Sansa Stark is in a relationship with Joffrey Baratheon, the grandson of a very high profile politician. The skeletons in the Baratheon/Lannister closet are numerous and in many cases literal. One evening, having found out her boyfriend was cheating on her, Sansa takes matters into her own hands and humiliates her boyfriend. His retaliation is almost immediate.

Sandor Clegane is an ex-military man who moved back to town to pack up his old man’s things after the funeral, but with a scarred up face that makes job hunts particularly brutal, he decides to take up his father’s mantle and keep running the barber shop. His life changes when a girl comes into his shop after hours, begging him to cut her hair.
SO OKAY, this is for Swimmingfox who requested a Sandor!hairdresser one shot. It... well, it exploded into this. I have no idea how long it's going to be but it definitely ain't no one shot.

I hope you guys like it! GIVE BARBER!SANDOR A CHANCE.
Chapter 1

The palm of her hand still tingles, no matter how frequently she squeezes it into a fist, and despite the patter of rain on the umbrella over her head, despite the pounding of her heart and the fizz of adrenaline and nausea in her stomach, it is the sensation Sansa focuses on most. She wonders if it will tingle and smart forever, and she half hopes yes. It is proof of her courage. Proof of her anger. Proof of her idiocy.

Why did I slap him? Oh, god, what was I thinking, she thinks as she stands on the street corner, the black asphalt a glitter and shine from the rain and the reflected smears of neon lights. She gives her hand another squeeze as she waits for the light to change so she can cross, and she’s grateful that when she bought the black umbrella they were all out of splashy colors. Sansa lowers it so her head nearly touches the metal frame inside its nylon dome. It’s as good a hiding place as any, here in Chicago where the Lannisters own everything and everyone, here where anyone could be tailing her, here where anyone could strike out to punish her for her bravado.

The crosswalk sign lights up, innocuous white, bright in the rain, cheerful and inviting, and she hurries across the street with the small knot of other unhappy, wet pedestrians. The balls of Sansa’s feet throb in her stiletto booties but it doesn’t slow her down. The restaurant where she publically humiliated Joffrey by slapping him clean across the face is only a few blocks away. She knows her boyfriend; he’ll send someone after her if he hasn’t already. She needs to get as far from him as possible, and she takes a narrow side street to get off the main drag.

She finds an awning-covered store front and pauses under it, watching the passersby hurry to and fro in the downpour before she pulls her phone out of her purse and dials. Her roommate works later hours but she’s hoping she’ll answer even if she’s still at the office. Her hands shake and she shivers uncontrollably, so much so that the umbrella vibrates above her head.

“Hey, San, what’s up?”

“Jeyne, thank god you answered,” Sansa says, closing her eyes from the relieved rush she feels at the sound of her friend’s voice.

“I’m climbing home now. I know you’re probably full from fancy French food but I ordered a pizza in case you want some later. At least that’s one good thing about living in a building with no elevator. Plenty of opportunity to burn calories,” she says, only a little breathlessly.

“Listen, Jeyne, do me a favor and don’t answer the door tonight. I um, I messed up, I think,” and she tells her all about finding out Joffrey was sleeping with another woman on the side, tells her all about how she stormed into the restaurant where he was waiting for her, tells her all about how hard she slapped him for being a cheating bastard.

“Oh wow, San, that’s- that’s not so good,” Jeyne says quietly, nearly a whisper. “You’re gonna want to hole up at home for a few days. Did he hit you again?” she asks after a moment’s hesitation, voice low and serious.
“No, I left too fast for him. He didn’t even stand up, he was so stunned.”

It was a proud moment for her but now she’s more than a little terrified of the consequences. She’s seen firsthand what happens to people who undercut the Lannisters. Suddenly the slap feels enormous. Sansa’s eyes tear up.

“Well, look, we don’t know how seriously he’ll take it. He’ll probably get coked up and burn off steam with his buddies. Maybe he’ll spin it to the gossip blogs that you were the one who cheated on him.”

“I shouted, though,” Sansa says, shifting her weight from foot to foot to relieve some pressure, wishing there were an easy way to relieve the pressure behind her eyes. “I called him a lot of bad names and I- oh, man, I humiliated him, Jeyne. He’s going to be livid. I ran out of there but I’m scared he’s got someone tailing me.”

“Go find a store or something, buy some new clothes and change your outfit. Take a cab out of the city. At the very least do something about your hair, like put it up in a bun or something. You probably shouldn’t come home, huh,” Jeyne says.

Sansa can hear her keys rattle as she unlocks the door.

“God, I guess not. Not for a couple of hours anyway,” she says, watching a car turn down the quiet little side street.

It passes by little-old-lady slow, and Sansa nervously tips her umbrella towards the street, fully hiding her face from view. Shit, shit, shit, she thinks.

“Oh, honey, this isn’t good,” Jeyne says.


“I’m on my iPad right now,” she says with a sigh. “I googled Joff’s name and there’s already a small blurb on TMZ right now. ‘Boom SLAP,’ it says. Oh Christ, Sansa, there’s a video of you guys.”

Suddenly Jeyne laughs.

“Sorry, but man, you really whacked him good.”

“There weren’t any reporters though! How is there a video? Oh my god, oh my god, Jeyne, he’s going to kill me,” Sansa says, and for the first time in her life she wonders if that overdramatic statement might literally be true.

“It was filmed on someone’s phone and sent in to the site. Are you in a cab yet?”

“No, not yet, I’m on a- it’s not a busy street. I got off Michigan a few minutes ago,” Sansa says, her fingers numb from the cold now.

A warm cab sounds amazing to her, right now, and she slowly lifts the umbrella to look both ways. Deserted.

“Ooh, there’s my pizza. Oh, you poor thing, you haven’t even eaten dinner and now you can’t come get anything here,” Jeyne says.

“I’m not hungry, believe me,” Sansa says, and then she gasps. “Jeyne, don’t answer the door, or at
least check to make sure it’s the pizza guy.”

“I’m not an idiot, San,” Jeyne says with a laugh. “Hang on. Yep, I was right. It’s totally him, and he’s cute, too,” she says.

Sansa hears the deadbolt and chain as her friend opens the door, hears Jeyne’s friendly greeting and the murmur of a man’s voice, and then she hears the unmistakable hollow pop of gunshots.

Sansa screams.

“All right, you’re all set,” Sandor says, dusting off the back of his customer’s neck with a soft-bristle brush before he unsnaps the smock.

“Thanks, man, it looks great. You’re getting almost as good as your father was before the stroke,” the suit says as he gets to his feet.

He’s been a lifelong customer and has introduced himself a few times but Sandor never remembers names. He has no use for people skills, not since he came back from Afghanistan with mild PTSD on top of the half-ruin of his face he went there with. The shop was never popular for the conversation anyways, even back when his old man was still alive and kicking, but for its affordable no-nonsense approach that Sandor has adopted as his own.

He snorts noncommittally at the compliment, shakes the smock out and drapes it over the back of the barber chair before crossing the room to the register. The whole place has a sepia sort of feeling to it, with its rust and cream checkered linoleum floor and the old wood paneling on one wall, and as Sandor rings him up and takes the guy’s cash, once again he tells himself he’ll remodel the place. With his own two hands if he has to scrimp that much to get it done. It’s like taking a step through an old timey photograph; it’s like taking a step into the past when he was a kid playing with his GI Joes on the floor, or when his older brother was beating the shit out of him in the back room while his father just turned up the Hank Williams.

“Do me a favor, flip that sign around on your way out,” he says, gesturing to the placard hanging on the glass window in the door as he wipes his hands on the thighs of his jeans.

“Sure thing, man. Here, go have a drink on me,” the suit says, stuffing a ten dollar bill in the tip jar. “Go spend it on a pretty girl somewhere,” he says with a wink and a laugh as he pushes the door open with a shoulder blade.

“Like I have one of those hidden around here somewhere,” Sandor says with a roll of his eyes as he disappears into the back for the dustpan and broom.

Smartass bastard, he thinks, listening to the old strip of jingle bells clamor to life as the door opens and closes. This guy wasn’t so bad, was actually on the amusing side as he got out his phone and showed Sandor some video online of a girl slapping the shit out of some rich bitch kid, but then he had to make it personal. He gets all types in here, old men and young, rich and poor, but the kind he really loathes are the well-meaning talkers. Have you tried skin grafts, do you get disability, what did your girlfriend think when you came back, damn dude is that shit for real. No. Yes. What girlfriend. Fuck you.

Sandor flips on the radio and listens to blues as he sweeps the floor, is not quite so lost in the moment as to hum, but his mind is a pleasant blank buzz of abstract thoughts, disjointed imaginings of tearing down the wall paneling and chipping up the shitty tile, of sitting in a bar when he’s got
the placed cleaned up and ordering a stiff drink, of wondering what the hell he’s going to do for dinner.

The only interruption of his task and his thoughts is the sound of those damn bells again, and he realizes the suit must not have flipped the sign.

“We’re closed, man, come back in the morning,” he says over his shoulder as he squats down to sweep the cuttings into the dustpan.

“I need you to cut my hair,” a woman’s voice says, and it’s high and warbled like something viscous, all tremble and no backbone considering her demand at 7pm on Friday night. Where did she think she was?

“I don’t know if you can tell, sister, but this isn’t some day spa salon,” he says as he stands and walks the cuttings over to the trashcan, tipping the dustpan to empty it. “You want a fancy hairdo you’ll have to find one of those, unless you want a buzz cut or something.”

“I don’t need anything fancy, but- please, you have to,” she says, and that’s when Sandor realizes she’s crying.

He frowns, turns around with the broom and dustpan still in his hands like he’s a janitor and not a business owner, and stands there like a moron as his words are momentarily stolen right out of his mouth.

She’s beautiful. There is no other way around it, though he wishes there were. He’s never been good with women even in everyday exchanges, but he’s piss poor with them when they’re attractive. There is something about the horrible unfairness of it all, the teeter-totter imbalance when he stands face to face or side by side with them, that makes him nervous and uncomfortable. And then there’s the inevitable—

“Oh my god,” she says, sucking in a mortified gasp when she finally stops wiping her eyes and actually looks at him.

She’s got her back pressed to the door, looked like a startled, frightened deer, or something more exotic maybe, with all that long, auburn hair, and she’s hiccupping now, she’s crying that much harder. Great. Fucking great. He could use that drink right about now.

“You don’t like it you can just turn around and leave,” he says with a scowl, crossing the room to approach her. “Go find your pretty little salon full of your pretty little people, Red. I don’t know shit about women’s hair and I definitely don’t waste my time messing around with people who can’t even look me in the fucking eye.”

She makes a decent recovery, though she turns her face and drops her gaze when he’s standing just a couple of feet away from her. Little Miss Long Hair takes a deep, shuddering breath and wipes her eyes again with the back of her hand. Mascara comes away with it, smudging her cheeks like a street urchin. The other hand holding a closed umbrella is shaking so hard that raindrops are scattering all over his floor.

“Please, Mr. um,” she says, glancing behind her at the window where it says CLEGANE BARBER SHOP. “Mr. Clegane, please help me,” she says, trying for even though the effort of mere speech is enough to make it weak and water all over again. He opens his mouth to tell her to can it with the Mr. Clegane bullshit, but then she keeps talking, and then Sandor is absolutely floored. “They killed her, I think, and I don’t want them to find me. I mean, I don’t know if they’re following me but I need to- I need to cut my hair. Oh Jesus, I shouldn’t have slapped him.”
His eyes widen as she talks about chicks being murdered with one breath only to prattle on about her hair with the next, and he actually takes a step back from her, thinking she must be fucking crazy. He’s about to tell her as much, but then world seems to erupt with noise. There’s a loud crack and the sound of screaming, there’s the loud crackling as his store front window shatters, and there is the familiar sound of gunfire that takes him right back to Afghanistan, and now he’s on auto pilot.

One moment she’s standing there pleading with this mean man, struggling to look past the bulk of him, the scars and the tattoos, the angry scowl and the untamed savage look of his dark hair and thick beard, to appeal to the decency of him to just help her. And the next minute it’s like everything is exploding all around her. But then again, she supposes it has.

Sansa screams, dropping her umbrella as she covers her ears with her hands, ducks her head as the glass behind her explodes. Other than that she seems incapable of moving; her legs have gone to lead and her muscles seem fused together. But then she’s wrenched away from the door, hauled up in the scarred man’s arms as he lifts her clean off her sky-highs and turns to carry her down the length of the narrow room.

Her face is pressed against his chest, she is essentially crushed to him as he sinks down to his knees with her legs between them, and then he’s lowering her on the floor between two barber chairs, his massive frame completely covering hers. His black hair hangs down around the crown of her head, and that paired with the breadth of his body essentially covers her completely. A great beast of a man is all that’s between bullets and Sansa, and she clings to him, two fists of black t-shirt over a white thermal, turns her head away from the window so that one cheek is against the linoleum and the other is against his pectoral.

The ratatatat continues for only a few more seconds, and she flinches each time something else breaks or the whizzing of bullets overhead pings and zings into the far back wall. Somewhere out on the street, a couple of car alarms have been triggered, someone’s dog is barking nonstop, and it all adds to the chaos even after the gunshots stop and a car peels away down the street. Somewhere, she can hear Otis Redding sing, the slow sweet stretch of his voice a haunting, horrible contrast to what’s just happened. Lullabies and drive-bys. Sansa realizes that she is crying, so hysterically that no sounds come out of her mouth, only soft puffs of breath, in and out.

“I think it’s over,” he says, head moving so that his words are warm gusts in her hair.

His body shifts slightly, and she opens her eyes to see the flex of his arm as he raises up on an elbow. She isn’t sure, as shell-shocked as she is, but she thinks he cups his hand around the back of her head. “Hey, Red, you all right? You’re all right, aren’t you,” he says, the deep of his voice all the gruffer for his attempt at speaking softly.

It’s like being asked how her day is by the checkout clerk in a grocery store, where Sansa absently just says Oh, great, thanks instead of answering honestly. Sansa nods.

“Yes, I’m- I’m fine,” she lies.

“You were just involved in a shooting, you don’t have to sugar coat it,” he says.

When she turns her face to look up, now that he’s lifted off of her enough to do so, she sees him turn his head to look out the tattered remains of his window. Up close the scars are gruesome, look painful even though they’ve clearly healed, but they’re not the only interesting thing going on with his face. He’s like a cross between a bear and the kind of mountain man to hunt one, big and
brawn, wooly and dark, and when he looks back down at her, the length of his hair falls into her eyes, making her blink and turn her head.

“If you’re not okay, you’re not okay. It’s not like I’m doing real good right now, either, with the looks of this place,” he says as he carefully gets up on his other elbow. “Goddammit, I just cleaned the floor, too.”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers just as a crooked, shattered framed photograph falls off the wall, and the sound of more broken glass makes her jump so violently it makes him jump here above her. “I’m so sorry about your shop.”

“Why are you sorry?” he says derisively as he gets slowly up onto his hands and knees above her. “There’ve been shooting on this street before, just not so up close and personal,” he says, glancing down at her, his eyes a barely perceptible flick down the length of her body and back up to her face. It would affront her if she weren’t already so splintered from what just happened. “It’s not your fault some stupid fuck decided to play The Purge.”

Without the weight and warmth of him, Sansa begins to shake. She’s in a LBD and heels with only a light trench. Being beneath him was like being curled up in her bed, compared to her scant clothing that’s still chilled from the rain. He sits back on his haunches, flipping his hair out of his eyes so it hangs more or less over the scarred cheek. Coupled with his beard, it more or less hides them from view.

“Well, actually I think it was,” she says. “I- that’s what I was trying to say when I came in, actually.”

“Here, you’re shaking like a damn leaf,” he says after he stands.

He is a giant looming shadow of a man who extends a hand to her and Sansa takes it gratefully, unsure as she is if she can stand on her own two feet let alone get up off the floor in four inch heels. He drops her hand and turns, picks up a shard of glass that had fallen on one of the barber chairs.

“So what, you’re telling me you did this? Who’d you piss off, girly? John Gotti?”

“Worse,” she whispers, hugging herself tightly for comfort, for warmth, for fear. God, why did I have to slap him?

“The Lannisters.” he says, his gray eyes wide and incredulous as he takes a step towards her, like he’s hoping he’s hard of hearing and misunderstood her.

Sansa nods, tears welling up before they streak down her cheeks. She feels them bead on her jaw before dropping to the floor. Her contribution to the mess.

“Son of a bitch,” he says, turning to fling the shard of glass down the length of the room. Sansa flinches.

If she thought it was the extent of his outburst, though, she was wrong, because he rounds on her, grabbing her by the upper arm as he drags her towards the door. She stumbles in her shoes, is forced to grab onto him to keep from falling, but he ignores it, stoops to pick up her umbrella. Even though the door is just a metal frame now with not so much as a jagged piece of glass anymore, he still pushes it open before pulling her through and out onto the sidewalk.
“Go on now, go. Get out of here, and don’t you fucking come back,” he says, walking backwards away from her towards his ruin of a shop front. Sansa lets loose a terrified sob. “But thanks a million for the death sentence, Red.”
Sandor glares after her a moment before he turns and reaches for the door, but then it dawns on him that there’s not even a goddamn door left. With a grunted snarl of frustration he smacks his open palm on the brick wall of the store next to his and walks through the ruined door, shards of glass a crunch beneath his feet. Fucking Lannisters, he thinks, pulse pounding in his ears as he stands in the middle of his ruined business. There is a photograph on the floor of him with his father and brother, the glass broken from a bullet and the subsequent fall from the place of honor it’s had for the past twenty years. Sandor stares down at it for several moments before he lifts a foot and smashes the heel of his boot down on top of it.

Fucking Lannisters. He watched his brother go down the dark rabbit hole of a world built on the foundation of organized crime, watched the drug running turn to drug addiction, watched the reckless behavior land him in a cop car on the way to the police station. He didn’t see the ambush that killed his brother and turned him into little more than a bloody smear of meat in the plastic backseat of a CPD cruiser. But he heard about it. He heard about it and then he signed up for the military the next day and got the fuck out of town.

Gregor was a tough son of a bitch, even with all the heroin coursing through his bloodstream, and yet Tywin and Cersei Lannister managed to track him down and take him out before the cops could wrangle anything incriminating out of him. Sandor wipes a hand across his bearded mouth and stares down at the glass-scattered floor, thinks of a swish of auburn on a dark, rainy street. She’s a fraction of what Gregor was, in menace and height and weight and monstrosity, and Sandor sent her packing with a pack of wild dogs in hot pursuit. Fucking Lannisters.

“You’re a fucking asshole,” he mutters as he stares down at the photo of himself, flanked between two men who let him down so utterly throughout his life. And now he is no better. “A fucking asshole and a hypocrite.”

Hypocrisy is something he cannot abide by.

He turns and steps through the empty space of the huge window frame, glances left and right before he spies her at the end of the block. It’s cold, he realizes as the rain is an instant beat down on his head and shoulders, clammy from the chill and humidity, the sort of damp winter night that digs right into a man’s bones and never leaves. He blows breath into his cupped hands before lifting them around his mouth.

“Hey!” he calls before jogging towards her.

She’s in a black coat and shoes, practically disappears into the ink of the dark sidewalk, all save for that hair of hers she was so eager to cut, and now he knows why. It’s a calling card of auburn, a flag of Come and get me, baby. Sandor breaks out into a run down the sidewalk.

“Hey, get back here, girl!”
She is a lightheaded sort of sway when she turns to see who it is, a stumble backwards that he’d call Saturday Night Drunk Girl if he didn’t already know better. When she sees him running towards her she screams, ragged and hoarse and weak, and he thinks Well, I’ve heard that plenty of times from Saturday night drunk girls.

“Hey now, come on back, I didn’t mean what I—” but he stops here, because he did mean it, when he yelled at her.

He meant to upset her and get her the fuck away from him, and he’ll not lie. But still he shrugs, an over exaggerated gesture he hopes she can see through the rain and the black and the cold.

“Get back here, it’s not safe out here.”

“No! No, get away from me!” she shouts, turning to run away from him.

Sandor slows to a stop, chest heaving from the sprint, and he’s about to tell her to go fuck herself, that he was just trying to help, when she trips on her ridiculous shoes and falls to her hands and knees.

“No!” she screams again, struggling to remove her shoes as she gets to her feet.

Her hair is soaked from the rain now just like his is, and it hangs in thick cords that she whips over her shoulder as she abandons her shoes and her umbrella.

“Oh my god, please don’t hurt me. Tell Joff to just leave me alone, tell him I’m sorry, just please don’t hurt me, please. Oh god, Jeyne,” she sobs, getting to her bare feet and staggering away from him, and then she cries out in sudden apparent pain.

Something in him cracks at the very sight of her so terrified, so taken down by her own fear. Cracks like plaster and outdated wood paneling, and maybe there’s a little remodeling going on here inside him. Sandor sighs, pushes the wet hair from his eyes and takes quick, long strides towards her.

“Hey! Red! I’m not- it’s me, the guy from the barber shop,” he says, unwilling to shout the name Clegane when his brother’s old cronies just shot up his livelihood.

She glances over her shoulder as she takes a halting, limping step away, but when he shouts Hey Red one more time she stops and turns towards him, as if that alone alerts her to his identity, but then again she’s too far away to see the scars.

He picks up his jog again, bending down to snatch her ridiculous shoes when he passes them by, though he abandons the useless umbrella because the two of them are already drenched.

“So,” he says, coming to a stop just in front of her, nothing between them but the cold and the rain and wretchedness. “Lannisters, huh.”

“Yes,” she says with a miserable nod.

“That’s tough fuckin’ luck, Red,” he says with a sigh. He’s never had a pet before, never so much as a goldfish, and yet here is, about to take home the most dangerous stray he’s ever come across. “Come back with me, it’s not safe out here,” he says, handing over her high heels.

She takes them with a tremble of her chin.

“I don’t know if I should put them on. I think I cut my feet on something,” she says, wet hair
falling in her face as she looks down over her shoulder at her kicked up foot, and when he looks
down too he sees blood.

“Can you walk without them?” he says, but when she lowers her foot to check the other she gasps
and grips his arm for balance. “I guess that’s a no,” he says, his head a swivel as he peers up and
down the street in the frigid rain.

He’s sure they’ll come back around a second time. They’re probably already swinging around the
block for a second look. His adrenaline hasn’t stopped pumping into his bloodstream, and standing
out here in the open is starting to make him feel like he’s going to throw up right on those fuck me
shoes of hers.

“If you help me I can make it,” she says, but when she takes another step her fingers dig into his
forearm and she lurches into him. “Just go slow.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, woman, do you want to get actually shot this time? My brother worked for
the Lannisters, all right? I know what they’re capable of,” and that’s when she stops fussing over
her shoes, lowers her foot to the ground and stares up at him. “So up you go and gone we get,” he
says, bending at the waist to push his shoulder against her belly and to wrap an arm around the
backs of her bare thighs.

She shrieks when he stands and hefts her up onto his shoulder, the purse strapped across her body
an uncomfortable wedge between her belly and his chest.

“Put me down,” she says as she whacks him on the back with her shoes.

Sandor ignores her, walking as quickly as he can with the extra weight of her. Headlights swing
into view at the end of the street, and he almost breaks into a jog. It passes them by, and even she
stills a moment as it cruises by. He lets lose a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“I said put me down.”

He bows his head as he climbs through the broken window, can see the gravel stuck to her bare
feet and the rain-spattered streaks of blood coming from both heels and the ball of her left foot.
Sandor resists the urge to swab them away.

“Oh yeah? You want me to put you down here?” he says, gesturing to the unholy mess of the floor.

He tries not to think of the years' worth of hard work that lies scattered among the glass.

“That’s not- I don’t- your brother works for them,” she says with a whimper and a wet cough
before the tears start again. “Your brother works for Joffrey and you’re going to take me to him
and I don’t- oh my god, they’re going to do to me what they did to Jeyne. Jeyne,” she cries, her
hand’s purchase on his back slipping so she sags against him again, a sad rag doll that sob against
his shirt.

“I never said I worked for them,” he says with no small amount of exasperation, but he tries for
gentle as he carries her to the back room where his coat and keys are, where there’s a door leading
to the alley where he parks his old truck. “My brother did, before they killed him. I laid low. I laid
so fucking low I went to a war torn country just to be on the safe side,” he says, grunting under the
weight of her as he leans over and grabs his keys and jacket from the storeroom counter.

“Well then what are you going to do with me,” she whispers. “I don’t- my only friend in the city is
dead now, I can’t- I don’t- where are you taking me?”
“I’m taking you to my place, against my better judgement,” he says, opening and stepping through and locking the back door to his largely defunct barber shop. “If we hang out here any longer we’re probably going to get shot at again and they won’t let us just run away next time. You’ve done the unimaginable and got the Lannisters set on you, but I can’t just leave you on the sidewalk, Red. I may be an asshole, but I’m not a complete dick.”

It’s not the usual way she’s used being escorted to a car, slung over someone’s shoulder like a bag of trash or dirty laundry, but nothing about tonight has been usual. Starting with the moment she stormed into a high end French restaurant and ending here where this man is unlocking and opening the passenger door to his truck. Scared of falling, Sansa wraps her arms around his neck when he squats down to dump her on the bench seat of his truck. The impromptu hold on him brings him into the truck with her, his wet hair pressed against her cheek until she remembers herself and lets go. He gives her a look and she hastily scoots back towards the middle of the seat, lifting her feet up before he shuts the door behind her.

She tucks her legs beneath her on the seat, and it’s too dark in here to see how badly her feet are cut up, so instead she chews a fingernail as she watches him – Mr. Clegane, I think it was – walk briskly around the front of the beat up old truck. He moves quickly for being such a big man with heavy strides, and in a heartbeat he’s unlocking the driver’s side door. Sansa keeps her eyes downcast as he opens the door and slides in, and she wonders how her entire life boiled down to this massive stranger with a chip on his shoulder so big she’s surprised he doesn’t have back problems.

What an unlikely savior.

What a horrific night.

Sansa puts her head down into her cupped hands and breaks down all over again as the very recent, very visceral memory slides back into focus. The popopopop and the muffled sounds of a struggle. The chilling beepbeepbeep of the phone call going dead. The ankle-twisting two block run from a phantom she didn’t see but only heard through her phone. This is all her doing. This is all her fault. The slap heard round the world, only to end with—oh, god, Jeyne.

“All right now, you’re all right,” he says, getting himself situated behind the wheel after he slams shut the door.

It’s huff and gruff and filled with a lack of patience that reminds her of her sister, and by god, does that fill her with another wave of guilt and remorse. She hasn’t seen Arya in over a year and has no idea where she is, and right now she wishes she hadn’t been so stupid, wishes she hadn’t been so selfish and stuck up and blind. If she had just gone with her, with all of them, she wouldn’t be sitting here soaking wet, on the run, mourning her only friend and sitting next to this angry man. She gazes at him, her- her what, her driver? Bodyguard? Her hero? Some hero, she thinks.

He looks like murder to her, but maybe it’s the deep dark heavy of the situation and that fact that her ears are still ringing from gunshots and broken glass. Maybe it’s the fact that he knows her world of jet-set and plead-the-fifth, her world of Daddy dies to save the family, yet still hunkers down in his little shop on a little street. Maybe it’s because he looks like the job but he knows better than to interview for it.

He might be scary, but he’s probably not stupid.

He is, however wet like a grizzly bear in a stream sitting here next to her, though despite how
drenched he is, he doesn’t seem to be bothered by the cold. Instantly with his arrival the windshield fogs up from him, and with a shiver Sansa wishes she had that strength of heat, some fire inside her to warm her fingers and her cut up toes. Instead she is like a sad little minnow compared to him. All terrified wriggle, trying to warm the water when really, shouldn’t it be working to warm her?

“How can we turn the heat on? I’m freezing,” she says, her teeth chattering even as she speaks.

“Broken,” he says, all that’s that as he leans over the steering wheel to gaze down the alley before he puts the truck in gear and drives.

The buildings are tall and crowded together, the street itself is narrow and winding like a serpent, and the inadequate light makes it gloomy and terrifying.

“So who’s this Jeyne chick you keep crying about?”

“My roommate. My best friend. She’s dead I think. They killed her because of me,” she whispers, burrowing inside the thin shell of her sodden trench coat, shivering as she pulls on the seatbelt to lock herself in.

It takes three tries before the thing clicks in, she's shaking that violently.

“I heard the gunshots over the phone, she’s- oh my god,” Sansa says, covering her mouth with her hand. “It’s all my fault.”

“Yeah, there’s a lot of that going around tonight,” he mutters under his breath, glancing left and right before pulling out of the alley onto the main road, wary as a panther slinking through the underbrush.

The comment stings. He spares her a quick look and then sighs.

“Look, Red, I’m sorry about your friend. It sucks, no matter how you cut it.”

“My name is Sansa,” she says as she turns away from him to gaze out the window.

It feels right, letting him know, considering he could be the last person she talks to tonight. Somewhere there is a car full of people trying to kill her. The fact that the city is so huge does little to assuage her sick feeling of fear. It just means there are that many more places to hide and lie in wait.

“Mm,” he says with a snort as the car comes to a red light, as if that guttural sound is his name and that’s as far as the introduction goes.

She glances at his profile before she shakes her head and looks out the window, is lost in scattered thought staring out at the tall buildings and the slither of the river under the bridge they’re on when she feels his hand on the back of her head, pushing her down.

“What are you doing,” she says incredulously, because Joffrey tried that kind of pervy crap with her more than a few times and who does this guy think he is?

She turns to look at him, and the action brings her cheekbone into his palm. The scars aren’t so bad here in the dark, but the severity of his expression is just as menacing, if not more so, and that’s why she jumps at the sudden intimacy of the touch to her face. He moves his hand to her shoulder and pushes her down towards the seat again.
“Get down,” he says through the clench of his teeth, jerking his head towards his driver side window. “There’re a few guys in that Jag over there and they’re looking over here. Be on the safe side, would you? I’m not in the mood to get my truck shot to shit on top of everything else.”

Sansa bites her lip and nods, unclicking her seatbelt as she lies on her side, her head brushing his jeans as she folds her arm beneath her head for a makeshift pillow. His hand rests briefly on her shoulder, but when the light changes he moves it to shift the truck into first gear. She feels bad now, for being the one to make assumptions about his character, feels embarrassed for the flight her thoughts took when he touched her.

“So what’s your name,” she whispers a few moments later, staring at the gear shift in front of her.

The first time he shifted it his elbow knocked her on the head, but with all other subsequent movements he is more careful around her, and she supposes she should be grateful for the second thought. *I should be grateful for everything right now,* she thinks, watching different shades of streetlight streak across his dashboard as they hurtle through the streets.

“Hmm? Oh,” he says, as if he has forgotten she is there, this drowned rat of a woman lying on his truck with her head nearly in his lap.

Sansa finds him utterly mystifying.

“Right. It’s Sandor. What was yours again? Sansa?”

“Yes,” she says. “Thank you, Sandor, for- for- oh god,” she says, closing her eyes and shaking her head, the side of her face a rub against the seat.

She doesn’t know what any of this is. Rescue? Kidnap? Escape? She doesn’t know what to call *any* of it, much less how to thank him for it.

“Just, thank you.”

Aside from the rumble and gutter of the engine, the cab is silent for several moments until Sandor clears his throat and shifts slightly in his seat, making her head bob.

“‘You’re welcome’ is a bit of a stretch, let’s be honest here, so let’s just settle for ‘Don’t mention it,’” he says with another sigh.

“Fine with me,” she mumbles, words small and folded in on themselves.

Sansa thinks that’s about all she deserves from him after she came crashing into his world in a hail of gunfire and broken glass, and she hunches into a scrunched up fetal position with her legs tucked up to her chest. The truck is still cold, but the fabric of the bench seat has started to capture and radiate her body heat, and the top of her head is warm from Sandor’s nearness. The vibrations of the road and the occasional rocking of the truck as he takes turns here and there lull her, and suddenly she feels the heavy hot weight of overwhelming exhaustion. She ran a half marathon once, and the fatigue she felt afterwards was nothing to what she feels now. She tucks her hair behind her ear and closes her eyes, and there is a feeling of safety here in this small little space, here where someone else has taken the wheel, literally and figuratively. A running engine and the drumbeats of rain, the breathing of a man and the occasional shift of him numb her up right down to her throbbing feet, and before she even realizes she’s dozing she drifts off into a sleep-sea of rain and tears.
The drive home fell silent shortly after introductions, which is just fine with him. He has more than a few things on his mind: ghosts of his past and the boogeymen of his future, thanks to the girl lying next to him, are just a couple of them. He’s starving, he’s cold and he’s wet and they all serve to make him extremely foul-tempered. But then he supposes the little waif here is likely in the same boat, so he tries to keep it in check. At least she’s stopped talking and crying; he doesn’t blame her for the latter, considering what all went on, but by god the sound of crying is like nails on a chalkboard to him. It’s not until he pulls up in front of the old brownstone he calls home that he realizes she isn’t lost in thought like he is but is actually asleep.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” he sighs, throwing the truck into park as he sits back and rests his elbow against the driver side window, stretching his right arm along the back of the seat so he doesn’t use her head as an armrest.

Sandor holds his head in his hand and stares out at the rain. It’s not even that late but suddenly he himself feels bone weary. A little disco nap sounds pretty good to him but instead he’s the one awake, wondering what to do with her and how to go about it while she gets her beauty sleep. *You could stay awake the rest of your life and it wouldn’t make a lick of difference,* he thinks, turning his head and gazing down at her. What the hell he’s gotten himself into, he isn’t sure. He’s got a pretty good idea though; Lannister influence spreads city-wide, and he has more than a few acquaintances who found themselves on the wrong end of the baseball bat after borrowing their money. But that’s just business. This shit here is personal. He frowns as he watches her sleep, at the pale curve of her cheek that glows like a little moon under the muted light from the streetlamp across the street.

“What in the hell did you do, hmm?” he says.

Another deep, world-weary sigh out of him as he closes his eyes and scrubs his face with his hand.

“All right, let’s get you out of here.”

There’s a few moments of him standing like an idiot on the sidewalk, glancing from his truck to the front door and back and forth again, but finally he settles on leaving her in the locked truck so he can open up his building. He props the auto-lock door open with a brick and jogs down the steps to go get his stray.

“Come on, we’re here,” he says as he opens the door, but she is dead to the world, limp like a noodle when he reaches in and plucks up her sleeve.

Her arm drops right back to the seat without so much as a whimper out of her.

“Well then, up you go, for the third goddamn time tonight,” he mutters, leaning in the car so he’s basically stretched out above her.

*Twice now I’ve had a pretty girl under me today,* he thinks as he digs his left arm under her shoulder and his right under her legs, *and not for any of the fun reasons.* Hauling her out of the car is as awkward as he knew it would be, and a muscle in his back twinges painfully as he grunts and twists the trunk of his body to pull her free. He kicks the door shut with a slam, thinking maybe that’ll surely wake her up, but no. Her head simply lolls against his chest from the movement, one arm sliding off her stomach to dangle down. Worried for how it might look to a passerby, a limp lifeless girl dressed to the nines draped in the arms of someone who looks like him, Sandor hefts her once and hustles inside.

She doesn’t wake until he stumbles on the landing of the first flight of stairs, and she comes to life like a startled bird, or like those YouTube videos he’s seen of cats falling into fish tanks. Her
dangling arm is a sudden upward launch and she slaps him in the chest so hard it stings. Sandor grunts from the impact and pauses with one foot on the next flight up, glaring at her. She blinks owlishly in the dim lighting.

“Sorry,” she whispers after shifting slightly in his arms, taking inventory of the situation with makeup smudged glances around the stairwell and finally up at him and his face.

It does not escape his notice that she’s looking in his eyes and not his scars.

“I forgot what happened for a minute and I thought you- I think I fell asleep,” she says, taking the offending hand off of him to rub at her eyes, and when she opens them she stares at his chest. "Oh my god, you're carrying me."

“Yeah, I am, and you owe me for it, considering the night I've had,” he says, peering around the back of her head to make sure he's on the right step before he climbs the rest of the way to his floor.

Suddenly he feels bad.

“Been one hell of a day for the both of us, huh,” he says, and that must be the truth because in the confusion of how to get her out of the truck and open the door, he forgot about his keys. “Damn.”

“What?”

“Well, you've got your feet all full of glass. I can’t exactly set you down to fish my keys out of my pocket, now can I?”

“Oh,” she says, as she looks around the narrow strip of hallway, takes in the cracked walls and the warped floorboards, as if a new set of keys will magically sprout up from the ugliness. “Which pocket?” she says, finally settling her gaze up at him.

Sandor raises his eyebrows. She lifts a shoulder in a tiny shrug, and when she bites her lip he cannot help but lower his gaze, just for a second. Even in the sallow, wan overhead lighting, he can see her blush when their eyes meet again.

“Left,” he says simply. Let her dig around in there. It’ll be the biggest thrill he’s had in months.

He has to hand it to her, though, how matter of fact she is about it, though graceful is overselling it. She wriggles and squirms as she fights to get her pinned arm past the press of their bodies, and there is a horrible sort of moment where her fingers brush his fly.

“*My left,*” he says quickly, and then her fingers are a wiggle and dig and poke into the pocket of his Levis.

He can feel her nails graze his thigh before she hooks her index in the keyring and pulls them out.

“I did it,” she breathes, the tiniest of smiles when she looks up at him.

He breathes out through his nose, shakes his head and walks down to his door at the end of the hall.

They fumble a bit in an awkward little dance of his bent knees and her leaning out of his arms to get the key in the lock, but soon they’re in and he’s suddenly hyperaware of the kind of place he lives in. There’s not much to look at, off white walls and a few second hand rugs here and there to break up the wooden floors, but at least it’s neat as a pin. He walks her past the kitchen and plops
her down on his squishy old sofa, and she presses her knees together and pulls the hem of her black dress as close to her knees as it will get. She is the brightest, shiniest thing in the entire apartment.

“Do you have a blanket or anything? Or maybe some um, like a shirt or some sweats I could borrow? I’m just, you know, I’m all wet. From the rain,” she says hastily, and *that* makes him laugh.

She almost scowls at him, face drawn inward in a pout, but then she huffs a small chuckle and shakes her head as she inspects her fingernails.

“Let me see what I can find,” he says, disappearing into the back bedroom.

Sandor peels off his wet t-shirt and the cotton thermal underneath, tosses both in the hamper as he crosses his room to the closet. He finds a pair of track pants and an old hooded sweatshirt that says *ARMY* on it and tosses them over his shoulder, and in a moment of genius he remembers her feet and gets a few things out of the bathroom.

“They won’t fit but they’ve got a drawstring,” he says when he tosses the clothes down to her, and her eyes widen when she looks up at him.

He’s confused until her gaze drops, and he follows the look to regard his own bare, tattooed chest. Self-conscious, he sweeps a hand down his own body; he’s no Arnold Schwarzenegger but he takes care of himself.

“I’ll go change in my room, give you some privacy. This is for your feet,” he says, setting down the tweezers, q-tips and rubbing alcohol on the little end table next to her.

“Thanks, Sandor,” she says for the second time.

*What’s her name again? Sansa, that’s right.*

“No sweat,” he says, turning away and closing his bedroom door.

He changes into dry jeans, a t-shirt and flannel shirt, paces his room like a caged big cat, rubs his wet hair with a hand towel until he can hear her move around.

“I was thirsty,” she says quickly when he comes out, turning around in the center of the room to regard him with a glass of water in her hand.

She’s all little girl lost, standing there in his clothing, the cuffs of his sweatshirt covering her entire hands save for the tips of her fingers. Littl girl lost and little girl sad, wide eyes ringed with black and her cheeks all smudged up. Her hair hangs thick and heavy from the rain, leaves dark stains of wet on her shoulders and chest. He shakes his head.

“So, you *really* want to cut off all that hair, huh,” he says, because what a shame, to see such exquisite hair fall away from her, like a lovely autumn tree losing all its leaves.

“I don’t know what else to do. I’m scared,” she says simply, taking a sip of water.

Suddenly he’s more than a little scared too, and they stare at each other when there’s a loud knock on the door, both of them momentarily frozen in place until she snaps to action.

“Please don’t answer it. Please, Sandor,” she whispers, crossing the room to come stand at his side.
He doesn’t say anything, stands there feeling the very real sensation of dread filling him like water does a well, and together they stare at his door as the knocking intensifies.

_Fucking Lannisters._
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

“Sandor, no,” she hisses, grabbing at the soft flannel of his sleeve as he takes a step towards his door. Why doesn’t he understand what happens when people answer the door, lately? He turns towards her, a finger at his mouth as he silently shushes her, the other hand staying her with a squeeze on her shoulder. She takes a desperate, pleading step towards him, pushing against his hand, his over-long pants a soft polyester cushion when she treads on the cuffs.

“Pipe down,” he murmurs, taking the finger from his mouth to point it at the baseball bat in the corner by his door. “It’s not like I’m defenseless, here.”

She took notice of most of the other things in his apartment as she dressed, gazing around the place as she peeled out of her dress and stood on freshly doctored feet to pull his enormous sweatshirt over her head and step into his track pants. It is the very definition of Spartan, but there are glimpses of personality, here and there. There is the long row of vinyl records along the wall under his window, a framed vintage photograph of the El train hanging over the sofa, a tiny barrel cactus on his table that made her snort with amusement, it is so fitting to his personality. But she never noticed the bat. Still, to go up against a gun with a baseball bat? There is literally an idiom about those kinds of odds, and she tells him so.

He rounds on her again, stepping into her space with his head bowed and hair in his eyes as he bends his gaze down to her, and his glare and the second bout of loud knocking make her adrenaline pump. “Listen, sweetheart, do you think this is the first time I’ve been in this kind of situation?”

“I’m thinking no,” she whispers.

“Well now you’re thinking right. I can swing a bat faster than that cocksucker can lift a gun, much less aim it at me,” he says, and then after a moment’s hesitation he grins, his scars a twist above the thick of his beard. “Or you. Now go in the bedroom and open the window and get onto the fire escape. If you hear shots, climb up to the next floor. I know the guy who lives there, he’s cool. They won’t be looking up for you, only down.”

Sansa nods and does as he says, hiking up the legs of his pants as she hurries to his room. If someone suddenly picked up the world and shook it like a snow globe, she wouldn’t be surprised, that is how surreal this entire night has turned out to be. Her fingers fumble as she twists the window latch, but before she’s even got it unlocked, she hears the sounds of conversation instead of struggle. Tucking her hair behind her ears, she frowns, turning towards his still open bedroom door, straining to hear.

“I told her already the damned check is probably sitting in her P.O. Box,” Sandor is saying. He sighs, loud enough to hear even from another room. “Thanks for the head’s up though. I’ll tell the old dragon lady next time I see her. And hey, Lothor, just so you know, when I drove home just
now there were some little shits causing trouble down the block. I’d keep your door locked tonight if I was you.”

The door closes and Sansa takes her hand off the window, breathing with relief at such an innocuous interruption. She hugs herself as she gazes around his bedroom, which is about as decorative as a barracks, though she’s never been in one. But like the rest of his apartment it’s meticulously kempt, save for a towel tossed carelessly at the foot of his bed. Even his shoes are lined up in a neat row in his open closet. *He said he went to a war torn country,* she remembers, and suddenly the barracks comparison makes a lot more sense.

“What are you doing just standing there? What the hell did I just tell you?” he says, and she whips around with wide eyes at the angry snag of his deep voice. He’s all black shadow and blacker glare, filling the doorway with the baseball bat by his side like he’s the villain in some horror movie. *And yet tonight he’s my good guy.* Good lord, he confuses her. One minute he’s carrying her in his arms and the next he’s snapping at her like she’s an idiot. How sharply his tides turn, and now she’s thinking of vengeful sea gods. The bat might as well be a trident.

“You told me to go upstairs *if* there were shots,” she points out, lowering her arms from around herself to stick them in the front pocket pouch of his sweatshirt. Sansa shrugs, aims for nonchalance though she feels like she’s walking on a tightrope with him here.

“Yeah, but I told you to go out on the fire escape and wait. If that’d been one of your little buddies and if he’d taken me down, he could have gotten in here before you put one leg over the windowsill. If you’re not even smart enough to follow a simple direction, I’m worried for your future,” he says with a look dripping with condescension, and that’s it for her.

“And here I thought you could swing a bat faster than a guy could aim a gun,” she snaps, fed up with the attitude and the bullshit. “Look, I’m sorry about everything, okay? I’m sorry for walking into your store, I’m sorry for the shooting, I’m sorry for—no, you know what, that is all I’m sorry for, buster,” she says, crossing the room as fast as she can on still-smarting feet, as hunter-quick and graceful as she can wearing pants better suited for a giant than for her. His eyes widen and he takes a step back, but she eats up that distance as well. “Because you came after me, after you basically told me to *fuck off,*” she says, jabbing her finger in the center of his chest.

“Hey, now, who do you think you—” he starts, but she cuts him off angrily with a shake of her head and another hard poke in the chest. Ridiculously, he looks down at her finger like it’s an alien.

“And I don’t know about you but that’s not exactly a nice thing to say to a girl after she’s been through- well, after she’s been through what I’ve been through. I don’t know where to go, I don’t know what to do. My best friend is dead. My boyfriend literally wants to kill me. I’m in some guy’s apartment and his clothes, I’m barefoot and I’m tired and I’m hungry and I’m cold, so for the time fucking being,” she says with a bitter bite to her voice that has rarely, if ever, been there, “if you could just stop being so mean to me, that would be great,” she says, and now she hates herself because she’s crying again. *I want my mom,* she thinks, not for the first time since her family walked away from her. Tonight though, the yearning for her mother’s embrace and the scent of her perfume is acute.

They stand there glaring at one another, Sansa angrily wiping away her tears, and she will be damned if she’s the one to back down, not after so many years with the Lannisters, not after Jeyne, not after everything. She’s grateful for his help and she’s said so. She’s minded her manners best as she can, so now it’s time he minded his, at least enough to stop belittling her like this. Finally Sandor sighs and raises the bat to rest it against his shoulder.

“You look like hell,” he says, and her jaw drops open. After everything she just said, now he’s
going to insult her looks?

He rolls his eyes. “Not like that. Jesus, you of all people should know not like that. You’ve got
makeup all over your face. You look filthy. Go wash up and I’ll fix us something to eat.”

Sansa looks at him with the type of scrutiny that usually gets her in trouble when she aims it at
Joffrey, but Sandor just looks back with an expression that is somehow both frank and impassive.
*Take it or leave it,* he seems to say. It’s likely the closest thing to an apology, to comfort and
empathy that she’s going to get out of him. He is still all height and muscle and sternness but there
is a soft quality to the grey of his eyes that makes her think of that flannel shirt he’s in. All rough
tough burly man, but not made solely for function; there are other things there. She sniffs and
nods. *I’ll take it.*

“Okay,” she sighs. “Okay, thank you.”

He was right; she *does* look like hell, like some half-drowned goth princess made all the paler by
the flicker of the LED light over his mirror. She scrubs her face with soap and with water so
deliciously hot she actually scoops some into her mouth after she rinses off, swallowing it for the
warmth and the soothe. Just that little bit of heat fortifies her, and instead of wishing for her
mother’s presence she wishes for some of her mother’s backbone, reminds herself she is Sansa
Stark and she walks with her chin up and her head held high.

There isn’t a hand towel, here where it should be, and she looks around the tiny bathroom with a
dripping face. She’s not about to dry off with the huge sheet towel hanging over the shower curtain
rod, knowing the place where men wrap their towels around their bodies. But she remembers
seeing one discarded on his bedspread. It’s damp but it will do, and when she pats her face dry she
can smell the spice of man. There is even more comfort, even more soothe to this scent. It’s
nothing like the stinging cloud of overpriced cologne she’s used to Joffrey walking around in. No,
it makes her think of decent men like Robb, like her father, and she takes one more deep inhale
before she returns it to the towel bar in the bathroom, spreading it out carefully, reverential with
memory and heartache.

There’s a glass of amber liquid waiting for her on the coffee table next to her Miu Miu shoes, and a
bowl of pasta that still has tendrils of steam curling up from it. She stares at the meal a moment
before looking up at where he’s sitting at the little table across the room from her.

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before looking up at where he’s sitting at the little table across the room from her.

He says by way of answer, gesturing with his fork towards the bowl as she sits down
in front of it. To be fed, to be set a place at a table, well. It’s certainly no French restaurant but right
now to her it’s the most luxurious meal she’s ever seen. “But if I was you I would drink that
whiskey first. It’ll warm you up and dull some of all that shit you’re going through right now.”

“Thank you,” she says, peering in the bowl of spaghetti, noting that he even put a few shakes of
parmesan on it. Finer than any freshly shaved parmigiano-reggiano, and it makes her smile when
she lifts her gaze to him. “This looks amazing.”

“Yeah, real gourmet for little Miss Fancy Pants, I bet,” he says with a huff as he looks at his food
while shoveling more pasta onto his fork. He rolls his eyes when he glances her way again. “Oh
for fuck’s sake, you’re looking at me like I saved a puppy from a fire instead of nuked some
leftovers in a microwave. Go on, drink up before I drink it for you,” he says with a shake of his
head.

Bourbon’s not her favorite but she’s had her fair share of it, trying to impress her boyfriend and the
woman she once hoped would be her mother in law, so she takes it without complaint and eyes him
over the rim of her glass before she takes a drink. Even with the junkyard dog hunch of his
shoulders and the bow of his head, the fall of hair in his eyes and the black of so thick a beard, she can see the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth, the curve of a smile before it disappears with another shovel of food. *I see you, buster,* she thinks, dropping her gaze. *I see you, and you sure can bark but I bet you won’t bite.* Sansa closes her eyes and downs the finger of whiskey in one swallow.

He’s impressed she doesn’t sputter when she knocks back the full shot he gave her, but he’s not surprised that she doesn’t ask for another drink, instead chases the whiskey with a long slug of water. He watches her throat work from behind a sheaf of his hair before returning his attention to his food. They eat together in silence save for the clink of forks against cheap porcelain and his occasional swig from a bottle of IPA, and when she’s finished she gets up to carry her dishes into the kitchen.

She looks absolutely ridiculous in his clothes, though a part of him thinks of soft words like rumpled, thinks of mellow things like coffee on a cold winter morning. *No,* he thinks firmly, *it’s ridiculous, she looks like a little kid,* because despite her long legs – soft pale skin, the flex of her hamstrings under his arm as he carried her through the shop; Sandor closes his eyes briefly – the cuffs of his pants completely cover her feet. The extra padding doesn’t seem to do much good, either, because she still winces with every other step even though she doesn’t limp anymore.

“Come here a minute, Red,” he says when she comes light-stepping back into the living room. Still chewing, he pushes his bowl to the center of the table and sits up straight, waving her over. She’s slow blink gaze as she tips her head to the side and regards him with suspicious curiosity. “C’mon. Lemme see those feet of yours. You’re walking like you’re trying to be sneaky.”

“Maybe I am,” she says with an arch of her brow, but still she comes, standing a few steps away from his cocked out knee. “Where am I supposed to sit, the floor?” she says, and he rolls his eyes.

“My lap,” he says dryly, and he grins when her jaw drops open. “I’d offer you another chair but this is the first time I’ve ever had a reason to own more than one.”

“I am not sitting on your- oh,” she says with an indignant huff when he can’t help but chuckle at the look on her face. She sniffs, folds her arms across her chest. “Oh, I see, you’re teasing me. Well, fine then, forget it,” she says, walking back to the sofa, digging under his sweatshirt and giving his pants an upward wrench when they sag down her hips and ass.

“Suit yourself,” he says with a shrug and he drains his beer before taking his own dishes to the kitchen, the fatigued part of him fully prepared to just set them on the counter and walk away. But then he sees her bowl, lowball glass and fork all neatly stacked and soaking in sudsy water in the sink. Tidy and considerate, mannerly and prim even after such a shit night. He sets his own dishes next to hers and sighs, rips off a paper towel before he heads back to the living room.

“All right, come on, let me see them,” he says, flipping on another lamp for the light, and he crosses the room to the couch.

She is scrolling through her phone when he walks in, and she looks up at him with an elevator gaze, up and down and up again as if sizing him up for truth. Sandor lifts his eyebrows as he walks over to her, straddles her legs where they stretch out so she can rest her feet on the coffee table. He gazes unblinking down at her. She snorts and looks back at her phone, calling his bluff.
"Go on, try me," he thinks, though what he says is "Go on, Red, scoot," as he sinks down in a slow sit on the coffee table to give her time to pull her feet out from under him. She does so, lightning quick as she drops her phone in her lap and lifts her eyes to his. He didn’t realize just how startling blue they were until now, another color of her to get lost in if he lets himself. “They still hurting you?”

“Mhmm,” she says, her knees tucked up to her chest, her peach-pink pedicure a perfect match to the polish on her fingernails.

He nods, twisting his torso to grab the tweezers where she left them near her shoes. Sandor waves her over and tentatively she slides a foot towards him. It is cold but dry when he’s got it in his hand, as pale and as soft as the backs of her legs, and he squints as he peers at the ball of her foot.

“If they still hurt then there’s still something stuck in ‘em,” he says quietly, matter-of-factly as he gently bends her toes back so he can better see the whole span of her sole. He angles her foot to take advantage of the extra light, rests his elbows on his knees as he looks for the offending sliver or shard, and then he Ahs.

"Did you find something? I swore I got them all out," she says, tipping her head as she watches him. He flicks his gaze up at her.

"Just needed another pair of eyes, I guess."

“Tell me about it,” she says with a roll of her eyes and a waving gesture of her hand that suggests she needs another one for more than just a few splinters. That glimpse of humor makes him huff a laugh, and then it’s like a crack of lightning, when they catch each other smiling at each other. She picks up her phone again while Sandor drops his attention back to his task.

She hisses through her teeth when he digs the tweezers in, wriggles her foot reflexively to try and escape the pain, her leg a sudden flex of muscle. He squeezes the top of her foot where he's got her so she doesn't wrench free or kick him in the head, and presses his thumb into the arch to hold her steady. Sandor sets the small sliver of glass on the table, sweeps his thumb across the bottom of her foot, wiping away the bead of blood until the red smears to pink and finally to nothing.

"So, you don't got any family at all in town?" he says, speaking mostly to her foot as he makes another light pass of his thumb from her heel into the dip of her arch, across the width of the ball.

When he’s convinced there’s nothing else he soaks a paper towel with the rubbing alcohol and swabs the entirety of her sole with it, making her suck in another breath at the coldness of it.

"Here, gimme the other one now," he murmurs, sitting up as she switches feet. “Family?” he reminds her.

"No," she says quietly, dropping her phone on the sofa beside her with a sigh. "They um, they left after my dad died."

"Then why don't you go to them? It's even better they're out of town. Get as far from the Lannisters as you can," he says, holding firm to her other foot as he digs out something black and hard. A splinter of rain-blackened wood, but it’s better than rusted metal.

He hunches closer to her foot, jerks his head to the side to get the hair out of his eyes, fully aware that his scars are in plain sight now, thanks to the extra light. Her eyes are on him, he can tell. It nearly has a weight to it, the steady of that gaze, blue like peacock feathers and just as pretty. He wonders what feathers weigh, when they’re laid on the skin.
"Because I don't know where they are," she says, and it's sad enough that he pauses from his inspection and looks up at her with a frown. *Here it comes,* he thinks, *more tragedy.* "They're um, they're with Witness Protection. I haven't seen them in over a year."

"Witness Protection, Jesus," he says as he sweeps his thumb across her other arch, trying to find more nasty little stowaways, but her expression remains passive and pain free as she fiddles with the hem of his sweatshirt. "That's pretty intense. What'd they do, and why didn't you go with them?"

"I don't want to tell you," she whispers, glancing up at him from her fidget. "You'll hate me even more if I tell you."

Sandor rolls his eyes at her. "I don't hate you. But you got admit, you're kind of a disaster, barging into people's lives the way you do. You can't hate a hurricane. It can’t help itself. But damn," he says, letting go of her foot when he realizes he's been stroking the arch of it with his thumb this entire time. Sandor looks up. "You sure can hate what it brings, can’t you?"

To her credit she doesn’t burst into tears when he sums her up best as he can, and she lifts her eyes to the ceiling and heaves a sigh. He repeats the process with the rubbing alcohol, waiting to see if she’ll tell him anything about her family, wondering if he even deserves the information. Half of him thinks he damn well does, considering what’s happened to him tonight. He has one hell of an interesting phone call to make to his insurance company tomorrow. But then the other part of him thinks everyone’s entitled to the keep the deep dark of their secrets just that; whispering little hauntings that hang in the shadows of a man’s heart, or in this case, a woman’s. Clearly she agrees with him, and she speaks her mind once he lets go of her foot and she tucks both legs under her.

“Tell you what. You tell me what happened to you,” she says, nodding to his face, and she’s only the slightest flicker of a wince when he bristles at that, “and I’ll tell you what happened to me,” she says as she looks back at him without so much as a waver. Sandor shakes his head in disbelief at her as he stands up, as much to shake her off as to shake off the memory. The steam and the smell and the screaming. The fucking nerve of this chick.

“You know what, Red, you got yourself a deal,” he says, wadding up the paper towel in one hand as he stands and wipes the other on the seat of his jeans. “And maybe the day we sit down and share our sorry ass histories, you can go ice skating in hell afterwards,” he says, giving her a final glance before going to the kitchen for another beer, and she has the audacity to watch him walk away as if she gives a shit.

Sansa sits tailor style on the floor of his living room in front of his record collection, chewing her lower lip as she plans out her tomorrow and listens to Solomon Burke with the album cover in her lap. She taps her fingers on the flat of it as she bobs her head side to side to the beat, trying to ignore the sounds of a naked man washing himself off in the shower. But his words travel around in her head like the 45 that’s playing and it only makes him that much more difficult to tune out.

*If you’re so clever, little smart ass, then you sit here and come up with a game plan while I take a shower,* he said, striding from his bedroom with one of his pillows and an extra blanket from his own bed. He tossed them on the coffee table and headed into the kitchen only to return a minute later with a glass of whiskey in one hand while he unbuttoned his flannel with the other. That time at least she kept her eyes on his as he crossed the living room and disappeared into the small cave of his bedroom.

“Goddammit,” she can hear through the thin walls, right after a hollow thud that must be a bar of
soap or a bottle of shampoo hitting the bottom of the tub.

Sansa turns up the music and squeezes her eyes shut as she gets to her feet. The summer-warm honeybee buzz of liquor has long since worn off, and because he told her to think up her own game plan and because she’s basically cut lose in this guy’s apartment, Sansa thinks To hell with it and heads for his kitchen. She finds the bottle of Elijah Craig on the counter, and it takes just a second of her idly slapping her thigh with the empty album cover before she shrugs and reaches up for one of the mismatched glasses on the middle shelf and pours herself another shot of whiskey. Step one, liquid courage.

Slow-sipping hard liquor makes her shudder and shake her head like a wet dog so she simply tips back half of it and swallows it like she did before. She needs bold right now, and the melancholy sway of music and the rain and the bone-rattle events that have happened start weaving together to make a different sort of backbone than the one she wished for before. A Sansa spine, all her own and made up of experience instead of some pining daydream to be exactly like someone else. Step two, self-confidence.

The return of those buzzy bees and the slight sea-storm pitch they make as she walks to his window make her hum as she gazes down into the black of a deserted street, the rain a meandering slide of tributary tears on the window pane. Sansa traces one trail from the top of the window to the bottom, rests her forehead against the cold glass as she closes her eyes and sings along to the lyrics she knows. Rhythm and blues and bourbon and rain tell her that her plan’s as good as any. Sansa nods against the window. Step three, approval, she thinks with the sudden humid, blooming smell of masculine soap, that spice she found in his towel.

“Making ourselves right at home, I see,” he says from behind her, deep-voice-boom and billy goat gruff.

If he means to sneak up on her he is going to be disappointed, because she’s already inhaling him, and the thought of the expression on his face makes her smile as she turns around to regard him. True enough he’s standing there with a surprised sort of look on his face to see her with the smug sliding through her, here with his whiskey and his music in her hands.

“You told me to come up with a game plan. These helped,” she says, lifting her hands halfway up the length of her body.

“All right then, let’s hear it,” he says, busying himself with snapping open the blanket and spreading it out over the couch. The attention to comfort on her behalf makes her smile, makes her regard him.

His hair is damp all over again from the shower, a nonstop fall across half his face, and that’s when she sees it’s grown out only on the top and the scarred side of him, but is trimmed close to the right side of his head. He’s in track pants that more or less match hers and a white, ribbed undershirt that usually makes her think of trailer trash or gym rats, but right now just seems crisp and clean on him. The contrast of tattoos helps, she muses, lifting her glass to press it against her cheek. He stops punching and fluffing the pillow, straightens to frown at her and her silence, and that’s when she realizes she’s staring at him again, and that’s when she covers her tracks by knocking back the rest of her whiskey.

“Okay, well, tomorrow I’m going to take a cab right out of your life and to a Nordstrom, and I’m going to buy myself some new clothes. I should have enough cash to not use any credit cards. They leave a trail,” she says with a sage nod, having reluctantly realized it when she was busy piecing together new wardrobes with her imagination.
“And your hair?” he asks quietly, sitting down heavily in the middle of the sofa, leaning back to kick his legs up on the coffee table. He’s barefoot for the first time since she’s met him, and there’s something so odd about this man named Sandor, who to her is boots and leather and cynicism, lounging here as bare as she is now. “You wanted me to cut it, remember.”

“How could I forget,” she says with a sigh, setting the album cover on top of the row of his records so she can lift a lock of her own hair and glance at it. “I’ll get it done. Dye it or something,” she says. What is that look on his face, she wonders with a frown. Relief?

“And then what? Live life on the streets? Take a cab out of the state? Not sure you have enough cash for that.”

“I’m going to take a bus,” she says, trying for confidence though the thought of riding a Greyhound across the country is less than appealing.

Sandor laughs, slapping his thigh with a hand. “I can see it now,” he says, moving his hand through the air like he’s revealing a marquis headline. “Little Miss Nordstrom, squashed next to some sweating pervert who keeps leering down her shirt,” he says, laughing again at her scowl.

“All right now, you’ve had your fun,” she says, setting her empty glass on the corner of his coffee table. Sansa comes to stand next to his long legs where they stretch out on the coffee table, though she is not about to straddle them the way he did hers. “You’re in my bed, Sandor, and I have a big day tomorrow,” she murmurs.

Sandor sighs, slouches back against the cushions as he folds his arms behind his head and looks up at her. “I know, that’s why your bed’s in there,” he says, tipping his head back and to his right towards his open bedroom door. “Sleep tight, Red, and don’t go rummaging through my nightstand like you did the rest of my place.” He grins. “Might not like what you find in there.”

“I’ll have you know the records are in plain view, and so was the whiskey,” she says loftily, fighting the flush and blush from his words and from her lingering honey-buzz. She picks up her phone and the water glass she did rummage for earlier.

She makes it to his bedroom door before she stops herself and turns around to look at him. His back is to her as he carefully removes the 45 from the record player and slides it gingerly back into its sleeve. For the first time she wonders what he’s like at his job, those big hands of his holding little scissors, snipping away. Sansa runs a hand across the back of her neck, gives herself goosebumps at the thought of his hands in her hair.

“Hey, Sandor,” she says.

“Hmm?” he says over his shoulder, face a quarter turn her way. He offers her the good side of his face, and something about that makes her sad. They’re not so bad, not really, she thinks, even though they are. She half-wishes he would have taken her up on it earlier and just told her where they came from. But then you’d have to ante up too, she reminds herself. “What’s up?” he asks.

“Oh, I just, um. Thank you, and good night,” she says.

“Mm,” he says, switching off his stereo as he turns to head back to his couch. He glances up at her, waves her away. “Go on, get some sleep.”

And she does, surprising herself at how easily it is to comfortably curl up in the big expanse of his bed. There’s that spice of him again, even here on the cool side of his pillow, and she realizes it’s the first time she’ll ever sleep the whole night through in a man’s bed. Joffrey always insisted she
leave and go back home before getting cozy with him; she is more familiar with 2am cab rides home, still sore between her legs and bleary from exhaustion and what she always thought was love making. She wonders what it must really be like, to be loved, because she knows now that wasn’t it. There’s another blush before she burrows her head under the sheet and comforter, and then she drifts off, mercifully cut loose from dreams, and it is soft black and nothingness, a long stretch of endless deep.

“Hey, Red, wake up,” someone breathes in her ear, hours later or maybe a few minutes, and it takes her several seconds to place the voice, the nickname, the smell and the feel of this bed that isn’t hers, the warm weight of this hand on her shoulder.

“Sandor? What’s going on?” she asks, groggy from the taste of booze still slathered on her tongue, mingling now with the taste of interrupted sleep, and she wonders if he wants his bed back. The touch leaves the second she moves to sit up. Sansa flips the hair out of her eyes, can barely make out the shape of him squatting beside her, the streetlight bleeding in through his bedroom window is so faint.

“We had a little visitor just now. The shit you can sleep through, I swear to Christ,” he mutters, and now she wonders where that baseball bat of his went to. “So it’s time to go up, like I told you before,” he whispers as he switches on the little bedside lamp and wrenches open his nightstand drawer.

Sansa gasps. Step four, panic.

“Oh my god, what’s- is that—” and before she can help herself, she reaches out and wipes her fingers across the smatter of color across his cheek and down into his beard. She stares down at her fingertips, how they’ve come away—

“It’s not mine, don’t worry,” he says with a terrifying sort of grin that doesn’t reach his eyes. He stands to his full height now that he’s pulled a handgun out of the drawer and immediately unlocks the window, pushing it up with his free hand. Sandor uses the back of his hand to wipe away more of the blood on his face. “Now I’m red like you,” he says as he stares at down it, and then he looks at her. “Though nowhere near as pretty.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Picset

Lothor and Mya, because what the hell, right?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Once he’s outside on the wet fire escape, Sandor spits out the taste of another man’s blood over the railing, taking a moment to try and calm the railroad clang and clatter of his adrenaline. He almost wishes it were raining harder than a drizzle now, anything to drown out the noise in his head. It’s been a long time since he’s killed someone and the last time he did it there was manic wartime logic throbbing between his temples. Sandor forgot how thin a line it is to take a life, how easy a line it is to cross. Maybe I just knocked him out, he thinks, knowing that that possibility is highly unlikely given how loud the crack of the bat was. Still, every dog has his day, but if the guy sprawled out in his apartment is the dog or if he is in this scenario, Sandor isn’t sure.

But at least that fucker barely even crossed the threshold after picking his lock. Sandor was on him so fast that his earlier words to Red were true; the goon barely even got to raise his gun. There is an odd feeling inside him, the oil and water of horror and thrill, the shakeup of Fuck yeah, I’ve still got it and Christ no, I still have it.

“Oh my god, it’s so slippery out here,” she says, and he turns to see her put her bare foot to the slatted metal, and sure enough, those corn silk toes go sliding before she lowers her heel.

“Careful, now. I didn’t knock a guy’s teeth out just for you to slip and fall over the railing.” He tucks the gun in the waist of his pants at the low of his back, takes her by the elbow when she straddles the window and swings her other leg over.

“Very funny,” she says as she accepts his help, one hand to his shoulder as he steadies her. “You didn’t really—” she says, stopping herself as she squints up at him in the watery lamplight from across the street.

“Listen, honey, he was here to do you grievous harm,” he snaps. “I did what I had to do,” and he watches her expression closely to see what she makes of it. She sniffs and looks away and Sandor is satisfied.

“Wait, I left my—” she says, glancing at the window as he reaches past her to close it.

“You don’t want to go back in there, all right? I made a mess and we need to get gone,” he says as he lets go of her to yank down the ladder leading up to Lothor’s. The rattle of metal on metal as it clanks down is like machinegun fire and it makes her wince, or maybe his words do.

“After you,” he says, gesturing to the ladder. She reaches for the thin railing as she takes the first step, and Sandor is right after her, corralling her with the blockade of his body.

“Shouldn’t we at least call the police?” she asks as she ascends, dainty step by dainty step. He
watches the grace of her even on such a precarious wet surface, supermodel on a runway, lithe cat on some sort of skeletal skywalk.

“You know as well as I do that most of the cops are on Lannister payroll,” he says. “I’m not about to lead a lamb to slaughter,” and instantly he regrets the choice of words, not only because of how they sound when spoken out loud but because of the way her knees buckle and her hands slip on the wet railing. So much for grace.

Sandor braces himself, flexing his leg muscles and digging deep through his heels when she sags back against him, and he holds her upright so she doesn’t topple them both, or worse, pitch sideways over the edge to the sidewalk three stories down. He wraps one arm around her to hold her steady and keeps his free hand firmly gripped around the handrail.

“Hey, come on now, it’ll be okay. I didn’t mean—”

“No, no, it’s true,” she says, voice a weary crack, and with his arm firmly around her middle he can feel how violently she’s shaking. “They killed Jeyne and just- they just- oh my god, this is really happening.”

“You’re his girlfriend, Red. You can’t tell me you didn’t know this sort of shit went on,” he says.

“Some part of me did, yes,” she says after a long time, long enough that his hand on the wet railing is white-knuckle numb now. “I thought he loved me, though. I thought he’d always protect me, not- not this,” she whispers, shaking her head. “At least I hoped so.”

“Waste of hope when it comes to the Lannisters,” Sandor says simply.

They stand there a few moments longer until she gives a great, heaving sigh, face tipped up to the sky as if fortitude and gumption fall with the rain and she would catch it on her tongue. He feels her body pull itself up and away from him. He is about to ask if she’s all right, but wordlessly she climbs the rest of the flight up, and he takes that for a yes.

Sandor chafes his palms together briskly once they’re on Lothor’s landing while she Brrrs behind him with her hands stuffed in his sweatshirt pocket, and he wonders how late it is when he squats down and raps his knuckles on the window.

Last he checked the time was when the rat-like rustle and chinkle of sound at his deadbolt woke him up around midnight. Despite the late hour it’s more than likely that his upstairs neighbors are still awake. Lothor is a second shift EMT, but it’s his bartender girlfriend Mya who pushes aside the curtains with a flashlight in one hand and a can of mace in the other. Sandor swears and shields his eyes from the high beam she aims at his face while Red steps into him, nervously clutching the span of undershirt between his shoulder blades.

“Put that damned light down,” he shouts as loud as he dares out here, shielding his eyes with his hand. “It’s just me. Can we come in? It’s on the urgent side.” Understatement of the year, there.

Mya sighs with visible relief even while glaring at him. She disappears from view a moment before there is a sudden bloom of light that warms up the room they call an office even though neither of them work desk jobs. Mya twists the latch and pushes open the window, sticking her head out into the clammy damp midnight air.

“What the good goddamn are you doing out here so late? I thought you were those dirt bags Lothor said you saw earlier.” Her eyes are clever and bright and he waits for it, counts One, two, three in his head before her gaze flicks to the girl hovering in the misty drizzle behind him. “Who’s this,
“No, she’s—” What is she? Sandor can’t say she’s his stray pet, his own personal disaster who hums to soul and steals whiskey, who looks him in the eye and pokes her finger into his chest like she could take him in a street fight. “This is Sansa,” he says after a hasty pause.

“How, so you do remember my name,” she snaps from behind him, letting go of his shirt as Mya steps aside and lets him crawl into the room.

“Dynamite doesn’t have a name,” he gruffs as he turns towards her, helping her through the window when his track pants get her hung up on the window sill. With the flick of his wrist, he frees the clothing from the snag of splintered wood, sets her free like a vixen from a snare. “Sure does have a color, though.”

“Sansa. Sansa,” Mya muses in the weirdest introduction Sandor’s ever heard, and she’s still murmuring it under her breath as she steps around them to close the window and yank the drapes back into place. “Where have I heard that name before? Sansa,” she repeats, drawing out the syllables like taffy.

“This is Mya,” Sandor says with a roll of his eyes as his neighbor stands there, struggling with something that’s clearly on the tip of her tongue.

He and Red – Sansa, whatever – stand side by side like strange and uncomfortable chess pieces dressed in pajamas, waiting for their hostess to acknowledge them, or at least ask why the hell they crawled through her window just now. Bartenders, Sandor supposes, must see a lot of weird shit for this to pass under her radar.

Finally: “Ha! Sansa Stark,” she says, snapping her fingers with a bright smile as she points to her and pulls a phone out of the pocket of her hoodie. “Now I remember. Though TMZ dubbed you Sansa O’Snap,” she says with a laugh and a shake of her head. “I just watched it like twenty minutes ago.”

She takes a moment, thumbs tapping on her screen, and then she laughs again. “You smacked the hell out of that little shit,” Mya says as her phone illuminates her Cheshire cat grin. Something starts niggling and gnawing on the edges of Sandor’s memory. “Here, look,” she says, turning her phone so he can see. It’s a video he’s seen before, just once earlier that night, and he knows what’s going to happen before it plays out. A long haired auburn woman in a snug black dress will storm into a restaurant, yell at some guy before she lands a blow on his cheek that is so loud the phone’s speaker will pick it up over the din of restaurant noise. That dress is draped over my bathroom door right now.

Sandor rounds on her and she looks away in anticipation of his disbelieving stare. “That was you?” he asks. He’d wonder what the aftermath of that altercation looked like if he hadn’t been living it all damn night. “And that was Joffrey Lannister?”

She nods, looks at the floor as she slowly wraps her arms around herself in a sad, lonely, little hug. “Yes,” she whispers, finally lifting her gaze to his, slow like it weighs more than debt, currency of silver converted to sorrow. Before he can help himself, Sandor shakes his head in sympathy.

Gregor once had to break a guy’s kneecaps simply for refusing to let a shitfaced Joffrey into his bar. He embarrassed him in front of the other customers, his brother had told their father with a shrug as he opened the shop’s register to take a fifty. Two busted knees to save face because what, fifty patrons saw? Sandor takes Mya’s phone and scrolls past the ‘Boom SLAP’ blurb below the video to see how many hits it’s gotten. Nearly half a million and it was uploaded less than 8 hours
ago. He wonders if 35 is old enough for a heart attack.

“Fuck,” he says.

He isn’t an affectionate man but she’s pitiful and alone when she starts to breathe quick and shallow, so he lifts his arm towards her. He’s almost surprised when she steps into the circle of his arm and rests her head against him, her hand curled up and resting on the center of his chest. Tentatively, haltingly, he lowers his arm around her, letting the palm of his hand drape over the cap of her shoulder, fairly certain he’s doing this right.

“I hate to break it to you, Red, but we are *screwed.*”

“I know,” she whispers against his chest. He feels the slightest tilt of her face against the ribbing of his undershirt, and finally a huff and warbling sort of weak laugh. “But hey, dynamite goes boom, right?”

“In this case,” Mya says dryly, deftly taking her phone from Sandor’s free hand before heading out of the office, presumably to go get Lothor. “I think it goes *slap.*”

We, Sansa thinks with her cheek pressed against Sandor, and that right there is as bizarre a sensation and moment and situation as the rest of them. She stares at the loose fist of her hand resting light as a petal against the plane of his chest. *He said we,* and suddenly there is more shaky-legged comfort in that two-letter word than there is in a warm bed or a shot of whiskey, in the idea of a Greyhound bus ticket and a new set of clothes. She tucks that word in the pocket of her soul, right there next to that Sansa backbone she built for herself, as if she is a magpie pulling all the bright things from this cold, dark world that will guide her through this. *We.*

The floor lamp giving off melted butter light is behind him and so she’s still shrouded in half-dark, her world limited to the wall of him and the drapes to her left. His arm weighs less than she’d figure, dense as it is with muscle, but then she has a feeling that he’s maybe he’s as unsure as she is in this, this, *whatever* this is. Embrace is too rom-com. Hug is too claustrophobic. This is more of a lean. Two people taking a tiny break, a sliver-slice of a rest on a night that seems determined to never end. For some reason, though, she’s glad it’s him right here. He’s an asshole and he’s scary and he’s crass but she can’t shake the suspicion that he’s honest down to the very marrow in his bones, and she supposes that’s better than sugar-water platitudes. She wonders when it was, the last time she stood next to an honest man, and that makes her think of her father, and that makes her speak just to drown out the noise of memory.

“Mya seems nice,” she says, forcing her train of thought to switch tracks as she thinks of a soft-black pixie cut and finger-snap bright eyes. She unfurls her fingers, rests her palm flat on his chest before giving him the gentlest of pushes as she lifts her head and reels herself in from him to give him some space, to let him know he can run if he wants to.

*Please don’t want to. You’re all I have,* and it’s only a little desperate, just the faintest tinge of clinging to flotsam after a shipwreck.

“Yeah, she’s all right,” Sandor says, his words a gust against the crown of her head, and when she looks up at him she sees he’s already gazing down at her. They frown at each other, a sort of funhouse mirror of reflected expression. “What, what’s wrong?” he asks, his arm lifting off of her, leaving a snake line of cool across her shoulders where the bare skin warmth of him was.

*Everything,* she wants to say, and the *parumpapumpum* of his heartbeat beneath her ear a moment
ago seemed to agree with her.

