.

As Stannis escorted the medic and Sansa out of the kitchen a disruption from the front door diverted Davos’ attention. Angry voices echoed down the hall. "- her father..." "I'm his brother!"

He hurried to the entryway, surprised to find Ned Stark and Robert Baratheon arguing with the officer posted out front. Davos waved the two men inside, who immediately peppered him with questions.

"My daughter, Sansa, is she here? Is she hurt? What happened here?" Ned turned in circles, worry etched across his face as he sought out Sansa.

Robert turned on Davos, red-faced.

"Where’s my brother? What’d he do? I swear I’ll kill him if he-"

Davos held up his hands. "Whoa, whoa, both of you. Please. They’re both here and safe. Sansa doesn’t appear to be seriously injured, and no, Robert, Stannis didn’t do anything to her. In fact, he got here just in time."

Ned sagged against the wall. "Where is she? Let me see her."

"She’s being examined by a paramedic. You can understand that they need privacy right now."

Davos pointed to an antique bench near the front door. "Sit there. I shouldn’t have even let you inside - this is an active crime scene - but it’ll be a media circus out on the street soon. Stay put so you don’t contaminate any evidence. I’ll be back shortly."

At the end of a second hall an officer stood guard outside another closed door. Stannis propped himself up against the wall, head bowed, body still heaving with rapid breaths. His shirt was soaked with sweat, and tremors shook his arms and legs. He was on the verge of collapsing.

"They won’t let me in. Won’t let me see her, talk to her…"

Stannis swallowed once, twice before speaking, and when he did speak his voice was thick and raspy, words unsteady.

"My own house, Davos! They dare invade my property, touch my girl, threaten her, hit her! They would have…taken Sansa from me." Stannis turned away, but not before Davos caught a glimpse of shiny dark blue eyes.

"I can’t lose her," he choked.

Davos reached out to his friend, laid his hand on Stannis’ shoulder. What other comfort could he provide? "You didn’t. You won’t."

The medic poked her head out the door and asked Stannis to bring Sansa some clothing, preferably loose and warm.

Davos held Stannis back. "Your brother and Ned Stark are here, waiting in the foyer. Are you ready to deal with them?"
Stannis shook his head, then winced and closed his eyes briefly, face tight. “I’ll use the back stairs.”

He opened another door. Tucked inside was a tightly wound spiral staircase which Stannis climbed with heavy steps, pulling himself up with effort. Davos sighed. His friend had refused medical attention, but that didn’t mean he didn’t need it.

Davos returned to his two unexpected arrivals pacing back and forth across the foyer.

“Well Detective? My daughter, when can I see her?”

“In a few minutes, as soon as the paramedics have finished up.”

“Gods, what am I going to tell her mother? Hell, I don’t even know what happened here, Detective!”

Ned ran his hands through his grey-brown hair repeatedly.

“That’s what we’re going to try and find out. As soon as Sansa is cleared we need to ask her some questions, try to piece this together.”

Ned exploded. “Absolutely not! I am going to take my daughter home, have our family doctor check and make sure she isn’t injured, and only then can you ask your questions. And that’s only if she’s up to it. You will bring me to her now.”

“Come to Stannis’ study. I’ll bring her there as soon as she’s released by our medic.”

Davos stopped Ned when the older man tried to brush past him. “Please understand something, Mr. Stark. Only Sansa knows everything that happened here. By aiding us she gets to be an active participant in the justice process, not just a passive victim. Survivors of violent crimes often need to talk, tell their story. It helps in their own recovery. Trust me, I’ve seen it dozens of times.”

A short while later they gathered in Stannis’ study, which was unscathed by the earlier tussle. Sansa ran to her father when she saw him. Ned engulfed his daughter in his arms, whispering her name over and over again. Eventually he stood back and cupped her face in his hands.

“Tell me truthfully - are you hurt? I can have our doctor come to the house if you want.”

“I’m not hurt, Dad, not really. Just bruised. Stannis got here in time. I don’t know how, but he did.”

Ned reached out to shake Stannis’ hand. “That’s the second time I’ve had to thank you for saving my daughter. I hope there doesn’t have to a third time.”

Stannis nodded once but didn’t speak. Davos had to get Sansa’s side of the incident recorded as soon as possible - neither Sansa nor Stannis would be able to keep their composure for much longer.

“Let’s start. The sooner we start, the sooner we can get done and be out of here.”

Sansa sat huddled next to Stannis on the sofa, Ned hovered on her other side, and Robert paced throughout the room. Another detective had joined Davos to take their statements.

“Miss Stark, I know this must be difficult, but please try to tell us everything that happened.”

Sansa took a deep breath. Davos didn’t miss the surreptitious squeeze that Stannis gave her hand. Without letting go, she turned to Davos and the other detective and began.

“I woke up to a sound coming from the kitchen. I thought it was Stannis, I had no reason to think otherwise…”
Sansa spoke robotically as she described what had happened in the kitchen. Davos had seen it before - victims often retreated into the world of pure fact, reciting the events as if they were reading them from a news report. Sometimes it was the only way they could keep from breaking down. But eventually, they all did.

It wasn’t until she started reciting how the lead intruder grabbed her that Sansa faltered.

“He... he yanked my hair, pushed himself against me...I couldn’t get away. I tried, I swear Stannis, I tried.” Sansa’s face crumpled and tears began to fall.

“That’s enough! Can’t you see my daughter isn’t ready to do this?!” Ned Stark leaped up to shield Sansa from her questioners. She tucked her face into Stannis’ chest even as he curled his arm around her, muttering hoarse words too low for anyone else to make out. Whatever Stannis said worked, for Sansa’s shuddering shoulders soon stilled, and she nodded in response to his quiet query.

“We’ll take a break, if you need to.” Davos motioned to his assisting detective to stand, but Sansa cut him off.

“No! I said I can do this. I need to do this. They told me things, information that you need to know. I can’t stop now.”

Sansa sniffled and wiped her red eyes with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. One of Stannis’, Davos recognized, easily large enough to fit two Sansas with room to spare. It swallowed her up, much like a child who could get wrapped in a giant down comforter with only her face peeking out, all details and shapes hidden beneath the bulky cloth.

“Sansa, sweetling, are you sure?” Ned still paced on the carpet between Sansa and the detectives.

“Yes Dad! I have to. Please.”

Ned and Stannis locked eyes. Neither man spoke, but both nodded, and Ned sat down once again. Sansa turned back to the detectives. “I’m ready now.”

Davos started first. “Did they give you any indication why they were here, or how they got in?”

Sansa nodded. “I asked them that, to stall for time. The big one, the boss I think, liked to talk. He said they just walked right in. He was so casual about it, almost like he said he had just gone to the store or something.”

Stannis snarled, bruised face fierce and red. “Impossible! I set the alarm myself, I swear it! There is no way anyone could have just walked into this house!” He gripped the arm of the couch so tightly his knuckles turned white.

Robert jumped out of the corner he’d been sulking in to loom over Stannis, pointing his finger right in Stannis’ face.

“I swear Stannis, if Sansa was hurt because you forgot to set the alarm I will consider you as guilty as the bastards who did this!” His face turned dark and thunderous, a vein pulsing above his eye. He was out for blood.

“Stop it, Robert!” Sansa smacked Robert’s hand away from Stannis. “You weren’t here! Why don’t you listen?”

“Fine,” Robert spat. “Tell me how it is that my brother is not responsible for you getting attacked in
Sansa turned away from Robert without another word. Stannis held her hand but said nothing, only glared at his older brother. Yet the tightness around his eyes betrayed pain, and the bleakness behind them betrayed his own sense of guilt. Sansa would have none of it.

“It’s not your fault, Stannis.” He looked away, lips pressed tight together, jaw clenched. As if he were trying to keep from yelling out loud. Sansa touched his cheek, squeezed his hand. “They told me they shut off the alarm themselves. And that it would look like you were the one that did it. It’s not your fault.”

“What?!” Everyone exclaimed at once, and the room became noisy with suppositions and assumptions. Even Robert chimed in, although he had nothing useful to say. Only Stannis remained silent. He gripped Sansa’s hand tightly in his own as he stared at a distant spot on the wall.

“Miss Stark, was there any other indication that these men were more than they appeared? More sophisticated, perhaps? Technical experts?” Davos took notes - and observed his friend - as the other detective asked more questions. Stannis had not spoken nor had he moved since Robert had accused him of negligence.

“No, I don’t think so. The big one, the man who seemed to be the leader, stank of fish and fuel. The others were just gross.” Then she sat up straight, eyes wide open. “But they knew that Detective Seaworth and Stannis were having coffee together - he said so. And then he said, 'That copper friend of his has enemies on the inside. They hear things, they share things.'” Davos wrote down Sansa’s last statement, carefully avoiding giving any emotion away. But the thought appeared anyway. Could he trust the detective sitting next to him? Could he trust the uniformed officers that had responded to the scene? Was one of them dirty? All he could do was continue as he had been, and try not to let any confidential information slip.

“Sansa, if you can, do you have any idea why those men broke in here? Were they looking to rob the place?”

“At first, I thought they just wanted the pearls Stannis had given me. One of the men told the boss to grab them, to make it look like a robbery.” As she spoke Sansa ran her hand along her neck, where the pearls still resided underneath the bulky sweatshirt.

Ned looked with a mixture of anger and concern at Sansa’s face - particularly the nasty bruise that spread across her cheek. “What did that monster do to you?”

“He hit me when I made him mad. He…” Sansa paused for just a moment, then described every little move the man had made, every pinch, every pull, every ugly, threatening word. As the other detective made notes Davos watched the men in Sansa’s life clench their fists, growl under their breath, grit their teeth in anger and anguish. But they did not interrupt her.

“Then…” Again she paused and gripped Stannis’ hand.

“Then what? Sansa?” Ned spoke softly, encouraging his daughter to continue.

“You’re not going to like this, Dad.” Sansa looked from Davos to Ned, tears once again threatening to spill over. She took a deep breath. “He mentioned Lyanna.”

“Just...just let me finish. This is hard enough without you guys losing it too. Please?” Sansa needed these men to keep it together. Davos needed them to remain calm too, even though he had a good idea that what she was about to say would drive any caring man mad.

Ned’s eyes were closed, but he ground out a broken “yes”. Robert paced away to face the wall, but remained quiet. Stannis remained at Sansa’s side, silent but steady.

“Okay. Not okay, but... The lead guy said they were taking more than just the pearls. They had a van waiting. He said...he said they were going to leave me, my body...” Sansa gulped. “...by the docks, exactly where Lyanna had been...dumped.”

Ned sucked in a deep breath, his face grief stricken. But Sansa held up her hand and he quieted.

“He said, ‘Everyone knows about wild Lyanna Stark. Don’t you watch the news?’”

“Tell us the rest, Miss Stark.”

Sansa nodded, closed her eyes to take a deep breath, and opened them. She focused on a point on the wall.

“I’ll never forget his words. They were so ugly, so violent.” Sansa spoke in a monotone, voice as blank as the expression on her face. She began to recite.

“A Stark-whore dump, that’s where we’re going. What is it with you Stark girls and Baratheons? Wonder what will happen after they find you? Another bad-boy Baratheon responsible for another Stark girl’s death? I bet your sugar-daddy will go mad with rage. He’s got a reputation. His boozing brother will drink himself to death. They say the youngest brother has no business running a business. This will be a shitshow worth watching.”

For a long breathless minute nobody spoke, nobody moved. Davos had rarely heard statements as horrifying and malevolent as what Sansa had just repeated.

A crash of glass accompanied by an anguished shout shook Davos loose of his reverie. Sansa shrieked as the glass shattered, and burrowed her face into Stannis’ chest. Whisky poured down the opposite wall to pool amongst the shards of glass.

“Lyanna.” Robert stood behind them all, despair etched in his face. “That night. If only I hadn’t been so damn selfish, she’d be alive, none of this would have-”

Stannis finally spoke up. “Enough! This isn’t about you, Robert, or Lyanna. She’s dead and gone. Quit wallowing in the past.”

Davos winced as Robert whirled towards Stannis. Tone-deaf as he was, even Robert heard the scorn that permeated Stannis’ voice. If he didn’t intervene the two brothers might start fighting, and that was last thing Sansa needed. Or Stannis, for that matter.

Ned saw it too. He stood and grabbed Robert by the shoulders. “Stannis is right. We need to focus on the living, not on the dead.” He gestured towards the couch. “And that means protecting Sansa.”

“We’ll give you some time to discuss this.” Davos gestured to the other detective to follow him out of the room. Stannis would fill him in later. At this point, Davos couldn’t truly trust any police officer on the force anymore. And that meant he couldn’t trust any of them with Sansa’s safety either.
Away from the study, Davos and the other detective compared notes and reviewed evidence. Within ten minutes he was soaked with sweat. Every time an officer looked at him Davos could feel it, every time two officers started talking he would wonder - *are they collaborating? Did one of them eavesdrop on me back at the station?*

His partner for the day sidled up to him in the kitchen. “So, where do you think they’ll take her? You’re friends with Baratheon, right? People that rich must have a security team, safe houses, all that.”

_Fuck. Keep it casual. Maybe he’s just nosey._ “Beats me. I’ve known Stannis a long time, sure, but he’s as private as they come.” Davos had his own ideas on how they would handle Sansa’s security. But he would not state them out loud.

Soon enough the officers and detectives wrapped up their evidence gathering. Davos stayed behind after all the other officers left. He too would have to go the station to file his own report, but not before he spoke with Stannis and made sure they had a plan in place to keep Sansa safe.

Angry voices carried through the closed study door. Robert. And Stannis. Davos rapped on the door and entered without waiting for permission - he suspected the two brothers might get into a physical fight if someone didn’t intervene. They stood at opposite ends of the room from each other - Robert gesturing wildly, Stannis standing near the fireplace with his arms crossed. Sansa and Ned sat on the couch, watching the altercation in stunned silence.

“You had to slum it, didn’t you, living here in the city? I told you, Stannis, buying this townhouse was a bad idea. It’s beneath you.”

Stannis spread his arms wide with quick, sharp movements as he spoke. “There’s nothing wrong with this neighborhood, Robert! Nothing. And it suited my purposes.”

“Well clearly it’s not safe enough for Sansa.” Robert turned in a half-circle, then pointed his finger directly at Stannis. “You swore you’d keep her safe! And yet here we are. You broke your promise.”

Stannis blanched, then snarled and leaned forward as if to charge. Davos quickly stepped in between the two men, arms held out to keep them apart.

“Listen to me, both of you!” Davos practically shouted. Both brothers ceased their motion to stare at the much slighter detective. “This case is larger now than just finding out who wants to harm Sansa. Remember what she told us? That thug wanted to watch the *shitshow*? It’s clear the entire Baratheon business is in someone’s crosshairs.”

“Fuck.” Robert scrubbed his face, anger diverted from his younger brother.

“And they want to use Sansa to get to us.” Stannis spoke more calmly now, and paced back to sit next to a still-stunned Sansa. “I won’t let it happen, girl, I won’t.”

“So what are we supposed to do about it?” Robert asked, sounding more tired than angry at this point.

“Let the police handle it. That’s our job. You have more immediate concerns.”

Ned put his arms around Sansa’s shoulders. “Like keeping my daughter safe.”

“Well, she can’t stay here. My brother doesn’t have any security staff, no buffers, and now, a security system he can’t trust.” Robert snorted in derision. “You might as well put out a sign, Stannis: Burglers Welcome.”
“Damn it, Robert…” Stannis sighed and scrubbed one hand through his short hair. He stood and turned in a full circle, looked towards the kitchen and then back at the red-headed girl clutching her father’s hand.

“It’s true. She can’t stay here. It’s a mess now, and I’m going to have to swap out my security system.” Stannis leaned against the fireplace again, staring into non-existent flames. His hands trembled, ever so slightly, until he clenched them into fists and released them. As far as Davos could tell no one else noticed.

“There’s the executive suite in the Tower. Or Renly and Loras’ penthouse. They have excellent security and plenty of room.” Robert clapped his hands together, eager to have provided a solution. Sansa just sank deeper into the couch.

“No place feels safer than one’s own home. And that’s where I’m taking Sansa.” Stannis stiffened when he heard Ned’s forceful dictum. Even Sansa pressed her lips tight together, but it was clear she didn’t want to contradict her father either.

_Gods above, how can these men all be so blind?_ Davos went to sit on the couch near Sansa and Ned.

“How about you, Sansa? What do you want to do?”

Sansa granted Davos a quick, grateful smile. “I don’t know anything about arranging security. I just want to be somewhere quiet and safe. Where I don’t have to wonder who’s at the door, or down the hall, or out on the street.” She went over to stand with Stannis, took his hand in hers. “And I don’t want to be away from you, Stannis.”

Stannis took Sansa in his arms, buried his nose in her hair. “Aye, and you won’t be. I’ll not allow it.” He threaded his fingers through her hair, nuzzled her with his nose, closed his eyes. Sansa relaxed into Stannis’ protective embrace.

Davos marveled at the way his friend just tuned out the rest of the room in those few moments. He’d never seen this side of Stannis before - didn’t even know it existed.

Ned, sitting next to him, spoke softly. “They were like this last night too, when he picked her up. I swear, it’s as if the whole world fades away when they’re together.” The older man looked upon the quiet couple with a mixture of regret, fondness, and acceptance. “He loves her, she loves him, it’s that simple. But we still have to figure out where to take her.”

Davos hummed, then coughed loud enough to get Stannis’ attention. Apparently Stannis had been listening after all. He whispered a few words to Sansa that Davos couldn’t follow, except for “does that work?” Whatever he proposed pleased her, because Sansa answered with an emphatic “yes.”

“Robert.” Stannis locked on to his brother with a newly reborn intensity. “Your place. You live in a gated community, your estate is practically a fortress. Sansa says she’s willing to stay there.”

Davos knew Robert would say yes when Sansa reached out her hand to him. “Please?”

“Ah, Sansa, I can’t say no to my first goddaughter. And I don’t suppose you’d come if Stannis wasn’t part of the deal.”

The two brothers locked eyes, nodded. For the moment the animosity that so often flared up between them had been tempered by the need to protect someone they both loved. Davos could not waste any time. He jumped to his feet.
“That’s a good solution. In the meantime, I’ll make sure an officer keeps watch on the townhouse for
the next week or so. And all of you, this is important. Don’t discuss any of this on your phones or
computers, whether it be text, voice, or email. Someone’s been eavesdropping on my
communications. Someone is after Baratheon Industries. And that someone has very deep, powerful
resources.”