“You’ve still got um, you know, on your uh, right there,” she says, gesturing to her own face before lifting her hand to wipe clean his own, but it stops halfway there, a dragonfly in a web, because it’s a strangely intimate impulse on her part, even though she already did it once before. *I was half asleep though,* she reasons.

“Oh, yeah, right,” he says, turning away from her as he rubs the length of his forearm across his face and mouth. It comes away with tiny streaks of red, thin and tremulous like traces of rain on a windowpane. Sansa lowers her hand.

*What did he do down there and who did he do it to,* she wonders, sort of wishing they were still in that little lean of theirs, that she didn’t have to hold herself up all alone. She feels divided into a guilty question and a dark reply: *If someone is hurt downstairs, is it because of me,* one part of her asks, all fidget-fingered and worried. *That person is hurt because they wanted to hurt me,* comes the hair-tossing, flint-eyed reply.

“You guys don’t have to stay in there, you know that, right? Lothor’s awake and everything,” Mya says from the doorway.

“I was never asleep,” Sansa hears, and it’s the sleepy, scruffy voice of a man. “I was just resting my eyes.”

“The old man was snoring. We were finishing up a horror movie marathon,” Mya says with a good natured roll of her eyes as she steps out of the doorway and ushers them into the main room of their apartment.

“He can fall asleep to horror movies?” Sansa says, glancing at Sandor as he nudges her through the door in front of him.

“You fell asleep in my truck right after your own horror flick,” he whispers. “Or did you forget?”

It seems she forgot, but she doesn’t tell *him* that.

“We’ve seen them about a hundred times, it’s just for good old fun now,” their hostess says with a wave of her hand.

This apartment has just one more room than Sandor’s but the differences go far beyond the simple matter of square footage. It’s comfortably, cheerfully disordered and lived-in here, every surface practically drenched in personality. There are scribbled-on sheets of paper shoved between books on the built in shelves, eagle feathers and various pieces of geodes and shards of mica on the mantle of their bricked in fireplace. There are slaphappy works of frenetic, spirited artwork hanging on the walls and a huge black and white Jolly Roger rug tying their mismatched living room furniture together. The real pièce de résistance, however, is the huge burlesque style photograph of Mya, framed and hung behind their dining table. She is dressed as Rosie the Riveter against a backdrop of yellow silk, complete with bandana and flexed forearm, except in this homage she is completely topless.

“Jesus,” Sansa hears Sandor mutter from behind her, and she whips around in time to see him looking at it with a sort of scandalized look on his face. Before she can help herself, she lets slip a high, foolish giggle, no better than a school girl in sex-ed class. He glares down at her.

“My eyes are over here, guys,” Mya says, and together Sansa and Sandor turn on their heels to literally put the photograph behind them.
Sansa blushes when she sees the amused looks on both Mya’s and Lother’s faces, there on the sofa where she’s sitting on the armrest with her feet in his lap. So much for first impressions, she thinks, feeling like a moron. Her first impression of Lother, on the other hand is a good one; he seems tired and he seems happy, with a lazy yawn and the salt and pepper three day scruff on his chin, with the way he idly runs his fingers up Mya’s leg to the back of her knee and down to her Achilles. He seems older than Sandor, maybe by ten years or so, but far more relaxed and more comfortable in his own skin, but then right there she’s figured out the reason why.

“Evening, you two. Sansa, good arm, you got there,” he says with the upward nod of his head and a smile. “Sandor, I’m guessing those shits from down the road wound up fucking with you, eh? Not that I mind the interruption. Mya always loves a romantic Romeo balcony scene, and my knees hurt too much to get out there these days,” he says, laughing when she smacks the back of his head.

“Something like that. Look, I hate to be a pain in the ass, and I know it’s real late, but can I talk to you a minute, maybe in the kitchen?” Sandor says.

Sansa looks up at his profile as he speaks, here on his scars side, where it’s a riot of twist and turn and knobble. His voice is as mellow as a sea trench voice can be, but his jaw muscles are working, like Calm is a vitamin he’s chewing in order to get it into his bloodstream.

“Sure. I could use another beer, what about you?” Lother gives Mya’s calf a squeeze before pushing her feet off of him so he can stand. He’s a groan and a stretch as he crosses that skull and crossbones area rug towards and then past them, giving Sansa a nod.

“Do bears shit in the woods?” Sandor says as he turns to follow Lother, and it’s strange, hearing him cover up panic and adrenaline with the blasé of a hackneyed phrase. I know your heartbeat, buster, she wants to say. It’s okay to be scared. Lord knows he’d have company.

She is left to awkwardly stand there staring after them until Mya rests a hand on her shoulder. Sansa jumps like a cat, gasping and pressing a hand to her chest as if her heart is going to rocket out of her chest, though she supposes that would save her a lot of misery in the long run. Mya’s eyebrows lift and then she laughs.

“You doing okay? You need a drink or something? I think I might have some pot gummy bears somewhere around here from last weekend,” she says, glancing to her bookshelves as if that’s the usual place where people keep their drugs. Sansa shakes her head, lets her hand drop from her chest before she looks like some pearl-clutching, shrinking violet. I have backbone, damn it.

“No, I’m fine, really,” she says, but then she glances down at her bare toes peeking out from Sandor’s long track pants. “Actually, and this is going to sound really weird, but—”

“Sweetie, you came in through the window. Weird’s over and done with,” Mya says with a laugh, miming crumpling up paper and tossing it over her shoulder. Sansa huffs a chuckle and sighs, pointing down.

“I really need to borrow some shoes. I don’t have any. Well, I do, but they’re stilettos and they don’t exactly go with Sandor’s stuff,” she says, going for dry humor as she makes a hand model gesture down the length of her body.

“Oh thank god,” Mya says with another peal of laughter, resting her hand on Sansa’s shoulder again as she sags forward with her head bowed. “I mean, I thought that was your outfit by choice. I’m no fashionista but Jesus, you look homeless. Come on. I’ve got flip flops you can just have, and I’m sure we can find something at least a few rungs higher up the Cute Ladder than, you know, that,” she says, linking her arm in Sansa’s as she pulls her towards the back bedroom.
She’s not Jeyne but it is female camaraderie, kindness and guileless humor and aimless chatter here with Mya, it’s talking clothes and shoes and sweet boyfriends instead of bullets and death and bad guys. And so the little magpie in her snatches all of that up too. When Mya smiles and asks her what size she is as she tosses shirts out of her closet onto her bed, Sansa smiles back.

“Shit, that’s intense,” Lothor says from where he sits on the counter with a beer in one hand. He shakes his head with a low, slow whistle through his teeth. “You could have just said so from the beginning instead of making up some shit about street kids. Everyone knows about the Lannisters, man. It’s not like I wouldn’t have believed you.”

Sandor shrugs. “I didn’t want to raise a false alarm in case they left us alone,” he says from where he leans against the counter, arms folded across his chest.

“So what’re you going to do?”

“Leave town for a while, I guess. Get out of their hair for a few days, weeks, I don’t know. My business is a pile of rubble right now, anyways. Not like I’ve got anything waiting for me, come Monday morning.”

“You gonna take her with you?” Lothor says, tipping his head towards the kitchen doorway. “You don’t even know her.”

“I know,” Sandor sighs, staring down at his beer before taking a long, long swig. And it’s all her fault, he wants to say, but he’s sort of been saying that all night and it’s getting old, even to his ears. “I can’t just leave her here though.”

“Bastard with a heart of gold, huh,” Lothor says, grinning against the mouth of the bottle before he takes a swallow of beer. Sandor rolls his eyes.

“Pot calling the kettle black, considering,” Sandor says.

“Welcome to the club,” Lothor says with a laugh. “You ready?”

Sandor drains his beer and sets the bottle on the counter next to a box of half eaten pizza. His .38 is a hard presence of body-warmed metal against his low back. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

The main living area is empty and quiet when he leaves the kitchen. All he can hear is the tread of his running shoes on the worn floorboards, and just like that he’s halfway to fear and panic. Did they find her? Would they sneak in and take her so silently that he didn’t even notice? Sandor is swarmed with these questions until he tilts his head and holds his breath, listening with every cell in his body, and then he lets loose his sigh. There are the faintest murmurs coming from the bedroom, brook-stream soft and lilting, and he realizes it’s the burble of women talking amongst themselves.

Feeling like an overreacting moron, Sandor draws his hair out of his eyes, letting it fall to the left side of his face as he crosses the living room and heads into the bedroom.

“Hey. Red. Lothor and I are gonna head down to—”

She and Mya turn as one to look at him, Mya with some sort of lady shirt in her hands while Sansa stands there in nothing but a sports bra and a pair of yoga pants. Sandor freezes in the doorway, gripping either side of the door jamb as if it’s the only thing keeping him on his feet, and maybe it is, he’s that taken aback. His gaze is a quick sink and soar from her head to her toes and back
again. She is like an ivory piano key standing upright, a cinched-waist pillar of pale, and I’m staring, I’m staring, get a fucking grip on yourself. As if to make him feel even more of a pig, Sansa snatches the garment from Mya and covers her front best as she can with it, even though he’s seen girls wear less at the gym. She clears her throat as she tosses her hair over her shoulder with affected panache.

“Yes?” she says with the smallest clearing of her throat, and they both ignore Mya’s snort of a laugh as she turns to pick up the other shirts off of the bed.

“I was uh,” he says before blinking and shaking his head, and to avoid all of that business going on, he stares at a point on the floor somewhere between them. “I just wanted you to know, I’m gonna go downstairs real quick. Get my wallet and keys, that sort of shit. You need anything? A to-go cup of bourbon, maybe?”

“I have marijuana gummies, thank you,” she says. Mya laughs from deep inside her closet.

He blinks at the floor, looks up at her like she has two heads instead of that quirky little smile that’s making her mouth curl like ribbon. “What?”

“Nothing,” she says hastily, stretching the shirt as wide as it can go as she presses it to her shoulders, as if he’s going to walk right over and take a bite out of whatever he can see, as if a shirt could stop him, were that his goal. “Um, do you mind getting my phone? I left it earlier.”

“Sure thing,” he says, wondering what joke he’s missed out on before he turns to go.

“Hey, Sandor?”

“Yeah?” he says, looking over his shoulder.

“You’re um, you’re really coming back, right? Back here,” she says, just above a murmur, church mouse small and just as fidgety.

Sandor shakes his head at the question, and for a moment her face falls and freezes in a look of utter dejection. He rubs the back of his neck and huffs a laugh. “Yeah, Red, I’m coming back. Try not to burn the place down while I’m gone.”

Sansa exhales with a relieved smile. “I can’t make any promises,” she says.

Sandor cannot help but laugh. “I’ll say,” he says.

Lothor locks the door behind them after barking at Mya to use the chain, and what little spark of humor Sandor shared with Red is gone now that the two men descend the stairs in silence. Not so much as a television or radio plays behind the closed doors of their neighbors they pass, and he’s cautiously optimistic that his little altercation with that Lannister thug went unnoticed. Never take a baseball bat to a gun fight, she’d said to him with her irritating judgment. Yeah, well, he thinks with a shade of scorn as he looks down the narrow stairwell before gesturing for Lothor to follow him down his hall. Baseball bats don’t make noise.

“Prepare yourself,” he mutters once they’re standing side by side, but he supposes Lothor’s job experience will keep him more calm and collected than anything Sandor could say. He lets go of a breath and pushes open his lock-picked door.

There’s a spray of blood on the wall to the right, red spatters darkened to black in the low light casting in from the hall, and the door won’t fully open thanks to the body on the floor. It lies prone a foot or two away from the threshold, and the door makes a dull, hollow thud when it butts up
against the heel of an expensive Italian loafer. Not the kind of shoes for doing dirty work, but then again, they’re probably the cleanest thing on the guy, so there’s that.

“Looks like Casey didn’t strike out this time,” Lothor murmurs once they’ve stepped over the body’s legs and he can see the bat Sandor abandoned next to the guy’s head.

“Yeah, well,” Sandor says, stepping carefully over the bloodstain on the skinny strip of rug before scanning his apartment. “Do me a favor and keep an eye out, all right?”

“Sure thing,” Lothor says, squatting down beside the guy’s chest. Sandor glances at him before disappearing into his room, sees his neighbor put two fingers against the thug’s neck.

“Anything?” he asks as he hastily changes back into his street clothes, lacing up his boots as he looks around for her phone. Quickly he shoves a couple changes of clothes in a gym bag, grabs his keys and wallet and stuffs her phone in his back pocket. Before he leaves the bedroom he yanks her mostly dry dress off his bathroom door, flinging it over his shoulder like a gym towel.

“He’s a dead duck,” Lothor says, soft and matter-of-fact, standing out of his squat when Sandor returns. “Barely there and not for long.”

He sighs. On the one hand it’s good there’s nobody left for a he-said, he-said argument on the stand, and the evidence is pretty cut and dry for self-defense during a B and E. On the other hand, it’s murder, plain and simple. His mind begins to race with a dozen scenarios, but then he remembers the weight of her when she fell back against him on the fire escape. Only one person at a time on the Lose Your Shit ride, he thinks, staring across the room at his records a moment. He wonders at the next time he’ll be here.

“Fuck it,” he mutters, and he strides over, knowing just where to find a particular album. Sandor snatches it and gestures with a wave of his hand towards his door before grabbing up her fuck me shoes as well. Lothor nods and turns on his heel, careful of the starfish sprawl of lifeless limbs as he makes his way back out into the hall.

They check the foyer downstairs just to make sure it’s clear, Lothor with his Gerber knife and Sandor with his .38 drawn, a Lou Reed record under his arm and a pair of heels in his other hand as they creep down to the main floor. There’s not another soul to be found here, even hidden under the stairs, but his heart sinks when he sees the brick he used to prop open the door is still there, that anyone with half a mind could have waltzed in here. He kicks it out onto the stoop, letting the door close and lock itself, and he swears under his breath.

“I’m a fucking idiot,” he snarls as they climb back upstairs, tucking his gun back in his waistband, letting his t-shirt and flannel fall over it in concealment. “A brainless fucking fuckhead.” What was he thinking? I wasn’t, he reckons, recalling the drape of her sleeping in his arms. He doesn’t know this girl from Eve and yet he knows the weight of her a hundred times over. Against him, under him, in his arms and in his bed, in his hand and on his chest. He’s not an affectionate man, no, but he’s still flesh and blood, and it isn’t impossible, to move him. Of course I wasn’t fucking thinking.

“At least it was just the one guy,” Lothor offers, shrugging when Sandor slides a glare to him on the fourth floor landing. “And it’s not like it was the brick that gave her away. They must have tailed you guys, or tracked her somehow,” he says, knocking on his own door. “Babe, it’s me. Unlock the chain, we’re back.”

“Tracked her,” Sandor repeats, staring down at the fancy shoes in his hand.

Foolishly he lifts them to inspect the soles, as if some shiny 007-type device will be stuck to one of
them, blinking bright red with a miniscule antenna and a blip noise to boot. Of course there isn’t, it dawns on him, because this is the 21st century and there are far simpler ways for anyone to keep tabs on someone. Now he really feels fucking stupid, because it’s not a high tech device at all that’s making him feel like the dead duck now. No. It’s a sparkly white iPhone with a pastel blue case in his back pocket, better than a trail of breadcrumbs, and without a second thought he pulls it out and flings it to the floor. It’s not until he grinds it to smithereens under four, five, six smashes of his heel that Lothor shoves him in the shoulder. Panting from exertion and with poorly tamped ill temper, he looks up and sees Mya and Sansa, standing in the now open doorway with their jaws dropped open.

“We brought you your shoes, Sansa,” Lothor says with a shit-eating Boy Scouts smile, slipping between the girls as he grabs Mya’s hand and tugs her with him into the apartment, leaving Sandor and Sansa to glare at each other over the threshold.

Chapter End Notes

So I know the BBC just did a study that demonstrates magpies do NOT in fact steal shiny stuff, but they ARE inquisitive about things, and will often inspect them.

This report does not exist in this world, hahaha. Please and thank you! :)

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Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Picset

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Her eventual dreams were disjointed, chaotic things that woke her often, either from freefalls that ended just before she hit the pavement or from record-player repetitions of her slapping Joffrey, over and over and over again, even though her slumber-self knew the inevitable outcome. But the worst dreams were the ones with flashing red and blue lights and the purple in between as he rode away from her, because she never woke up from those, and they played out in slow motion agony, burying her in the guilt of inaction and cowardice. Dreams were slow to come after she finally fell asleep, but once there they seemed never to end until right this moment when she realizes with a start that she is awake.

Sansa blinks with a sharp inhale, lets it gutter out as she stares at the living room ceiling fan above her. Another blink and breathe as dreams fade out and reality comes rushing in like tidewater, all salt and sting and cold and not much better than what it replaces. The evening had started out round and fat with fury but wound up stretched thin with fear, a winding twisting red riding hood path that led her right to her very own big bad wolf. Her heart leaps right up into her throat at the thought of him and she sits up with a flip of her hair as she looks around the front room. He’s still gone. The entire place is brittle-bright from the splinters of morning sunlight coming in through the window that’s still spattered with raindrops from last night.

Last night, she thinks, and now there’s something like relief floating around with all the other stuff, because it’s finally over. The long-drawn uncertain night is gone, has finally slunk out of view, finally letting dawn break, and break it did. Yolk-yellow light fills the apartment with good natured warmth she can feel as she slowly stretches her legs under a heavy layer of blankets. She’s in the middle of the room on the aero bed Lothor inflated for her sometime in the wee hours of the morning after she spent nearly two hours waiting for Sandor’s return. But even though the evening is over, even though it’s a brand new day and all those other empty clichés Sansa used to love, he’s still not back yet.

He said he’d come back, she thinks. She watched him go willingly with the cops after he called them about the guy in his apartment, stared down through Mya and Lothor’s bedroom window at the hustle and bustle in the street below. He looked up once and she swears their eyes met, even with four stories of dark between them, because he gave the faintest of nods before getting in the back of the cruiser. She heard the engine turn over all the way up on the top floor, pressed her fingertips to the window as she watched it pull away down the street and away from her.

“Sandor just texted me,” Lothor said, walking in the room a few minutes later.

Sansa whipped around, pressed her shoulders to the cold glass as if to hide the silent exchange she just had with Sandor. “What did it say?”

“He says: ‘Red’s purse and coat are still in my place. Hid them in closet.’ I’ll go get them for you
now,” Lothor said. Mya sat on the bed picking at her nail polish, chin resting on her knee, but she smiled up at Sansa as Lothor read, an odd little curving thing that was equal parts sad and sympathetic and something stuck halfway between commiseration and ‘thank god it’s not me.’

“Oh,” Sansa said finally, turning to look out at a deserted wet, black street. “Oh, all right, thank you.”

Even in that moment he thought of her and all she did was watch him ride off with the cops. She didn’t do a thing to help him, even as her heart beat to the sound of his voice in her head, over and over and over again: You know as well as I do that most of the cops are on Lannister payroll. Sansa flings the covers off of her and swings her legs off the inflatable, and the air mattress makes her list side to side like a boat in its slip before she gets to her feet. He said he’d be back. He said it before he went to his apartment and he said it again after breaking her damn phone, after he and Lothor decided to call the cops before a bigger lapse in time made it even more suspect.

“So where is he, then,” Sansa says as she tugs the long sleeves of Mya’s shirt over her hands and hugs herself, wondering if it’s rude to make herself coffee in a stranger’s house.

She hasn’t even known him a full day but his absence is acutely felt now, if only because of how many times he saved her ass last night. There is something about close calls that make a connection all the stronger. He covered me when they shot at us, she thinks, closing her eyes with a shake of her head as the memory swims up unbidden, some venomous dark creature that wants to sink its teeth I her. He told you himself the cops are all dirty, and you knew it too, deep down. You knew everything, but you lie to yourself as much as you lie to everyone else, she scolds herself. Yeah, well, no more lies, Sansa decides as she heads into the pound cake colored kitchen, gazing around to get herself oriented. She’s sick of lies and fear. She wants truth and courage, magpie backbone. Sea monsters be damned.

There’s no coffee pot but there is a French press, and she knows those things better than the back of her own hand, has ever since she was ten years old. Catelyn Stark is no amateur when it comes to coffee and she let her kids know early on how to make their parents a good cup on weekends. Sansa’s poking around in cabinets looking for a bag of coffee, half smiling as she remembers her mother’s tutelage, and she’s in the middle of wondering if her mother is still as fastidious about this ritual when the sudden rollick of classic rock and roll cracks the silence like a spoon on crème brûlée.

“Jesus,” she says with a jump and a laugh as “You Never Can Tell” fills the air to mingle with sunshine.

“Nope, just me,” Mya says, sauntering into the kitchen with her hair tied up in a scarf and a pair of sunglasses halfway down her nose like a grandmother’s bifocals. The silk sleeve of her kimono sags off her shoulder, revealing no nightgown whatsoever, and she has a dark hickey on the nape of her neck. Sansa has never before used the expression in a positive way, but Mya looks ridden hard and put away wet, and she makes it look adorable. “Did you sleep okay? We haven’t used that air mattress in like a year, I was worried it had a leak in it.”

“No, it was awesome. I slept great,” she starts, but then she stops, because it’s a lie. “It was okay. Weird dreams, is all,” Sansa says, stepping out of her hostess’s way when she makes an auto-pilot beeline for the French press.

“Man, tell me about it. I took a Tramadol before bed last night and I dreamed I was Bambi. How weird is that?”

“Was Lothor Thumper at least?” Sansa asks with a smile as she makes herself useful by filling the
kettle with water from the sink and setting it on the stove. She sets the burner to high as Mya
laughs and opens a cabinet and pulls out a dark green bag of Sumatra.

“He was the skunk, if you can believe it,” Mya says with a grin, glancing at Sansa over her
shoulder as she scoops soil-black coffee into the press. “Flowers around his little ears and
everything. It was such a great dream. I was so sad when I woke up.”

So was I, Sansa thinks with the nip of her lower lip. “Has um, has Sandor texted Lothor again?”

Mya looks at her with another one of those cinched-brow sorrow smiles. “It’s only like 9am. I’m
sure they’re going to talk to him for a little longer than just a few hours, especially if the Lannisters
really are involved. But don’t worry,” she says hastily, grabbing the kettle once it shrills to life on
the stove’s big burner. “It’s just to cover their bases. I mean, those stupid goons run all over town
getting into trouble constantly. Sometimes they come into the bar where I work after getting out of
jail, and by the end of the night they end up right back where they started.”

“Yeah, but Sandor said the cops are, you know, they’re all team Lannister here.”

Mya shrugs. “Well sure, but the evidence is cut and dry. The guy’s lock-picking doohickey was
hanging out of Sandor’s door for chrissakes. I mean, even the Lannisters cut loose the idiots that
don’t toe the line; the cops will do the same with this mook,” she says, pouring in the boiling hot
water before slowly depressing the top of the French press.

“True,” she says dubiously, thinking of what he said about his brother. They killed him too, and
Sandor was so scared he went to war instead of sticking around to see what happened afterwards.
She winces, chewing on her thumbnail, thinking of Sandor waltzing into a police station crawling
with people so deep in the Lannisters’ pockets they basically live there. Lamb to slaughter, indeed.

“Anyways, I was thinking. Lothor has to work at 4pm this afternoon and he usually sleeps away
the morning. Sandor’s busy, and we have all day until my shift tonight,” Mya says, hopping up on
the counter as she pulls a bottle of pale pink nail polish from her robe pocket.

“Yeah? What’d you have in mind?”

“First, I need to fix my nails so they’re as fancy as yours,” she says, nodding to Sansa’s bare feet
and the $80 pedicure she got two days ago. “And then we need to get you some clothes. You can’t
walk around in yoga pants forever, as comfy as it sounds,” she says, shaking the bottle of polish.

Despite everything Sansa smiles, playing with a lock of her own hair, pinching the ends together
like it’s a paintbrush and the back of her hand is a canvas. Sunshine and blue sky, female
companionship and something so innocent as shopping all sound amazing. Better than a therapy
session for a fraction of the cost, unless they hit up her favorite store.

“Can I just text Sandor from your phone or Lothor’s before we go? Just so he knows where we
are,” she says with a quick follow up. “So he doesn’t think I bailed or anything.”

“Sure,” Mya says, glancing at the bottom the nail polish bottle. She laughs and holds it up so Sansa
can read it. “Just tell him you need to hit up the stores because you can’t go around like this
anymore.”

Sansa squints, and she cannot help but laugh when she reads the name of Essie polish.

*Topless and Barefoot.*
If he dies right now and if there is such thing as an afterlife, Sandor is positive he will spend eternity hearing the same questions in his head, over and over again until the end of time. Where were you when you heard the noise? Did you know the deceased? Do you think the deceased has anything to do with the vandalism to your business? Have you been involved in any recent financial trouble? Why do you think your business was targeted? Did the deceased threaten you with bodily harm? Could you repeat what happened last night, with as many details as you can? Do you have banking loans for your business or did you go down a more creative financial avenue for your business? Did you or did you not, Mr. Clegane, know the deceased prior to the incident that lead to his death?

Now he’s sitting on a chair in the linoleum tiled corridor that connects the bare bones lobby to the rabbit warren of offices, meeting rooms and holding cells. The long square hallway, uninterrupted by doors or interior windows, makes him think of slaughterhouse cattle chutes. The short row of chairs he’s in is lined just outside the open doorway of a large room of desks and low-wall cubicles, and he sits slouched in his seat with his head tipped back against the wall, having finally been ousted from the bland, unimpressive room they use for questioning.

The only thing remarkable about it was the spectacularly horrible cup of coffee they offered him a little after 5am, when he was bleary brained and wiping his burning eyes more often than they asked questions, and the asked plenty. He drank it anyways, thinking how he couldn’t wait to piss it out just to spite them all, and because of it he’s got that jangly wired feeling that makes him feel nauseated and overstimulated, even two hours later. The fact that his text has gone unanswered for three hours doesn’t help the clutter of sensation in his belly and his limbs, the slosh of an empty stomach and the restless leg twitches that make him shift in his chair every thirty seconds or so. He wants to tear himself free from his own skin, and he’s halfway considering it when the phone in his pocket buzzes against his leg. He shifts to dig it free, swipes through to his texts and taps on the contact.

Sandor: I need to call in my favor.

Delivered 4:27am

Read 7:22am

Grunt: Sorry it took me so long to get back to you. Name your price

Sandor: Getting questioned by police for a crime I did but for a reason.

Grunt: That's an easy fix, sure it's worth the favor?

Sandor: Lannisters were involved and now so am I.

Grunt: Worth it, then. Where are you?

Sandor: Station at Harrison St.

Grunt: Homicide? You must have been busy

Sandor: Just hurry up.

To his credit he does, considering the sprawl of the city and the traffic that doesn’t have anywhere else to go. Twenty minutes later his old army buddy walks in through the dark tinted glass doors, early morning sunlight a rectangular bloom and fade as the doors close behind him. Sandor stands, giving the police officer nearest the hall a glare when he looks up suspiciously, and he strides
down the hallway. Bronn laughs and shakes his head as he takes off his aviators and tucks them in the inner pocket of his suitcoat.

“Hey, brother,” Bronn says, moving his travel mug to his left hand as they shake hands and bump shoulders in a half hug.

He takes a step back as they regard each other, his face dark-lit with the same sardonic humor he had they last went out for beers. Bronn is still broad shouldered and lean though there’s the faintest traces of silver scattered through his dark hair that wasn’t there all those months ago. He looks good, but any old bum would cut an impressive figure in that impeccably tailored suit of his.

“How long no see,” Sandor says, and despite the situation and the bullshit and that shithead detective who’s been breathing down his neck all morning, he grins. There’s no better time to see a familiar, friendly face than when you’ve been hauled down to the police station.

“No doubt, man, what’s it been, eight, ten months? You look like shit, by the way,” he says, eyebrows up as he dips his head to study him with a critical eye. Sandor glances down. His clothes are well worn in a comfortable, security blanket kind of way but they’re at the very least clean, unlike that stained-shirt cunt of a detective assigned to his case.

“Seriously, your eyes are so bloodshot you look stoned,” Bronn says, reminding Sandor of Sansa and her ridiculous marijuana gummies. A flicker of worry flits through him like lightning in a jar. It’s been hours already, he thinks, hoping she’s still tucked away safe and out of sight.

“Sorry, but you haven’t been hauling in the coffee,” Bronn says, slipping a hand in the pocket of his slacks as he takes a sip of his own.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Sandor says, rolling his eyes before he closes them and rubs them with the butts of his palms. “And I’ll never forgive them for it.”

Bonn laughs. “Here, have mine,” he says, handing over the chrome travel mug. “The shit’s so expensive it’s ridiculous, but I can barely taste the difference from store brand crap.”

Sandor takes a sip and hums his approval after the hot slide of it when he swallows. He nods. “Trust me, you could tell the difference if you drank the kerosene they gave me earlier.” He takes another two or three long swallows, ignoring the vague scald of it as he wills it to give him more energy and less of that jitter-slap to his senses.

“That beard of yours is growing in so thick I bet half the guys in our platoon wouldn’t recognize you,” Bronn muses. “Hell, I bet the other half would shit themselves if they knew it was me bailing you out instead of the other way round.”

“I think they would’ve shit themselves the first time they heard about you becoming a cop,” Sandor grins, though that’s a quick enough fade thanks to their surroundings. “And besides, I’m just here for questioning. They haven’t arrested me.”

“You,” says Det. Moore from behind him, and Sandor’s eyebrows lower like firm caps over his eyes as he glances back at the middle aged cop. Authority gone soft and flabby, flaccid with incompetence, and he’s had plenty of time to sum up the bastard. It will take him days to forget the man’s pasty features and his wan, washed out eyes, made all the paler from the anemic, florescent overhead glow.

“On what fucking grounds,” he says, turning to face his antagonist in full, but then there’s a firm weighted hand on his shoulder.
“I’ll take it from here,” Bronn says coolly, nodding when Sandor hands him back the travel mug. “Clegane’s done here, I think, Mister uh,” he says, squinting as if Moore’s name will magically appear on his forehead.

“It’s Detective Moore,” he snaps, making his turkey waddle quiver, and he sounds whiny and ineffectual, looks like a fishwife when he plants a fist on the love handle overhanging his belt. “And on what grounds? I’m the detective assigned to the Polliver case.”

“On the grounds that I’m a fucking CPD Lieutenant, detective. I hope to baby Jesus that you haven’t forgotten who backed my promotion,” Bronn says, sliding his sunglasses from his pocket and putting them on.

Moore’s expression of self-righteous indignation fades into the warble of freshly-set custard. Bronn grins and Sandor does too. “I- but I- well, no, no I didn’t forget.”

“Didn’t forget, sir,” Bronn says with a grin, not bothering to wait for the amendment as he turns silently on the heel of his dress shoe. “Come on, Clegane, I’ll walk you to your car.”

“Have a great day, asshole,” Sandor says over his shoulder, grin widening at the look on Moore’s face.

They do not speak as they walk, instead match their individual paces to a brisk clip as their long legged strides eat up the two city blocks it takes to get to where he parked his truck, and Sandor supposes he’s just lucky he didn’t get a parking ticket on top of everything else. Wordlessly he unlocks the passenger side before going around and getting in the driver’s seat, and together they climb inside, slamming shut and locking their doors in synchronized unison. He slouches and rests his head back against the seat while Bronn unbuttons his jacket and sighs.

“Tell me everything, from the very beginning,” he says.

Sandor complies, starting with a recap of his brother’s dealings with the Lannisters a decade prior, but Bronn makes a hasty wave of impatience at the mention of Gregor. Sandor nods and chuckles and moves on, though he would be loath to admit that he’s sort of touched the bastard remembers that backstory from their days as army grunts together.

So, he thinks as he takes a breath and starts with what happened last night. **So, it begins with Red,** he thinks, red of the woman, of the bright drape and drip of rain-darkened hair when she traipsed into the barber shop, of the hot flare of her when her temper ran out and sparked like a road flare. Of course it starts with her.

It starts with her and ends with her too, once everything’s said and done and Bronn is sitting there with a beleaguered sort of expression on his face as he gazes sightlessly at the traffic sliding past them. Sandor is just wrapping up the details of last night’s shit show when his phone buzzes again.

“Hang on,” he says with a grunt as he lifts his hips to dig his phone out of his jeans pocket, and he’s instantly nervous to see it’s a text from Lothor until he reads it. He huffs out a chuckle right before choking on it.

*Hi Sandor, it’s Red. Everything’s okay, though I’m sorry you’ve been out all night. Lothor’s still asleep so Mya’s taking me shopping downtown at Nordstrom. I can’t be barefoot and topless forever, can I?*

“Son of a bitch,” he wheezes into his fist as he tries clearing his throat of all the things trapped in there, first laughter and then the word topless and then the uneasy thought of her wandering around downtown Chicago like there’s not a goddamn hit out on her. **Woman, you’re going to be the death of me.**
“Ah,” Bronn says with a sage nod, taking the last long drink of coffee. “Sounds like woman trouble to me.”

“You don’t even know the half of it,” Sandor mutters, even though he literally just told Bronn the whole of it.

“Well, listen. You just do what I said and get out to Winnetka as soon as you can. I’ll be there tomorrow. Try to make sure nobody follows you, but they’ve got ways of dealing with that once you’re there.”

“And here I thought that family was fighting the good fight,” Sandor says dryly, watching as Bronn opens the truck door and unfolds his legs to get out.

“Look, you know how they say, ‘never stick your dick in crazy’? Well, I stuck mine in crafty. Smoking hot and craftier than a goddamn cat. I tell you, it’s almost as bad as crazy,” he laughs. He’s never known Bronn to be a romantic, but the shift in his tone when he talks about this woman is significant enough for even Sandor to notice. “She’s determined, too, so yeah, she does what she’s gotta do, same as the rest of us.”

“So says the dirty special agent.”

“Hey, now,” Bronn says from the sidewalk, ducking his chin to look at Sandor over the rims of his aviators as passerby go to and fro behind him. “That’s survival. I’m just trying to fit in with the rest of these douche bags,” he says with a grin. “I’ll see you in Winnetka. It’s the safest place you could be right now. Don’t even bother going home, just head right there once you pick up that girl of yours,” and he punctuates his sentence with the shutting of the passenger side door so Sandor can’t even argue that she’s not his girl.

He mutters under his breath, starts his truck as he watches Bronn walk away, disappearing in the crowd like ice melting in a puddle. He shakes his head and sighs, asking Siri on his phone where the hell Nordstrom is, and as he merges into the right hand lane he figures a double-dipping FBI agent is probably the best friend a guy like him could have after a night like his.

If her iPhone wasn’t in pieces she’d have her earbuds in, Alina Baraz or Amy Winehouse or Nicole Atkins smoothing away the background until nothing remained except her, nothing but Sansa and the brush of silk and satin and wool under her fingers, the glossy white of marble tile under her feet, the distant scent of floral notes and musk from faraway makeup and perfume counters. But her phone is gone. In its absence she moves through the racks of dresses in an odd little bubble, one that a back and forth drift between the world she walks in and the softer, more silent world in her mind. It’s the world in which she’s alone, not because she let her family walk away but because she likes it that way; the world in which she’s alone, not because her boyfriend is fucking other women but because there’s no shitty boyfriend to begin with. But it isn’t the same with the music drowned out, and she sighs.

The time for make believe is over.

So is the time for picking an article of clothing for its color or texture or fit. For the first time in her life Sansa is reduced to sales, and she slinks around the clearance racks like an unfed alley cat, fingers always drifting, drifting, drifting, though now they’re hunting that discreet price tag with the red sale sticker instead of whether or not it’s 100% cashmere. Still, it’s the same sort of dance, even though there’s no song to hum to anymore, and she’s got a few marked down blouses draped over her arm when Mya comes bouncing up to her.
She’s still got her hair tied up in the scarf from earlier that morning but changed the flimsy robe for a Reverend Horton Heat t-shirt and a pair of cigarette pants, camo ballet flats and a vivid smile the color of a poppy field.

“Sansa, holy shit, there you are. I’m on cloud nine right now, I can’t believe it,” she breathes, cheeks a merry pink for a woman who admitted earlier that she once swore she’d never step foot inside a Nordstrom.

“What? What did you find,” Sansa says with a smile, dropping the sleeve of an overpriced sweater dress as she turns to face her new friend. “Show me, tell me everything.”

“They have men’s skinnies that fit my hips with actual pockets in the front,” she says with a foot-bouncing squeal as she holds up a pair of Nudie black jeans. “My phone fits in the front pocket and everything. I don’t even give a rat’s ass they’re almost $200. Pockets, Sansa. Pockets,” she says, going so far as to spin on her toes like a ballerina before she Eeeeeeess again and trots off towards the dressing rooms.

She smiles, standing in the choppy waves of Mya’s rockabilly wake, before gazing down at the shirts on her arm with something chewing on the edges of her, some itchy sort of feeling that she recognizes as doubt. There is an opportunity to go full incognito, here, to shed all the layers she’s built up over the years in order to create someone who doesn’t really exist anymore. Cream colored angora and ballet pink chiffon, soft innocuous colors to accentuate the soft innocence of her. *There isn’t much left of that inside me, anymore,* she thinks, hanging them back up as she walks to another clearance rack.

Every article of clothing she touches now is pregnant with possibility, like those Choose Your Own Adventure books Bran used to love when he was in elementary school. A cowl necked sweater the color of envy, who is she? Office day job, keeps dark chocolate in the freezer and still sends party invitations by mail. The loose black silk tunic top, she paints abstracts on the weekends and drinks lemonade out of mason jars once she empties them of her homemade jam. The color blocked dress is a bloodthirsty man-eater who sips liquor in a martini glass so cold that ice floats on the gin’s surface. She pulls them all off the rack, grinning as her gaze lifts to another rack and settles on a leather pencil skirt. *That skirt is the devil herself, and it’s about time I spit a little hellfire,* she thinks, running her hand along the clothes as she makes her way towards it.

“I love to see a happy woman when she’s shopping,” a sales clerk says brightly as she makes her buxom hip-sway way towards her. Talk about being poured into a dress. *Now there’s a man-eater,* Sansa thinks, and she nods with a smile.

“I am, yes. There’s a lot of amazing things on sale today.”

“There is *every* day! Honey, I *never* buy anything full price here. With my employee discount it’s almost like stealing,” she whispers with a scandalous lift of her eyebrows, and Sansa laughs.

*French Connection bandage dress: man-eater who knows how to cut coupons.* There are simply so many different Sansas she can be now, and the giddy thought of it makes her heart race the way romantic comedies or the thought of a first kiss used to. Because she has nothing anymore, not even any of her old contacts now that her phone is broken, and there is freedom here, standing at the very bottom, because nothing’s holding her back anymore. She exhales, chuckles again before she realizes the sales girl asked her a question.

“I’m so sorry, what did you say?”

“I said, would you like me to start a room for you?” she says with a smile.
“Oh! Yes, please, that’d be great,” she says, handing over her three new identities with reverence.

“If you need anything else or need to dump another arm load, come find me. And don’t worry, honey, I completely tune out when I’m getting my shop on. The only thing that gets me as excited is—well, something along those lines,” she says, lifting her arm and pointing somewhere across the department store floor.

She glances over her shoulder and laughs when she sees that the saleswoman has pointed to the impressively tall figure of a long haired man in a flannel shirt and jacket, but a few blinks later Sansa realizes it’s Sandor of all people. She gasps from the recognition and the other woman takes it as agreement, and for a moment the two of them stand side by side watching him, his phone pressed to his ear and his eyes downcast. The scars are barely visible from this distance, as is his surly disposition, and for a moment, just a moment, one of those new and unknown women living inside her perks up and soaks in the view.

“We don’t usually get the wooly lumberjack types up here in Women’s, but as long as he’s here I’ll take two,” the sales girl laughs, arching her back slightly with a toss of her hair as she turns on the heel of her stiletto and saunters back towards the dressing rooms.

Sansa stands alone, struck dumb in a way, thoughts a slurry as she watches him approach her unawares, and because he hasn’t seen her yet she can study him freely, can see how he arranges his face when he thinks no one is looking. Without the frowns and the scowls and the sneers his scars are a lot less noticeable, and she wonders if he knows that, if he make those faces on purpose to push people even further away. Suddenly she realizes they have that in common. His angry scowl to her cloying cashmere, his foul language to her benign smiles, his—well, his look of surprise, now, because finally he’s lifted his gaze from the floor and it’s landed right on her. She sucks in a breath like it’s through a straw, such a deep lungful there’s no room for words, not even a hello as he changes direction and heads straight for her with a frown settled comfortably in its place of honor between his eyebrows. He looks so tired, and she wonders if he’d go back to Mya’s and sleep if she asked him to.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he says, stopping just in front of her, here where it’s snug close quarters between two carousels of clearance items. Her worry and concern for him and over where he’s been all morning seeps out of her at the harsh tone of his voice. Sansa narrows her eyes a moment before she shrugs.

“Well, I thought my text made it pretty clear. If I still had a phone I would have taken more time to flesh out the details, but as it is, I had to borrow Lothor’s,” she says, surprising herself at the instant flare of attitude. She just barely manages to contain a giggle, it takes them both that far aback.

“You shouldn’t be waltzing all over town,” he says with quick recovery, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, as if he is bracing himself for battle. Fine. She’ll bring him one.

“I’m not waltzing around. I’m in one place trying to buy some clothes. I can’t wear this forever,” she says, gesturing to the full outfit Mya insisted she not only wear but keep.

“Anyone could track you down, Red. Hell, I did and I sure as shit don’t know my way around a place like this.” He’s still got his phone to his ear but it’s clear he’s speaking to her, with the incline of his head and the heavy weight of his gaze. Summer storm gray, a travel across her face as he regards her and waits for a reply. She wishes she were in the color block dress, all of a sudden.

“That’s because you called me and I told you where we were,” Mya says, materializing with a Nordstrom bag in one hand and her phone in the other where she presses it to her ear. She glances
to Sansa with a grin, and she and Sandor both hang up their phones in unison. “Besides, it’s not like anyone can track her anymore. You did a real good job of making sure that can’t happen anymore.”

“They can track this,” he says quietly, and Sansa just manages to chase away the instinctive flinch when he reaches out for her. But it’s not to chuck her jaw with his fist like Joffrey used to, it’s to lift a sheaf of her hair off of her shoulder. He gives it the gentlest of tugs.

“I told you to cut it,” she murmurs, gazing down at the way he rubs the lock of hair between his thick fingers before he lets it slide out of his grasp.

“I’m starting to see why.” Sandor’s eyes remain downcast until he takes a breath and clears his throat, looking up at her once more. “Come on, let’s get out of here. We have a little road trip to take out of the city.”

“Let me just try on what I picked out, and then we can leave, okay?”

“What the- what, one of these things?” he asks, picking up a violently purple print blouse. “Jesus Christ, this is $75,” he says, practically throwing it back on the rack, he is that mortified.

“Yeah but it’s marked down,” she says with a roll of her eyes, exasperated but trying for patience like a kindergarten teacher with her students.

“It’s still a piece of shit. Come on. This is a waste of money.”

“Hey, pal, it might be a waste of money, but it’s my money, all right? You’re not the fucking boss of me,” she snaps, her voice dropped low for privacy, from irritation she knows is more than justified, and the hungry wolf in her is satisfied to see the look of shock on his face. She does not need new clothes to be this woman, because it’s her, down to the very root, the very marrow. She isn’t just song and dance, she is tooth and tongue and claw.

“So you can just sit tight, lumberjack, and I’ll be out when I’m good and ready. Understand?”

Sansa turns away from him without waiting for a reply, and she lifts her chin, putting some of that buxom shop-girl sway into her hips as she heads for the dressing rooms. Behind her she hears Mya say Well I guess she told you, and she huffs out a chuckle. But she doesn’t outright laugh until she hears Sandor say Yeah, I guess she did.

Chapter End Notes

 Bronn!!
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

It’s the third time he’s called her this morning, and still the damned call goes to her voicemail. She has a tone of voice like clarified butter on the recording, but he knows her better. He does not leave a message. *To hell with her*, he thinks, sliding his black phone back into the inner pocket of his coat. *She hates surprises, so let’s shock the hell out of her,* he thinks as he walks down Grand Avenue towards Michigan Avenue, and he’d sneer if he hadn’t just caught the wandering flit of a young woman’s gaze as they walk towards one another. He smiles instead, smooth like hand cream, a dazzler judging by the way she blushes and glances down, her chin tucked almost completely in the huge cowl of her infinity scarf. He chuckles as they pass each other by, hands in his pockets as he crosses Michigan; there is something hugely addictive about that star-struck kind of attention from pretty women, and the younger they are the better. It fills him with pride, to awaken the woman in a girl, and it makes his cock hard, imagining breaking her in. Suddenly he is not quite so irritable, anymore.

Besides, it’s a beautiful day, made even lovelier by dawning cloudless and bright after yesterday’s dreary deluge of rain. Nothing but steady, tireless downpour, wet enough to ruin any pair of shoes, let alone the pair of Salvatore Ferragamo drivers he’s in right now. The sun has dried the sidewalks and he strides with confidence and ease towards his midday coffee break at Starbucks a block away. The Shops at North Bridge loom up on his right, and while they look soot gray on overcast days, today the stone nearly glows from the sunshine, a soft brushed look like warm, expensive wool.

The strength of his mood, benign if not *completely* cheerful, is threatened as he passes The Shops at North Bridge, their main entrance always a cluster and crowd of patrons and tourists. He rolls his eyes up past the huge Nordstrom sign to the sky above as an overweight woman in a sweatshirt bumps into him, too busy filming her adventure on her iPhone to pay him much attention. There’s a rather delicious thought that crosses his mind, one involving a good hard shove to the meat between her shoulder blades that would send her right into the glass doors, but then he is utterly distracted by a vision right out of one of his nightly fantasies.

It is a swish of long auburn hair, the bounce of it as a young woman pushes through the crowd, and his fantasy is almost realized when he watches her companion, a huge man with a full beard in a flannel shirt, grasp her lightly by the wrist and drag her against him and out of bustle’s way. *Take her other wrist,* he almost says. *Take her other wrist and bind them together,* she’ll go far more easily that way, *and if she doesn’t, well.* There are always other ways to achieve that. But instead of giving his advice he simply slows to a near-standstill, as thoughtlessly rude as the cluster of tourists he seems to be stuck in. He inhales deeply as they pass by, his eyes almost sliding shut because he’s seen enough to know that this girl is indeed Sansa Stark. But his eyes stay open, go so far as to widen with surprise when it registers in his brain who it is walking beside her with his *hand* on her. *As if that son of a bitch has any right to touch such a creature,* he thinks, because those scars are better than a calling card, are as familiar to him as his dead brother’s predilection for violence.

They are bickering at each other over the cost of clothing, which makes sense considering the fact
that Clegane looks like he’s walked out of the clearance section of a Sears Catalogue. Still, there is an air of familiarity about them as Sansa rolls her eyes, as Clegane plucks at the Nordstrom bag hanging from her arm and peers inside with a snort and the shaking of his head. Familiarity, laid back ease, camaraderie? It puzzles him, considering what he knows of Joffrey’s bad behavior last night, what he and nearly 750,000 other people know of the dinner he had where Sansa nearly slapped him right out of his chair. This doesn’t look like a woman scorned.

He resists the urge to reach out and snare her by her hair when they pass him by, and he nearly, nearly has the brush of her shoulder against his, but instead of closing his fist in the red of her, instead of relishing the almost-touch, he turns his head away from her. It’s best she doesn’t see him now; he’s fairly certain she’ll simply associate him with her beau’s bad behavior, even though this time he had nothing to do with it. At least not then. At least not yet.

His phone is in his hand again when he heads inside the Starbucks, but still the damned thing goes to voicemail. Enough with treating him like he’s not good enough. He’s in a $5,000 Saint Laurent coat, for Christ’s sake; she can take five minutes out of her Botox regimen to pick up the phone. Fine. There is one way to get her attention, and that’s to mention her wayward son by name. He’s fairly sure she’d even put down her drink to answer a text that mentioned Joffrey, especially if it painted him in a negative or troubled light. And so he sends one. I wonder if your beloved Joffrey told you he put a hit on Sansa last night? Polliver is dead because of it.

That should do it, and at the very least if he doesn’t get a text or call back, he knows Cersei will more than likely answer her damned phone the next time he calls her. Now that she’s more or less leading the Lannisters down their current path, with one brother on the lam and the other behind bars, with her father tied up in business negotiations in Tokyo, one would think she’d be more on the ball with her correspondence. It makes no matter to him if she procrastinates, or at least that is what he’s fond of telling himself. There are three Swiss bank account numbers only he knows about; she could take down the entire family if she wants but he’ll make sure to get out scot-free. Still, it does vex him, to be ignored, especially by an uppity woman. He flexes his hand into a fist, hidden in the pocket of his overcoat, and he imagines Cersei’s throat in his grasp.

“Good afternoon, sir, welcome back. Will it be your usual? Let me try and guess it,” she says, snaring the corner of her smile with a crooked tooth that makes him think of bite marks. He nods his participation in this game. “Let’s see it’s a, um, oh yeah! A grande-sugar-free-non-fat-earl-grey-tea-misto?” says the gum-snapping barista behind the counter, and the smile and the freckles and the Sir all serve to make him exhale and smile.

“You guessed it, young lady,” he says though he has had her name memorized since her first day behind the counter. It’s far too late to find that girl in the infinity scarf, but he considers asking this one when her shift ends.

“And your name iiiiiis,” she draws out, and he knows it’s because she’s corn fed simple and corn fed pretty, it’s because she’s devoted her brain to drink names instead of his. He smiles, because there are so many different, fun ways he could train her to never, ever forget it.

“Petyr,” he says with a patient smile, thinking of two bound wrists held in one hand.

It’s a beautiful afternoon with the sunshine bouncing off buildings like they’re ripples on a river, and inside the Pearl Tavern it’s just as sparkling and fresh. The pale floors, white marble tables and bar top gleam from the light streaming in through the windows and from the money she sends them each month to clear the place out whenever she wants. It’s a beautiful day and she’s here with her son, yet thanks to the incessant ringing of her phone, Cersei is beyond irritation.
“Honestly, that man doesn’t know how to simply wait his turn,” she says with the slap of her phone to the table between her plate and glass. “Does he think I’m just lounging in bed waiting for his calls? I have a life. I have responsibilities,” she says, digging the miniscule fork between oyster and shell, wrinkling her nose when a splash of brine lands on her manicured cuticle.

“Sure you do,” her son says, and his voice is a disdainful drip of boredom that makes her glance up from her task. Joffrey glares at the screen of his phone, and she can just make out the tinny playback to know what he’s watching.

Cersei frowns. They have lunch every Saturday afternoon and it annoys her that he’s not only apparently very hungover but is completely distracted to boot. This time has always meant something to her, but lately it has become priceless. With everything that’s been happening lately, lawyers and weekly pathetic calls from Jaime, angry emails from her father, all she wants, all she needs, is some quality time with the one child who hasn’t moved out of state or overseas. All she needs is the stability of routine while she does her best to hold up the family name.

“Put down your phone, Joffrey. First off, this is our time together that I take to heart and take very seriously,” she says, because it’s true; this is one of the few times during her week she looks forward to. “Secondly, I didn’t pay market price for you to watch that video when you can do it for free on your own time.”

Damn that video, and damn that girl for humiliating my son. She’ll have to arrange some sort of PR stunt with Sansa. Maybe pull the puppet strings and get the girl to go out with that airhead roommate of hers, cause a few scenes, wreck a new car maybe. Then a nice weekend out of town on a ‘retreat,’ followed up with a few photos of her going to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Perfect.

“So? Everything you order is market price,” he says dismissively, sighing as he throws his weight against the cushioned booth they’re sitting side by side in.

“We’ll need to start taking precautions though, so you best enjoy it now,” she says lightly, setting her fork down amongst the ice and half shells as she selects a wedge of lemon and squeezes it over her oyster. “With your Uncle Jaime’s situation and those funds currently frozen because of the investigation, we could do with a little tightening of our belts,” she says, exhaling before tipping the oyster in her mouth.

“If you eat one more of those things, I’m going to throw up all over the rest of them,” Joffrey says. He really does look green around the gills.

“Oh for Pete’s sake, didn’t you learn anything at that university your grandfather got you into? It’s called hair of the dog,” she says with a soft scold, pressing her fingertips on her napkin before pushing her bloody mary towards him.

He does as she bids though he makes an anguished sort of face at her, and she smiles, uses her fingers to comb the overhang of sandy blond that brushes against his forehead as he sips. Such a handsome boy, she thinks, imagining him in five, maybe ten years’ time, calling the shots from behind her father’s desk. It will happen far sooner now that Jaime’s gone and gotten himself arrested, so long as Tywin understands when to let go of the reins. Her father tells her five times a day to grow old gracefully; it’s about time the old man takes his own sexist advice.

Her son sputters and coughs, shaking her from her daydream.

“Jesus, mom, that’s basically straight liquor,” he says with a shudder.
"If it were straight liquor it wouldn’t be red," she says, taking the glass back from him to finish it. "Now come on, have an oyster and let’s you and I have a chat. I have an idea about what to do about Sansa,” she says.

It does not escape her, that flicker of worry over her son’s face as he finally lifts a hesitant gaze her way. Cersei’s heart goes out to him. She’s suffered countless number of Robert’s drunken outbursts, so many public humiliations she can’t even count them. I know that look. He’s devastated, poor boy.

“Listen, about Sansa,” Joffrey says, and despite that wounded puppy look on his face, her name still slithers from his mouth with a sneer to shape the sound, he is that unhappy with her.

Her phone chimes with a text, buzzing loudly with the follow up vibration.

“I’m going to kill him,” Cersei mutters under her breath, snatching up her phone and her drink. “Let me just see what it is he wants and then we’ll talk,” she says, sucking down the last quarter of her bloody Mary through the straw as she gazes at her phone.

The text nearly makes her heart stop, but then it pumps all the faster for the shock and the fury that take root and bloom in the hot red of her bloodstream. She feels on fire, she is so angry. Of all the times for him to pull such a stunt, to be so reckless and childish over something like being embarrassed in public, this is the worst. If she acted the rash way her son did last night there wouldn’t be a man alive with the last name of Lannister or Baratheon, except maybe Tommen.

“Joffrey, are you kidding me? You know full well we need Sansa happy and more importantly alive. What were you thinking?” she hisses, lifting her eyes from her phone’s screen to settle her gaze on her son’s face, and oh does he look guilty. It’s not shame at all, like she thought, but just weak-kneed guilt for being yet another thoughtless man in her life. Why does no one but me do any thinking around here? Now she wants to slap him.

“Mom, I—” he says, but she holds up her hand between them, shaking her head sharply, left and then right before she stops still as stone as she stares at him wordlessly. He slumps back against the booth again with a scowl and picks up his phone again.

“You’ve got my attention now, so don’t waste it,” she snaps into the phone when Petyr answers, all smooth and careless, wrinkle-free linen on a summer breeze.

Petyr tells her everything, unraveling the events of last night like fine ribbon from a spool, and she angrily shoves her empty glass into her son’s chest when she learns that his little pet goons shot up some sort of retail space as well as sent an armed man into a residential neighborhood where he wound up dead. She glares at her son’s narrow back as he makes his way to the bar, at the slight protrusions of his shoulder blades that she used to call his angel wings. Intelligence, it seems, is not a requirement for the Seraphim.

“So he used a tracker app and shot up some business, and then followed her to some apartment,” she says. “And then there’s Polliver. But then he wasn’t the brightest of the bunch anyways.”

“You’re forgetting the murdered roommate.”

Cersei sighs, eyes closing as she rubs a temple. She needs a painkiller or another drink or both. “I’m assuming the police will keep this quiet?”

“Of course,” Petyr says. “Our own Det. Moore was assigned the case, though apparently he was wasting too much time on trying to actually accuse the victim. Bronn said it was an embarrassment
to the force and sent the man home. But that brings me to my next point: There’s a rather interesting tidbit in all of this,” Petyr says amiably, as if they are discussing the weather, the power ball, the latest episode of this or that. “It appears that Sansa fled to a business owned by a man named Sandor.”

“So?” Whoever the hell he is.

“Sandor Clegane. Gregor’s younger brother. There’s no mistaking him, not with those scars.”

Her eyes open. Scars she doesn’t know about, but then again Petyr’s job is intelligence, so she dismisses it. It takes her a moment to remember, interrupted as she is by Joff’s arrival and the delivery of a fresh drink, but she recalls the vicious brute easily enough as she takes a long sip. Gregor Clegane, shot up in the back of a cop car in order to keep him quiet. He was one of the last members of the old guard, as Jaime used to call them, the ones who were around for nearly everything, the ones who knew nearly everything. Well, she and Robert did pay for his funeral, at least.

“It could be a coincidence. She could have stumbled anywhere. She was, from what I have been told, extremely drunk,” she adds, remembering to spread her own invented tale with a sliver of pride, but there is also the memory of the sour looks Sansa’s been shooting her son’s way over the past two weeks. Would that little fool be so bold as to try and go after us? Is she brave enough for revenge? Cersei had warned her of a timid heart, even before her family had tried to betray them, but she always assumed it fell on deaf ears. Now she wonders.

“Ah,” Petyr says. “I’m not so sure about that. I saw them today, just now actually, coming out of the mall on Michigan. Practically arm in arm, bickering at each other like an old married couple. I find it interesting that she ran to him after accosting Joffrey, and I find it very interesting that he apparently took her in not once, but twice. She was in his apartment last night, or at least her phone was. Who knows what Gregor could have told him? Who knows how easily he could insert himself with the other men now that Sansa’s on his arm, or how easily he could—”

“Take over,” Cersei whispers, gazing at her son who is texting furiously to one friend or another. Suddenly he seems less foolish and more intuitive, almost. Maybe he knew, she thinks, pushing the straw aside to drink directly from the glass. Maybe that’s what he was hesitant to talk about, knowing it would worry me.

“Take over,” Petyr seems to agree, before he ends his brief pause with something more ominous. “Or take us down. If you’d like, I could—”

“Go. Follow them.”

“I’ve lost the trail by now, since you decided to wait so long to answer your phone or call me back,” he says, and there’s the snip to his voice, pinched and almost nasal. She ignores it. “But I could always speak to Moore down at the precinct and find out where Sandor lives.”

“Do it,” she says quickly, stabbing her straw into her ice, and vaguely she wonders how the glass is already almost empty. “Jaime is in jail, Tyrion is disowned, and my father is overseas trying to build up another empire. I can’t- no, I refuse to let this family go down on my watch. Just find them.”

“Not a problem. So, will that be all, or am I free to go? There’s someone I’m interested in tending to.”

She rolls her eyes at his lewd allusion and dismisses it from her thoughts, cluttered as they are.
Cersei hesitates a moment, buys a little time with a long *Hmmm*. Her father will be angry for severing the one tie they have to the rest of the Starks. ‘We don’t leave loose ends,’ Tywin is fond of saying. But needs must when the devil arrives, and the devil today has long red hair and bright blue eyes.

“No, wait. Petyr, are you still there?”

“Oh, yes. I’m still here.”

Cersei nods, firm and decisive. *This is the right thing to do.* She knows it. She knows it.

“When you find them, kill them both.”

It’s as nondescript a building as the entire block of them, faded brick brownstones hunkered together like old women under an umbrella, but thanks to the yellow police tape it’s easy enough for Petyr to pick out. He sits in his idling Lexus two houses down, slowly chafing his hands together in front of the heater as he watches the lazy amble of cops coming out and going in. The body will have been taken hours ago, before the sun rose, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t little clues left behind, a little trail of trapisng girl, just to confirm his suspicions before he pulls out all the stops. Not that he isn’t itching to get out there and track the scent; he’s been snared in the orbit of her ever since the Starks aligned themselves with the Lannisters and tried to get a piece of the pie. All he wanted was a little taste of *her*, once the mother rebuffed his advances. A slice of Sansa, sugar and spice just waiting to be bent over and broken.

Petyr tamps down the images that come rearing up, slides on a pair of leather gloves, and switches the ignition. In the sudden loss of warm air from the heater, he is able to calm himself down, hot blood simmering down to reptilian chill as he sets his jaw, lets his expression melt into indifference as he steps out of the car. By the time he makes his way to the steps, there is something of slight interest happening on the stoop, in the shape of short black hair and cigarette pants, a red bandana in her hair as vivid as a cardinal in the snow.

“Look, idiot, I *live* here, all right? I was just taking out the trash,” the woman says, firecracker snap and crackle, the popping of chewing gum between her teeth an added round of punctuation to her words.

“Where?” Petyr says as he climbs the cement stairs, careful not to scuff the toes of his shoes. Really, he should have changed them. He glances backwards and gestures to the sidewalk and street. “I don’t see any garbage.”

“Where the fuck do you think, hmm?” she says, easily transferring her irritation from the uniform to him, and she jerks her head to the side. “Out back where the cans are.”

“Fair enough,” he says with a smile, but where it made the girl in the scarf blush and the barista give him her number, it only serves to make this woman arch her eyebrows at him. Petyr lets the smile drop. There are other ways to impress. “So, you live here, hmm?”

“Yes, and I’m just trying to get back in my building, even though I came out here only like two minutes ago.”

“You can let her in now, can’t you, officer? As far as I see, she’s owed at least entry into her own home.”

“And on whose authority are you here, doing all this seeing,” the officer says with a defensive sort
“On the authority of my last name: Baelish,” he says. It’s an old trick, one he’s used for the decade or so he’s been linked with the Lannisters, and it’s very nearly as powerful as theirs, now. Still, it makes him smile when the officer stammers.

“Of course, sir, I’m sorry. I didn’t- I just never seen you face to face, is all,” he says, and either from embarrassment or out of some attempt to scrape together what’s left of his dignity, he doesn’t bother addressing the woman in the bandana.

“There you go,” he says, turning to face her, and he’s pleased to see she’s regarding him in a different light. There are, indeed, he thinks, because if it’s not one thing with women it’ll be another. They’re different and yet all the same at the end of the day. “No more trouble.”

“Well,” she says with a downward flicker of her gaze as she regards him. “Thanks, I guess,” and she turns her back to him as she walks through the open doorway.

“I was just wondering,” he says, walking in after her, raising his voice so it can follow her up the stairs. “Have you seen a woman here recently? She won’t be a tenant, but someone’s guest, girlfriend maybe. I’m fairly sure she was here last night.” He stands in the center of the foyer, neck craned as he watches her ascend.

“There’s lots of women here,” she says, glancing down at him.

“This one is on the tall side,” he says, not bothering to mention long legs and pale skin. “Blue eyes and long, auburn hair. Her name is Sansa, and she’s been missing. We’re all very worried about her,” he says with sincerity. He doesn’t like it when things he wants disappear.

“Nope, can’t say that I have,” she says. “Aside from a dude breaking in and dying on the third floor, it’s been pretty fucking boring around here,” and just like that, she’s gone, nothing more than the sound of retreating footsteps on stairs.

Petyr sighs. He looks around the little foyer, the crooked rows of old brass mail slots on one wall and the tiny cracks in the plaster on all four of them. The floor creaks and groans underfoot, and there’s a stale dampness to the air even though it only rained last night. Sansa is too good for this place, and he wonders what led her here of all places as he climbs the stairs to the third floor.

There is more tape, crisscrossed over the closed door, a bright yellow spider web of Do not cross that he tears down almost lazily. The door is unlocked, and Petyr steps over the small pile of police tape as he walks inside.

It’s as boring as the entire building in here, the place leeched of personality save for an extensive record collection that makes him huff with derisive amusement. Get with the times, Clegane, he thinks as he sidesteps bloodstains and makes sure to keep his coat from brushing against the splayed wall. A couch and coffee table, another small round table and just one chair. Petyr frowns, and he wonders if maybe he’s wrong; surely if these two are together, there would be more than one chair. Still, he’s a good study of people, has to be in order to learn how to make them tick and then make them pay later on down the line. Those two were close. Kissing close, he thinks grimly as he heads into the kitchen, his hands clenching into two tight fists as he imagines it.

There is a bottle of Elijah Craig, half drunk, still sitting on the counter, an open cabinet full of mismatched plates and glasses, and two stacks of dishes in the sink, an empty beer bottle in the trash and two more glasses on the other side of the sink. Petyr inspects them both and chuckles when he lifts the second one to better capture the light, because while the first only had fingerprint
smudges, this one also has the lovely print of a woman’s lower lip on the rim, and when he touches it with his gloved thumb, the still sticky gloss smears. It makes him think of mouths and what they can do, what he can do to them.

“Sansa, Sansa, Sansa,” he murmurs, bringing the glass to his nose, inhaling the still fragrant notes of caramel and oak, the fading burn of liquor. “Drinking whiskey straight. Naughty girl, what have you gotten up to,” he says, thinking of how she’d shudder and quake whenever Cersei would make her a martini.

The bedroom is neat save for the shambles of the unmade bed, a blanket and pillow thrown haphazardly on top of the flung-over covers. Petyr narrows his eyes and grits his teeth to think of the two of them rutting like base animals in here, though it doesn’t stop him from sitting lightly on the edge of the bed. He runs his hand across the mattress, smoothing out wrinkles in the fitted sheet. He would give her silk sheets and goose down, vanilla scented candles and satin camisoles. This, by way of comparison, is a pigsty.

“What’s this, hmm,” he says as the roam of his fingers catches on something under the pillow, and if he had any doubt before, it dissipates like virga now that he’s got an amethyst earring pinched between thumb and forefinger.

Petyr grins, because he remembers when Joffrey told him to buy some jewelry for Sansa’s birthday a few months back, and there is something so delicious about the idea of hunting her down while she’s wearing something he himself picked out and paid for. A lovely little link between the two of them: she with one piece of the set and he with the other, here in the palm of his hand, here where soon he’ll have her.

“Run away if you want, little girl,” he says, closing his fingers around the amethyst as he stands. “I’ll still find you, no matter where it is you go.”
“I still can’t believe it.” Sandor says, letting go of the gear shift to reach over her knees for the glove compartment as they slog it out through weekend traffic. The sun is pin-pricking brilliance all along the left side of his face, and without his sunglasses he’s half blind, here.

“Can’t believe what,” she says distractedly as she gazes out the window, but his rummaging hand pulls her attention back into the cab of the truck. “Here, you’re- no, that’s not- oh for crying out loud,” she says, sitting forward.

Sandor just manages to keep his eyes on the Acura hitting its brakes right in front of him when he feels the brush of her fingers as she finds his shades and pushes them into his hand. Quickly he uses one knee to steer and his left hand to shift into neutral as he slams on the brakes, slides a look her way to make sure she’s all right, but her seatbelt is in place across her chest. She removes his closed hand from the innards of the glove box and slaps the compartment shut. Sandor huffs and flicks open his shades to put them on.

“You’re welcome,” she mutters, as if she pulled him out of Lake Michigan with his very last breath in his lungs.

He rolls his eyes and grunts his thanks.

“So, what can’t you believe?” she says after they crawl through two more intersections. “The pretty day, the drop in gas prices, Beyonce’s new album, what,” she says, and the sudden arrival of a sassy sense of humor is enough to make him glance at her with surprise and a little bit of begrudging approval.

Now he grunts a laugh.

“That you spent over $200 on four pieces of clothing,” he says of the two shirts, dress and pair of jeans in the bag sitting in the footwell by her crossed ankles.

“Oh, please, that’s nothing. That averages out to fifty dollars per piece, and considering one of them is an Alexander McQueen dress, that’s actually amazing,” she says, this time to him and not the window.

“These jeans cost me $15,” he says with another glance her way, just in time to catch the stretch of her throat when she tips her head back and laughs.
“That’s because you don’t care about clothes,” she says simply.

“I do too care about clothes,” he says defensively. He’s no fop or dandy, not even as concerned with attire as Bronn is with his tailored suits, but he’s not a fucking schlub either.

“Not as much as I do.”

“It’s ridiculous, though; there’s no excuse for that kind of waste. It’s crazy,” he says, merging into the right lane to get ready for the interstate on-ramp.

“Oh yeah? How much money have you spent on your music?” she says, and he can feel the trash bag between them rustle as she roots around in it.

“Careful now, my handgun’s in the duffel bag in there,” he says hastily, taking advantage of the red light to look over at her, but what she pulled out is an altogether different kind of weapon. She’s got his prized Velvet Underground album in her lap, and she gazes down at the cover, tracing the black and white picture of the band members with her fingers. “Careful with that, too. That record’s older than you. Hell, it’s older than me.”

“Would you sell it to me for a hundred bucks?” she says, lifting her eyes from the album to him, and for a moment they regard one another, the blue of her eyes clear now from sarcasm, tears, dislike or anger, and Sandor finds that he likes them better for it, even has he shakes his head vehemently.

“Not a chance in hell. That record is worth more than— oh, real nice, I see what you’re doing,” he says.

She grins, the first one he’s seen out of her, and it strikes him how long it’s been that he’s known her, the life span of a mayfly, the blinking of an eye. Less than a day and it already feels like an eternity, the hours and dread and high blood pressure of it all. Sansa drums her fingernails on the record a moment before she nods and tucks it back in the Glad bag Mya left out back for them to pick up.

“I myself wouldn’t hesitate to sell it for ten, but it means more to you than it does to me,” she says, running her fingers through her hair, from the crown of her head down to the very tips of it as she draws it over her shoulder. Fathomless ginger, silk and sift, and Eyes on the road, Sandor, he thinks.

“That record belonged to my mother,” he says quietly, shifting gears as the light turns green and the car behind him immediately lays on the horn. The traffic keeps him occupied, and for the first time in his life he thinks about thanking a bumper to bumper situation.

“Oh,” she says with a voice as low as his though it’s far sweeter, just like the rest of her. She’s all lilt and light and linger, watercolor and pen to the charcoal sketch of him. “So I guess it’s pretty special, huh.”

“More than that dumb MacDonald’s dress or whatever it is,” he says, unable to hide the twitch of a smile that tugs up on the corner of his mouth.

Sansa laughs. “It’s McQueen, and you’re just saying that because you haven’t seen it yet,” she says, nodding firmly when he looks at her with raised eyebrows, and for a moment he hangs himself with a noose made up of the word Yet. “It’s gorgeous. It makes me feel alive when I put it on. It’s a man-eater dress,” she says with a conspiratorial lean towards him.

She could be a man-eater in Mya’s trash bag, he thinks with a shake of his head and the roll of his
eyes, and with a huffed chuckle Sandor pulls the truck onto the I-94W to take them up to Winnetka.

“Yeah, well, keep your appetite in check, Red. I’m the only one who knows where we’re headed,” he says, as if he did not have to use the maps app on his phone to figure it out.

“Okay, so about that, who exactly is going to take us in? I mean, do they know what they’re going up against? Why are they helping us?”

Sandor hesitates. There’s two ways he could go here, but he’s stinging-eye exhausted and doesn’t have the mental capacity at this moment to talk her down and hurtle down an interstate at the same time. So he lets just the one shoe drop, for now.

“It’s my buddy Bronn who set it up. He’s got connections to a- oh, for fuck’s sake, what now,” he says when his phone buzzes in his pocket, long steady vibrations that mean it’s a call and not a text. He gives the screen of his phone a quick look once he’s wrested it free, then swipes the screen to answer it. “Mya, what’s up?”

“Oh my god, I’m so happy you answered,” she says, but before she can say why, Sansa snatches at his phone and yanks it away from him, snaring his hand in the process.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he says, tightening his grip on the steering wheel with his left hand while they struggle for control of his phone, a tug of war that would be funnier if he wasn’t hurtling them down the interstate at 80 miles an hour.

“It’s illegal to talk and drive, Sandor,” she says, giving the phone another pull. “Unless you think getting pulled over by CPD is a good idea right now?”

Oh, he hates to concede, but the idea of spending even another second with a cop that isn’t Bronn makes his stomach flip, makes him almost taste the bitter memory of the world’s shittiest cup of coffee.

“Fine then. Put it on speaker,” he says, wresting his hand from the pin between his phone and her palm.

“Mya? You there?” she says, holding the phone up between them.

“Fuck, you guys, I can’t believe how close that was,” she says, her voice a record-scribble-scratch through his phone’s tinny little speakers. “Did you get your stuff where I told you to look?”

“We did, yeah,” Sandor says, leaning in towards his phone in Sansa’s hand. “Good thinking with the trash bag.”

“Well, let me tell you something about how good your timing was,” she says.

They listen in silence as Mya rattles off the encounter with the obstinate cop and the slime-ball who asked her questions, and when she gets to the line about asking for a missing woman named Sansa, the two of them lock eyes and stare at each other. It’s a fraction of a moment but it crackles and singes and pops as they realize someone’s already on the lookout for her. Her mouth opens as if to say something, the distraught cinch of her eyebrows suggesting apology or fret, but he shakes his head a fraction before looking back to the road. She’s said I’m sorry enough. It’s high time they leave those words behind them, along with the city he can still see in his rearview.

“I talked to Lothor just now before I called you, and I think we’re going to head out to his mom’s house further south along the lake. Just for a few days, to let the place air out. You two stay far
away from the city, all right? I didn’t like that guy one fucking bit, and that was before he tried
undressing me with his beady little eyes.”

“What was his name?” Sansa asks, tucking her hair behind her ear as she brings the phone a
fraction closer to her mouth.

“He didn’t tell me his first name, but he said his last to the cop. Baelish, I think it was.”

“Oh God,” Sansa whispers, her free hand lifting to cover her mouth.

“All right, well, thanks Mya,” Sandor says with a sidelong look at his passenger. “We’ve uh, I need
to use my phone for the GPS so we’ll talk to you later. Lay low and just, you know, steer clear of
those fuckers.”

“Will do, buddy. It was fun meeting you, Sansa. You um you need anything more, you just let me
know, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” Sansa says hastily. “Bye for now,” she says, ending the call and setting the phone on
the seat next to him.

“You okay over there, Red?” Sandor asks, stealing another look her way. Bitten lip, frown, legs
drawn up to her chest, and he’d bitch about her shoes on the seat if it weren’t for that lost, horrified
look on her face.

“Yeah, I just um. Oh,” she says with the great heave of a sigh, world weary despite her youth. How
old is she, even? She of the whiskey and the man-eater dress. “That Baelish guy’s a real piece of
work, is all. Super gross and super smart. And now he’s looking for me.”

He doesn’t know this guy but he already loathes him, after Mya’s colorful description, after the
look of disgust on Sansa’s face. It reminds him of Gregor and the filthy things he would brag
about, makes him think of his brother’s laughing expression as he detailed years’ worth of
debauchery enjoyed in the span of one three day weekend. The idea of a monster like that sniffing
around his neighbor, getting his claws into Sansa, makes his blood boil and his knuckles whiten as
he squeezes the steering wheel.

“I guess that’s settled then,” he says finally, changing lanes when he sees the Winnetka exit
coming up on the right.

“What is?”

He can’t help but smile at her, even though he can feel how wistful and sorry-ass it is. Sandor
shrugs and puts on his blinker.

“I’m going to have to cut your hair.”

Sansa was born into money. As a toddler she ate applesauce with a literal silver spoon her
grandmother had given her for her christening, as a child everything she wore was professionally
tailored, and when she turned fifteen her father flew the two of them first class to Manhattan so she
could see The Nutcracker on Broadway. But her lifetime of experience dining on the upper crust
does nothing to prepare her for the sight of the huge estate sprawling out in front of them when
Sandor pulls off a sleepy road onto a driveway paved in warm-hued cobblestones, marking an
ambling, patient path up to a house that, honestly, has no rival, not to Sansa.
“It looks like a wedding cake,” she whispers of the three story manor made from what looks like palest pink fondant, though she’s sure it’s something more like stone or granite or stucco, whatever it is mortal men use in lieu of the magic this wizard architect used here. She exhales with an open, sighing mouth.

“It looks expensive,” Sandor says as he rumbles his truck up the drive. “No wonder you love it.”

The driveway leisurely wanders up a gently sloping lawn that is green even at this time of year, though pale due to the season, and magnolia, wisteria and dogwood trees dot the velvet grass, their roots cloaked with skirts of various plants that will likely flower in the spring. It is exotic, even here in Illinois, rich with evocative life brimming during one of the bleakest months of the year. It is stunning, a lift-your-chin look of rebellion at Mother Nature herself. It reminds Sansa of the ancient emperors in China who would have silk petals and leaves sewn to trees in their gardens during winter. Beauty at all cost, if only because it is affordable when you are king.

Or queen, she thinks as Sandor pulls the truck up to what she can only call a mansion, no bones about it, because at that moment the front door opens and a woman steps outside. She’s dressed in heels Sansa calls sky-highs, in a hip hugging sweater dress that looks like it was woven from cumulus and sugar. Her head is bowed as she picks her way down the stone steps towards the circular driveway where Sandor put the truck into park, and Sansa watches, enthralled, as she flips waves of goddess-blonde over her shoulder and lifts her head to smile at them.

“Well, would you look at little miss ooh la la,” Sandor mutters beside her.

“Shush,” Sansa whispers, sparing him a pestered glance before their apparent hostess opens the passenger door of the truck.