He caught Stannis’ gaze, burning bright and strong. In spite of the situation Davos would swear he’d
seen the ghost of a grin flash across his friend’s bruised face, but in an instant it disappeared to be
replaced by something else. Determination. And something darker - a feral hunger.

In spite of the heat and humidity, Davos shivered.

Chapter End Notes

Big thanks to TommyGinger for being my muse and beta-reader.

Comments are always welcome!
In the end it had taken both Davos and Sansa to convince Stannis to ride with Robert.

“Stannis, you took some hard hits, you’re strung out, you’re in no shape to drive. Satisfy the public safety officer in me and just go with your brother.”

“I am perfectly capable of driving.”

The last thing he needed was another weakness for Robert to hold over his head. He could hear the boasting now - *I’ve driven a hundred miles after drinking all night, had no troubles at all.*

Stannis had been on the verge of grabbing his keys and his girl when Sansa herself gripped his arm.

“Stannis, please?” Sansa’s shaky voice brought Stannis to a standstill. Her worried blue eyes pleaded silently - she feared for his own safety in spite of the ordeal she had just gone through.

To hell with Robert and his boasts. Sansa needed him more than he needed to show his strength. That could wait.

“I’ll ride.”

Once in the back seat Sansa whispered “Thank you” in his ear, quiet enough that only he could hear it. He held Sansa close for the rest of the drive, focusing only on her warmth which eased the ache in his battered ribs. For once Robert kept his mouth shut.

It was mid-afternoon by the time they pulled into Robert’s huge circular driveway. Stannis didn’t scoff at the high solid fence, the guarded gate, or the long driveway leading to the secluded mansion. He didn’t sneer at the the gaudy facade of the enormous place, or insist on carrying his own luggage when Robert’s doorman came out to greet them. Instead, he just gave Sansa his hand and escorted her inside.

Ned arrived shortly thereafter, having been given a ride to the café by Davos where he retrieved his own vehicle.

“Your mother is going to insist that you come home.”

“I know Dad, but right now I want to stay here with Stannis. Please try to get her to understand?” Sansa pleaded with her father.

Ned nodded and kissed his daughter on the forehead. “I will. And I’ll be back as soon as I can with your things.”

Robert, distracted by a phone call, left them in the care of his full-time butler, a retired army officer who now managed Robert’s household. He led them upstairs to a vaguely familiar set of rooms.

“Weren’t these Renly’s rooms?”

“Renly’s old rooms?” Sansa whispered to Stannis. “I’m not so sure…”

The butler gestured for Stannis to precede him into the suite. “The suite was fully renovated at Ms.
Lannister’s orders after Renly moved out. It was to be for Mr. Lannister’s use.”

Stannis nodded, pleasantly surprised with the rooms’ minimalist decor. He made short work of examining the bathroom, bedroom, sitting room, and closets, as much for Sansa’s peace of mind as his own. “This will do.”

While Sansa explored the suite, Stannis spoke with the butler, making sure he knew exactly where to get the soup Sansa liked so much, and protein shakes for himself. His sore jaw would keep him from eating anything solid for several days.

“Is there anything else, Mr. Baratheon?”

He reached automatically for the familiar tin in his pocket, but came up empty handed. Damn. The only tobacco he had brought was in the red can, packed safely away. And if it truly was - compromised - as Davos had suggested, then now was not the time to test it - or himself. He blew out hard to try and dispel his cravings, then gave the butler the details for his regular tobacco.

“And one more thing. Tell my brother not to disturb us - Sansa and I need some rest.”

As soon as the latch clicked Stannis returned to the bedroom. He removed his shirt as the room felt oddly stuffy. He couldn’t quite fathom how Sansa could stand wearing the heavy sweatshirt, but she appeared comfortable in it. He took her hand and of one accord they stretched out on the bed. Sansa immediately laid her head down on Stannis’ chest. He didn’t want to admit it directly to Robert, but he was exhausted. And he knew Sansa was on her last legs as well.

Neither of them spoke, instead just took quiet comfort in each other’s presence. Stannis relaxed as Sansa swirled her fingers lazily through the hair that insisted upon growing on his chest. As the motion slowed, so too did his thoughts. He gave in to the beckoning oblivion of sleep and closed his eyes, drifting off with the pleasant warmth of his girl lying alongside him.

Stannis awoke with a jolt to a rapping on the door.

“Sansa? Sansa, it’s Mom. Can I see you?” Catelyn’s muffled voice still managed to convey annoyance. Had she been knocking long?

Sansa lifted her head off Stannis’ chest and sat up quickly. “Yeah Mom, just a sec.”

Stannis had barely managed to sit up when Catelyn came in and promptly started to cry when she saw Sansa’s bruised face. She hugged Sansa tight, whispering ‘my girl, my girl, what did those monsters do’ over and over again. Sansa held on tight to her mother as well, and kept on trying to reassure her with ‘I’m ok’, but she too had tears streaming down her face.

He stood up stiffly, torn between wanting to stay with Sansa and getting away from one distraught Catelyn Stark.

Catelyn turned towards him. “Stannis, will you give Sansa and I some time, please?” She wiped the tears from her face with one hand while holding tightly to Sansa’s hand with the other, as if she were trying to keep Sansa from slipping away. Her knuckles turned white from the tight grip.

In truth, Stannis did not want to leave Sansa alone with Catelyn. He knew the incident would just bolster her opposition against him. But Sansa sensed his hesitation and gave him a little nod.

Stannis stumbled downstairs and followed the sound of voices to the kitchen, where Robert, Ned, and Davos were discussing the timeline of the morning’s events. He ignored them in search of water and ibuprofen. His ribs had started aching again. He stared for long moments out the window,
watching the shadows lengthen across the yard as the sun set while thinking nothing at all.

“Damn, Stannis, you look like a Mack truck ran you over.” Davos’ uncharacteristic exaggeration jerked Stannis out of his reverie.

“Huh? Oh.” All three men were staring at his bare torso - in his haste to get clear of Catelyn he’d forgotten to put on a shirt. Bruises covered half of his ribcage and abdomen. And by the way his spine felt, his upper back was probably black and blue as well. As if the marks on his face did not already give testament to the beating he’d received.

“For all the hits you took, Stanny, it doesn’t look like you managed to connect in return. Was he too much for you?” Robert scoffed as he picked up Stannis’ arm to look at the unmarred knuckles. Stannis snatched his wrist out of his brother’s grasp with a barely concealed snarl.

“Dammit Robert…”

“Leave off, Robert. Stannis saved my daughter. The how isn’t important.” Ned waved a beer bottle in Robert’s face, effectively distracting him and keeping him out of Stannis’ reach. The two men wandered into Robert’s enormous living room, leaving Stannis alone with Davos.

Stannis sagged against the counter and regarded his old friend wearily. “I assume you have an update, or else you wouldn’t be here, no?”

Davos glanced towards the door, making sure no one overheard him. “I found out how backup showed up so quickly. It wasn’t my call to dispatch, but an anonymous 9-1-1 call.”


“You’re not going to like this.” Davos paused. “I got the number traced. It was that blond kid, Harry Harddyng.”

“What!” Stannis exclaimed, then quickly settled when Davos shushed him. “That punk knew it was going to happen. Have you found him?”

“Not yet,” Davos shook his head. “I put an APB out on him though. If he’s seen, we’ll take him in for questioning.”

Female voices carried from hall, alerting Stannis to Catelyn and Sansa’s approach. He held Davos back.

“Don’t tell Sansa.” Davos nodded his assent, but also gave Stannis a warning.

“You can’t go after him. Leave that to us. I couldn’t protect you from the legal ramifications if you did, no matter how justified you think you are.”

Stannis fumed. He could stuff Harry’s body into one of the crab traps that permeated the backwaters of the bay, and no one would ever know... Then Sansa spoke, breaking him clear from his daydreams of vigilante justice.

“Here, I thought you might want this.” Sansa handed Stannis his shirt.

Stannis glanced over to the far corner where Cat and Ned were in the midst of a quiet but intense argument. They spoke too low for Stannis to understand their words, but Ned’s aloof stance and Cat’s wagging finger told him all he needed to know - they were at odds about something. Next to him, Sansa sighed.
“Everything alright with your mother?” Stannis wished she would go away. Soon. He had never been comfortable in Catelyn’s presence; even less so now that he was dating Sansa.

“She insists that I come home with her. But I don’t want to. At least Dad understands.” Sansa tugged at her hair. “Ugh! I wish she’d just - loosen up - a little, you know? I’m a big girl now, and I can make my own decisions.”

“You’re still her daughter, and with everything that has happened, I can understand why she wants to take you home.” Privately Stannis did not understand. If he was not strong enough to protect Sansa, how could Cat and Ned possibly do so?

Stannis guided Sansa back to the massive sofas to sit with Davos. They spoke for a few minutes on what would come next in the investigation. That included both Sansa and Stannis going to the station on Monday to review suspect photos and talk to a criminal sketch artist, in hopes of identifying the intruder who got away.

The whole time they talked Davos had been fiddling with a heavy ring on his hand. Something about it looked familiar.

“Davos.” Stannis gestured to his friend. “Let me see that.”