“You must be Sansa and Sandor,” she says with the jaunty cock of her hip and a dazzling smile that’s all pale pink freesia lipstick and white teeth, something her brother Robb would call a classic Colgate smile. Her eyes are the slightest flicker across Sandor's face and Sansa is impressed that she doesn't so much as frown at the sight of his scars. “I know it’s probably bad of me to say, considering the circumstances, but I’ve so been looking forward to meeting you,” she says, stepping back as she draws the truck door open as far as it will go. “I’m Margaery Tyrell. Come on in, and we’ll get you settled.”

She feels sort of like an idiot, but she can’t help but crowd close to Sandor when they walk inside after Margaery. It’s like walking into a museum, following the hammer-on-nail tap of the blonde woman’s heels as she crosses the huge, circular foyer. This size and scope of this place shrinks her, the two story yawning space a stretch of light, both natural and artificial, coming from the windows and sparkling chandelier overhead. Even Sandor seems smaller by way of comparison. He’s still warm though, when Sansa takes that half-step into him so their arms are pressed together, and then somehow he’s even warmer when he doesn’t shrug her off, only inclines his head to gaze down at her with a smirk.

“Shouldn’t I be the one intimated by high cotton? Just pretend you’re back in Nordstrom,” Sandor says, and when she looks up at him his bearded face hides any trace of emotion until he narrows his eyes at her.

Initially it comes off as a look of weary derision, but then the crinkle and the spark in the storm-sea grey of them makes her realize he is simply teasing her instead of making fun of her or worse, flat out insulting her. Fine. Teasing she can handle.

“Even I don’t have the cash to buy anything in this place. Except maybe that,” she says, pointing to a mango-colored rose petal that rests on a marble-top table in the center of the foyer, having
dropped from the extravagant bouquet standing attention there in a cut crystal vase.

Sandor huffs in what Sansa is beginning to pick up as his standard delivery of laughter. “Tell you what,” he says, leaning across her as he reaches out and swipes the petal, his arm an effective stop against her ribs so that she cannot walk forward until he straightens and hands the soft thing to her. “Let’s call it ‘on the house.’ I think they can afford the loss,” he says with a conspiratorial whisper.

Sansa chuckles at that, a hushed, library-whisper sort of laugh that still echoes in the two story high room, and she rubs the petal between her thumb and fingers as she gazes up and around, trying and failing not to look like a star-struck rube. There is a huge staircase that curls like a gilded seashell to the left wall, a sunshine-bright sitting room beyond it and an exquisitely furnished dining room to the right. Towards the middle back of the foyer there are a set of French doors cracked open, and it’s there that Margaery waits for them with a smile.

“I’m happy to see you two can still laugh after everything that’s happened,” she says, the smile melting a bit to make way for concern in her expression. “And I’m relieved you made it here safe and sound. Now, would you like anything? Lunch, brunch, drinks, a swim? The pool’s heated, I should mention, but there’s also a Jacuzzi just out back below the veranda. Or maybe a bubble bath for you, Sansa? You, on the other hand,” she says with a hand lifting to her hip as she studies Sandor. “You look like you could use a nap.”

Sansa glances up at him to buy some time, stunned into silence by the battery list of temptations and delights, and she feels out of touch and selfish when she realizes just how exhausted he looks. *My god, how much sleep has he even had?* She went to sleep in his bed around 9:30 or 10:00, and was up in Lothor and Mya’s sometime after midnight. But while she eventually went back to sleep, Sandor instead went downtown to the police station. She’d blame his grouchiness on lack of sleep, but come to think of it his mood has actually improved, the longer he’s gone without sleep. She wonders if he is delirious, and then wonders if she should have offered to drive them. It’s hard to know what to do, where to stand, which Sansa to be after all that’s happened.

“Maybe,” another man says, and the surprise of it makes Sansa jump and lift a hand to Sandor’s sleeve as she looks back to Margaery, who has a new shadow now in the shape of a well-built man in a finer-made suit, with a smirking sort of trickster-gleam in his eyes like he’s some modern day Clark Gable. “If that shitty coffee has left his bloodstream yet.”

“Don’t remind me,” Sandor says with another huff. *So this must be the friend, then,* Sansa thinks as the cards fall into place like leaves around her. “Bronn, this is Sansa, the girl I told you about.” and that has her wonder just what he said, wonder if was the teasing type of detail or the insulting, the crinkle-eyed commentary or the sour glaring snippets, sharp like he bit them off instead of spoke them.

“Sansa, I’m Bronn. Good to meet you,” Bronn says, his hand a familiar, intimate drift alongside Margaery’s backside as he steps forward, crossing the foyer with his hand outstretched.

“Likewise,” she murmurs as they shake, and to her surprise he laughs.

“You look about as clear on what’s going on as a big puddle of mud. Come on in, we’ll fill you in.”

There is a sprawling family room area beyond the French doors, but it’s above and beyond what Sansa is used to calling a family room or a den; for one thing, the only thing that suggests it’s more informal than the sparkling sitting room they passed is the huge flat screen TV on one wall next to a full sized wet bar. Aside from that it’s as glamorous as can be with three sitting areas, cozy clusters of classic contemporary furniture like it’s a resort lobby and not a glorified TV room. And
then there is the view of the backyard, one that makes her think of that summer in high school when she went to Versailles with her senior class.

“Now that’s high cotton,” she murmurs at the sprawl of lawn, the long roman style pool and attached Jacuzzi, what looks like a koi pond at the bottom of the property, and Sandor hums in amusement or agreement or perhaps both.

“You should see it from the master suite balcony,” Bronn says with a grin. “You can’t even see the tennis court from here.”

“Bonn, stop it,” Margaery says with a cheerful scold and a flirtatious smile suggesting that she doesn’t mind his cheek one bit. They must be married, Sansa thinks as the blonde woman stands behind a cream and jade armchair and gestures for everyone to take the seat of their choice around a low cocktail ottoman.

Sandor gives Sansa a slight push in the center of her back, his translation of gentlemanly manners and the age-old rule of ladies first. Since Bronn is already seated in the armchair across from Margaery’s, she sits on one side of the matching loveseat, and she sinks a moment before the addition of Sandor’s weight makes her rise like she’s a soufflé.

“Now,” Margaery says as she elegantly lowers herself into her chair, crosses her legs and immediately sits forward with her arms folded on her thigh. “Tell me everything Bronn told you two. I don’t want to waste time back-tracking for no reason.”

“He told me to come to Winnetka,” Sandor says with a shrug, and he wastes no time in getting settled as he leans back in the corner of the loveseat with his cocked out knees brushing the ottoman’s cushioned edge, his arm stretched out along the back of the little couch. “Said one of the big bad Tyrells was a lawyer who would be interested in helping us out. I wasn’t in a position to argue with that, so here we are.”

“That’s all you told them?” Margaery says as she tips her head to give Bronn a pointed gaze that is decidedly not cheerful, but he is utterly unfazed and unapologetic. “Honestly, they’re probably beyond confused,” and Sansa wants to say She’s right, but she’s not going to get in the middle of a marital dispute.

He shrugs, sitting back and propping up an ankle on his other knee, and he drums his fingers restlessly on the armrests. “I was pressed for time, Margie, and I stuck my nose in a case assigned to another man. Besides, anyone could have followed us. You think I’m going to sit chatting away when one of the Lannisters’ men could have been watching me?”

“Wait, wait,” Sansa says with the shake of her head and the fog of confusion blurring her thoughts. He sits forward like Margaery, points at Bronn until she remembers it’s rude to do so. “You mean they were watching Sandor, right? Since he, you know,” she says, making a feeble gesture like she’s swinging a tiny baseball bat, “since he did that to that guy. Why would the Lannisters be watching you?”

“You mean he didn’t--” Margaery says, flipping her hair over a shoulder so she can glare at Sandor now. Sansa is a distracted Ping-Pong glance between them before she looks back at Bronn, who shrugs again, the grin on his face coyote-sharp and just as ruthless.

“Because I work for them.”
Sansa sucks in a gasp so sudden, so high and dry against the back of her throat that Sandor wonders if she’s just had a stroke and has lost the ability to form words. But then they come out like a flash flood, a frantic, babbling stream of No, no, no with an occasional splash of Oh my god. He sighs from the stab of guilt he feels just under his skin, though there’s exhaustion there too; weariness from the night that never ended, from the caffeine wearing off and now from the ordeal of yet another freak-out. When’s it going to be my turn to lose my shit? Nevertheless, when she springs to her feet he’s ready for her, and he sits up with a snap and the darting out of his hand as he grasps her by the wrist.

“Get back down here, Sansa. It’s okay. It’s not like that,” he says, giving her wrist the lightest of tugs, as if she is a sheet breezing on a clothesline, and somewhere deep and distant and far away in him, there is satisfaction when she turns her terrified look his way and it fades somewhat.

Sansa sits back down next to him, closer than her little tucked away corner over there, and even though he’s only a few inches away, even though he still has the snare of her here in his hand, she does not stop staring at Bronn.

“Jesus Christ, Bronn, what the fuck’s the matter with you,” Sandor snaps, glancing away from her to glare at his friend, who for once in his life doesn’t have smugness coming off him like cologne. Sandor turns back to Sansa, slides his grasp from her wrist to her hand where he squeezes her firmly enough to make her look at him. “Listen to me, Red, just let me explain.”

“You knew?” she says with a wounded look of betrayal. “You knew he works for them and still you brought me here? And she, she’s their lawyer isn’t she, and they’re going to somehow frame me for someth- oh, god, are they going to pin Jeyne on me?” she says, eye wide with horror, and he’s sort of amazed, the kind of conclusions she’s leaping to, but then he supposes life lived under the Lannister thumb can inspire.

“Should we give you two a moment?” Margaery says, words laced with concern.

“Just tell me the damn truth,” Sansa says with something of a snarl, shooting Margaery and Bronn scathing glances before finally turning to look back at Sandor. Her fingers squirm and wriggle like minnows in his hand but he does not let go. “You first.”

“You really think after everything I’d do something like that, just drop you off at their door? Haven’t I proved I’m on your fucking side yet? What else do you want me to do, huh? Want me to kill somebody else?” he murmurs, satisfied and yet somehow sad when she drops her gaze away, but at least her fingers have stopped working like she’s trying to break free.

“And I’m not their lawyer, Sansa, I work for my grandmother,” Margaery says softly, and he and Sansa turn and look over as she scoots her armchair closer. This is the part he himself didn’t know. “She’s the Illinois attorney general and she’s been working for years trying to get the Lannisters. And Bronn does work for them, but it’s a front,” she says. That he knew.

“I’m a special agent with the FBI,” Bronn says, going for gentle at last, having finally wiped that smirk off his face. He leans forward too, arms braced on his thighs and hands clasped between his knees. “I’m sort of what you’d call a spy.”

Sandor watches Sansa’s profile as she stares first at Margaery before turning quicksand slow to stare at Bronn. She blinks, opens her mouth to speak and then closes it again. She lifts her hand to push her hair behind her ears, and she’s still got that rose petal he gave her tucked in her palm, and then he realizes they’re still holding hands, that her thumb has come to rest on his knuckles. He stares at her pale nail polish until the sudden sound of her laughter snaps him back to attention.
“You can’t be serious,” she says with a shake of her head.

“Like a heart attack, sweetheart,” Bronn says with his familiar grin. “Turns out the Lannisters aren’t just pissing off pretty redheads these days. We were approached by none other than a Lannister,” he says, inhaling to speak further though Sansa’s gasp cuts him off.

“Oh my god, you’re talking about Tyrion, aren’t you?” she says, and now it’s Sandor’s turn to be confused.

“Who’s Tyrion?” he asks.

“Cersei and- and Jaime’s brother,” she says, faltering on the second name like it’s a stone to trip over instead of a simple word. “Tywin disowned him. Cersei loved it, she got super drunk that night, she was so happy. I’ve never seen her smile so much. I wouldn’t have thought he’d go to the police about it.”

“Not the police,” Bronn corrects. “He knew that would be a waste of time. He went right for the FBI, and I got assigned to undercover duty.”

“And he’s very good at it,” Margaery says. “We’ve been working together for months now,” and the affectionate warmth of her voice is a dead giveaway that they’re doing a shitload more than just working.

“A little too good at it, huh Lieutenant,” Sandor says, remembering the condescension at the station.

Bonn shrugs with a tip of his head and another laugh. “What can I say, I’m an overachiever,” he says, and then he winks at Sansa. “They pay a lot better than the FBI.”

“The important thing,” Margaery says, emphasis and tone silencing Bronn as she raises an eyebrow at him, and Sandor is just fine with that because he wasn’t too fond of that wink either. Margaery smiles as she looks back to Sansa. “The important thing is that you know you’re safe now, okay?”

“Yes,” Bronn says after clearing his throat and standing, and he crosses the room towards the wet bar along the far wall. “I hung around the homicide division and so far there’s no further suspicion over Sandor, and your name never came up at all. Still, it’s a good thing you’re up here with Margie. She’ll take you under her wing.”

“Absolutely I will,” Margaery says with a smile. “Now, what can I get you, what do you need, Sansa?”

There’s evident relief in the woman, in the deflation of tension in her shoulders as they slowly lower, and she sits back against the cushion of the loveseat, and she smiles up at Margaery when the blonde woman stands.

“That bubble bath sounds amazing, to be honest,” she says with a sheepish smile. “I haven’t bathed or showered since before all this happened, and- well, you know what they say.”

“Time to wash it all off,” Margaery says with a nod and a smile. She claps her hands and then laces her finger together. “I’ll go find Megga and tell her to draw you a tub. I’m just going to go check and see that your rooms have been set up for you, and then I’ll come get you. You two just sit tight, and think of this as your new home for now.”

And then she’s off, mincing out of the room on those dangerous shoes of hers, the sound of them
all business despite the casual sway of her hips and hair. He thinks of sharks in the water, beautiful and ravenous and one-track minded. Bronn stuck his dick in something, all right.

“She’s kind of amazing,” Sansa says with an exhale.

“Margie is more than amazing,” Bronn says from behind them with the clink of ice in a glass. “She’s a fucking class act and is absolutely terrifying in the court room.”

Sansa smiles, turning to face Sandor in full, her knees pressing against his as she shifts in her seat. She glances down and says Oh, and when her thumb brushes against his tattooed knuckle he looks down too.

“I didn’t realize we were- I’m sorry,” she says, her fingers straightening, and he releases her, his palm still warm from her hand.

“Don’t got to be sorry for that,” he says, a little rougher than he intended but there he is. He’s not a gentle person. At the very least, it’s honest self-representation. Even though you were just holding hands like a little girl.

“No, I mean, I’m sorry for doubting you. Again,” she says, tucking the hair back behind her other ear. Sansa heaves a sigh and looks up at him again with an apologetic smile. “I won’t let it happen again, all right?”

“Better not,” he says, squinting at her and going for mean, but her eyes meet his and she laughs, head tilting to the side. He frowns then when something out of place catches his eye, and before he can help himself he takes her lightly by the chin.

Sansa flinches at the touch but doesn’t jerk away from him, watches him instead with curiosity rather than that earlier suspicion that stung him, and he tilts her side to side before he hums and touches her right earlobe.

“You’re missing an earring.”

“Am I?” she says.

It’s an expensive looking thing when she touches her left ear and pulls the earring out, dropping it in her palm as she gazes at it. Sandor expected her to freak out over losing something so precious, but she simply hums a Huh and tosses it on the ottoman. He stares at her.

“What, not fancy enough for your tastes?”

“No, it’s not that, it’s just that Joffrey bought those for my birthday. Funny though, whenever I wore them he never even noticed, like he didn’t even care. So I guess I don’t really care about them, either.”

“Sansa? Megga’s got your tub filled. I hope you like Lush products, because she gave you the full royal treatment,” Margaery says from the still open French doors leading back into the foyer.

“Oh, all right, thank you so much,” Sansa says as she stands. “That’s me, I guess,” she says, gazing down at him with a smile.

“Want me to throw that out for you?” Sandor says, nodding towards the abandoned jewelry.

“That would be awesome,” she says as the smile broadens into a grin. “Thanks, Sandor,” she says, sidestepping the ottoman to follow a beaming Margaery who links arms with her as they head out
of the room.

“Don’t mention it,” he murmurs, picking up the earring and gazing at it. That’s when he realizes that while Sansa is more than willing to part with semi-precious stones, she still took that rose petal with her.

“I don’t recall you saying just how pretty that girl is,” Bronn says, mid-rummage and putter and stir at the bar along the wall.

“Is she?” he says, earning a loud Ha of laughter from behind him. Sandor rolls his eyes.

He gives up and gives in, twisting the little silver and amethyst earring in his hand so the light makes it glitter like wolves’ eyes in a black forest. Out of nowhere lines from a poem he had to learn in high school come back to him, words like lovely, dark and deep, mind’s eye memories of deep soft snow banks and a quiet, still, fathomless wood.

“No, she’s not ‘pretty,’” he says, answering himself. “She’s singular.”

“Rest in peace, I guess,” his friend chuckles, and Sandor can hear him cross the room back towards where he’s still sitting. “I took the liberty of making you a drink,” Bronn says, sitting back down, and when Sandor looks up he sees he’s got an Old Fashioned in each hand. He tosses the earring down and immediately reaches for one, trying to blink away the soft of roses in the softer of her hand.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Picset

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If the showroom quality of Margaery’s downstairs carries hints of resort life with that faint fresh scent that can only come from real flowers, with that near-tangible something that lingers around luxury, then the second floor of her house is simply otherworldly. Taking that seashell staircase upstairs is like true ascension, climbing up into near blinding light that makes Sansa blink. Such is the power of money, when walls painted sugar cookie warm and plush carpets softer than tropic sand can transform weak winter sunlight into the bloom and dazzle of an earthly star.

“So, down that hall is my room,” Margaery says, her thin bracelets a chinkling slide down her forearm as she lifts a hand and points to the immediate left once Sansa has stepped off the stairs. “Don’t hesitate to come get me if you need anything. Megga’s shift ends at five today and she’s off tomorrow, so seriously, Sansa,” she says, glancing over her shoulder, smiling like she’s on a red carpet instead of in a hallway. “Find me if you need me.”

Oil paintings hang on the hallway walls and every so often there are small alcoves with sculptures, or little canvases on tiny gold easels, tiny splashes of abstract color and bronze art deco figurines, ladies with their arms raised to the sky or draped in scarves. Sansa smiles, brushing the swishing metal skirt of one spritely woman with a fingertip, gazing back at it as she walks past, nearly eclipsing her hostess where she stands in a little offshoot hallway. There are two half-closed doors, and Margaery leads her to the one on the right.

“I’ve got you two in here,” she says, giving Sansa’s hand a gentle squeeze before dropping it to push open the door to a large bedroom.

It’s as light and lovely as the rest of the house, with a pair of fat, clean-lined armchairs facing each other next to the huge French doors leading out onto a balcony. There is pale blue bedding to match the walls and so many throw pillows on the king sized bed that even long-legged Sansa could get lost in them. The whole room feels sort of like she’s walked into sun-warmed linen. She’s starting to suspect that every room has a chandelier in it, and she’s gazing up at it with a dreamy sort of disconnect to the outside world until Margaery’s words sink in.

“Wait, what? Sandor and me, in here?” she says, spinning around to face her hostess who’s standing inside the attached bathroom, folding a huge bath sheet.

“Of course,” Margaery says cheerfully, hugging the folded towel to her chest before her smile fades into a frown. “Oh no, is it not big enough for you two? It’s not the largest room but it’s my personal favorite, on account of the balcony and the window over the tub. Or is it too feminine for him? He’s pretty much what you’d call a man’s man, isn’t he. Bronn’s the same way,” she says with the upward flick of her eyebrows and a smile that borders on salacious.

Sansa shakes her head vigorously, crossing the plush room. “No, the room is perfect, it’s just that
Sandor and I aren’t, you know, we aren’t together. Well I mean, we came here together, but we’re not together-together. We’re not a couple or anything,” she says, fully aware that she’s blushing, and she feels like she did at sixteen when Arya discovered her doodling her teacher’s name on her notebook cover.

“Oh,” Margaery says, eyes widening a moment before she laughs and shrugs, turning to set the bath sheet on the travertine countertop. “Well how silly of me to assume! I’ll move him across the hall, then, and let you have this one. Like I said, it’s the best,” she says with a wink, gesturing to the drawn bathtub that is sidled up against a huge window.

“That is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” Sansa says because in this moment it’s the absolute truth. The tub is filled to the brim with mountains of bubbles and water so hot she can see the steam from here. There are a couple of lit candles flickering on the windowsill, and high above them hang colorful pots of various types of ivy and violets.

“Good, that’s what I was going for,” Margaery beams. “So let me just clear all this out of here and get out of your hair so you can have a nice long soak,” and she turns to face the counter.

There is an array of toiletries set out, milky bars of soap with pressed flowers in them, tubs of cocoa butter and little jars of face cream, and a pale pink razor, and they all sit next to a black leather Dopp kit. Margaery tucks the latter under her arm, and for some reason watching that representation of Sandor get kicked out of the place makes Sansa feel bad.

“All right, you enjoy, and don’t hurry by any means. We can have drinks and hors d’oeuvres at any time, and Bronn and I have gotten used to eating pretty late, on account of our work.”

“Thank you so much,” Sansa says, following her out of the bathroom. “I mean, honestly, you two opening your home to us, taking us in when all this craziness is going on, it means so much to me, Margaery. And to Sandor too, I’m sure.”

“Our house?” Margaery says with another laugh, high and tinkling like one of these ubiquitous cut-crystal chandeliers. “This is my house, as comfortable as he’s gotten here.”

“You’re not- you two aren’t married?” she frowns, because of course they are, with the familiar way they move around each other, and Bronn even said something about the master suite, but then the long drawn out extension of Margaery’s laughter tells her she’s being hopelessly naïve about everything.

“Oh my god, no,” Margaery says mid-laugh, shaking her head so quickly her hair bounces, and her cheeks are a flushed and merry pink when she gazes back at Sansa. “No, we’re not married. We’re just sleeping together,” she says with a grin.

“Oh, sure,” Sansa says, nodding like that’s something she’s done before, maybe on the weekends or after work. “Right, absolutely.”

“I adore him, honestly, but between our jobs and schedules, there’s no way we could move it past the fling stage. Every girl should have a fling once in her life,” she says, stopping out in the hallway to flash Sansa another red carpet smile before disappearing into what will be Sandor’s room. “It’s wicked fun.”

Fun, huh, Sansa thinks later, up to her chin in sudsy water as she sits in a tub so deep, a tub so full of bubbles she can’t even see the caps of her knees. She’s never considered herself a casual kind of girl, aside from a healthy peppering of dates and a few make-out sessions in college, and she’s never been one to consider Just Sex to be fun. Fun was in the building of a relationship, sowing
seeds for a future harvest of trust and commitment and love.

“Look where that’s gotten you,” she murmurs, puffing her cheeks full of air before she blows a spongy cloud of bubbles out of her face.

Almost two and a half years with Joffrey, and looking back Sansa finds it hard to pick apart the experiences to find any of the fun. Sweep-off-the-feet lavishness, yes; she left behind more fine jewelry and expensive clothes than she could ever admit to Sandor, and every single one of them were bought with Lannister money. There were trips to Aspen and Greece, her own personal car and driver for a while, too. But was it fun? Can it be, when it leads to an ego bruised to match the occasional contusion on her forearm or jaw, to a broken family she hasn’t spoken to in over a year, to sitting in a tub in a stranger’s house because now she’s running for her life.

“Talk about a fling,” she says as she drains the bath and dries herself off, because there’s nothing quite like running away from everything to feel so utterly flung.

There’s a pair of jersey pajamas laid out for her on one of the armchairs, a glass and pitcher of water on the nightstand next to Sandor’s rose petal that weren’t there before her bath, and Sansa cannot help but sigh and smile. At least she’s being flung in style. She steps into and pulls on the pajamas, feeling only mildly scandalous that she has to wear them commando, and is sitting on the edge of the bed combing out her wet hair when she hears the strangest sound.

Is someone mowing the lawn, she wonders, standing to look out through the balcony doors, but then it revs up again and she follows it out into the hall, and then she smiles.

His bedroom door is still half open and there’s that humid aftermath smell of a hot shower and men’s soap, and Sansa bites her lip as she lightly, gingerly pushes her fingers against the door. She’d call out his name but she doesn’t have to, because the sound she heard is the sound of him snoring, here where he lies on his bed, head on a stack of two pillows and arms folded across his bare chest. The pajama pants he’s in are different from the ones he wore last night so she can only assume he got the same royal treatment she did. The fact that they’re about half a foot too short for him proves it, and that broadens her smile.

Her mother used to complain about her father snoring, especially after long nights at the office or after one too many scotches after dinner, and so Sansa slips into her mother’s skin as she walks to him on carpet so thick there’s no point in tiptoeing. Make him roll onto his side, she hears in her mother’s voice, but that seems more than a little forward her. Sansa bites her lip with a frown as she watches him sleep.

His wet hair is raked back away from his face, and the plain sight of his scars makes her wince, but this time for the pain of them and not the brutality of their aesthetic. His chest and arms are covered in old-school tattoos like he’s the incarnate of some vintage army boy stereotype. Even in sleep he cuts a formidable figure. But then he sucks in another deep breath through his nose, filling the room with the sound of chainsaw snoring, and Sansa has to cover her mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

“Sandor,” she giggle-whispers. “Sandor, come on, roll onto your side. You’re snoring so loud,” she says, but either her voice is too quiet or he’s too far gone, because he simply opens his mouth to swallow the last of his log-sawing before he smacks his lips and turns his head away from her.

Fine, she thinks, dragging her hair over her shoulders so it won’t hang in his face, and with a nervous sort of grimace Sansa tucks her hands under his shoulder and ribs and pushes up. He’s warm smooth skin and about a ton of muscle, considering how hard it is to make him budge, but after another rattling snore he twitches.
“Gedditoffame,” he mumbles, words garbled from sleep and the thick of his beard, voice impossibly low now that it’s so drenched in dreams, and he lifts a hand from his chest to swat at his shoulder, brushing her wrist with his fingers. Sansa freezes a moment, wondering if she’s about to be discovered, but he stills instead of wakes. With a grunt of determination, she flexes her arms and gives him another hard push.

Even as deeply buried as he is in slumber Sandor is grumpy, and he mutters darkly in his sleep as he reaches out for another pillow and snatches it to his chest. But he stops snoring now that he’s on his side, and Sansa gazes down at him with her hands on her hips, proud of her hard work.

“There. Sleep in peace, you old grizzly bear,” she whispers, giving him one more glance as she heads for the door.

“Muh,” he says into the pillows, his hair falling across his cheek as he shifts and burrows. “Bunchafuckers,” he says, true to himself even in dreams, as bristled and cantankerous as he always is, and she cannot help but smile, cannot help but laugh once she’s back in her own bedroom.

His sleep is so deep and dark and consuming that Sandor wakes with a violent start, his hands clenching and making fists in a pillow that’s dragged to his chest, and he flips onto his back and sits up with a start. The room he’s in is flooded with pale, early morning light but it does nothing to help him identify where the hell he is. Sandor blinks owlishly as he looks around at the opulence of his surroundings, flings the pillow away from his body and stares down at the strange pair of pajamas he’s wearing.

“What the fuck,” he says, shaking his head with a frown. He remembers hands on him, or was it dragonflies, remembers some woman talking to him, but No, no, that was a dream, he thinks, still looking around with bemusement until his gaze settles on the folded pile of his clothes on an armchair in the corner.

And then it all comes back like a flash flood. His last haircut of the night, a woman in a hail of gunfire and glass, leftover pasta and Solomon Burke and the shuddering crack of a bloodied baseball bat. A broken phone and a man-eater dress and driving up the interstate, a stiff cocktail before a hot shower and then nothingness. And now here in this room, where he could almost, almost tell himself it never happened, if it weren’t for surroundings, memories both abstract and textile. He flexes his hands, can feel the ghost-weight of Sansa in his arms. He looks around, can still remember the bright blonde of the other woman and her easy going smiles only the truly wealthy can manage, and that reminds him of everything.

It's all gone.

His livelihood and his home and the safety and security both of them provided are all figurative – and in the case of the former, almost literal - clouds of dust. He is a tactile man who works with his hands and always has, whether it was the handle of a broom or the stock of a gun or a pair of scissors. Sandor looks down at his hands, where they rest palms up on his thighs, open and empty like the space where his barber shop used to be. Wordlessly his back bows and he drops his head into his waiting hands. At least they’re doing something now.

For a moment the room spins like he’s drunk though he’s sober as a monk, and the vertigo yanks and pulls on him a moment as thoughts dart around his brain like a frightened school of fish.
Insurance money, police reports, dead men, this strange new concern for Sansa, all of them whip around until he cannot make sense of them anymore. His heart pounds.

“Goddammit,” he mutters, squeezing his eyes shut as he rubs his palms down the length of his face, sitting up and dropping his hands as he does so. Clegane Barber Shop has been around since before he was born. It only took him five years of running it on his own to lose a 45 year old business.

Sandor stands and crosses the bedroom to splash his face with water in the bathroom. He thinks of Gregor and his old man, conjures up their identical looks of derision and I-knew-it disappointment, braces his hands on the counter and stares at his dripping wet reflection in the mirror. He has a silent argument with ghosts as he locks eyes with himself. Weak-willed words of defense against an eternal verbal assault that has not stopped since it started when he was a boy, that will not stop until he’s in his grave. Self-awareness does nothing to stop him, because hope, even dark hope like his, springs eternal, and he tries to win.

“Fuck you guys,” he says, thinking of his father’s grave and the urn of his brother’s ashes he threw in a dumpster outside a Polish restaurant. “And fuck that shop,” he says, pushing himself off of and away from the bathroom counter.

He is rootless now, in essence homeless as well, considering he has no desire to back there anytime soon. His livelihood might have been destroyed, but so are the last ties to a past he’s been trying to shrug off for years. He’ll start over on his own terms, once the insurance money comes through, and even though it’s his most recently and extensively honed skill, he doesn’t have to necessarily do barber work. I could do construction, he thinks as he pulls on a shirt and opens his bedroom door to step out into the hallway. I could do whatever the hell I want, because all the people who forced my hand are dead now, he thinks, because it’s not loss. It’s freedom.

It takes him only one wrong turn before he finds the light-filled foyer and the spiral staircase that empties out onto a marble floor, and it’s cold beneath his bare feet, the kind of cold that is crisp and clean rather than foreboding and ominous. But then he supposes that rather matches the house’s owner. Crisp and bright and smiling, not some fur-draped mothball-stuffed old woman, some batty old broad like the crazy lady in Great Expectations.

Margaery was her name, he remembers. Bronn said she was crafty, but he never said just how in the black she was. Judging by the look of this room and the smell in the air, the rub of his sheets and the marble beneath his feet, she’s richer than Midas, though for Bronn’s sake, he hopes not everything she touches turns to gold.

“There he is,” he hears to his left, and he takes the steps necessary to stand in an open doorway that yawns into a lavish sprawl of a sitting room.

Sansa is smiling up at him, sitting in a floral print high backed armchair with her feet curled up, prim and regal even in what are clearly pajamas. Across a low dark wood coffee table Bronn and Margaery look up and smile in unison from where they sit side by side on a sofa, as casually dressed as they were all spruced up earlier. And exactly when the hell was that, he wonders, blinking as he looks though one of the floor to ceiling windows to the front yard. His eyes widen, because the light isn’t pale because it’s morning, it’s pale from the thick snowfall.

“Isn’t it pretty?” Sansa says, gazing out over her shoulder at the scene behind her chair. It is pretty, but to him it’s mostly just a bunch of extra work to do.

“Jesus Christ,” he says, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. “How long was I out?”
Margaery picks up Bronn’s hand from where it rests on her knee, cranes her neck as she looks down at the watch on his wrist. “About 19 hours.”

“Oh,” he says. It makes sense. As rested as he feels he’s equally discombobulated, with such a long stretch of sleep and dreams between then, all chaos and rain and noise and panic, and now, peaceful rich suburbia with blankets of snow covering everything up.

Margaery asks if he wants coffee or anything to eat, tells him it’s right smack between breakfast and lunchtime, and when he admits he could do with a little of the former and a lot of the latter, she pops up like a jack in the box and tells him to wait a tick. Part of him wonders if she doesn’t enjoy playing mother, here in this massive dollhouse of hers, and he watches her with amusement as she sails out of the room in expensive looking loungewear, happy like she’s off on vacation instead of to the kitchen. Sandor snorts a laugh when he looks back and sees Bronn watching her leave as well.

“So what else did I miss?” he says, gesturing to the wintery landscape outside as he takes a seat in the armchair next to Sansa’s, resting his forearms on his knees as he glances between the two of them.

He’d feel weird, sitting in this formal living room wearing pajama pants and an old t-shirt, if Bronn weren’t wearing track pants and an old sweater. Sansa’s dressed for bed as well but it doesn’t much matter to him. She’d look all gussied up if she was wearing a trash bag.

Bronn nods towards Sansa, who sets her gaze adrift from the window to him like it’s a breeze of snowfall, light and soft. She gives him a small smile, sad on the edges though her eyes are warm enough.

“We were just talking about what Sansa’s next move should be,” Bronn says with a gesture her way.

“I was telling them that I’d go to my family if I knew where they were,” she murmurs, looking down at her fingers, running her thumbnail along her cuticles. “It would be the safest, considering.”

“Oh, yeah,” Sandor says when he remembers. “Witness Protection, huh,” and she glances up at him with a nod before lowering her gaze once more.

“But, and I was in the middle of explaining this when you came down,” Bronn says, sitting forward in a pose identical to Sandor’s. “Considering how she’s connected to the Lannister case me and Margie’ve been working on for so long, and if she swears to testify against them when the time comes, I’m sure I could pull some strings and track some of her family down.”

Sandor looks at her. She’s smiling but it’s that strange waver between happy and sad, where the odds are split whether she could burst into laughter or tears. She meets the unabashed study of his gaze, and he frowns.

“You’re up for testifying against them?” He imagines her in court, shaking like a leaf, her voice a warble. But then he remembers the flare of her temper and the prod of her finger on his chest. It’s the second Sansa who replies, her chin up and eyes clear, though he swears there’s the barest swim of tears there.

“Whatever it takes.”

“I could probably find out within a week or so,” Bronn says. “I don’t recommend her buying any
airline tickets anytime soon, but provided they’re in the country, we could find a way to transport her the second we find out.”

There’s an odd mingling feeling inside him at the thought of her leaving as abruptly as she showed up. Relief is right up there at the top, considering he’s dodged literal bullets since meeting her. But there’s a bizarre sort of comfort knowing there’s someone else here as lost and untethered as he is. Two balloons let loose in the sky is a lot less lonely than just one, but he supposes he’s been alone most of his life, and it’s not an unfamiliar feeling, in the end.

“All right then, Red, it’s time,” he says, slapping his knees as he gets to his feet.

“For what?” she says, looking up at him, but despite her question she stands too.

“Your haircut. Can’t send out there without some sort of change, they’ll find you in a heartbeat,” he says, wondering what it will feel like, sifting her hair through his fingers.

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. Consider it my farewell gift or whatever,” he says, ignoring Bronn’s grin as he stands as well.

“Thanks,” she says with a smile, her fingers running through her hair like they’re tiny little goodbyes.

“Don’t thank me yet,’ he says gruffly. He turns to go find Margaery and see if she has any scissors. “I still need to go on YouTube to figure out girl hair.”

After he watches a handful of videos, it only takes Sandor a few minutes to shovel down the scrambled eggs and toast Margaery made for him, and he chases it down with hasty sips of coffee while Sansa and the others sit with him at the round table in the breakfast nook. His back is to the window and Sansa sits across from him with her chin in her hand as she gazes out past his shoulder and the wild of his long black hair. The snow falls lazier now and it’s a far lovelier sight than the rain soaked, chilly streets back in Chicago, and she can’t help but feel like the snow has done some sort of magic in protecting them from further harm, like it’s falling just to cover their tracks. She certainly feels safer, out here with Sandor and armed now with Bronn’s reassurance that he can help find her a way home. It’s such a tantalizing thought that she is able to ignore that niggling doubt she’s had for the past year or more, the worry that even if she finds them they will slam the door in her face.

“Hey, you, earth to Red,” Sandor is saying, and she startles and blinks as her gaze darts from the snowy backyard to him, here where he’s snapping his fingers at her with one hand and holding a forkful of eggs with the other. “Sansa, do you copy?”

“Roger that,” she says quickly, sitting up straight as she flips her hair over her shoulder.

Sandor looks amused in that dangerous way of his like cats with mice or bears with honey. He takes his bite of eggs and chews slowly as he regards her, shaking his head at her when he finally swallows his mouthful. “Okay, so what did I say?”

“Umm,” she says, drawing it out into a hum to buy time and rack her brains to see if anything seeped in while she let her thoughts wander, and even though he arches an eyebrow at her and gives her a stern look, she can’t help but grin. “Well, I mean, you were talking with your mouth full and it is very hard to understand pig speak,” she says, all maternal discipline to her tone.
Sandor laughs.

“He said you should get your hair wet before he cuts it,” Margaery says. She’s got her elbows on the table and a cup of her own coffee in her hands, and she idly blows on it between sentences. “But I think he should get a feel of your hair dry before you do so. So he can get the weight of it,” she says with an imperious nod.

Sansa looks at Sandor, who drops his gaze from her as he pops the last bit of his toast in his mouth, his jaws working as he takes the napkin from his lap and wipes his beard with it. Finally he looks up at her, guarded, almost wary, and it confuses her until she thinks of him running his hands through her hair. It’s an act of utmost intimacy, one she’s always enjoyed though Joffrey never liked it, something parents do until lovers replace them. Sansa reminds herself that it’s part of his job, but there’s something about the informal setting they’re in that makes it hard to imagine him in a professional capacity. And so her heart is beating hard and fast like the pound of rain on a tin roof when she lifts a shoulder and shrugs it.

“All right, fine,” he says as he sits back in his chair.

Margaery hurries off to go fetch Sandor that Dopp kit she had originally put in Sansa’s bathroom while Bronn strolls out of the room with his phone pressed to his ear as he murmurs in tones so hushed Sansa cannot hear. She watches him disappear before looking back to Sandor, and there’s another thumb of her heart when she finds that he’s watching her.

“What,” she murmurs, lifting a hand to her mouth and then her cheek, thinking there’s something on her face. He rolls his eyes.

“Are you always so self-conscious?”

“Says the man who’s grown out only one side of his hair to hide his face,” she retorts, proud of being fast on her feet this morning.

“That,” he says, getting to his feet as he comes around the table to stand behind her chair, “is because I have every reason to be, unlike you,” and then he sighs, a slow steady exhale, and then he pauses, long enough that Sansa wonders if he’s snuck out of the room, and then his fingertips brush her temples and her eyes close of their own accord.

She can just barely discern the blunt half-moons of his short nails as he gathers her hair away from her face, the light drag of them as his fingers slip past her hairline. The heaviness of hair on her shoulders and back lightens as he lifts it up, and she shivers when he lets it fall from his hands and between his fingers. Before she can help herself, Sansa tips her head back, the slightest of inclines, the subtlest of moves, but his fingers still a moment until she lets go of a breath.

There’s a sorry moment when he takes the touch away, and she’s positive he’s going to step back and refuse to cut her hair, but then his fingertips are at the sensitive skin of her temples and her eyes close of their own accord.

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“I,” she says, her voice shaking so hard she just stops talking all together.
“Sorry,” he mutters after clearing his throat.

“All right, so I have scissors and a comb and some towels,” Margaery says, brisk bright business from behind them, and it’s such an explosion of sound Sansa jumps an inch or two in her chair while Sandor swears profusely from behind her, and they both of them turn around to stare at her.

Margaery blinks and then smiles, vixen-clever and coy. “Sorry about that, did I startle you? Bronn keeps telling me he’s going to put a bell on me, I’m so sneaky. Anyways, Sansa, you want to come here? I’ll help you wet down your hair in the sink.”

It’s not as sensual, not as soft-touch-sinking as when her hair was dry, but she is still hypersensitive and hyperaware of his presence and his touch and his every move once she’s sitting with a bath towel around her shoulders like a smock with a layer of newspapers under her chair.

“Here goes,” he says. “Don’t claw my eyes out if I fuck this up, all right? You’re the first woman I’ve ever had,” he says, and she hears the clatter of scissors on the table next to her when Bronn bursts out laughing from the other room. “First woman customer, goddammit,” he snarls.

“Either way I’m honored,” she quips, looking back and up at him, and the incredulous expression he gives her is enough to make her burst apart with laughter.

“I should buzz your head completely for a line like that,” he snaps, giving a sheaf of her hair a sharp tug that makes her squeal. “Now sit still, Red, so I don’t fuck this up.”

He sets his phone on the table and watches a few seconds of one video before he picks up the scissors and gets to work, and to keep her sanity Sansa decides not to watch it when the sounds of snipping start to fill the air. The first few snaps of the scissors are hasty, right at her shoulders, and Sandor explains that he’s getting rid of the length now to make the finer work easier to handle.

“I’ve had a few of those emo hipster types come into the shop,” he says after a while, coming around to squat in front of her as he turns her head this way and that. His forearm rests on his knee and the scissors dangle expertly from his fingers as he uses his other hand to tilt her face to the side. “Long shaggy musician hairstyles, so I figure I’ll give you something like that. I’m sure you can pull it off.”

“What if I can’t?” she asks his mouth, finding it fascinating how she can hear his words without being able to watch them form behind the thickness of his beard. She lifts her eyes to his where they’re already on her.

“You will.”

It’s the strangest sensation to feel the circulation of air on her shoulder blades and back, then the tops of her shoulders as he continues to snip away, pausing only here and there to either back up the video or switch apps to scroll through images in Safari. It’s always been sort of a security blanket, the length of her hair, something to find comfort in since she’s worn her hair long since she was in kindergarten. But there is a lovely sort of lightness here, a freedom that feels at once timid and brazen, knee-knocking and spine-straight. Sansa sneaks her hand up to her throat, slides it around to the nape of her neck. She jumps when he swats her hand.

“Quit it, now, or I’ll fuck up,” he says, deep voice far away from concentration.

Sandor stands in front of her again, hands on his knees as he hunches over with his face half a foot from hers, and she lets her gaze wander as he studies her hair so intently he doesn’t even notice. There is so much texture to him, the scruff of his beard, the gnarl of scars and the shadows they
make under the fall of his hair, and she has to mentally berate herself when she is so tempted to reach out and touch his face that she very nearly does. You're like a naughty child, she thinks, and it makes her think of Rickon with his hands in everything, makes her think of Arya and Bran with their prank phone calls.

“Don’t be sad now,” Sandor says, ruffling her hair at the crown of her head as he watches the way it falls against her face. He brushes a lock of it aside, pinches another with his fingers as he pulls it straight and lets go so it springs back into place. She lifts her eyes to his, and to her surprise she finds him smiling. “I’m almost done, I promise.”

“That’s not why I’m sad,” she says with a smile to match his, with the shake of her head that makes her cheeks tickle when her freshly cut hair grazes them. “I just miss my family.”

“Ah,” he says, standing up straight and walking behind her chair again. “That’s understandable.” Voice hushed, at least for him, words soft, at least for him. Touch feather-light, because it’s him. "All right, now. You’re done, Red.”

She shivers again when he huffs a breath on the back of her neck to blow the cuttings off her skin, and when he whips the towel off her shoulders she immediately lifts her hands to touch the short length of her new hair. Sandor comes to stand in front of her again, arms folded across his chest as he regards his handiwork. There are wisps of it that go down her neck nearly to her shoulders, two swoops of gradated bangs that rest against her cheeks, and sprigs of hair that do a sort of outer flip in the back. Even without a mirror she can tell it’s something that would impress her sister, something that would make her fit in at all those alternative music venues Jeyne was starting to get into.

“Here,” Margaery says, materializing again in her particular style, and Sansa looks up to see her holding out a hand mirror. She beams. “You look amazing.”

“Good stuff,” Bronn says from the doorway leading into the family room.

She takes a breath and then lifts the mirror to gaze at her reflection, and when she gasps with shock it’s because he did such a good job. Sansa turns her head left and right, unable to stop grinning when she runs her fingers through it, watches the way it falls, shakes her head vigorously to feel the loose airy way it drifts against the back of her neck.

“I love it,” she breathes, staring at her reflection so hard she starts laughing. She can barely recognize herself; she could drift through a board room full of Lannisters and go unnoticed. And to add to that success, it’s a decent cut. It’s more than decent. It’s perfect.

“I told you you’d pull it off,” Sandor says, grinning down at her.

“You did good, even if I was the first girl you ever had,” she says, going for that brazen side of freedom even though her cheeks flush so hot she’s positive they’re bright pink.

Sandor smirks, not one to be outdone.

“Thanks for popping my cherry, Red.”

Chapter End Notes
Margaery's floor plan and the haircut inspo
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

For the past day and a half she’s been touching her hair, little whisper-cool touches, light like snowflakes across the back of her neck where she twists locks of it around her fingers, and always with a half-smile on her face that reminds Sandor that he himself put it there. He has marked her, in some small and strange way, and while he doesn’t know exactly what that means, he knows it means something, and so he lets it sit here in his heart, a foreign little squatter that doesn’t speak his language but tries to all the same.

She’s doing it now and he’s watching her from the veranda, the way she tries to read some book she found, her knees drawn up to her chest and her back nestled in the corner of one of Margaery’s expensive couches. The flip of a page, the flit of her eyes as she smiles, tips her head against her knuckles before her fingers unfold and slide into the new crop of her hair. Despite being on hold for twenty minutes and the irritable mood that’s put him in, the corner of his mouth twitches up. He huffs a white-cloud laugh and turns away from the window with a shake of his head, phone pressed to his ear with one hand while the other is shoved in the pocket of his jacket.

She’s impossible, he thinks, gazing out at the still and silent wonderland of snow that stretches out from the bricked stairs at his feet, all the way down to a wooden fence half obscured by shrubby pines that are so fat and glossy they make him think of winter ponies.

Impossible and unavoidable, given how many times the memory of his hands in her hair has come back to him since Sunday afternoon. It will tease him like the lazy drift of smoke on autumn breezes, the way she tilted her head back into his touch, the way all that auburn sifted through his fingers, like he was a man who found gold in a stream after panning for it his entire life. It will hit him like the sudden onslaught of an oncoming train, the way she whimpered for him or because of him, the subsequent hot rush of power he felt to hear it, the way it made his hands flex into fists on account of it. What he’d give to hear her again, just one more time. Just once, he’d like to think he was to thank for coaxing a beautiful woman to make noise.

Sandor clears his throat and glances over his shoulder, as if Sansa can hear his thoughts through his skull and several panes of energy efficient glass. Margaery is there now too, and they smile and laugh and use their hands to talk, like they’re in some sort of coffee commercial or on the glossy page of some magazine selling women’s loungewear. It’s boring and bland but still, it’s compelling enough that he stares a moment. What is it about beautiful people, he wonders, because he’s never been one, but then the inane elevator music cuts off in his ear, and the thought dissipates as a nasal, accented voice comes through the line.

“Dondarrion, Dayne and O’Nutten, thank you so much for holding, how may I help you on this lovely Tuesday morning?”

Sandor rolls his eyes. “Put me through to Beric, I need to file a claim on my business.”

“Oh, no, well I am just so sorry to hear that, Mister…?”

“Clegane. Sandor Clegane.”
“Please hold, Mr. Clegane.”

There’s more elevator music but the sound of a human voice perks him somewhat, and he trots down the snow covered brick stairs that lead from the veranda to the lower level where steam curls up from underneath the azure blue pool and Jacuzzi covers. He’s half tempted to shove aside the thick padded hot tub cover to feel the heat with the dip of his hand, and since there’s nobody here and nothing to do, he squats down and does so. It amazes him, the amount of money wasted on heating a pool and spa that no one is using, and somehow the water feels all the hotter, all the silkier for it. Perhaps later he and Bronn can come out here for a soak with a couple of drinks, maybe even a cigar like they used to enjoy overseas every once in a while, and then he thinks of beautiful women and bare legs, the slip of them in steaming water and the soft of auburn.

“Sandor, you there?”

Feeling as if he’s been busted trespassing, both physically and mentally, Sandor hastily stands and shakes the hot water from his hand. “Yeah.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting. It’s never good to hear from a client unless they’re asking for more coverage,” Beric says with a chuckle. He exhales into the phone, the sound of a man stretching behind a desk. “So, which is it? Good news or bad?”

“Bad,” Sandor says. “But I’ve never had to file a claim before so I guess there’s that.”

“Well, shit. I’m sorry to hear it,” Beric says. “Go on, lay it on me.”

Sandor gives him the blow by blow of the shooting but he knows better than to mention any troublemaking redheads traipsing in from the rain. He describes the mess and the abandoned cash register, though he reckons there was less than $200 in there, details the wide open shattered window and door. When snow flurries begin to fall he walks back up the stairs to the covered veranda, closes his eyes against the memory of losing everything.

“Anyways, so that’s about that. I’ll need to completely overhaul the place, so the sooner you can send out the adjustor to inspect the damage, the better.”

Beric gives a long, low whistle under his breath. “That’s some tough luck there, buddy,” he says, and Sandor can practically hear the man shaking his head.

“Yeah, no shit.”

“Look, I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” he says slowly, and there is a sick tingling crawl of dread that picks its way down Sandor’s spine. His eyes open and he stares sightlessly at Sansa and Margaery through the window. “But we don’t cover incidents like that, Sandor. You gotta go to the cops for criminal shit like that, not that they’d pay.”

“I mean, if it were up to me I’d fork over all the money you needed to get you back on your feet, but my hands are tied here,” the insurance agent says, but when he keeps talking Sandor can’t hear it.

His hand drops away from his face, the phone fleetingly forgotten in his fist even though he’s holding it so tightly his knuckles hurt, and he turns to stare down the length of the veranda, past
the supporting pillars at the end and into the gauze of snow covered pine trees and bare-boughed deciduous. All this money, all this decadence, and here he stands, a hunted down pauper with nothing to his name except a bunch of vinyl and a beat up old truck.

“Fuck. Fuck! FUCK!” he shouts, and for added weight and punctuation he winds back and then launches his phone as hard as he can, wishing he could fling it through his insurance agent’s window so he’d know how it felt. The outburst is so sudden, so out of the snow-flurry-blue that a flock of roosting birds erupts from the evergreen like black fireworks, a doomsday celebration just for him.

“Shit goddammit it all to motherfucking hell,” he snarls, turning and walking away from the debris of a shattered smartphone, pressing the heels of his palms against his closed eyes as if to keep his brain from exploding like those birds. He lowers his hands and looks around, desperate to hit something, to punch out the anger and desolation and sheer loss he feels, and one of those milk white pillars of stone looks good enough to break a few bones on, and he draws his arm back to give it one hell of a go, but then two slender hands wrap around his bicep and tug him back.

“Now, now, now,” Margaery says quickly when he turns to glare down at his intruder. She raises her eyebrows and shakes her head slowly. “That’s a bad, bad idea, Sandor. Nobody wants to go to the hospital right now, all right?”

Sandor grunts; it doesn’t sound half bad. Maybe they’d give him morphine so he could fall asleep for the next hundred years or so, wake up when all this mess is over and everything is back to how it was, but that’s impossible. He lifts his eyes from her when a flicker of movement in the background catches his attention, and he sees Sansa standing in the open doorway, hugging herself from the cold or his outburst or both. Another impossibility.

“What happened?” Sansa says with a frown.

“Nothing happened, that’s the problem. My insurance won’t cover it. Any of it. I’m- there’s nothing.”

“Oh my god, Sandor, I’m so sorry,” she whispers, a hand lifting to cover her mouth, and she gazes at him with her brow knitted with concern and saccharine sympathy.

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” he snaps, and Sansa’s eyes widen before they narrow, and by god if she wants to give him a fight he’s more than willing to—

“All right, listen,” Margaery says swiftly, pulling his arm until it’s more or less by his side once more. “Come inside. You want to hit something?” Margaery says, voice a low lilt as she gives his arm another tug, her fingers firm digs through the layers of his jacket and flannel.

“Yes,” he says with scathing passion.

“Then I’ve just the room for you.”

It’s a home gym on the second floor she takes him and Sansa to, and he’s not just talking about a couple of hot pink barbells and a dusty treadmill. No, there is a whole wall of free weights and bosu balls, coils of jump rope hanging by hand wraps and a cracked pair of boxing gloves that might be Bronn’s though Sandor suspects there probably Margaery’s. There is a treadmill though it’s high shine from use, a stair climber and an elliptical machine, but the point of glory for Sandor is the taped up old punching bag hanging from a metal chain in the corner.

“Go nuts,” Margaery says with a grin as she walks into the room and turns around to face him, She
put her hands on her hips and tips her head towards the punching bag. “Beat them all up, Sandor. The Lannisters, the guys with the guns, the bastard insurance company. Better than a therapist, that bad boy over there.”

Without a word he strips off his jacket and tosses it in the corner, strides across the room and when he’s a few feet from the bag he rushes forward and slams his fist into it. Over and over again, to punch out the thought of his father shaking his head at the mess his youngest son made, to punch away the self-loathing because that’s an all-you-can-eat buffet he sups on every day, to punch through the sheer helplessness he feels. It’s something he hates almost as much as hypocrisy and other people’s bullshit. He doesn’t know how long he stands there, legs bent and braced, the right fist switching for the left and back again, but at some point he realizes he’s winded himself, and with one more grunt of anger he lands one last blow to the center of it, relishing in the creak of metal as the thing swings on its chain.

“Well now _I_ want to hit something,” Sansa says, and he glances over his shoulder to where she’s leaning on the door frame with her arms crossed over her chest, and that’s when he realizes their hostess must have left the room.

She’s still demure, even with the alterna-cut he found on YouTube, standing in some baggy soft sweater and black leggings Margaery gave her. He’s seen her terrified and heartbroken, composed and aloof and imperious, forlorn and faraway and irritated, but he’s never seen her truly infuriated. The anger in him could use some company. So he nods, stills the bag with his hand and takes a step back, wipes the beads of sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand.

“Well then come over, Red Rover.”

She feels stupid for some reason, crossing the room to stand beside a punching bag with the intention to hit it, something she’s never before attempted. People always looked one step away from deranged whenever they used them at the gym. And then there’s Sandor. To have this big beast of a man panting and shaking out his big hands right close next to her has her suddenly nervous. He’s huge and he’s beyond angry and for a moment that nervousness bleeds out to fear, and _that_ makes her feel even stupider. Those ragey hands were in her hair this past weekend, achingly tender, all soft sift and loose-touch lift, save for that tantalizing way he made two fists, pulling her into him before letting her go. And that makes her realize that if he can have two sides to him then so can she. Deranged. Unhinged. _Pissed off._ Those can be hers now.

Sansa closes her hand and draws it back like he did, but before she can let it fly forward he stills her by wrapping his hand loosely around her fist. He shakes his head when she looks up at him with confusion.

“Take the thumb out of your hand. That’s how you’ll end up breaking it,” he says, letting go of her so she can take his advice.

“Like this?” Sansa says, wrapping her thumb around the top of her index finger’s knuckle.

He shakes his head again and lifts his own hand, making a fist and showing her where the thumb should be. “Curl it up nice and tight in front of your knuckle, not on top. And then let her have it,” he says, nodding to the bag.

Sansa lets her have it, launching herself forward as she throws her punch, but either her aim is off or she didn’t apply enough force, because her fist glances off the bag, and she does little more than sort of lamely push it so it swings lazily back and forth.
Sandor laughs.

“Oh shut up,” she snaps.

“Here, let me,” he says, coming around to stand behind the bag, and he hunkers down about a foot, knees bent as he holds it against his chest and shoulder, his good cheek pressed to the battered vinyl of the punching bag. He nods. “Now do it.”

It’s an improvement for sure now that the target can’t escape the flimsy of her fury, though the little smacks her fists make are nothing compared to Sandor’s whacks from before. She hmphs in the back of her throat like some angry kitten, and when he laughs again she narrows her eyes and slams her fist right into the bag so hard he grunts from its impact. Triumph flares up in her, dark and red-eyed and hungry for more.

“’Atta girl,” he says with a raised eyebrow nod as she lets loose another volley of blows.


“Wait, what?” Sandor says, lifting his head away from the punching bag.

It’s either the distraction of his voice or his movement, but something sends her aim off kilter, and before Sansa quite realizes what happens, she punches him, hard, right in his face. Pain blossoms in her hand as hot and angry as she is, a fiery streak across the knolls of her knuckles, the impact of her bones colliding with his is that jarring.

“Jesus Christ,” he shouts, letting go of the bag as he straightens to his full height.

The look on his face is almost comical when he presses a hand over his cheekbone and eye, wincing at the contact. Before she can help herself, Sansa claps her other hand over her mouth and lets loose a wild peal of maniacal laughter. But she is the only one here who finds it even remotely funny, and Sandor steps into her with a look of such loathing and anger that the laughter dries out, dies of thirst from so withering a stare, and a spike of that fear comes back as he whips his hand from his face and bends his head down to her.

“Goddammit, Sansa, what the fuck’s the matter with you?” he snaps.

“I’m— I’m—” she says, voice shaking form exertion and anxiety now that her fear has crept back in, to see him so angry with her.

The look in his eyes shifts a moment as he glares down at her, comes close to something like disgust before he sidesteps her and storms out of the room, leaving her staring after him with her heart pounding and her hand throbbing.

It takes her almost an hour before she has gathered and composed and made sense of her thoughts, and when she asks, Margaery finds an old screw top ice bag and fills it with ice water.

“I’ll be up in my room if you two need a moderator,” Margaery says with a wry sort of smirk as she gathers up a few file folders, binders and loose papers from where they are spread out on the dining room table. “My office is up there, so if you ever need me and can’t find me, that’s where I probably am.”

“Okay,” Sansa says, biting her lip as she follows her hostess out to the foyer, and that’s when she
hears the music.

“I have a feeling your grump is in the library,” Margaery says, smiling over her shoulder as she climbs the curlicue staircase. “It’s the only place there’s a record player.”

Sansa follows the rise and fall of melody, the strum and tambourine and the sorrow of a song she’s never heard before. The wintery bleach-out of light streaming through the parlor windows makes her blink as she passes through the room, and the snowy tranquility of it makes the song seem that much sweeter, that much more heartbreaking.

The library is a contemporary spin on a fairytale classic, and instead of leather wingback chairs and dark wood wainscoting there are vanilla colored walls and bay windows with pastel cushions and throw pillows that turn them into nests. Two modern style low backed sofas flank a squat, square coffee table, and off to the side there is a short staircase that leads to a loft with bookshelves lining the wall. And sitting on that staircase with his head in his hands is Sandor, a black-haired, red-flannel smolder of a heartbroken man. Sansa sighs.

“Hey,” she says, passing the ice bag from hand to hand like some sloshy sort of slinky, and after a moment’s hesitation she crosses the room and comes to sit on the step beside him.

He lifts his head, turns to look at her, and while she was expecting more of that anger, had memorized a few choice words for him in case he came at her again, instead she finds utter grief and misery, and to her mingled horror and surprise, the beginnings of a black eye there above the scars. Sansa inhales sharply. As if he needed more hurt to his face.

“Oh, Sandor,” she says, like he’s a little kid who’s gone and gotten himself into a scuffle. A scuffle named Sansa, she thinks.

“Mm,” he grunts.

“Does it hurt?” she says as she lifts her hand without thinking and rests her fingertips on his cheekbone just beneath the contusion, curiosity and concern a pair of wild horses dragging her in to him. It’s smooth under his eye where the skin is darkened and puffy, but just under it are those scar tissue knots and wrinkles, and she’s halfway to a caress with her palm when he moves. He flinches, hisses, jerks away from the touch.

“Of course it hurts,” he says, but his voice isn’t the angry snap that it was upstairs. It’s defeated.

“Here,” she says with a wince, sorry for the loss of touch, hasty to cover up the disappointment in her voice. “I brought you something,” and she holds up the ice bag.

“Thanks,” he says with that exhaled snort of his that means he’s amused. Sandor takes the bag and gingerly presses it to his eye. “Sorry about earlier,” he says after a few moments, the shift of ice between them muffling his words somewhat. “I’ve sort of got a temper thing.”

“To be more specific, I think you’ve got a phone thing,” Sansa says dryly, earning herself another one of those Sandor laughs, but it sobers and dies soon enough. He sighs and looks at her.

“I hated that look you gave me, Red. Like you- Christ, like you thought I was going to come after you like that asshole did,” he says finishing up with a shake of his head. “It made me feel like my brother or something.”

“You scared me, Sandor,” she admits, looking down at her loosely clasped hands in her lap.

She turns them over, inspecting the red and purple buds of bruising on each knuckle of her right
hand. Wordlessly he takes the ice bag from his face and gently rests it on her hand. Sansa looks up at him, and this time he holds her gaze instead of letting it drop away.

“I don’t want to scare you,” he murmurs.

“I haven’t been scared of you this whole time, not really. Not until upstairs.” She wants to tell him he’s become a source of comfort for her, not as familiar as a good long bubble bath or a hug from her mother, but still there, something new and strange and, she suspects, something maybe wonderful. But that’s a lot words she’s not ready to give shape and sound to.

“You don’t have to be scared of me, Sansa. I would never hurt you. I’m not Gregor and I’m not Joffrey. I don’t hit women.”

“But you yell at them,” she says lightly, half a tease and half a scold.

“Yeah, well, you hit men,” he bandies back halfheartedly.

“Not on purpose. Not yet, anyhow,” she says, and she smiles when he huffs out a chuckle. “I’m really sorry, by the way. I don’t know what happened, I just, I don’t know, I got distracted.”

“It’s okay,” he says, dragging his fingers up and through his hair to get it out of his eyes, and she’s not sure if he realizes it but it exposes his scars in full to her. “I should have paid more attention with little miss fists of fury going to town.”

“Oh ha, ha,” she says, leaning in to nudge him with her shoulder, and even though it’s like throwing a pebble at Gibraltar, he sways with the movement.

They sit in silence for a few moments as the record plays, Sansa gazing at the ice bag on her hand while Sandor looks down at the step beneath the one they sit on.

“Is this your mother’s record? The Velvet one?”

“Velvet Underground,” he corrects. “And yeah.” A sniff, a sigh, the shifting of his feet.

“What’s this song called? It’s pretty. I mean, it’s sad, like super sad, but it’s pretty.”

He glances at her. “‘Pale Blue Eyes.’ It was her favorite. I listen to it whenever I—” he stops himself, sighs again and straightens out of his hunker. “I didn’t inherit a whole lot from her. Her hair and her eyes, I guess, but all the other negative shit I got from my dad. Sort of ironic considering how much I disappointed him,” he says with a bitter tinge to his voice. “The short fuse, the anger, all the bad shit. My brother’s even worse.”

“He looks at her. “With the Joffrey type stuff,” Sansa mumbles, and Sandor nods.

“Yeah, that stuff. I listen to her favorite stuff whenever I feel like I’m getting a little too close to my old man. But I swear, Sansa, I would never hurt you, okay? Please tell me you know that. I need to know that you know that.” Sandor looks at her again, earnest and pained, a man broken by the past and whatever hauntings of it still remain inside his head and his heart. Oh, how well she understands that feeling.

“I know that,” Sansa says, because it’s the truth, and this time when she rests her hand on the scars of him, he does not flinch. She smiles, wistful sorrow and tentative hope, drops her hand to pick up the ice bag and carefully press it to his cheekbone. “And I’m not going to hurt you either.”
If he thought he left a mark on her with that haircut, then it is nothing compared to the mark she left on him. He turns his head as he regards himself in the mirror, and no matter which way he looks it’s still a big mess of ugly there on the left side of his face. Like he needed any help in that department. The hot shower he just took didn’t do his shiner any favors either, and it’s swollen and sensitive to the touch when he experiments with a ginger poke of his finger.

“Good on you, Red,” he mutters, shaking his head as he slaps off the light to his bathroom.

By the time he’s dressed and jogging down the stairs, there is the rustling rummaging sounds of a key in a lock at the front door, and for the briefest of moments Sandor feels like he’s back in his apartment, standing with a baseball bat in his hands staring down his door, but then Bronn strides into the foyer like he’s king in the castle. He raises his eyebrows and points to his left eye when he sees Sandor, who simply rolls his eyes and shakes his head. Bronn shrugs, outstretches his arms like he’s Christ on the cross as he heads towards the TV room.

“Lucy, I’m home,” he shouts, the boom of his voice echoing like cannon-fire against the vaulted ceilings.

“Bronny!” Margaery exclaims from behind and above Sandor, and he turns in time to see her lean over the railing at the top of the stairs, beaming like she’s Juliet in the world’s most expensive playhouse. “I didn’t know you were coming here tonight.”

Bronn tilts his head back to regard her, his grin no less wolfish now that he’s got her in his sights. He drops his outstretched arms. “For you, duchess, I could come anywhere.”

“Don’t I know it,” Margaery laughs.

“Oh, Jesus,” Sandor says, only mildly disgusted, but neither of them seem to give a shit.

He flattens himself against the wall as ‘Duchess’ runs downstairs, her bare feet silent on the carpeted steps and an amusing clash with the expensive dress she’s wearing. Bronn walks to the foot of the stairs and lifts his arms again.

“Bring it on in, Margie,” he laughs as she launches herself from the bottom step and flings herself in his arms, and she squeals when he wraps his arms around her and buries his face in her hair.

For a man who claims he’s only putting his dick in crafty, it sure as hell looks like he’s put his heart in her too, Sandor thinks, and he shakes his head with amusement as he leaves them to their charade, their true and secretive feelings that are about as hidden to the world as a pretty redhead is to him.

He finds her easily enough even in a house this huge, sipping wine at the dining room table, and it’s quiet here, between the murmurs of conversation in the foyer and the sounds of cooking in the kitchen. Sansa looks up from the magazine she’s idly flipping through, but the movement of her fingers freezes when they lock eyes, and for a moment he himself stands still.

They sat together in the library long after Sandor pressed his hand on top of hers, held the ice bag to his cheek along with her as Lou Reed sang sad sweetness and the ashes of his old life fell like feathers all around them. He figured she would have left after she gently slid her hand free from beneath his, but instead she smiled, ran her fingers through her hair and down her neck, rested her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand. The song switched to another, and then another, and when she showed no signs of leaving, he took her bruised up hand and set it knuckles-up on his knee and put the ice bag on top of it. And there they stayed, stone-statue-still, the afternoon daylight fading from bone white to dove gray, until the record played out and the air was filled
with the needle-scratch fuzz of white noise, snow on grass, the leaf-light weight of her hand on his knee until she smiled at him. Sansa said *Good music, thanks for letting me listen*, and left under the guise of needing a bath and a drink, maybe at the same time, and didn’t *that* torture him as he sat alone in dying daylight.

“There you are,” she murmurs, closing her magazine and pushing it away as she sits up straight and smiles. It’s soft and its small but it’s still a smile, and it’s for him, and he devours bread crumbs wherever he can find them.

“And there you are,” he says, gesturing to her glass. “Any more of that around here?”

She nods towards the wall behind him and he turns to see an antique mahogany buffet with a crystal decanter of red wine and half a dozen wine glasses in the center of it. He pours himself a glass and stands there awkwardly as Sansa gazes up at him, pleasant and impassive.

“We should dye your hair too, I’m thinking,” he says, taking the handful of steps necessary to stand at her side, and she cranes her neck to look up at where he looms over her.

“Really?”

“It’s too stand-out of a color,” he says, tipping his glass to his mouth with one hand while he reaches out and tugs a sheaf of her hair with the other. *Fuck it*, he thinks, admitting it out loud to her in some small way. “It’s singular.”

“But if I change it, what will you call me then? Brown? Black? Platinum?” she says, sipping her wine as he grins.

“Oh, you’ll always be Red to me, even if you shave your head completely bald.”

“You’ve *got* to stop talking about shaving my head,” she says with the narrowing of her eyes, mock stern and full of faux warning.

“Oh, are we doing more hairstyles tonight?” Bronn says as he and Margaery walk in from the foyer, both of them flushed with eyes bright like foxes at play. He’s got his hands on her hips as he stands behind her, familiar and possessive and enviable.

“No,” Sansa says quickly, standing up from the head of the table where she had placed herself, and there’s something Sandor likes about that, though he himself would never be so presumptuous. “Sorry, Margaery, did you want to, you know,” she says, waving vaguely at the seat she just vacated.

“Oh, lord no, we rarely eat in here. I use it more for paperwork than I do for fine dining. Let’s eat in the nook off the kitchen, it’s more casual, and that way we can all say hi to Elinor. Whatever she’s cooking smells amazing, don’t you think?”

He’s a burger and fries kind of man, a leftover pizza for breakfast kind of guy, but even he has to admit it does look pretty good, whatever it is Elinor serves them once they’re all seated at the table.

“Oh, I *love* coq au vin,” Sansa breathes once the plate is set before her. *Of course she’d know what it is*, he thinks. It’s a fancy ass name for what looks like braised chicken and carrots over egg noodles with some sort of gravy or sauce.

Margaery and Bronn chatter to each other while they eat, voices light enough though the topics are on the heavy side; court orders and caseloads, granny Olenna almost getting thrown in jail for contempt of court, which only makes her granddaughter laugh. Sandor and Sansa are quiet for the
most part, as neither of them are a part of this world, but both of them look up from their plates, gazes meeting, when the name Lannister is mentioned. They look at Bronn in unison.

“Cersei Lannister called me this morning,” he says, flicking his gaze from Margaery to Sansa. “She wants me to go down to your apartment building.”

“Why?” Sansa says, dropping her fork onto her half-empty plate with a clatter.

“I’ll find out tomorrow,” he says with a shrug, but his expression isn’t completely void of empathy, with his forehead cinched in a frown. “But the last time she called me personally was to plant evidence.”

“Evidence?” Sandor says, thinking of his own apartment.

“Like I said, I’ll find out for sure tomorrow. I’m only speculating.”

“Remember, you two are safe here,” Margaery says, leaning forward to reach across the table and rest her hand on Sansa’s. “No matter what they do. Okay?”

“Okay,” Sansa says, looking about as sure of that information as Sandor is of how to spell coq au vin.

“Speaking of safety, I talked to my contact at the FBI earlier, Sansa, and they’re going to start looking up Starks for you. One buddy there is going to try and root around the Witness Protection order and see if he can’t get any privy information.”

“Thank you,” she says. “Are you sure that won’t come back to get you? Like what if the Lannisters tap your phone?”

Bronn laughs and shakes his head, wipes his mouth with his napkin before he sits back in his chair with his glass of wine. “I have four cell phones, and I cycle them out every few weeks. Every six months I change the numbers.”

“Oh,” Sansa says, and then she glances at Sandor with a grin. “I just get my bodyguard to break mine.”

Everyone laughs, even Sandor.

“Anyways, Sansa, I wanted to clarify just how we’ll get you to your family if and when we track ‘em down. I could possibly arrange transport but with Cersei calling me personally now, I’m not sure how easily I can pull that off. People pay attention more when she starts digging her nose into shit. And even with your new ‘do, there, I don’t know how good of an idea it would be, taking public transportation like a plane or a bus.”

Again, Sansa slides her gaze to Sandor, and he looks back nonplussed until he realizes the implication of her linger. He raises his eyebrows.

“What, you mean me? I cut hair, sweetheart, I don’t chauffeur.”

“She called you her bodyguard, though,” Margaery says, her voice drawing out in that coaxing, beguiling way people do when they want something from you. “She feels safe with you.”

“I do, really, Sandor,” Sansa says, nodding vigorously, and there’s an arc in him at that.

Bronn laughs again between swallows of his wine. “Pack your bags, buddy, you’re going on a guilt
trip,” and both Sansa and Margaery turn their heads to glare at him, and he chokes on his wine and laughter.

“I’ll pay you,” Sansa says, snapping her fingers as the idea hits her, looking back at Sandor. He raises his eyebrows at the offer.

“I’m not looking for a handout, Red.”

“It’s not a handout, it’s a fee for service,” she says, sitting straight in her chair, and her eyes brighten and widen with excitement as she gets herself going. “Yeah, that’s it. When we find my family, they’ll give you whatever you want. Whatever amount you think is fair. You can use it to fix up your barber shop. I mean, that was all my fault, wasn’t it? So let me fix it. Just, just help me one more time,” she says, like whatever cockamamie road trip they’ll head off on will only take an hour or two. “Help me, and then let me help you. Please, Sandor.”

“Guilt trip sounds about right,” he mutters, looking into his wine glass before tipping his head back and draining it.

But there is such vivid, eager desire there in the hope that bathes her face with an almost-glow. He’d think it was deception and manipulation if they hadn’t already bared themselves to one another, and Sandor is fairly sure that even after just a few days, he knows this girl, this woman well enough to know that she truly wants to right some wrongs. And to hell with it. There’s nothing here for him, rattling around Margaery’s house. And there sure as shit isn’t anything waiting for him at his place, except for some creepster henchman sniffing around for a fading scent. And money’s money, after all.

“All right, Red,” he says with a sigh, leaning forward to reach for the decanter on the center of the table. He pours himself another full glass, wondering what he’s signing up for, but he already knows when he finally lifts his eyes to hers and sees the brilliant smile on her face. “I’ll take you home.”
It’s still dark when the alarm on his phone buzzes to life beneath his pillow, and Bronn unfolds himself from around Margaery to roll over and turn it off. 5:45am on the nose, and even though he’s woken up at this time five days a week for the past few years, it still doesn’t get any prettier this fucking early. It doesn’t help that he’s here in her bed, either; it’s hard enough getting up at his own apartment back in Chicago, but when he’s ensconced in 1500 thread count sheets with a gorgeous woman curled up naked next to him, well. You’d practically have to put a gun to his head to make him move with anything faster than the utmost reluctance.

He has spent so many days and nights here over the past several months that even if he were struck blind he’d know the way from her bed to her bathroom, and he does it now without flicking on a single light until he closes the bathroom door. It’s bigger than his office down at CPD and fancier than a Roman bathhouse, pale marble everywhere with a window overlooking her bedroom balcony, and he gazes blearily out at the predawn darkness as he brushes his teeth. He fucked her on that balcony over the summer, watched her knuckles turn white as she gripped the railing and panted out his name, and he felt like he was king of the world with her hips in his hands. That was back before she started asking him to spend the night, before she started calling him Bronny, before he started thinking of her at random parts of the day.

It’s no cup of coffee but the water pressure in her shower is enough to wake him up some, standing between dual streams of water as they beat on him front and back, and he scrubs his face vigorously with a soapy washcloth until his skin tingles as much from it as from the hot water. He washes up the rest of his body, briefly considers jacking off before deciding there’ll be enough time if she feels up for it, and it’s that idea that makes him skip the shave and turn off the water.

Once dry, Bronn drops the towel from around his hips and pads across her room, scoots his body back into its spoon around the curve of her ass and the bend of her back, buries his face in the heat of her hair at the nape of her neck. He breathes in, slow and steady and deep though he has long since committed the scent of her to his memory. She stirs when he slides a hand over her ribs to rest his arm in the dip of her waist, stretches her legs out alongside his with a hum of discontent that makes him smile in the ink black of her room.

“It’s not morning already, is it?” she says, voice tiny and far away, tucked away in sleep and dreams that he hopes he stars in from time to time. There’s disappointment in her voice and he finds that he likes the sound of it when they’re discussing his departure.

“Sorry, duchess. I hate it as much as you do,” he murmurs, bringing his hand up to cup one of her breasts, to give it a hopeful squeeze of query. “Can I say goodbye to you proper?”

“Mmm,” she says and she sighs, twisting towards him like a mermaid in the sea, and her arms lift to slide around his neck once they’re face to face on their sides. She runs her hand up into his hair and tugs. Instantly he is hard. “Depends on how good it is.”

“I’ll give you my best like I always do,” he says, lifting his head to kiss her, but then she turns her
head so that the kiss lands on her cheek instead of her mouth.

“No morning breath kisses,” she says, eyes still closed as she shakes her head.

“No for me,” he says, pushing her onto her back so he can pull himself up and on top of her, and he drops kisses on her jaw, noses his way down to her throat. “I brushed my teeth like a good boy. Maybe if you weren’t too lazy to get up with me, you could brush yours too. Hell, we could even shower together,” he says, wondering when he turned into the kind of man who wanted to do so much with just one woman.

Margaery laughs.

“Nothing you do could make you a good boy, Bronny. You could do community service and donate money to every charity under the sun and you’d still be rotten to the core,” and he groans when she lifts her legs to wrap them around him.

“Just like you like me,” he says, and now he wishes he’d turned on a light because of the delicious way she gasps and arches under him once he pushes himself inside her.

“The only way I’ll have you,” she says, and with another hum she tugs his head up and kisses him on the mouth, as mutable and adaptable as he is, and they are fluid like two snakes ribboning together, and Bronn is already missing her as he starts to move inside her.

“Don’t forget to text or call when you’re done with the Lannister business,” she says later as he fills the thermos she got him and a mug with her fancy-pants coffee. She’s in a floor length bathrobe that’s made of cashmere so fine it makes his hands itch to touch it. Or maybe that’s just her.

“Yes, dear,” he says with a grin and the rolling of his eyes, and she sticks her tongue out at him when he hands over the mug.

“I’m serious. I know Sansa’s worried. I almost wish you hadn’t told her about the evidence thing,” she says, glancing at him as she doctors her coffee with milk and sugar.

Bronn shrugs. “I lie about 20 hours out of every 24. Even I can get sick of it. I just wanted her to know what’s up, that’s all.”

“You spend some of those 20 hours with me, rotten man,” she says as she walks him out of the kitchen towards the door leading to the garage where he parks his rental car. “What exactly are you lying about when you’re here?”

He kisses her, lets it linger to buy time on how to answer that question. It’s hard enough, living two lives and trying to squeeze out as much benefit from each without compromising the other. Now he has feelings to contend with, ones which were never supposed to crop up in the first place. She started off as a highly enjoyable means to an end, a back to scratch once she scratched his, and oh, does that trigger some fond memories. It was one dinner to discuss the case and then it was two, and then it was sex in the backseat of his car and coffee on Sundays in her bed. And now?

“Covering up the fact that I’m really just using you for sex,” he lies.

She smiles brightly, looks for all in the world like she is massively relieved. “Oh, good. Same here,” she says before she turns on her bare heel and saunters down the hall. “Stay safe, Bronny.”

“Stay crafty,” he calls out after her, and by way of response she reaches back and slaps her own ass.
Bronn laughs.

The moment he’s out of Winnetka, he drives the rental to the parking lot of a grocery store on the outskirts of Chicago, where he leaves one cell phone in the trunk before he locks it. It’s bitterly cold this morning, even with the four layers he’s got under his thick wool overcoat, and he hustles as he crosses the street to where he’s parked his Range Rover in someone’s snow-slushed driveway. Behind him he leaves the rental and the cell phone he uses to contact the FBI, leaves the special agent, leaves the soft of a woman and the way he can’t stop grinning whenever he’s with her. Bronn sets his jaw, and by the time he reaches the other side of the road he has put one life on hold in order to slip into the other.

Dawn streaks the eastern wall of the sky as he pulls out a small envelope filled with cash, and with a glance up and down the street he puts his driveway rent money in the person’s mailbox at the end of the drive. Once in his Range Rover, he puts the key in the ignition and lets the engine idle as it heats up, pulls the cell phone from the glove compartment and scrolls through the half dozen texts waiting for him. They are all from Cersei and time stamped between 2am and 3am, and he’d be mildly concerned at the volume of texts if it wasn’t painfully obvious that she was drunk.

Cersei: Are u ther

Cersei: there*

Cersei: I knw it’s late but I think u shoud goover ther now

Cersei: to that girls apt

Cersei: Sansa I mean

Cersei: delete that

He smirks and taps out a reply before blasting the heater.

Bronn: On my way now.

Surprisingly, she replies back almost immediately, making him wonder if she’s even been to sleep yet.

Cersei: call Petyr, he has an errand for you before you go

“Aha,” he mutters as he finds Baelish’s number, using Bluetooth to stream the call through his car speakers. He digs the tape recorder out from under his seat and switches it on before making the call. Sounds like it’ll be planting evidence after all.

“Good, you’re on your way,” Petyr says, voice light and noncommittal. He’s heard the man order a hit with that same tone of voice, like he’s reading off a grocery list and not ending someone’s life.

“Yeah, where do you need me?”

“There’s something you need to pick up at the YMCA on Jackson. Just pull up in front and wait. I’d do it myself but I’m a bit tied up at the moment,” and there is the subtlest hint of smugness there that makes Bronn wonder. “If I can get away, I’ll try and meet you at the apartment building.”

Bronn does as instructed, driving through streets that are wet black stretches of asphalt between the lumpy lines of filthy snow that clump up between the sidewalk and roads. It’s as dismal and ugly
as Winnetka was beautiful, and his mood is an inevitable descent to grim when he pulls up in front of the Y. A young twenty-something kid in workout clothes and a watchman’s cap strides up to the passenger side of his car, shrugging out of the Adidas gym bag he’s got strapped across his chest. He raps his gloved knuckles on the window and Bronn rolls it down.

“You forgot your gym stuff at my place, man,” the kid says, shoving the bag through the open window and carefully setting it on the seat. His extra care makes Bronn think. Drugs you can toss around with relative ease, and he doubts Cersei Lannister is sending him to Sansa’s apartment to deliver a Ming vase. Weapons, then, he thinks, nodding to the kid as he pulls out a few twenties from his wallet.

“Thanks, man, I appreciate it. Go grab a pizza and some beers later, on me. As a thank you.”

“What, and waste all that time on the treadmill?” he laughs mirthlessly, pocketing the money before he produces a set of earbuds, sticks them in his ears and takes off in a halfhearted jog in the opposite direction.

He opens the bag once he parks a block away from Sansa’s building, and a quick check of its contents before he leaves the car proves that his suspicions were right. Inside among nondescript workout clothes, a pair of brand new running shoes and a gym towel is a .357 magnum, the same caliber as the bullets he knows the coroner pulled out of Jeyne Poole’s lifeless body.

“Is it working now? Can you see me?”

Margaery nods once her Skype screen stops freezing in pixilated, fuzzy blocks, and she sits back once Tyrion’s face reappears clearly and crisply, at least comparatively. He’s sitting in front of what looks to be a stone wall of some sort and occasional gusts of wind tell her he’s outdoors and that it’s on the chilly side, considering the scarf wrapped round his neck, but nowhere near as cold as Chicago is today. She’d need two parkas just to walk down to the mailbox.

“Yes, that’s better. Bad internet connection?” she says, glancing down at her cell phone where she’s texting with her grandmother.

“Yeah. The price you pay for privacy out in the French wilderness,” he says dryly, turning his laptop around to show her sweep of land that is pleasantly rugged and scruffy.

Margaery rolls her eyes good naturedly. “Oh, you poor lamb,” she says, leaning forward again as something far off in the distance catches her eye. “Is that the Pont du Gard?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, it is,” Tyrion says, the smugness of his voice rich like the countryside.

“Well, aren’t you suffering,” Margaery laughs, and when he swings the laptop back around he’s grinning.

“Oh, I am, but at least I’m doing it in style. And believe me, it’s very stylish. N’est ce pas?” he says to someone off screen, and Margaery raises her eyebrows when she hears a woman laugh and respond in French.

“Who’s that?”

“Oh, my newest and dearest friend, as it happens, though she didn’t think we’d become close when we first met. Something about that pesky last name of mine doesn’t quite inspire confidence for some people. Dany, come say hello.”
She’s a lovely looking young woman with blonde hair so pale it’s nearly impossible, and French breezes make it waft as she leans down behind Tyrion in his chair and smiles.

“Bonjour, Margaery,” she lilts, and the accent of her voice turns Margaery’s name into three smooth stones sent skipping over some warm salt sea. “Tyrion’s told me so much about you and all the hard work you and your grandmother are doing. Believe me, no one could be happier to hear it.”

“Hello,” she replies with a polite smile, flicking her gaze to where she holds her phone in her lap, and quickly she taps out *who the hell is Dany??* She widens her smile to a brilliant one and tilts her head when she looks back up. “I wish I could say the same, but my client here has kept awfully quiet for some time,” she says with a playful scold to her tone.

“I’ve been busy,” Tyrion says with a wave of his hand before looking up and away from the screen. “I’ll just be a few minutes. You go on inside, it’s getting chilly. The sun’s going to set soon.” He smiles serenely until Margaery can hear a door shut, and then he immediately looks back at Margaery with a hand raised like she’s an advancing wild animal.

“Who on earth are you sharing case details with? Did you clear this with Bronn? Did you even tell Bronn, or my grandmother?” she snaps. “Do you have any goddamn idea of how sensitive this situation is?”

“Now, now, ma cherie, don’t get too upset with me.”

“Oh, would you just can it with the French? I’m not one of your little sugar babies, Tyrion, I’m your fucking attorney. Now who the hell is that woman and why does she know so much?”

“Considering she’s agreed to help me fund your rather exorbitant bills, you should be grateful I made contact with her and that she agreed to see me and then, or rather, now, decide to house me.”

“In style,” Margaery says with a roll of her eyes, gazing down when her phone buzzes.

**Olenna:** Money, honey.

**Margaery:** When were you planning on telling me??

**Olenna:** The next time you came up for air out of that agent. I only heard from him this morning, keep your hair on. GTG, appt with Varys.

Margaery sighs and tosses the phone onto her desk next to her computer.

“Okay, so why is she helping you out? The goodness of her French heart?”

“Don’t be rude,” he says cheerfully. “She’s helping me because she wants to see my family go down in flames as much as I do.”

It’s not really a surprise, considering how widespread Lannister influence has become; Tywin’s busy on the other end of the world trying to make it even bigger, even though he should know better. Rome fell, too. But for someone to go so far as to invest in that downfall, that dedication typically stems from something more than getting roughed up in an alley for not repaying a Lannister loan. *Or getting your business shot to hell,* she thinks with a wince, recalling Sandor’s outburst yesterday downstairs on the veranda.

“Why?”
Here, Tyrion grins again. “She’s a Targaryen, Margaery. A gorgeous, angry Targaryen who wants to sip on the vintage of revenge. How French is that?”

Margaery sucks in a gasp that makes him nod. The Targaryens were the family that gave the Lannisters their start, the French version of the Corleones with wild-eyed Aerys and his rising star son Rhaegar. The two dynasties were thick as thieves, good family friends with sleepover parties between the kids and exotic holidays together until Tywin had them – allegedly – all killed on a yachting trip 27 years ago. Well, almost all, because apparently and without knowing it at the time, she just got a glimpse of the only one left.

“Nobody- there were no survivors from the wreckage, Tyrion. How did- is she going to- oh my god,” she whispers, sitting back with a thump in her cream colored Louis the XIV chair.

“She was just a baby when it happened. Sick with the chickenpox and stuck at the hotel with her nanny while everyone else got on that boat. And no,” he says with something of a sigh. “No, she won’t come forward. She’s going to send her nephew over to get a feel of the lay of the land, so to speak, but they refuse to come out of hiding and reintroduce themselves to the world. The money is the only thing she’s comfortable putting forward. That, and access to her amazing wine cellar. Lucky me,” he says, and he leans forward as he reaches around the laptop for what turns out to be a glass of champagne. Tyrion grins. “Santé, ma cherie.”

“Oh, for the love of— you’re ridiculous,” she says with a sigh, pushing her laptop back to organize the papers on her desk and return them to her briefcase. “Go on, enjoy your French woman and view and delicious champagne. I’ll Skype you next month.”

“You could always come visit us,” he says after a lengthy sip. “Bring that muscle man of yours and we could all go on a double date. I could show you Nimes!” he says with half a shout, like she’s walking away from the meeting instead of about to disconnect them with the click of her mouse.

“Maybe,” she says, signing off with a laugh, but only because the idea of traveling with Bronn isn’t half bad. She wonders if he’s ever been to France, wonders what he’d look like sitting on the steps of the Sacré-Cœur at night with the city lights on his face, and she’s smiling when she checks her phone for messages and heads downstairs to where she left Sansa watching Tales of the City.

“Sandor still gone?” she asks after grabbing a bottle of Pellegrino from behind the bar. She holds it up when Sansa pauses the show and looks over and the not-for-long redhead smiles and nods enthusiastically.

“I’d love some, thanks. And yes, but he said it could take some time. Said he doesn’t know his way around Target,” Sansa says with a smile, clearly amused with the idea of sending him out for hair dye.

“What color did you decide on?” Margaery asks, filling two lowball glasses with ice and two wedges of lime. She pours the sparkling water over both and walks them to the couch where she hands one to Sansa.

“Thank you,” she says, scooting more towards the corner of the couch as is her wont; always curled up when she sits, tucking herself safe and sound in the corners of chairs, couches and loveseats. “I went with a soft black,” she says with a smile.

“Oh, but will Sandor still call you Red?”

Sansa laughs. “That’s funny, I asked him that last night. He said yes.”
“I’m sure he’d say yes to anything you asked,” Margaery teases, sipping her drink before setting it on the coffee table.

“What do you mean?” Sansa says, voice a hover between sharp and cautious, nonchalant and painfully aware.

“You know,” Margaery says with a laugh, waving her hand towards Sansa. “How he looks at you.”

“He doesn’t look at me,” Sansa says with a shake of her head and a chuckle as she toys with the ends of her hair. “I drive him nuts, that’s all.”

“I’ll say,” Margaery says dryly, and she reaches over to push play on the remote next to Sansa.

“Oh, like you’re one to talk,” Sansa says with a huff, the ice in her drink rattling as she takes another sip and unfolds herself to set it down next to Margaery’s.

Margaery grins. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” she says, lying right through her teeth, because it’s no secret they’re sleeping together, and she told Sansa as much when the poor girl had the preposterous idea that the two of them were married.

“He’s in love with you, Margaery,” Sansa says, and it’s her turn to look at her sharp and quick.

“No he isn’t,” she says instantly.

She shakes her head after thinking about it for a moment longer than the incredulous Ha that rang like a bell in her head. His laughter and grins and the grab of his hands, the way he holds her tight from the moment they fall asleep together to the second that stupid alarm of his goes off. And the sex. Every surface, even the pool and the hot tub and the back of his car where it smelled so exquisitely like his cologne. She can’t walk past the Versace counter in Nordstrom without getting a sample of it. But that’s on her. He’s noncommittal, and she hasn’t even been to his apartment. Not that she really could, since he lives right in the city where there are eyes on every corner. But then there’s the way he murmurs into her hair when he’s sleeping, his nicknames for her and how whenever she looks up he’s usually looking right at her.

“Stop it, Margaery.”

“No, we’re just having fun, Sansa.”

“Since when is falling in love not fun?” Sansa smiles.

When it’s only one sided, the brash and thoughtless side of her wants to say. But instead she just smiles smoothly and rolls her eyes as if it’s all ridiculous, and she’s about to reply when her phone buzzes with a text. She’s half expecting a dirty one from Bronn, like he does when he can get the time, but she frowns when she reads the message from her grandmother.

Olenna:  [link to news article]

Margaery gasps again after tapping the link. It’s the second shock of the day and it’s not even noon, but already she feels like she needs to lie down or take a swig of Tyrion’s French champagne.

“Oh Sansa, this is bad,” she whispers, scooting to the center of the sofa as Sansa does too, peering over her shoulder to read the screen.

Sansa Stark, 24 and Sandor Clegane, 35, are wanted by police for possible involvement in the death of 23 year old Jeyne Poole and an as-yet unidentified man in his late 30s, each of whom were found dead in the individual residences of Stark and Clegane, respectively. Police are asking that anyone with information regarding either of these individuals call the number below. Photos below.
“Bronn’s evidence,” Sansa whispers from behind the press of her hand. “Oh god, Margaery, and Sandor’s still out there running stupid errands. If he- oh my god, if they get him and take him in it’s all my fault. Because of stupid hair dye. It’s going to be all my fault again. Oh god,” she says, voice shaking from the pressure of trying not to cry.

Margaery tosses the phone onto the floor and puts an arm around Sansa, pulling her down and against her shoulder. “Shh. Let’s think about this clearly. He’s not down in Chicago, he’s in Winnetka, and it’s not like some cashier at Target is going to be scrolling through a news station website at 10am. They won’t air the pictures ‘til the five o’clock news, maybe not even til six. And you two are safe here until you get out of town, and then you’ll be in the clear. It’s going to be okay. It’s all going to be fine, I promise,” she says, rubbing her hand in a circle on Sansa’s back, wondering if she’s just lied through her teeth again.

The body’s long gone but the bloodstains remain, a practical drench of it right by the door. Bronn has to step around it after the landlord lets him in past the police tape with a shake of his head and a You think you know a person and then they end up doing something like this. Bronn hums noncommittally and nods, pocketing his badge and ID, and he stands there staring at the man until he gets a clue and leaves him alone.

“You think you know a person and then they end up doing something like this.” Bronn hums noncommittally and nods, pocketing his badge and ID, and he stands there staring at the man until he gets a clue and leaves him alone.

“Just uh, just let me know if you need anything,” he says, running his hands through his thinning hair before he turns and heads back downstairs.

But privacy and time are all Bronn needs at the moment, and so once the landlord is gone he immediately turns on his heel and strides through the living room towards the back of the apartment where the bedrooms are.

It’s a world of youthful, energetic femininity in here, with the lightweight sort of curtains that make him think of summers and seashores, splish-splashy floral pillows and bright slipcovers on the sofa and armchair in the front room. The hallway is narrow and shadowed but that didn’t stop them from decorating here, too, with two rows of switched off Christmas lights lining the ceiling of the hallway and a framed cross stitch on the wall that reads 99 PROBLEMS AND A STITCH AIN’T ONE that makes Bronn snort a laugh. But then he wonders if it belongs to the dead girl, and the smile fades as he looks away from it and heads into the first bedroom.

He knows immediately that it is Sansa’s room from the family photos on the dresser amongst the little porcelain dishes of jewelry and the glass vase with a small bouquet of dying flowers in it. The fall of her red hair is a pop of color even in a 5x7 photograph, and once more it’s painfully clear that she really should dye it.

“Sorry about this, Sansa,” he murmurs.

He squats down and unzips the bag he’s got over his shoulder, takes out the gun and sets it on the floor, gives it a light, halfhearted shove with his gloved hand. The gun slides under the bed, almost disappearing behind the bed skirt save for the butt of it. Bronn sighs. Most of his time moonlighting as a dirty cop has been fun. Envelopes of money and Meet me at the corner of So and So, sleeping with the women who want to get with a made man until his FBI contact gave him Margaery Tyrell’s contact information. But then he got in with the Lannisters and the turns wound up darker and darker, each one taking its toll on him, little gouges out of his conscience and dings to his moral compass. And now here he is, framing a woman for the murder of her friend when she herself was supposed to be the one who wound up dead. It’s fucked up, is what it is.

Bronn stands, giving the room a perfunctory look over before his gaze falls on her dresser. He
hasn’t heard back about her family yet but any day now they’ll be taking off out of town, and Sansa has said more than a few times that she misses wearing her own clothes. He sticks his head out into the hallway a moment before he pops back in her room and yanks open a bottom drawer, knowing full well to avoid the top ones, because if she wants underwear she’s going to have to go to the store and buy it her damned self. Bronn grabs a couple of sweaters and checks another bottom drawer, and a pair of jeans follows the sweaters into the Adidas gym bag, and he’s feeling pretty good about his choices until he turns around and almost walks right into Petyr Baelish.

“Doing a little light housekeeping? I should tell Cersei to pay you more if you’re going to be taking on more responsibilities,” he says, smiling benignly as he slides his gloved hands from the pockets of his camel hair coat.

Bonn immediately wills the tension out of his shoulders and grins with a shrug, thinks of big dumb animals plodding across a barnyard and pretends he’s one of them. “I know she doesn’t pay me to think, but I figured it was a good idea to take some of the girl’s stuff, make it look like she packed a bag before bailing out,” he says, injecting his voice with a slightly stronger Chicago accent.

“Good idea,” Petyr says with a nod as he steps fully into the room, his fingers drifting along the surface of Sansa’s furniture, the corner of her nightstand and the filial of her bedside lamp. “Lucky for you, you chose the right bedroom. I don’t think you’ve ever met Sansa, have you?” He’s got lazy indifference like a housecat but Bonn is good at reading people, and he can see the spike of suspicion in the bland of Petyr’s gaze.

“I looked her up on Facebook,” Bonn says with another grin, like he’s a dumbass who’s finally proud of the first clever thing he’s ever come up with, and that coupled with the simple explanation is enough to take Petyr’s edge down a few pegs. His heart pounds, but he keeps the shake out of his hands, manages to force his body from breaking out into a nervous sweat.

“Well, if you’re going to stage a quick getaway you can’t forget these,” he says, coming to stand next to him, and Bonn immediately clears his expression of any disgust when Petyr reaches out for one of the top drawers of Sansa’s dresser. “A nice young lady like Sansa would never leave without them.”

“I just didn’t want to get pervy,” Bonn says, ignoring the sudden roil of nausea he feels in his gut when Petyr reaches into the underwear drawer, slow and deliberate, almost reverent when he fans his hands over the myriad of silk and satin and lace, all the colors of the rainbow. Suddenly Bonn thinks of exotic birds, stolen and stuffed and sold in cages.

“There’s nothing perverse about staging a scene. And besides, it’s not like you’re rifling through her dirty clothes hamper,” Petyr points out. “These have been laundered and are like new.”

“Oh yeah, I didn’t think of that,” Bonn says, but when Petyr lifts a pair of panties from the drawer and brushes his jawline with the lace trim, it’s a little too fucking disgusting, even for Bonn, and he’s broken other men’s bones before. He imagines some pervert doing it to Margie’s things, and it makes him want to punch this sick fuck’s lights out. “Anyways, I hate to rush you, man, but I got an appointment I need to head to across town. Plus someone’s got to tell the CPD to come back and do another search for the gun.”

“Of course,” Petyr says, utterly unfazed of performing such a bizarre and private gesture in front of company.

“Take it easy,” Bonn says, and even when he’s out of the hallway in the front room he keeps the dumb dog look of affability on his face, and he’s glad for it when Petyr calls out.
“Bronn? You forgot these,” Petyr says, stepping out into the hall, and when he turns back to look at Baelish, the man has Sansa’s underwear dangling from his outstretched finger.

Bronn laughs, well-practiced as he is, though it sucks a bit of his soul away to do it. He shakes his head. “Nah, you keep ’em. I prefer to think all pretty girls walk around wearing nothing under their skirts. Makes it more fun that way,” he says with another laugh, and it doesn’t escape his attention as he strolls out of the apartment, the way Petyr’s smile didn’t reach his eyes.

He hasn’t slept in his own apartment for a few nights, one of the longer stretches in the months he’s been with Margie, but when he switches to auto-pilot in the middle of afternoon traffic, Bronn finds himself on the I-94 to Winnetka again, and there’s something like relief, thick and slathering over his heart when he realizes he’s on his way to see her again. She may truly be using him for sex like she said earlier, but all he wants right now is to see her, is to be himself the way he always is whenever he’s in her hands and her care.

There are no messages waiting on the phone in the rental car’s trunk, and because he’s suddenly eager to get Sansa the fuck out of this city and away from all these assholes who want to do her harm, Bronn sends another text to his contact. He waits thirty minutes in his idling car in the parking lot, waiting for anything out of the ordinary, and he drives ten minutes in one direction before finally heading towards Margie’s house. Sandor’s in the driveway when Bronn pulls up, the sun setting behind a knotted tumble of hunkered down clouds and casting the grey of dusk over everything. At the sight of his old army buddy, Bronn is acutely aware of how good it is to see a friend and know they’re genuine, and how tired and alone he feels all of a sudden.

“Hey, man, where did you run off to today?” he asks after he pulls up behind Sandor’s truck, but a glance down at the bags in his hand answers that question for him “Target, huh. Just a little shopping to get your mind off things, eh?”

Sandor grunts as they walk to the front door. “Red’s going dark,” he says, holding up a bag, and in the dying light Bronn can just make out a box of hair dye called Feria.

“So there are more hairstyles to be had,” he says dryly, and Sandor is in the middle of saying Don’t I know it when the front door opens and two pretty women come tumbling out of it towards them.

“Oh my god, where have you been,” Sansa shouts, running down the flagstone walkway only to throw herself up and into the arms of a very surprised Sandor. There’s a long drawn out moment of hesitation before he carefully, cautiously, wraps an unsure arm around her waist.

“I had to run some errands.”

Bronn’s thinking that’s one hell of a reaction to a man running a couple of honey-do errands, until she clarifies. “Sandor, you’ve been gone since 9:30 this morning,” she breathes, loosening her arms so she slides back down to the driveway, her shirt riding up her torso in the process until Margaery leans over and tugs it down.

“One of them took longer than I thought,” Sandor shrugs, his arm dropping away from her with a slow slide across the low of her back, and Sansa huffs at the brevity of his reply.

“Our pictures are up on the internet and you were out all day!” she says, and that makes Bronn take his eyes off Margie to stare at her. “We’re in the news, Sandor. They’re calling us suspects for Jeyne’s murder and- and that guy in your apartment,” Sansa says, gazing up at him with a terrified sort of look on her face, and he gazes back with a frown. “They’re falsely accusing us!”

“I did what they’re accusing me of, Red, or did you forget?”
“Another huff.

“That was self-defense and you know it,” she snaps, taking the Target bags off his wrists with a shiver. “Anyways, you can’t leave the house anymore until we’re leaving Illinois, it’s not safe. You stand out too much with your height and your hair and the um, you know,” she says, waving her empty hand in a vague gesture towards his chest. “You’re just a big guy,” she finishes with a murmur, fading out like the setting sun that’s abandoning them to dark and the cold.

“Yeah, well, you’re freezing,” Sandor says, and he gives her shoulder a light shove towards the house. “Get inside and let’s dye your damn hair,” he grunts as he follows her, but when they walk past Bronn can see the grin on Sandor’s face.

Margie turns to look at him once they’re alone outside, hugging herself inside the soft drape of one of her throw blankets. “And then look what the cat dragged in.”

“I had a fucked up day today,” he admits, running his fingers down her hairline to her ear before he drives them into the thick of her blonde hair. “I didn’t want to be in the city.”

“Oh,” she says, tipping her head into the touch though she’s laid back cool here with him, and now he’s craving for truth like it’s sunlight and he’s a withered up weed.

“And I wanted to see you.”

“Oh,” she says with a honeyed smile, thick like that relief he felt in the car, but far, far sweeter, and she slides her arms up and around his neck, pulling him down for a kiss, one that makes him close his eyes and forget how fucking cold it is out here.

But it’s nice and warm when he’s blissfully back in her bed, stripped down to his boxer briefs and cozy from goose down and the wrap of her arms around him. But where he’d normally tug up her nightie and bury his head between her thighs to get her going, the silk of her chemise makes him think of Baelish.

“What’s wrong? Where’d you go, Bronny?” she murmurs when he heaves a sigh and rests his forehead against her hip.

“I came real close to fucking up today, I think,” he says, and with her fingers carding through his hair, Bronn adjusts himself until he’s on his side curled up against her with his cheek pressed into soft curve of her almost-flat belly, and he tells her everything. “All these years, all my training, and I was almost busted by some fucking pervert just because I decided to get some of Sansa’s things for her.”

“You did? Baby, that’s so sweet.” Her hand slides out of his hair to run a touch down his jaw, and Bronn closes his eyes.

“Or fucking stupid,” he sighs. “All these entanglements are what can get an agent trapped. It’s why all of us are loners,” and that’s when her touches stop.

“Am I an entanglement, Bronn?” she whispers.

He inhales slowly, opening his eyes to look at the ripples of emerald green silk half ridden up her thighs. Lies pile up in his life thicker than the filthy snow in downtown streets. Lies walk around him like Baelish and Cersei and Detective Moore. All he wants is clean and warm and safe, especially here in this tucked away little world he inhabits with her so he thinks to hell with it.

“No,” he says, lifting his head to look up at her where she reclines on the bed, her hair aglow from
the muted light coming from both bedside lamps. She’s already smiling at him. “You’re my girl.”

“Yeah?”

“I sure as hell hope so,” he says, scooting up the length of her body to kiss her on the mouth.

Before long he’s got that nightie up and off, and before long he’s got her sighing, and he doesn’t know if it’s love but whatever it is it’s so sweet it makes his eyes roll back in his head, makes him come with her name rolling out of his mouth like it’s a song they sing in churches, makes him fall asleep with her head on his chest and his arms cinched tight around her. Whatever it is has him dazed with heavy, sweet, dreamless sleep that he’s startled out of at some point in the middle of the night when his phone buzzes.

“Oh my god, not your alarm already?” Margie mumbles in her half-sleep as he slides a hand under his pillow to fish out his phone.

“No,” he says, wiping the sleep from his eyes with one hand as he holds his phone up above his head and blinks at the text message. “No, it’s not the alarm. It’s Sansa’s family.”

Aunt Mae: Found Eddard’s brother Benjen. Text back for address.

One handed, Bronn begins to text back.
"You’ll have to wash your hair in cold water now, at least for the first few washes, to make sure the color doesn’t fade out,” he tells her as he pours a pitcher of water over her hair. She can feel the firm press of his fingertips against her scalp as he drives the excess runoff from roots to tip. She frowns.

“You said it was permanent, so why does it wash out?” She tilts her head back as far as she can so the water won’t get her clothes wet.

Sandor laughs. “Nothing’s permanent in this world, not even hair dye,” he says, voice a deep crack of lightning, boom of thunder, god of the sky or is it the sea? She closes her eyes with a haughty sniff.

“That’s not true,” she says, and she means to be imperious but it just comes off small like an old echo, like someone clapping alone in a haunted church.

“Oh yeah?” he says, amused and dark and exasperated because it’s always a three sided die with him but this time it seems to have landed on an edge so he can be all at once for her. “What lasts forever, Red?”

“Love.”

“What do you know about love?”

And she realizes that she knows nothing, not the way she meant and the way he understood. It’s all a big gaping mystery to her, and she is stranded on the cliff of familial love because someone tore down the bridge leading to the intimate on the other side of the chasm. She hears the sound of a mourning dove and turns to see one pecking at the window over the bathtub.

He laughs again, sandpaper harsh, as if he can read her mind.

“Now hold still.”

And then the pitcher is gone and his hand is in her hair, squeezing the excess water from it in the tight vise of his fist, and that’s when she realizes it’s not really that cold at all, that it’s warm like bathwater, because he’s here with her in Margaery’s huge tub full of soapy water that is the color of obsidian.

“Look at me,” Sandor says, and with a forward yank that is equal parts rough and gentle, painful and beyond bliss, he tugs on her hair until Sansa sits up in the silk-soap of water and opens her eyes.

He is shadow and the flicker of a fire, wet black hair raked back from his eyes, beard dripping with water that smells like snow even though it is so hot in here. Sansa realizes she is naked, that he is naked save for all the tattoos that move around his skin like living vines, and when her eyes drop to
know him further he squeezes his hand in her hair, regaining her attention and the lift of her gaze. She feels his submerged hand on the back her thigh and the squeeze and pull of it.

“Look at me,” he repeats, dragging her by the bend of her knee and his fist of her hair until their bodies meet and water spills over the edge of the tub. Her legs are over his now and they are seated together like slippery pieces to some puzzle she’s never laid a finger on before. “Are you ready?”

When she nods he presses his open mouth to hers, firm and wet with the push of tongues, and suddenly he is so deep inside her she comes in an instant. Sansa’s breath is sucked out into her lungs as she gasps out loud and wakes up with such a sudden, startled jerk of her legs that the covers are wrenched completely from her body, which, she is confused to discover, is fully clothed.

“What the hell,” she pants, chest heaving and heart racing like she’s just run a race or been thrown off a cliff, though the pulsing between her legs is from something altogether different, and she laughs nervously, embarrassed even though she’s alone when she realizes she just had an orgasm in her sleep.

Sleep. Dreams. Not real. Even so, Sansa reaches up and runs her hand over the top of her hair to see if it’s wet or dry, and it’s somewhat of surprise to find that it’s the latter. The movement of her fingers through it sends up the sharp-cloying scent of Feria conditioner like puffs from a vintage perfume atomizer. Dream world scents, though it had all felt so tangible and real.

Of course it felt real, she thinks, scrambling for explanation. He helped her dye her hair before they turned in for the night, and the first part of the dream was almost exactly what had taken place earlier. Her question about the hair dye and his laughing at it, though when he told her nothing in this world was permanent she had just rolled her eyes and kept her mouth shut, by now accustomed to his caustic replies.

But the rest of it?

Sansa flicks on the bedside lamp, and the firework burst of light, however muted from behind its thick linen lampshade, only proves to make her more discombobulated, fuzzy-headed, dizzy almost. Hair hangs dark in her eyes instead of auburn, and it reminds her of his hair, wet from her bathwater, and there is still that deep sweet throb between her legs at the memory of how dark-bright his eyes were when he told her to look at him, when he—

“Stop it, Sansa,” she snaps, all hushed tones as she blinks and looks around sightlessly, though she freezes when her gaze lands on the open bathroom door. A flush in her cheeks burns hot in the half-dark room, and she closes her eyes and shakes her head as she buries her face in her hands.

This is all Margaery’s fault, she thinks after she heads into the bathroom to refill her water glass, and she watches her own reflection as she drinks thirstily. Talking to me about Sandor looking at me. She turns to stare at the tub she was just in—No, just dreaming about - and she remembers the last time she took a bath there. It was a sad girl mope of bad memories, and then she laughs because that must be the reason behind the dream. All of it is. Margaery and her knowing smirks and leading questions she answers herself. Sansa’s own self-pitying musing in the tub and the longing for something real. The cut and dye and the tender way he handles her, the careful way his barber hands work their way through her hair.

She’s had sex dreams before but never of anyone she’s actually laid eyes on before, except for that really hot guy she saw while riding the El home with Jeyne after a night out. The last sensual dream she had was when Michael Fassbender was fighting for her honor in a sexy regency era outfit, and even though she had woken up right after he had literally ripped open her bodice, she still counts it as a sex dream, because, come on, Michael Fassbender. But this time, she dreamed of—

“Of course you did,” she says to her reflection, going for stern despite the way her body reacted,
both in sleeping and waking hours. She straightens her spine and lifts her chin. This is science, logic, biology, hormones. Something. Anything.

“He’s the only man who’s laid a hand on you in over a month,” she reminds herself, thinking of all the past cold lonely nights while rumor after rumor of her boyfriend’s unfaithfulness piled up around her. Of course a few touches from a guy would trigger something, especially such gentle ones like when he cut her hair and later dyed it, when he closed his hands in her hair and Are you ready, she hears in his voice. There is an irrepressible shiver that runs down her spine that makes her scowl and switch off the light before she heads back to bed.

“Everyone has urges,” she says matter-of-factly as she climbs under the covers and pulls them back up in place, and then a huge snore from Sandor’s room across the hall makes her freeze like she’s been caught shoplifting.

Suddenly Sansa laughs, so out of the blue and so loud that she covers her mouth with both hands, and she dissolves into ridiculous fits of stop-and-start giggles as it strikes her, over and over again, that she had an erotic dream about Sandor, that she’s trying to explain it away like a teacher in a sex-ed class. So she had a sex dream. So what. Fuck it, is what Sandor would say, and then that sends her into another fit of giggles that won’t stop, even when she turns off the light and lies there listening to him snore.

He’s already jogged a few miles on Margaery’s treadmill and showered by the time Sansa drifts downstairs, wearing jeans and a loose black top that matches the new dark of her hair, which she’s got pulled up high into a messy, spriggy ponytail that makes him think of spring leaves on new boughs.

“Morning, lazy bones,” he says from the breakfast nook table where he sits eating bacon, eggs and a toasted English muffin he made himself after that chef lady of Margaery’s finally took no for an answer. He grins when Sansa startles at the sound of his voice, wheels around from the coffee maker to look at him with a hand over her heart.

“God, you scared me,” she breathes, sweeping her fingers across her collar bone before her hand drops to her side. A moment of collection when her head bows and her eyes drop to the floor, an inhale through the nose before she lifts her gaze to him. Her mouth is open like she’s going to say something, but first she winces. “How’s your eye?”

“Looks worse than it feels, Red,” he says after a while. It’s fun to mess with her, but there’s sincerity here and there between them now, hearty brave little flowers popping up through the snow. Besides, it’s more than a little embarrassing, how he got his shiner.

“Well, good. Anyways, yeah. I had um, I had a hard time sleeping last night,” she says, and there is amusement in the flicker of her eyes as she studies his face.

A week ago he’d think she was making fun of him but now he’s somewhat used to her little lady looks and silent musings, can almost find a bit of familiarity there in them, so instead Sandor just narrows his eyes at her in the way he knows will make her laugh. And she does, though she tries to look annoyed by rolling her eyes as she turns away from him to pour herself a cup of coffee.

“That’s too bad,” he says, halving a fluffy mound of eggs with the edge of his fork before shoveling it on and up to his mouth. He chews, watching the way she moves for the mug, the coffee, the creamer.
“What’s too bad?” Margaery says as she rounds the corner.

Her eyes are downcast as she texts rapid-fire on her phone, though she offers a halfhearted version of her million dollar smile, cinched up in the corner from distraction. She’s wearing an expensive looking bathrobe over an Erykah Badu tank top and pair of yoga pants, hair up in the same sort of style like Sansa’s. He’s starting to understand it as some sort of universal early morning girl thing, this mussed up look. Christ knows it’s been long enough that he’s forgotten. He wonders, for a moment, if Bronn is ever tempted to pluck it free and let it tumble down. Sandor curls his empty hand into a fist, and then he remembers there’s not much left to tumble.

“Princess and the Pea over here couldn’t sleep,” he says, dropping his eyes to his plate, grinning to the rest of his bacon as he pops the piece in his mouth, because he’s already expecting the indignation when she pipes up.

“Excuse me, I am not a princess. It’s just that somebody snores,” she says, coming to sit in the seat next to him, a little harrumph in the back of her throat as she flicks a glance his way before blowing away the steam from her coffee. “Loudly.”

“I do not,” Sandor says even though he has no idea whether or not he does.

“Well it’s the only thing that makes sense,” Margaery murmurs down to her phone as she drifts over to the table, sitting with a leg curled under her across from Sansa. She exhales through her nose after her phone chimes with a text, taps out a reply and sets the phone down on the table, looks up at Sansa and then Sandor with a smile. “I can assure you, there are no peas in my beds.”

“You seem busy this morning,” Sansa says, nodding her chin towards Margaery’s phone.

“Ah, well,” Margaery says with a wave. “I’m playing catch up. Bronn got a late start out this morning.”

“I’ll bet he did,” he says dryly, sweeping the last bit of his muffin through the remnants of egg and bacon grease, and he sits back as he pops it in his mouth and chews, glancing back and forth between the two women flanking him.


“As much as I wish that were the reason, it wasn’t. And to be honest, I’m not really going to be the busy ones today. You guys are,” she says, tapping the screen of her phone and glancing down at it again.

“What do you mean,” Sansa frowns, setting her mug down and sitting forward in her chair. She has a foot propped up on the edge of it, and she rests her chin on her bent knee as she looks at Margaery with interest.

“What I mean,” the blonde woman says gently, with a smile to match that cashmere robe of hers, “is that Bronn’s contact found your family. Well, wait now,” she says, lifting a hand when Sansa gasps and sits up straight. “I don’t mean your mother and siblings, not yet, but we did find someone. Your father’s brother, Benjen Stark. Do you know him?”

“Benjen,” Sansa whispers, and her foot slips from the chair, falls with a light thud to the tile floor beneath the table. “Oh, my God, uncle Benjen.”

She stares off into the middle distance, head tilted somewhere between him and Margaery, and when the seconds of silence tick by and multiply, Sandor leans forward, reaches out and takes a light grip of her shoulder. She jumps at the contact, damn near startling him out of his skin, but
then she gazes down at his hand, blinks herself back to present.

“You still there, Red?”

“Are you all right, honey?” Margaery says with a frown of concern.

“No, yeah, I’m fine, I just, wow,” Sansa breathes, looking fleetingly to Margaery before the gaze shifts and lands on him. Sansa smiles, far away like a curtain of mist on some abandoned horizon. “I haven’t seen him in forever. Last I heard of him he was up doing wilderness survival courses way up in British Columbia,” she says with a distant, memory-soaked chuckle. “Lone wolf Ben, my dad used to call him,” and then connections fire off in her brain, and Sandor can see the pretty aftermath of them in the sudden spark and flare of her blue eyes. “Wait, is that- are we going to go to him up in Canada?”

*Talk about gas money,* Sandor thinks before he starts quietly panicking over a passport he’s let expire, over lurid mental images of getting arrested and slammed to the ground at the border, but then Margaery shakes her head.

“No, he’s moved since then,” she says, drumming her fingernails on the screen of her phone. “Now he’s doing that sort of stuff down in Sedona, Arizona, apparently, though the business is listed under his partner’s name. Some place called Reed Survival. ‘Off the grid,’ they call it,” Margaery says with a laugh that Sandor can understand, considering she practically *is* the grid in a place like this.

“Arizona? He’s been- and he never- all these years and he never got in touch,” she murmurs, flashing Sandor a small albeit sincere smile when he squeezes her shoulder and lets her go so he can sit back out of his lean.

“Yes, and I hope you don’t mind, but we are first and foremost concerned with your safety, so Bronn instructed his contact to get ahold of Benjen, so he – Bronn calls him Aunt Mae for anonymity’s sake, and also because he needs some imagination - so he could go down there under the pretense of taking their field course. He knows you’re coming, Sansa.” Margaery beams like a talk show host reuniting long lost friends.

“Oh Jesus,” Sansa says, sweeping herself up and to her feet as she paces around the table, first behind Margaery before coming to stand behind his own chair. He can feel the brush of her fingers against his shoulder blades when she wraps her hands around the back of his chair. “I haven’t seen him in forever and I’m just going to swoop in like some damsel in distress. Or some silly little princess with her pea, right?” she says.

Sandor cranes his neck to look up and back where he knows she'll be waiting with A Look for him. “Hey now, I was just fucking with you, Sansa. Trust me, you're no pansy,” and she almost, almost smiles when he points to his black eye.

“Sansa, he *wants* you to come there. When we told him about the situation and what had happened, he was so relieved that we had you out of the Lannisters’ den. He doesn't know where the rest of your family is, *but* Aunt Mae is already on that,” Margaery says with a smile as she glances from Sansa down to Sandor. “You'll be safe with your uncle and before you know it, we'll send you back to your mother and siblings.”

He inhales sharply when Sansa lifts her right hand and touches the cap of his shoulder, fingers light, and before she lowers her palm to press down on him, he can discern the tremble in her.

Instinctively, Sandor flexes his muscle. Any extra support he can offer.
Her thoughts have whipped and whirled around in her head all morning, so snake-eating-its-tale that she can barely make sense of them anymore, and now they have dissolved to something more abstract and emotional, so that it is fear chasing hope chasing excitement chasing a big fat blur of the unknown. It is that feeling right before the drop of a roller coaster, that feeling you get when dozing almost becomes sleeping before the sensation of a sudden fall jerks you awake. Too high-strung and buzzy-fizzy-belly to do much with her brain. And so she sits tailor style on the floor of her bedroom, surrounding by the myriad belongings she has accumulated over the past week.

*Magpie Sansa*, she thinks with a half-smile as she packs the clothes Mya gave her and the little snack-pack Ziploc baggie, the flip flops she’ll save for warmer weather in Arizona. The Nordstrom bag with two blouses, a pair of jeans and that delicious Alexander McQueen dress. The clothes and toiletries and ballet flats Margaery has given her, plus the small pile of freshly washed underwear and one black lace bra her hostess found, unused with the tags still on them in an Agent Provocateur bag in the back of her closet. There is the black gym bag Bronn brought her, full of random men’s workout clothes that are too small to donate to Sandor, but also with a couple of her own beloved sweaters and a pair of well-worn, comfortable jeans she used to wear every weekend. All in all, not a bad little hodgepodge, and she’s busy emptying the Adidas bag of the menswear and repacking it with her belongings when Margaery breezes in with a cute, tulip-red hard-shell valise in her arms.

“Oh, honey, no, leave that piece of junk here,” Margaery says with a tut and shake of her head, and in a fluid motion she sinks to her knees next to Sansa, setting the case down between them. “Here, we can just throw that thing away. Who knows where it’s been,” and her garden party voice darkens somewhat, like she knows just where Bronn got it. Without another word, Sansa’s hands leap away from the gym bag like it’s a coil of serpents.

“Thank you,” Sansa says, her heart suddenly a solid ache at the thought of leaving her new friend. And honestly, she’s cried enough over the past week, but already she feels an urge to wipe her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Please, it’s *nothing*, believe me. I haven’t used this thing since college,” she says with a wave of her hand before she unzips the suitcase, but she stops when Sansa lays a hand on her wrist.

“I mean thank you for *everything*, Margaery. For letting us come here, sight unseen, for taking us in for so long and for, well. I mean damn, Margaery,” she says, lifting the bra by its strap with a sudden grin. “It’s Agent Provocateur, for god’s sake.”

“Like I said,” Margaery says with a cool shrug and the toss of her freshly brushed hair. “It’s nothing.”

Both women laugh.

They finish packing the single case together, talking here and there about interstate routes and the best motels one can find on frontage roads, how road trip food is both simultaneously gross and utterly craveable. Once fully packed, Sansa leans over and slowly drags the zipper closed.

“Wait!” Margaery leaps to her feet, lithe and limber even in another one of those sweater dresses she’s changed into. “You forgot something,” and she pads barefoot across the room to Sansa’s nightstand, where she plucks the almost-dried rose petal Sandor gave her when they first walked into this house, and just like that Sansa’s dream swims back up to the surface of her thoughts.

“But if I pack it it will crumble into a billion pieces,” Sansa says, though she outstretches her hand
to catch it when Margaery lets it drop.

“Potpourri,” Margaery says with another shrug, though this time she’s got a butter-warm smile there instead of a look of lofty affected derision.

“I didn’t realize you saw him give it to me,” Sansa says, lifting it to her nose to see if it still smells sweet, but it’s gone, the fleeting springtime glory lost to the dry-parchment fade of color and scent and soft. Carefully she closes her hand around it even as she tells herself this is no time to start collecting fragile souvenirs.

“I see everything,” Margaery says with a sage nod as Sansa gets to her feet, and then not for the first time since they’ve met, she pulls her in for a big hug. Sansa returns it in earnest, giving her a tight squeeze that makes her think of Jeyne, and she desperately hopes she will one day see Margaery again, and there’s some comfort when they pull apart and Sansa sees some of that sorrow to part there in her friend’s gaze. “And I know I’ll see you again,” she says. Mind reader Margaery.

"Me too," Sansa smiles.

“Now, if you think of it, give me a call every few days, just to let me know if you’re all right. I will try not to worry if you don’t,” Margaery says with teddy bear firmness. “But you damn well better.” Tear-pricking smiles between them as they face each other with the suitcase between their bare feet.

They trot together down the spiral staircase down to the foyer where Sandor stands by the door with his duffel bag slung over his shoulder and his record in his hand. He’s usually a stormy beast of a man but right now, from so high up, he looks more like an orphan child than anything, and there is a pull in her suddenly, like the plucking of a violin string, when she realizes that in essence they are both of them lost together. There’s hope for her at the end of the tunnel and she desperately wants there to be some sort of hope for him, too, a way to rebuild or recreate or start over clean. There is something sad and something very exciting about this moment, and by the time her feet leave the carpeted stairs and tap their way across the marble to the door, she’s almost shaking.

“Hey,” she says, all coffee overdose jitters as she pulls nervously on the dropped hem of her sweater, and where she smiles Sandor simply nods.

“Here, I’ll take it,” he says, stretching out his hand for her cute new-not-new luggage, and she smiles, holding it out to him. His hair is pulled back from his eyes and shoved under a wool beanie and she’s already looking at him when his gaze flicks up to hers. “Are you ready?”

The suitcase slips out her hand, she is so taken aback and so assaulted with dream-world memory and how similar it is to the way her phantom-Sandor said it, even though he’s drenched in wan morning sunlight instead of soaking in jet black water. Sandor catches it before it lands on the floor. He gives her a strange look, and she lets loose a high giggle that makes her sound like an idiot. She scrambles for some of that last minute savvy that’s gotten her through countless evenings with Joffrey and his mother, but in the end she doesn’t have to search far because the truth is right there.

“Sorry,” she says. “I’m just- you know, I haven’t seen my family, any of them, in—” she tries, but he nods again and saves her from her own stammering.

“Hey, I get it. This shit’s intense,” he says before turning to Margaery. “Tell Bronn I said thanks, and that I’ll see him around.”
“I will,” she smiles as she follows them outside to his truck. “He was very disappointed he couldn’t stick around to see you off, but he has to keep up appearances,” Margaery says, rolling her eyes like he’s gone to the country club for golf instead of down to Chicago to play mobsters and spies.

Sandor puts their two bags in the bed of his truck, gets in and starts the engine as Margaery and Sansa hug one last time, the kind of embrace shared between sisters, their arms like warm, high-necked cowls of affection where they drape over shoulders and squeeze.

“Thanks again for everything,” Sansa whispers, wiping at her eyes again when they pull apart.

“You’re beyond welcome,” Margaery says with the subtlest of sniffles, a watery chuckle before she says Oh! “Here, I almost forgot. You can’t head west without a pair of sunnies,” she says, and that’s when Sansa realizes she has a pair of Betsy Johnson sunglasses perched on her head.

“Margaery, you have to quit it,” Sansa laughs as the blonde woman slides them carefully in place on the bridge of her nose.

“I’ll quit it the second you drive away,” she says, wiping her nose with her sleeve before shaking her head with another laugh. “Okay, go on, get out of here, before I burst into tears like an absolute fool,” and once Sansa is in the truck she closes the door for her, and their stay here ends the same way it began.

They drive through sleepy, money-soaked Winnetka in silence until Sansa shivers and sighs, looking away from the window to gaze at Sandor. His profile renders him unmarred, hidden as his scarred and bruised left side is from her, but somehow he looks almost lopsided on account of it. And it’s strange to see him with his hair completely pulled back, outside of dreams; the tips of it can just be seen, poking out behind his ear from under his wool hat. He catches her staring, and while a few days ago she might have looked away in a hurry, today she does not, and their eyes meet in the fleeting moment he can take his attention from the road.

“You cold?”

“Yeah, but I’ll get used to it,” she says. “At least ‘til we can stop and I can get another sweater from the back,” she says, but to her surprise he reaches over and turns on the heater.

Sansa gasps with a smile. “You had it fixed,” she breathes, pushing her hands out from her sweater sleeves where they had retreated from the cold, and she fans out her fingers in front of the vents as the wonderful rush of heat floods the cab. “But when did- oh, you’re kidding me,” she says, looking over at him where he’s doing a very bad job of hiding a rather smug grin.

“You really think I’m so dense that it’d take me an entire day to find you a box of damn hair dye?”

“I don’t know, maybe I punched the sense out of you,” and she grins when he laughs.

“Whatsoever you say, Miss Daisy,” he says, still chuckling as he pulls out onto the interstate, and that reminds her.

Carefully she turns her hand over, looking down where her thumb pins the old petal to her palm and as quick and casual as she can, Sansa opens his glove box and drops the delicate little thing in among the charger cords, half empty packs of gum and insurance and registration forms.

“What’s that?” he asks, looking over his left shoulder before he shifts, accelerates and merges into interstate traffic.

“Nothing,” she smiles, turning to gaze at the scenery as it streaks by. “Just something I felt like
holding on to.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The scenery is still the snow-covered fallow fields of rural Illinois when Sansa drifts off to sleep, after complaining about five times how boring road trips are with no phone to mess around with or no magazines to flip through. Fine by him. He figured she’d try playing I Spy or 20 Questions or some other road trip bullshit, the types of games he loathes. Sandor glances at her, where she’s slumped into the corner of the cab between the set and the door, her legs curled up on the seat here between them. Her hair hangs scattered over her closed eyes, the color of burnt cornsilk, and the barber in him wants to brush them to the side. Maybe it is just the man in him, but either way he dismisses it and puts his attention back on the road where it should be.

One thing Sansa was right about was the no phone thing. He hates to admit it, but he’s grown dependent on the ever-present technology. Driving across the country without that never-leave-home-without-it phone makes him feel like he’s walking blind across a tightrope. He has no idea what kind of weather awaits them the next state over or how much gas will be, and that thought agitates him. As a small business owner he’s used to constantly tallying costs, adding income and deducting loss, but there is no cash flow here on this trip, and the steady leaking of funds as they cross the country is a constant worry. He’s got a good amount of money in his wallet, thanks to never using credit cards and to a few hundred Margaery slipped him before she went to help Sansa pack, but he knows all too well how easy come, easy go, money can be. Hell, how an entire goddamn livelihood can be, too.

She stirs, twists her body so her knees go from the seat up to the air, head turned now towards the back of the truck, arms tightening in the hug she fell asleep giving herself even though the fixed heater is a low steady rush of warm air. Then again, it’s the warmth that likely pushed her over the edge from dozing to full on sleep, considering he’s feeling a little drowsy himself. He’d crack a window to let in some of that bracing Midwestern winter breeze, but he knows it would likely wake her. She told him that morning she didn’t sleep well thanks to him, and he supposes ruining her nap would likely be a dick move on his part.

I’ll stop at the next gas station we come across, he thinks, and the thought of a hot cup of black coffee is almost, almost enough to wake him up on its own, but then she murmurs in her sleep, stretches out her legs, and suddenly Sandor has one of her feet in his lap.

Now he’s awake.

He glances over at her a few times, tries to discern if she’s awake or about to be, but no. No, she’s sound asleep, jaw slack and mouth almost open, and here is her damned leg resting on his thigh, her foot dangling between his spread knees, edge of her shoe nudging the lower curve of the steering wheel. He tells himself that’s the reason why, when he grasps her ankle with the careful circle of his hand around her and pulls it closer to the trunk of his body. He tells himself it’s for safety reasons as they hurtle down the interstate, when he lets his hand rest on the dark denim of her skinny jeans, because the last thing they need is her kicking the wheel and sending them careening off into a ditch somewhere. Death on Route 66. No, it’s better to keep the weight of his
touch on her, the corral around a wild and unpredictable horse. He can’t help but think of the last
time her feet were in his care, cut up and bleeding, and he thinks of how far they’ve carried her in
the longest fucking week he’s ever known in his life.

Absently Sandor rubs his thumb against the denim, wondering if these are the jeans Bronn brought
back from her apartment or the ones she bought in Nordstrom. How bizarrely jealous he’d been,
when Bronn had pulled the chivalry card. He didn’t admit to himself then and can barely admit it
now, but there it is, the truth, sitting fat and smug like a cat with the canary. In a matter of days
she’s snatched away his job and given him another. Barber to bodyguard, like the big broody
bastard he is. It only makes sense that he should have been the one to get something from her
apartment, even though the rational part of him reminds the other that he was busy fixing his car,
that Cersei was busy putting his ‘Wanted’ posters up all over town. Another rub of his thumb, and
then he sees a highway sign alerting him that the next exit has a couple of gas stations, and when
he glances over his right shoulder to check traffic and to merge into the right lane, he sees that
Sansa is awake and watching him.

“Jesus Christ,” he exclaims, his hand leaping off her leg like it’s a live snake, and it might as well
be, judging by how hard his heart is thudding in his chest. “You scared the hell out of me just
now,” he says, changing lanes and gliding off the interstate just in time as he takes his exit.

“Sorry,” she murmurs, sliding her leg from his thigh, a slow drag that makes him wonder if she’s
teasing him. That and the fact that her eyes are on him each time he glances at her.

Hastily he clears his throat. “You were kicking the steering wheel, so I, you know,” he says, and
it’s not really a lie, more of a cover-up exaggeration to save a massive amount of face, here where
he’s been busted touching a sleeping woman. Jesus, you’re about as bad as Gregor.

“Sorry,” she says again, blue eyes heavy from fatigue or behind-the-scenes thoughts that she’s not
sharing.

“Don’t worry about it,” he says gruffly, forcing his attention from her and back to the road, and he
downshifts on the downgrade as the exit bottoms out into a sleepy-town intersection.

She sits up and faces forward, her feet dropping to the footwell as he slows to a stop at a red light,
stretches her body best she can while sitting in the cab of a truck. “Where are we?”

“Still in Illinois. I was fading like you for a bit there, so I figured I’d stop for some coffee,” he
says, pulling through and immediately turning right into the gas station on the corner. He guides
the truck into a parking spot and puts it in neutral with the e-brake on. Sandor looks at her.

“Coffee sounds great. I feel bad for drifting off and leaving you all by your lonesome,” she says
with a smile, and he snorts.

“I’ve been all by my lonesome all my life,” he says, opening the door and stepping down out of the
cab. He drapes one forearm on the open car door, the other against the top of the truck as he leans
in and looks at her. “You coming in?”

Sansa gives him a smile, something bordering on broad with the white of teeth and the raising of
eyebrows. She bends and draws her left leg up onto the seat, leans over it to whisper
conspiratorially to him. “We’re on the news, Sandor. Bonnie shouldn’t be seen with Clyde, right?”

And that’s a strange feeling right there, when she bites her lower lip and widens her eyes at him,
because even though it’s an idiotic thing to say - it did not end well for old B and C - because even
though they really are on the run, something about what she says and the way she says it makes
Sandor throw his head back and laugh

“Whatever you say, Red. You’re the boss,” he says. “Want your coffee black or all gussied up?”

“You know me,” she says, snapping her fingers and pointing at him before he rolls his eyes and slams the door shut.

The gas station is a locally owned thing and so there is no automated chime when he opens the door, just the jingle of a couple of bells tied to the door, and it takes him right back to his shop, almost brings back the sound of smocks being snapped open and the smell of his old man’s barbicide. Why it doesn’t remind him of the products he himself uses these days he doesn’t know, but it only serves as a sort of mile marker of how far he’s gone from Then to Now, and for some dumb reason it makes his heart beat faster. There’s a wild sort of freedom he’s never felt before; it was either an anchor to his mother or his father, to the army before he yoked himself to the heavy wagon of self-employment. And now he has nothing, which means in a weird way, he has everything.

*You’re a moron if this makes you excited,* he thinks as he pours two coffees in eight ounce Styrofoam cups, leaving plenty of room in one for all the shit he reckons she puts in it. *You’re a moron. A broke, homeless moron,* he thinks, dumping creamer and two sugars in one cup, pocketing two more sugars in case it’s not enough. But still, there’s the whole Bonnie and Clyde thing, and there’s something appealing about pretending you’re lawless instead of realizing you’re defenseless.

“Is that all for you?” the clerk asks, snapping her gum as she scrolls through her phone.

He thinks about asking her what the weather will be, how much gas is country-wide, if there’s a new update on the game he likes to play on his phone.

“Yeah. No, wait, uh, hang on,” he says, taking a step back and gazing down at the magazine rack below the counter.

There’s a few he recognizes from subscriptions he filled out for the shop, like *Men’s Health* and *Details* and *Sports Illustrated*, but the others are like Greek to him. Finally he settles on one called *Vogue* and another called *InStyle*, and because his mother always used to like thumbing through it, a *People*.

Sansa half scoots, half crawls across the seat to unlock the door and open it for him, seeing as his hands are full and he has three magazines rolled up as one and shoved under his arm.

“Did you clean out the till, Clyde?” she says with a grin, and she takes one of the coffees from him before she inches back to her corner of the cab.

“Too much security,” he says, playing along because he’s an idiot. “I uh, I got you these,” he says, and he tosses the magazines on the seat next to her.

“Oh my god, thank you, Sandor,” she says, setting the coffee on the dashboard to browse her options. “Hey, I love *Vogue*. Ooh, and *InStyle*. And *People*! My mom loves this magazine.”

Sandor laughs as he gets into the truck and shuts the door. “Mine did too.”

“Mm,” Sansa says with a smile and a hum, and she picks up her coffee before he puts the truck in reverse and gets them out of the station. “You know, it sort of came to me when we were driving, when I was sleeping, or maybe dreaming, I don’t know. The whole Bonnie and Clyde thing, I mean,” she says, and he glances at her before getting on the on-ramp for the interstate. She is
contemplation and tentative sips of coffee, a glance his way with a smile.

“This coffee is perfect, by the way.”

“Yeah?” He can’t help but feel pretty fucking smart about that. *Observational skills, A+,* he thinks.

“Yeah, thank you. Anyways, isn’t it kind of cool though? Like, we’re the bad guys right now, Sandor. I mean, *I* know Joffrey and his mom and that entire den of lions are the real bad guys, but to *them,* to them we’re the bad guys. Isn’t that sort of awesome? Sort of bad ass?”

“Don’t you want to read any of those magazines? Christ knows they cost enough,” he says, going for gruff instead of admitting he was flirting with that same delusional conclusion in the gas station.

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe later. It’s a long way to Arizona, and I’ve already spent the first part of our trip passed out while you did all the heavy lifting,” she says, wiggling in her seat to get comfortable, crossing and re-crossing her legs until she decides to sit tailor style like some sort of yogi. “Hey, want to play 20 Questions? I’m *very* good at it. I bet you’ll never guess.”

Never one to be outdone, he takes a sip of coffee and gives her a glare. “Try me.”

Four hours later they’re walking across a cracked-asphalt parking lot on the far side of St. Louis, Sandor stretching his arms to the front and sides and then back while Sansa yawns and tries to pop her back with a twist to the left and to the right.

“Maybe we can just get our dinner to go and eat out here, walking around instead of sitting down some more,” Sansa says with a sigh.

“It hasn’t even been a full day of driving. You’re in for a rude awakening if your ass is already tired of sitting,” he says, reaching out in front of her to open the door to the roadside diner.

“Let’s leave my ass out of this, thank you very much,” she says primly, sailing through the open door, and she wonders if he’s watching her walk ahead of him, wonders if his gaze is dropping to her ass, and now she’s wondering if she’s putting more sway to her hips than normal, and then she’s blushing.

But she *caught* him, hours earlier, when she had accidentally stretched out into his personal space. Instead of pushing her away or waking her up, he simply accepted the intrusion and, at least to her sleepy blinking gaze, seemed to actually like it. She caught him, and then she felt him, the stroke of his thumb, the pressure of his grasp, the scoop of his hand as it pulled her leg towards the trunk of his body. She can still remember the feel of it, even now as one of the cooks behind the counter tells them to pick whatever table they want.

Sansa picks one of the booths tucked in the corner, the window at her back and a wood paneled wall to her right as she scoots in, and Sandor slides into the booth across from her.

“I’m so hungry I could eat a horse,” he says, grabbing one of the menus propped up between the napkin dispenser and bottles of Heinz ketchup and French’s mustard.

“There’s probably one of those on this menu,” Sansa says as she follows suit and studies her own menu. “I think the only salad I’m going to find here is a lettuce leaf and tomato on a burger.”

Sandor rolls his eyes. “So order a damn burger then.”
It makes her think of Margaery and how they admitted greasy road trip food was the best. Suddenly she’s hungry enough to eat a horse too.

“Fine, maybe I will.”

“Hell, make it a cheeseburger.” He slouches and hunkers, elbows on the table, face hidden by the wool cap still pulled over his head and the laminated double-sided menu, all save for the brood of his black eyebrows and grey eyes she can see over the bright yellow menu.

“I’d be a fool not to.” Sansa tosses her hair, lifts her chin as she gazes at the myriad ways a person can absolutely destroy their cholesterol. She taps the menu with her fingernail. “Oh, look at this one, they actually call it The Love Handle.”

“Looks good,” he says with a nod, flicking his gaze up at her over the menu, intense as always despite their flippant conversation, making her think of last night’s dream. “Don’t forget to add the bacon.”

“Naturally,” she sniffs, distracted, gazes back to the long row of sides. They’re all fried, and they all look amazing. Look at me, she remembers.

“Oh, look, you can add a fried egg to it for only $.75,” he offers.

“Well now that’s just being ridiculous,” she says, slapping the menu down to glare at him. Whatever hotel or motel they’ll be staying at tonight, she hopes there isn’t a scale.

“All right kids, my name’s Molli, what can I get you?” says a waitress, materializing with that harried server stealth. She’s a suicide blonde with dark brown roots, her ears loaded with earrings like a gun with bullets, and then she’s a lingering gaze at Sandor, a smile and subtle lift of her eyebrows.

Sansa sits up straighter and smiles. “Well I would love a glass of water with lemon,” she says brightly.

“Mmhmm,” the waitress says with a nod and a glance before looking back at Sandor. “And what can I get for you, big guy?”

Sandor sighs, tossing the menu to the table before he sits back and tugs the wool cap off his head, setting it on the booth beside him. Sansa frowns, gazing back and forth between the two of them, can’t help but notice that the waitress’s smile broadens when Sandor rakes his hair back and flips it over the left side of his face. He’s doing that because he doesn’t trust you, she wants to snap. He doesn’t want you to see.

“I’ll have the double cheeseburger with extra bacon, a side of fries and a coke,” he says, finally looking up at the blonde woman, and when he sees her frank appraisal he double-takes, and if Sansa weren’t so irritated she’d laugh. “Thanks,” he adds awkwardly.

“Excellent choice,” the waitress says, winking at him before she bites her lip. “It’s my favorite. I always make sure to finish it, even though it’s so super big.”

Sansa’s mouth hangs open.

“Sounds great,” Sandor says, glancing at Sansa as he lifts his eyebrows like it’s the shrugging of his shoulders.

“All right, so is that all I can get you?” the waitress says after repeating Sandor’s order, and Sansa
is about to shout *How about my damn water or what about me*, but then Sandor clears his throat.

“The lady here will have The Love Handle, side of fries, and a water.”

“How about my damn water or what about me” she says quickly, willing the woman to look her in the eyes, and when she does, Sansa smiles. “Please.”

“Oh! Oh, sure thing, sorry. I thought the water was all you wanted, sweetie,” she says with a smile she aims at Sandor before she saunters back to the counter, and there is definite sway to her hips.

Sansa leans over the table, and the conspiratorial air seems to pull him to center as well, and they hunch over towards each other like negotiators.

“That was so rude,” she hisses, tipping her head towards the counter and kitchen.

“Well, I guess she figured you didn’t want anything. You don’t exactly fit the demographic for a place like this, Red,” he says, dropping his gaze and lifting it back to her eyes.

“No, not that, I mean, well yes that too, but she was totally hitting on you Sandor! Right in front of me,” she huffs, indignant.

“And that’s rude?” Sandor shrugs, glancing over his shoulder. “Wait, she was hitting on me?” he turns back to stare at Sansa. “Are you drunk?”

“High on life,” she snaps. “It was rude because we’re here together and- well, and we could be like, you know, together-together.”

“But we’re not,” he says, flat and matter-of-fact, looking at her like she’s spouted another head. Another drunk head.

“But she didn’t know that,” she says, elbow on the table as she points at him. “You opened the door for me. That’s like, a dating type thing to do.” *And you held my foot in your lap,* she wants to say, but that would be admitting she was awake for the entire stretch of that long moment, that the firm warm feel of his thigh under her leg jarred her awake, that she watched the sweet subtle dance of it, when he wrapped his hand around her ankle. And so she keeps her mouth shut.

Sandor rolls his eyes. “People open doors for other people, so what. She probably can just tell we’re not together, Red,” and then he grins suddenly, sitting back with his arms folded over his chest. “So she was hitting on me, huh?”

“Oh shut up,” she snaps, sitting back with a huff herself.

But it makes her think, makes her wonder about what Margaery had said, beyond the comment about road trip food, because we were both right about that, she thinks as she takes another monster bite out of her disgustingly amazing burger after Blondie Molli swings by with their food and drinks. No, she remembers Margaery’s comment about the way Sandor looks at her, and she has to wonder if Margaery was just projecting her Bronn obsession. Their waitress certainly felt comfortable enough hitting on him; if he was casting these lovesick looks Sansa’s way, wouldn’t it be obvious to everyone?

“So, I have a question,” she asks, dragging a fry through a pool of ketchup and she lifts it up and stares at it a moment before popping it in her mouth and chewing.

“I’ll try to find an answer, then,” he says, voice muffled from the wad of food he’s got in his mouth, his good cheek puffed out from it like a giant, bearded squirrel.
“How do men look at women? Like, when they like them, I mean.”

Sandor arches a thick eyebrow and stares at her from his hunch over his plate of half eaten food. He frowns, drops his huge burger and grabs a few napkins from the dispenser, and he sits back, scrutinizing her as he wipes his hands clean. After he’s swallowed, he takes a long swallow of coke, rattles the ice in the plastic cup and chuckles.

“You of all people know how men look at a pretty girl. Jesus, Red, we walked down the sidewalk for a couple of blocks and it was like a goddamn slobber-fest.” Another drink from his coke and the shake of his head, his hair falling in his eyes before he pushes it back.

“No, that’s not what I mean. That’s just, ugh, that’s just men treating women like pieces of meat. What I mean is, how do men look at women they really like, not just for her looks, but you know, for everything,” she says, dropping her gaze back to her plate a moment before toying with another fry and lifting her eyes back to him, and he’s gazing back at her uninterrupted, not quite a frown and not quite amused, not quite mystified but a little from all columns.

“Like he’s in love with her?” he asks, wiping a hand across his beard before he chucks the wad of napkins on the table by his plate.

Her heart flips like a fish out of water to hear him say it, the word love, and she thinks of black-water bathing and the feel of his fist in her hair. She feels foolish for it, because it was just a damn dream, but there it is. Sansa nods.

“Well,” he says after a few moments. “I wouldn’t know, if I’m being honest with you.”

“Haven’t you- what, you’ve never had a girlfriend?”

“Oh, I’ve had girlfriends,” he says dryly. “Hell, if I play my cards right, I could have another one soon. I’ve never dated a waitress before,” and he laughs when she throws her fry at him.

Future Girlfriend comes by with the check soon after, and Sansa relishes the walk from the diner to the car after Sandor pays the bill with cash. She walks on her tiptoes a few steps to work her leg muscles before another long stretch of time on the road, makes a mental note to dig her purse out of her suitcase when they get to a hotel. Next meal is on her, paid with her own money.

“So you’ve had girlfriends but you’ve never been in love? Is that what you mean?” she asks, hugging herself as they walk across the parking lot back to his truck.

“Yeah, I guess that’s what I mean,” he says, arms to the sky as he takes advantage of their last moments before they’re cooped up in the truck again. Sandor glances at her in the dead daylight, where it’s dusky-dark between the wan, yellow pools of light coming from the streetlamps overhead. “I was either too young, or- well, there was one woman, after I got back from Afghanistan, but I was a real prick after I got back. Didn’t work out too well in the end.”

“I’m sorry,” Sansa says, and he shrugs a dismissal as they stand facing each other outside of the truck.

“It is what it is,” he says. “Why’d you even want to know that?”

“I don’t know,” she says with a sigh and a shrug of her own. She gazes out at the empty snowy lot next to the diner, can see the blaze of headlights and taillights on the interstate off in the distance. Sansa smiles sadly and looks up to him. “I guess I just realized that I’ve never really been in love before, either. And I don’t think anyone’s been in love with me, so I just- you know, I just wondered what that looked like, is all,” she says, and there’s another mental note she jots down
below the *Bring Cash* that’s scrawled in her head, and it says *Kick Margaery’s butt*.

“Somebody’ll fall in love with you for sure, Sansa,” he murmurs, and there’s another pound of her heart, and the sad drops off from her smile as he gazes at her. And then he grins, pulls the diner receipt from his pocket and unfolds it to show a phone number under Molli’s floridly penned name, with a star dotting the ‘i’. “In the meantime, I’ll let you know if I find out,” and he barks out a laugh when she shoves him so hard he staggers into the hood of his truck.

Sansa offered to drive after she was done pummeling him in the parking lot, so Sandor has the surreal experience of riding shotgun in his own vehicle, and it’s a strange point of view, sitting on this side, gazing out at the road while Sansa drives, sitting ramrod straight with her hands at 11 and 1. It makes him think of little girls riding Clydesdales or something equally amusing, to watch her maneuver his big old burly truck through the light scatter of early evening traffic. They’re on the western side of Joplin, Missouri and they’ve been in this car for about 9 hours now, and his eyelids are so heavy now he can hardly keep them open, and more than once does his head drop forward with such suddenness that it startles him awake.

“We should stop for the night, I think,” Sansa says with a red, taillight-lit glance his way. “It’s past eight, and the last sign I saw said it’s another 100 miles to Tulsa.”

“Yeah, all right,” he says, slouching back in his seat, tipping his head back against the rear window as he scrubs his face with both hands.

“I can’t wait to take a shower,” she says. “Something about being in a car all day just makes me feel dirty.”

“I could go for a cold beer,” he says, and to his surprise, Sansa hums.

“Same here. Or a glass of wine.”

“Tell you what, we’ll find ourselves a place to sleep and then we’ll find a liquor store or something. We could both use a nightcap.”

There is a fast and furious bloom and pop of argument when they pass a few exits that advertise hotels like Holiday Inn, La Quinta and Howard Johnson, with Sansa insisting hotels are the way to go and Sandor demanding they wait until they find something cheaper. It’s with stony silence that she exits off the interstate with a Motel 8 their destination, though she perks up somewhat when Sandor points out a gas station with a BEER AND WINE neon light in its tinted window.

“Do you want me to go in this time?” she says stiffly after she carefully pulls into a parking lot, wiggling the gear shift to make sure it’s in neutral before she kills the engine. “I just need to get my money out of the suitcase in the back.”

“Nah, I got it,” he says, unlocking and opening his door, and he groans with a stretch as he gets to his feet outside. “Margaery gave me some cash before we left.”

"Don’t forget a bottle opener for my wine,” she says hastily before he can close the door.

“Yeah, yeah, keep your hair on,” he says, turning around to gauge her reaction, and he grins when she narrows her eyes at him.

“What’s left of it,” she says, and he laughs as he shuts the door.
The selection isn’t great but he’s able to find a six pack of Sam Adams black porter and a bottle of sweet white wine for her, judging by how doctored up she liked her coffee, and luckily for him it’s a screw-top lid. But he gets the biggest kick out of the pack of gum he buys for her.

“What’s this?” she says when he tosses it on her lap after getting back in the truck. She blinks as she holds it up to read it, and then she rolls her eyes and tosses it back to him. “Big Red? Really?”

“Yeah, it’s your very own brand of gum, Red,” he says, chucking it in the glove box.

“Please tell me you’re not going to start calling me Big Red now,” she says, starting the engine when he shuts the passenger door.

“Nah, that wouldn’t make much sense, unless you keep eating burgers called The Love Handle,” he says, following up with a Hey! and a chortle when she swats his arm. “How about Little Red then? Or Skinny Red? I bet you’d like Skinny Red, huh.”

Sansa sniffs imperially as she rumbles the truck down the road towards the glowing Motel 8 sign on the left, and she swats the stick jutting out of the side of the steering wheel to turn on the blinker. “Don’t try to change me, baby,” she says archly, sliding a withering sort of look his way, but if it’s meant to admonish then she’s shit out of luck, because it only serves to make him smirk as he looks at her in the barely-there light. “Plain old Red is just fine, thank you,” and while he laughs, Sandor wonders when she got the foolish idea in her head that she was ‘plain old’ anything.

He shoulders his duffel bag and hauls her red suitcase out of the truck once they’ve parked close to the lobby, holding it one hand while he grasps the plastic bags from the gas station in the other. After so long in the ambient dark of nighttime interstates, the indoor florescent lighting is such a loud blare that it’s almost like noise as he and Sansa blink owlishly in front of the check-in desk.

“Here, let me take that, Sandor, I know you’re exhausted,” Sansa says, leaning into him to take her suitcase from his hand, their fingers a mingle and touch and brush as they switch possession of luggage.

“Thanks, Red,” he says, and she’s smiling up at him, trapping him with the flip of her hair and the blue of her eyes, here in this dingy world of movie theater carpeting and ugly oak furniture, when the skinny front desk clerk clears his throat.

“Evening, folks,” he says, all artificial chipper to his post-pubescent voice, and when Sandor glances down he can see a high school chemistry textbook flipped open.

“Hi,” Sansa says, and when she puts bright to her voice it sounds smooth and sweet and genuine, even though he can see circles under eyes from a two hour focus on the road. “We need a, um, what, Sandor, just one room right?” she asks, glancing up at him, and when he nods she mirrors the movement, aiming another smile at the clerk. “We’re budgeting, so one room, please.”

“I can help with that,” he says, pushing aside the book as his fingers clack on the keyboard. “King bed all right? No extra cost, Mr. and Mrs…?” he says helpfully.

Sandor sucks in a breath that goes down the wrong way, and he succumbs to a coughing fit, but despite the scene he’s causing, Sansa simply smiles beatifically at him, all smug and I told you so with the lift of her chin.

“Two queens will be perfect,” she says. “Can we pay cash?”

He lets her shower first once they’re in their two queen room, and he takes off his shirt and sweater, sits with a cold Sam Adams and watches shitty limited cable on the edge of the bed he
claimed by tossing his duffel bag on it. It’s the one closest to the door, because the guard dog in
him doesn’t feel right unless there’s some sort of buffer between Sansa and the outside world.

“That,” she says as she flings open the bathroom door, and she stands in the doorway with her arms
outstretched and hands gripping either side of the frame, her wet hair still wrapped up in a towel,
her outfit switched to jersey pajama bottoms and a loose top. “Was amazing.”

“Congratulations,” he says, getting to his feet. “Please head to the stage for your award. Most
dramatic entrance.”

“I owe it to wine,” she says with a grin, reaching into the bathroom for her plastic cup of white
wine that she took with her into the shower. “In fact, right now, I owe just about everything to
wine,” she says, stepping aside to let him shoulder his way into the bathroom. “Have a nice time,
Sandor,” she says, waggling her fingers in a wine-tipsy wave before he rolls his eyes and shuts the
door.

He uses the shower stuff Margaery packed in that Dopp kit she gave him, scrubs his scalp with his
fingernails under a steady stream of piping hot water, his bottle of beer resting on the soap dish
next to the wafer-thin cake of soap the motel provides. And he has to admit, she’s kind of right
about the entire experience, because while he’s bone tired from staring at the white lines on an
interstate all day, there’s a skin-tingling invigoration here that slaps his senses awake, and it’s a
delicious contrast to the mellow his beer gives him. Once he’s clean he finishes the entire porter as
he simply stands there and lets the water rain on his back.