Stannis studied the ring for a moment, turning it back and forth. When he spoke it was matter-of-fact, as if he were just discussing the weather. “The man that nearly ran me over today wore a ring like this.”

He started to hand the ring back to Davos, but Sansa nearly jumped off the sofa.

“Wait! Stannis, what do you mean, man who almost ran you over? Are you alright? Did you see him?” He marveled at Sansa’s ability to dismiss her own trauma, even if just for a moment, in her concern for him. Stannis did not want Sansa to worry about him. That was just one more stressor.

Stannis shrugged. “It was nothing. I ran into traffic without looking. Like a damn fool.”

“Can I see it?” She too, much like Stannis had, turned the ring back and forth in her hand. “I’ve seen a ring like this before. Lothor...yes, Lothor wore a ring just like this too.” Sansa spoke quietly, and huddled up closer to Stannis.

“Who is Lothor?” Stannis all but growled the name.

“Petyr’s head of security.” Sansa looked down, not meeting anyone’s eyes. Stannis wrapped his arm around her shoulders once again.

Ned spoke up. “Petyr? Sansa, do you mean Petyr Baelish?” She nodded, but wouldn’t look at her father.

This time Stannis did growl. Davos shot him a warning look and a gesture. The information the two men shared could not be revealed, not yet. Secrets had a way of cascading out of control.

“Sansa, can you identify this man?” Davos showed Sansa a picture on his phone.

She nodded. “Yes. That’s him. Lothor Brune. But I don’t see what this has to do with him.”

“Probably nothing. I knew him once, is all. He was a dirty cop - got kicked off the force several years ago for corruption.”
Davos’ dismissive attitude did not fool Stannis. Thanks to Sansa’s attacker they now knew that someone still on the police force was eavesdropping on Davos’ conversations and activities. Brune might be the link to that unknown spy.

Stannis racked his brain, but he could not recall seeing the ex-cop at any of his fights. Regardless, he studied Lothor Brune’s image carefully, committing it to memory. As Baelish’s security chief, Brune would be privy to the Mockingbird’s secrets and schemes. Which meant he probably was aware of Stannis’ alter-ego and his participation in the circuits. A man to be on the lookout for.

Cat sat next to Sansa and took her hand. She pointedly ignored Stannis even though only three feet separated them.

“Sansa, all this talk of Petyr Baelish has me concerned. I need to know why you chose to intern with him without telling me or your father about it. We had a plan, an agreement for your career path.”

Something about Catelyn’s voice set Stannis’ teeth on edge. Controlling, aggrieved, put out - when had she decided that it was a contest between her and Stannis as to who had more right to Sansa’s company?

“That’s just it, Mom. The *we* part of the plan is really just your part. It’s like I didn’t get a say in it. So when that internship opportunity came available, I jumped at it. It was a chance for me to prove myself. And I wanted you and Dad to be proud of me for doing so.”

Stannis clenched his teeth to keep from yelling at the insensitive woman. Couldn’t she see how she had stifled her daughter’s growth and independence? From everything he had heard over the years, Sansa had been the model child. Beautiful, smart, capable, talented. And now that he had gotten to know and fall in love with her, Stannis could see all that, and so much more. Yet she still had felt the need to prove herself to her mother.

“From now on you need to keep us informed of these things ahead of time, dear. If we had known, we could have prevented -”

Sansa’s phone chime interrupted Cat’s lecture with an incoming message. She looked, then dropped it to the floor and scooted to the back of the sofa, face as white as the carpet on the floor.

“Gods, he was right! He was right.” Sansa cried and shouted and mumbled all at once. She rocked back into the corner of the sofa, mumbling ‘Petyr was right’.

“Sansa?” Moments ago, Sansa was fine - relatively speaking - and now she was bordering on the hysterical.

A photo was displayed on the phone, a photo of Sansa seemingly asleep on a couch, wearing only her underwear and bra. Stannis felt hot and cold all over. Who had seen his girl like this? Who had dared take her picture when she was so vulnerable?

He snatched it up, but the text swam before his red-hazed vision - it made no sense. It was Davos that read the words out loud.

“I told you the world didn’t deserve to see you. Now look what happened. I would have kept you safe. Better than he can.”

Growling, snarling, raging. It wasn’t until Davos shook Stannis that he realized that the animalistic sounds had come from his own throat, the shattered glass beneath the window had been a tumbler thrown from his own hand. Everyone stared at him. Everyone except Sansa. She did not react.
Davos sat next to Sansa again. Cat sat close by, calling her daughter’s name, to no avail. Sansa still did not respond.

Stannis could not sit - his arms and legs tingled, no - *itched* - but the itch came from within, the kind that no scratching could alleviate. He paced even as Davos spoke to Sansa.

“Sansa, can you tell us anything about this photo? When it was taken, or where?” Davos spoke quietly, without judgment. His even manner steadied Sansa. After a few moments she scooted forward again and studied her phone, only the paleness of her face betraying her frightened state.

She shook her head. “I’ve never seen this picture before. I don’t remember being like this. I don’t remember this room. I don’t understand how this is even possible.” Her voice continued to rise with each passing sentence, until her last words were nearly incoherent.

Sansa’s breath came rapidly, and her eyes cast about the room searching for something, anything, yet seeing nothing. Stannis knew what she felt - he had experienced that same panic last night in the opera house, when he had lost sight of her and had received that heart-stopping anonymous text. He’d thought she’d been taken from him. Now, her privacy and sense of self-security had been violated, and she didn’t know how to anchor herself. But Stannis did.

He choked back his rage and knelt before her, captured her face gently between his hands. Catelyn spoke but he tuned her out. Only Sansa mattered now.

“I got you, girl. Breathe, nice and slow, with me.” He leaned forward so that their foreheads touched, and all she could feel or see was him. “In and out, that’s it. I got you.” Soon Sansa’s breaths steadied out and the panic faded away.

Stannis gave the back of her neck a little squeeze, a gentle massage under her hair. “You with me?” Sansa sniffed and nodded. “I’m better now, just...today has been a little much, you know?”

“That it has, but we can get through it together.” *I swear it.*

Sansa straightened up, and reached for her phone. “Let me see that again. Maybe if I think hard enough I can remember something.”

Cat, forgotten on the couch, spoke up again. “Honey, are you sure? You don’t even know who sent this picture. Maybe someone Photoshopped your face onto it.”

“Baelish is responsible for this, Catelyn, I am certain. The words in that text are nearly identical to what Sansa related to me the night after she and the Tyrell girl were attacked.” Stannis held Cat’s gaze with his own. “You know what he is capable of.”

Catelyn sucked in her breath. “How do you know?”

“Mom? Know what?” Sansa looked to her father for guidance as well. “Dad?”

Cat sighed, but cast a sour glance at Stannis as well. “I suppose you might as well learn why we would have opposed your internship with Petyr. He lived with our family at Riverrun for a time while we attended school - his family was too poor to afford private school tuition, so our father let him stay with us as a favor to his father.”

“That explains how he knows you.”

“There’s more, Sansa. Petyr raped Lysa, and attempted to do the same thing to me, but Brynden
stopped him. He is not a good man.”

Sansa gasped. “I didn’t know that! Why didn’t you tell me earlier? I never would have taken that internship if I’d known.”

“It was so long ago, and your father and I didn’t think any of you kids needed to know that. Some things are better left behind. And the chances of you ever meeting Petyr Baelish were too remote to warrant it. Or so we thought.”

Sansa nodded, but it was clear she wasn’t happy with Cat’s explanation. She looked back at the photo of herself, sprawled unconscious in an unknown location.

“Those are my underthings, so I don’t think this was Photoshopped. I just don’t remember ever falling asleep anywhere in Petyr’s company…” She paused, deep in thought. “Wait. One of the last times we had dinner together I fainted. I remember being light headed after drinking a bit of wine, then nothing. But when I woke up I was fully dressed, lying on the floor in the dining room. Petyr said I had passed out, but only out for a minute at most. I think he must have drugged me.”

Davos spoke up, quietly. “Sansa, I need to know something. When you came home that night, did you feel that you had been physically violated in any way?”

“You mean raped?” Sansa shook her head, face turning red. “No. I wasn’t...there wasn’t...nothing happened like that, I’m certain.”

“Did he say anything to you, anything out of the ordinary?”

“Beyond being his usual creepy cryptic self? No...Yes. There is one other thing I remember about that night. I didn’t understand it at the time, it was so strange. Petyr said that only he could keep me safe and whole. He said, ‘Your soul is too pure for this world. And I could not stand to see that purity sullied by the world and all its filth.’”

Stannis snarled. “I should have wrung that little maggot’s neck last night when I had the chance.”

“What do you mean, last night?” Sansa looked at Stannis in alarm. “Stannis?”

“I didn’t want to worry you. Petyr approached me in the lobby while you were using the ladies’ room. We exchanged...words.”

“What else? What aren’t you telling me?”

Stannis showed her the photo that had been texted to him the night before, the one taken of Sansa from behind, alone in the hallway.

“Is this why you were so panicked in the lobby?”

He nodded.

“But why? What made you think something had happened to me last night?”

Stannis exchanged a look with Ned, one that Sansa did not miss.

“This wasn’t the first time, was it? Tell me, Stannis. I deserve to know.”

He wiped his face, wondering where the sweat had come from so suddenly. “First time was the night after I took you to lunch at that Italian restaurant.”
“That long ago? And what do you mean, first time?” Sansa stood up and walked decisively away from Stannis, moving instead towards the stairwell.

“I received another anonymous Snapchat text after we went to that music festival. I asked Davos what could be done. He said there wasn’t enough evidence for the police to act, but advised me to inform your father, which I did.”

Sansa leveled a baleful look at her father. “So you knew too?”

Ned started to walk towards Sansa but she held up a hand. “Sansa, honey, we were just trying to look out for your best interests. I didn’t want to worry you and neither did Stannis. It was my call.”

“After you finally told me about Lyanna I thought you were done keeping secrets. I can’t believe neither one of you told me I was being stalked! Do you know how unfair that is?”

“That’s it. I’m taking Sansa home with me right now. Honey, let’s get your things.” Catelyn barged straight up the stairs past Sansa only to be stopped by an unfamiliar word.

“No.”

Sansa stood at the bottom of the stairs, arms wrapped defensively around her body. Stannis ached to go to her, but she refused to even look towards him. She faced her mother straight on. “I’m staying here, Mom. I just need some time by myself.”

Cat descended the stairs, cupped Sansa’s cheeks. “Sweetling, you’ve had a terrible ordeal today. And you’ve learned some unpleasant truths. I know you’re hurting and scared. Trust me, I’ve been there, and I know what you need right now. Let’s go home, shall we?”

“No!” Sansa pushed her mother’s hands away and retreated a few steps up the staircase. “I’m sick and tired of everyone treating me like a child, telling me only what they think I ought to know, keeping from me what they think I don’t need to know, assuming that they know what’s best for me.”

Sansa finally turned her gaze towards Stannis, although her words were more sad than angry. “Even you, Stannis. I thought you were different. I thought…” She reined in whatever she was going to say, sniffled, and wiped her teary eyes.

“Sansa, sweetling…”

“Not you too, Dad. I don’t want to hear it. All of you, just leave me alone.” Sansa turned and resolutely walked up the stairs and out of sight without a backward glance.

Stannis turned as well, intent on going out back, outside where he might find some solitude, but Cat’s scathing voice stopped him.

“Just a minute, Stannis. I have words for you. A man in your position should have known better than to encourage a young girl’s infatuation.”

She stepped right in front of him, shaking her finger in his face. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself at your age, chasing her for a piece of tight young ass! She’s not your mid-life crisis. You never should have even looked at my daughter. If you had done the right thing this never would have happened!”

“She is far more than just a - ” Stannis bit back on his anger, bit back on what he wanted to say.
“Sansa means everything to me, Catelyn. Everything.”

He sidestepped around Catelyn and marched stiff backed through the mansion to the sprawling patio beyond. Like Sansa, Stannis had no desire to see anybody at the moment. Except for her. But right now even that was out of the question.

He didn’t know how long he sat out on the deck, sitting, chewing, ruminating on everything and nothing at all. The nicotine fix calmed him down but did nothing to help him solve the dilemma of how to make amends with Sansa. Or if he even could. The first stars had come out in the evening sky when familiar footsteps approached.

“I assume the Starks have left?”

Davos’ quiet affirmation did nothing to tell Stannis what he really needed to know. What he feared finding out.

“And Sansa too?”

“You don’t give that girl enough credit, Stannis.” A faint stirring in his heart. “No, she didn’t leave with her parents. She rather publicly told them off, if you recall.”

“I was included in that ‘telling off’, if you recall.” Squash that stirring now. While it’s small, before it takes hold.

A sigh in the dark, a clap on the shoulder, a rustling as Davos stood up. “You’re going to insist on sitting out here by yourself. Fine. Just don’t wallow too long, old friend. That young lady needs you more than you need your self-pity.”

“I’m not-” Stannis stopped speaking, as the back of his departing friend wouldn’t likely answer anyway.

He sat a little longer, remembering all the times when he had been alone as a teenager, wishing someone would come to him, yet knowing that no one ever would. Sansa didn’t deserve that. That got his feet moving, taking him back to the upstairs hallway almost without conscious effort.

Stannis knocked on the door, unsure if he should walk in unannounced. When he didn’t get a response he clamped down on his panic - maybe she was just in the bathroom - and entered anyway. The sitting room was empty. It took all of his willpower to not barge through the suite yelling her name. Instead he calmly opened the door to the inner bedroom, telling his racing heart to settle down lest it wake her if she should be asleep.

Sansa was not asleep. She sat on the end of the bed, struggling to lift her hand holding a hairbrush above her head. She looked across the room to see her reflection in the mirror, where her bruised face framed with tangled tresses stared back at her.

She dropped her hands to her lap and started speaking, but Stannis wasn't sure if she was addressing him or the empty room.

"Last night was magical. I mean, twenty-four hours ago I was walking the red carpet to the opera house, getting my picture taken by dozens of photographers, looking like a movie star, treated like a queen. Every girl's fairy-tale dream come true. And then this morning happened."

Sansa still didn't look at Stannis, just hugged her body while she continued. "Why would anyone
want to kill me? I don't understand. I've never hurt anyone, never done anything wrong as far as I can tell. Why?"

"And now here I am, sitting on Tywin Lannister's bed in a mansion. How bizarre is that?" She gestured to the mirror. "If it weren't for the bruises on my face, I could almost believe that the past day was just a freaky nightmare." Stannis' heart constricted. Did she really mean to include their time together as part of that 'freaky nightmare'? The hairbrush flew across the room until its flight path was interrupted by the heavy golden drapes. It fell to the carpet with a dull thud.

"What difference does it make?" Sansa pulled the hood of her baggy sweatshirt up over her disheveled red hair and hugged her knees to her chest. Her face had turned red and blotchy, and she used the sleeve to wipe her nose.

Stannis recovered the brush, stifling a groan when he bent over, and moved to sit across from Sansa.

"I can help with that, if you want."

"Like I said, what difference does it make." Sansa spoke in a monotone, much like Shireen had been wont to do when she was younger and frustrated with some situation or another. "I'm not going anywhere, and it looks like these bruises aren't going anywhere either. I still won't look like - or feel like - me." She gripped her legs even tighter.

Tread carefully. "The first time I got hit, I was barely a teen, alone at boarding school. I remember looking in the mirror and thinking that I wouldn't be the same, nothing could possibly be the same. But then a week or two passed by, and I found myself wondering where those bruises went. They were gone, but I was still standing. And so will you."

Sansa didn’t say anything, but she lifted her head and peeked out from under the hood. She reached out, avoiding his current cuts and bruises to brush her fingers instead across his brow, over the recent scar he’d acquired in the fighting ring.

Stannis closed his eyes and leaned into the fleeting touches dancing across his face. The caresses both asked questions, and accepted as a forgone conclusion that he could not answer them, all at once. She is a gift...

He brushed the backs of his fingers across Sansa’s bruised cheek, ghosting across her soft pale skin, now turned purple from the awful blow.

“They will fade, aye, and soon enough you’ll not know exactly where they were. And then, when you look in the mirror you’ll see what I see right now, that you were right here all along. And so it does matter, Sansa. It matters that you take care of yourself, and let us - let me - help you to do so, when you don’t feel quite up to it.”

Sansa nibbled on her lip, mulling over his words. Stannis waited silently. She had to be the one to ask, now. After just a moment she pulled her hood down and handed the brush to Stannis.

“Will you brush the tangles out? Please?” Her fingers brushed across Stannis’ right hand, the one that had been bothering him so much. Soft and fleeting, still the touch told Stannis what he needed to know - she would not reject him.

Stannis never thought that the simple act of brushing someone’s hair could be so soothing, relaxing, hypnotizing even. He fell into a semi-trance, just concentrating on the soft, smooth texture as he ran the brush through her hair over and over again. All other thoughts faded away - there was just the
repetitive strokes and silky sensations as his hands went through her hair again and again, until Sansa spoke, breaking through his daze.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Sansa’s voice was no longer accusing, just genuinely curious.

Stannis continued to run the brush through her hair in long, slow strokes as he considered his answer. Anything less than the truth was unacceptable.

“I wanted to - needed to - protect you. And that includes protecting you from unnecessary fears.”

“I’m not a child.” She glanced over her shoulder at him, silently begging to be affirmed as an adult, as an equal.

_How do I explain?_

“I hate to see you hurting. Or afraid, or worried. I would do anything to keep those fears from ever crossing your path.”

“I’ve always believed that loving each other means trusting each other enough to share our problems and worries, not keep them bottled up. Even in families. Jon and I talk all the time. You’ve had someone to confide in like that, right?”

“Grow up, Stanny. Men don’t whine like little bitches about their problems. They stand up for themselves. If you can’t handle a simple bully then how the hell can you ever become a man? Oh, I almost forgot. You’ll be spending the summer at school. Between Cersei and the company I won’t have time to deal with you.”

Robert drove off, leaving Stannis standing alone in front of the old stone-faced dormitory, mist clinging to his coat and hair. Soon the car disappeared in the thickening fog. Stannis would not see it, or his brother, for three years.

“A long time ago I learned that people didn’t want to hear about any problems, mine or otherwise. I keep quiet and deal with whatever comes along by myself. It’s habit now.”

“I’m not just ‘people’. I love you. So promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“I am in charge of my life, not my parents. But I can’t make the best decisions if I’m uninformed. If it concerns me, I have a right to know. Promise that you won’t keep me in the dark ever again. Please?”