It isn’t until he’s standing naked in the bathroom, dripping wet on the flimsy bathmat that’s already
damp from Sansa’s shower, when he realizes he forgot to bring in one of the towels. They are, he
knows, stacked just outside the door on the counter with the sink in the little area that separates the
main room from the room with the shower and toilet in it. Fuck.

“Hey, Red,” he says, head bowed as he cracks the door a fraction of an inch, mortifyingly relieved
there’s no mirror in here with him so that she can’t catch his reflection as he looms stark naked
behind the door. “Sansa, you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here.” He can hear her over the muzzy din of television noise until she mutes it.
“What’s up?”

“I uh, I need a towel. I don’t have one in here, I forgot to uh, you know, my bad or whatever,” he
says, and the flush of his skin from the hot water is nothing compared to the burning he feels in his
cheeks and on his face when she dissolves into peal after peal of girlish giggling.

“Oh, my,” she says, the wine adding a wending, up and down meander to her voice as it gets closer
to him. “Well, we can’t have you standing there in your birthday suit all night, now, can we?”

“Just give me a fucking towel, Sansa, for chrissakes.”

“Need anything else? Another beer? Should I go get some ice at the ice machine? Ooh, or maybe
go try and find a vending machine, too.”

“Goddammit, Sansa, would you just—” he bellows, but then the giggle erupts into out and out
laughter, and then her hand pushes through the crack of the door with a towel dangling from the
grip of her fingers.

“Housekeeping,” she sing-songs.

“Thanks, asshole,” he mutters, snatching the towel out of her hand, furiously rubbing his wet hair
with it before he hastily wraps it around his hips.

“You’re welcome, butthead,” she says, and she’s a big, mischievous beam up at him when he wrenches open the door to glare down at her. His eyes narrow when hers widen slightly, and she lets her gaze wander down the plane of his chest and abs, down to where he’s mercifully covered with the towel.

“Can I help you with something?”

“I- what? Oh! No, no, sorry, I just, I have something else for you. For us, really,” she says, backing up to let him stride out of the bathroom, and he grabs another beer out of its carrier box before rummaging through his bag for a clean pair of boxer briefs and the too-short pair of pajama pants Margaery gave him.

“Yeah? What’s that? Peace and quiet, I hope,” he says, opening his beer with the church key on his keychain, gazing down at her as he swigs another long swallow.

“Even better,” she says, and she gives a high, happy squeal as she holds up a credit card in her hands, pressing it to her mouth like it’s a love letter. “Look what Margaery left us in my suitcase!” She dances from foot to foot like she’s the chick from Flashdance, and Sandor can practically see the dollar signs in her eyes.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he says.

“I know, right?” she squeals, flinging herself onto her own bed, arms outstretched, a look of such utter bliss on her face that all he can do is shake his head at her and walk back to the bathroom to change.
Sansa might be the only one out of the pair of them who can sleep through anything, but Sandor is by no means a light sleeper himself, or an early riser. He's still out cold in his bed closest to the door, curled up on his side and somehow still a giant of a man. She sits at the little table by the window, one foot on the edge of her chair as she counts out her money, the early morning light bleeding in between the half-closed blinds in bright white stripes that paint the darkened room like a zebra. It's all very black and white film noir, and she's half-smiling as she hums tunelessly under her breath, dealing out fives, tens, and twenties into individual stacks like some sort of femme fatale, but the smile fades when she sees she's bringing less than a hundred dollars to the literal table. Stacks, it seems, is an exaggeration.

“Damn,” she murmurs, recounting twice before sitting back in her chair with a sigh.

He’s paid for the coffee and magazines, the food and the room, and despite what he says about Margaery slipping him some cash, she’s fairly sure he’s used his own money as well. She can maybe cover one cheap meal and a quarter tank of gas at this rate, and it doesn’t settle well with her. Other people have been footing her bill for far too long, and she’ll not break free from Lannister control and scrutiny to fall into the same weak-willed habits, no matter how badly that credit card Margaery left her is burning a hole in her pocket. Before her family sidled up to the Lannisters and Baratheons, she was plucky and efficient and scrupulous, would hand sew embellishments on last year’s blouse, would mix nail polishes to make new shades. She and Jeyne always wore the finest scores from higher end thrift stores though no one in their collegiate circles knew any better, and that gives her an idea.

The smile comes back as she thinks fondly, sadly, wistfully of her roommate, but before it can melt into tears she takes a deep breath and sits up again. Sansa scoops her cash together into one mismatched pile and stuffs it back in her evening clutch, black to match the dress she wore that night, black to match the noir of this film she calls her life now, and gets to her feet. She crosses the room and sits with a whump on her bed, gazing at Sandor’s sleeping form as she calls the front desk.

“Good morning, how can I help you?” the woman says brightly.

“Oh, yes, I was wondering if you could tell me if there are any thrift stores around here?” Sansa says in a hushed voice, her hand cupped around the phone, and she bites her lip when Sandor mutters in his sleep and rolls from his side onto his stomach. The pillow is washed with the scatter of black hair as he turns his head away from her.

“Well, yes ma’am, there are several. There’s a Salvation Army about a mile down the road, and a Goodwill that’s a little closer than that but in the opposite direction.”

“No, no, I’m sorry, I meant, um,” she starts, stopping herself just before the words Higher end leave her mouth, because that’s no way to build rapport. “I meant ones where you can sell your clothes for cash or store credit. Although since I’m strapped for cash, the more of that the merrier,
if you know what I mean,” she says, thinking on her feet, and she smiles when the woman laughs.

“Oh, believe me, honey, I know exactly what you mean. This job is fine, but any extra money is heaven sent, isn’t it. Let me take a look on my computer here, and I’ll call you back, room 232.”

“Thank you so much,” Sansa says as loudly and cheerfully as she dares, and she puts the phone back in its cradle with a happy beam.

She’s sitting on the floor next to her suitcase when the phone rings a few minutes later, and her pride of self-sufficiency is squashed from the heavy mortification of carelessness when Sandor jerks up with a snort at the sudden metallic trill. He posts up to his elbows in a half pushup, head swinging like some angry animal’s as he looks left and right, clearly out of sorts from the hour, the startle, the new location, and then he collapses, face down in the pillow just in time for his loud groan to be muffled.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry,” she says, hastily shuffling on her knees down the stretch between their beds to snatch the phone before its third ring. She sits with her back against her mattress, knees up as she watches the flex of his bare shoulder blades, and she can just make out the tattoos scrawled across his skin, and he’s so pale for a man who spends a lot of his time without a shirt on, and it makes her wonder, and—

“All right, so I found you a couple of stores, but I think Plato’s Closet is going to be your best bet for the biggest bang for your buck,” the front desk lady says, brisk and chipper enough to snap Sansa the hell out of wherever she was headed. “They really like high end brands though, so I’m not sure if that’s what you want?”

“High end, designer, that’s all right up my broke-ass alley,” Sansa says, grinning when the woman laughs again, and she pins the phone with her shoulder as she opens the nightstand drawer for a pen and pad of paper. “All right, hit me.”

Sandor lifts his head and turns to rest his cheek on the pillow as he gazes blearily at her with a frown of question, and she holds up a finger to bid him patience when she glances up at him with a smile. Sansa writes down addresses and directions to both stores, though she circles the one for Plato’s Closet, and she’s about to draw stars all around it before she remembers the waitress. She goes for daisies instead.

“High end? Designer?” Sandor groggy-gravel-growls once she’s hung up the phone. “Don’t tell me you’re already using that credit card,” he says, closing his eyes as he lifts a hand and rubs his face, and she thinks of big, sleepy kitties, scuffed up black cats that trade stalking alleyways for sleeping 18 hours a day on the backs of couches. Sansa smiles and holds up the pad of paper, tapping it with her pen.

“The exact opposite,” she says, and then she grins. “Get dressed, Clyde, we’re going on a money run.”

He fares better once they get a cup of motel lobby coffee in him, insists on driving so long as she reads him the directions, but the overall idea of what they’re doing seems to be lost on him. They’re idling at a red light in central Joplin, Missouri when he finally reaches over and picks up one of her Miu Miu booties and holds them up to inspect them. They’re black suede and probably 50% Scotchguard, given how many times she’s treated them in the short six months she’s owned them, and they’re absolutely gorgeous but Sandor’s staring at the shoe in his hand like it’s snake oil.

“You’re telling me this is going to get us big bucks?” he says with a mirrored-sunglass glance her
way. The light changes, and after a last lingering gaze at the shoe, he sets it back on her lap and shifts the truck into first.

“Well, yes, the pair of them will,” she says, gazing down at them. The suede is still soft thanks to only wearing them a handful of times, and even the bout in the rain outside Sandor’s shop didn’t do much of any damage. Sansa rubs at a tiny spot with the pad of her finger.

“At a thrift store? I thought thrift stores were cheap.”

“Here, turn left. No, that left. Yeah, right there,” she says, tossing her black hair out of her eyes as she sits up straighter once they’re on the right street. “And this is a different sort of thrift store. It’s-you’d call it a second hand store, more accurately. From my hand to theirs, and I’m hoping they give me a ton of money for these bad boys.”

“When you say a ton,” Sandor starts, pulling into the Plato’s Closet parking lot, and after he turns in the seat to stare at her, she turns away from him, hastily opening the door and getting out into the dry wintery air.

“Let’s just say I mean a ton, all right?” she says.

She’s not about to tell him what these shoes cost if $150 on four pieces of super-marked down designer clothes makes him crazy, but once they’re at the counter and her shoes have been appraised, he’s a dropped jaw and a staggered step backwards as he tears his sunglasses off his face. Before he even opens his mouth, Sansa covers her eyes with her hand and sighs

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he says, once the girl is prepared to hand over nearly $300 cash for Sansa’s shoes, and both women jump, though only Sansa winces as she looks up past her fingers at him.

To her credit, the girl behind the counter handles his outburst far better than she did after her initial gasp and stare at his scars, but then again with a man like Sandor, perhaps a few F-bombs and outbursts are sort of expected. She smirks and tilts her head.

“They’re in really good shape. I’d offer more if someone hadn’t just run out of here with a bunch of merchandise,” she says with a lingering gaze at Sandor's scars. Sansa tugs on his sleeve.

“Would you pipe down please? People are staring, Clyde,” she hisses.

“People are staring because you just got a thrift store to give you three hundred goddamn dollars for a pair of fuck me shoes, Red,” he says, staring at her between not-so-furtive glances and gapes at the booties as the girl whisks them off the counter to the back of the store.

“People are staring because you’re acting ridiculous. There’s an old saying about gift horses, buddy,” she says, lifting her chin as she stuffs the cash in her jeans pocket, drifting through the carousels of brightly colored clothes, and the fact that they’re all ridiculously marked down makes her fingers itch.

“Want me to look in your mouth then?” he quips, following her like a great hulking shadow, and there’s something close and comforting and dramatically wonderful about it that she absolutely loves.

“Careful, Clyde,” she says, plucking the ¾ sleeve of a red and black checkered dress that makes her think of bearded men and tattoos, and with a sort of absentminded tilt of her head, Sansa checks the price tag before glancing up at him where he’s rummaging through the pile of scarves on the center of the carousel. She grins when he stops to look at her. “Big Red bites.”
“I’ll bet you do,” he says with a huff of laughter. “Come on, seriously, how much did those shoes cost?”

“I’m not telling you,” she grins, taking the dress off the rack as she backs away from him.

“Come on, tell me,” he says, all almost smiles, and he tucks his aviators in the crew neck of his t-shirt as he steps towards her.

“No way,” she says with a huff of laughter like his, and when he reaches out to snag her sleeve she slaps his hand away.

“What, $500? Is that why she gave you so much?” he grins with another pluck of her sweater, and when she twists to escape him he pinches her in the dip of her waist, making her squeal from the tickle of it.

“Get away from me, jerk,” she laughs, weaving through the circular racks of clothes towards the dressing rooms in the back, and she shrieks loud enough to attract the shop girls’ attention when he grabs her around the waist and drags her back.

“What, did they cost more?,” he says, voice and words a gust on the top of her head before she turns to look at him.

“No. Yes,” she says breathlessly, cheeks flushed from the short lived dart and chase and dodge, from the amused glitter in his eyes as he gazes down her and the slow way his hand leaves her lower back. “But in my defense, I didn’t buy them.”

“Who did?” he says, letting her go in full when she backs up inside the only empty dressing room with a purple velvet curtain pushed to the side. “Let me guess, Joffrey?”

“Yes,” she says, snapping the curtain shut to block him out of view, and she’s grinning so hard her cheeks hurt as she hangs up the dress and pulls off her sweater and the loose shirt she slept in last night.

“Well that’s got to feel sort of good then,” he says, and she can tell from the close depth of his voice that he’s standing directly outside of her dressing room. It makes her feel like royalty. It makes her feel precious, and for a moment she forgets she’s paying him to do it. “Although maybe it would have felt better burning them,” he says, and she can see the shift of his feet where he stands, back to the curtain, just on the other side of it.

“Like you of all people would burn a source of income,” Sansa says, shrugging into the unbuttoned dress like it’s an oversized shirt, and she’s already giving her reflection frank appraisal when the curtain pushes open and Sandor ducks inside. There is just enough time to wrench the dress shut across her breasts before he draws the purple velvet closed behind him and turns to face her with a finger at his lips.

“What the hell, Sandor?” she hisses, but he shakes his head, walks her backwards until her shoulders press against the cold mirror, and that sensation paired with the warning look in his eyes makes her shiver.

“Shhh,” he whispers with the jerk of his head towards the curtain. “Don’t say my name, Red. The cops are here.”

The sky is the sort of overcast that slow dances between a white so pale it glows and the sort of
suede grey that promises darkness and future storms, but it doesn’t deter her from wearing her sunglasses. Yesterday was a long day and longer night, capping off a hard-as-nails week, and she needs the extra dark tint to hide from the snow-blind bright as much as from the rest of this coffee-bitter world she lives in. Besides. Plenty of widows wear them to visit their husbands’ graves to hide tears and sorrow, the black smudge of poorly-applied mascara. No matter that her own eyes are red thanks to gin instead of mourning Robert today, not that the man ever had much influence on her mood anyways, aside from irritation, jealousy, disdain and an overall sense that she’d been let down in life.

Well. Perhaps he inspired emotion after all.

She can hear footsteps on the drive that cuts through this particular section of Graceland Cemetery, the scuff and grit of wet asphalt beneath a man’s shoe before the sound softens to the crunch of snow underfoot. She glances over her shoulder, offering only the profile of her face behind the black wool collar of her coat as she confirms who it is, though it’s hardly necessary. There is no one else here but her, as far as she can tell; she even sent her driver Lancel to go get her dry cleaning. Satisfied it’s still just the two of them, Cersei turns back to gaze at her husband’s grave and feels nothing but the winter chill.

“It’s a bit dramatic meeting here, even for you,” Petyr says as he comes to stand by her side a moment. He surprises her by stepping forward and gently placing three calla lily stems on the sloped top of Robert’s headstone. “Though you certainly do cut an impressive figure, head to toe in black standing in the snow,” he says, straightening and turning a fraction to face her. “Every inch the mourning wife, even after a year. Well, almost every inch,” he says, reaching out to finger the navy and gold silk of her Hermès scarf.

Cersei tilts her head away from him, and it’s enough a gesture to clear his head and put him back in his place, and he drops the touch with a blasé sigh, as if they are gazing at mediocre art in a even more mediocre gallery.

“Have you found any trace of those two?” she says, smoothing back an errant lock of hair that has slid free from its French twist.

“We’ve had eyes on Clegane’s apartment since he went down to the station for questioning and there’s been nothing of any interest. Initially I was intrigued when his neighbors left town right after; the woman I questioned had been a bit rude,” he says by way of explanation when she tips her head to frown at him over the rims of her glasses.

Cersei rolls her eyes. The only women who aren’t rude to him are insecure gold diggers or recent high school graduates with daddy issues.

“And now?” she says impatiently, turning away from him to gaze at the graceful droop of lilies on polished slate grey.

“Oh, it was nothing in the end. They’re back now and keep to themselves. Haven’t so much as glanced at Clegane’s door, even though—”

“Who gives a damn about the neighbors? Has anyone actually seen Sansa or Gregor’s brother around town?”

Petyr smiles tightly, displeased for being interrupted, and it only serves to make her smirk. “If we had, my dear, you would have been the first to hear about it.”

She sighs and shakes her head. Compared to everything else happening, this should be the easiest
thing to do, tracking down two fools and silencing them. How hard could it truly be? If she weren’t so busy making sure Joffrey showed up to work each day, fielding phone calls from Jaime and maintaining a flawless public persona, she’d do it her damned self. Cersei squeezes her hands into fists in the pockets of her coat, can practically feel how long it’s been since she’s had a manicure. Add that to the to-do list.

“All right, well what about Sansa’s apartment? Clearly someone went back to plant the evidence, which was just in time, thank Christ,” she says. “Did they see anything out of the ordinary? Anything missing, anything new they could use to narrow down their whereabouts?”

“Yes, Bronn took care of it,” Petyr says, and then there is the most polite of hums from him, a little noise of well-practiced ponder and curiosity, one that suggests to her that he meant to bring this up whether she had steered the conversation here or not. “You know, I overheard Bronn say the most curious thing when he thought he was alone.”

Cersei catches herself just before she flinches, and it’s another reason she’s grateful for the sunglasses as she does a mental double-check on her expression. Last night she found herself gin-drunk and gin-bored, gin-frustrated and gin-texting, and while most of the time it’s a nuisance when she blacks out, right now she wishes that had been the case this go round. Instead she stands here in this bleak and lonely winter cemetery, with black barren trees all around and the occasional crow croaking overhead, with the very clear memory of texting Bronn to come over and fuck her.

“Did he now?” she says lightly, going for boredom.

He hadn’t replied, not that he ever does to late night texts until the next morning. It is as if he is waiting for her to sober up before they strike up a conversation, before he plows on with business as usual instead of plowing her. There is something bordering on gentlemanly about it, but then again these dumb-as-rocks men usually do a decent job of pulling off that sweet puppy act. Another reason Robert was such a letdown.

“Yes,” Petyr says, gazing overhead as a plane roars by, silver shimmer against the dull flat of cloud cover. Cersei is positive she’s going to get her ass handed over right now, a little piece of blackmail dressed up like a carrot to make her plod after it like she is some idiot mule. “I wonder, did Bronn ever meet Sansa?”

Taken aback and relieved, she blinks, glancing sidelong at him, but he is impassive and smooth, chemical peel and meticulously mussed hair. She shrugs, shakes her head, exhales as she tries to think of any time the broad shouldered, narrow hipped cop would have been lurking around one of their functions.

“No, not even once. Why?”

“He said the same thing.” Lightness and air to his voice, whipped cream dollop on the cloying slither of his tone. “Very interesting.”

“So?” It’s all very boring to her.

“Well, he knew which room was hers right off the bat.”

“50/50 chance.” Cersei is beginning to get impatient. She’s starting to feel numb from the cold, and she curls her toes in her leather boots. A stiff, warming cocktail is starting to sound good right about now. “You told me he said something, Petyr, stop beating around the bush.”

“He said her name. He said her name, and apologized out loud for doing this to her, presumably for
Cersei laughs, no longer caring if it looks and sounds improper to do so graveside. “So what? Sansa inspires pity in everyone, especially men,” she says, and it’s only a little bitter, coming from her, because where has the male pity been for her, all her life? “Men like you and Bronn only see the little girl when they look at a woman like Sansa. She’s was a fool in the beginning but she’s clearly out to get her own piece of my pie, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let her.” She wants to grit her teeth at the idea of some feather-headed girl like Sansa avenging herself on the Lannister name. On her name. “Forget this Bronn bullshit and focus on what’s really going on, here.”

“No, it’s not all. We’ve only been talking about you and I asked you here to talk about me. I want you to broaden the range of that news blurb you put in with WGN. It didn’t work, that flimsy little bit you had them publish online. I want it on the nightly news, all week long. I want it printed in the papers, and I want it broadcast across the country this time,” she says, turning in full now to face him, and she gives her best stony glare, one she hopes the little pissant can see through her glasses. “They want to threaten me? Well, then they better like running, because I’m coming at them with all we have.”

“You don’t want to scare them into hiding, though, do you? I could go after her myself, Cersei, secretive and on their asses before they know it. Or you could let me put my man on it, he’s very passionate, and I assure you he will be discreet like me.”

“You mean slithering like you,” she snaps, fed up with his bandying and his nuance. “I’m giving you a fucking order, and I expect you to follow it, do you understand me?”

“Of course, of course,” he says, taking two steps back with his hands lifted up in surrender. “It will be the next big news sensation, Sandor Clegane and Sansa Stark, wanted for murder,” he says with a sweep of his hand through the air before he closes his hand into a fist and points at her. “But, Cersei, listen to me. At the very least, let my man tail Bronn. I have a feeling that cop’s hiding something.”

“Pay for it out of your own pocket then,” she says, folding her arms across her chest as she watches him. He gives her a repulsive little smile and an idiotic bow before he turns and saunters back to his town car parked in the road. “And I want that story out now, goddammit.”

“Consider it already done,” he says, waving before he slides into the driver’s seat, and she watches him drive away with an undeniable bubble of rage in her chest, stinging and sour like indigestion.

She is still fuming an hour later, sitting at the bar inside the Allium on Delaware, rage-drinking something appropriately called the Queen of Hearts. Lancel asked if she wanted company but she told him no, told him to wait out front where he’s been the past twenty minutes. The last thing she wants is to spend time around an idiot yes man after she just parted ways with the worst of them. Besides, there are niggling thoughts she cannot ignore.
Did Bronn have a thing for Sansa? She wonders if he’d have come running if it had been Sansa’s busy little thumbs texting him last night, wonders if Lancel, who has met the redhead several times, ever fantasizes about being with her when he’s fucking her. Petyr certainly seems to have these ideations, considering how frequently her name comes up and not just in relation to the current situation. And he wanted to go after her himself, she thinks with a roll of her eyes. Where were the men who wanted to come for her? Was she already too old for it, already too close to mutton to be the lamb in some man’s eyes?

Cersei lifts her gaze to the bronze-tinted mirror backdrop behind the bar, drags a finger down her hairline as she feels what she sees. Still-smooth skin and perfectly glossy blonde, the lovely high curve of an all-natural cheekbone, the dip of a cheek to a plump, only occasionally injected upper lip. She frowns, drops the touch and sighs. I am still beautiful, it’s the world that’s blind, she thinks, and then there is movement behind her in the mirror, and when she shifts her attention to the booth along the far wall, she sees a dark haired man watching her.

He is neatly dressed, black suitcoat and white shirt with the top button undone, no tie. The glint and glimmer of cuff links she can make out from here, because even Robert got some things right, and she was never offended when he called her a barracuda. And then the man smiles, sophisticated and slow, catwalk perfect with the same kind of smolder to them that’s been hot and unattended to, right here between her thighs.

Goosebumps riddle her arms, even under her coat and her thick wool sweater, and determined to play up youthful coquette instead of seasoned appetite, she coyly drops her gaze and takes another swallow of her drink. Not every man’s eyes, then. She wishes Bronn would text her now, if only so she could ignore him as he so pointedly ignored her.

“Excusez-moi, mademoiselle,” she hears behind her, and oh how that already charms her. She lets a smile slide into place as she lifts her eyes again to the mirror, where the reflection of his own gaze is waiting for her. “I was hoping to buy you a drink,” he says, voice so richly accented that it is thick and dark like local honey.

“I don’t take candy from strangers,” she says, lofty and light, a breeze high in the trees, turning slowly in her seat to regard him for true. He’s trim and he’s panther-sleek like the triathletes she sees training at the gym. She imagines him jogging by the Seine, French music blasting into his earbuds as he muses over his next fuck. And that will be me, she thinks, smiling sweetly.

“Then allow me to introduce myself,” he says, sliding fluidly into the seat next to hers. “My name is Jean,” he says, pronouncing it like John but without the N. “Jean Neige.”

The dressing room is small to begin with, but it borders on claustrophobic now that it’s filled with dread and fear and the pounding of his heart that is so loud and dizzying, Sandor’s surprised Sansa can’t hear it. What had been the original rush of lighthearted, cat and mouse adrenaline has quickly spiked and soured into a flight or fright sort of panic that he can see written all over her face. They stand nearly toe to toe, Sansa’s hands clutching her dress like it’s a handkerchief to wring, and they stare at each other in mute horror. His gaze flickers across her face, but each time it returns to her eyes, they’re wide and they’re blue and they’re always on him, as if he’s got some solution he’s not sharing. But he’s got a feeling this is all his damned fault, after his little shit fit over the money right in front of some stranger, his scars on full display with his hair pulled back under his hat.

“What do we do,” she whispers, so quietly he’s got to read her lips to discern what she says.

He shakes his head, watching her mouth as it opens, closes on a shaky exhale, downturns at his
uncertainly. She mouths something again, and in order to hear it he rests a hand on the wall behind her and bows his head so he can hear the treble of her whisper.

“Let’s just stay here then, they can’t stay forever,” she says against his ear, face tipped so her cheek presses against his scars, and there is the sudden urge to lift his other hand and hold her close. That’s the panic talking, wanting comfort, he thinks, straightening to look back down at her and nod.

She lifts a hand and moves a finger around in a circle like she’s stirring something, and he stares at her in confusion before he registers the state of undress she’s in, and then his eyes widen. In his haste to slip out of view and let her know what was happening he didn’t even realize what he’d barged into. He spins on his heel as fast as he can without accidentally pitching forward through the curtain like a bull in a china shop, and stands there feeling like a fool as he stares at the floor, trying to listen.

It’s a murmur of voices from the other end of the store, the occasional increase in volume giving him no information aside from They looked just like them and I think they already took off, and none of it sits well with him. He pricks his ears, closes his eyes to try and hear better. It’s a world of darkness and hushed conversation, the seaside rock from the jostle of Sansa behind him as she gets undressed or dressed or re-dressed, whatever the hell it is she’s doing that brings her knuckles against his arm, her elbow a drag across his spine, at one point what feels like her forehead resting against him.

“Hey, Big Scary Guy and Miss Miu Miu,” a woman calls out from outside the curtain, and she, presumably one of the employees, taps her long fingernails on the curtain rod by Sandor’s forehead.

“Oh my god,” Sansa whimpers, and he reaches around to hold her against his back when she huddles up against him, two fists to his shirt with her cheek pressed against his shoulder blade.

He isn’t sure what he’s going to do, exactly, but he made a promise, and she feels so tiny against his back, and he knows the truth and the sweet of her now, knows that jail’s no place for a woman like Sansa. So whatever it is his instincts have planned for him, he’s fairly sure it will get the fucking book thrown at him. But then he hears chuckling.

“Don’t worry, I can see your feet, I know you’re not doing anything raunchy. I just can’t remember, were you guys here when those d-bags stole some of our merchandise? The cops were hoping for some more eye witnesses since they’ve done it all over town. Nobody can seem to catch them.”

And that’s when he remembers what the girl behind the counter had said about giving Sansa even more cash, and right at that moment, she seems to remember it too, and he’d laugh if he weren’t so weak-limbed from the dredges of fear that sour the gulp of relief he swallows down.

“Oh my God,” Sansa hisses, and the two fists let go of him to give him a shove, and when he bumps against velvet he can feel someone stagger back.

“Oh my God,” Sansa hisses, and the two fists let go of him to give him a shove, and when he bumps against velvet he can feel someone stagger back.

“Uh, sorry, no, we weren’t. We’d just come in after, I think,” he says. “You uh, you gonna buy that dress, sweetheart?” he asks, turning around to regard a red-faced, arms-folded Sansa who is shaking her head and glaring at him.

Wildly, at an utter loss here, he widens his eyes and shrugs, shakes his head right back at her.

“Yes, honey, I think I will. Sorry we couldn’t be of any help, officers,” Sansa says, a simpering
smile on her face as she rolls her eyes at him.

“Thanks anyways. You two kids don’t have too much fun in there,” one of the officers says, amusement thinning his voice into near laughter as they move on to the next dressing room.

“If only they knew,” Sansa snaps, pushing the sleeves up to her elbows before fanning her face. “Oh my god, I thought I was going to have a heart attack,” she says, and he can see the sheen of sweat on her brow and her flushed cheeks.

“Hey, man, I panicked, all right? I- Well, I sort of lost my shit over the shoes and suddenly I freaked out, thinking she’d seen my face. Had seen the scars,” he adds lamely, pointing to his face, as if she doesn’t know where they are, as if her gaze isn’t a cooling drift over them as she sighs and shakes her head again.

“They’re not that bad, Sandor,” she murmurs, lifting a hand from it’s folded-arm clamp on her elbow to gently touch her own cheek, where it had been pressed to his only moments earlier, and he knows she’s remembering the gnarled feel of them.

He rolls his eyes.

“It’s Clyde, and I call bullshit,” he says, pulling off his cap to shake his hair down in front of his face. “I’m not buying what you’re selling.”

“Well fine,” she says, pushing past him once he’s slid open the curtain, and they both sigh audibly at the rush of cooler air that hits their faces. Sansa turns to face him and pokes a finger hard against the pad of his chest muscle. “But I’m not trying to sell you a damned thing, Sandor. That was 100% free. And true.” Imperial lift of the chin, don’t-mess-with-me burn of a blue eyed gaze. For some reason she seems taller.

He shoves his hands in the pockets of his jacket, head inclined as he studies her. He’s half tempted to push back at her, maybe not with his hands but with his words, maybe call her out and call her ‘liar,’ but then she lifts one of her eyebrows in so blatant a challenge that he finds he can’t bring himself to say it. And he supposes it’s either one hell of a beautiful poker face or it’s the truth, and he supposes that after the scare he’s just had, it might be easier to just accept something soft instead of dig around for something hard. So he does.

“Free like those shoes, I bet,” he says, giving her shoulder a light nudge towards the register by the door so she can buy that lumberjack dress she’s got draped over her arm. “Since when is anything of yours free?”

“First time for everything,” she says loftily, tossing the dress on the counter before she turns to face him. "Isn't that right, 'sweetheart'?"

Sandor cannot help but grin at her sass. "Yes, dear."
“Where do you think you’re going?” Sandor says as he kills the engine at a gas station in Flagstaff, Arizona, because before the truck even shudders to stillness Sansa already has her door open. “It’s my turn to pump, remember?”

“There’s a Wendy’s across the street,” she says with a one-shouldered shrug as she dangles her foot out of the cab. “And I want a Frosty,” she says, grinning suddenly, maybe because of how childish a desire it sounds. He wonders if she knows how goddamned cute she can be, and then instantly he answers himself. Of course she does.

“It’s snowing outside, and you want a cold milkshake?” he says, pulling the key from the ignition as he opens his own door, and together they step out of the truck, slamming their doors shut in perfect unison.

It’s a little dance they’ve invented, moving with each other as they move across the country, and they’ve both memorized the steps, even though it’s only been a few days. But there are a shitload of minutes inside 24 hours, filled with plenty of opportunities to learn a person, inside and out and back. So it’s turned into a synchronization, despite their wild and fundamental differences, the broad and the slight of them, the dark and the light, the rough and the smooth.

“Yes, I do, thank you very much,” she says, walking around the truck to stand in front of him as he scrutinizes the pump prices. The metal canopy overhead shields them from the snowfall, but it flurries all around them like gauzy lace curtains, fat fluffy flakes that whirl and breeze and spin.

“This coming from the woman who gets all pissy if I turn on the A/C in our room?” he says, lifting his hand to receive the gas money she’s counting out, and she slaps the short stack of fives and tens in his open palm.

“That’s because you set it to freezing, Sandor,” she says, giving the cash a teasing tug when he closes his hand around it. He squeezes his fingers and pulls but still she holds firm and gives it another yank.

“It’s freezing now, Red,” he says, flicking his wrist so it whips out of her grasp, and he grins when she looks affronted at the end of her little tug of war game.

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“You little shit,” he gruffs and huffs.
Sandor gives chase for a step or two until she darts away with a girlish squeal of victory and hops up between the two gas pumps. He's got the flash of a grin before she jogs out into the snow.

“Much better,” she calls out, walking backwards towards the street as she draws the hat down over her head, so low it covers her ears and most of her forehead, and she laughs as he scowls, waves as he rolls his eyes. “Thanks for the hat!”

He shakes his head as he watches her turn, look both ways before sprinting across the street, and because she’s gone and can’t see him or hear him, Sandor’s mouth twitches in a grin as he heads inside to pay.

There’s a few people in line ahead of him so by the time he steps back out into the cold she’s already returned, and she sits on the open tailgate of his truck, legs swinging as she drinks chocolate milkshake through a striped straw. Snow studs her second-hand black wool coat, sits like stars on the dark ends of her short hair that stick out from under his cap, and the cold has brought sunrise pink to the cream of her cheeks. For a fleeting moment it makes him smile, until he remembers himself with the slight upward hunch of his shoulders as he strides back towards his truck.

“Looking like the cat got the canary over here,” he says, flipping open the little hinged door to unscrew the gas cap.

“And it’s delicious,” she says with a happy, warm-breath sigh, half turning on the tailgate to face him. She sets the shake down beside her as she pulls a French fry from a small paper bag in her lap.

Sandor chooses the cheapest grade of gas and sticks the nozzle in to fill the tank, watches with benign amusement as Sansa carefully removes the lid of her paper cup, but he can’t just stand there and be a silent, passive observer when she actually sticks the fry into the shake.

“What the hell are you doing?” he says, clicking the little latch into place so the gas will pump itself, and he comes to the side of his truck bed, folds his arms on top of it as he watches her with a sort of horrified curiosity.

“What?” she says, popping the shake-slathered fry in her mouth as she looks up at him, slow blink slow with her head tilted to the side. “Don’t you ever do this?”

“No chance,” he says, wrinkling his nose with a suspicious frown as he watches her take out another fry and dip it.

“Well, let me tell you, honey,” she says, letting the fry sink halfway down before she slowly pulls it out and holds it between them. “Your life is about to change for the better. Go on, try it,” she says, moving it closer to him as he stares at it with trepid doubt.

“I don’t think so,” he says, trying to mate the two flavor profiles in his head and coming up short. A greasy fry in a cold shake? It just sounds weird.

“Why?” she says, and he shrugs obstinately, watches the chocolate sweetness slowly drip down the fry and onto her finger. “Big brave man like you, scared of a little French fry?” Sansa twitches it back and forth like it’s a toy mouse and he’s a grumpy old cat.

“Oh, just give it to me,” he says, snatching it away from her, and he gives her a narrow-eyed glare as he pops it in his mouth and chews.
She licks the Frosty off her finger, watches him with ill-concealed delight and anticipation, all snowflake smile and bright sky gaze, eyebrows lifting as she nods. “It’s delicious, isn’t it?”

It is.

“It’s all right, I guess,” he mutters. With a sigh of resignation, Sandor walks around the truck and sits beside her, reaches over to grab another fry from the bag on her lap. “Here, gimme that thing,” he says, and she laughs and hands it over to him.

Sansa hums tunelessly, eyes downcast as they eat her fries and shake together, breathes a laugh when they dunk their fries in unison and she dribbles milkshake all over his knuckle. There’s something deeply intimate about it all, sharing food with this woman, sucking the sweet off his skin as he glances at her, still half-wary like a wild animal at some Serengeti water hole. But there’s something hauntingly familiar about it too, like they’ve been doing it all their lives, or in his dreams at least, some fleeting comfort he’s chased his whole life only to come up short. *It’s just a couple of fries*, he thinks as he takes a firmer grip on his imagination, and he gives her another glance just as she looks up mid-chew, gazes across the gas station parking lot and heaves a sigh.

“What’s up, Red?”

Sansa snaps out of whatever thought had its hold on her and looks at him, and it’s sheepish and hangdog and utterly opposite to the lighthearted bandy banter from just a few moments ago. She chuckles sadly with a downcast gaze and the shake of her head, takes the Frosty back from him to drag a fry through it in circles, over and over again until the thing becomes so sodden it tears in two. Before she can claim it, Sandor reaches in, grabs it and chucks it into his mouth, thinking it might make her smile. It does, but it’s small and dark and almost bitter, a thimble of coffee, a salt covered stone.

“It’s my family,” she says, rifling around in the bag for another rapidly cooling fry. “We’re almost there but like, it's like I’m so far away.”

“We’ll be there in an hour, once this slow-ass pump finishes,” he says, feeling like a jackass when it immediately shuts itself off behind him with a loud click.

“No, I mean,” she starts, but then she cuts herself off with another sigh, and now Sandor gets it.

“That thing you told me, back at my place. So bad you think I’ll hate you for it.”

“Hate me even more,” she corrects with another one of those rainy day sad smiles, blues music on vinyl, shoulder-slap sigh.

It’s ridiculous, seeing her so beat up when it’s her own fists doing the smacking, and he’s got the faded black eye to prove that Sansa knows how to hit when she means to. It’s strange, to think of her turning all that flinty-edged fire on herself, but then again, it’s something he does to himself, and just like that they have one more thing in common. Well, that settles it. He takes back the Frosty, shakes the cup with a vigorous back and forth before he puts it to his lower lip and knocks back a good mouthful of the stuff into his mouth.

“Hey!” she says with the indignant puff and fluff of an angry chickadee. “I wasn’t done with that!”

Sandor shrugs, grabs the bag of remaining French fries and chucks both guilty pleasures in the
garbage.

“Those were mine,” she snaps.

“I’m not sitting around at your little pity party, so let’s get up and go. Come on,” he says, waving her off the truck, but Sansa doesn’t budge.

“I’m not sitting here feeling sorry for myself. I own up to what happened a year ago, I’m just- I’m scared of his reaction when he sees me. So, you know,” she says after several moments, “I’m just stalling, thank you very much.”

Sandor snorts a laugh. “At least you’re honest,” he says, and then he dusts his salty, greasy fingers off on his jeans before standing in front of her. “Come on, Red, let’s go. It’s like a Band-Aid, you just gotta rip it off, and afterwards you’ll see it’s not as bad as you’re thinking it is.”

Sansa sags her head back and groans, leans back like she’s about to lie down in the cold bed of his truck, and when he grabs her by the wrist and pulls she comes rag-doll-willingly. Her little angry lamb bleat stretches out into something more guttural and zombie-ish as he slowly drags her off the tailgate, her body listing to the side from his pull on her. It’s amusing enough to the both of them that he’s grinning and she’s laughing when her feet finally touch down to earth.

“Fine, here I am,” she says with dramatic emphasis, following him as he replaces the gas nozzle into its holder, and she screws the gas cap back on for him before slapping shut the metal flap. “Do you want your hat back?” she says, and he turns to face her in the small space between the pump and the truck.

It’s not a romantic setting, with the taste of fast food still on his tongue, the faint high smell of gasoline on the thin winter air and the fact that they’ve been cramped up in the car for over six and a half hours. But she’s right here and her eyes are still bright from the laughter and the teasing and the honesty, and she’s close enough that he can feel the warmth from her, and suddenly, or maybe not suddenly at all, Sandor wants more. Fleetingly he thinks of the bicker-banter games they’ve played here and there and back again, how they seem to know each other now. His eyes wander to her mouth, only for a moment, and he tells himself it’s just to check her expression and see if she’s still sad, but her lips are parted and then she sinks a tooth into the pad of her lower lip, and that’s enough.

“Nah, you keep it,” he says after he clears his throat, after he thinks about giving a lock of her hair a tug or running a touch down the length of her arm even though it’s buried under several layers of clothes. Time for self-preservation. “Go on now, I’m fuckin’ freezing out here,” and he thinks maybe it works, with how she Hmms and scowls at him before they both get back in the truck.

Because these are dangerous musings, dangerous wanderings, dangerous thoughts when it comes to her. There’s a financial agreement involved, there’s the rock and hard place they’re stuck between on this crazy ass road trip, there’s the business of getting her back to her family and there is absolutely no room for a foolish school boy crush. None, whatsoever.

Yeah, he thinks later when they’re hair-pinning down Oak Creek Canyon, down 2,000 feet in elevation towards Sedona, when ‘You Never Can Tell’ comes on the radio and Sansa shrieks like a raptor and starts dancing at him in her seat like she’s Uma Thurman. Sure, he thinks when she falls silent and broods and frets and worries in the corner of the cab. Keep telling yourself that, idiot, he thinks when he glances at her and catches her watching him, when she smiles and he can’t help but smile back before looking back at the long and winding road.
It takes Sandor another forty minutes after getting down into Sedona before he finds the place, and she spends it with her face practically pressed to the window. The landscape is like nothing she’s ever seen, all red rock and pale blue sky. But by the time the truck rumbles to a stop at the bottom of a packed-earth ramshackle driveway in the middle of what feels like nowhere, they’ve taken off their thick winter layers and Sansa is twisting and wringing Sandor’s hat in her lap like it owes her money.

“Well,” he says, throwing the truck into park and sitting back with a sigh. “This is it,” he says dubiously.

“Are you sure? I can’t- I don’t see anything there,” Sansa says, hunching forward over the dashboard as she squints down the meandering drive. Even without her sunglasses and with her hand cupped over her eyes, she can only see the natural scatter and cluster of high desert trees, dark like evergreen against the rust red earth.

“See for yourself,” he says.

He holds out the piece of paper between them and she stares first at the address Margaery wrote down and then up at the numbers affixed to an old railroad tie that’s stilted up on two fence posts on the left side of the driveway. Each number has been cut out from a different old license plate except for the last one, which is an upside down L. Sansa leans over Sandor’s lap to look through his window at it, ignores his mutter and grumble, and she smiles at the whimsy of it, at the flare and spark of hope when she reads the dangling, metal sign that says REED SURVIVAL.

This, apparently, is it.

But then suddenly her nerves return and she sinks back to her seat, one leg folded beneath her as she chews her lip and stares at that sign. Al Green sings about mending broken hearts on the radio. The sign swings back and forth a bit in the steady breeze. Time seems to come trudging to a halt and suddenly so does she.

“We’re here,” she whispers.

“Yeah, we are. You ready?”

She turns to face him, lets her eyes soak him up a bit as the honeyed afternoon sun filters warm and golden through the windshield, and when she does not speak Sandor slowly pulls the aviators down off his nose. Sansa very nearly smiles when their eyes meet, because it’s like getting a hug from him, just to see him here without mirrors or tints or shades. He doesn’t much move more than that but his expression does, from his standard narrow-eyed, frowning scrutiny and on to understanding when his forehead smoothes out, a direct contrast to the wrinkle of his scars. Sandor rests his arm on the back of the seat as he shifts to look at her squarely, to pin her place and make her answer for herself.

“Hey. Sansa. You ready?”

No, the voice in her head screams.

“Mhmm,” she murmurs, chewing the inside of her cheek now as still she watches him, because
there’s comfort there, and how funny that is to her, considering where they started and where they’ve wound up. And by god, is she so happy that he’s wound up here with her.

“You’ve got this, all right?”

Do I?

“Of course,” she says, tearing her eyes from him before he can see the truth rioting around in her head and her heart, because if anyone can, it’s Sandor.

She wishes she could get another hug out of him for real, a pat on the back or an A for effort, but instead she just folds her other leg beneath her and sits facing the driveway. Sandor is staring at her in his particular way, she can feel it here on the side of her face, can feel it in the turmoil of her heart, maybe, but she only sniffs and lifts her chin. He snorts with his typical derisive amusement but when he finally puts the truck back in gear, it’s slow and steady, the gentle gait of a farm horse instead of the impatient pace of the surly creature she knows he can be. He’s buying me time, even now, she realizes with a flicker of something sweet. And so by the time she can finally make out the low one-story adobe house that hunkers amongst the chokecherry and acacia and juniper trees, she almost, almost has her pounding heart under control.

Almost.

“Oh god, I think that’s him,” she says, reaching out to swat Sandor’s shoulder and get his attention when she sees a figure emerge from the carport.

She winces when he grunts as her palm smacks his chest instead, a good, hard, loud smack even through two layers of t-shirts. Quickly she moves her hand and drops it back to her lap.

“Good. Maybe you can beat him up instead,” Sandor mutters, killing the engine a few hundred feet from the house.

“That wouldn’t be nearly as much fun,” she says, all halfhearted distraction as she blindly reaches out to open her door, but she’s present enough to give him a glance and a fleeting smile as they step out of the truck and slam the doors shut together.

The yard is separated from the surrounding desert only by low, handmade, wooden fencing that circles the front of the house close and snug, crossing where the driveway bottoms out. Even from here Sansa can hear the high crystalline tinkle and low baritone gong of metal wind chimes, the coconut clatter of wooden ones and the occasional squawk and quarrel of free range chickens. The figure she saw approaches, pauses a moment when a screen door creaks open and slams shut, and a petite woman in a long cardigan and longer black dress steps out of the front door. They watch the couple pad down the ruddy-red drive towards them, and Sansa smiles when the man who is presumably her uncle steps over the low fence easily enough but still turns with his hand outstretched to help the woman. Even when she has rucked up her long dress and stepped over, they still hold hands, swing them between their hips as they amble on.

“Is that your aunt?” Sandor says from where he stands at her side, so close their shoulders touch, or rather, hers touches his bicep.

“I have no idea,” she whispers, and the sudden wild thought that she has a family member she never even knew about makes her so ungodly nervous she starts to shake all over.
“Band-Aid, remember?” he murmurs.

“I remember,” she says, but words are so _empty_ sometimes. She needs more than that right now, and so Sansa darts her hand out and into his where she squeezes him, hard, her fingers digging into the back of his hand.

For a moment she’s worried she’s gone too far, with how still and rigid he’s gone, but then there is an exhale and a relax, and then there is the warmest squeeze around her hand, and it tells her things like _I’m here_ and _I’ve got you_, and she wonders if he’s ever said those words to her before, because all of a sudden they feel so steady and familiar that she swears she can hear his voice.

“Well, there,” Benjen says amiably enough, but it's laced on the edges with the kind of politeness that is reserved for strangers. He’s rangy and sun-beaten and barefoot in a zipped up North Face windbreaker and a pair of dusty jeans, brown hair tied back and out of his face, open and yet somehow aloof, a wild fox that has tamed itself over time. “How can we help you two?”

“All of the afternoon classes are over for the day, but if you want to sign up for an overnight hike we can check the books,” the elfin woman says with a smile, her dark hair a loosely braided tumble over one shoulder. She’s tinier than Sansa but older by at least a decade, though it still puts her nowhere near Benjen’s age.

Sansa can’t help but stare, first at the woman and then at her uncle, because he cannot recognize her, even now that they’re only a few feet apart. It makes her think of _It’s a Wonderful Life_ where nobody can see George Bailey, and if she weren’t so rooted to the spot with anxious shock and disappointment, she’d jump around and wave her arms in his face shouting _Hey! Hey Uncle Benjen, Uncle Ben, can you see me, can you hear me?!_ Benjen, and it _is_ Benjen because she remembers him clear as day even though it’s been years since she last saw him, shifts his kind and unassuming gaze from Sansa to Sandor, where he doesn’t quite flinch but reacts well enough when he registers the scars. Sandor’s muscles tighten and he shifts his weight from foot to foot like he's a rocket about to launch. Sansa look up at him and wonders if he is going to lose his temper, but the wary falls from her face when she gazes at his profile.

Bitter resignation is there instead, and that’s enough to make her break the ice and tear off that Band-Aid. She’s willing to freeze her ass off in a snowy gas station eating a stupid milkshake, and she’s more than happy to fill up a few hours with Sandor in his truck, rumbling down a desert driveway at two miles an hour, but there’s no way she’s going to just stand here letting Sandor suffer under a spotlight that should be shining directly in _her_ eyes.

“Uncle Benjen?” she says, voice the embarrassing squeak of a mouse because it’s about all she can manage right about now, but it’s enough because it does the trick.

The brunette gasps as her hand flies to her mouth, and her uncle turns his head towards Sansa so fast she’s surprised there isn’t a small sonic boom going off all around them. Benjen frowns, his gaze a rapid fire roam across her face, at her hair and down to her toes.

“No, it can’t be.”

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“Sansa? Sansa, is that _you_?” he breathes, half smiling as he shakes his head in disbelief, and even though she nods enthusiastically, still he shakes his head. “No, it can’t be.”

“It’s me, I promise. You bought me a Barbie Jeep for Christmas when I was four and my mom chewed you out for an hour.”
He throws his head back and laughs.

“Well I’ll be damned, it is you,” he says with a breakout grin, eyes lit up and crinkled in the corners as he outstretches his arms and beckon her forward.

Hesitantly she takes a jerking sort of half step towards him, until she feels Sandor’s hand let go of hers, until she feels it on the small of her back, a firm, warm press.

“You’re all right, Red, go on,” Sandor murmurs beside her, and then he pushes, slow and steady and smooth, like she’s riding a bike for the first time and he’s sending her down the sidewalk.

When you are alone, being strong comes easily, and if not completely that, that at least it comes easier. Sink or swim is often the major choice. Fight or flight comes next when you decide to kick your legs and keep your head over water, and Sansa has been doing plenty of both lately. Running away while fighting to become a stronger person, to collect the things she needs to stand up tall, even while turning tail and fleeing.

Having Sandor with her has made it easier on many levels. There has been the safety and the strength of him and the way he sort of slipped into a role of protector, even a friend and maybe more if she thinks hard enough about it, though the fluttery way that leaves her makes her more than a little anxious. Having him by her side has brought out the Bonnie to his Clyde and the Red to his ruthless, and she has shrugged easily into each skin because they were all a part of her from the beginning and they fit perfectly. She can look like danger just as well as she can like meek.

But that doesn’t mean that her knees don’t go weak for the luxury of being held up now and again. Walking now into her uncle’s open arms that scoop her up in a bear hug, being welcomed back into the fold after everything that happened, after everything he already knows, is all it takes for the tears to slip down her cheeks. Because there is just something about family, even when you haven’t seen that person in years, that makes letting go just a little easier.

“God, you’re all grown up,” her uncle says after a few moments, and he holds her at arm’s length to regard her, head to toe and back again, and there’s pride in his eyes, as if she’s his very own daughter. “And you look just like your mother. Well,” he says with a laugh and a sniff that makes her realize he’s almost as moved as she is by the reunion. “All except for that hair. I’d expect that drastic change from Arya, not you.”

“I know,” Sansa says with a chuckle as watery as his, running her fingers through the shortened length of shaggy black that’s starting to feel like normalcy to her now. “I guess the circumstances called for it,” she says, smiling so broadly her cheeks hurt, even as the tears fall of their own accord, because there’s another person named Stark right here with her, and that’s a miracle that hasn’t happened for over a year.

“Of course that’s why you changed your hair, how ridiculous of me to forget. You’ve finally gotten away from them,” he murmurs. “Finally. We’ve been so damned worried since that FBI agent showed up.”

“We? Who’s we?” she says sharply, sniffing and wiping her nose on the sleeve of her tunic. “Is mom here?” she asks, peering around him towards the house, heart in her throat all of a sudden at the thought of the screen door banging open and her brothers running out, Arya shoving past them, her mother bringing up the rear.
“No, honey, she’s not here. Meera and I have been worried, that’s what I meant. Christ, would you look at me, we’re standing here and I haven’t even- Meera, come here,” Benjen says, extending his hand out to her as she steps forward. "This is Meera. She's my partner, in every sense of the word."

He’s beaming, proud, the confidence of a well-loved man. Sansa's heart swells.

“Hi, Sansa,” Meera says warmly, stepping forward to stand by Benjen, and when she holds out her hand to shake, Sansa sees a tattoo of three arrows around her wrist like they’re bracelets.

"Hi, Meera," Sansa says, feeling nervous and strangely lovely. "Are you my aunt?"

Meera laughs.

“Not quite. I'd rather we start as friends first. I’ve heard so much about you, and I am just so happy you’re here safe and sound. Both of you,” she says with a curious tip of her head as she lifts her eyes from Sansa up, up, up, to Sandor.

“Oh! Oh, my god, I’m so sorry,” Sansa says, and because she misses the feel of it she walks back to Sandor, takes him by the hand, and drags him forward. “This is Sandor. He was there when- he’s agreed to- he’s my friend,” she says finally, finding the right way and the right words.

She gazes up at him, watches him nod curtly and shake Benjen’s hand and then Meera’s as they introduce themselves. God, he’s handsome, she realizes with a strange start. Maybe it’s because he’s painted in lovely desert-warm dying sunlight. Maybe it’s the giddy joy of finding her family again. But then she thinks of the deliciously absentminded way he walks around wearing nothing but a towel, thinks of how he drums the steering wheel when he really likes a song. She feels his hand in hers and remembers how it felt on her lower back, how it feels whenever he’s touching her, chasing her, teasing her. And then she thinks of everything. Sansa smiles.

“He’s my friend, and he helped me get here,” she says, and it’s the kindest way they’ve ever described one another out loud, the closest and therefore the most intimate, and he frowns down at her a moment before his hand moves inside hers, and then he laces his thick fingers with hers.

“Then we owe a great deal of gratitude to you, Sandor,” Benjen says.

“I owe him my life,” Sansa says as they gaze at each other, the breezes gusting up to wind, chilly now even though it’s far warmer here than any place they’ve been together so far, and it makes her short hair dance, blows the black of his across his eyes before he drags it away to keep on gazing. “I owe him everything,” she says, wondering if he understands her.

Sandor squeezes her hand, and Sansa’s heart leaps like a deer in her chest.

He’s only been here for a handful of hours but already he has the house’s layout memorized, even now that the sun has set and the hallway leading from her bedroom is pitch black. He works best in the dark anyways, though he supposes there is some irony there, considering how long he lived in the figurative dark regarding his parentage. Jon snorts at the thought as he walks out of Cersei’s TV room, shrugs into his unbuttoned dress shirt as he pads barefoot towards the kitchen.

“Where are you going, mon-armor,” she says, voice already a slurred drift and lilt and waft as it chases him down the hall. Her bastardization of the language makes him cringe, even though he’s
only been speaking French fluently for a few years. Still, she could put in a modicum of effort.

“I wanted champagne, ma belle, that is all,” he calls over his shoulder, the American accent of his thoughts sliding fluidly to the French of his spoken word. “Would you like more gin?”

He glances at his Luminox watch; the sedative with which he spiked her gin shouldn’t be working this fast, but then again she already had three drinks to his one. No matter to him; the sooner the better, considering how she’s been pawing at him. He has heard of men using drugs to get women into bed, but he supposes this is the first time a man has used them to get out of sleeping with a woman.

“Mm, no, champagne sounds amazing,” she says, drawing out the last word like chewed bubble gum. And then she giggles, slow and drunk, no lilt to that whatsoever. “I mean, magnifique. Bring a bottle back here to the bedroom, Jean. Maybe two, we’ll be up all night.”

_Mon Dieu_, he thinks, and then he rolls his eyes as he opens the refrigerator door, because he’s been immersed in this game for so long he’s starting to think in French right now.

_Why should I learn French? You’re French, Aunt Dany, they’ll put two and two together in an instant_, he’d said five years ago, sitting in a corner cafe in Montmartre, drinking an Americano and pretending it was Starbucks. Now all he has taste for is espresso. And revenge. As it turns out, they go well together.

_I am French because I was brought here as a child. My brother – your father – was as American as you. As American as I was supposed to be, back when I still had everything. You will learn French, you will slip through the cracks and past their guard. You will do what it takes, and we will take those shits down._

And so here he is, standing in a lonely, pathetic woman’s kitchen, waiting for her to pass out so he can take her down.

“I cannot find the– ah, bon, there,” he says, finding several bottles of Veuve Clicquot in the vegetable crisper, and he grabs one before shutting the fridge. “Shall we drink this in bed, or perhaps out on the balcony? It is so enchanting when the snow falls, n’est ce pas?” he says as he heads back to her bedroom, but he stops in the doorway when he sees her.

“Mmm,” she grunts, and then she’s out like a light, and then he can hear her heavy, drug induced breathing.

He tuts under his breath as he shakes his head, sets the champagne down on her nightstand next to her phone and her empty lowball of gin and melted ice. _Pitiful creature._

She was trying for seductress and wound up drunk sorority girl. His experience in various police departments before getting purposely kicked off the force tells him she was on her side, posed in a red chemise like some centerfold before the drugs kicked in. Now she’s a tangled blonde face plant into a satin pillow, arm draped over the edge of the mattress. He’s found dead bodies in similar repose. Even if he weren’t playing the role of emotionally-invested and therefore concerned love interest, Jon would feel compelled to push the poor fool onto her back and cover her with the duvet. That being done, it is time for business.

He takes out his wallet and pulls out a pair of surgical gloves, and once he’s got them safely on he takes her Android from the nightstand. Jon whistles under his breath as he carries the phone back to the opulent television room where they passed away the afternoon. The hack to break through her password will be mind-blowingly easy, provided she hasn’t downloaded the patch, and to his relief
she hasn’t. Luckily, paranoid often goes hand in hand with delusion, and she has both of them in spades.

He’d feel bad, but.

Jon switches on the television to give pretense for his being here, not so much for if Cersei wakes but if someone else with a key comes in. He has a feeling that the sight of a half dressed lover whiling away the time while Cersei sleeps off the drink is a frequent enough one that it will not raise suspicion, even if he did bring a laptop with him. Business, he will say in his French accent. Though I had intended tonight to be for pleasure.

A few minutes later and he’s gotten through to her home screen, has scrolled through emails and texts. There are slews of texts, plenty of them late night and drunk, most of them to a man named Joffrey, who he knows is her son. There’s a few to Bronn, the agent Tyrion’s lawyer is fucking, but there are countless more to a man named Petyr. It’s a name that doesn’t ring a bell, but their communications are frequent enough that he decides he wants them, and for good measure he decides to steal everything.

He’s got her phone plugged into his computer and a transfer launched when his own phone buzzes in his pocket.

+33 1 46 06 02 87: Comment est mon neveu?

He writes back in French to keep up appearances.

Jean: Better, now that that I have finally met a nice woman.

+33 1 46 06 02 87: You poor thing. Were you feeling lonely?

Jean: Only so-so. I am not sure what I want, these days, but there is a man I am interested in.

+33 1 46 06 02 87: I did not know you swung that way. <3<3<3

Jean: Perhaps I do now. Do you know anything about a man named Pierre?

The phone is quiet for several moments, and then he watches the little text bubble of ellipses for a least a minute before the message is sent.

+33 1 46 06 02 87: I spoke to my friend about Pierre. He thinks you will be very interested in him. I will call you a little later to give you any tips I learn about wooing him. My friend congratulates you on coming out of the closet, by the way, though he says to be careful. It’s different, dating men, and Pierre is no different.

Jon exhales through his nose, as loud a laugh as he dares even with Cersei so drugged up on the opposite end of the house. He slips his phone back in his pocket and sighs, shifting his halfhearted attention to the television as the data finishes transferring to his computer, and settles back in his chair while he re-buttons his shirt. I’m lucky she didn’t pop some of them off, for fuck’s sake. It’s boring local news but he doesn’t want to change it from the last channel she had on, and his eyes are glazing over until he hears a very familiar name.

“Now you may recall hearing a few stories about the Lannister family a few months ago, when Jaime Lannister was arrested, charged, and convicted of a money laundering scheme. Authorities are adamant when they tell us that the current search for Ms. Stark and Mr. Clegane has nothing to do with Jaime Lannister’s conviction, or that it could possibly link the Lannister family to any crimes under current FBI investigation. But they do stress that Ms. Stark and Mr. Clegane are extremely dangerous and are wanted not only in the Chicago Metropolitan area at this point, but
country-wide as well. If you have any information regarding these individuals, who were last seen exiting the Shops at North Bridge downtown roughly ten to twelve days ago, please call 88-Crime or visit our website for further points of contact.”

Jon stares at the photo of the girl with the long red hair, at a faded family photograph that is all blurred out save for the zoomed in, slightly blurry face of a tall, scarred young man with short hair. They don’t look like much, but he hopes to hell they give the Lannisters everything they’ve got.

Christ knows he is.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Picset

Chicago, IL

“Hey, baby girl, can I get a boilermaker?”

“I don’t bleed for five days every month to be called ‘girl,’ asshole,” Mya says from where she’s washing pint glasses out of boredom. She whips around to glare at her would-be customer, wipes her hands on an already damp bar towel and hefts it. “I’m a woman, in case you didn’t notice. Now rephrase that request, or I’m going to squeeze this rag out into your mouth.”

She’s in a shitty mood thanks to working until 3am that morning, only to be called in last minute to cover today’s first shift, a notoriously dead time for the bar that won’t do much to line her pockets. Her plans of lying in bed with Lothor are ruined, so she is hell bent on setting the world straight, one idiot at a time.

To his credit his eyes widen, and he lifts his hands in surrender. “Shit, man, I’m sorry. Whatever you want, can I just- can I get a boilermaker, please? Ma’am?”

“Oh, and now you’re going to ma’am me?” she says with her voice raised and eyebrows nearly up into her hairline, she is so affronted. “Have you ever spoken to a woman?”

He stammers and stares until her bar back comes up behind her, rests a hand on her shoulder as he whispers in her ear.

“You’re going to make him piss his pants, Mya. It’s 11am and the place is empty, just take his money and get over it,” Harry says.

“You get over it,” she mutters, grabbing the bottle of Wild Turkey. She pours the shot of bourbon and grabs a cold Coors from the fridge under the bar and slides them across the high-shine lacquered bar. “Here you go,” she says with a cavity-sweet smile, though it drops to a dead-pan expression when he hands her ten bucks and slinks away to leave her with a 100% tip that she immediately pockets after making change.

“I’m surprised there’s not a little trail of pee following that guy,” Harry says with amusement, leaning against the bar with his arms folded across his chest as he flips through the channels on the TV mounted in the corner.

“If you hadn’t interrupted me there would have been a trail of blood,” Mya says, plucking a maraschino cherry from the garnish box and popping it her mouth.

“Would have been more interesting than anything on TV today. Why is daytime television so shitty?” he says, surfing through all the basic channels.
Mya glances up in time to catch a flash of a familiar face. Two familiar faces, once she squints and puts the two together.

“Holy shit, wait a second, wait a second. Go back to that channel. No, the one before that. Yeah, that one.”

She stares transfixed as the news anchor tells all of Chicago and the surrounding area that a Sansa Stark, 24, and a Sandor Clegane, 35, are wanted in suspicion of two murders, Sandor of an innocent man and Sansa of a poor, unlucky girl whose only crime was being her roommate. Her eyes glaze over as she remembers the wild look in Sandor’s eye as he stood on the fire escape outside her office window. She remembers the terror on Sansa’s face, the sadness and sorrow, the pain. Sandor may have killed a man, but it was self-defense. There is nothing innocent about an armed man breaking entry into another person’s apartment. And Sansa, a murderer? Mya smells a rat.

Mya: Baby have you seen the news? about you know who?

Lothor: I take it you don’t mean Voldemort

Mya: I wish I did. I’m talking the two folks going UP against Voldemort.

Lothor: what’s up?

Mya: Turn on channel 9.

Winnetka, IL

“Just like that, just like that, just like that,” he says, his fingers digging into her hips so hard it makes her feel like a lethal weapon. “Fuck, you feel so good,” he grits out, head lolling where it rests against her plush padded headboard, and his eyes burn when he gazes up at her.

“So good,” Margaery whimpers as she rides him, rolling her hips the way he likes and the way that rubs her just right, right just where she needs it. He pushes up into her, nice and hard and well-practiced by now, and it’s good enough to make her gasp. “Oh, god, Bronny, I’m close, I’m so close.”

And then his phone rings.

“But it’s Aunt Mae,” he says, but Margaery shakes her head vigorously.

“Two more seconds, please,” she whines.

“It’s work, duchess, I can’t just—oh Christ,” he groans.

Because she has let go of his face to grab his hands and move them to her breasts, and together they squeeze them in a hungry sort of rhythm, and Bronn starts to fuck her faster, and the rub does the trick, and suddenly she’s spiked and sparkled, fizzing over, bubbles in milk, sugar in cream, utterly,
perfectly, deliciously fucked.

“Now,” she says a few minutes later, after he’s flushed the condom and is standing in the center of the room, naked as a blue jay and still half hard as he frowns at his phone. “What does Aunt Mae want with my man?”

“Shit. Shit, shit, fucking goddammit to hell,” Bronn replies, shaking his head as he busily taps out a reply before making a call and lifting the phone to his ear.

Margaery’s blood runs cold. He never ignores her even when they’re both fully clothed and pretending they’re just colleagues, and for him to brush her off now when she still has his sweat drying with hers on her body, well. It can’t be good.

“Bronn, what’s wrong?” she says, frowning as she sits up and drags the sheet up and over her body.

“Yeah, hey, it’s me. What the fuck is going on?” he says, striding across the room away from her, his body a perfect silhouette against the bright overcast light coming in through her balcony doors. Finally he glances at her over his shoulder.

“Baelish somehow got to the Associated Press. The shit’s gone viral, Margie. They’re splashed all over the fucking internet.”

St. Louis, MO

Molli sighs and throws her small white bag of garbage into the dumpster before heading back upstairs to her little studio. She’s never cleaned her place so much as she has the past month, and all because there’s literally nothing else to do. Today marks the third week in a row her hours have been cut at the diner, and the amount of money in her bank account is starting to seriously reflect this new and unpleasant turn of events. She doesn’t mind not having to stand around smelling grease and talking to lame people, but a girl’s gotta eat, and a girl’s gotta pay the water bill if she likes bubble baths half as much as Molli does.

You know what, screw this shit, I don’t have to put up with this anymore, she thinks as she climbs the stairs, and she makes a beeline for her laptop once she’s back inside her apartment. She found this shitty job on Craigslist, so maybe she’ll find its replacement there too, and she’s got high and mighty thoughts of finding the perfect job with great hours and amazing benefits, can practically see herself waltzing into the diner and quitting. Maybe she’ll spit in her grope-prone manager’s face, too. Take that, you fucker, she thinks with a dark little grin as she imagines it, pulling up Msn to check her email first.

But the fantasy fades when she blinks and stares at a face that is eerily familiar. It’s blurry a bit but she remembers seeing scars like that, and when she clicks the link out of curiosity, it hits her with a sickening sort of clarity.

The big guy at the diner.

Frowning, she quickly scans the blurb just under the SUSPECTS WANTED FOR QUESTIONING IN CHICAGO DOUBLE HOMICIDE title, feels a sick slosh in her stomach when she reads the
Authorities believe Clegane, 35, a skilled US Army veteran who served a single tour in Iraq in 2006, lured the man into his apartment under false pretenses in order to kill him, though after several hours of interrogation Clegane maintained it was in self-defense. His deceased brother Gregor was once close friends with Clegane’s victim, and the police now believe that the suspect had something to do with his brother’s death as well. Clegane, a small business owner, is also believed to have staged an attack on his barber shop in downtown Chicago in order to throw off authorities before going through with the murder.

Molli sucks in a breath. I gave that guy my freakin’ phone number, she thinks with a sort of enthralled horror. The only other thing that’s been bummering her out the past couple of days aside from fewer shifts is the fact that the rough and tough tattoo guy never called her.

And then there’s the girl. Molli can just barely pull her up out of memory, but even if she’s not as memorable as her companion, her actions are certainly more appalling. She scans down to where this Sansa Stark is mentioned.

—had known her friend and roommate, 25, who was brutally murdered in the apartment they shared together, for years. Police initially did not suspect Stark, 24, who was seen that night slapping her boyfriend, upcoming city councilmember Joffrey Baratheon, but recent evidence has come into play, placing her and the weapon used at the apartment she shared with Poole. Those involved in the investigation believe she has suffered some sort of mental break to explain the recent displays of violence and aggression, and that she possibly suspected there was a romance occurring between Poole and Baratheon.

New information has surfaced linking the two together, and it is believed that their intentions are to inflict some sort of harm or violence on the Lannister-Baratheon family, who have already dealt with several setbacks and hardships over the past year. Both Clegane and Stark are considered armed and extremely dangerous. Local authorities strongly urge those with any information to call the toll-free number below. Anonymous tips are welcome.

“No way,” Molli murmurs, resting her elbow on her desk as she covers her mouth with her hand. “It can’t be them,” she says, frowning as she scrolls back up to the pictures of them. They must be on the old side, considering this girl has vivid auburn hair, enviably bright like copper, and this guy doesn’t have any tattoos or long hair or beard, all the things that caught her eye in the first place. But it’s him. It has to be. She could never forget those scars, and there can’t be that many men walking this earth with half their faces scarred up.

Molli hesitates, chewing on her lower lip. She’s made some bad calls in the past, most of them involving men, and she’d hate to give wrong information. That poor girl, though, she thinks, picking up her phone.

Joplin, MO

“Oh my god.”

“I know.”
Both Plato’s Closet employees are standing in the rear office behind the trade counter in, hunched over their boss’s shoulders like Odin’s ravens as they stare at the homepage.

“You’re sure it’s them?”

“Positive. I mean, her hair’s different but there’s no way in hell I could forget that guy. He flipped his shit over those Miu Miu shoes.”

“The ones we sold yesterday?”

“Yeah. He lost his mind over the price.”

“Oh, that guy! They were fucking in the dressing room, I think.”

“Language,” their manager snaps.

“Sorry, I mean they were boning in the dressing room.”

“That’s so gross. They’re like sociopaths, flirting and running around here after they just killed two people.”

“Is there someone to call?”

“Yeah, there’s the police station number and then the 800 number. Says it’s been put up for this crime specifically.”

“Then let’s call that one.”

“Be sure to mention that her hair’s different.”

“Who should call?”

“You do it, you’re the boss.”

“Fine.” She picks up the office phone, dials 9 and then the toll free number. It rings twice before someone picks up.

“Baelish Investigations, how may I help you?”
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

So I am an absolute moron and accidentally updated this chapter to Kiss the Girl lol. Sorry for any confusion.

If Sansa had to describe what it feels like being at her uncle’s house, she’d describe it as taking a long, deep breath. And then she’d say that the whole place is freakin’ adorable.

Because it is. Chickens scuttle and shoo themselves in the front yard and in the back, pecking at the ground and drinking water from the puddle on the unevenly cobbled floor of the outdoor shower. The front porch consists of a rickety old swing and a red cement floor that is so full of potted succulents and hibiscus, of hanging baskets bursting with spider monkey plants and drooping trails of ivy that Sansa almost felt like Mowgli in the jungle as she stood there.

Now she stands in the den at the back of the house, gazing at the backyard as she listens to the sounds of her uncle and his girlfriend make dinner. The single story adobe house is sort of circular on the inside, like a wreath or the circle of someone’s arms, a lovely little hug of whitewashed walls and Saltillo tile. Front door opens to a cozy living room, and if one travels a counterclockwise path they’d take a dark, narrow little hall past an office and a bathroom and then a bedroom, into Sansa’s den through a mudroom to the kitchen, ending up in a dining area that empties out into the living room with a window looking out at the front porch jungle.

It is the homiest little home she’s ever been in, with photographs and rustic pottery on nearly every wall and surface, and there are rain sticks made of ocotillo and pebbles resting in corners, piles of black basalt rocks arranged with precarious balance on end tables, an ancient stereo system and record player that makes her think of Sandor’s apartment. She’d ask him to play his Lou Reed record if they weren’t already listening to Nick Drake, and so she listens to ‘Northern Sky’ as she absently eavesdrops, watching the sunset paint the backyard with broad strokes of orange and cinnamon. Her thoughts drift to and fro, and she hugs herself like she’s a little house herself, a one room cottage on a wind-swept hill with flowers in the yard, a magpie nest with a bathtub big enough for two.

“We’ve got plenty of sleeping bags, I’m sure one of them would fit him,” she catches her uncle saying amongst the sizzling sounds of butter and garlic that Sansa can smell. Her ears perk when she realizes they’re talking about Sandor.

“Ben, please. You can’t make the man sleep on the floor after driving your niece across the country. Just because you sleep on the ground half the time doesn’t mean other people do too.”
A teasing tone mingling with a kitchen knife chopping, the metallic clatter of bowls, the glug-glug-glug of wine pouring in a glass.

“That FBI agent never said there were two people coming, though, and we’ve only got the one sofa bed.”

Meera laughs.

“Aren’t you adorable,” she says, her cardigan-and-corduroy voice barely audible over the sounds of cooking.

“What do you mean?” Benjen says, sounding nonplussed.

“Honey, they’re clearly together. The way they looked at each other? The way they held hands? You’re telling me you didn’t notice that?”

Something bright and hot and breathless blooms up in Sansa, and her heart beats and her blood thins out to helium, making her feel like she could float away or burst like a bubble. She’s leaning against the wall next to the wood-slat blinds that cover the French doors leading outside, but at this turn of the conversation, she pushes off the wall and goes to stand in the doorway, still out of sight but close enough to hear more clearly. *How do we look at each other*, she wonders, biting her lip as she grins suddenly, because she’s pretty sure she knows the answer to that question.

“I haven’t seen Sansa in years,” he says, all mild-mannered defensive. “I was paying more attention to her than to any sort of romance.”

“Well, I saw everything, and let’s just say that I don’t think they’ll mind sharing the sofa bed.”

“You’re not wrong,” Sansa whispers, pressing her cheek to the doorjamb, and she wonders what Sandor will say, wonders what he’ll do when he finds out.

“Not wrong about what?” Sandor says from behind and above her, his voice haunted-forest deep.

Sansa gasps and spins around to face him, her hands flying back to grasp the door frame she leans against. *Holy shit*, she thinks, because he’s the Sandor from her dream, shower-fresh with damp hair half hanging in his eyes, though it does nothing to block the burn of grey as he gazes at her. If her heart was beating before now it’s hammering like the clapper in a bell. Sandor frowns fleetingly when she sort of slumps to the side, reaches out to steady her on her hips. *Right here on my hips.* And then he grins.

“Busted,” he says with a chuckle. “You’ve been here an hour and you’re already sneaking around listening in on other people’s conversations.” He shakes his head in mock admonishment, and even though she lifts her chin and sniffs, it does not escape her, that his hands haven’t left her body.

“Hey, buddy, I was just standing here minding my own business,” she says, and she wonders what he’d do if she lifted her hands and put them over his, if she pinned him on her and staked a claim, but she’s scared any movement on her part will scare him away, so she does nothing.

“Sure you were,” he grins, and then he slides a look into the mudroom, tips his head as if to take a peek through to the kitchen. “They say anything interesting?”

Sansa bites her lip, rests her head against the jamb and grins herself. *This ought to be good.* “They think we’re a couple, actually.”

Sandor freezes, a statue of muscle and tattoos and that humid warm shower smell, and his stillness
adds weight to his hands, makes the air feel heavier here between them where suddenly she’s finding it harder to breathe. His gaze comes back to her, dark and unreadable, a drop of chocolate syrup on a ripe red berry.

“Oh yeah?”

“Mnhmm,” she hums with a nod, and now there’s this hot melted feeling that runs through her, from the high point of her heart down to the low of her belly where she burns like a star.

“Interesting,” he says.

“I thought so too,” she whispers.

And then his hands move, imperceptibly at first so she thinks she’s imagining it, but then no, no, that’s the flattening of his hands, the full firm press of his palms as they slide danger-slow up to her waist. The giddy dizzy flare of it makes her feel like she’s just pounded a bottle of liquor, the salty spice of tequila maybe since they’re out here in the wind-whipped wild desert.

“But we’re not a couple,” he says, and she can feel the prickling of sweat on her lower back as his eyes flit and flicker across her face, down to her mouth, up to her hair and back to her eyes. “Are we?”

“I guess not, no,” she says, and it sounds like heartbreak, heartache, to say that. It feels like it too, much to her drunk-feeling amused surprise.

“Well then what are we, Red? Hmm?” he says, taking a step into her, just one luscious step that brings him into this close warm space.

Sansa digs her fingers into the doorframe behind her back, and it’s like she’s snared in some spell, some sort of dangerous man enchantment, a Sandor spell of woodsly soap and wet black hair, the rub of his thumbs that makes her shirt ride up, the audacity of such a point blank question after so much dancing around. Has it really been less than two weeks? It feels like a lifetime.

“I have no idea,” she says, her words a barely whispered gust of tingles and nerves. She feels like she’s buzzing, a bumblebee that’s just flown into a rosebush.

“Me neither,” he says, lifting a hand from her waist to pinch a lock of her hair between thumb and forefinger. He gazes at it as he murmurs, “But we’re not ‘nothing’ anymore, are we?”

“No,” she whispers.

As Sansa shakes her head she lets go of the doorframe, because life is short and you only live once, because she is Bonnie Parker and he’s her Clyde Barrow, because she’s a bad girl on the run and he’s killed a man for her, because there is nothing she wants more than to—

“Hey, guys, dinner’s rea-” Meera calls out as she rounds the corner through the mudroom and into the den, but she cuts herself off when she runs into Sansa’s shoulder. "Oh crap, I'm sorry."

The spell breaks, the heat dissipates, Sansa can breathe once more.

“Fuck,” Sandor says, his hands flying off Sansa’s waist like he’s been caught stealing, though it is nothing she isn’t willing to give. He backs up into the room until his calves bump the coffee table.