Sansa held his gaze with a resolve that belied her earlier resignation and hopelessness. Stannis could not look away from those gorgeous, determined blue eyes. His hands stilled, slackened, dropped the now-forgotten brush.

“I promise, Sansa.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

She leaned forward and he gratefully accepted her invitation, sealing the promise with a gentle kiss.

Sansa pulled back after a moment and wrinkled her nose. “I think I want a bath. Help me?”
Stannis gladly helped Sansa out of his - now her - big sweatshirt and ran a bubble bath for her in the spacious bathroom. He unclasped the pearls - miraculously unscathed - and studied them for a moment.

“You don’t have to keep these, if you don’t want to. I understand if they remind you of what happened.”

“No.” Sansa gripped his wrist tightly. “Those monsters won’t win. They don’t get to take last night’s magic away from me. I’m keeping these pearls and I will wear them whenever I want.”

“Good.” Stannis put the pearls safely away, then helped Sansa into the tub and washed her hair. Just like brushing it earlier, he found the repetitive motion hypnotic and surprisingly intimate. More importantly, the gentle scalp massage appeared to relax Sansa.

After he rinsed and wrapped her hair in some weird hair-turban thingy - he accepted her explanation that towel-drying long hair would cause damage, even if he didn’t understand it - Stannis proceeded to gently wash Sansa’s back. She turned back and forth, clearly enjoying his tender ministrations. But she remained quiet for quite some time. Something still bothered her.

“I overheard my mom, when she lashed out at you in the hall. I’ve never heard her speak like that before. What she said to you was so...so ugly. Is that what she really thinks of me, of you, of us?”

He hadn’t wanted to hold this conversation, but putting it off wouldn’t make the underlying issue go away, either.

“That’s the default assumption of anyone who sees us together. Stereotypes exist for a reason.”

“I don’t want to be a stereotype! We’re people, not clichés!”

Sansa slapped the water in time to her last words, sending soap bubbles flying all over the sides of the tub and herself. Her reddened face was framed with white suds, and through them bright blue eyes blazed with youthful resolve. In spite of the situation Stannis could not hold back a smile.

“What? Why are you grinning? This isn’t funny. I don’t want people to see us that way.”

“I’m not laughing at you. I admire your spirit, your courage, your drive for independence. You amaze me, every single day. Today even more so.”

She looked back down at the suds. “Why? I’m just a girl. I haven’t done anything with my life yet. Not like you.”

He tilted Sansa’s chin up with two fingers, so that she would meet his eyes again.

“You are not ‘just a girl’. You’re my girl. And far, far more than that, you are your own person. You have talent, strength, and a sense of self that many people twice your age lack. Do not sell yourself short. I don’t.”

“You’re just saying that.”

Stannis snorted. “Hardly. I’m certainly not going to tell you something that I don’t believe.”

Whatever Sansa had intended to say was interrupted by her big yawn. Stannis stifled another grin and helped her out the tub and get dried off. She didn’t want to take the Valium pills prescribed by the Stark family doctor - Ned had brought the prescription over - but gave in when Stannis nodded his encouragement.
“It’s not weakness, Sansa, and you won’t become dependent on them after just one or two nights. If anything, getting sleep now will make sure you don’t require them later.”

Like earlier, they snuggled in bed of one accord, Sansa once again laying her head across Stannis’ chest. She fell asleep almost at once.

His sleep came slowly, and when it did it was punctuated by dreams, fragments of past nights paying him an unwelcome visit.

_In the closet, a small locked chest. Battered pickup truck. A gym by the docks._

_Anticipation._

‘I promise, Sansa.’

_Thumping rave music. Dank tunnels. Energetic crowds. A boxing ring, mat stained with blood._

_Exhilaration._

‘I promise, Sansa.’

_Dark, fog-bound alleys. The hunt. Young punk squirming, helpless, beneath him._

_Power._

‘I promise, Sansa.’

_Blood samples...tested positive...Spike...aggressive, “jonesing”._

_Shame._

‘I promise, Sansa.’

_‘Stannis Baratheon or Stefan Esterman? It’s so hard to tell.’_  

_Rage._

‘I promise, Sansa.’

_“...tired already? ...forget to spike your Wheaties?”_  

_Defeat_
Stannis woke suddenly, his pillow soaked with sweat. Sansa slumbered on, undisturbed by his movements as he got out of bed and stumbled into the bathroom.

He splashed cold water on his face, trying to dispel the unpleasant remnants of his dreams. Except they weren’t dreams, but reminders of his double life that continued to play tricks on him.

And why was he sweating so? His hands shook, his skin itched, his eyes burned from the too-bright bathroom light. The bruised and haunted image staring back at him from the mirror looked both contemptuously familiar and completely foreign all at once.

Stannis shut off the light.

He used the filtered moonlight to navigate his way back to Sansa’s side of the bed, and studied her sleeping form. She had tucked one hand up under her face, and hugged an oversized pillow with the other. Her breaths came slow and steady, punctuated with the occasional sigh that seemed to declare ‘I’m still here.’

He gently swept a lock of hair back from her face so that he could see her profile more clearly. So young, so innocent, so vulnerable. She turned and mumbled in her sleep, but he was certain that she would not awaken. Stannis quietly left the bedroom for the front sitting room. It was up to him to protect her.

He opened his suitcase and dug deep down inside for a second, smaller leather kit bag within. Inside that bag sat a set of keys with ‘Ford’ inscribed on them, and a red tin of tobacco.

Stannis stared at the contents, and they stared right back at him. Who would win? Was it even a contest?

“...forget to spike your Wheaties?”

Yes, he had. But no longer. He wouldn’t get caught flat-footed, unprepared, weak, again. Not where Sansa’s safety and security were concerned.

Stannis grabbed the red tin of tobacco and left the bedroom suite, silently closing the door behind him. He waited until he was out in the far recesses of Robert’s acreage before opening the tin and giving in to his craving, satisfying the itch and the drive for adrenaline. And something else.

‘I promise, Sansa.’

A promise, to keep her safe. By any means necessary.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long delay between updates, this Fall has been super busy.

Big thanks to TommyGinger for the beta-read!

As always, comments are most welcome!
“Got it.”

Sansa put the finishing touches on her final assignment of the semester, saved it, and sent it to her professor.

The Dean of the Business School had agreed to allow her to finish up all of her class work remotely. Now, nearly two weeks after the attack, her work was complete, a week earlier than required.

“I’m free!” She shouted her giddiness to the empty library in Robert’s estate, happy that the semester was over.

But as quickly as she had laughed Sansa sobered. Staring at her pile of books, her stomach twisted up inside and she grew dizzy. Sansa dreaded discussing school with her mother. A confrontation was inevitable once Cat learned that Sansa intended to drop out of KLU for the next year.

Drinking some juice settled her stomach and banished the dizziness. Still, Sansa was restless. With her classwork done a burden had lifted, and she wanted to get some fresh air. She also craved some company. The big house was so empty. Only her, Stannis, Robert, and a few on-site staff members occupied the complex. Robert was usually gone until late evening, and Stannis had started teleworking in order to keep up with the affairs at the Tower. The house was now less of a sanctuary and more of a lonely prison. She needed change.

“Miss Stark?” Robert’s butler appeared in the kitchen. “Detective Seaworth has arrived. He’s currently waiting in Mr. Baratheon’s office.”

“Oh. Stannis is still asleep, but I’ll see Davos. Thank you.”

Sansa practically ran to Robert’s - currently Stannis’ - home office, eager to speak with Davos. They hadn’t heard from him in nearly a week. Hopefully he had some new information to share.

She stopped in the hallway to gaze in the mirror. “Stannis was right.” She touched her face, where only a faint trace of yellow bruising remained along her cheek. “I can barely see them now.”

She smiled at Davos, currently standing in the open door of the study. “They’re nearly gone!”

“It’s good to see you smiling again, Miss Stark.” Davos greeted Sansa. “What has you floating on cloud nine this morning?”

“Besides the bruises going away?” Sansa blushed, but kept smiling anyway. “I’ve finished all my classwork for this semester. I won’t have an incomplete on my transcript, and I don’t have to go back to campus. I’m done!”

“I remember my uni days, and the relief of finishing each semester. Can’t say as I blame you for being happy about that.”

“Thanks! Now what can I do for you, Detective?”

“I wanted to see how you were faring. Both of you. I haven’t heard from Stannis in a while, and knowing him, probably wouldn’t if I didn’t come by.”

“I’m fine. Well, I’m okay. But I’m starting to feel stir-crazy, like I’ve got cabin fever or something.
I’m tired of looking at the same walls in here.”

Stannis had been extra protective, and extra vehement, all but forbidding Sansa to leave Robert’s property without him. Robert had done his best to keep her entertained with movies, fancy catering, and in-house spa treatments, and Margaery’s daily visits broke the monotony, but as time wore on she found the big estate’s grounds had shrunk.

“Pushing through all my classwork has helped, but now that I’m done, I really want to get back to living a normal life again. I’m not sure it’s safe, though. Stannis is convinced there’s a kidnapper around every street corner.”

Davos frowned. “I can assure you that is not the case, Miss Stark. And honestly, I think it will do you good to get back out, so long as you’re watchful. We’re progressing with our investigation, have new leads to follow, and I’m certain that no one will try that a second time.”