“Oh my god,” Sansa says, lifting her hand to her forehead as she steps away from the wall, and she giggles like an out of breath idiot as she presses fingers to her temple and tries to regain her senses.
Any of them will do, she’s so addled at this point. “You um, you startled me, sorry,” she says as she turns around and looks at Meera.

“I’ll say,” Meera says, and if there is a poster child for ‘Amused’ and ‘I Knew It,’ it is Meera Reed. She grins, folding her arms across her chest as she glances from Sandor to Sansa and back again. “Sorry to interrupt, but dinner’s ready. Come on through and grab a plate and some wine.”

It’s a dinner of Portobello mushroom burgers they serve up themselves at the stove, flipping the mushroom caps onto whole wheat buns with a spatula while Benjen sets the table and Meera lights a couple of candles on the dark wood dining room table. Their side dishes are micro green salad and a pot of something that clearly mystifies Sandor.

“What the hell is this stuff,” he whispers in her ear, hunching over so the others won’t overhear.

Sansa laughs, rests a hand on his shoulder as she tilts her face up to whisper back. “It’s called quinoa. It’s like a grain. It’s good, try some.”

“More rabbit food,” he mutters, though when Sansa heaps a large scoop of it on his plate he does not argue.

“Sorry it’s all veggies tonight. We haven’t had any meat in the house for a few weeks now,” Meera says as they seat themselves. She folds one leg beneath her, sips from a can of Hansen’s ginger ale. “We can get some chicken breasts or steaks at the store tomorrow, so long as Ben grills them outside.”

“The smell of meat cooking makes her sick to her stomach lately,” Benjen says from behind a forkful of salad, and he grins as he chews, looking across the table at Meera. “So we’ve been doing all we can to make sure she stays happy.”

Sansa gasps when realization dawns on her, and she looks from her uncle’s expression of open adoration to Meera, who is grinning right back at him. It’s such a happy look they share, intimate and romantic, almost sexy with its joyful smolder. *I’m going to have a cousin.*

“Are you—?”

“Just barely, but yes,” Meera says as she nods.

“That’s wonderful! Congratulations,” Sansa says.

“Congrats,” Sandor says around a mouthful of burger, though baby talk seems to make him slightly uncomfortable, judging by his expression when Sansa asks how far Meera is.

“About a month or so along,” she says, watching as Sansa sips her wine with bugged out eyes at this news. Meera laughs. “I miss wine already.”

“I miss steak,” Benjen says.

“You’ll get over it,” Meera grins.

“I already have,” he says with a chuckle.

“So how did you two meet?” Sansa asks, still floored by the news that her uncle Benjen, wild untamable uncle Benjen is going to be a dad. She wonders if she should buy their child a Barbie Jeep, and the memory and thought make her smile.
“I heard about this wilderness woman with her survival school down in Arizona,” Benjen says. His eyes dance as he takes a long sip of wine. “So I walked down to see if I could handle it.”

“You walked?” Sansa asks incredulously. Last she heard he was in British Columbia.

“Well, walked some, hitchhiked some, rode trains some, and when I finally found a good deal, I bought a car and drove the rest of the way. It was worth it,” he grins.

Again there’s that long warm gaze between them, one that reminds Sansa of that little moment she shared with Sandor earlier. It makes her squirm in her seat, and when she lifts her eyes to Sandor he’s already watching her over the rim of his wine glass. _Worth it_, she thinks as she recalls all they’ve already been through. Sandor smirks as if he can hear her thoughts, and she blushes, takes a sip of her wine to cover it up. The momentary lull in conversation seems to have attracted everyone’s attention, however, because when she slides a look over to Meera the brunette is smiling, sugar cookie warm, as she glances between her guests.

“So how did you two meet?”

_Tell them we’re not a couple_, she dares him internally, looking back to Sandor with her eyebrows raised, unsure of how to answer that question. He’s got his mouth full of the rest of his burger, and he watches her with an amused look in his eyes as he chews his food and sits back in his chair. Suddenly it’s sort of hilarious to her, trying to sum up how they met, the pain and horror and conflict, the near insurmountable ordeal they’ve been put through. But Sandor does a pretty good job of it.

“She came into my shop looking for a haircut.”

“So you’re a barber,” Benjen says thoughtfully, and maybe it’s his girlfriend’s pregnancy or the fact that Sansa is under his roof and protection, but there’s the subtlest trace of parental scrutiny as he digests this information along with his quinoa.

“He served in the army, too,” Sansa adds, because to just say Sandor is a barber is like saying Pegasus was just a horse.

Benjen nods, eyebrows raised as he studies Sandor. “Both are good, honest professions. A barber shop. That’s cool.”

“Yep. And that’s how I met Sansa.”

“And then I ruined his life,” Sansa says with an echoed chuckle into her wine glass as she finishes the glass, and she can still hear his _But thanks a million for the death sentence, Red_. How far they’ve come.

“No you didn’t, Red,” Sandor says quietly, and she frowns as she looks at him, smiles slowly as she sets down her empty wine glass. He grins. “But you sure as hell made it a lot more interesting.”

It takes another burger and another helping of that quinoa crap before he feels full, and as Sandor eats he listens to Sansa reacquaint herself with her uncle, who seems like a pretty cool, laid back guy, and to get to know this Meera woman who won’t stop studying him. It’s disconcerting, even though at the very least she doesn’t seem horrified by his disfigurement, because he knows it’s coming sooner or later. She’s basically Sansa’s family, and so therein lies the discomfort; he can’t just tell this woman to fuck off if she asks him about it. New dad Benjen would beat him senseless, and then there’d be the look in Sansa’s eyes. No. He’ll just have to be straight with them, because
there’s a weird uncomfortable feeling in his chest now at the idea of disappointing her. There’s a weird wonderful feeling in his chest now at the idea of kissing her, and he’s fairly certain that’s what would have happened in the den if they’d just had a little more time.

It happens after dinner when Benjen is out feeding scraps to the chickens. Sandor’s standing by Sansa, trying to make himself useful, and as she washes dishes she hands them to him wordlessly, and he dries them before stacking them on the counter.

“So, Sandor, I have to ask,” Meera says after putting leftovers in the fridge. She stands beside him on his left side, her expression noncommittal as she opens a cupboard and sets the plates inside. “Those are burn scars, aren’t they?”

Sansa immediately freezes, and he watches the warm water from the faucet fill the soapy wine glass in her hands, watches as it overflows until she remembers herself and overturns it to rinse it. He snorts a chuckle, tries to keep the bitter off his face as he glances over at their hostess.

“Yep, they’re from burns.”

“I thought so. One of our younger teachers, Shireen, she’s got scars on her cheek as well, but they’re different. She got hers from a rock climbing accident. On the job risks, unfortunately. But I don’t see how cutting hair can get you those,” she says, nodding up towards his face. “Are they from the army?”

“They’re from my brother,” he says without hesitation, but when Sansa sucks in a gasp to his right he speaks to her instead of to Meera. “Though I think I would’ve preferred them from Uncle Sam instead, considering.”

“Gregor did that to you?” Sansa whispers, a look of mortification on her face. She lifts the rinsed glass out of sink and lifts it up to him, and when he takes it from her she lets go, rests her wet hand on top of his for a brief moment.

Sandor nods.

“Wait, what?” Meera says, and though she’s disturbed and concerned, there is none of the tender empathy he can feel radiating off Sansa. “How did- what did he do? If you don’t mind my asking,” she tacks on hastily.

“Of course I mind,” he says bluntly, and when he glances at her he can see Meera’s eyebrows lift. “But better to just get it out of the way now, right?”

“Sandor, you don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Sansa says, and that’s when he realizes she has never pestered him about them, that she will be the first person to know without having asked.

“It’s okay, Red,” and so Sansa shuts off the water and dries her hands on a dish towel, turns around to lean against the counter as she gazes at him. “It happened a long time ago, anyways.”

“Okay,” she says, looking and sounding utterly unconvinced.

“He uh, let’s see now,” he says, backing up to lean against the stove across from the two women, and they look at him, one with undisguised curiosity, the other with something like heartache. “Well, my father owned the shop before me. Meant it to go to Gregor, who fucking hated the work. Too boring for him. I didn’t mind it, but I was just a kid, so to me it was like playing business owner. Working the register was my favorite.

“Anyways, I had something I wanted to go do, a baseball game out in the street or something,” he
says, pinching the bridge of his nose with his eyes closed as he remembers. “So I asked to go do it, and my dad said yes, and made Gregor stay behind to finish up the shift. He didn’t like that. I skipped by him on my way out back and he grabbed me by the collar of my shirt. He was ironing the sheets my old man used for smocks back then, and so he took the iron, took me, and just,” Sandor says, lightly slapping his scarred cheek with his open palm.

Both women gasp in horrified unison.

“Yeah,” he says with a sigh, a long slow exhale as he stares up at the ceiling. “Turned me into a ugly monster all because he had an afternoon of sweeping up trimmings. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the smell of cooked meat, all while knowing it was coming from me.”

“Oh Jesus,” Meera says, rubbing her fingers over her mouth.

“Shit, Meera, I’m sorry, I forgot,” he says, and now he’s the guy who’s going to make a pregnant chick barf, and he feels bad. “I could use some more wine,” and then he remembers that and feels like a real dick now, but she seems unfazed, eager almost for something to distract her from the imagery.

“I’ll open another bottle,” she says immediately, heading to the wine rack in the dining room.

“Sandor,” Sansa says the moment Meera’s out of the dimly lit kitchen, and she takes the two small steps required to bring her right in front of him in his lean, though she has to spread her feet to stand around the long stretch of his legs.

“Don’t give me the pity bullshit,” he says, trying for gruff in his warning though it comes off as mostly just tired.

“It’s not pity, dummy,” she says, resting a hand on his folded forearms, and he’s too stuck in the bright flicker of anger in her eyes to look, but he can feel her thumb brushing against his skin. “If your brother wasn’t already dead, I’d kill him myself for what he did to you.”

If he thought she was smoking hot before, it is nothing compared to the defiant anger and emotion he sees now, and all on his behalf. Despite himself and the dark way talking about what Gregor did can drag him down, Sandor smiles.

“You saying you’d kill a man for me, Red?”

“Well,” she says with a single-shoulder shrug and the sparkle and flare of her temper fades somewhat when she grins up at him. “One good turn deserves another.”

Sandor laughs. “You’re too cute for your own damned good,” he says before he can help himself.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” he says.

_Fuck this shit_, he thinks, unfolding his arms to dig a finger down into the front pocket of her jeans, and there’s a deep-seated burn of arousal when she gasps, high and ragged and guttered like a flickering candle, as he pulls her flush against him. He staggers around his legs, catches herself with a hand to his chest, and it’s no moonlit promenade or snowfall in June, but it’s still heady and intoxicating enough in this dark little kitchen to make his heart pound. She tilts her head back when he stands up out of his lean, and he’s walked her halfway back to press her against the counter when the outside door in the mudroom opens with a bang.
“I just remembered the old camper we have on the edge of the property,” Benjen says, and he’s too distracted by the cache of chicken eggs he’s cradling in his t-shirt to notice Sandor and Sansa spring apart like teenagers busted behind the bleachers.

“Oh?” Sansa says breathlessly, her trembling fingers pressed to her forehead as she stares at Sandor.

She’s gorgeous, delicious, and he knows this even without yet having a taste of her. He’d be hard as a rock staring at her so undone from a not-kiss with him, if he weren’t in the precarious position of her father-figure uncle catching him with a tent in his pants. Sandor takes a deep breath and gets his shit together, stares at her uncle to knock some sense back into him.

“Yeah,” Benjen says, kicking the door shut behind him as he walks into the kitchen, all unassuming smiles as he looks up at them. “It’s no good for tonight so you’ll just have to share sofa bed, but tomorrow I can go haul it over and you two can stay there. The pullout bed’s only a double though, so you’ll be cramped a bit.”

“Sofa bed?” Sandor says, glancing to Sansa, who blushes beet red and covers up a girlish giggle with her hand as she stares at the floor.

“All right, who wants another glass of wine?” Meera says, materializing with two bottles of red in her hands.

“I do,” Sandor and Sansa say in unison.

Two glasses of wine later, she’s standing next to Sandor as the four of them stare down at the impossibly narrow sofa bed. It’s cheerfully made up with bright red and white and pink flannel sheets, two fat fluffy pillows in starched white cases and a dark blue afghan thrown over the foot of it, but still. Big tall Sandor sleeping on it alone is humorous enough, but to imagine him sharing with someone? It’s comedy gold.

“Uh,” Benjen says from Sandor’s other side.

“We’ll figure it out,” Sansa says with a wave.

“You could get pregnant with your clothes on, it’s so cozy,” Meera says dryly, standing to Sansa’s left.

“Really, sweetheart?” Benjen says, leaning over to glare at his girlfriend from Sandor’s other side.

“Sorry,” Meera grins, flicking a glance to Sansa, who bites her lip and looks away before she falls into a fit of hysterical giggles.

Sansa is beyond glad her uncle on the other side of Sandor, who’s already giving her stern glares. The last thing she needs is for her uncle to shoot her an admonishing look while she’s buzzed off wine about to sleep next to a man they think is hers though he’s no such thing.

Well. Not yet, she thinks, wonders, hopes.

“Honestly, we’ll be fine. You two should go get some sleep, it’s late. Meera, you’re sleeping for two now,” Sansa says, teasing-light since they are on such tender new ground.

“Then I must be having triplets, I’m that tired,” Meera says, stretching her arms up to the ceiling as
she steps around Sansa.

“Lord, please no,” Benjen says as she takes him by the hand, tugging him after her as they leave the den.

“Sleep well guys,” Meera says.

“I have sleeping bags if it’s too cramped,” Benjen says over his shoulder.

“Baby, just stop,” Meera says, and Sandor and Sansa are left staring at each other as the bedroom door closes.

“Too bad there’s not more wine,” Sandor says, rubbing the back of his neck as he looks back at the tiny bed.

She doesn’t blame him. As close as they’ve come to kissing, it’s hard to forget that her uncle is just one wall away from them in a tiny little house. To go from almost kissing to sleeping together is a big leap, and her heart is a nervous little flip in her chest. And then she remembers, and she turns to face him and snaps her fingers at him.

“I’ve got something better.”

He watches her like a curious puppy when she crosses the room and kneels in front of her suitcase, squats down beside her and watches as she unzips it and rifles around for that Ziploc Mya gave her. She says *Aha* and turns to him, shaking out the baggie and holding it up in his face.

“Candy?”

“Nope. Well, yes,” she says, opening the bag and shaking out two gummy bears in the palm of her hand. “But also pot. Mya gave them to me while you were down at the station.”

“You’ve had weed on you this whole time? Little miss high heels, fancy pants Sansa, good girl gone bad with drugs on her?”

Sansa laughs at his incredulous, dumbfounded look. “There’s more to me than meets the eye,” she says, flicking her eyebrows up, making him snort out a Sandor-laugh of his own.

“Don’t I know it,” he says, staring at the candies.

“Well?” she asks, holding up her outstretched hand. “You chicken?”

“What the hell,” Sandor says with a shrug and a sigh, and he picks the yellow one and pops it in his mouth. “Anything to help stomach having to sleep next to you,” and he grins when she pushes him so hard he falls out of his squat and lands on his butt.

Half an hour later they’re sitting outside under the stars, Sansa wrapped in the blue blanket even though it’s not really that cold to her, and it feel like warm milk is swishing through her veins instead of blood. Every lick of the breeze feels like a cool tongue on her skin, and thoughts bloom and fade before she can find the words to express them. But they’re sitting together, shoulders touching as they gaze up at the sky.

“Jesus, I feel weird,” Sandor says, voice deep like dark chocolate, and she thinks that together they’d make hot cocoa, and that makes her laugh. “Shut up,” he says, though she can hear a grin shape his words differently. “Did I just sound weird? I can’t tell.”
“I think that star is moving,” Sansa says, lifting an arm to point at it, and her limb feels heavy and light all at once, like her muscles will die if she holds it up any longer, like her arm could just up and float away like a balloon.

“That’s an airplane.”

“Oh,” she says, and she bursts into laughter. “Zoom,” she says between two long, silent peals of stoned-as-hell laughter.

“God, you’re too fucking cute.”

“You are too.”

“That’s the weed talking.”

“Nope,” she murmurs, watching the airplane streak across the sky. “That’s the Sansa talking.”

Two hours later and they’re sitting on the porch swing out front, eating her stash of candy she bought a few gas stations ago. She’s fond of the Blow Pop, but Sandor’s tearing into the Starbursts like it’s the first thing he’s eaten in years.

“I told you once that I’d tell you mine if you told me yours,” she says, staring at her Blue Razz lollipop like it’s got all the answers to all the questions in the entire world.

“Mm,” he hums. He’s hunched over, elbows resting on his cocked out knees as he unwraps another Starburst.

“My dad was murdered,” she says, and it’s nice that she’s so numbed up right now, and it almost feels like it’s someone else talking instead of her.

But then heStill,s fingers frozen with a half-unwrapped candy snared in them as he turns his head to look at her over his shoulder. She’s curled up in the corner of the swing, knees drawn to her chest. Sansa takes a thoughtful lick of her Blow Pop, shifts her hazy-dazy gaze from her sucker to Sandor.

“He was murdered with his friend Robert. Joffrey’s dad. It’s why my family fled. They were um, like they were going to get immunity? For testifying? Cause my dad did some stuff too. I mean, I don’t know much of what, but he worked for Robert, and then he decided he wanted to come clean to what he’d helped with, and Robert did too. But then they were killed one day. I was shopping when it happened.”

“You do love to shop,” he says after a few moments.


“So why d’you think that would make your uncle hate you? Make me hate you?”

“Because I didn’t believe my family,” she says, and now the words feel like hers because they’re drenched in the guilt she’s carried around for over a year. “They thought the Lannisters did it to keep them quiet, but Cersei, she told me- and she can be so persuasive, like, so- but she told me it was a rival family that had done it. That my dad and Robert didn’t want to come clean at all but that they were planning on overthrowing this other family, the Greyjoys I think, over in Boston. And so they killed them.

“She said she’d protect me. Said that Joffrey loved me so much and would keep me safe. So I told
my family they were wrong or they were lying, and then they left, and I stayed. Like an idiot. A
dbig, dumb idiot. And then they tried to kill me, so, I don’t know. Yeah. Yeah, so that’s why I
thought Benjen would hate me. That’s why I thought you would. God knows I deserve it.”

“Hey, hey now,” he says, and the swing bucks a little when he turns in his seat, sitting back and
shifting to look at her. Sandor rests a hand on her knee. “You’re crying, Red. Don’t cry.”

Sansa blinks, brushes her cheek with a bent finger and looks down at it. It’s wet with tears she
didn’t realize she was crying, and her finger glitters like a snake in the yellow porch light.

“Oh,” she says.

“Look, you were manipulated, Sansa, by the best players of that kind of game. Those people own
Chicago and have put plenty of people through the ringer. They killed my fucking brother and he
was devoted to them. So don’t- don’t beat yourself up. You were tricked and you were played but
that doesn’t mean you’re an idiot. You’re not. So don’t cry, okay? I hate it when you cry,” he
murmurs, graveled voice lower and slower from the drugs, from the topic of conversation.

She looks up to see him staring at her THC-intense, grey eyes black in the low light. “Sorry,” she
whispers.

“Don’t have to be sorry.”

“So you don’t hate me?”

“I could never hate you, Sansa. Hell, I—” he starts, but he stops himself, glances away from her.

“You what?” Her heart pounds. Tell me, tell me. Look at me.

“I uh,” he says, clearing his throat, and his hand leaves her knee so he can finish unwrapping his
Starburst. “I’m just so damn high right now.”

“Yeah, same here,” she says, looking back at her Blow Pop. She sighs and puts it in her mouth,
bites it so hard it breaks in two.

Another hour passes and finds them side by side, wedged together on the narrow little pullout bed,
and even though Sandor’s got one foot on the floor to keep the spins away it is still so small for
them, and even though he’s laughing while telling her to shut the fuck up, Sansa cannot stop
giggling.

“This is just so comfy,” she says, or tries to at least, she’s laughing that hard, and each word takes
such effort that it’s like wringing out wet laundry with each syllable. “So roomy.”

“God, would you shut up? I can’t breathe,” he wheezes as he presses his palms to his eyes, and the
little mattress shakes from how hard they’re both laughing.

But eventually it dies down from the two of them, sputters out in long heavy sighs and sleepier
hums of amusement. Moonlight is bright and bold, casting the room in midnight blues and unicorn
whites. She managed to change into her pajamas in the bathroom, giggling to her reflection as she
made silly faces at herself, and Sandor changed in the den while she did so. But it’s overwarm to
their northern blood, and so he stretches out beside her without a shirt, and she’s lying next to him
on top of the covers. It’s balmy and still and serene, and now that he’s finally stopped laughing she
has the slow steady rhythm of his breathing to lull her.

“Hey, Sandor,” she whispers.
“Mm?” he hums. His hand moves as he scratches his chest, and she thinks of cat’s tongues rasping against fur.

“You’re not an ugly monster.”

“You’re high. And probably drunk too.”

“No, I’m serious.” It’s easy to say this on the current of a drug-fueled drowse, and so she keeps going. “I think you’re beautiful.”

It is quiet, still, silent even as Sansa doze-blinks up at the ceiling, and she is convinced he’s asleep until he speaks.

“Thanks, Sansa.”

And then it’s gorggy, boggy, swirling dreams she drifts off into, strange and soft and muzzy, the juicy pulp and flavor of tropical fruit, the idea of something on the edge, just right here, here against her cheek where it is so warm, where the earth beats like a ruby red heart. And then there is a great splitting roar, chainsaw through swaying, beachside palm trees, a rumbling roar that makes her eyes open and her head lift when she realizes where she is.

She’s draped on him as if she were a blanket, and she understands completely now, why he’s always cranking on the air conditioning during the winter, because he’s warm like a furnace, like a beach on the tropic of cancer, and he’s snoring so damned loud it has jarred her right out of her THC-addled sleep. But she’s still hazy-humored and so she’s giggling as she extricates herself from their tangle of limbs.

Maybe sober Sansa would be more embarrassed to have found herself so intimately sprawled with her leg hitched high over his, her foot wedged between his legs and tucked under his thigh that is so close to the edge of the bed. She’s still hugging him around his middle, is still enconced in him here where his heavy left arm is wrapped around her shoulders, here where the tattooed fingers of his right hand are wrapped loosely around her wrist where it rests across his chest. But this Sansa, with Starbursts and Blue Razz her lingering in her mouth, with the fuzzy hum and throb in her veins, feels just one thing.

Happy.

No, no, there’s more, she decides when she sets her gaze to roaming, up his chest to his face and the full display of his scars, tucked against his left as she is, and the only light comes from the blue and white of a star-studded moonlit sky. She wants to hate them simply for the fact that they came from his horrible brother, but she finds she can’t, because of the lovely reminder that it’s him. Warmth radiates from him and cool light splashes his face, and it makes her think of how many coin-flip sides he has to him, makes her think of red heartbeats and hot black bathwater. Now there’s not just contentment.

Now there is want.

_I want him_, she thinks. _No, wait. Not think. Knows. Oh my god, I want him so badly, _and how horrible would it be, to maybe press herself against him, to wiggle up out of his arms to kiss his cheek, to kiss him on the mouth maybe like he’s sleeping beauty, and she can be the prince to wake him up, to shake him up, to make him just kiss her already and grab her by the—_

Another huge, rattling, nose-breathing snore just before his head tosses to the side away from her so there’s nothing but a sleep-heavy exhale and the spray of black hair across his scars. Sansa
pauses mid-pornographic thought, stares at him a moment before she bursts into wheezing laughter, dropping her forehead to his pectoral.

“Sandor,” she whispers against him.

Aside from the tightening of his arm around her shoulders and its subsequent slide and drift down her back to the base of her spine, he does not move. She just manages not to purr from the touch, hilarious as it may be here with a big man like him, sawing logs so loud she’s convinced Benjen and Meera will wake up if they haven’t already.

“Sandor, you have to move,” she repeats as he snores again, and she lifts her head, props herself up on an elbow here where she stretches out on her side, flush to his body.

*I have to get him to roll over again,* she thinks. That much is clear, as she winces from another bone-shaking snore that reminds her of prowling bears in the woods, but he’s nudged up right against the edge of the mattress, and if she turns him that way, he’d definitely fall to the floor. She giggles helplessly at the thought of it, big bad Sandor landing with a whump and maybe a flail. As she gasps for breath mid-laughter she’s grateful there’s none of that dry mouth she experienced the three times she smoked pot in college, and she clears her throat a few times as she tries to pull her half-stoned shit together.

Okay, so I’ll pull him towards me and just scoot out of the way, she thinks, glancing behind her. Yeah. Yeah, that’s it. Sansa gives a nod to nobody but herself as she moves the arm from around his ribs so she can get a firm grip on his shoulder and pull. His hand falls limply from her forearm down to his stomach.

Sandor’s long, square frame barely moves an inch as she tries dragging him over, though his head turns towards her, and for a fleeting moment she wonders if he will open his eyes. Sansa pauses, gazes, studies and admires. And Sansa wants.* Look at me,* she remembers with a shiver, with an eye-closing spark of gimme-gimme-gimme, but he’s opening his mouth to snore again, or so she thinks, and so before she’s caught staring at him like an idiot, she grunts and yanks on his shoulder.

He turns with the movement this time, hums deep in the back of his throat like he really is some beast on the prowl, and she’s flush with victory that her maneuver worked again until she realizes she never scooted back. Sansa is breathless, speechless, and now she’s pinned with her back to the mattress. Like some huge rolling wave he keeps moving towards her, and his hum darkens and lengthens until it swells up into a mumbled word.

“M’awake,” he murmurs, and the arm that was around her back moves up so it’s behind her neck. “M’awake,” he repeats.

His right hand slides off his body and onto hers, palm to her waist as he comes to a stop just above her, his thick beard brushing her forehead and the tip of her nose, her mouth somewhere under his chin. If she tilted her head and opened her mouth she could lick his throat. How badly she’d like to.

“Look at me,” Sansa whispers, words she desperately wishes he’d say to her, and it’s warm and almost an echo here in the little cave of space they’ve made with their bodies.

“Mm, don’t need to,” he says, moving his head, the soft wiry brush of his beard moving down her face, covering her up in darkness. “Not when I can feel you, Sansa,” he says, and she turns her head just so, just so and just in time to catch the kiss he lands sideways on her closed mouth.

It’s awkward and all beard at first, almost all smothering for a moment until he opens his mouth and she can actually feel his lips with hers, and she inhales deeply, tilts her head to keep catching it,
keep it close when their mouths slide into place and lock. Sansa arches under him, stretches best as she can to better reach him, and then there is the slow drag of his tongue against hers, sweet like sugar with the metallic tinge of sleep, a deep wet lazy exploration of her before it’s gone.

“Sandor,” she moans, and she tries to press her mouth back to his, all plead and pucker for another kiss, tries to find his mouth in all that beard, but it’s gone.

“You taste like a lollipop,” he mutters, half-hum-half-chuckle, and then silence, and then the drowsing easy breathe of slumber, the breathe in and out, snore-free and tasting, as she does, of candy.

He pulls back away from her so he’s fully on his side again, painfully far away even though they’re only inches apart. She wonders if she should scoop away now, run – stagger, more like – to the bathroom to wash her face, brush her teeth and stare in the mirror to see if she somehow looks different. If she looks kissed, if toothpaste tastes differently for the knowledge of knowing just what Sandor tastes like, now. But it’s so warm here, and even though he drew away, his left arm is still the pillow of muscle and bone beneath her, his right still a weighted drape over her waist. So all she does is turn onto her left side as well, in a spooned-up mirror of him, and they both hum and rumble together as he cinches her up closer, and if it weren’t for the remaining vestiges of THC oozing through her, she would never sleep again, not for a million years. But she does fall asleep and soon, and oh, oh, how sweet her dreams are.
Sandor sleeps, though to him it’s a writhing, spine stretching sort of sleep, feels far more like sex than slumber to every part of his body except the most crucial one. The only thing these dreams lack is the wet warmth of a woman. Cupped hands fill with the soft knead and squeeze of flesh, his ears fill with the sounds of someone sighing his name, and when he pushes his hips forward there is someone there pushing back. A bare neck is there to kiss and so he does, a fall of hair is there to nuzzle and so he does, burying his nose in it, to smell her warm sleep-sweat and memorize it, if only he could. They are the realest, most tantalizing dreams he has ever had. Sandor sleeps and he clings and once, just once, he has the very tangible feeling of someone kissing his hand.

And then Sandor wakes. Sort of. It’s early enough that the light and the air have a soft grey quality to them, and he can just make out the soft murmurs of people talking, though to him it could be wind the trees for how alert he is at this moment. Part of him thinks he might still be stoned, but then the tree breeze murmurs clear up and turn to words.

“I’ll be fiddling down at some of the fire rings and then I’ll bring the camper back up.”

“Sounds good. I’m going to run some errands and pick up some steaks for you guys.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want it making you sick. I could do it after the camper and you could just stay home and rest.”

“I’m fine, baby, honestly, so long as it’s not cooking around me. Besides, you need to spend some time with Sansa. Probably get to know her boyfriend too.”

Jealousy pokes its way through the underbrush somewhere in his brain, but then he remembers they think that man is him, and then he’s sated like a full-bellied beast until he shivers.

The entire length of his back that isn’t covered with a soft blue blanket is post-dawn chilly which is such a contrast to the rest of him that it makes him frown. He remembers falling asleep after laughing his ass off like a dipshit, remembers being almost over-warm in this temperate climate, even though it’s still technically winter. But his back is so cold it’s almost pinpricking painful, compared to the soft silk heat warming his chest and arms. He doesn’t realize why until he opens his eyes.

He’s all over Sansa like a cheap suit.

She’s nudged up against him with her back to his chest, has one of her legs tucked between his under the blanket and the other drawn up and half hanging off the mattress. He’s got his arm around her and actually underneath her shirt, can discern the squeeze and capture of her breasts around his forearm, can feel the ridge of her collar bone under his hand where he holds her to him. Her shirt is basically a sleeve covering him from wrist to elbow, and her arm is curled around his and holding him in place, which is why he’s so warm even with the blanket only pulled up to his hips. His other arm is fast asleep, pinned as it is beneath her head, but that’s not the one he’s
Suddenly his dreams don’t feel like dreams anymore. Mortified, deeply embarrassed and terrified he’s crossed some boundary, Sandor carefully, gingerly slides his arm and hand out from under her shirt, and with sleep-clumsy fingers he tries to pull her shirt back into place, down over her belly and waist where it would be had he not dived right in to help himself. But then Sansa reaches up and grabs his hand, giving it a firm tug as she draws his arm back around her like it’s the flannel sheets they’re sleeping on top of.

“Warm,” she murmurs, her voice cracked and croaked like a little frog’s.

“Yeah?” he replies, swallowing to try and lend some moisture to his throat, and despite the discomfort of early morning thirst, he smiles and settles back down against her, burying his face against her shoulder.

“Yeah.”

Sansa sighs and Sandor sleeps.

The next time he wakes up the light is full ripe and golden, warm and sunshine bright, and to his sorrow he finds he’s alone. Far more awake now than he was earlier, Sandor rolls onto his back and blinks up at the ceiling fan lazing overhead, drags his hair out of his eyes as he tries to remember.

\textit{She was here, she slept next to me all night}, he recalls, and then he remembers the way she said \textit{Warm} and how she dragged him back around her, remembers that if it wasn’t a dream then it wasn’t a one-sided reality either. All those dream-state flashes and searing touches he can barely recall, those were \textit{real}. She moved \textit{with} him, last night. Not against him. It’s too hard not to smile at that and so he doesn’t even try, and he’s grinning like an idiot as he hauls himself up and to his feet and takes a leak, grinning at himself in the bathroom mirror as he brushes his teeth.

“Hey, Red,” he calls after he drinks from the sink faucet, wiping the water from his beard with the back of his arm.

The house is silent. He stands in the hallway, ears pricked, but all he can hear are the to-and-fro of wind chimes and the barely audible clucking of chickens. Barefoot, he pads more or less silently down the hall into the living room, peers through the hanging ivy out onto the front porch. He frowns when she’s not there, moves on through the dining room.

Empty kitchen, too.

“Come on now, Red,” he says louder despite how small the house is. He sounds mean from worry so he dresses it up a bit, clears his throat and tries again. “Hey, sweetheart, where’d you go?”

And then he hears a scream.

Without a moment’s hesitation Sandor sprints best he can through the cramped little mudroom, bangs his shoulder against the doorframe as he spills back into the den next to their rumpled half-made sofa bed. \textit{The backyard}, he thinks, wondering what or who in the hell got a hold of her out there. He flings open the door and launches himself out of the shaded, dim house and jogs out into the center of the bright cheerful yard. There is a shushing, whooshing sort of sound coming from somewhere, and the army grunt in him immediately thinks of leaking fuel lines or tear gas.

“Sansa,” he shouts. Sunlight is a midmorning dazzle in his eyes here were the shade tree shadows can’t yet reach him, and he blinks like a distraught owl as he takes a step left and then right and
then forward, squinting around the yard with his heart pounding in his chest. “Sansa, where’d you go?”

“I’m right here,” he hears from the side of the yard, her voice thin and high like it gets when she’s upset, and he blinks and shades his eyes as he strides off the flagstone path and onto the packed dirt towards the sound of her voice.

“I heard a scream, are you all right?” he asks when he can see her off in the corner of the yard, but when she turns around to face him he stops in his tracks.

“Don’t you dare,” she snaps.

Sandor throws back his head and laughs.

She’s standing there in her pajamas, spattered with water and rust colored mud from head to toe with the angriest look on her face that he’s ever seen, and behind her he can finally make out the source of the noise. It’s an outdoor shower surrounded by wood fencing on three sides, solar powered by the look of the little panels affixed to a huge water reserve behind it, and there’s a spigot of water shooting out from behind the showerhead, sending a thin yet powerful stream of water right at the dirt on the edge of the cobblestone shower floor. The result is a little fountain spray of ruddy muddy water.

“What are you doing just standing there, Red, shut the damned thing off,” he says, padding his way across the yard towards her, still snickering as he picks his way past potted plants and the typical yard debris of sticks and stones.

“I can’t get close enough to it! It keeps spraying me, and I’m already filthy as it is,” she says, using the back of her wrist to brush hair out of her eyes as he comes to stand next to her, farthest from the spatter of water and mud.

Sandor chuckles with a shake of his head as he sighs. “The showerhead is loose, that’s all. And what are you even doing messing around out here? There’s a shower inside,” he says, and he should know, considering it’s where he cleaned himself up last night.

“I wanted to use this one,” she says indignantly. “Meera said the water’s hot even on overcast days, and she said it’s really cool, showering outside.”

“Well, you got showered all right, by the looks of you,” he says with a grin, and he shouts “Hey!” when she shoves him.

“If you’re not going to be any help then just go back inside, I can figure it out myself, thank you very much,” she says, all huff and pout as she folds her dirty arms across her chest and stares into the shower.

“Look now, sweetheart, I came running out here because I heard you scream. I thought someone had gotten ahold of you. You scared the hell out of me.”

The admission melts a little of the frost that’s icing the edge of her expression, and she glances at him with softer eyes than before. He regards her with an eyebrow arched, shows her he can do surly too though he’s fairly certain she’s well aware of that now. But then memories come drifting back to mingle in the air between them, light touches warm like the dapple of sun, soft sighs sweeter than the wind chimes talking to themselves out here, and Sansa seems to be thinking of them just as he is. Her gaze flicks down from his eyes to his mouth, down the length of his bare chest as he so often catches her doing these days, and then she smiles.
“So you were coming to my rescue, huh,” she murmurs, her eyes a slow take-your-time as they lift up, up the length of his body to finally settle a softer gaze on him.

He nods. “I guess so, yeah, stupid as that sounds.”

“I don’t think it sounds stupid at all,” she says, stepping towards him, shaking her short hair from her eyes as she tips her head back to look up at him, butter and honey and coax and cajole. “I think it’s beyond sweet. It’s romantic.”

“Oh yeah?” he says, heart back to that quickened pace of earlier. Him, romantic? Now there’s a first.

“Mmhmm,” she smiles, and then she grins, tipping her head towards the shower. “So here’s your chance.”

Sandor groans and tilts his head away from her, rolling his eyes before he looks back at her with the shake of his head. “You’re a little shit, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told,” she says sweetly, and she claps her hands and squeals happily when he sighs heavily and pushes past her.

“Fine. It only needs to be tightened, but fine,” he grouses.

Ignoring the squelch of mud underfoot and the hammer-pound of water under pressure that splatters him across the shins and thighs, he walks right through it and steps into the shower, hand reaching up to tighten the showerhead, and just as he thought the leaky spring disappears. Good for Sansa, but it means he gets a full blast shot of water right on his chest now that it’s all being funneled through the showerhead, something he stupidly forgot about before waltzing in to do her dirty work for her. Being shirtless works in his favor here, or at least for a second until the front of his pajama pants become instantly soaked. It looks like he’s had the world’s worst pants-wetting accident.

To make matters worse, or at least more embarrassing, Sansa bursts out laughing behind him.

“My mom always used to say ‘no good deed goes unpunished,’ and I guess that’s true, especially right n-hey!” she says, cutting herself off with a shriek.

Because he has turned around to reach out and snare her by the wrist, and now with one sharp tug he’s yanked her into the shower. Her feet are momentarily drenched with mud but the shower-fall cleans them and she is more or less instantly soaked right here next to him, so close he can feel the goosebumps on her arm where it brushes the wall of his abs.

“If anyone needs punishment it’s rotten little shits like you,” he grins.

“Oh my god,” she breathes, gasping under the spray of water, and she pushes her hands up her face and over the top of her head to get her soaked hair out of her eyes. “Oh my god, I can’t believe you just did— oh. Oh wow, the water really is warm,” she says, the spit and fire of her momentarily doused from the realization as she squints up at the showerhead affixed to the middle wooden panel.

“Yeah, it’s real nice,” he says, and at first he means it sarcastically because his pajamas are sticking uncomfortably to him like cling wrap.

But then she looks up at him like a hungry little thing, and he thinks of Look at me and his sleepy roam and wander and the way she wiggled and moaned beneath him, those hazy dream things he
knows now are real. Suddenly “nice” just doesn’t cut it anymore. Sandor rakes his hair back out of his face, lowers the hand to cup it around the fine curve of her jaw, and he watches her expression change from flirty flit and laugh and smirk to something more drawn out and breathless, something he feels right in the center of his chest where she places a hand. This isn’t just nice anymore. This is something much, much finer.

This is the two of them together and a threshold he meant to cross yesterday, a threshold he realizes he’s wanted to cross for a while now. And finally, finally without a doubt, he sees that want reflected in the blue sparkle of her sunlit eyes and the way her mouth opens when she looks down at his. He rubs her cheekbone with his thumb, smiles when she sighs and tips her head to the touch.

“You still taste like lollipops?” he murmurs.

Sansa gusts out a laugh, closes her eyes and smiles, slides her arms up his chest to drape them over his shoulders, and when she tilts her head back Sandor repositions them, just slightly, so the beat of water will hit him in the back instead of her face.

“Only one way to find out.”

It is so close to her dream, when he lowers his head and kisses her, when the hand on her jaw slides back to the base of her skull to keep her close as their mouths part against one another, so close that Sansa can’t help but suck in a ragged breath of shock and shiver and shake. He’s here and he’s kissing her, and it’s real and he remembered, it’s real and he wants her and he’s giving her a good taste what it really means, to be wanted.

She wants him so hard it hurts.

There’s the heat and humidity of warm, warm water, the wet of his beard against her chin as he pushes his tongue into her mouth to find hers, the hungry hard way he fists her drenched shirt with both hands at the base of her spine, the daub and slide and flick of his tongue and the way he hums in the back of his throat when she does the same thing to him.

There is so much right here in this moment and Sansa wants to devour it all, from the way he presses himself against her to the way he shudders when she drags her nails up the path of his spine, from the bend of his shoulders as he bows himself over her, making her head tip back and her mouth drop open, to the way he sucks on her throat before he bites it, firmly, hard enough and luscious enough to make her moan so loud it echoes in the little shower.

“Christ, you’re delicious,” he groans against her neck, his fists opening so his hands can skate around her hips and up to her waist.

“Better than candy?” she asks, running her hands up his back again and over his shoulders so she can push them up into the thicket of his black hair, so she can make fists and tug right back.

“You are candy.” he says, words a thick nasty snarling sound that makes her throb between the legs so hard it makes her squeeze herself, and she moans again so maybe he’ll get some kind of idea of just what he’s doing to her.

It works.

Immediately he rucks up her sodden shirt and she lifts her arms obediently, and it peels off like an old useless skin as he drags it up and over her head. Sandor glances out of the shower as he chuckles the useless shirt into the dirt. Sansa laughs breathlessly a moment at the almost savage display of
give-me-what-I-want, laughs until he turns his hot gaze back on her, and then there’s nothing to do but gasp. Because he’s looking at her like a man dying of starvation or thirst, and he rounds on her with predatory precision, backing her into the corner of the shower. He’s looking at her like she is a lollipop, one he’s going to devour whole even if it kills him.

Well, Sansa thinks, biting her lip as she steps into him, her hands going for the waistband of his pajama pants, and she wraps her fingers around the band of his boxer briefs as well, grips and pushes them down past his ass and his thighs, pushes them down until they’re on the ground and he can kick them off in the direction of her shirt. Not if I get to you first, big man. I will swallow you up.

He’s carved from muscle and ink, something she’s known since the first night she’s met him, but there’s something exquisitely beautiful about him, naked and burning up for her, fully aroused and staring at her like she’s a mirage he’s convinced will disappear if he comes closer. But she’s here and she’s his-all-his when he steps into her again, when he kisses her mouth and touches her body, when he bites her lower lip and holds her close enough that she can feel how hard he is for her.

Sandor cups her breasts like they’re wells of spring water, licks and sucks them into his mouth, grunts and groans like an animal when she grabs him by the back of the neck and pulls him close-closer. Water beats down on them like rain, sun beats down on them like gold, and breezes that once chilled her to the point of shiver only serve to take her breath away now, overwarm and turned on as she is. All the moments they’ve spent together, all the tiny ways they’ve gotten closer and closer, all of them have woven into this, and it’s bliss, this lovely way they’re tearing into each other.

“Fuck, you’re perfect,” he says, lifting his head from the devastating lovely work he was doing to her hardened nipples, and he gazes at her breasts as he cups and kneads them and lets them drop to their full natural place, and then he looks up at her eyes with a gorgeous sort of pained expression. “Every last inch of you,” he says, sinking to a squat as he yanks down her pajama shorts and panties so hard she squeals and staggers and almost falls over his shoulder.

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god,” she says, filling her hands with his hair as he kisses her above the thatch of usually waxed auburn hair that’s starting to grow back.

His hands slide up the backs of her legs as he slowly stands to his full height, kissing his way up her body until he’s got two handfuls of her ass.

“I like it when you say that,” he says, hauling her up and into his arms with a slippery hoist of limbs, and in her mind she says goodbye to the last bits of her clothing and hopes they’ll be naked here for the rest of their lives.

“Good,” she pants, and then she groans when he walks her against the wall of the shower, the glossy wet planks of wood a creak against her back when he presses her to it.

“I like being the one to make you say that,” he says, wet nipping kisses dropped to her shoulder.

“Well then keep up the good work,” she says, grinning when he huffs a distracted laugh.

Sansa tugs on his hair so hard he grunts, head pulled back so she can kiss his throat beneath his beard. When she returns that bite he gave her earlier Sandor kneads his fingers into her where he grips her by the ass, jerks his head out of her grip so he can kiss her and pushes his hips into hers so firmly the fence shakes. It’s a question that begs answering and she does so without thinking, by the simple virtue of wrapping her legs around his middle.
“Jesus Christ,” he grits out, his voice strained so thin it actually comes out as weak, and Sansa knows exactly why.

Her body jumps and shudders when the head of his cock comes so close to pushing inside her she’s actually not entirely sure it hasn’t, and then they both freeze, Sansa with her back to the fence, Sandor with his mouth pressed to the spot where her shoulder and neck meet. For several moments there is nothing but the sound of wind in the trees and chickens scuttling around the house, the rush and drum of water that’s raining on his back and making water drip from the ends of his hair. Their chests heave and press together, in and out, in and out, as a sliver of common sense starts to wedge its way between them.

“Please tell me you’re on the pill,” he murmurs against her skin, pressing his bearded mouth to her as he waits for her answer.

Sansa sighs and closes her eyes, shakes her head. “No. I suppose this means you don’t have a condom on you.”

“I don’t got nothin’ on me right now except you, Red,” and his chuckle peters out into a disappointed, still rather breathless sigh.

“In your wallet? In the truck? I’ll sprint out there myself,” she says. Hope springs eternal, and her heart is still high and bright, hoping he’ll snap his fingers and go Aha, yes!

“It’s been a few months since I was in the position to keep condoms stashed everywhere,” he says, making her prickle with jealousy. “And I never in a million years thought we’d- I wasn’t ever- well,” he sighs, slowly loosening the possessive grip he has on her, and with aching sorrow she unlocks her ankles at the base of his spine. “Let’s just say condoms were the last thing I thought I’d need on this trip.”

“Little did you know,” she says in a soft scold.

Sandor laughs, shakes his head. “Yeah, no shit.”

He groans and takes a step back, stretching his back in an arch as he looks up at the sky, and he drags his hair out of his eyes and squeezes the water out of it. Her gaze flicks down at his crotch, at the hard up-thrust of his penis. Phrases like So hard it hurts and blue balls cross her mind, and if she’s got this tormenting ache deep up inside her then she can only wonder what he’s going through.

So she decides to find out for herself.

When she pushes off the wall and reaches out for him, wraps her fingers around the base of him and squeezes, Sandor jumps and hisses like a snake through his teeth, and with his hair still clenched in his hands he rights his head to stare down at her.

“What d’you think you’re doing, sweetheart?”

She shrugs and grins and doesn’t answer because neither of them needs her to, because if she tried putting words to it, if she tried saying Jacking you off or Making you come she’d probably chicken out. Boldness can still be fragile. Wordlessly she pulls her fisted hand down the length of him, watches the muscles in his stomach jump and shudder as he tries to keep himself together.

Sandor lets go of his hair and takes two grips on the tops of the surrounding fence, one behind her and one next to the shower head. Together they watch her hand as it pushes and pulls, pushes and pulls, and even though he’s not really touching her, save for the kiss he lands with shaky
imprecision on her forehead, she finds that she is painfully turned on. And because it’s all aching and strange and wonderful, because she feels oddly more herself around him than she has with anyone else and more powerful as a result, Sansa decides to act.

“Oh fuck yes, Sansa,” he whispers when she slides a hand down her belly, downdowndown, and he drops one hand from the fence to follow the path she’s making, to cup her right where she’s about to slide into herself, until there is the sound of a door opening.

“We’re back, you guys! Benjen’s got the camper here and I picked up some steak and sweet potatoes,” Meera says from the back patio. “You guys out here? Ben, where’d they go?”

Sansa’s eyes widen as she looks up at Sandor, and he is frozen to the spot, one hand on the fence and the other over her almost-busy fingers as they stare at each other. Terrified, Sansa shakes her head no so vigorously it almost makes her dizzy. If they’re just quiet, she’ll go away and look somewhere else, so long as they’re perfectly quiet and—

“Oh, Sandor, there you are. I can see the top of your head. Enjoying the shower? I told Sansa to help herself, so I’m glad she told you about it. I love that thing.”

“Oh,” he says, staring at Sansa before he closes his eyes and tries to come up with something. “Yeah, thanks,” he calls out, frowning and wincing at the lackluster reply. “It’s uh, it’s great,” and then his eyes fly open as he glares down at Sansa. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing,” he hisses.

Because now she’s wrapped both hands around him, and she’s pulling on him as best as she can, as well as she knows how, all to see him come, all to see him come undone here in their little secret spot, here where Meera doesn’t know she is. If this isn’t being a bad girl on the run, then what else is, and every bad girl needs her bad boy, and Sandor is hers now, she’s sure of it.

“Shhh,” she whispers.

“Good, glad to hear it,” Meera says, and there is the clatter and scrape of her tidying up patio furniture and picking up old coffee mugs. “Have you seen Sansa? I wanted to ask her about dinner.”

“Oh god,” he grits out in a whisper, shaking his head, jaw clenched. Sansa grins, triumphant, when his hand leaves her body to brace himself on the fence perpendicular to the one he’s already clinging to. “I uh, I think she was um,” he says.

“Out for a walk,” she whispers, leaning forward to kiss his chest.

“Out for a walk,” he shouts, and Sansa has to bite her lip to keep from laughing, from coming herself, maybe, with the way he’s looking at her, toe-curling-pained, vulnerable, enraptured and snared.

Never has she been like this with a man. Joffrey would have called her a cheap whore, even though he wound up sleeping with those types behind her back in the end. But it doesn’t feel cheap here, with him. It feels like gold and black opal, glittering and priceless and rare.

“Oh! Nice, it’s a great day for it. I’m glad you guys are getting out there and enjoying the warm weather.”

“Come for me,” Sansa whispers, dropping another kiss to the slick wet tattoo scrawled across his pectoral. “Come for me, please.”
“Yep,” he says, shuddering now as his hips rock forward into her hand and whether he’s answering Meera or Sansa, she’s not quite sure, but it shallows out her breathing as she watches him move in her grasp.

“All right, well, I’ll go get some towels for you and Sansa if she wants to shower after her walk.”

“Mmhmm, thanks,” he wheezes with a grating river rock scrape.

“Louder, baby, she can’t hear you,” Sansa murmurs, tugging on him as hard and fast as she dares, kissing and licking his chest, one hand leaving his cock to slide it around his body and run her nails up his back. Damn, but does she feel powerful, tugging on this big strong man, making him tremble and grit his teeth, making him do as she tells him.

“Thank you!” he shouts, hips pushing into her hand, the head of his cock brushing her belly, and then she presses her nails into his back and drags down. He groans, low and slow and breathless as he comes on her hand and her stomach with a low, drawn out, guttural sound of release.

“No sweat,” Meera says. “Enjoy!”

Sandor exhales forcefully when the door slams shut, sags between where he’s still hanging onto the fences, his head resting on the crown of her head as he pants into her wet hair. Wordlessly she lets his half hard cock slip from her hand, and she rinses her fingers off before winding both arms up around his shoulders. After several moments he stands straight, drops his hands from the shower walls to wrap his arms around her.

“I’m going to get you back so hard for that,” he mutters.

“I’m counting on it,” she says, and she laughs when he groans and drops a hand to squeeze her ass. They spend the rest of the day apart, which to Sandor is probably the best thing for him. He’s already found himself thinking about her more often than not, but after what happened in that shower, after sinking his teeth into her and getting struck dumb by that little stunt she pulled, well. Images of panting, pigheaded cartoon animals with their jaws hitting the floor and their tongues rolling out come to mind. While he’s almost gotten to the point where looking like an idiot in front of Sansa isn’t so horrible anymore, the thought of getting caught staring at Benjen’s niece like that in front of Benjen is less appealing than getting punched in the balls.

Sansa goes off with Meera when the latter woman asks if she wants to learn how to make primitive fire, all shy sly grins over her shoulder at him as they saunter off through the desert towards Shireen’s campsite or hovel or whatever the hell it is she lives in all by herself. It’s the weirdest and probably coolest version of play house Sandor’s ever heard of, and he stands there watching her walk away, half impressed that fancy pants big money Red is going to go learn that kind of stuff, half worried she’s going without him. He’d give her the handgun he’s got stashed in his glove box if he didn’t think Meera and Benjen would lose their shit if he tried.

“They’ll be all right,” Benjen says in his simple smoke-drift way as he stands beside Sandor and holds out a bottle of Lagunitas IPA. “Meera fights like a wolverine if she has to. She’s given me a black eye before,” he says with a chuckle, and Sandor has to laugh along with him.

“Same with Sansa,” he says, glancing at Benjen as he taps his left eye where the bruise is almost, almost gone.

He and Benjen while away the time drinking beer and setting up the old camper he lugged up from
the edge of his property, playing house in their own right as Benjen hauls out mismatched bedding and blankets from the house, as Sandor beats the dust out of the pillows that were already in the camper.

A couple of hours later they’re sitting in the backyard on multicolored Adirondack chairs, gazing out over the low fencing into the afternoon-drenched desert. Sandor keeps his attention divided between the horizon where the girls will show up and that outdoor shower in the side corner of the yard, where he can just barely see inside. If it were possible, he’d leave that shower money in his will.

“So,” Benjen says after they’ve finished and the camper is more or less freshened up and aired out, all tiny windows cracked open and the door flung wide to let out the musty and let in the fresh.

“So,” Sandor says, and while he’s never met a woman’s parents before, he’s got enough common sense to know what’s coming. He takes a long swig from his fresh beer.

“I’m not even going to pretend I have any right to lord myself over Sansa, to act like her father or like I’ve even been in her life the past ten years. But she is family, and I do love her, and I have to ask. Meera told me to mind my own business, but after everything that’s gone on with my brother and his family, I just, you know, I want to make sure she’s going to be fine.”

“Are you asking me my intentions?” Sandor says, and it’s strange, to be put in this subtly inferior position when there aren’t that many years than separate the two of them.

“Yeah, I guess,” Benjen says with a chuckle. “As cliché and outdated as that sounds. She’s been alone with that twisted family for a long time.”

“In the beginning my intentions started out as just getting her somewhere safe, Benjen. Never anything more than that, I swear,” Sandor says after a moment. He stares at his beer, digging his thumbnail into the sweating bottle’s damp label and gummy adhesive. Because he’s admitted something here, something he’s only barely just put to words with Sansa.

Benjen is quiet for a long moment as he digests this information, his nut brown face wrinkled round the eyes as he squints out overhead, dirt-dry, dirt-colored hair pulled back and knotted at the base of his skull.

“So you two weren’t together at the start then,” he says, turning his head to gaze at Sandor.

“Nope.”

“But you are now?”

Sandor chews on that question a moment, thinks it through and tries to leave out the very easily-recalled memory of her hands wrapped around his dick. Thinks instead of her foot in his lap, her hair in his hands, her life in his hands when she chose him, when she keeps choosing him much to his mystified wonder and disbelief. He thinks of how it felt when she called him beautiful, how it felt when she tugged him back around her as they slept.

“Yeah,” he says, looking at his beer once more before he brings it to his mouth and takes another long swallow. “Yeah, we’re together now.”

“Sansa said something about you doing this whole road trip escort thing for money. Earlier this morning when you were still sleeping,” Benjen says when Shandor shoots him a sharp glance of wariness.
More honesty. Well, he’s never had a problem with it, even though fessing up has never been so goddamn soft and personal, so tender and breakable.

“That was just an excuse to come with her,” he says quietly. *Money’s money*, he’d thought that night back when she asked him. But then she’d smiled and then he’d known the truth of it.

Benjen doesn’t say anything, but when Sandor hazards a glance he sees the other man smiling, and so he does too, though he dips his head and looks back to the desert, and then they both go Ah and stand up together, because two silhouettes have taken shape amongst the ocotillo and agave, the yucca and juniper. They sway like women, flapped sails, and one of them, the taller with the long limbs and doe-like grace, makes his heart pound as he stands there like some pimply kid watching his prom date walk down the stairs.

She’s smiling and soot-covered when they open the little gate to the yard and step through, and Meera’s talking about using sotol for bow drills or some other horseshit he doesn’t have time for, because Sansa’s standing right here. She’s showing him the blisters on her soft palms, palms he knows all too well now, and she’s telling him how it took her three hours of back and forth drilling between her, Meera and Shireen but she did it, she made an ember and blew it into flame, and suddenly he can’t stand it anymore.

Sandor cups her dirty face in his and kisses her, because she’s too cute and too beautiful and somewhere along Route 66 she became his, maybe. Maybe isn’t a definite but it’s the best thing he’s had in a long, long time, and he figures if she’s his, if he’s hers, then he’ll find out in her response.

Sansa makes a whimper of surprise and curiosity in the back of her throat before its hums out to silence, and then she inhales slowly through her nose, smiles into the kiss and opens her mouth against his to get closer. When she winds her arms around his neck, her blistered palms curled into lose protective fists, Sandor wraps his arms around her waist. Somewhere behind him are the scraping of chairs and murmur of conversation, the discussion of taking naps and making dinner and the closing of a door.

“What was that for,” she murmurs against his beard when the kiss breaks, drawing back to look at him a moment. She smells like campfire and earth and sunshine, and he can see pale pink burn on her cheeks and nose, the springing up a few freckles from just a few hours outdoors.

“Just making sure,” he says, kissing her again, then once more because she’s grinning and she’s letting him, and her fingers are playing with the ends of his hair like she’s been doing it all her life.

“Sure about what,” she asks, arms loosening their cinch around him as he straightens and gazes down at her. She’s smiling and frowning together like she’s halfway sure of what he means and also confused as hell, and he laughs lightly, taps her nose with his forefinger.

“Sure about us,” he murmurs as he watches her. He’s never begged for anything in his life but in his head he’s begging now, *Please don’t let me be wrong, please don’t let me have fucked this up.*

Sansa opens her mouth, takes a breath she intends to spend on words, but then pauses as she bites her lip, glances down and then back up at him, and he recognizes the flicker in her eye as hope, and if there was any doubt before, there isn’t any now.

“So there’s an us now?” she says slowly, teasing, some of that Venus vixen coming back to her now with the way she runs a hand down his chest, toying with the buttons of his shirt, and goddamn but does that set his thoughts on another, dirtier track. Sandor blinks to focus.
“Yeah, there is. I mean, if you want there to be,” he says, because there’s nothing wrong with affirmation when everything is still so staggeringly new.

“What do you think,” she says, rolling her eyes before she settles an arch look on him. “Or do you think I do that sort of thing to all the boys,” she says, pointing over her shoulder towards the shower.

“I think,” he says, hands on her hips as he walks backwards and pulls her with him, “that you need to go inside, get your stuff, and move it to the camper, missy.”

“That does sound like a good idea,” she says as he dances her around so her back is pressed to the French doors.

“The best idea I’ve had today, ever since I decided to fix that shower,” he says, inclining his head to kiss her.

“Boy, you can say that again.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Sansa lies stretched out on her back in bed listening to the halfhearted spatter of rain on the camper roof, here where it’s a lovely nest of flannel and quilts and one stretched out crocheted blanket made from tie dye yarn. The little round windows are cranked open to let in the cool nighttime breezes and the smell of creosote, the occasional yipping of coyotes and hooting of cactus owls, and she’s buzzing and humming, so happy it almost makes her want to cry. Because he’s here with her, sleeping on his stomach with his arm flung across her ribs, a warm band of Sandor she’s wearing like a sash, and he kissed her slow and sweet and heavy before he fell asleep, cupped her face and called her gorgeous, called her Red, called her his after he asked if she really was.

Yes, she said, hitching a leg up on his hip as they lay on their sides facing each other, swapping toothpaste-mint kisses and deep breathing that comes after a long, long day. Yes I’m yours, and it felt so good to say, it felt so good to know.

Good, he said, running his hand from her naked knee and up her naked hip to toy with the trim of her panties, to slip a finger beneath it, a lazy exploration that made her hum and made her smile.

Tonight is only the second time she’s slept next to a man in the romantic sense, having always been ousted from Joffrey’s bed before she could get comfortable, and though she’s still fizzy and knotted from earlier that day, there’s something tantalizing and decadent about just lying here, listening to him breathe. It’s why she’s still awake, blinking drowsily as she stares up at the little ceiling with a smile on her face, and it’s why she’s fully aware of him when he sighs in his sleep and moves.

Sandor’s arm slides down her body, hand a calloused brush when it comes in contact with her skin, and Sansa inhales sharply when his fingers curl around the thin lace and elastic strap of her underwear. The mattress creaks beneath the shift of his weight when he lifts up onto his elbow, the covers drop away from them both as he pulls her panties down.

“What are you doing,” she whispers, wide awake just like that.

“You didn’t really think I was sleeping, did you?” he says, lifting his head to kiss her chest through her freshly washed pajama top. “Not with you right next to me, wearing next to nothing?”

“Oh god,” she gasps as his hand moves up between her thighs until it slow-slides to a halt with his palm pressed right up against her, his warmth to hers, his skin to hers. Apparently it is time for payback.

“I’ll never sleep another night of my life because of you,” he says, pushing her legs apart as he eases himself on top of her.
“Oh, no,” she says. “Oh, I’m so sorry,” and her hands fall from his hair as he posts himself up on his hands above her, too far away to reach. So she lets her arms fall to the pillow on either side of her head, going for happy helpless here with him.

“No you’re not,” he says, and it’s too dark to see a grin but she can hear it, mingling with his amusement as he slowly pushes his pajama-clad hips against her nakedness, and she can feel the hardness of him right where it belongs and that makes her moan.

“No,” she breathes, eyes closing as she pushes back, firmly enough that he grunts out a sigh of his own. “No, I’m not.”

“Good,” he says, drawing his body away from her, and then the shadow of him is gone.

The mattress creaks again, rises slightly as Sandor leaves the bed completely, and Sansa’s starting to think that payback is a bitch, if he means to get her all worked up and then just abandon her. But then he wraps both hands around her ankles and pulls, one slow long fluid tug that brings her close to the foot of the bed.

She looks down the length of her body, can just make him out where he stands in the little walkway that leads from the camper door to the bed. Sandor’s bulk looms until he lowers down into a squat, just as his hands slide up the tops of her legs. They skate off to the sides and scoop under her ass, and with a firm squeeze that makes her whimper he yanks her down the rest of the way until her feet hit the floor on either side of him.

She hasn’t received oral sex much in her life, and the majority of times happened in college before she met Joffrey, who rarely if ever deigned himself to the task, and so it takes her a few rapid-fire shallow breaths to mentally prepare herself for what’s going to happen. There’s such open—no, such spread eagle vulnerability to it that has always made her feel anxious. It requires trust, to let a man put his mouth there, and she’s worried it won’t feel good on account of those nerves, worried she will be too distracted by those nerves, but then he hums that big beast hum of his, and he frees his hands from underneath her to stroke her sides.

This is Sandor, she tells herself. This is a man she has trusted with her life and trusts now with her heart, and so Sansa closes her eyes and exhales, lets her legs part further so she can trust him with all of her.

“Now,” he muses as his hands come back down, one to wrap around the top of her right thigh, the other disappearing completely until it finds her with another down-stroke through her pubic hair that makes her back arch almost immediately, once he presses a kiss to where he’s sliding a finger down, then in and then up. When he opens his mouth it makes his beard rub her, a good soft-rough scrub that is a devastating contrast to the slick wet muscle of his tongue. He slips another finger inside her, half a dozen good slow strokes that make her lift her hips off the mattress, high as she can, and that makes him hum, makes him kiss the slick of her before flicking his tongue out again and again and again.

Sansa thinks she might die.

“I’m going to die, oh my god,” she pants, reaching back behind her to fist the sheets, back arching again as the hand that was on top of her thigh moves to her low belly to press her down and hold her in place.

Sandor says nothing, only slow-roll chuckles, smug as a cat with cream, and Sansa swears she can
feel the low vibration of his laughter right in the center of her, all the way up from his fingers and straight into her heart.

Her pulse is a freshwater swish through her veins as she starts filling the camper with noise, first little whimpering sounds accompanied by eyes-shut frowns as she concentrates on what he’s doing. But then they lengthen out to sighs as he hits his stride and she does too, rocking her hips with the rhythm he’s found between his tongue and his fingers. She opens her eyes to stare sightlessly at the ceiling, and then her sighs burst apart into back-of-the-throat gasps and moans.

“Yes, Sansa,” he murmurs, lifting his mouth off of her, presumably to watch her, and she tips her head to the side, looks down the length of the bed to where she can just barely, barely make out the shadow of his eyes. “Let me hear you,” he says, lowering his head, and he rubs his beard against her again.

And that’s when she starts calling out his name. *Sandor, yes and Sandor, please,* and one time nothing but *SandorSandorSandor.*

“Fuck,” he says, fingers leaving her wet and empty and alone, and she starts to protest until he uses both hands to spread her further apart, to find that sweet spot where he’s already been busy.

“Yes, there,” she pants out, moving her clutching hands from behind her to her sides, but she changes her mind when he moves up her body slightly, head bent to his task, and she grabs him by two fistfuls of his hair.

He grunts at the tight squeeze she has on him, so loud it’s almost a growl, and he grabs her ass again, pulling her up high and tight against his mouth as he works his tongue over her, harder and harder until she cries out in frustration.

“No, no, no, softer, softer, not like- yes, oh yes, just like that, just like that,” she says, back arched off the bed now so that only her thrown back head and her ass make points of contact on the mattress, because she’s going to come, and maybe she’s going to die, and if she does the latter she absolutely does not give a damn.

The sighs and moans come out like *Oh-oh-ohs* when she finally comes, so loud now they fill the camper and probably the entire desert around them, and her hips buck against him, and she pulses and jerks and still he doesn’t stop, not until it gets to the point of unbearable sensitivity, and then she lets go of his hair, slides a hand between his mouth and the warm wetness he’s brought out of her.

“I guess she’s had enough, hmm?” he murmurs from the dark and from the floor, still squatting at her feet, and there’s more of that amusement from before except now it’s lower, darker, and she recognizes the sound of it as smug pleasure, deep satisfaction, the sound of a man who knows a job well done when he hears one.

“Oh my god,” she whispers, her body a weak sink down back to the bed, limbs like jelly, sweat sheening itself on her arms and belly, her legs so wobble-shaky she can’t even attempt a sexy pose. Instead she just lets them hang limply off the edge of the mattress as she feels that wonderful, tingling, hovering sort of detachment from a long-suffering orgasm finally being set free.

“I’m going to take that as a compliment,” he says, voice muffled as he takes off his shirt and uses it to wipe his face. Once upon a time she would have been mortified at that, but right now she’s too blissed out to care. Not one whit, here. Not one whit, with him.

“You should. Your payback is *amazing.*”
He laughs, kisses her hand where it’s still draped protectively over her vagina, and it makes her laugh with him as she remembers herself, makes him hum with that amused satisfaction. She moves her hand to the back of his neck as he gets to his knees and kisses his way up her body, nose pushing up her forgotten shirt as he makes his way to her breasts.

“‘Amazing,’ she tells me,” he says, pulling down her shirt once he lifts his head and straightens. “‘Beautiful,’ she calls me. She must be stoned again.”

“Stone cold sober. And you better get used to all of that, big man,” she says as she sits up, and then she grins. “Especially if you keep doing that.”

“Not a problem,” he says, sitting back on his haunches as she finds her underwear and slides them back on, following suit with her shorts once she finds those. “Wait, where’re you going?”

“Bathroom,” she says as they both stand together, shifting places in the narrow little space so she can get out. “And to get water. Want some?”

“I’ll go with you,” he says, following her as they both leave the camper. “I got you so wet I think I need another shower just to get you off of me. Not that I much mind,” he says.

“Very funny,” she says, smacking him soundly in the middle of his bare chest, and his laughter mingles with the desert night air, fades like the distant barks of a coyote.

She uses the bathroom first after they tiptoe into the house, leaves him to his own devices when she makes her way into the kitchen, and she gasps so loud she claps a hand over her mouth when she turns on the light and sees someone there.

“Sorry,” Meera says, all sheepish grin with her mouth full from her perch on the counter. She quickly chews and swallows, gazing down at her food. She’s got a small saucepan on her lap that’s full of rotini pasta and about half a pound of shredded parmesan on it.

Sansa laughs.

“Pregnancy craving?”

“Not really, I don’t think, not this early. I just woke up so hungry, and I haven’t been eating much with the nausea and all so I figured I better have at it while the mood strikes me. You um, you want some?” she says, holding out the pan.

Sansa would sooner step between a mama bear and her cubs than take food from a pregnant woman.

“No, I’m just here for water, but thank you,” she says, stepping fully into the kitchen to get a glass from the cupboard and the Brita pitcher from the fridge.

“I’m sure I make pregnancy look about as fun as a barrel of monkeys,” Meera says with a chuckle as she stabs her fork into the pasta and cheese. “No meat, no wine, sick to my stomach all the time.”

“Yeah, but it’s worth it, right? That’s what my mom always said, and she was pregnant five times,” Sansa smiles, pouring herself some water.

“Oh yeah,” Meera says happily, chuckling to herself as she gazes down to her still flat belly. “A little Benjen bun is totally worth it.”
Sansa smiles, heart warm from that adorable little confession, body warm from Sandor’s salacious appetite, and then she says *Hmm* as something strikes her, and she wonders if it’s not more than a little inappropriate. But in the two days they’ve been here Meera has been nothing but cheerfully irreverent, good-humored commentary and a sly sort of presence that seems to know far more than she admits. So Sansa channels her inner Bonnie Parker and thinks *Screw it.*

“Hey, can I ask you a huge favor?”

He can hear the two girls giggling and whispering in the kitchen so once Sandor’s taken a leak and washed his face he leaves them to it, having a sneaking suspicion they’re sharing information he does *not* want to be around for. He closes the front door behind him loud enough so they’ll hear but not loud enough to wake Benjen, chafes his hands against the desert chill as he crosses the yard to the camper sitting in the driveway behind his truck.

The open windows have let the breezes steal away most of that sweet humid sex smell, though it’s still enough to almost make him hard again. The buck and writhe of her, the knowledge that he was doing that.

“Fuckin’ A,” he mutters, heading back to their bed, *our bed, the bed I am sharing with her,* and with a half-satisfied, half-frustration groan he turns to sit and then lay back on it.

It’s so hard for him to believe and yet so *easy* all because of how seamless it was, how unencumbered a transition it was to go from stranger to acquaintance to friend and now lover. To go from angry and annoyed to bewildered and enchanted, to go from clothed to wet and naked. Together now, they say. I’m yours and you’re mine, they affirmed. But he isn’t sure what that means or how long that lasts. There’s an expiration date here, he’s certain, and it will be the second he pulls up her mother’s driveway and is politely thanked and paid like he’s the help. Sandor sighs, closes his eyes. He thinks of her open mouth and the snapping bright blue of her eyes, thinks of the way his name sounds, hot and damp around the edges from her breath as she says it.

“Sandor!” she whispers, making him jerk and startle out of his thoughts.

“Yeah?”

She practically bounds into the camper, making it list to the right slightly from her enthusiasm, and then she-chucks something at him, lightweight like it’s a box of tea, but then impact makes it opens on the bed beside him and the faint wisps of moonlight that make their way through the windows reflect and bounce off the shiny wrappers.

“You’re kidding me,” he says with a laugh, picking up a condom and holding it above his head to stare at it. If he wasn’t on his way to an erection before, this new revelation is certainly helping him along.

“I asked Meera and she gave me the whole box. Said they didn't need them anymore,” she says, and he lifts his head in time to see her pull her shirt off, tossing it to the floor as she steps over it and walks towards him. There go her shorts and panties too, and she’s as naked as she was earlier when they became an ‘us’ in the shower, her body a faint wash of white here in this world of darks and greys and blue-blur blacks. “So no, I'm not kidding. I'm serious as a heart attack.”

Now *this* is a sight for sore eyes. Sandor immediately sits up with a cinch of his abs, stares up at her and prays for early sunrise just so he can see her better, here where she’s naked and sinking down on top of his thighs, knees to the mattress on either side of him. He runs his hands up her legs
to the small of her back.

“You’re probably going to give me one,” he says, nuzzling his face against her chest, hands moving around so he can run his thumbs along the underswells of her breasts.

“I’d rather give you an orgasm,” she says, rolling her hips forward, groaning in the back of her throat when she presses the spread open sweet of her right against his hard cock. Sansa kisses his cheek, noses against his jaw a moment, and then she’s a teasing nip on his earlobe when she finds it in the dark. Sandor hisses. “Another one, I mean.”

His brain buzzes with flashes of memory of her in the shower, of how frantic and lustful and out of his goddamn mind he was for the want of her, and though it’s a far more calm climate here, it only takes the arching of her back and the rise of her breasts against his face to drag the primal back out of him. Because he’s wanted her for a while now, has probably wanted her since the very beginning, and he came so close earlier this morning, was right there before reality slapped them both upside the head, and their moment is here now.

Right now.

“Then let’s make my girl happy,” he says, because right now she is his girl, and he twists his body to throw her onto her back with a grunt.

Sansa sucks in a delighted sort of gasp as she uses her elbows to scoot backwards on the bed, all bare long legs as she watches him shimmy out of pants and boxer briefs. He uses his legs to kick them off as he crawls on his knees towards her, grabbing one of the scattered condoms on his way up the bed. She’s already breathless, shallow pants as he stretches out above her.

“You do it,” he says, slapping the condom down on her chest, holding himself up at arm’s length with his fists to the mattress on either side of her shoulders.

“Do- do what?”

“Put it on,” he gruffs, lowering his pelvis to bring his cock down against her cunt where she’s wet, and he knows it is because he did it, and the reminder makes his hips move again.

“Oh, yeah, duh, of course,” she says breathlessly, and there’s the rustling of a wrapper and then the soft skin slide of her hand down the length of him, all the way to the base where she first grabbed him hours earlier.

“Fuck me,” he groans, eyes rolling back in his head for the touch of her again, and then there’s the slippery slide of the condom as her other hand rolls it down into place, and it’s like he’s made up of nothing but thick color, blacks and reds, the heavy shades of lust and want, the desire to possess and make his, the deep aching need to be ruined and owned by her through and through.

“I’m about to,” she murmurs, and then she wraps her legs around him, heels pressing into his ass as she squeezes her thighs and pulls him down.

“Fuck yes you are,” he says, kissing her roughly on the mouth as she guides him inside, and that is it, because holding back is not only impossible to him it’s incomprehensible.

She inhales so loudly it’s like a scream turned inside out when he pushes inside her, and he immediately collapses to his elbows from the instant hot soft clamp of her, the quick rushing slide until he’s seated almost entirely in her. He’s missing out on the slick wet of her thanks to the condom but it’s still deliciously tight, it’s still her wrapped around him. And then she squeezes him hard, her entire body a lovely warm fist around him, and Sandor thinks he’ll go blind.
“Oh god,” he says, lowering his head to kiss her shoulder, and then he starts to move.

Sansa throws her head back when he kisses her and withdraws from her almost completely, lets loose a shuddering moan when he bites her shoulder, rounds his back and pushes into her again, and they are such strong fluid strokes that she reaches back to brace a hand against the wall behind the bed, and now that there’s no escape from him, each forward thrust hits home in the sweetest rough way. It’s everything she wanted standing outside in that shower with him, more now that she has a taste, because she doesn’t want him to stop, not ever, not with this sweet pound into her, the scrub of his beard and press of his teeth and the way his hand has come to cup the crown of her head.

Sweet, possessive, mean, lovely. It’s getting fucked in every sense of the word, when he grabs her by the hair and moves her head to the side, when she cries out his name as he moves the suck and the kiss and the bite of her shoulder up to her throat, just below her ear. When he grunts and groans, rabid and hungry and it’s all her wonderful, wonderful fault, when she moves in time with him, digs her nails in and makes him hiss.

“God you feel so fucking good, Sansa,” he groans against her skin where she’s already starting to sweat, and it makes her smile with her mouth open to hear him, makes her hitch her legs up squeeze his sides with her thighs. “Christ you feel so good.”

“Call me Red,” she pants out before she can help herself or really comprehend what she’s even saying, and then he laughs, a wicked deep laugh as he lifts his head and thrusts into her, hard.

“You feel so good, Red,” he says. Another thrust. Another. “So good, Red. So good,” he says, over and over in time to each forward slide of his cock, each rock of his hips until she’s calling out his name again, until one good firm intentional Kegel becomes the inevitable and uncontrollable pulse and roll of an orgasm, a good strong climax that makes her cry out Fuck, makes her cry out Fuck yes, please, Sandor, please.

There’s too much. Too much of her he wants that he can’t reach, not without stopping, and the last thing he wants is to stop fucking her, to stop making her say his name and whimper, to stop making her rake his back with her nails, to stop making her legs wrap and re-wrap around him until they fall back to the bed from weakness. He wants her breasts in his mouth, her ass in his hands, wants to yank her hair and kiss her lips and suck her tongue, wants to flip her over and fuck her from behind, but he can’t stop, not when she sounds so happy, not when she looks so goddamned gorgeous, drenched in sweat, head thrown back to the pillow, breasts bouncing from every single barely-controlled thrust.

The thought of everything he could do, everything he will do if he gets the chance, all add to the buildup inside him, the warm slick jelly feeling that’s filling him up, the closing in of a climax like the cinching of a silk noose. And there’s the real fact that this might all be fleeting, that he could lose her as quickly as he got her. That desperate sort of sorrow only serves to fan the flame instead of extinguish.

“Oh Jesus, I’m gonna come,” he says, forehead creased in a frown so hard it almost hurts. Don’t stop don’t stop he tells himself.

“Come for me, Sandor, yes,” she breathes, hands in his hair, hands at the back of his neck, down his back, reaching, grabbing, pulling, wanting wanting wanting.
Don’t stop don’t stop turns to Yes, okay, yes in his head, because she reigns supreme, because she says jump and he asks how high, because she’s moaning his name and begging him to come, because he will do whatever she wants, because he cannot keep it in anymore, because he is in love with her. Yes, okay, yes.

“Yes,” he grits out, jaw clenched tight as he fucks her, fast and hard and graceless now that he’s going to come, and then his mouth opens and he lets loose a ragged sort of groan that’s part cry and part sob, almost, the sound an animal makes when it’s dying or killing or both.

Sandor comes in a jagged series of thrusts, head dropped down with his forehead against hers, and then she finds his mouth with hers, hands in his hair again, holding him down to her like she’s stealing his soul, and then he remembers thinking of love in that white hot moment, and he wonders if this is what it tastes like, when he empties himself completely and collapses on top of her.

“Oh,” she pants, voice a wheeze from dry throat breathlessness, from the weight of his bulk maybe, and so he immediately hauls himself back up to his elbows. “Oh my god.”

“Sorry,” he says hastily, lifting his head to gaze down at her. “You okay?” he asks, moving the hand resting on the crown of her head to brush the hair off her forehead and out of her eyes.

“Are you kidding? I’m amazing,” she sighs as her eyes slide shut.

“Yeah you are,” he says, running a touch along her temple with the back of his knuckles, thinking words like Beautiful as he gazes at her in the low fuzzy light.

“I want to do that again,” she says richly, winding her arms around his neck.

“You’re going to have give me a minute, Red,” he says with an amused groan, and when his cock slips free of her he rolls onto his back, dragging her with him so she’s more or less draped on his chest.

“Whatever it takes,” she says, words like decadent little desserts from the grin that shapes them.

They are both sweaty, tacky to the touch though it doesn’t stop her from resting her cheek above his heart, from running fingertip trails down his stomach, the touch skating the thatch of dark hair covering his groin. He is still breathing hard, making her head rise and fall with him, and he stares up at the ceiling wondering how the hell he got so fucking lucky.

“You know, I’ve never actually slept with a guy before you,” she says lightly, tipsy-trippy light like she’s telling him she’s never ridden in an airplane or seen the ocean.

“What?” he says, mortified as his mind flips back to how ruthlessly hard he just fucked her. He could have snapped her in two. “Jesus Christ, Sansa, that’s something you need to tell me before we take a roll in the hay.”

“Oh my god, no! No, wait,” she says, laughing as she lifts her head and rolls onto her belly so she can face him, and she’s breathless and giggling as she puts her hand on his chest and her chin on her hand. “I meant sleep, not ma- not having sex. I’ve had sex before, plenty of times.”

He’s relieved but still Sandor frowns. “Hang on a second, let me take care of this real quick,” he says, gesturing down to the mess of the condom, because what she’s telling him sounds an awful lot like something he needs to pay attention to.

He takes it off and wipes himself clean, poor t-shirt – or lucky, depending on the perspective, pulls
on his underwear and walks the knotted condom out to the trash can in the carport. When he returns she’s snuggled up cozy under the covers, though she tosses them aside to let him back in, and she Brrrs and shivers delightfully when he drags her closer with his night-chilled hands.

“All right, now,” he says once she’s got her head on his chest, hand on his ribs as he looks up at the ceiling. Sandor slides the arm he’s got around her under the covers so he can trace the curve of her back. “Tell what the hell that means, you’ve never slept with a guy.”

She does, and it’s bizarre and stupid and sad, to him, the idea of this lovely creature being kicked out of some idiot’s bed, and when she’s done telling him he kisses her on the forehead, on her mouth when she tips her face up to look at him.

“I will tell you one thing, sweetheart,” he says with a sigh as his eyes close. “I will never, ever kick you out of my bed,” and for now, just for now, he ignores that he doesn’t even really have a bed, anymore.

“Really?”

“Uh huh,” he affirms, lowering his hand to snap the elastic of her panties, to grip her ass and give it an affectionate squeeze. “Hell, you’ll be lucky if I let you leave.”

Sansa purrs like a kitten.

"Dammit," she says a several minutes later, voice already a sleepy faraway doze.

"What's wrong?" He's half asleep himself, so contentedly full from the day and from her, utterly spent as well. He’s not even sure he said those words out loud.

"Ugh," she says with an annoyed sigh. “I forgot my glass of water. I was so stoked to get those condoms I left it in the kitchen and ran right out here."

Sandor laughs so hard he starts coughing.

He wakes her up slow like silk, hands a roam, always a roam and she’s starting to think this might never end, even if they sleep together for a thousand nights, the way his hands drift and touch, graze and squeeze and rub. She opens her eyes and blinks them shut immediately, it’s that early-morning-bright in here, warm happy sunshine despite how chilly it is from the cold desert night. Sansa turns in his arms, rolls him on his back as she climbs up on him, still half asleep but so happy for sleeping with him all night, so warm when she straddles him and buries her face in the fall of hair on his left side, her cheek pressed against the strange ripple of his scars.

“Good morning,” she says sweetly.

“Ugh,” he says, raising his arms past his head as far as he can, and he stretches out like a cat beneath her, unhindered by her added weight.

“You’re not a morning person,” she says sagely, because she has the empirical evidence to back it up.

“No,” he says with a yawn, his arms dropping loosely around her. “But you are.”

“You noticed,” she says with affected delight, and it’s enough to make him snort a laugh.
“Yeah, I noticed. Hard not to with you bouncing around motel rooms at 7am like a Mexican jumping bean.”

“I don’t bounce,” she says, lifting up onto her hands to look down at him.

Sandor grins.

“Parts of you do.”

Sansa lets him have that one. “So you’re not a morning person. You love a good cheeseburger. You love music and Lou Reed and are a total vinyl snob. You yell at machines when they’re not working like a grumpy old grandpa,” she says, and it’s true. Since they left Winnetka he’s yelled at a television, a vending machine, a gas pump and the automated checkout at a grocery store. Sansa smiles. “And don’t get me started on phones.”

Sandor grunts, reaches out and smacks a hand on her pillow, grabs it and drops it over his face.

“What’s your favorite hobby?”

“Sleeping.”

“Oh, very funny. Everybody, come check out this guy’s standup,” Sansa says, sitting up straight now as she regards him. He is hers now, and the way to finish that sort of sentence is to say he is her boyfriend. Boyfriends and girlfriends should know these sorts of things. She pulls the pillow off his face and flings it behind her.

“For fuck’s sake, Sansa, it’s like six in the morning,” he says with a squinted sort of glare at her, but she just smiles serenely.

“What’s your favorite movie?”


Sansa frowns, and Sandor laughs.

“You don’t know them, do you?” he asks, rubbing his eyes with a finger and thumb.

“I think- I think Steve McQueen’s in them?” Her brother Robb went through a phase in high school.

“Bingo.”

“Okay, so what’s your favorite color?”

“Red,” he murmurs, finally opening his eyes to gaze up at her. He’s sleepy and bleary, looks as surly as a wet cat, and she thinks she’s never seen anything so lovely.

Sansa smiles.

“Aren’t you smooth,” she says.

Sandor rolls his eyes and huffs, runs his hands up her spread thighs and under her shirt, around her hips to her back. Something stirs in her when he moves the touch up and up, until her shirt lifts over her breasts.
“Whatcha doin’, big man,” she murmurs, knowing full well because she is already lifting her arms for him.

He grunts as he sits up to pull it off completely, tosses it by Sansa’s pillow before he sighs and gazes at her bare breasts. She makes a high tiny noise in the back of her throat as she watches him, as he cups both breasts and licks one and then the other, lets them fall back to place as he rubs his thumbs across her nipples. Still he gazes, and it’s reverential like worship and wonder, and the look in his eyes makes her wet, almost more than the way he’s touching her.

“Trying to become a morning person.”

He does a pretty decent job of it too.

Sandor stays sitting up after they’ve stripped each other and acquired another condom from the scatter of them that’s still all over the bed, and he lets loose a long slow moan when she lowers herself down on top of him, and though she’s sore from last night it still feels so good. He presses a hand to the middle of her back and the other just under her ass, his fingers almost rubbing his own cock as he helps lift her up, as he angles his hips in time with her pace, pushing up just as she sinks down.

It’s far slower, far sleepier but lovely and warm and bright, early morning wink and blink with crisp breezes that pebble her skin and make her shiver, which only makes him groan and kiss her throat. And then he lays back on the bed, hands on her hips as he watches her. For a moment she’s self-conscious, left up here all alone and to her own devices, but he squeezes her hips and pulls her forward, and she gasps as he fills her up.

“You’re beautiful,” he says, hands leaving her hips to cover hers when she plants them on his chest. “I could watch you fuck me all day long,” he says.

His gaze lifts and alights, shifts and lands to take in every part of her, from the place where they are connected all the way up to her eyes, and that look of his steals her breath away, because it’s more than just being craved physically. She can feel it, she knows it and it makes her move with a fluid sort of determination, and she arches her back as she pulls her hips away from him, until he is almost completely out of her, and then with a groan and the sagging back of her head she rolls forward until there’s nowhere left to go.

“Perfect,” he says, hands skating up her arms to her elbows where he grasps her and pulls her down so she’s flush to his chest.

“Yes,” she says against his mouth before she kisses him, and he takes a two handed hold of her ass as they move and lift and thrust, push and pull and work together to bring each other around.

Lazy turns to urgent once she starts moaning his name and asking for more even though she’s behind the wheel, and he murmurs nasty things in her ear, lovely rich things about what he’s going to do to her next and how much she’s going to like it, how he’s wanted to fuck her the second he saw her.

“I want to fuck you til you fall apart,” she says without thinking, words a scribbled sort of rush out of her mouth as she comes from his words, from his hands and his cock and the way he looks at her, from how hard she’s already fallen for him, from how far a drop there’s still to go.

“You will, Red, you will,” he says. “I’ll let you tear me apart if it makes you happy,” he says, and then he swears, says Fuck and Christ and I’m gonna come, and there are five or six more upward thrusts before he does, wild things she tries to mimic with the lift and drop of her hips until it’s over
and they’re both gasping and sweating, gazing at each other with a sort of heavy, mystified realization.

“You like shopping,” he says an hour later, when they’re dressed and she’s pulling her uncombed hair into a high ponytail, though the ends at the nape of her neck are too short to pull up.

Surprised, Sansa turns around where he’s sitting on the edge of the bed putting on his shoes, and she smiles when he looks at her.

“You drink your coffee with enough sugar to make it taste like a cookie. You fidget when you’re nervous and you tip too much,” he says, getting to his feet and crossing the camper to hold her by her hips as he looks down at her.

“There’s no such thing as tipping too much,” she argues, even though she’s grinning like a fool.

“You’re high class and ritzy but you also like junk food and shitty TV shows. And you can make fire with your bare hands,” he says, lifting them to kiss the blisters on her palms.

“You’re going to make me cry in a minute,” she whispers with a smile, because it feels good to know you’ve really been seen by someone, and he’s standing here looking at her. Not through her or at some preconceived notion of her, but at her, and for the first time in her life she feels adored by a man.

“But you also love to eat fancy food I can’t pronounce let alone spell,” he says with another heavy sigh, like he’s just said she loves to rob banks and kick puppies. “So I guess that means I need to take you to dinner.”

“We’ve eaten dinner together every night since we met,” she says all fizzy foamy happy, almost lightheaded from the nearness of him, and it’s insane to her, how they can have sex and be naked around each other, but just him standing here in jeans and a white shirt can make her brain go to mush.

“True,” he says, dipping his fingers in her pockets as he so likes to do. He gives her a tug and a shake, a serious glare as he looks down at her. “But never as a date.”

Sansa flings her arms around his neck and jumps up into his arms with a squeal, and the camper rocks as he staggers back from the impact.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

There is a brief lull – or perhaps a long one, she’s not really paying attention – in the low-tone, measured conversation, and in that bloom of space Catelyn sighs. She’s lightly drumming the inside of her wrist against the arm of the low, contemporary style sofa she’s sitting in, drumming to the beat of the winter rain on the window pane, rain that has fallen for two days now. The hems of all her jeans and slacks are damp since she’s still not used to wearing galoshes as part of an outfit and refuses to ruin her soft black leather riding boots in the downpour. *Maybe I should just go buy some damned rain boots,* she thinks. Because the rain isn’t going to stop just for her, and she isn’t leaving Portland, Oregon anytime soon, either. Another sigh.

The sky may spit but it’s still a soft, unassuming grey. *The grey of Ned’s eyes,* she thinks, and the sentiment is half-fond, half-sad, all memory. She thinks of the last tailored suit she bought for him, a soot color that both paled and warmed his eyes, all seriousness though whenever he did laugh, oh, how they shone. Lord, how she misses him still.

“Catelyn?”

“Hmm?” She is still gazing out the window at the drum, the pattern and the beat, the trail of sky-tears as they slide in rivulets down the glass to gather and spill over the wooden sill outside.

“Where did you go, just now?” Dr. Luwin’s voice is even and calm, all still waters run deep and patient as a monk’s, though Cat has never before met a monk, not that she’s known of.

She blinks, shakes her head and smiles as she looks back to her psychiatrist.

“Shopping,” she says, because it’s half true. She shakes her head again and rolls her eyes, lets loose of a breath of laughter. “I’m sure that makes me sound like an airhead, but there you have it. I was thinking about shoes.”

Luwin chuckles, gazes at her over the thin rims of his glasses as he taps his pen against his notepad. It’s obvious he doesn’t believe her, but he has the grace to know not to pry. She works better with him that way, and after over a year of therapy he should know her well enough by now.

“We were talking about the kids,” he says, gazing down at his notes. “I just asked you how they’re doing after seeing Sansa in the news.”

“I don’t want to talk about that,” she says quickly and with a violent shake of her head. “I refuse to believe it, I- there’s just no way,” she says, closing her eyes against the memory of seeing Sansa’s serene smile under the most horrific headlines, all revolving around murder. *Poor Jeyne.* “If she’s-no, I don’t care how angry she could get, she could never do that. She would not do that, no matter how long she’s lived with the Lannisters. She is not a monster.”

She and Robb argued about it for an hour last night, voices raised loud enough to make his young
son cry, and that had been enough for his wife to put her foot down and insist the three of them return home. *I don’t know, mom, she’s been so far up their asses, she might be capable of anything.* And then she slapped him, and then he left. Sunday night dinner, ruined.

“We’ll put a pin in that for next week, then,” he says gently, but his reverse and U-turn are too late.

The harmless drumming of her wrist transforms into a hard pound of her closed fist on the armrest. Tears well and prickle in her eyes and she wipes them away angrily, pulls on the cuff of her sweater to glance at her watch. Ten more minutes.

“I understand where these feelings are coming from, believe me, Catelyn. This is an unspeakable thing that’s happened to you and your family, and now it’s worse than insult to injury. There are simply no words to describe what has just happened.”

She sniffs and looks back at the window. *What do you know, old man,* she wants to say, because he’s a lifelong bachelor married to his job. Books on the shelf don’t translate to life experience. He hasn’t lost his husband to murder and his daughter to crime, because those people don’t exist. *Neither does Ned anymore,* she thinks with a choked sort of sigh. It is almost too painful to ponder what Sansa calls life, these days.

“Would you like me to prescribe something for you? Something to help you with this anxiety?”

“No, god, no. The sleeping pills already make me feel foggy for half the morning. I don’t want to take anything else.”

“And how is the Doxepin treating you? Are you sleeping well?”

Cat shrugs listlessly. “Yes, it’s fine, I suppose. It’s not as hard for me to get to sleep, but I still need the pills to stay that way. The dreams, they- well, they’re still very real. Without the meds they wake me up and I end up pacing the house until Rickon gets up for school.”

She’s dreamed about the last morning she saw Ned alive almost every single night. The dreams about Sansa are less set in stone, range everywhere from when she was a baby to when she graduated college. Memories that feel so real she wakes up sobbing with watery sunlight streaming in through the curtains.

Luwin nods sympathetically, makes a few more hasty-scribble notes before he clicks his pen and sighs.

“Listen, for now let’s try and focus on the positive things that are going on for you. Robb has his family, Bran is only a semester away from graduating almost two years early.”

“And Arya has her dancing,” Catelyn says with a damp, sad little chuckle. “Rickon has his cars and hasn’t gotten in trouble in months. And I suppose I should be grateful he still agrees to come on errands with me considering how much he hates it.”

“’Atta girl,” Luwin says with a warm smile as they stand in unison. He cups his left hand over her right when they shake farewell, a warm, soft, paper-skin handshake. “I’ll see you next week, all right?”

“Yes, of course.”

He beams a crinkle eyed smile and nods. “Go on, now. Make sure that son of yours hasn’t dismantled everything in the waiting room.”
Catelyn huffs a laugh and nods. She inhales deeply before opening the door, shakes back her hair and walks out, tries to leave everything behind her in Luwin’s office. If she could she’d lock it up like bones in a tomb.

“Jesus, you were in there forever,” Rickon says from his slouched sprawl in one of the armchairs in the front room.

He is slumped so low his rear end hangs off the chair and his shins are bumped up against the coffee table, all long lanky limbs and mop of untidy hair, ripped up jeans that are perpetually stained with motor oil. She supposes she should be grateful he’s so interesting in rebuilding cars and not in stealing them, considering how wild a ride his adolescence has been so far.

“It’s the same hour as it is every week, Rickon,” she says with good natured exasperation at his surly teenage impatience.

“It’s a goddamn lifetime,” he says as he hurls himself out of the chair and to his feet, hitching up his jeans.

“Language,” she says, kneejerk and halfhearted, and she grasps him by the back of his neck with an affectionate squeeze as she steers him towards the door.

“Hey, so I texted Bran while you were in there taking forever,” he says once they’re buckled into her used Mercedes station wagon. “He’s between classes now ‘til six and I was hoping I could go hang out with him til then? Is that okay? He can even give me a ride back from the dorms. I’ll be home for dinner and everything.”

“Did you do your homework while I was taking ‘forever’ or did you just stare at your phone the entire time?”

“Most of it,” Rickon says, raking his hair out of his eyes as he turns to gaze out the window.

“Rickon,” she warns.

“Okay, so I still need to do my geometry, but Bran can help me. He loves that shit.”

She doesn’t bother admonishing him this time. Cat remembers high school and college very well; she hated ‘that shit’ as much as her younger son does.

“Fine, I can drop you off on the way home,” she says. “I need to stop by Whole Foods anyways, and errands really aren’t your thing these days.”

“Thanks, mom,” he says with relief, flashing her his dazzler 1000 watt grin when they glance at each other during a red light, and it makes her heart swell to see the genuine warmth in his eyes.

Bran’s sitting at an outdoor table outside the student union food court, smoking a cigarette in the fading drizzle looking very art-film suave and fine-boned melancholy, wearing a sweater and a black blazer. He looks more like he studies art history than engineering, but then she supposes all of her children are more than one note wonders, especially after everything they’ve been through. The fact that her middle son has simply thrown his grieving and his energy into school is likely miraculous.

Cat rolls down her window after Rickon shoots out of the car like a bat out of hell.

“Both of you, come here,” she calls, ignoring the groan of protest from her youngest and the irritated, embarrassed look on her middle son’s face as he stubs out his cigarette, backs his
wheelchair from the table and rolls towards her.

“Mom, come on, this is humiliating,” Rickon says, hand to his waistband as he tugs up his loose jeans.

“Most of all for me,” Bran says. “I actually go here. I’m actually a legal adult, being beckoned to my mom’s car like a little kid.”

“Look at all the hoots I give,” Cat says, determined not to drop those f-bombs her kids are so fond of these days.

Rickon bursts into laughter. Even Bran snickers and says Wow mom, way to be a rebel.

She ignores them with a roll of her eyes before she pins her older son with a meaningful look, and she hopes there isn’t the pathetic shimmer of desperation in it that she feels so poignantly in her heart.

“Have you spoken to Robb today, Bran?”

Rickon and Bran exchange looks.

“No, not- well, yeah, but just about stupid stuff. Not about- we didn’t talk about her,” he says, dropping his gaze as he ruffles the rain out of his hair with a bare hand.

Catelyn hums nonchalantly, nods as she chews on her lip and sighs. An inhale for fortitude, exhale for resignation. “All right, fine, thanks for telling me. And hey, listen,” she says when Bran starts to roll himself away from the car. “No giving your brother cigarettes, do you understand me?”

“Mom, come on,” Rickon says, shifting his weight from foot to foot.

“I’m serious, young man,” she says, lifting a pointed finger to her youngest son who stands two inches taller than her now. “Your brother Bran is old enough to do it but you still live under my roof and I will not have you smoking. Understood?”

“Yes, mom,” both boys sing song with sullen, young-blood reluctance.

“Wonderful,” she says with a bright big beam of a smile that drips with enough sarcasm to make her boys crack smiles they try to hide, because she’s not really buying it.

There’s still a decent chance they’ll go ahead and smoke a pack of cigarettes together. Rickon has always idolized Bran, even after the accident that made Bran’s interests shift from the mechanics of things to the study of them. He wants to do everything his brother does – except math – and smoking has turned into one of them. Cat won’t be surprised if Rickon comes home wearing a turtleneck reciting beat poetry.

“Remember to use the right names with each other in public, all right? And bring your brother home earlier than 5:30pm. That way there’ll be time enough to feed you before your class, all right?”

“We always remember,” Bran says with a shrug. “And I’ll see what I can do as far as dinner is concerned. Thanks, mom. Come on, Ric, let’s go.”

“Take me to all the hot chicks,” Rickon says as they wave goodbye and head back towards the food court.
“Hey, your mother is a hot chick, you know,” she calls out, if only to enjoy the remaining Embarrassing Mom moments she has left.

Her affected blasé humor fades as does her smile while she watches her boys leave, and the bright way she feels around her children darkens and dampens and disappears altogether as she sighs and rolls up her window. At least they’re running around town together. If only Arya would get more involved with her brothers, she thinks with a sigh. But her youngest daughter has isolated herself more and more in her dancing, going so far as to switch majors and move out of the house and into a loft with four other dance majors. We spend all day on choreography, her daughter will tell her during rare phone calls. By the time I finish homework and eat I’m exhausted and I fall into bed. Nothing personal mom, god.

Cat waits until she’s back on the interstate to call Arya, using the blue tooth speaker she had installed when she bought the car, but the call just goes to voicemail as it so often does.

“You’ve reached Nymeria at 227-2718. Leave me a beat and if I can dance to it I’ll call you back.”

Cat smiles sadly and leaves a mundane message for a girl she calls Ria but christened as Arya 22 years ago. She wonders what kind of voicemail message Sansa has these days, if it’s still her and Jeyne singing “Call Me Maybe” or if it’s changed. Something sleek and leonine, her honey voice thinned out with poison, polished and smooth and as emotive as jade or jet.

Whole Foods comes and goes, slippery floors smeared black from wet dirty asphalt carried in on rubber shoe soles, and there is a terrifying moment where Cat thinks she’s about to slip and fall. But she gets the vegetables for tonight’s stir fry and a full pound of chicken under the hopes Bran will actually come early enough to eat, a bottle of red wine and some more Sriracha since Rickon practically drinks the stuff. There’s paper towels and tortilla chips and a gallon of milk, roasted almonds and cream for her coffee, and then she’s struggling with the heavy reusable tote bags in the near empty parking lot.

There is a beautiful black-haired woman gazing at her from a few parking spaces away, and she leans against a black SUV with her arms crossed, ignoring the drizzle like Bran did. Cat glances up once, twice, thrice, and her heart pounds when each time the woman is unwavering in her attention.

Cat shoulders both totes on one arm as she digs her keys out of her purse, fingers shaking from fear as she tries to look outwardly calm. Go for bored, she reminds herself. Bored housewife running errands for the fifth time this week, she thinks. But then the woman pushes off the SUV and walks towards her, the stride of confidence, the stride of a jungle cat, and that makes her think of the predatory way Cersei and her father moved, and now Cat has to struggle to maintain the façade. She's knows what being hunted feels like. She's lived it for god knows how long, and there’s no mistaking this woman’s focus.

“Mrs. Stark,” the other woman murmurs once she’s standing beside the station wagon’s open hatch door.

It is like being struck with a whip. Cat gasps and drops one of the tote bags as she straightens and turns around, but the other woman catches it before it even hits the ground.

“Sorry, you must be mistaken,” she says shakily, going for irritated and failing miserably, pushing her hand against her grown out bangs as she tries to look irritated. “I have no idea who you’re talking about.”

She reaches out and tugs the bag out of the woman’s hand before setting it in the back of her car,
and she slams the hatch door shut with one hand so as not to turn away from this woman, and she’s thinking that was a wise hunch when the woman reaches back to pull something from her back pocket.

“Don’t shoot me! Oh god, please don’t shoot me,” Catelyn says, backing up against her vehicle until the wet window presses against her back. Leaves never shook as hard as she’s shaking now. Drops of rain soak through her sweater like pricks of blood. She thinks of her children, wonders if Rickon and Bran will show up expecting the health food they both hate only to arrive at an empty house and brand new orphan status.

“Mrs. Stark, please,” the woman says with a hiss of a whisper, and when she brings her hand back from behind her Cat can see the shining gold of an FBI badge. “Please, I’m not here to hurt you, I’m here to help you.”

Cat glances down at the badge, hefts it in her hand when the woman gives it to her to inspect. “I saw plenty of badges in Chicago that didn’t mean squat, in the end.” She hands it back.

“Those were CPD, not FBI, and the FBI has been the agency always working with the Stark family, not against it. I’m Special Agent Arianne Martell. I’ve been working with Special Agent Bronn Blackwater, who’s been gathering intel on the Lannisters for years now.”

It’s all slashes and splashes of grey out here, the sky and the asphalt, the gunmetal color of her station wagon and the nondescript slate colored slicker Arianne is wearing. But there’s a bright warmth in the chocolate of this woman’s eyes that Cat wants desperately to believe is sincerity.

“And you’re telling me this in a grocery store parking lot?”

“I didn’t want to startle you at your house or when you were with your children. I read your case file, I know how protective you are. So I figured a public place would be better.”

“Our Oregon contact has always been Agent Tarth,” she says dubiously. It’s true, what she said about the FBI, but Cersei always had so many police on her payroll, and this woman isn’t the one she’s been seeing quarterly. And at the end of the day, there aren’t a lot of reasons to trust, anymore.

“I’m not actually assigned to your case, that’s why,” Arianne says, holding up her hands in surrender when Cat steps to the side with widened eyes, her back sliding against the rain on her car. “But I’m still connected via Bronn.”

“How did you find me then?”

Arianne tips her head to the side and studies Cat during a long, pregnant pause before finally she shrugs and sighs. “I slept with her assistant.”

Catelyn snorts.

“There wasn’t that much red tape to snip through anyways. Like I said, I’m helping Bronn on the Lannister side, and he’s been in very recent contact with your daughter, Sansa.”

The world goes black around the edges as all the blood seems to drain from Catelyn’s face, and this Arianne woman immediately rushes forward to hold her up as she tries to regain her balance and her bearings and her sanity. Those involved in the investigation believe she has suffered some sort of mental break to explain the recent displays of violence and aggression, and that— No, Cat thinks. No, I refuse to believe it.
“Sansa,” she murmurs, blinking sightlessly as she stares into Arianne’s eyes, as memories and dreams loom up real and viscous and enveloping. She frowns and blinks and shakes her head. Impossible. This is impossible. “And this- this agent of yours, Bronn, he’s seen her?”

The black haired woman nods. “Yes. For a short time they shared the same roof,” she says, and how jealous Cat is, of this man she’s never met, all because he’s shared four walls with her daughter. “He’s been working undercover. Through a series of bizarre events I won’t trouble you with right now, Sansa sort of fell into his lap. She’s safe for now but— have you seen the news lately, Mrs. Stark?”

Catelyn nods quickly, unable to speak with her heart in her throat.

“Don’t believe a single word of it, except for the fact that she’s on the run.”

Her knees buckle, and once more Arianne steps in to support her, this time with an arm around her shoulders, and despite the cold clammy air the FBI agent is warm like Florida sunshine. A sigh escapes her like the release of a pent up storm or swarm of bees, the rush of darkness fleeing the scene as the sun rises.

“I knew it,” she says, tears welling in her eyes as fast as she tries to dash them away. “I knew she couldn’t have done that.”

“Several days ago she fled the Lannisters and the state of Illinois. She’s been staying with your brother in law Benjen Stark for the past few days. I actually helped with that one,” Arianne says with a smile.

“Benjen?”

She hasn’t spoken to Ned’s younger brother since everything fell apart and he was told to change locations as well, hurried whispered conversations in the middle of the night explaining how his older brother died, how his older brother’s family would be disappearing. It’s all overwhelming, dizzying, and now Cat knows what it means when people say their mind reeled.

“Yes, Mrs. Stark. I helped Bronn to get her to your brother-in-law’s while I worked on tracking you down to bring her to you. Any attempt Bronn made to try and do that would have been disastrous had he been found out. It’s taken me a few days to find you but I did, and now we want to get Sansa home. Home to you.”

“I don’t believe you,” Catelyn whispers, blinking several times until the dizziness leaves her. “I don’t believe you at all,” she says.

Cat presses a shaking hand to her mouth as she conjures up the image of her daughter. Poor mislead defiant Sansa, the cool of her blue gaze as she glanced at her mother over her shoulder before stepping into Cersei’s car.

Arianne shakes her head as she smiles broadly, conspiratorially, warmly. Sincerely. She squeezes Cat with the arm she has wrapped around her shoulders. “You don’t have to take my word for it, Mrs. Stark, I can prove it to you. I have a secure-line phone in my car. Let me follow you home and we can call her. She can tell you herself.”

The sound of Sansa’s voice, dulcet and tempered, musical even when she’s rattling off to-do lists, laughing and sweet, warm like a hug, warm like freshly dried towels, comes back to memory as if she had just heard it yesterday instead of fifteen months ago.

“Okay. Yes, okay,” Catelyn says firmly, because it's time to trust again, time to believe in
something good, and she nods vigorously as she bursts into tears.
“It looks like your radiator hose is leaking,” Sandor says, glancing back at Benjen and Meera’s house from where he stands in the driveway.

“Well what the hell does that mean?” Shireen asks, all indignant pipsqueak next to the mass of him, hands on her hips as she squints and stares at what he’s doing.

“It means you have a leaky radiator hose.”

“Oh, aren’t you funny.”

“That’s what they tell me,” he says with a sidelong grin and glance slung her way.

He’s hunched over between the propped open hood of Shireen’s Jeep and the heat of its innards. There’s moisture where there shouldn’t be, and to make sure he’s right, Sandor squats down and rolls onto his side, scooting his upper half under the old CJ-5. Sure enough, there’s the telltale spray from a tiny pinhole leak in the bottom radiator hose, the sticky sweet smell of neon green coolant running down the sidewall of the engine compartment.

“So what is it?”

“Your radiator hose is leaking.”

“Well, shit, Sandor, I could have told you that,” Shireen says.

It sounds bitchy but when he drags himself out from under the Jeep and squints up at her in the rose blush sunset, she’s grinning down at him with her arms folded across her chest, her scarred cheek an odd sort of mirror to his own. Sandor snorts.

“Making fires and fixing cars, what can’t she do,” he says.

Apparently, though, fixing cars is actually one of the few things she can’t. Everything else she seems to manage just fine. Over the past four days, whenever he and Sansa haven’t been going at it they’ve been stuck like burs to Benjen, Meera and Shireen, and it’s been fun and bewildering and more than a little impressive, seeing what these barefoot little cavemen and women can get up to. He has watched Shireen build a kiln from mud and water and stone, has watched Benjen blow fire into a tinder bundle and has watched Meera set a trap that later caught a wild hare, which made her promptly throw up.

Four days of running around playing Little House on the Desert, four days of playing hide and go seek with reality, four days and nights of Sansa, lovely Sansa with her long limbs that wrap around him like delicious vises, lovely Sansa, who whispers to him Yes, harder and I love waking up next to you with equal relish, lovely infuriating Sansa who is taking so long to get ready for this
goddamn date that he’s showered, dressed, and given mechanical diagnostic to a wickedly awesome old 70’s Jeep in the time it’s taken her to blow dry her hair. And she’s still not out here.

“Well what do I do? I can’t afford to take it to a mechanic.” Shireen takes a step back as she cranes her neck to gaze up at him, all frown of concern and tip of her head. “Is there something I can do in the meantime? Duct tape? I’m good with duct tape,” she says, and Sandor believes her.

He shrugs, glances over his shoulder and down his back where ruddy dirt streaks the white of his shirt like tracks of dried blood.

“You need to replace it. But in the meantime, just carry a gallon jug of water with you. Fill up the radiator before you have to start it up and it’ll keep you going for a while longer.”

“Thank you,” Shireen says with a relieved sigh.

He’s pointing out various things to her as they stand side by side and gaze under the hood when behind them the screen door slaps against the adobe. They spin on their heels in the dusty dirt, face the house just as Sansa walks out onto the front porch. She’s cute as hell in that lumberjack dress she bought in Joplin, pretty as a picture if the things he’d like to do to her in that dress are things you’d do to pictures. Sandor leans against the Jeep, folds his arms across his chest and lets loose a low whistle of awe that makes Sansa grin and lower her gaze.

“Looking good, Red,” he says.

“Cute dress,” Shireen says with a nod of appraisal and approval.

“But you’re all dirty,” she says, turning him physically around to dust off his back.

“I’ll just put my tuxedo jacket on over it,” he says over his shoulder, making her laugh, and what an odd feeling of satisfaction that gives him.

“So where are you guys headed?” Shireen says, lifting up onto her tiptoes to lower the Jeep’s hood, and she lets it slam back into place before dusting her hands on the seat of her shorts.

“Um, Meera recommended this place called Rene,” Sansa says.

“Oooh,” Shireen enthuses as she digs her car keys from her pocket. “My dads went there last time they were in town.”

“Yeah? What was the verdict?” Sandor asks.

“One dad said it was incredibly romantic and very delicious,” she says after a moment.

“Well that sounds just about perfect,” Sansa says with a sun-soaked smile, all spray of freckles and bird’s wing black hair.

“And the other dad?” Sandor asks, having a feeling he knows where this is going.

“I think his exact words were ‘Take out a second mortgage expensive,’” she says with a grin, getting into the Jeep and starting it.

Once she’s rumbled past the camper and Sandor’s truck, he turns to Sansa with his eyebrows raised.

“Well I guess we know you’re going to love it.”
Arianne sits at a pale wood dining room table strewn with magazines, bills, and the sprawl of what looks like abandoned homework, and the drab rainy afternoon light bleeds in dully through the two tall narrow windows. First she was offered coffee and then tea when her hostess forgot her affirmative answer to the former, and she’s been sitting here waiting for the latter for ten minutes. She’s starting to wish this didn’t technically count as being on the clock, because a good stiff drink is starting to sound ideal right about now. There is enough nervous energy emanating off Catelyn Stark to seep into Arianne’s pores, and Arianne isn’t used to anxiety. She’s always been too damned busy to be nervous, and so the second hand effects are unpleasant at best.

“Mrs. Stark, let’s just give her a call now,” she says, gentle as she can once the widowed mother paces back into the room, eyes glued to her phone.

“No, please, I want my other children here for this,” she says, tapping her finger impatiently on the edge of her iPhone. “Bran and Rickon are on their way, I just can’t get ahold of Arya or Robb. She’s always in the studio and he- Robb and I got in a fight last night, so he’s not answering my calls or texts right now.”

“I understand completely, but the sooner we call her, the sooner she’ll know how to get home to you.”

Catelyn Stark stops her pacing to look up at Arianne.

“The fight was about Sansa,” she says softly. “I just want him to know the truth. I want him to hear his sister’s voice, I want all of them to—” her voice cracks and splinters, fine bone china dropped on a tile floor.

“All right, Mrs. Stark. It’s okay, we’ll wait a little bit longer.”

“Thank you,” Catelyn says, lowering her phone as her hand hangs limply at her side. She blinks and shakes her head. “Oh my god, look at my manners, I’m so sorry. Can I get you a cup of coffee or anything?”

Downtown Sedona – or maybe it’s just plain old Sedona, Sansa isn’t entirely sure considering how it’s all just so small and quaint and adorable - is all red rock and blush colored brick, charming little boutiques and restaurants clustered in chic looking plazas along the winding main road. Dark green trees lend cool color to the sanguine scene, and the occasional plaza fountain winks and splashes in the cooling late afternoon air. It’s picturesque and beautiful, otherworldly and foreign to her city girl eyes, even if they’ve already been here almost a week. But it’s civilization and it’s a date, it’s her and Sandor together, walking beside each other like they’ve- well, like they’ve been walking side by side this whole time. Suddenly she feels like she did in fifth grade when a boy asked her to be his girlfriend and they walked around the mall for two hours hardly speaking and not touching at all.

Because standing naked in an outdoor shower is one thing. Sleeping together and sleeping together is one thing. Running around the desert with her uncle and his girlfriend and employee, laughing and drinking beer at sunset and kissing each other when no one is looking is that same wild and protected and isolated thing. But stepping out together where other people can see them and judge them, that’s something else entirely.

Should I try to hold his hand? Should I wait to see if he opens the door for me? Maybe I should
open the door for him. Maybe I should just tell him to hold my—

“So,” he says with a sigh, and then he lifts his arm and drapes it around her shoulders, pulling her against his side. “What’s the most expensive thing you’ve ever eaten? I don’t have anything to mortgage but I guess I could go to one of those Quick Loan places,” he says.

It’s joking and shaded with teasing but it’s also relaxed and perfectly him, nonchalance and a complete lack of awareness on his part, how he can affect her. Just like walking around wearing nothing but a towel or walking around shirtless. He’s unassuming and he turns her legs to jelly, and she’s grinning like an idiot as she tips her head to rest it against him.

“The answer to that question is always lobster,” she says with a giddy sort of laugh, a giggle that makes her feel like she’s far younger than 24. “Well, unless it’s steak and lobster.”

“I’ll bet.”

There is no lobster entrée at Rene but the prices are high enough to draw another one of those low whistles out of Sandor as they sit across from each other at a candlelit table for two near the back of the half full restaurant. To be truthful it’s sort of surprising to Sansa herself, that a little desert town can offer entrees as high as $55 when she can eat very well in Chicago for a fraction of that. Still, everything looks delicious and relatively high end quality, the duck or the halibut, even the simpler chicken entrée looks amazing. But she is determined to keep this fun and exciting, all flirty first date smolder even though they’ve done things to one another that smack more of tenth date status or a post-Let’s Move In Together conversation.

“The um, the spinach strawberry salad looks great,” she says after a while, because $11 is far closer to the price range they’ve been used to since they left Illinois.

Sandor huffs an exasperated sort of chuckle and lifts his eyes from his menu to gaze at her over it. “You’re going to eat a side salad for dinner?”

“Well, sure,” she says, lifting a shoulder and her eyebrows as if it’s no big deal.

“You’re not fooling me, sweetheart. Look,” he says, setting down the menu to lean over his folded forearms on the edge of the table. Talk about smolder, here in the low light with his dark features, with the intense way he comes across even when they’re talking about budgets. Sansa bites her lip and crosses her legs. “We’ve been through a world of shit in less than a month, and for some reason you’ve decided you want to fu—”

Just then a server drops off a little basket of warm bread and herbed butter, glances with an embarrassed sort of realization between the two of them as he fills their water glasses. Sandor wonders how many intimate conversations he’s interrupted.

“Your server will be right with you,” he says with a gusted rush, and once he’s gone Sandor and Sansa look at one another and grin.

“Anyways,” he says, dropping his gaze to the bread as he tears a roll in two and slathers both steaming halves with the butter. “For whatever reason, we seem to be a thing now, and after everything, I think we both deserve a night to sort of, I don’t know. Have some fun. Spend some money. To say ‘fuck it,’ right?”

“Fuck it,” she whispers, though it comes out soft and lilting because he’s handed her a buttered half of a roll. She would rather throw out every expensive gift she’s ever gotten from a man, just to feel this tickled over a piece of shared bread from Sandor.
“Besides,” he says with his mouth full of roll, sitting back and lifting his hip off the seat as he reaches into his pocket. “I’ve got this,” he says, tossing Margaery’s credit card on the table between the napkin lined bread basket and the flickering votive candle.

Sansa grins as she slowly lifts her gaze from the credit card to him.

“I’ve created a monster,” she says slowly, tearing off a portion of her bread and popping it in her mouth.

A huff of breath. “I was already a monster, Red,” he says after he swallows. It is Sansa’s turn to scoff.

“Maybe,” she says around her bite of food, as much a heathen now as her littlest brother. “But now you’re *my* monster.”

“Damn straight,” he says, licking the butter from his fingers as he grins at her like a wolf.

Sansa re-crosses her legs.

“So you’re *really* in the FBI?” the younger son named Rickon says for the fifth time after he and his wheelchair bound brother came bursting in through the Stark house’s front door. They’re in the front room now, the three of them sitting around the coffee table while Cat stands in the foyer with her phone pressed to her ear. “Like the *real* FBI. But you’re so hot,” he says, and he’s just far away enough that Bran can’t quite reach him when he tries to smack him.

Arianne smiles. This sort of reaction she is used to, and she sits forward, a viper about to strike.

“Makeup and high heels, guns and handcuffs aren’t exclusive things. In fact, sometimes they can work *very* well toge—”

“All right, now, Agent Martell,” Catelyn says briskly from the hallway, striding in quickly as she holds her phone like a prayer book in both hands. She sits down across from Arianne, between Rickon on the sofa beside her and the son Bran in his wheelchair that’s pulled up between the two couches.

“Any luck, mom?” Bran says, leaning over his narrow knees to rest a hand on his mother’s clutched ones, and that is a touch he’s close enough to manage, a touch far more preferred considering how Mrs. Stark lets go of her phone to clasp her son’s hand in hers.

She shakes her head. “Both of them, right to voicemail. They’re going to be so upset when they learn they’ll have missed her.”

“Let’s just call her, mom,” Rickon says, turning his body towards his mother. “We can always call her again when Arya and Robb get their heads out of their asses.”

“Rickon, please.” Catelyn is all fatigued resignation, a clutching, scrabbling backslide towards defeat. It makes Arianne frown with sympathy, something else she’s never had in spades.

“I know, I know, language,” he says with a roll of his eyes.

“I say we call her, too. Aren’t Ric and I enough of a fan club?”

“Oh, Bran, of *course* you are,” she says, near tears as she looks up in shock and displeasure to her
son. “I just want us all to be together again so badly,” she says.

“So let’s call her and get started on that,” Bran says, gentle and firm, an undercurrent of natural born leader lending weight to his words.

“Shall I?” Arianne says, pulling the phone from her pocket. There is only one number saved in it, the number of headquarters back in Illinois which will then transfer her to Reed Survival’s main line.

Both boys are gazing intently at their mother, who looks for a long time down at the phone in her lap before she reaches out and takes each of them by the hand. Arianne can see from across the coffee table when she squeezes them, when the boys squeeze her back. Finally Cat lifts her eyes and looks up at Arianne. She nods.

“Yes, please. Let’s call her now. I don’t want to wait anymore.”

He’s sitting in a high class restaurant with a high class girl, drinking expensive wine and eating antelope, and if that’s not the strangest thing he’ll ever think or say or do in his life then it will have been an interesting life he ends up living. Then again, ever since she came traipsing into his life, it’s all gotten a lot more interesting. And a lot more wonderful, if that can be believed. That night in his apartment is so far away, the crack of the bat and the spatter of blood, the early morning hours spent in questioning, the way they slipped through the cracks and narrowly escaped that Baelish prick. And suddenly the only thing that’s left is the good stuff.

But she seems to have that effect on him, seems to slow him down and push out all the bad to let that good stuff seep in, and maybe it’s because there’s actually some good now to fill what used to be negative space. Good to Sandor used to mean mundane, being left alone. Now it means soft skin and open mouths, it means crackle and tension, the kind that can curl your toes just from an exchanged glance across the room. The kind that can do that just across a small square table, the way it’s doing that to him now when she looks up from her plate and smiles at him. Crack and sizzle.

“This is fun, isn’t it? You’re having fun, right?”

“I better be, for $45 worth of antelope,” he says dryly.

“Sandor, come on,” she chides, setting down her forkful of seared scallops to take a sip of her white wine.

Tension flickers from that fleeting look of insecurity, and he sets his own fork down on his nearly empty plate to reach across the table and take her by the hand. Sansa stills like a lovely wild creature in one of Meera’s snare traps. Sandor smiles, tries for gentle and kind as he rubs his thumb on the soft skin inside her wrist.

“Yes, Sansa, I’m having fun. It’s nice taking a walk around your world.”

Flicker back to burn when she tilts her head and turns her hand over in his to clasp her fingers over his knuckles. Such a simple thing, holding hands over dinner, but something he’s rarely done and not for a long time, to boot. And it is precious to him. She is precious to him. All of it is.

“And would you want to come back for another visit? To my world, I mean.”

This time he keeps the jokes about money to himself and simply nods. “Yeah, sweetheart, I want to
come back. Anytime you want,” he says.

It’s true enough but he also has to wonder how much longer any of this will be going on for. Whenever they figure out where the hell they’re going it will change again, this otherworldly sort of limbo state they’re in, sleeping late and getting suntans in winter, listening to records outside with her feet in his lap, drinking wine at midnight and that damnable, wonderful, outdoor shower. Nothing lasts forever is true enough, and his pessimist father’s amendment of Nothing good lasts forever has always been such an ingrained part of his personality that it’s hard not to apply it to their situation, whatever it is. Its uniqueness doesn’t preserve it, either, though Sandor thinks it damn well should, considering how long he’s waited, considering how hopeless it all seemed before.

“Would you two care for any dessert?” their server says later when she comes to take up their empty plates, all smiles at Sansa and eyes that still widen ever so slightly whenever she looks at him.

“None for me, thanks, I’m stuffed,” Sansa says, and he’s relieved because even though this dinner is covered by Tyrell Law Firm it’s still hard for him to rationalize spending another twenty bucks on Bananas fucking Foster.

“Just the check,” he says with an upward glance to the woman as he hands over the credit card, and he figures that’s got to look pretty smooth, not even bothering to find out the cost before opening up the coffers.

“So,” Sansa says once the server disappears into the kitchen. “We just had a date, Sandor.”

“Yeah we did,” he says, resting his elbows on the table and his bearded chin on his laced knuckles. “Kind of the cart before the horse but I’d say it’s all working out.”

And it is. They already know the fundamental parts to one another, the heartbreak and the loss and the sorrow, the smaller things that fill in the spaces like sand between stones, the petty likes and dislikes that make up a person. And yet all throughout dinner they still talked and touched and laughed, even when Sansa insisting she feed him a scallop. Which wasn’t so bad until they caught the eye of one table when she fed him like a child off her own fork and they sniggered. That sucked, but was also kind of amazing as well, because at the end he really didn’t give a shit.

Sandor has Sansa sign the receipt since there is no way he can pass for a person named Margaery, and there’s a lulling sort of moment, here when they’re free to leave but allowed to linger, where he can watch the candlelight bathe her face, where her eyes are darkened and seem hungrier for it every time she looks at him. A moment where it’s all rich and thick and tantalizing like the food they just ate, a moment where his heart starts to pound because before he fully comprehends what he’s doing he opens his mouth and speaks, though it’s to the light spray of breadcrumbs on the tablecloth and not to her. Not yet. He doesn’t have the courage. Yet.

“When we were in that diner before,” he starts, pressing his thumb to the crumbs and dusting them off onto an empty bread plate.

“The diner? Oh, that place with your not-so-secret admirer?”

The hot miffed jealous tone to her voice makes him smile. “Yeah, that place. You said something back then, something I didn’t think about until the other day.”

The other day when they were walking back from Shireen’s with their fingers laced together, when
she said something and he glanced over at her, caught her looking at him the way no woman has ever looked at him in his life.

“What did I say?” she murmurs.

“You asked how a man looks at a woman,” he says slowly, brushing off the last of the crumbs from his thumb. “How a man looks at a woman when he’s in—”

But he stops because suddenly she has grabbed him by the hand, fingers digging in so hard he can feel her nails break the first layer of his skin. Finally he looks up at her with a frown, wondering what the hell’s gotten into her, but then he sees the look of distracted fear on her face and the way she’s looking at him pointedly before flicking her gaze to his right.

“They’re staring at us,” she whispers, and when he turns his head to look she squeezes him even harder, so hard it’s starting to actually hurt now, but he catches a glimpse of the server who brought them bread and water talking with a busboy two tables away.

“Because you’re gorgeous and I’m all scarred up, Sansa. People stare at me all time and now with you on my arm? You’re going to have to get used to it.”

“No, not like- I’ve seen those kinds of jerks stare at you but this is different. They’re- oh my god, they’re checking their phones and whispering. Sandor, there was that news story in Chicago I read online, remember?”

“You said the pictures were old. Plus that was five states ago, they wouldn’t have anything all the way out here,” he says.

But then he remembers identifying Gregor’s remains in the morgue. Lannisters pay debts, and they also stop at nothing to make others fulfill theirs. He frowns and tilts his head slightly, straining to hear anything, and then there it is, whispered, conspiratorial, ballooned with a sort of delighted morbid curiosity.

“Yeah but this one says here that she dyed her hair.”

“—tattoos he didn’t have before but this one describes that guy over there to a T.”

And there it is, he thinks as he mouths Get up and go to Sansa, as he quickly gets to his feet and follows her, hand pressed to the small of her back like he’s escorting her to the theatre and not to a dusty old getaway car outside. Because reality has come rushing in like floodwater, because they’ve been sitting here on a fucking date when they’re really on the run, because he left his gun in the glovebox and there are two more servers stepping in front of them, blocking the front door with their arms folded across their chests.

“Oh, no,” Sansa whispers, and then she starts shaking like a leaf.

“Well, well, look who’s feeling better,” Benjen says from where he’s sitting on the sofa in their little den, and he tosses aside his battered Smithsonian Magazine when Meera lets her bathrobe drop from her shoulders to the floor and she stands naked in front of him.

“I am, I am,” she singsongs softly as she straddles his lap and kisses him. “I took a tub,” she says, dragging his t-shirt up and over his head, and then she laughs. “A tub and a Tums.”

“That is the recipe for love right there,” he grins, kissing her full breasts, heavy round globes of life
that make him sigh for the softness of them.

“And we have an empty house for the first time in like six days,” she says with a sigh as she rises up on her knees to let him hastily squirm out of his jeans.

“Very true,” he says, trying to ignore that one of their guests is his niece as Meera settles back on top of his naked thighs, and he groans when she sinks down onto him, when he slips up high and hot inside her.

“And it’s been forever,” she says, and even though forever implies years and it’s only been weeks, it is still long enough to make him agree with her. The last time they had sex was likely when she conceived, and there is something wonderfully mystic about that, delightfully salt-of-the-earth about it that it makes him even harder just to think of it.

“Yes it has,” he says with a sigh as she starts to move her hips, and he grips her waist as he slouches down to give her more room to move.

It is lovely, getting a taste of her again, feeling the rippling way she likes to move when she sets her own pace, and he rests his head back against the sofa cushion as he gazes up her, little earth mother Meera with her mouth open and her head tilted back. Benjen slides a hand across her belly, wonders when she’ll start really looking the part, and then she arches her back and Benjen slides his eyes closed.

And then the damned phone rings.

“Don’t answer it,” she gasps, righting her head and cupping his face in her hands as she rocks, rocks, rocks. “Please god don’t make me stop, I just feel so good, finally.”

“Never,” he murmurs, opening his eyes.

He reaches up to grasp her by the back of the neck, to pull her down and kiss her, and so by virtue of the office being the only room with a phone, by virtue of that office being on the opposite end of the house, they don’t even have to listen to the message, and Meera keeps feeling good and Benjen keeps loving every minute of it.

It all happens so very, very fast. One moment Sansa’s getting to her feet, grateful she’s in flats because the very real chance they’ll have to literally run away from here is getting stronger by the minute. And then the next there’s two young men in black slacks and waiter-uniform white shirts standing front of the door, and she’s begging Sandor Please, do something, and then he does.

And then, chaos.

There are maybe ten other tables of patrons here and almost everyone either starts screaming and backing away or starts shouting and advancing towards them. Sandor keeps her between the door and his back, deftly angles her here and there to keep himself between her and everyone else as they creep closer. It makes her think of wild dogs trying to get a good angle at another animal’s fresh kill. But when Sandor punches one server so hard he sinks to his knees with a bloody nose, when the other young man balks just before Sandor smacks him so hard with his fist he staggers back into an empty table and falls to the floor, the other customers freeze in a horseshoe around them.

“You’re that couple on the news,” one person says with a gasp. “The two suspects from Chicago.”
“Jesus Christ, I’m calling the cops. Edd, give me my purse, I’m calling the cops,” one woman says, her voice a shake and shiver though in her aftershock sort of daze Sansa has to admire her pluck and courage.

“Nobody is calling anybody,” Sandor says with a snarl, and with a quick glance left and right he reaches over and grabs an open, full, bottle of wine.

Everyone looks terrified. Everyone looks stuck in their skin, stuck in horror, stuck in an unreal moment of time better lived out on the silver screen. And then to her dismay she realizes they’ll be on the small screen, thanks to the busboy in the back, filming them on his phone.

“Baby, please,” she whispers as she pulls on Sandor, who is huge and looming, all bristle and boor and hair in his eyes, black bearded like a devil, lawless like Clyde, My Clyde, she thinks with a real shock of pain and love in her heart, and she is terrified, so blood-run-cold scared that something horrible is about to happen to him.

“Hey, hey, hey, nobody wants any trouble,” a middle aged woman says loudly from the back of the room, the commotion having drawn the chef from the kitchen. Her voice is booming and authoritative, but even chefs aren’t much match for him when he’s got his blood up like he does now.

“Neither do we, lady,” Sandor says though it looks exactly the opposite of that, here. With the neck of the wine bottle in his huge fist, he slams his other palm down on top of it, so hard it almost sounds like a gunshot. The bottom of the bottle shoots off, red wine splashes his feet and the floor like blood, and a few women scream as those closest to him back up several paces.

Sansa herself gasps with surprise. And yet somehow, somehow, this has become the norm for them. If she had time or the brain space she’d wonder what that means. Instead she simply chooses flight instead of fight.

“Let’s just go, please,” Sansa pleads as he brandishes the bottle like a some sort of butcher knife towards everyone as he back up, his other arm wrapped backwards around her as he presses her to him.

“Don’t even fucking think of following her,” Sandor says, unleashed beast and bloodied knuckles, wine stained assassin with a wild, terrifying look in his eyes. “If you do, I will fucking kill you.”

“Murderer,” someone spits out, amongst hive-mind hums and grumbles of agreement, but Sansa can’t really blame them, not with what’s happened.

“You’re goddamn right I am, and to me you’re just another body in a bag,” he snarls, glancing back at Sansa when she eases open the door behind her and slips out.

“Hurry, hurry,” she begs, tugging the arm he had around her as he turns sideways to squeeze out after her.

“I meant what I said,” he shouts as the door slowly swings shut on its hinges, as the horrified faces of the other patrons are slowly obscured from view. “I’ll kill you all if you come after her.”

The door clicks when it closes. Sandor flings the bottle at the it, cracking its ceiling-high pane of tempered glass into a million snowflake shards. But it’s just another loud bang and startle in a long, long list of others, and so Sansa simply stands behind him, unflinching and for the most part unafraid, so long as they are together and the hell out of there.

“You okay?” he asks her roughly, spinning on his heel to finally face her in full.
“Yes, you?” Sansa pushes her hand in his.

“Yeah.”

And then they run.

“It’s been twenty minutes,” Rickon says, pacing like his mother now, though he keeps hitching up his ripped up jeans where Catelyn is a graceful to and fro, the sailing of a fine ship to her son’s waterski through breakers.

“Can we call again?” Bran asks head in his hands as he hunches over in his chair.

“We can call as many times as you want. The only reason I’m all the way over here is to get you two connected again,” Arianne says, her mind drifting briefly to Agent Payne, and she is forced to hide the smallest of smiles that slips through the façade. Well, maybe not the only thing. She’ll have to text him again before her plane leaves tomorrow night.

“All right,” Cat says, a little bit of her smooth polish chipping as she turns around and reveals she’s chewing on a fingernail. “Let’s call again.”

“Okay, hang on,” Arianne says, and she dials the number, waits through the rings until she’s patched through to Areo, who then patches her through to Reed Survival down in Sedona.

One ring turns to three, and she’s fairly sure she’s about to get their answering machine message again when the phone is picked up.

“Hello?” Laughing and breathless, amused and female and utterly dripping with satisfaction that almost makes Arianne laugh. Instead she locks eyes with Mrs. Stark and nods. Catelyn sinks to the couch with her hands pressed to her mouth.

“Meera?”

“Yes? Who’s this?” A hum and exhale as she tries to catch her breath.

“It’s Agent Martell,” Arianne says with another nod as a high pitched sob squeaks out past Catelyn’s fingers. “I have Catelyn Stark with me here and her sons Rickon and Bran, and they’re desperately hoping to speak with Sansa.”

There is a short pause before a sudden inhale and shout.

“Benjen!”

He is driving fast, too fast probably considering he’s not 100% sure he knows where he’s going, and because of it they take two wrong turns before getting out into the desert past the Sedona suburbs, and the entire time he’s cursing himself in his head, and occasionally doing it outside his head too.

“Stupid fucking idiot,” he mutters, pounding his wine-sticky hand on the steering wheel as he glances for the fiftieth time in the rearview.

No lights, headlight or cop or otherwise. Thank Christ and Lucifer too, for all he cares.
“Stop saying that,” Sansa says, teeth a chatter in the dark cab beside him. “You’re not stupid, we just- we didn’t know how widespread it all got. Benjen and Meera don’t even own a computer. We aren’t stupid, we just didn’t know.”

“Fine, not stupid,” he says, swinging the truck onto the long dusty driveway of Reed Survival. “Careless. So fucking careless.”

“They know about my hair,” she whispers. A sad saltwater droplet of water, that whisper.

“I know,” he says grimly, and it’s such a shame to him, to think of all that lovely auburn, cut off and dyed away and not even for the benefit of her protection. “Like I said. Careless.”

“They know about your hair too, and your tattoos, too.”

He never went online to see his photo on Chicago’s WGN website but from what Sansa described to him it sounds like the old outdated family photograph he’d smashed after his shop got the drive-by treatment, and truth be told with that going for him and Sansa’s dye job, he reckoned they were more or less back to high cotton living out here with Benjen and Meera. But either there’s a new photograph or some stupid police composite, maybe even recorded footage from the station where he was questioned. Goddamnit.

“No fucking stone left unturned,” he says angrily.

He shuts off his headlights and turns on his fog lights once they’re off the main road, not wanting to risk anything after that whole pile of bullshit at the restaurant. The entire thing keeps flashing through his mind, from how he’s about to drop bombs like love before the real artillery was brought out. Love and holding hands when he’s here to fucking get her home to her mother, when she started off saying things like I feel safe around you, and this is what he’s done to repay that trust. His stomach flips and flops from nausea and adrenaline and anger.

He’ll never eat antelope again.

“We shouldn’t have done that,” he says roughly as the soft silver gleam of the camper blooms up dull in the faint yellow glow from his fog lights, and he throws the truck into neutral as he kills the engine. “Never, never should have done that.”

The cab of the truck fills with silence as he sits back and lets his head drop against the top of the car seat, and he presses the heels of his palms against his eyes. His heart won’t stop pounding. Something could have happened. Something bad, and it would have been his fault. He’s here for one reason, at the end of the day, even though it’s turned into a thousand, and he very nearly fucked it up. He could kick himself, and maybe he would if the throbbing in his bruised knuckles weren’t enough of a reminder of his stupidity. Sandor sighs and rights his head, stares sightlessly at the front porch.

“You don’t mean- you just mean the restaurant right? Not- not the rest of it, right?”

“The rest of what? The kid filming me on his phone or the bastard who called me a murderer? Yeah, I mean the rest of it, Jesus.” You’re goddamn right I am, he remembers. Fuck. What was he thinking, going off the deep end like that?

But Sandor knows exactly what he was thinking about.

“No, I mean us,” Sansa says, shifting in her seat to face him in full, and her eyes are wide in the near-dark, wide and fearful like they were before at the restaurant, but now there’s terror in them, a horrified sort of sorrow threatening to break her like water breaks a dam. “Do you regret us?”
“Of course I don’t mean that,” he says quickly, reaching out to scoop her in closer to him with an arm around her shoulders, and her breath hitches, once and then twice, and then she lets it loose in a steady stream that makes her back shudder as she curls up against his side with her folded legs leaning against his thigh. “I could never mean us,” he murmurs against her temple as he kisses her there, because by us he means her and he could never, ever say he regretted her, in any way, shape or form. Even now, even after everything. Especially after everything.

“We’re going to have to leave here, aren’t we?” Sansa says miserably a few minutes later. Considering they’re basically back to living in this truck it’s a wonder they haven’t left it yet, but for now it feels quiet and safe and sound, just the two of them in the black of the desert.

“Yeah, I’m afraid so, Red,” he sighs.

“It was starting to feel like home, almost, wasn’t it?”

Waking up wrapped around her, wrapped up in her, spending the entire day outside, no family business to worry about, no bills or clients or traffic, no news or telemarketers, no junk mail or taken aback looks from strangers. Just music and food and fucking, the sweat of her skin and the smell of her shampoo, coyotes in the distance and birds in the trees. Sun in his eyes. Sansa in his sheets. Sansa in his dreams.

It was never reality, but, “Yeah, it was starting to feel like home,” he says.

“Well we’ll just have to make a new one somewhere else,” she says, church-mouse indignant, small and righteous an unflappable.

“Wherever you want,” he says with a sad exhale of laughter, and he’s running his hand through her hair and kissing her temple when the front door bangs open, making them both jump.

“Sansa!” Meera shouts, running off the porch and towards the truck, waving them out of the truck even as she sprints towards it.

“What’s wrong?” Sansa says after Sandor gets out and helps her out of his door. “Is everything okay? Is it Benjen, Shireen?”

“No,” Meera says with the shake of her head. “No, it’s your mom, Sansa. Your mom and your brothers, they’re on the phone inside. We’ve been talking to them for an hour waiting for you guys to get back.”

Sansa gasps, turns to stare up at him underneath the cold spray of desert stars. Shock and awe, maybe mistrust there too, and it’s a comfort to know she’s still got trust and faith in him even after everything. Sandor nods.

“Go on, I’ll be right behind you.”

She nods in kind and turns, runs to the house so fast one of her shoes flies off her foot, abandoned to the dust as Cinderella runs home. Sandor watches her, watches and wonders as he almost slams the truck door shut, but a second thought grabs hold of him, and he leans in across the cab seat to get his gun out of the glove box.

Just in case.
There have been more than a few times in Sansa’s life where she has gone on auto-pilot while driving, where one minute she’s pulling out of her parking spot and the next moment she’s two miles away, blinking herself back to the present while idling at a red light she never remembered stopping for. Most of them can be, and were, blamed on pulling all-nighters at the university library or on exam-cram sessions at all night cafes and diners with Jeyne, and a few were after being kicked out of Joffrey’s bed in the wee hours of the morning so he could get proper rest and she could get all that beauty sleep he said she needed.

But not this time.

No, Sansa goes from Sandor’s side in the cold dark nighttime air to Benjen’s in the warm glow of his small cluttered office, and she might as well have teleported there, she is so blink-and-you-miss it from point A to point B. All she knows is that she is slightly breathless and strangely light, here where the events that just transpired have fallen away from her, snow pushed off the eaves, dust blown off a painting, all because her mother is on the phone.

“Hey, Sansa,” Benjen says, smiling warm and wistful and crinkle-eyed as he stands up from his ancient wooden swivel office chair, and it creaks and lists to the side slightly as he moves out of her way. “Yeah, Cat, she’s here now, she’s— of course,” he says after a pause, cupping his hand over the mouthpiece of his landline phone, and his head straightens as he regards Sansa.

Her heart drops in her belly.

“She doesn’t want to talk to me, does she,” Sansa says, words a slick-marble mumble as they drop heavy and clumsy from her mouth.

“No, honey, no, that’s not it at all. We’ve been talking for the past hour and you’re mostly all we’ve discussed. Lord, are you two similar. She’s worried you don’t want to talk to her,” he says.

There’s kindness and patience and a little bit of sorrow in the blue of his eyes when he holds out the phone with his hand still cupped over it protectively. Suddenly Sansa knows with all her heart that her uncle will be an excellent father. She smiles, heart pounding, shakes her head so her shorn bangs and short tips brush her cheeks.

“Nothing further from the truth,” she breathes, shaking out her hands like she’s about to play an instrument as she steps towards Benjen and the phone, the desk and the chair, towards her mother and the past and everything that’s happened between then and this very moment.

Her hand trembles when she takes the receiver from him, and they stare at each other, Benjen’s gaze encouraging, Sansa’s eyes wide with fear and nerves and happiness and the unknown, tears already pricking from the loss and the want and the pain and the isolation. He nods and then steps backwards out of the office, into the dark little hall where Meera is standing biting her thumbnail. She stares at them, breathes in shallow pants as he smiles and nods once more before quietly
shutting the door.

Privacy. Fear of rejection. Panic. Desperate, desperate pull. Sansa puts the phone to her ear and closes her eyes.

“H-hello?”

“Sansa?”

It comes out like sponge cake that’s soggy from tears but it’s also a quick rush and ballooned with hope, disbelief maybe, a suspicion that Sansa understands more than her mother might ever know. Weak in the knees, Sansa sinks down into the creaky old chair, rests an elbow on the desk and her forehead in her hand as she nods idiotically, vigorously, uncontrollably.

“Yes,” she says, voice already broken from a sob. “Yes, mommy, it’s me.”

“Are you okay? Tell me you’re okay just so I can hear it in your own voice.” Rapid fire whisper-quick.

“I’m okay,” she murmurs. “I promise I’m okay.”

And in that moment, both mother and daughter burst into tears. Each low keening sob is here and there painted bright on the edges by the occasional brushstroke bloom of disbelieving, Christmas morning kind of laughter. Over and over again and for god knows how long, they repeat “Sansa” and “Mom,” “My baby” and “Mommy,” until it finally seeps and trickles into whispered snippets of conversation that start with all the things they’ve wanted to say for the past fifteen months.

“I’ve missed you so much.”

“I think about you all the time.”

“I’ve been so worried.”

“I thought you guys hated me.”

“We could never hate you, we love you. I love you, all of you, with all my heart.”

“I love you too. Oh god, I miss you so much.”

And then the tears start again, and the sad laughter at how they cannot control their tears and at how painfully stupid it is that it’s all come down to this.

“I’m so sorry, mom, I’m so, so, so sorry.”

“Little duck, don’t be sorry, please. It’s- no, after everything, don’t be sorry. I just want you to be safe.”

Sansa sucks in a warbled breath and holds it in with a misty-eyed smile on her face. It’s been years since her mother called her that, or Ducks, or ruffled her red ‘feathers’ before bed, and to hear it in the same sentence as her absolution is almost more than she can bear. To keep herself from dissolving all over again she clears her throat and smiles to put the sound of it in her voice.

“Tell me where you are, how everything has been, how- how is everyone? Robb and Bran, Arya and Rickon. Oh god, tell me everything, please.”

She wipes her cheeks with her fingers and her nose with her sleeve, picks up the black cradle of
the old fashioned phone and slides out of the chair onto the floor, backs up until she can curl up in the corner of the room with her knees to her chest, and she watches her fingers fidget and futz with the curlicue phone cord as her mother talks.

Robb’s wife had the baby and Rickon’s trying to build a car from scratch like that Johnny Cash song; Arya is dancing her way from ballet to hip hop to Bollywood to graduation while Bran is weighing his options between a master’s degree and, inexplicably, launching a farm-to-table food truck. Sansa laughs and she cries and she closes her eyes, trying to imagine it all.

“—and the house is nice, cute and cozy but still so empty now that it’s just Rickon and me. And- and I miss your father, and you, and you two are all I can think of sometimes. And then there I am today, depressed and missing you and standing in this parking lot with my arms full of groceries when this woman comes and tells me she’s in the FBI and that she can connect me to you, and oh. Oh, Sansa,” her mother says, and Sansa smiles, tears leaking down her cheeks, because she can practically see her mother rub her forehead with her fingers. “I didn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe it, but here you are.”

“Who is this woman?” Sansa asks, sniffling against the back of her sleeve.

“Her name is Arianne Martell. Does that name ring a bell?”

“No,” Sansa says with a frown, and there is the faint murmur of quiet conversation that is too low to pick up over the phone. “How can you be sure to—” but her mother cuts her off.

“She’s telling me to say that she works with a man named Bronn? Does that ring a bell? She told me you stayed with him briefly.”

Sansa closes her eyes and smiles, lets her head thunk back against the wall as she nods, and she misses that laughing guy, though the pang she feels is nothing compared to the one for her friend Margaery. It feels like a thousand years ago already, the day they hugged and parted ways, even though it’s not even been ten days since they left.

“Yeah, I did. He’s a nice guy, mom. He took care of us.”

“Arianne is telling me to tell you that a Margaery misses you. She’s texting Bronn and he told her that— what? Okay, that ‘Margie misses you and hopes your suitcase is working out all right.’”

Sansa laughs, and her heart dings from missing her friend, from having another person crowding up her heart right now, happy and full as it is in this moment, with her mother’s voice curled up soft and sweet in her ear, with the dark shimmer of Sandor’s nearby presence she swears she can feel.

Her mother asks about this Margaery and because she swears it’s a secure line Sansa tells her everything. Everything. Starting with Jeyne, and oh, how they cry together for Jeyne, for the long trail of misery leading away from the Lannisters, moving on to Sandor and the drive by at his barber shop, the attack on them in the middle of the night, the drive up to Winnetka and then the news about where Benjen was and the cross country road trip to her uncle and his pregnant girlfriend.

“Arianne tells me she learned how to make fire when she went down there looking for them.”

Sansa sniffs and smiles.

“So did I.”
“Did you! I’m proud of you, Ducks,” her mother says, all water-laugh and sniffle-smile. Sansa can almost, almost remember the smell of her perfume.

“Did what? San can make fire too?” Sansa can hear a man’s voice in the background, and with a sudden jolt and the snatching of the phone away from her mother, she realizes it’s her littlest brother.

“You can make fire? I wanna make fire, man.”

“Rickon? Oh my god, it’s been forever,” she says, and it’s a back and forth tug of war now between her two brothers as they fight over who gets to tell her what and who gets what details, and she’s telling Rickon about tinder bundles and Bran about driving across the country, at one point telling them both – the phone likely smashed between their ears as they listen together – how much she loves and misses them both, how she’s going to squeeze the stuffing out of both of them when she gets there.

“I’ll tell you who could squeeze the stuffing out of us,” Bran says, having wrested the phone away from their brother. “That dude you’re with. Rickon just found a video of you guys in a restaurant, and holy shit, San. You’re traveling around with a grizzly bear, from what it looks like. Is he really a murderer?”

Sansa winces. She knows from personal experience how quickly things can go viral but she didn’t think it would get posted this soon. Her heart does a strange sort of tilt and cleave at the mention of the restaurant, all dark chocolate red wine lusciousness one moment, and then with the ticking of an unseen clock it turned brittle and blinding, splintered and dry-mouthed, the sickly bile of panic and fear.

But then there’s Sandor.

“He’s very brave.”

“That doesn’t answer my question, San,” he says quietly. “Hey!” he shouts from a distance.

“Sorry about that, Sansa,” her mother says. “You don’t- if you don’t feel comfortable talking about it, I understand. Is he there with you now?”

“Yes, but not in the room with me. He gave me my space for this,” she says, smiling small and happy and sad all at once, because it’s been one strange and wonderful and horrible day, and the tick of that clock has ticked to lovely all over again, here with her mother.

“He did seem a little, well, a little intense in that video, I’ll admit. I’m not saying I clutched any pearls, like Arya always says I’m doing, but it was sort of terrifying. But then, Benjen told me repeatedly how much he seems to care for you.”

_Good old Uncle Benjen_, Sansa thinks with a smile, gazing at the cord wrapped around her pinky finger.

“Mom, Sandor is wonderful. He’s a good man and not just deep down. I don’t know what Arianne told you about the whole situation,” she says, trailing off to coax some sort of clue from her.

“She didn’t tell me much. Only that he knew Bronn from the military and that they’ve always kept in touch. That Bronn owed Sandor from their time overseas and so that’s why he’s been doing so much to help him.

Sansa frowns, opens her eyes and blinks across the messy office, stares sightlessly at countless...
maps and ripped atlas pages thumb-tacked to the walls. He never told her this before, and it’s
another layer to him, another spine on a pine cone, another petal off an artichoke, all prickle with
tenderness hidden deep underneath.

“Sansa, are you there? I didn’t lose you, did I?” Catelyn says, tinny and scared just like that, but it
reminds Sansa of past times and so she only smiles again, putting a pin in the Sandor thing until
later.

“You never did trust cell phones, did you?” she says with a chuckle. “Or heaven forbid another call
beeps through, it’s Y2K all over again.”

“Oh, hush,” her mother says with a huff of laughter, sort of like Sandor does except it’s soft like the
pashminas she loves to wear, gentle the way she used to tuck Sansa into bed.

They sit there, or rather Sansa does, back sore from the wall and butt numb from her crunched up
spot on the floor, and for a while they listen to each other breathe. Sansa pretends her head is on
her mother’s lap, her shoulder, tipped against her own cheek as they watch Housewives or Iron
Chef.

“Hey, mom, what are- are you um, are you wearing your perfume right now? The Boucheron,” she
adds, if only to help her try and conjure up the scent.

“Yes, I am,” Cat says after a moment.

“God, I miss it,” Sansa whispers.

“What about you, hmm? Still insisting that you’re Vivian Leigh and should smell like every flower
in the garden?”

They both laugh.

“No perfume for me lately, not since I left. I don’t even have anything that was originally mine
anymore, save an old bra and the LBD I wore the night I- the night it all- that night.”

The conversation trails off. Sansa imagines her graceful mother, all substance to the flash of Cersei,
all warmth to the glitter, quality versus quantity.

“Did you really cut and dye your hair like the news says? All those feathers, just gone?”

“Yes, Sandor did it,” she says, and she can’t keep from grinning. “You’ll probably hate it. Even
Benjen said it’s more Arya than me, but I love it.”

“If it helped keep you safe, then I’m going to love it too, trust me. I can’t wait to see you.”

“I wish I could see you now. What about you, same hair? Same clothes?”

“Same hair, sure, and then clothes, oh, I don’t know, the same old thing, I guess.”

“I just want to picture you right now. Is it something new or something I know?”

Catelyn describes the long cardigan she’s got over a thinner, gauzier sweater that, after another
handful of descriptive words, both mother and daughter realize she borrowed from Sansa ages ago
and never returned it.

“To think I’ve been in a little duck hug this whole day, and now I have her on the phone,” her
mother says.
They both laugh until, once more, together they cry.

“Jesus,” Shireen murmurs, chin in her hand as she stares at the screen. “Here’s another one.”

“Any new information?” Benjen says, two hands to the back of her chair as he leans over her shoulder and squints at the screen, looking like a man who’s never touched a computer in his life.

It’s strange for Sandor, someone who’s kept his nose down and eyes up ever since his brother put an iron to his face, to see himself in such a glaring, unflattering, countrywide spotlight. His entire life has been twisted and warped and displayed in such grotesque parody of itself that it’s almost unrecognizable. But here it is on Shireen’s beat up, sticker-smothered laptop, on msn.com and a few of the other major browsers as well, though thankfully not on the main pages anymore according to what that FBI woman told Benjen earlier.

It is still a tough pill to swallow. He is painted a homicidal monster and now has his own video embedded side by side with Sansa’s ‘Boom SLAP’ video, though his is less adorably titled as “BODY IN A BAG.” Even though now they’re just a link instead of a full side-by-side photo spread, the video has already earned several thousand hits. All in all, my film debut isn’t half bad, he thinks, and he’d laugh if it weren’t all so fucking horrible right now, if he didn’t cringe at himself every time he relives it behind his closed eyes.

Sandor sighs, rests his elbows on the dining room table and puts his head in his hands.

“We can um, we can talk about this later,” Meera says, and when he peers at her through his knuckles he can see the concerned look in her eyes as she gazes at him. She reaches out and gently pushes the laptop shut.

“No, it’s fine, talk about it all you want. I guess it’s about time we pulled our heads out of the dirt and actually took a look around, huh,” he says, dropping his hands and lifting his head to look up at them, and it dawns on him, what he just said. He’s batting a thousand, tonight. “No offense,” he says quickly.

Benjen chuckles and shakes his head as Shireen and Meera give him broad, unashamed smiles.

“None taken, believe me,” Benjen says as he pushes off of Shireen’s chair and wanders into the kitchen, through the mudroom, and disappears into the den. “I think this entire ordeal sort of proves it’s time we get a computer or something,” he calls out.

“Are you guys going to take off tonight or tomorrow morning? I wish you’d stay, even just a little while longer to get some rest,” Meera says with a frown.

Sandor braces his hands on the edge of the table and gets to his feet and shrugs. He feels about a hundred years old, suddenly so overwhelmingly world-weary.