Sansa nodded her head, but couldn’t quite meet the detective’s eyes for a moment. “You’ve known Stannis for far longer than I have. You probably know how he handles stress.”

“Poorly.” Davos’ Fleabottom accent still conveyed his concern. “How is he? Truly?”

“I’m so worried about him. He’s been teleworking from here, but even so he gets into more and more arguments with Robert and Renly, disagreements about little things in the office that don’t really matter. It’s like Stannis is trying to pick a fight with them. He’s so pent up, like a caged tiger. And…” Sansa didn’t want to break Stannis’ trust, or reveal any intimate details, but she couldn’t keep quiet, either.

“He’s been going somewhere at nights, practically every night since the attack. I don’t know where or why. After we go to bed he waits until he thinks I’m asleep, then he slips out. Sometimes he doesn’t come back until two or three in the morning. I’m sure it’s not another woman, but…”

Sansa bit her lip to keep from crying. Surely that wasn’t it, was it? He hadn’t made love to her since the morning after the attack either. Did he not want her anymore?

“Not a chance. Stannis doesn’t give his heart away easily. You’re the first - not even his ex-wife held his love. Loyalty and vows, yes. Love, no. Trust me - Stannis isn’t having an affair.”

“Then what could he be doing?” Sansa wiped at her eyes, dried her tear-dampened hands on her jeans.

“Thinking. Walking. Maybe going for a run. I’m sure he just doesn’t want to keep you awake.”

“Since all this happened, he’s been so tired, and his schedule is all wrong. I mean, it’s ten o’clock now, and Stannis is still in bed. That’s so not like him. Renly even called me once, wondering why Stannis hadn’t dialed in to a conference call. I had to go wake him up.”

“Maybe you two need a change of scenery. It might do you both good to get out of the city. Get some rest and fresh air.”

“That’s a great idea! I’ll ask him later today. I hope he’ll agree.” Sansa jumped to her feet. “Do you want me to get him?”

Davos waved off her suggestion while standing. “No, no, let him sleep. I’ll touch base later. It’s good to see you again, Miss Stark. We’ll talk soon, I’m sure.”

It was not until after Davos left that Sansa realized that the detective had not shared any new
information concerning the investigation with her. She carried a cup of strong black coffee up to the rooms she shared with Stannis, wondering if she could convince him to take her out of the city.

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Davos watched, and waited. Night had fallen a few hours ago. As was always the case, the dark brought out King’s Landing’s more checkered residents, the ones who operated on the fringes of legality, those who ignored the law altogether, and the poorer souls, the folks that worked two or more jobs along the margins of society, just scraping to get by.

Tonight’s object of interest was a small convenience store located a few blocks away from the docks. Occupying a poorly lit corner, the shop nevertheless enjoyed a steady stream of customers entering and leaving. Some bought snacks, others booze, and still other customers stopped just outside the door to scratch feverishly on instant lottery tickets. A neon sign above the door flickered with uncertainty. *Open 24 Hours.*

The vacant upper-story apartment he currently occupied was one of several leased by the police department for stakeouts or the occasional bolthole. Dust danced in and out of shafts of dim streetlight, stirred to action by the occasional rustle of fetid-smelling air flowing through an open window. Davos had spent more hours than he could remember watching and waiting on various stakeouts. But he never thought he’d be on the lookout for his best friend.

Not far from Fury Road, this little store fit the general description Stannis had given Davos. It seemed the most likely place for him to buy Spike. And so Davos waited.

When Sansa had told him that Stannis was going out at night, Davos knew he had to push forward with the investigation. He had no doubt that Stannis was on the hunt for Harry Hardyng, for the thug that invaded his home, and maybe even for Lothor Brune. Davos had to find them first, and convince Stannis to cease any vigilante pursuits - if he could.

Sometime after the foot and street traffic had slowed, a tall shadow appeared along the dingy, dimly lit wall of the store, followed closely by the man who cast it. The owner’s face was hidden by a ball cap, but Davos recognized the long stride and broad shoulders. Stannis.

He held himself still in the dark apartment, fighting against his own desire to confront his friend then and there. In just a few moments Stannis left the store again, stalked back down the street and disappeared into the darkness beyond.

Davos waited a few minutes longer, until he was certain that no one else was in the store. Then he moved.

Unlike the street outside, the interior of the little shop was well if harshly lit by glaring, bare-bulb fluorescent lights. The familiar bell on the front door announced his presence to the bored attendant. The clerk barely glanced up from his post at the register before turning his attention back to his phone.

Davos made a cursory tour of the small store, keeping his floppy old fishing hat pulled low over his face. He made his way back up to the front, and quietly flipped the lock on the door. For this particular conversation he needed no witnesses.

That got the clerk’s attention. “Hey man, what are you doing?” He dropped the phone and reached under the counter.

Davos held his hands up. “I just want to talk is all.”
The store clerk pointed towards the door. “Uh uh. Nobody just wants to talk. You unlock that door right now. See the sign? Doors to remain unlocked during business hours. Unlock the door and leave.” Anger and uncertainty mingled together in his voice as he spoke.

Once again Davos tried to speak with the man. “Look, I just have a few questions, that’s it.”

The clerk barged out from his post towards Davos, a stout wooden bat held out to his side. “Anybody locking my door is up to no good. You get out of here!”

The veteran detective had dealt with similar approaches dozens of times, and quickly had the clerk pinned against counter.

“Ah, ah, threatening a police officer is against the law.” Davos quickly displayed his badge to the clerk, careful to keep his name hidden. It was unethical, not to mention against the law, but he’d bent the law more than once in the pursuit of greater justice.

“I’m here for information on a suspect, and you’re going to give it to me. Tell me about the tall fellow, the one who was just here. What does he buy, and how often is he here?”

“Tobacco. He don’t talk, he just gets his chew and leaves.” The clerk’s panicked voice came out garbled, as his face was smushed into the dirty formica countertop by Davos’ strong hold. “Why are you treating me like this, anyway? All you had to was ask your question. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You sure about that? I’m not. In fact, I bet you got some pretty red tins full of Spike behind this counter. How about we take a look?”

“No way. I don’t do that. This is just a little family store, I swear!”

“Yeah, right.” Davos increased the pressure on the clerk’s arm, twisting it into an unnatural position behind the smaller man’s back. The clerk whimpered, but shook his head. Davos twisted his arm even more.

“Wait, wait! I thought I had a deal with KLPD. I was promised you guys wouldn’t bust me - that I was on your no touch list or something.”

“That’s right. And remind me, exactly, what were the terms of the deal?” Davos tweaked the man’s arm as incentive. The clerk began babbling immediately.

“All I gotta do is make sure the big fella gets his Spike, man. I can sell to others, but I have to make sure to save enough out for him. And lately that’s been a lot. He’s been in here almost every night now.”

“And who delivers the product to you? The same person that promised you this deal?”

The clerk’s sweat dripped down to puddle on the counter, but Davos paid it no mind. The more uncomfortable the man was, the more likely he would be to talk.

“I dunno his name. He was just very convincing, you know? He drives a gray sedan, that’s all I know. And he pays me good, really good.”

“Now you listen to me very carefully and you’ll get to keep your deal. I’m going to show you some photos, and you’re going to tell me which one is your source, you hear?”

“Uh huh.”
Davos showed several photos of men to the clerk, one by one. Some were police officers, a few were petty drug dealers, others were random photos he’d pulled off the Internet. Only one caught the clerk’s attention.

“That one.”

“Are you sure?” Outwardly Davos spoke without emotion, but inside his stomach did a little flip. The fingered photo was that of Lothor Brune.

“That’s the guy. He drops the product off couple times a week and collects the cash. He said the cops would leave me alone.” The clerk squirmed against the counter. “He promised, man!”

“How long have you had this little arrangement?”

“Three years, maybe a little longer.”

“And the big fellow, he’s been buying all this time?”

The clerk nodded, as best he could with his head still pinned to the counter by Davos’ iron grip.

“Longer. He was here buying chew even before I got the Spiked stuff. All I had to do was introduce it to him.”

“Did he ever ask for Spike by name?”

“Uh uh, not ever. My supplier just told me to give the big guy samples, back when he first started this deal. Paid me to do it. After a couple of tries the guy started asking for it by the label.”

“Fake label, obviously.”

“Duh.” The clerk had the gumption to snort, even though he was still immobilized. “No shit, Sherlock.”

Davos tightened his grip until the clerk cried out. “Watch it, punk. A mouthy attitude is a good way to lose a deal, know what I mean?” The clerk nodded.

“So here’s the new deal. It’s the same as the old one - you don’t change a thing. You keep doing what you’re doing, and don’t say anything about my little visit to anybody, not your supplier, no one. Are we clear?”

Once the clerk babbled assurance that he would keep selling Spike - and keep his mouth shut - Davos left the store. He had another stop to make before the night was over. He needed more information, and a certain snitch was going to provide it.

Finding Billy proved difficult. Davos spent nearly two hours checking the usual hangouts in Flea Bottom without success. Past midnight now, he had nearly given up when he overheard two drunks arguing in a dark corner about the ‘bookie’s new table’ on Dectur Street. Finally, a lead.

One of the concessions Davos had given to Billy, as part of their ‘partnership’, was that he would never approach the bookie out in the open. And so Davos waited in a dark corner, watching Billy ply his trade from across the busy thoroughfare. Despite the late hour Dectur Street remained active, crowded with recently graduated college students celebrating their newfound freedom.

Soon a gray sedan pulled up near Billy’s table. Davos used his camera to zoom in on the driver - it was Lothor Brune. He snapped multiple photos while the ex-cop jumped out of the car and
immediately started gesturing and yelling at Billy. The bookie’s body language demonstrated placation and deference - hands up, he backed away, mouth moving all the while. Davos couldn’t hear what was said, but by the way Lothor kicked over Billy’s table he clearly didn’t get the answer he wanted.

As soon as Lothor drove away Billy packed up his gear. Davos waited, then followed Billy through a narrow unlit alley before hailing him, ensuring first that they were alone. Billy stiffened, then relaxed once he realized who had called him.

“Detective D, it’s been a while. How’d you find me?”

“No matter. Just tell me what Lother Brune wants from you. He looked mighty upset.”

“Him? He’s just looking for some kid. A punk that used to throw the dice at my table. But I ain’t seen him in months.” Billy always spoke as if nothing bothered him, but Davos knew it was an act. The street gambler was hiding something.

“What kid?”

“Kid named Harry. I guess he pissed Lothor off.”

“The blond punk that works at the Blue Crystal?” Stannis’ gruff voice carried down the alley, preceding the man himself. He stopped noiselessly a few yards from Davos and Billy, remaining within the deeper shadows of the adjacent building. Davos frowned. He had no idea that Stannis had been nearby.

“Yeah, him. What’s it to you, pal? This is between me and the big D here, not you, whoever you are.”

“Never mind that.” Davos had to redirect Billy. “What’d you tell Lothor?”

“Same thing I told you. Haven’t seen him.” Billy looked around constantly, and sweat dripped down his face. His feet continually shifted back and forth in the dusty grit of the dark alleyway.

“What’s your connection to Harry and Lothor?”

Billy leaned against the wall and pretended to check his watch. “It’s getting late. Sorry Detective D, but I can’t help you. I gotta go.”

He didn’t take two steps before he was thrown face first against the wall. Stannis held his wrists tight with one hand, and pulled his hair back with the other. Billy’s neck tendons stood out as he strained uselessly against Stannis’ strong grip.

“You don’t go nowhere until you answer the question.” Stannis spoke with a thick, gruff accent, giving no hint of his posh upbringing or elite social standing as one of the wealthiest men in Westeros.

Davos barely managed to not shout Stannis’ name out loud. “Answer my question, Billy.”

The weasel eyed bookie tried to twist around to see Stannis’ face, but the larger man simply pushed his head harder into the bricks. “No looks, just answers.”

“Good cop, bad cop? This is a new trick for you, Detective D. Okay, fine.” Billy gulped as his breathing grew more rapid. “Harry used to gamble all the time. And lose. He owed me big money - over ten grand.”
“Where does a college punk get that kind of cash? And what’s Brune got to do with this?”

“He don’t got the cash. All those college brats think they can game us, but they always lose.” Billy squirmed again, but stilled when Stannis thumped his head against the wall. “Last year Brune paid off Harry’s debt - all of it. He said Harry couldn’t ever place a bet with any of us again. No matter if Harry had collateral to back it, he was forbidden. And now I guess that punk pissed him off, ‘cuz Lothor’s been searching high and low for him.”

“And you say you haven’t seen Harry anywhere.” Davos crossed his arms and waited.

“Nope.” Billy answered quickly. Too quickly. Stannis noted it too, and gave Billy another thump. “Ow!”

“Tell the truth, Bookie,” he growled. “I can do this all night. Can you?” Stannis tweaked Billy’s arm tighter, and the bookie squeaked in protest.

“Okay, man! Yeah, Harry came to me a week ago. He was scared shitless, asking for cash. He needed to get out of town in a hurry. I didn’t give him none, because I like to breathe, you know? But before you ask, I don’t know where he went. He didn’t stick around to gab.”

Davos exhaled the air he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “Much better, Billy.” He gave Stannis a hard nod. “Let him go.”

Stannis shoved Billy towards the main road, away from himself and Davos.

Davos gave him one last instruction. “You just walk across the street and keep on going, Billy. Don’t look back.” The bookie didn’t need to be told twice. He took off.

Davos gestured to Stannis to follow him. The two men walked silently for nearly ten minutes through the foggy gloom, crossing several narrow streets lined with old stone buildings. During that time Davos’ anger towards his friend only grew. In the deepest shadow of an abandoned church Davos finally came to a halt, and whirled on Stannis.

“How dare you interfere with my investigation! You’re not a police officer, Stannis. You had no right!”

Stannis crossed his arms and leaned back against the church wall. He shrugged. “It worked.”

“This time, maybe. But you assaulted my best source of information in Flea Bottom! And I doubt if he’ll ever give me so much as the time of day again thanks to you roughing him up.”

Stannis shrugged again. “I only care about Sansa. So what are you going to do with the information he just gave you? Can you get a wiretap? See Brune’s bank records? What now?”

“Now? Now you get off the streets. I don’t need you poking around here. You’ve got no badge, no contacts, no investigative experience. This is delicate work. And you snooping around could ruin the progress I’m making.”

Stannis sneered. “I got him to talk. Your pussyfooting ways weren’t working.”

“They would, in time.” Billy would have spilled. Eventually.

“We don’t have time! You were there, Davos!” Stannis’ voice grew husky and hoarse with pent-up anger, and something else, an emotion that Davos had never heard Stannis acknowledge. Fear.
Davos paced to and fro for a moment. Stannis was right - time was a luxury they couldn’t afford to squander.

“I’ll get the wiretap warrant first thing in the morning. The District Attorney will have to be involved, though, and you know what that means, Stannis.”

“I’ll have to testify.”

“Not yet. But yes, you’re a primary witness. You will have to talk to the DA and probably testify before a Grand Jury. It won’t be pretty.”

Stannis huffed but remained silent.

“Promise me, Stannis, that you’ll leave the rest of this to me. Stay off the streets, stay out of Flea Bottom, and stop looking for Harry or Lothor. In fact, why don’t you take a vacation? Get out of town for a few weeks? Take Sansa somewhere nice.”

Stannis nodded quietly. “I’ll think about it.” Then he frowned. “That gray car. It’s the same car that nearly hit me that morning.” He didn’t have to specify which morning. They both knew.

“Makes sense. I’ll check CCTV traffic archives for any video footage of his car in your neighborhood. It’s only circumstantial, but still another piece of evidence to link Lothor to the attack on Sansa.”

“Answer me one more thing.” Davos breathed unsteadily. He hadn’t wanted to cover this subject again, but he had to, for Sansa’s sake. And for Stannis too.

“Spike. We both know you’re using it deliberately now. How could you?”

Stannis pushed himself off the wall, standing straight and tense before Davos. “I don’t have a choice! I need to stay strong, to keep my girl safe. This shit helps me do that. I won’t get caught off guard again.”

Davos reached out, desperate to find any way to reason with his drug-addled friend. “Don’t you see what Spike is doing to you? It’s making you more aggressive with each passing day.”

Stannis laughed, a short harsh bark devoid of warmth or humor. “That’s the point.”

“How is taking that drug and going on a vigilante hunt keeping Sansa safe? Spike is dangerous!”

“Then maybe you should have thought about that before you decided not to tell me about the drug test results.”

Davos stumbled backwards, struggling to keep his balance as Stannis poked him the chest.

“Remember that? The one you swapped out? If you had told me then, we might have figured it out all those months ago. You think I want this? I could have gotten free of it, long before Sansa was in danger. There’s no time for that now.”

Stannis turned around and strode away. Davos called out, his one Hail Mary left.

“Sansa knows.”

Davos had no time to even raise his hands before his back collided with the stone wall, breath explosively expelled from his lungs. Stannis pinned him there with just one hand, muscled forearm shoved against his throat. He could not move.
“Sansa knows what?” Despite the cloying heat and humidity of the fetid nighttime air, Davos shivered.

“She knows you go out at night. Not why. Only that you’ve been slipping out and not coming back until the early morning hours. She knows you’re exhausted, irritable, and looking to pick a fight with your brothers. She’s worried about you.” Davos gulped. “So am I. Please, Stannis, reconsider what you’re doing. Stop using Spike.”

Just as quickly as he had pinned Davos to the wall Stannis let him go and backed away.

“I can’t.”

“Stannis…” Davos called out, but Stannis just shook his head while he continued his backwards retreat. A retreat into the fog and darkness, hovering just beyond the streetlamp’s reach.

“Not while Baelish is free. Not until my girl is safe.”

And then he was gone.

Davos cursed himself roundly and thoroughly, cursed his wrongheaded decision not to tell Stannis immediately about the positive drug test. A decision that now put an innocent young girl in danger.

And yet Stannis was right, partially anyway, in that going through detox and withdrawal at this critical juncture would be ill advised at best, and potentially dangerous at worst. Stannis’ good name was at stake. And if the truth about his addiction came to light, not only would his reputation be destroyed, but his credibility as a potential witness against Petyr Baelish and the illegal fight circuit would be damaged.

“Dammit.”

At least he had enough information to secure a wiretap warrant on Lothor Brune. That put the investigation one step closer to Baelish himself, and until they located Harry Hardyng, it was the best Davos could do.

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