“I’m still not sure,” he says, looking over his shoulder towards the closed office door across the little living room. “I need to talk to Sansa. Check on her, make sure she’s okay. She’s been in there nearly two hours,” he says.

“Go ahead, take your time,” Meera says. “I’ll put the kettle on either way. You two can tell me if it’ll be late night French press or sleepy time tea,” and she smiles sympathetically as he nods and leaves the room.

He waits a moment outside the closed door, head bowed as he listens for any sound of
conversation, wondering if that counts as eavesdropping. But it’s all silent inside, and after another beat or two Sandor knocks as lightly as he can.

“Sansa?”

No answer.

Sandor’s heart thuds so loud he feel the pulse-pound in his temples.

There’ve been enough Let’s Have A Heart Attack moments in the past few weeks to last him a lifetime, and he’s hoping this isn’t another one of them as he carefully, quietly twists open the door knob and peeks inside. He half expected to see an open window and signs of a struggle, wonders what the hell he’d do, where the hell he’d start, if he had to search this ink black desert for her. But he is in luck, because the windows are closed and she is here, curled up next to the door with the phone in her hand, sound asleep. Sandor sighs with relief and a roll of his eyes.

It’s a cluttered little cave made of adobe walls and wood trim, nature meets repurposed in here, and it’s the first time in two decades that he’s stepped into an office without a computer. It’s books and maps and low-glow lamplight from a lamp with a rawhide shade, a multi-colored rag rug in the center of the room that the wheeled office chair has scrunched up on the edges. It’s tiny and warm and fuzz-light dim in here like a little Sansa cocoon; add to all of that the soothing only a mother could provide, and it’s no wonder she’s asleep.

“Hey, Red,” he murmurs, pushing the door completely open so he has room to squat down next to her, forearms resting on his bent knees as he gazes at her. “Wake up, sweetheart.”

Nothing doing, there. Her head is sagged almost completely to the side, and the only thing keeping it from actually resting on her own shoulder is the phone receiver, a hard black plastic pillow with its cord still tangled in her fingers. Despite himself, despite everything, Sandor smiles. If only he could ease himself down next to her. He feels like he could sleep for a lifetime.

“Come on, time to get up,” he says again, louder this time, because it’s time to get up and it’s time to get the hell out of Dodge, and that’s when he hears the tinny, faraway sound of another person’s voice.

It’s all fresh instinct at this point that makes his head jerk up as he looks at both windows and then behind him, first thought going to intruder, spy, another hitman. But then there’s another tinny sound, a woman’s Hello that makes him look down at the phone. With a frown he gingerly slides the receiver from under Sansa’s cheek and stares at it Cro-Magnon-curious and then he hears the Hello again. Wordlessly and with only the tiniest of slumber-grunts, Sansa rights her head and turns the other way.

“Hello? Hello? Sansa?” the voice says, tiny like a cartoon, faraway like a woman tucked away by WITSEC.

It’s an older instinct that makes Sandor lift the phone to his ear. He clears his throat.

“Hello?”

There’s a long pause like a held breath, puzzled frown, dawning realization.

“Sandor?”

He exhales, gazes at Sansa, the curve of her cheek and the sleep-pout of her mouth, and for a strange and fleeting moment Sandor feels the connection he has to this woman on the phone, this
flesh and bone connection made up of stubborn will and blue eyes, hard lessons and soft skin. It makes him feel like an outsider at the very same time it makes him feel like one of them, these Starks of whom he’s only met one. Standing outside the DNA strand shouting I know her. I know her better than any of you.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Oh, good,” she breathes, all sigh of relief with the edge of a smile to her voice. “I can never trust these cell phones. I was worried I’d lose the connection. She asked me to, well, she asked me to read to her and I think she fell asleep. I’ve been trying to wake her up but she—”

“She can sleep through anything,” he finishes for her, smiling, unable to help himself as he watches her sleep. His truck, his bed, his arms. He’s known this about her since night one.

“Yes,” Catelyn Stark murmurs. “Yes, she can, ever since she was a baby. Best baby on the block and the envy of all our friends, she was always so docile,” she says with a little huff-and-puff of laughter, nostalgic and forlorn, and Christ if it doesn’t make him think of his own mother.

“A bit more headstrong and spirited these days though,” he says.

“Good,” she says with conviction, though her voice is still hushed, as if she is standing in this very room with them, looking down over his shoulder at her sleeping daughter.

Sandor smiles.

“Listen, Sandor, I need to hang up unfortunately. It’s getting late and Agent Martell needs her phone back. She has a plane to catch tomorrow, but I want you to know, I gave Sansa her number. Do you see it written down anywhere?”

He glances over at the desk where there are various pads of yellow legal paper and spiral notebooks, but the phone cord is too snared in her fingers, so instead of standing to check he eases back out of his squat until he sits with a grunt on the floor. He scoots back and peers over the edge of the desk, sees a name and number written in fluid floral handwriting on a scrap of paper, beneath an address in Portland, Oregon.

“Yeah, I have it.”

“Good. Keep that. She wants you two to call her once a day. She’d give you your friend Bronn’s number but it’s too dangerous since he’s undercover.”

“No, that’s cool. We’ll call her every day.”

“Good. Listen, when Sansa wakes up, tell her I love her and that we’ll see each other soon. Give her all my love, okay?”

“You’ll see her soon,” he repeats, gazing at the stretched out phone cord that connects them, from the tangle of her fingers to the phone in his hand. Love, huh. That won’t be a problem. “And I’ll give her all your love.”

“All of mine?” Cat asks with a sudden shrewdness. “Or yours?”

Sandor works his jaw a moment as he drops his gaze and stares at the floor. He’s got that uncomfortable hot prickle feeling in his face and down his spine, deep in the very dark of his gut and behind his eyes. Yes, he wants to say, mine too. But instead he says, “I’ll bring her home to you, Mrs. Stark. You have my word.”
She is quiet a moment, but then she hums her acquiescence. “Thank you, Sandor. I can’t express, I
don’t think, how much this means to me. I will be forever in your debt.”

“You don’t owe me anything. I’m not taking anybody’s money for doing something I would do
regardless.”

“I’m still grateful,” she murmurs. “Don’t forget to tell her, Sandor,” woman-cryptic, words loaded
with more meaning than their definitions.

He huffs. “I won’t. Goodnight, Mrs. Stark.”

“Goodnight. See you soon.”

Sandor groans as he gets back to his feet and then forward onto his knees as he carefully places the
phone back in its cradle next to Sansa, and he carefully disentangles her fingers from the cord. Still
she sleeps, and still it makes him smile. Unable to help himself, he lifts a hand and runs a light
touch along her hairline, down her temple to her earlobe where it drops off. Like the switching on
of a light, the caress makes her stir, and she rights her head with a frowning blink before she opens
her eyes and looks up at him.

“Did I fall asleep?”

He exhales a laugh and nods his head. She slips her hands in his when he holds his out, and
together they stand, Sandor pulling only a bit of her weight as she gets to her groggy feet.

“Yeah, baby, you fell asleep. Come on, now, we have a getaway to plan.”

They head back to the dining room together, Sansa rubbing her eyes with one hand while her other
hooks itself in an empty belt loop on the back of his jeans, and when they part to sit back down at
the table, instead of taking her own chair, she simply sits on his lap. In his peripheral vision he can
see Meera smile, can see Shireen duck her head and hide her grin behind her open laptop. From the
back room the faintest strains of Van Morrison’s “Crazy Love” can be heard, and he is too
wonderfully mortified to look anyone in the eye, so instead he looks at Sansa, who sleepy-smiles at
him before she looks over at the others.

“So what are we going to do?” she asks, snaking her arm around Sandor’s shoulders.

Fuck it, he thinks, and he wraps an arm around her hips, shifts her so her seat bones aren’t digging
right into his thigh, and settles in for the long haul. However long that will be.

“That’s up to you,” Meera says. “You can stay another night and leave in the morning, or you can
leave now. We can help you pack whenever.”

“You guys should take that camper. You won’t need a hotel room that way,” Benjen says from the
kitchen, and when he emerges he has three mugs in his hands, and Sandor can smell the
peppermint from here.

“I’d love to,” Sandor says. “But I’m easily recognizable as it is. That silver bullet camper of yours
will only bring us more attention.”

“That’s a damn shame,” Meera says with the upward quirk of her eyebrow. “You should still take
my little housewarming gift when you go, though,” and isn’t that a wicked little grin she spares the
two of them.

“So, um, anyways,” Sansa says hastily, and together they glance at her uncle, who’s blowing on his
tea and gazing at Shireen’s screen with bemused curiosity. Sandor’s going to miss that guy.

“Anyways,” Shireen sweeps in before she sits back in her chair. “I was thinking. I know it’s a little beaten up, but you two need to swap your truck with my Jeep. I’ve been reading as many articles and blurbs on you guys as I can and they haven’t mentioned it, but I’m sure the police in Illinois have put out an APB on your plates. It’ll only be a matter of time ‘til they stop you, especially now that Sandor’s a freaking YouTube sensation.”

“Goddammit,” he mutters. He loves that fucking truck, and the CJ-5 is not exactly roomy. “Just make sure to get a gallon of water first.”

“Already did,” Shireen grins.

“Okay, so where will they sleep? No camper, no hotels, they don’t even have the bed of a truck anymore,” Meera says, frowning up at where Benjen stands between her and Shireen.

He laughs.

“Silly woman. What do you do for a living? They’ll camp. We have tons of maps of every campground in the western U.S., and more supplies than we know what to do with. And I knew those sleeping bags would come in handy,” Benjen says, snapping his fingers with a triumphant smile.

“I have never camped in my life,” Sansa says from his lap, and he has to hand it to her, she sounds only slightly put out by the idea. He gives her hip a squeeze of reassurance, though camping with someone who’s never done it sounds like a shitload of hassle on his part. But hey, what’s new these days?

“Now you’re going to camp like your life depends on it,” Shireen says.

“The only question now is when we should leave,” Sandor says, lifting the hand from her hip to brush her hair behind her ears. “It’s your call.”

She responds instantly and warmly to the touch, tipping her head into it and towards him, her eyes sliding almost, almost closed before they open once more. She looks at Meera, Shireen, and then finally her uncle. When Sandor flicks his gaze to the other man, he sees a small smile on his face sun-weathered, grateful, warm, sad like he’s already missing her. Sandor does not blame him.

Sansa’s lungs fill with a slow, deep belly breath that she lets out when she looks down at Sandor from her perch on his lap.

“I want to go home.”

“You got it, Red,” he murmurs, tilting his face up when she bows her head to kiss him.

“I’ll go get the French press,” Meera says.

The El Train makes good noises as it rattle-shake-snakes its way through the city, and it soothes him like the clock recording he listens to his in earbuds, and it makes him happy, and it makes him think back on everything he has learned over the past several days. It makes him excited, bright like fireworks excited, so excited that he keeps rubbing his palms down the thighs of his jeans as he sits and thinks thinks thinks about what he is going to do tonight. Do, do, do, because he is a task man. A man.
Tick, tock. Tick, tock. Tick, tock. Tick, tock. Tick, tock. It is all going as he intended, and that makes the world tilt just right, and that makes his blood run nice and cool, and that makes his thoughts flow like a stream – nice and neat, nice and neat, nice and neat – and that makes him happy. He has been so excited to finally work more closely with the Lannisters that when Joffrey called him that night and oh, tick, tock, tick, tock, how fast, how fun, how beautiful it all seemed to go when he did the job, and I fucking did that job beautifully. No one will know just how beautiful it was. She was perfect. Tick, tock, tick, tock. He has been so excited. Joffrey knew, and Joffrey called, and he delivered.

But then Petyr called him afterwards, so disappointing, so irritating, tocktocktocktock. For an errand. A simple fucking drop off, and it made his blood boil, and it was tickticktickticktick, all wrong, and there he was, standing outside of a fucking YMCA, freezing cold, holding a duffle bag with a gun in it, handing it over to the dirty cop like a kid drops off, drops off, drops off, drops off I don’t know, I don’t know, I’m not a fucking errand boy, I am a task man, goddammit.

He sucks a breath in through his teeth to steady himself and ignores the fat woman sitting across the aisle from him, because she’s staring, and fuck her for staring, because people who stare aren’t thinking, and all he is doing right now is thinking. Thinking about what he will get to do. Tonight. Lovely lovely tonight.

Tick, tock. Tick, tock. Tick, tock. He listens and it soothes him, he pays attention to the train sway and he thinks.

When the train stops he takes the steps down to street level the way he always does, one and two and one and two, nice and neat, nice and neat. And it’s all going so well, until he walks into his apartment, which is also nice and neat, and dark always because the light is all wrong here, and it’s all wrong NOW because there is the light on overhead. He squeezes his eyes shut, rips out his earbuds and lets them dangle from where his phone is in his jeans pocket. He lifts an arm and points towards his bedroom.

"What did I fucking tell you,” he shouts out, shaking with anger. His words are clipped, each one their own little sentence, nice and neat, nice and neat, nice and—

“You didn’t tell me anything,” says a voice, an instant slather of cough syrup thick over the nice and neat of his apartment. Ooze and spurt and leak, oil spill and oil stain. Nails on a chalkboard to him. No. No, he would prefer the nails and chalkboard. “How could you, when I got here before you did?”

He flinches, squeezes his eyes tight-tight-tighter before turning on his heel towards the voice. He opens his eyes, and of fucking course, it’s Petyr in here, Petyr who fucking knows what this shit does to him.

“Turn off the light, turn it off now, okay, asking nicely, and my father only ever did that once, though he never asked and only told, so what I’m doing right now is above and fucking beyond right now.” He shuts his eyes again and shakes his head, ticktickticktick, my blood too hot, too hot, too hot, where is she, where is she, nobody will ever know how beautiful it all went, I am a MAN.

“All right, all right,” Petyr says. “Just calm down and sit down. Or stand, if you prefer.”

“Did you go into my bedroom or the bathroom, because everything is just as it should be, and if you went in there—”
“No, I did not.” Clipped and cool. Much better to the hot oil.

The couch Petyr is sitting on creaks with movement, and suddenly the bright red flare of his closed eyelids goes blessedly grey-black again, and only then does he open them. He takes a shaky, tremulous breath. Tick, tock. Tick, tock.

“What are you doing in my apartment,” he asks after a handful of increasingly calm breaths. His every word is a levelled piece of art, small slices of cake, vanilla NO, NO, NO, NO, red velvet, red velvet. Warm and slippery, soft and red, the only time a mess is necessary and beautiful.

Petyr sighs as he walks away from the light switch, his fingers drifting down the wall as his touch parts from it.

“It’s been days, Ramsay, and I haven’t heard a peep from you. When I put someone on an intel job, I expect more than silence. Intel, after all, is information.” He gazes around the room, white walls and brown wood floors, nice and neat, and it impresses Ramsay but does not seem to do much for Petyr.

“Because all I had were hunches,” he says, shrugging off his backpack and hanging it on the left hook (left hook, left hook, like a good strong punch). Jacket is next, peeled off like an apple skin, right hook right hook (everyone is guessing that one, better go for the left). “And now I know.”

“So then tell me everything,” Petyr says with a polite smile, sickeningly patient like a school teacher, and Ramsay wants to scream I AM A MAN but he grits his teeth and puts one earbud back in.

Tick, tock, ahhh.

“Ramsay?”

“Yes?” he says, tilting his head the way he’s seen people in hospitality services do. He tries the smile he practices in the mirror for her.

“I asked you, may I sit?”

“Oh. Yes,” he says, and he does not sit, because that is what legs are for, they are for standing.

“Go on, then. These hunches that are now facts. Tell me.”

“Yes. Yes, Petyr, I have found out so much. Bronn is fucking a woman in Winnetka, and he drives two cars and keeps his cell phones in each trunk, and smiles differently in Winnetka than he does here, and fucks that woman a lot. I watched. A lot.” He masturbated a lot as well, but that, oh, oh, that was a mess, not tidy, ticktickticktick, what a shame, such a mess, but it couldn’t be helped. Red velvet is better than vanilla though both have their times, their moments, their places. Tick, tock.

Petyr raises his eyebrows.

“You watched a man fuck a woman? You watched a man fuck a woman and you think that’s some sort of fact I needed to know? Of course he fucks women or men or something. Everyone fucks, Ramsay,” Petyr says, slo o o ow drip slow, there are those nails again, and does this man have a fucking chalkboard in his pocket, because not everyone fucks, that’s stupid, and there is nothing wrong with that everything in its time and place and moment.

He turns up the volume on his earbuds. Nice and neat, nice and neat. Nice. And. Tick, tock.
“No, wait, I should have- I did not tell you who he is fucking.”

Petyr widens his eyes sarcastically and *THAT IS SARCASM, YOUNG MAN, I DID NOT RAISE A MAN TO BE SARCASTIC UNDER MY ROOF* shrugs with dramatic exaggeration.

“And who is she?”

“I wrote down the address. I came back to town. I searched it. The woman is blonde, and very pretty, and her name is Margaery Tyrell. But when Bronn fucks her he screams it loud and he says it more like *Margie,*” Ramsay says, and he’s worried because his cock is starting to harden from the memory, *not here, not now, we have to wait, we have to make it perfect and beautiful.*

“You are fucking with me.” Gone is the oil spill and now the voice is hard and flinty and something with clean sharp edges, and *now* Ramsay feels he can get along with this man.

He shakes his head vigorously, grinning wide because *I fucking told you, dad, I told you it was the truth.*

“That’s not all,” he says, bouncing on his toes, and thank you internet, thank you YouTube, because, “I learned how to break into cars, and so I did, and I checked a phone, the one in the little car, not the SUV, and in the phone were some recent calls, and so I dialed, and do you want to know where it rang-rang-rang? Three times, it rang, which I really liked though one and then two is preferable, but three is a very clean pattern.”


Ramsay grins, all teeth, which are nice and straight after ten willing years of orthodontia.


Petyr inhales sharply and gets to his feet, pulls out his phone, stares at it a moment before pocketing it again. He walks across the living room and stares out the window.

“Fuck. Fuck, fuck. Fuck. She- *Cersei cannot find out about this.*” Teeth clamped together, jaw muscles tight, tight-tight-tight, wound like a motherfucking *clock, yesss.*

“I will make it go away,” Ramsay says, perked up, hopeful, fireworks excited, because he will make it go away *tonight.* He already planned on it.

“You’re goddamn right you will,” Petyr says, turning to face him. “You’re going to kill Bronn, and if that lawyer cunt Margaery is there you are going to kill her too. Do you understand?”

Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock.

“*Yes I do.*” Ramsay says. No smile, shoulders back, spine straight, nice and neat. *NICE AND NEAT, NICE AND NEAT UNTIL THE MESS IS CALLED FOR.* He might come in his pants though he isn’t even hard. It would be worth the mess.

“Good. And this time, instead of standing there jacking off for five days, would you fucking *call me* when it’s done?”

Tickticktickticktick. *Fuck you.*

“Yes I will,” he says with a simple up and down nod. “Tonight.”
“Good. Call me when you’re done. I’ll let myself out.”

After he does and the apartment is clean again with no Petyr or cologne that makes Ramsay open two windows to let in snow chill and clean clean clean, after Ramsay double checks he’s out of the hallway and locks the five deadbolts and four chains, every other, every other, he sprints to his bedroom.

“Knock, knock,” he says, pulling the chain round his neck out from under his shirt, the key warm from his body heat as he uses it to unlock the bathroom door. He steps in and closes the door behind him.

“Hi, hi, hi,” he whispers, tapping the shower curtain with his fingertips like they are raindrops coming down. “It’s me.”

No sound, but then he has said time and time again, no noise, no trying to leave, no talking. It makes him smile, that good behavior.

“I trust you did not tell Petyr you were here, which is very good. So very, very good. But I bet you heard what we were saying. It’s a small apartment but soon we’re going to have a house. A big, big house,” he says, sitting down on the bathroom floor with his legs folded tailor style beneath him. “Don’t you want a big, big house? You can answer me now,” he says, looking up as he grasps the shower curtain and drags it to the side.

Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock,.tick, tock, tick, tock.

She is naked and shivering but she is naked and clean, and that’s The Only Thing he’s asked of her, except for the no talking no noise no leaving. Pretty dark brown hair still wet from when he made her shower earlier, and she smells like unscented soap and water, warm humidity that will leave soon because of the open windows but that’s okay because he will just watch her shower again.

“Don’t you want a big, big house?”

Her eyes are wide and dark, pinned on him like big brown buttons, but still she doesn’t speak, only shiver shiver shiver. Tocktocktocktocktock.

Ramsay clenches his jaw a moment and frowns, and his head jerks to the side though he only meant to tip it, just tip it, a little, not like that, not ticktickticktick.

“You know, I could have just killed you. I killed another girl and put her in your place, all for you. And I did a very beautiful, beautiful job. Should I have killed you instead? Would you like to be dead in the dirty ground instead of here, clean and pretty and with me?”

She shakes her head no, vigorously, and it makes her breasts shake behind her bent knees that she’s hugging to her chest, and there goes his cock again, but waitwaitwait, not here, it’s not perfect yet, not nice and neat.

Yet. Yet. Yet.

“That’s what I thought. So, tell me now, pretty girl, would you like a big, big house?”
“Yes, please,” she whispers.

He claps his hands twice. Tick, tock.

“Good, good, good. Good. Now, I have to kill the man and woman who live there,” he starts, and he waits, irritated-flicker as she lets loose a low moan that sounds an awful lot like crying which is just more noise.

She flicks her eyes up towards the ceiling and he watches her throat bob as she swallows the sob. She nods when she’s mastered herself, just the way he has asked. Oh, she’s so good, good.

“Good. good. Now, I have to kill the man and woman who live there, but when I do, you and I will live there, and I will be Bronn, and you will be Margaery, though when I finally fuck you I will call out your name like Margie. And your hair is wrong, so I got you a wig.” He tilts his head to the side, and gets it right this time. “Do you want to see it? You can answer.”

“Yes, please,” she whispers.

He is so excited, and so even though it’s not perfect and it’s not time but she is clean, he leans forward and cups her cheek with his hand. She’s cold, cold and clean like marble, lovely lovely. It will be even prettier with some red on it.

“I promise you, Jeyne, you’re going to love it there.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

The world he has come to know over the past few hours is comprised of a grey-carpeted hallway and dingy staircase at the end of it, of nondescript apartment doors and walls that, from time to time, seem to close in on themselves. It’s not so far-gone a building that the overhead lighting buzzes and flickers and lends a greenish cast on everything, but it is rented to the poorer demographics of urban Chicago, and therefore no tenant here has so far hassled Jon Snow for lying in what looks like a pool of his own spilled liquor, fast food crumbs and bodily fluids. All in all, Drunk American Bum has so far been his most successful disguise since he started slinking along life’s underbelly incognito. It is also his most boring, ass-numbing, and offensive-to-the-olfactory organs. After all, dressing as a homeless alcoholic requires more than just a pretty outfit. It requires authenticity, and Jon reeks of it.

The slow passage of time has not gone unrewarded, however. Since he followed Petyr Baelish here from his ritzy apartment building in what Google has informed Jon is called the New East Side, a building he dare not infiltrate dressed as a bum, Jon has witnessed several activities of interest, both from behind and in front of the door Jon watches now. He has seen what is clearly the occupant enter after Petyr let himself in, has heard yelling, has heard what sounded an awful lot like Kill him, and has watched Petyr leave. And as interesting, as intriguing as one person demanding murder from another can be, it is still not the most fascinating thing Jon has seen or heard from his heap of ratty old coats and a tattered quilt here in the L-shaped bend of the hallway just caddy-corner from the apartment door he studies.

No, the most interesting thing was when Petyr Baelish came back and studied the doorknob, casting Drunk American Bum a suspicious gaze before determining the latter man was passed out cold. And then he took out a flashlight and looked closer, and then he swore, the softest, smoothest ‘motherfucker’ before snapping a white handkerchief from his coat pocket and wiping the doorknob so clean it sparkled even to Jon’s faux-bleary gaze from beneath a wool hat and matted wig hair. And then he checked his watch and glanced at Drunk American Bum again before clucking his tongue in disgust and turning on his heel. Jon watched him disappear down the stairs at the end of the hall.

Very, very interesting. Interesting enough that Jon decided to wait here and find out why, because cleaning fingerprints off an object typically isn’t done by someone who is on their way to a church bake sale or to donate their time and energy down at the local soup kitchen. Up To No Good is a phrase that comes to mind, and it did then when Jon watched him, and even though nothing has happened out here since then, it is still ominous and singular enough to make him stay parked here in his dirty corner wearing his dirty clothes, holding his dirty half drunk – well, half poured – bottle of Jägermeister.

He is about to surreptitiously check his watch when there is sound, movement, the rattle and twist of a doorknob across the hall from him, and out steps the young man who stepped in two hours ago. Dark hair, wide eyes too alert to be vacant though they’re pale enough, earbuds back in as he draws a backpack over one shoulder and turns to lock the door. Jon holds his breath.
“Shh, shh, shh,” the man whispers as he locks the doorknob and then deadbolt after deadbolt. “I will be back soon, very very soon.” Inexplicably he unlocks every lock before he locks them all over again, this time in descending order. His neck pulses and with a serpentine sort of fluidity he twitches his head to the side. “And then we will dress you up, and we will have a big, big house. Big house and a big party, just us, all nice and neat.”

The moment the man takes a step back from his door, Jon lets his body sag, thinks dark boozy thoughts and wishes he’d taken a more recent swish-and-spit of the nasty tasting digestif to really play it up. But in the end it makes no difference. Occupant of Apt 282 is still talking to himself, beyond distracted as he turns away from Jon and brisk-clip strides down the hall.

“It’ll be a mess but it’ll be worth it, so very very worth it, for her and for me. It’s too bad she’s not blonde, though. I should get some dye when I’m done, and we can play dress up head to toe to head all over again. Blonde will look so good with red on it.”

Even Jon, who has done plenty of these sorts of wait-and-watch stints with perfect passivity of expression, cannot help but frown after the man trots downstairs.

“Putain, c’était bizarre,” he mutters.

Kill him, he heard a voice say, and though it was through a closed door Jon swears it was Baelish’s, and as far as he is aware there were only two people inside that apartment. One to give the order and the other to fill it, and he’s already on his feet about to give chase when there are distant footsteps on the stair.

“Merde.”

Quick as he can, Jon sinks back to his feet, spins open the cap of the bottle, squeezes his eyes shut and gives his face a good slosh of digestif before slumping back down into a position his joints and ass know all too well by now. The sound of footsteps rises from third floor to fourth and with them a voice Jon is very familiar with by now, cat’s purr and devil’s tongue, simper and soothe and betrayal and lie. This guy’s gotta be a politician, he thinks as Petyr Baelish crests the final stair and steps into the hallway.

“I’ve gotten information on their whereabouts ever since the story went viral, and I’m not sure if you’ve heard but apparently last night they were spotted and videoed in Arizona of all places. I think they’re following Route 66 to California, though they took a little detour to Sedona. Yes,” he says, giving Drunk American Bum a disdainful sneer as he pauses outside of 282’s door. “Yes, check YouTube. Honestly we couldn’t have hoped for a better reaction out of Clegane. People are calling every few minutes attesting they’ve seen those two. Yes. Yes, I think they’ve been getting some help, but I’ve put a guy out on that tonight, actually. I’ll do a sweep through after he’s finished and see what I can find. No, don’t worry, I’ll take care of her and Clegane myself, just as soon as I tie up one last loose end. Go on, now, Cersei, I’ve got work to do.”

Baelish hangs up and Jon watches from behind matted hair and a layer of grime as he squats down in front of the doorknob, pulls out a penlight with a gloved hand and shines all around the polished brass surface.

“Damn it, Ramsay,” Petyr sighs with a shake of his head. He stands and pulls out a loose, single key from an interior breast pocket of his coat, and the skilled picklock in Jon makes him want to scoff at having to rely on such a pathetic crutch as an actual housekey.

Jon watches from his cramped, stinking corner as Petyr glances towards the stairwell and opens each lock before unlocking the knob and stepping inside. All in all, a far more efficient system than
the actual occupant’s. He watches and listens as Baelish re-locks them all from inside, and once he’s done Jon whips out his phone.

Jean: Pierre is up to no good, I’m afraid.

+33 1 46 06 02 87: How do you know? I am sure he is still very interested in you.

Jean: He is showing a great deal of interest in another man, unfortunately. Asking him to do things that even I would not do, and I have done plenty.

+33 1 46 06 02 87: Yes? And?

Jean: I am jealous but I do not know what to do. Do I stay and learn more or go after Pierre? Or do I go after the new man in his life?

+33 1 46 06 02 87: Tammy Wynette says it best, stand by your man.

Jean: Not the advice I was looking for.

+33 1 46 06 02 87: It's all the advice I have for right now, Cheri

Jon frowns as he stares at the apartment door, and the longer he stares at it, the more he itches to find out what is behind it, to find out what it is that has Petyr Baelish so damned intrigued.

Petyr can still smell Jägermeister from this side of the door, and he has to wonder what other sort of money Ramsay makes when he’s not off running errands for him and the Lannisters, to be unable to afford rent in a building with a guard. Or at the very least a door code. He flicks on the light, something of the sadist in him getting a little thrill to know how fucking irritated Ramsay would be to see it shining bright and merry from up above.

“All right, Petyr, let’s think like a mad man now,” he murmurs as he stands in the center of the small one bedroom apartment and looks around.

He can see from here that the kitchen is wiped down with almost disturbing care, and though it’s not stainless steel and black granite like his, it’s still almost sparkling from attention. It would be like finding a needle in a haystack.

The living room seems largely untouched; not even a television or remote control, not even a dent from nightly lounging on the sofa. The neatness he can appreciate when he’s sending the kid out on a job but right now, Petyr could use a little carelessness, and then he thinks back on their conversation and he nods with a frown. Sighing and checking his watch for the fifth time since he left the first time, he lightly makes his way into the bedroom.

Second hand everything, chipped wood dresser and two nightstands that look like he plucked them from a street corner and very likely did. Queen size bed that Petyr is beyond certain has never been christened, unless it was with that bottle of hand lotion neatly line up with an old lamp and a pint glass containing an inch or so of water.

Wasting no time he quickly unbuttons his coat and sits on the edge of the bed nearest the nightstand in question, and he turns on the bedside lamp in hopes that he’s found what he needs. Carefully he plucks the glass by its heavy base and lifts it in front of the lamplight, turning it to and fro as he inspects it. And then he smiles.
“Ah,” he murmurs. “Jackpot.”

With one hand he roots around in a hidden, tailor-made interior pocket in his camel hair coat, removes Detective Moore’s fingerprint kit and sets about lifting the sets of Ramsay’s prints from the glass. Dust and tape and lift and press to clean plastic backing before slid safely and gingerly into a manila envelope. It is quick work though not as well-practiced as it used to be, and it is a far more pleasurable task than the next one.

Every man has his kinks and Petyr has more than the average bear, but even digging around for a used condom is so far down his list of likes that it falls right off the paper. But still, needs must, and a few lifted prints aren’t enough for what he’s got in mind. At least in this department, Petyr is lucky and more than a little grateful for Ramsay Bolton’s fastidious nature. Because while the rabid little masturbator may have been busy for the past several days, judging by the contents of his bedside trashcan, at least the pervert had the decency to knot every condom he ejaculated into.

With a disgusted sort of grimace he drops the prophylactic into a Ziploc bag and seals it, and he has put both pieces of evidence into his inner pocket, has buttoned himself back up when he hears the faintest of sounds coming from the bathroom.

Petyr freezes in place, all save for his gaze which flicks immediately to the closed bathroom door. It stares back at him with all the impassive indifference one could expect from a door, though he has never liked the secrets a closed one implies.

“Hello?” he whispers through a smile so it comes out sounding sweet, sugar cube for an untame pony. “Anyone home?”

He turns off the bedside lamp and turns back towards the bathroom door, slides a hand inside his coat and into his trouser pocket where there is a thin plastic produce bag wadded up in the bottom. As thin as it is, it’s too loud to shake free and use, and because of that his heart pounds as he takes a slinking step towards the bathroom. With his other gloved hand he reaches out for the doorknob, and he is about to twist it open when something thuds from outside and a car alarm goes off in the alley outside Ramsay’s bedroom window. It is so loud and jarring and stop-your-heart sudden that Petyr swears and jumps in his skin like a cat on a hot tin roof.

Gritting his teeth in anger over his cowardly reaction, he turns away from the bathroom and strides quickly, light as he can, back towards the front door, wrenching open the deadbolts as he mutters irritably under his breath. Now is not the time to be rattled. Not where there are moles of whom to be dispatched, not when there are lines to be drawn in the sand, reminders to be made so people know their fucking places in this world.

He has half a mind to show that filthy hobo his place by kicking him down the stairs and out into the alley gutter where he belongs, but by the time Petyr has undone all of Ramsay’s ridiculous locks, the hobo is gone.

“Good fucking riddance,” he snaps to no one but himself as he re-locks Ramsay’s apartment.

He checks his phone on the way downstairs, irritable and eager to lay into someone.

Petyr: Have you done your job yet?

Ramsay: On my way.

Petyr: Be sure to give them my condolences.
He lets the irritation with himself mingle with the healthy standard case of Chicagoan road rage, allows them both to fuel him the entire way to Olenna Tyrell’s Golden Coast office, and by the time he has used his plastic bag to strangle her secretary, he is more than prepared to deal with the spiky old bitch herself.

“Alys, who in the hell did you let in?” he can hear after he knocks loudly, obnoxiously, rapid-fire quick on the thick wood French office doors. He can hear the click of her pumps on the floor as she crosses her office to the door. “I told you, I’m not taking any meetings, even if it’s Marga—” she cuts herself off with a gasp when she flings open the door and stares up at him, open mouthed like an old carp wearing a shade of Yves St. Laurent lipstick that’s ten years too young for her.

Petyr smiles.

“You know, I have a message from Margaery, actually,” he says as he shakes open his plastic bag.

“What the hell are you doing here, Baelish?” she snaps, and even though she refuses to take his bait, that doesn’t mean he won’t force feed it to her.

“I’m tying up loose ends,” he says, striking her so hard in the face she crumples like a rag doll to the high gloss wooden floorboards. He straddles her hips like a lover as he sinks to his knees on top of her, and she is so deliciously stunned she doesn’t fight him when he draws the bag over her head and cinches it tight around her throat. “Margaery wanted you to know that she’ll see you soon.”

“No,” she says, gasping in her last breath so hard the bag is sucked into her mouth. There is the struggle at last.

“Yes,” he hisses.

He has to give her credit for struggling so valiantly at her age, with a bloody nose and what’s probably a pretty vicious bump on the back of her head after her fall. But all good things come to an end, and eventually hers comes too, wide eyed and frozen in terror and, hopefully at least to Petyr, at least a little bit of anger.

“Now,” he says a few minutes later, standing over her body with the Ziploc bag in his hand, and he’s only got the faintest wave of nausea over what’s to come. He gazes down at the crisp expensive pantsuit, the silver dye wash of her bouffant pressed down from the plastic bag, and he wrinkles his nose. “Now for the nasty bit.”

“Come on, duchess, take it like a good girl, all right?” He’s trying to be nice, stroking her hair out of her eyes, smiling encouragingly as he looks at her, but Margaery is all watery-eyed defiance, flushed and sweating, shaking her head with her mouth pursed together here where she sits beside him.

Bronn rolls his eyes.

“You’re telling me you’ll let me come in your mouth, but you won’t take a simple dose of Theraflu?”

He got here about thirty minutes ago, dropped off his jacket and holster on the kitchen table, the Thai takeout on the counter of her kitchen and took the stairs by twos to get to her, and he found her where he thought he would, half dressed and in bed waiting for him. But he hoped she’d be burning up for him half an hour later and not with a 102 degree fever. My poor girl, he said with a worried frown after she moaned Bronny I don’t feel so good, because he’s seen this woman suffer
through a business meeting with food poisoning, and if she’s sick enough to be so weak she needs his help walking to the bathroom to go pee, then she’s sick enough to require his immediate attention. Instantly he went to work putting on his Florence Nightingale costume. A quick-read thermometer, a fresh glass of water from the bathroom sink, a few Advil and a quick trip downstairs to heat up the mug of Theraflu she’s currently turning up her nose at.

“Because that tastes horrible,” she croaks out, falling limply to the side to rest her head on his shoulder. She sucks in a snotty, clogged breath through her nose and whimpers. “I don’t want it.”

“Well then I’m going to take that as a compliment,” he chuckles, kissing her clammy forehead before he sighs and eases her back onto her high nest of pillows.

“Ugh,” she says with her eyes closed, too listless and ill to banter back.

Bronn frowns again and pulses his jaw muscles as he gazes at her, watches her eyelids flit and move as he risks a light, careful brush of his fingers down her cheek. Despite how sick she is, the waxy pallor and soft bruise color under her eyes, she is still utterly lovely to him, and somehow all the more precious for her weakened condition. She’s told him time and time again to just sit down, shut up, and listen whenever he tries to fix some problem she’s having, but this isn’t some prick who cut her off or some vapid secretary who deleted all his notes from the last business meeting. She is hurting. He has to fix it.

And then, an idea. “Hey, I got us some takeout and ordered some Tom Yum Kung, you want me to bring you some of that instead? It still clear you out like a whistle, and since you always eat half of mine I’m sure you’ll like that more than Theraflu. Sound good?”

“Mmhmm,” she whimpers, and he smiles.

“Good. Now how about you stay right there while I go get it,” he says, grinning when she groans and opens her eyes only to roll them with exasperation. “I’ll get you feeling better, don’t you worry.”

He eases off her bed and watches her a moment as she groans in misery and rolls onto her side away from him, and once she’s settled he practically runs for the hall.

“Bronny?”

“Yeah, babe?” He puts his hand on the doorframe and leans back in her room, and Margie’s gazing at him, beady-eyed and bleary in the middle of her sick bed, pretty as a picture, sight for sore eyes, cleverest girl he’s ever fucked and ever had a home for here in his heart.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

He jogs down the steps and cuts through the large TV room for the kitchen, snags the entire bag of takeout, napkins, chopsticks and plastic cutlery, turns on his heel to head back the way he came, and walks right into a stranger and his switchblade. Bronn’s eyes widen and he drops the bag as the knife sinks into his torso, once and twice and three times, quick as the flicking of a snake’s tongue.

The smell of Thai food blooms hot and greasy and for a split second it’s appetizing, spicy and floral with cilantro and coconut, but he pushes it out of his mind as he clamps both hands around the man’s wrist and shoves it straight back and away from him. It’s silent when the knife slips out but it should be as loud as a crowd of one hundred thousand people screaming, it is that painful, three hot cuts, open wounds, and his undershirt and sweater are instantly heavy with blood.
“What the fuck,” Bronn snarls, pressing his left hand to the wounds as he immediately backs into the kitchen for a weapon to match, and he keeps his eyes trained on his attacker, the wild pale eyes and the inexplicable earbuds he’s got in. *Is this fucker listening to music right now?*

“Do you remember me, Bronn? The duffle bag and the gun? I hope you remember me, because I definitely remember you. I’ve been watching you, both of you,” he says, sidestepping the mess of takeout that Bronn was hoping he’d slip and fall in. He is bright eyed when he giggles, a sick lilt, bubbles in bile, and the smell of food and blood and sear of pain start making Bronn feel like he’s going to be sick himself, or maybe it’s the fact that this sick prick is talking about him and Margaery.

“You been keeping tabs on us, hmm?” Bronn says, sweating now like he’s the one with the fever, but he’s not been in the FBI for nearly ten years and undercover for over three without learning a thing or two. *Keep this bastard talking,* he thinks, because the target is getting too much pleasure from the cat and mouse, the play and the struggle, to let it end yet, and it ain’t over ‘til it’s over, and it won’t be over until Bronn fucking lets it. The last thing that he’s going to let happen is giving this cunt the chance to get upstairs.

“Oh, yes, I have. Such a happy couple and such a pretty house and soon it will be mine. I just have to clean up all your mess,” he says, lunging forward with a speed Bronn isn’t anticipating – or maybe he simply can’t anticipate, he’s already lost so much blood – and Bronn staggers back against the breakfast table, knocking two chairs aside as the knife sinks into him again, this time nice and high into the meat of his chest. “Now there’s more mess.”

“Fucking bastard,” Bronn spits out.

“I’ll be fucking her soon enough, and I will call her Margie and she will call me Bronn,” he pants breathlessly, and Bronn wants to retch at the high pitched way he imitates the way Margaery cries out for him.

The urge is overwhelming to push away his attacker and block the blade from getting him again, a persuading, wild, strong urge to sink down and roll up into a ball and wish it all away, but that won’t get him to his weapon, and so he’s stabbed two more times before he grabs hold of his holster on the table behind him under the wool of his coat.

“Oh, oh, I almost forgot,” his attacker says as he steps into him, face so close to Bronn’s he can smell mint gum, their shirts sticking together from so much blood, and he drags the tip of the blade down Bronn’s cheek, though the latter man can’t really feel much anymore. “Petyr Baelish offers you his condolences, whatever ‘condolences’ are,” he says, close enough that Bronn can hear the ticking of his watch.

“Fuck your condolences,” Bronn grits out, and he grunts in pain as he swings his arm around in front of him, shoves his still-holstered gun under the man’s clenched jaw as he grabs him by the throat and squeezes the trigger.

He squeezes again and again until his ears ring so loud he can’t hear anything else, again and again until the bullets run out and the back of the guy’s head is all over the floor and breakfast nook wall, and only then does he let the body drop to the kitchen tile with a heavy wet squelch.

It takes a moment for him to catch his breath before he realizes he’s too exhausted to take that deep a breath.

“Margie,” he whispers, letting the gun fall from his hand as he wraps his arms around his middle and hunches over, trying his best to staunch the flow.
He makes it to the stairs before he collapses, and for Christ knows how long he lies there with his face on the carpeted edge of a step, staring at how his blood stains the pale cream of it. Bronn feels bad, that he’ll never get to apologize for that, that he’ll never get to tell her he—

“Bronn? I heard a bunch of- oh my god, Bronn! Bronn, no!”

It’s louder than the stab wounds were, when she starts screaming, although – no, wait, those were quiet, and now it’s sort of quiet here too? Where did she go, she was just there yelling at him to not make a mess, and oh fuck, the food, and fuck, why does my chest hurt? – but then there she is, knees under his face as she bumps down onto the stairs beside him, and she’s chattering away, always yapping on her phone, probably to her grandmother again.


Bonn smiles. Blink.

“Come on, honey, don’t leave me, the ambulance is on its way, baby. Don’t you- goddammit, Bronn, stay with me, stay with me, please don’t die. Oh god, Bronny, don’t be dead.”

Something shakes him, and he grunts. *God, mom, just let me sleep, ten more minutes. Ten more minutes and I’ll get ready for school.*

“Don’t be dead, Bronn.” Ah, it’s Margaery. Jesus, he thought he was dreaming about her for a minute there, but she’s real. All of this. All of this is real.

“I’m not dead, baby,” he says, vision a milky, fade-to-black swim as he looks up at her, blonde halo, tears falling on his face, as warm as all this blood. “But I am in love, and isn’t that just as bad?”

*God, I love you*, he says, and he feels so warm and bright for the truth of those words and to know that she *knows* now, so safe and comfortable here in her arms. He blinks. Wait, he did say it out loud, didn’t he? *I said it, I’m sure I said it.*

Blink.

And then his eyes stay closed, and then he feels nothing.
Sleet is a hazy spit from the sky that can best be described as vague, but while it’s nasty enough to keep the sidewalks relatively clear, it’s not enough to keep Jon from his daily run, though the bitter winds are enough to keep his path as far from the lake as possible. It takes him almost a full mile before he’s sufficiently warmed up to stop thinking about the bite and sting of cold sleet on his face, after which his mind goes on a blessed meander through random thoughts. The world reduces to the wet grey sky that is reflected on the wet grey sidewalk, the black trunks of dormant trees, the blur of people he passes, the steady rhythm of his breathing and the electronic pulse and breathless lyrics of the music he’s listening to. It’s why he almost stumbles when his music pauses itself and a call rings through, it is so jarring.

Jon presses the center of his earbuds’ volume control to accept the call, fully expecting it to be his aunt since she is the only one who has this number.

“Bonjour, Dany, ou devrais-je dire bonsoir? Quelle heure est-ce là? 6 heures du soir?” A miserable looking woman in a parka perks up at the ribbon curls of French, giving him an interested sort of look from inside the wrap of her scarf, and even half-numb, serious, solemn Jon cannot help but smile at that.

“Jon.”

Another jarring sensation as he hears not his aunt’s French cadence but a man’s low-rolling American, rich with amusement even in just one word, and Jon’s smile fades. He slows to a walk and then finally comes to a standstill, hands on his hips as he catches his breath and watches it cloud out in front of him in thick white puffs that dissipate almost immediately.

“Tyrion?”

“Yes.”

“What the- wait, is Daenerys all right?” Tyrion has never once called him, and he’s only met the little man a handful of times before he flew out to America.

“What? Oh, goodness, yes, she’s fine. I mean, she’s pissed at me, but what else is new?” he says with a self-deprecating chuckle. “Listen, I need to be quick because your aunt and I got into it over whether or not to tell you this.”

“Tell me what?” Jon moves from the middle of the sidewalk to stand next to a storefront window, sticks his gloved hands in the pockets of his Nike running jacket.
“I just got word from Margaery Tyrell, my lawyer,” Tyrion sighs, and the wry amusement fades from his voice. “Apparently the Lannisters put a hit out on her grandmother night before last, and unfortunately they succeeded. They put a hit out on Margaery and the FBI agent working the case as well, but luckily that attempt was not successful.”

“Dieu,” Jon murmurs, rubbing the back of his neck inside the hood he’s got pulled up over his head.

“Yeah, it was a busy night,” Tyrion says with another world-weary sigh that betrays his emotion. “Thank Christ those two were together; if Bronn hadn’t been there, I don’t—well, I don’t think there’d still be a Margaery around to be calling me.”

“I’m sorry to hear all this, but what’s it got to do with me?”

“Because you’re over there in the thick of it. Look, there’s no proof that it was Lannisters who got Olenna, not yet, but prints were lifted from her office that pin it on some whack-job by the name of Ramsay Bolton, who incidentally was the man Bronn killed at Margaery’s house.”

Jon sucks in a breath and lets it hang in his lungs until they ache. Ramsay. The name Petyr said in the hallway before letting himself into that man’s apartment.

“I think I followed Baelish there the other night. Putain, Tyrion, it was night before last,” Jon says with a dizzying sort of realization. Kill him, he said. “Fuck,” Jon says in vehement English, and he paces down the sidewalk a few feet, pounds the brick wall with the side of his fist. “Fuck, I was right there. I was right there, and I tried following that little weirdo but waited too long to catch up to him.”

The realization that he could have prevented a murder comes with a sickening, overwhelming feeling of self-disgusted remorse. You’re a fucking idiot, he thinks, wishing he hadn’t sat there hemming and hawing over the phone with his aunt. If only he’d gotten up and followed him.

“Now this is where your aunt and I disagree. She wants you to come home. I want you to try and find something, anything linking Ramsay Bolton to my family. Petyr is too dangerous to follow anymore but there might be something with this Ramsay kid. He was reckless and foolish at the Tyrell house; Margaery tells me he told Bronn that Petyr Baelish sent his love or whatever, but any judge or jury would call that conjecture or possibly even false information if Bronn were to testify. We need something concrete. It’s time to stop gathering intel and finally put an end to this,” Tyrion says with something of a snarl to his voice.

“I know where he lives,” Jon says quickly. “I sat outside his door for hours that night, I can get in,” he says, taking quick mental inventory of the locks he say. Child’s play.

“Will you help me, then?”

“Absolutely,” he says. “I get why Dany’s nervous but you’re right,” Jon says, immediately turning around to stride down the sidewalk in the direction from whence he came, and once the crosswalk sign changes from red to white he breaks back out into a run as he heads back to his hotel. “The time for bullshit is over. I’m ready to take these fuckers down.”

“Good,” Tyrion says. “Now I’ve got to go try and cook dinner to make a French woman happy, and that’ll be hard enough without her finding me on the phone with you.”

An hour later he’s back in that dingy deserted apartment hallway with his Danslesbls bag of tools pinched between his knees, the handle of one tool in his mouth as he uses two others to open the
final deadbolt. The door cracks with a dry, soft creak and then yawns open on silent hinges, and once he’s got his tools put away and his tool bag shoved in the front pocket of his running jacket, Jon gives one last glance to the hallway and then steps inside.

It’s tomb-like, would feel that way even if Jon didn’t know the occupant was dead, it is that still and Spartan. Going by the brief sighting of Ramsay on his doorstep Jon figured this place would be a disturbing display of mental and psychological chaos, but it’s so pin-neat he reckon’s a person could eat off the floor if they wanted to. It’s bare bones and clean lines, 90 degree angles and utterly devoid of personality. Even Jon, who is admittedly reserved when it comes to these things, has a few magnets on his refrigerator and a big black and white photo of his dog Fantôme on the wall in his little flat in Montmartre.

He takes a few cursory circuits around the front room and into the kitchen, looks through drawers for mail or notebooks, scraps of paper or flash drives, but comes up empty-handed. Swearing quietly under his breath he tries the bedroom instead but if he is expecting some splash of personality in the rear room he is mistaken; it’s as nondescript as the living room. He does see a closed laptop on a small weather-beaten desk shoved in the darkened corner of the bedroom next to the dresser, and Jon figures he’ll poke around in there after completing his sweep through the place. He pats his jacket pockets to make sure his own flash drive is still there, makes his way to what he assumes is a walk-in closet when the locked doorknob stops him in his tracks. Jon frowns, but then Jon smiles.

Locked doors always hold a bit of promise in these situations, and it takes him longer to get out his toolkit than it does to unlock the door, and he’s got a quickened pulse and a pep to his step when he pushes open the door and steps into—

A bathroom. Frowning in disbelief Jon gazes around at the thick opaque shower curtain and the toilet and sink, the tiny pebble-glass window above the toilet with bars on the outside even though they’re four flights up. A simple stupid fucking bathroom with a lock on it. Jon gives a sigh of irritation, sweeps his hand over his tied back hair as he shakes his head and turns to leave, hoping that there is something on that goddamn computer, but then there is a small cough from behind the shower curtain that nearly makes him jump out of his skin.

“I’m sorry,” a woman whispers, ghostly and faint, see-through like rain-soaked silk. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to, please don’t hurt me.”

“Mais putain, c’est quoi ce bordel?” Jon mutters, and if his heart was racing before right now it’s sprinting. His hand shakes when he lifts it and takes hold of the edge of the shower curtain. “Who’s there?”

“What? What do- I don’t under- oh, oh, no, no, I’m sorry, I um, I’m m-m-Margaery, right? And you’re Bronn?”

Jon frowns, an eerie, sickly sour feeling sliding down his spine, and he’d think someone was playing a joke on him if the stakes weren’t so deadly and serious, and so he grits his teeth, jaw muscles a tight clench as he braces himself and drags open the curtain. The sight he sees is enough to make him wrench the curtain shut again, and he covers his closed eyes with a hand.

“Putain,” he swears, feeling so sick he actually considers lifting the toilet lid to vomit.

Because there’s a gaunt naked woman curled up in the tub like a baby in its cold, porcelain womb, shaking from fear or the cold or both, knees drawn up to her chest, eyes downcast, brown hair hanging in her face like she’s trying to block out the world, or block her own existence from it.
“I’m sorry,” she whispers inexplicably, confusing him here where he thinks he should be the one apologizing for seeing her without her clothes, but then he remembers where he is.

He remembers whose apartment this is, remembers what that man did, what that man said in the hallway as he hurried towards the stairs.

Swallowing the surge of nausea that roils up his windpipe, Jon carefully, slowly opens the curtain again, trains his eyes on her face with firm determination. She is lily pale, skin nearly as translucent as that selfsame flower, and still she refuses to look at him. It sweeps him over utterly, the worry and concern and dread over what she has been through. He takes the toolkit from his pocket and sets it on the sink, unzips his running jacket and shrugs out of it before he sinks down into a squat.

“Hey, don’t be sorry. It’s going to be okay, I’ve got you now,” he murmurs, shaking out his jacket and settling it lightly over her, and he does his best not to touch her for fear of what a man’s touch might trigger.

She hisses with shock at the contact of his body-warmed jacket, jumps and jerks and lifts her head, eyes blinking furiously into focus as she looks up at him. A startled gasp shudders out of her open and trembling mouth.

“Who are you,” she says with a high gasp, sitting up higher in the tub, fingers clutching like birds’ feet at the edges of his jacket as she shakes violently underneath it.

“My name is Jon,” he says, hands held up like he’s approaching a wild animal, elbows resting on his knees as he regards her, trying to put all the soft he can muster into his voice, and he thinks of all he knows, of what he can tell her now that would give her the most comfort. “I’m- I’m a friend of Margaery Tyrell’s,” he says.

“He went to go kill them,” she whispers. “He went to go kill them and when he gets back he’s going to t-take me there, and he’s going to- he’s going to- oh, god,” she moans.

“No,” Jon says quickly, shaking his head, “no, he’s dead. Bronn killed him before he could hurt them, and he’s dead. He’s not coming back. He can’t hurt you anymore, he’s gone. Gone forever,” he says, and he is flooded with relief when he sees the way her expression changes. “And I’m going to get you out of here, all right?”

She stares at him in silence for several beats until the shivering turns into great shoulder-racking shudders, and her mouth opens into a wide square of anguished relief, a silent sob of trapped breath and tears that well up and spill over. They stare at one another, stuck in this bizarre, twisted, life-changing moment together, and when Jon holds out his hand to help her up she takes it, her hand as cold as the porcelain she’s imprisoned in, and when he stands and gingerly pulls her up she bursts into a dry, cracked, keening sob and collapses against his chest.

“You’re okay, everything is going to be okay now,” he says quietly, over and over again, mind reeling and thoughts racing at this new disturbing development.

But empathy makes him wince and close his eyes when she grabs his shirt in her fists and clings to him, his jacket a half-forgotten sag between them until he pulls it free and drapes it over her shoulders, and only then does he lightly, ever so lightly, press a hand between her shoulder blades. She is skin and bone, and suddenly he realizes that if Ramsay has been dead for nearly two days that she hasn’t eaten in as long. When the sobs fade to ragged breaths he clears his throat.

“Will you tell me your name? Your real one,” he corrects, thinking of her bizarre declaration from
earlier.

“Jeyne,” she whispers. “My name is Jeyne.”

The Jeep CJ-5 is cramped with its claustrophobic soft-top zipped up around him like he’s trapped in a big suitcase, and the fact that his body is sore from two nights of sleeping on hard uneven ground adds to that feeling of stoved-up misery. They’ve managed to make it all the way up to Oregon in just two days though they put in over twelve hours of driving each day, and they are tired, cranky, a little on the filthy side after light drizzle turned the last camping spot into one big mucky mud puddle.

They have bitched at and bickered with each other in heated spurts that reminded him of the first few hours they met, and that had made him smile, and when that made her angrier he told her the reason, and then she’d laughed. But not much is funny right now, not when they sit with the engine idling in a campground parking lot outside Eugene, Oregon, because it is raining so hard they can hardly read the Daily Rates sign tacked above a lockbox secured to a wooden post.

“Look, I don’t care if it makes me a bigger princess than I was before,” Sansa says, and her tone is half dry-amusement and half still-miffed as they stare out at the downpour, “but there is no way I can camp in that.”

“If that makes you a princess then I guess I am too,” Sandor says with a groan as he pushes his sore back against the car seat, anything to try and wring out a few more inches of stretching room in this little Jeep.

“What are we going to do?”

He shakes his head.

“I don’t know, Red. We could keep pushing on to Portland, I guess. Stay with your mom.”

“No, I don’t- I need to prepare myself more for that. It would be almost midnight when we got there,” she says, gazing at her nails that have too much dirt under them to chew on, and the deprivation of one of her favorite fidgets makes her sigh.

“First she wants to haul ass and then once we’re here she wants to slow down,” he says, lifting a hand to run his fingers through the dry dust in her hair.

He kind of likes her all scuzzy and gritty, though he’s had the crisp and clean of her and loved every minute of it, soft scent and tea-cake sweet. But then there’s the Sansa who’s made fire with her bare and blistered hands, the Sansa who snapped at him to shove it up his butt if he didn’t think she could change the flat tire they got outside Winnemucca. Which she did with father-taught confidence as he stood there, arms crossed over his chest as he fell a little more in love with her.

“I know, it’s stupid. It’s just been so long, and I’m scared. I’m tired and dirty and I just want to make sure it’s as perfect as it can be, when I see them, you know?”

“I know,” he says. “But if we don’t go to Portland tonight then I’m afraid we’re stuck where we are, and I sure as hell can’t sleep in this fucking Jeep.”

“Well what if we just got a motel room for the night? Just one night, Sandor, honest, and we can find the seediest, grossest motel there is, nothing fancy or high-traffic. Someplace quiet and backwoods,” she says, getting herself excited as she thinks it through. “Just a warm bed and a
shower. We could shower together again,” she says with a grin. “We have lots of fun in showers.”

Sandor laughs. He knows it’s risky but at the same time they’re both on the worse side of miserable, and there is no part of him that wants to set up a tent in this deluge, especially since Sansa’s more than a little hopeless when it comes to helping him.

“All right, fine. But it’s got to be real backwoods, all right? Not quite Bates but just as questionable, got it?”

“Got it,” she grins.

They stop at a grocery store first so Sansa, the least conspicuous of them, can grab them something halfway decent to eat, and Sandor is so nervous to see her go it alone he nearly gets out of the car to pace in the rainy parking lot. But then she’s jogging back to him with two plastic bags in her hands, the rivulets of rain streaking clean through the dirt on her face when she gets back into the car, breathless and chilled and as excited as a kid on Christmas morning.

It takes only a few seconds and one deep sniff for Sandor to understand why.

“Is that- did you get a roast chicken or something?” His stomach roars to life at the savory warm aroma.

“I got one of those take away rotisserie chickens, some nice cheese and bread, and some grapes, and then,” she says, setting the bags carefully at her feet as he puts the Jeep into gear and rumbles back down the road towards the motel that’s so old it still has a sight out front that reads MOTOR LODGE, $5/NIGHT. Sansa flips her wet hair out of her face and turns in her seat to look and grin at him. “I got us a cheesecake!”

He’s not really a sweets guy but even Sandor can’t help but laugh at the look on her face, like she’s just won the lottery instead of picked up a clearance item cheesecake from a sleepy supermarket on a rainy weeknight.

Once more he waits in the car while Sansa half-hides under his wool cap as she gets them a motel room, and once more he’s nervous and uneasy until she emerges triumphant all over again, flashing him a streetlamp-lit grin as she jingles the key in her hand. It only takes one trip to get their bags and dinner inside, and once he shuts and locks the door behind them it feels like he’s finally got room to breathe. From tiny Jeep to miniscule pup tent and back again has been his life experience over the past 48 hours, and to be able to stand and stretch his arms out, to cross a room and fling himself on a king sized bed is almost more luxury than he can process.

But then there’s the hot shower he takes after she does, the comfort of clean(ish) clothes and the deeply satisfying way a mostly-hot meal fills him up, the light and happy flit of her gaze as she smiles at him between licking grease off her fingers and tearing off another hunk of baguette, the way that somehow over the course of nearly a month this sort of thing has become the definition for Normal. The two of them confined to one another, be it in his apartment or his truck, a dressing room or a camper, strange and private spaces where you’d think they’d wither but instead they thrive.

“Okay, now it’s time for dessert,” Sansa says with borderline sexual relish that makes him snort a laugh.

She’s near-reverent when she pops open the clear clamshell pastry container, and she uses a plastic knife to saw out two slices of cheesecake that they have no plates for. Sansa frowns a minute before he takes another napkin, unfolds it and spreads it out like a tiny tablecloth.
“Thanks,” she says, setting the pieces side by side in the center of the table, but when Sandor picks up a plastic fork she gasps and shakes her head. “No way, buster,” she says, pinning the edge of the napkin with her fingertips as she pulls the slices away from him. “This kind of treat takes ritual.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he sighs.

“Oh, come on! Trust me, Sandor, okay? There’s eating cheesecake and then there’s tasting cheesecake. It’s a total waste of calories if you mess it up. See, look at how yummy that looks,” she says, carefully, slowly, pushing the side of her own fork down into the slice until there’s a good-sized hunk of it balanced on the tines.

“Mmhmm,” he humors her.

“So what you have to do,” she says as she lifts it up and holds it out for him, and he raises his eyebrows as he shoots her a look of exaggerated exasperation over the extended bite of cheesecake, “is put it in your mouth.”

“That’s what he said.”

It’s her turn for exasperation, though she huffs out a laugh and rolls her eyes instead of snap at him.

“Put it in your damn mouth and hold it on your tongue, then slowly mush it up against the roof of your mouth and let it just kind of melt away,” she says, lifting the fork another inch as she raises her eyebrows and nods towards it. “Go on, do it.”

He huffs and grunts and shakes his head but in the end he obeys and leans forward, glaring at her with narrowed eyes as he opens his mouth and takes the bite. She watches him with unconcealed delight, chin in her free hand as he follows her instructions, and there is something to this little technique of hers. The lingering presence of the dessert makes his mouth salivate all the more for it, and he can’t help but shrug in concession.

“It’s good isn’t it?” she breathes, and he chuckles as he nods. She laughs. “I told you that’s the way to do it,” she says, folding a leg beneath her as she leans forward to cut off another bite.

“Ah, ah,” he says, covering her hand with his to still it, and he gently presses it to the table before he slides the fork out of her grasp. “One good turn deserves another,” and he rests an elbow on the edge of the table to cancel out its wobbles as he sinks the fork into the uneaten slice of cake.

He can’t help but watch her right back as she gazes at him and waits for her dessert, as he lifts the fork and holds it out for her. Her eyes slide shut in rapture as she closes her mouth around the bite, and he hums as he slowly drags the fork from the purse of her lips. She hums right back as her jaws work once, and he has the empirical knowledge now to know what’s going on inside her mouth, the slow press of sugar and sweet, the spine-tingle slide of confection and saliva, the melt and mingle and the swallow. And she’s sitting there half hunched over, eyes closed with a smile on her face, so utterly lost in this little moment, so lovely and alive that he just can’t help himself. Not anymore.

“You asked me once how a man looks at a woman,” he says, looking down at the slices of cake as he snags another bite on his fork. “How a man looks at a woman he’s in love with, because no man has loved you before and you’ve never known what it looks like.”

When he lifts his gaze again her eyes are open, wide and blue and dark, and she swallows again, deer in headlights, and he hopes to high hell that she’s not going to tell him to shut up and stop
before he even starts. Her mouth opens like she’s going to speak but no words come out, only a small sigh he can barely hear. He imagines it tastes like cake.

“Do you remember?”

Sansa nods, and he rests his other elbow on the table as he holds out another forkful for her that they both promptly ignore.

“Look at me, Red,” he murmurs, pausing a moment when she sucks in an eye-widened gasp. “Really look at me and you’ll know,” he says.

Because there’s this lovely thick feeling of snaring and being snared whenever they gaze at each other, this hot feeling of belonging somewhere outside of his own skin, and that’s something he’s never felt before. Because there is the pound of his heart and the squeezing of his fists, and he feels her in both of those things, in the loving and the fighting, and the mere wicked thought of losing her is enough to drive him mad. And he has to make sure she knows that even though he’s never wanted to bare himself to anyone ever since his mother died, and the sad lonely thought of her not knowing is enough to drive him to desolation. And he’d not be alone, anymore, if he can help it.

The leg she’s got tucked beneath her unfolds and her foot drops to the floor, and then she’s standing up and walking around the table, and he drops the fork to the napkin when she crawls onto his lap, an open-leg straddle over his hips as she sinks down in place. Sandor leans back in his chair, tilts his head back to gaze up at her as she cups his face in her hands, her eyes a flit and dance across his face as she looks at him with a strange and pensive mystification.

“I dreamed about you,” she whispers after a few moments, and she presses herself that much closer to him when he lifts his hands and slides them up her legs, her pajama shorts bunching until he gets to her hips and squeezes.

“Did you,” he says, watching her mouth, her eyes, smelling the soap and the meal and the sugar off her, lovely human Sansa scents that means she’s real, tangible, breath and heartbeat and flesh and blood.

“I did, a couple of weeks ago. I thought it was a sex dream,” she says, exhaling out a breathless little smile and laugh to match when he flicks his eyebrows up suggestively. “But it wasn’t about sex, it was about love. You asked me in the dream if I was ready and I said yes.”

One hand lifts from his beard so she can push her fingers in his hair at the top of his head, her nails a drag against his scalp as she draws the hair from his eyes and off his scars. Sandor mirrors the action somewhat, moving one hand from her hip to run his thumb across her lower lip, down to her jaw and her throat.

“And are you ready now?” he asks, feeling half-blind here since he was only in the dream on account of her imagination, but he knows what he’s asking her for now and he knows what it will mean when she replies.

Sansa smiles and nods.

“Yes,” she whispers.

She leans down to kiss him, her hands leaving him so she can wind her arms around his neck, and he sits up with a deep inhale through his nose when their mouths open together, wraps his arms around her waist and cinches her in closer in a hot hard heavy press of bodies. Her legs come up when he hauls himself to his feet, and he’s all wrapped up in Sansa as he walks them to the bed. He
puts first one knee and then the other to the mattress, lets go of her body to drop down to his hands and knees as he crawls them up to the pillows, but still she clings to him, a warm little berry gripping the vine, and he grins as he kisses her because it’s wonderful to be fucked but it’s bliss to be loved.

And this is love, now.

It’s also insistent and impatient and hungry and not just from him but from Sansa. She’s all hot mouth and heavy panting breaths in his ear that make him shudder as much as they make him hard, and if she’s not sliding her bare legs against his she’s hitching them up around his hips, always capturing and never letting him go, and he thinks there’s no finer way to die than at her mercy.

Not that she shows him much.

Each time he moves away from her to push down the bedspread or kick off his pajamas she comes all the closer, refuses to let him leave her for even the briefest of moments, and soon they are naked and pressed together, Sansa the demanding force even though she’s caught between his bulk and the mattress. He tries rolling off of her to get a condom but her hands are already sliding down between their chests and bellies, are already a relentless firm squeeze around the hard base of him as she pushes his erect penis down towards the slick of her he’s already felt with his fingers.

“Sansa, what are doing,” he hisses, drawing back his hips just as she rocks hers up. “I need to go to the bathroom, the condoms are in there.”

“I don’t care,” she pants against his mouth, one hand leaving his cock to grasp him by the back of his neck. “I don’t care,” she says again after she kisses him. “I want to feel you, please. Just you right now, Sandor, please,” she begs pleads orders and commands.

Words abandon him when he finally relents and she has her way, when he has the heat and the wet and the high rolling moan that leaves her when he pushes into her. Certain parts of her go limp while others tense, her back an arch and legs a vise, her head thrown back and throat long when she opens her mouth and breathes out his name. It’s one of the few times he’s had sex without a condom and the sensation is overwhelming, all consuming like a mouth around a piece of cheesecake, and before too much longer he’s afraid it’s almost over, and he grunts out for her to touch herself to get her there before he loses mastery over himself, but then she runs her nails down his back and—

“Look at me,” she pants out.

Sansa locks her legs around him and squeezing her thighs the same time her the muscles of her cunt clamp around him. He groans in delicious misery. Sansa grips him by the hair and tugs his head off her shoulder, and he stares dumbly down at her as inevitability builds up inside him.

“I love you,” she says as her body undulates and tears him apart, a ship in a storm, a foolish lonely man finally, finally devoured by love.

“I love you, too,” he says as he strokes back and pushes inside her slow as he can, but the confession is the final straw, the tear in the tether reining him in.

The last thing he sees is her sweat-bright breathless smile before his eyes roll back in his head and his hips snap back far enough that he pulls out of her completely just as he comes on the bed and her stomach, and her words an echo inside his head as he drops down on top of her.

Hours later and he’s dead asleep, lost maybe in some good love dreams himself when the repeated
stroke of her fingernails down through the hair on his chest rouses him, their repetition too measured to be a stretch in slumber, and he groans, grunts as he opens his eyes and finds the light in here the soft gray of predawn.

“What’re you doin’ awake,” he mumbles, voice thick with sleep as he smacks his lips and closes his eyes again.

“I’m just thinking,” she whispers from where her head is tucked up in the space between his chest and shoulder. “I’m lying here with you and I’m so lucky,” she whispers, and he frowns because the ordeal she’s been through, they’ve both been through is on the opposite end of the spectrum from lucky.

“Because you found cheesecake?” he rumbles, half smile grumpy, determined to get at least a few more hours’ sleep before folding himself up in that goddamned Jeep.

“No, because of you. Everything bad that could have happened hasn’t, because of you. Everything you’ve done since we met, it’s been to help me or keep me safe. And now you love me and I just- I keep thinking of Jeyne. She should have had someone like you, someone looking out for her. We used to say it was each other but in the end it wasn’t, in the end it was my fault and there was nobody there to—”

“Sansa, stop it,” he murmurs, lifting a hand to touch her hair, her shoulder, to wrap his arm around her and pull her closer. “You have to stop beating yourself up.”

“I just hope that wherever she is now, in heaven or whatever, that she’s okay. That she’s safe and happy somehow.”

“I’m sure she is,” Sandor says, rough voice graveled and low as he whispers back to her. “I’m sure she’s fine, wherever she is.”

Jeyne sits on the bed with her back to the headboard and her legs under the covers, wrapped up in a hotel bathrobe with an embroidered W on the pocket, staring at her unpainted nails, wondering if she will ever wear her own clothes again. The sweat pants and shirt they found for her in his apartment were immediately discarded when she got here, she was that loathe to be rid of him. Jon left the hotel room with them and came back empty-handed, and she can only assume he threw them out. She wishes he’d burned them instead.

It is still all so surreal to her, how she went from her apartment doorway with a man shooting the pizza delivery girl right in front of her, to a terrifying prison sentence in a sadist’s bathroom, to sitting in the lap of luxury at the Westin Michigan Avenue. All she had wanted was pizza, that Friday night. Pizza, Netflix and a bath. Instead she wound up half-starved on canned supplement shakes curled up naked in a tub. Jeyne wonders if she will ever be able to bathe again. God knows she’s been scrubbed and scoured and lotioned enough to last her the rest of her days, though considering that’s as far as he ever took the touching, she supposes she should feel lucky. She suppresses a shudder and looks up.

Jon paces the room on the phone, his hand a constant drag through his unbound hair as he speaks French so rapid-fire quick that Jeyne cannot put her college classes to much use. She picks up snippets here and there, knows he’s talking to his aunt Dany, knows he speaks of her when he mentions a bathroom and the name of her captor, the name she never wants to think of, ever again. She drops her gaze when he glances at her, worried he thinks she’s eavesdropping, but when she hazards another look his way he covers his phone and pulls it away from his mouth.
“Sorry,” he whispers, pointing to his phone with a roll of his eyes before he turns and paces towards the hotel door, letting loose another volley of French. Jeyne almost smiles. But finally his words switch to English and his body language changes as he turns around again and drops himself into the chair at the cherry wood desk next to the flat screen television.

“Tyrion, hello,” he says, resting his head in his hand. “No, I know, she’s being impossible right now. Not you,” he murmurs as he looks at Jenye over his shoulder. “My aunt.”

Jeyne nods, shifts her attention to the room service tray on the bed beside her as she lifts the half eaten burger and takes another bite. She has been surviving the past few weeks on Ensure and water from the bathroom sink; it feels good to sink her teeth into something, to chew something tangible and real and cooked. She never wants to eat anything cold again. She wants dry warmth and hot food, the comforting scald of a sauna, the dry burn of some desert sun, no more cold hard surfaces, only soft plush heat. She wants to never feel scared again, and despite not knowing him she finds she can trust Jon to help her with that. His conversation is further proof, as is the fact that he makes no attempt to keep it from her.

“Well if she won’t come here then I’m going to need someone’s help. I can’t- she needs a woman here with her, after everything she’s been through. She needs new clothes and probably someone to talk to. Well, yeah, I’ve bought women’s things before but not- not that kind of- her- no, I asked, she doesn’t have any family left,” he says with a sigh, scooting the chair back and to the side so he is partly facing her, and they gaze at one another as he speaks to this man named Tyrion.

My father would have killed himself with worry if he were still alive, she thinks, picking up a fry and dunking it in the little glass bowl of ketchup before she pops it in her mouth. Flavor floods her mouth and she sucks the ketchup and salt from the fry before chewing and swallowing. She never thought there’d be a time in her life when her father’s early death might be a godsend, but she’s living through it now. Jeyne sweeps a hand over the counterpane, searching for crumbs that aren’t there, and she wonders just how close she came to seeing her father again.

“Okay. Okay, yeah, that could work. Is she- I don’t want to bother her if she’s still at the hospital, but if she can hook me up with that contact, that would be the best, I think. I’m fine going rogue, so to speak, when it’s just me, but,” Jon says, and he pauses a moment as he looks at her. His gaze flickers away. “It’s not just me anymore. I’d like the law on my side now for Jeyne’s sake.”

When he hazards another wary look her way, Jeyne smiles. It’s true she’d be more comfortable maybe, if it were another woman here, but he has been so kind to her, so helpful in each and every way.

“Thank you,” she murmurs.

“Of course,” Jon replies quietly, smiling back until Tyrion says something to divert his attention. “Yeah, go ahead and give it to me,” he says, picking up the pen and scribbling something down on the little pad of hotel paper. “Yes. Yes, right. Merci, Tyrion. And tell Dany I’ll be fine.”

They hang up shortly thereafter and Jon lets go of a long, low groaning sigh as he leans over his knees, elbows on his thighs as he scrubs his face with his hands.

“I guess that went about as good as it could have,” he mutters from behind his palms. ”Thank Christ Tyrion’s there. I got Margaery Tyrell’s number from him and I’m hoping she’ll hook us up with Bronn’s FBI contact.”

Jeyne nods, looking down as she pushes her food around her plate. She wants to devour the whole damn thing but she already feels full, and even though it’s nearly to the point of discomfort, it is
such a nice change from the empty, wasted away feeling she’s lived with for the past few weeks.

“Is your aunt mad at you? For getting me out of there, I mean?”

Jon looks up at her sharply, his hands still covering his mouth and the scruff of his jaw. He shakes his head, drops his hands to his knees.

“No, not about you, not at all, Jeyne. She’s relieved that you’re all right, that I found you. Disgusted about the whole thing, but- well, I mean, who wouldn’t be?” he muses, though she knows the name of at least one man who wouldn’t. But he’s dead now, Jeyne reminds herself. “She’s just upset because I wanted her to come here.”

“She doesn’t want to risk seeing the Lannisters though,” Jeyne says.

“No, she doesn’t. But right now isn’t the time to hesitate or be scared, now is the time to act and to strike.”

“I don’t blame her,” Jeyne says, shaking her head slowly as she pushes the tray of food towards the center of the bed, and she draws her knees up to her chest, careful that the sheet and duvet completely cover her even though he’s already seen her naked. She never wants to be naked again. “I don’t blame her, even if it is scared or cowardly,” she says with a hitch in her breath that splinters into the shallow breathing that comes right before a hard cry.

“No. No, that’s not what I meant,” Jon says when the tears well up and spill out and drop down. He immediately gets to his feet and crosses the large room to sit on the bed beside her, and where he was at first overcautious to touch her when they first met a few hours ago, now he places a hand on the curve of her back, a warm firm point of contact, a buoy in a storm, a struck match in the dark. She never thought she’d know a benevolent touch ever again.

“You are not a coward, you are brave, don’t you see? What that monster did to you, what he put you through,” Jon says, voice tinged green with venom. “Merde, Jeyne. Not a lot of people could handle it, but you walked out of that place on your own two feet.”

“I didn’t do it alone, though, did I? I still had to have someone rescue me,” she says, because she has never been so terrified, has never felt so helpless and ineffectual in the scope of self-preservation, has never felt so humiliated and powerless, and it eats at her now just as mercilessly as constant hunger did during the weeks of her captivity.

“I only opened the door,” Jon says, and he doesn’t go so far as to rub circles on her back but he does keep his hand there. “I only picked a lock. You saved yourself the entire time you were in there all alone, by holding yourself together and keeping your wits about you.”

They’re nice words even though she’s not quite sure she believes them, and she lifts her head with the heave of a heavy sigh, wipes her face with the cuff of her robe as she turns and rests her cheek on her bent knee. They gaze at each other, again with that strange sense of profound connection that comes from experiencing something horrible together, however brief his share in it was. Finally Jeyne smiles again. It’s sad and it’s small and it’s lonely, but it’s genuine, and it’s one he returns in equal measure.

“Thank you for opening the door, Jon,” she says.

Jon nods, and then his hand does lift, the lightest of cups against the back of her head.

“Anytime, Jeyne,” he says, and in that tiny moment she knows that he means it.
There’s something lovely to her, getting ready in the morning with Sandor, the big shirtless tattooed hulk of him taking up most of the space in the bathroom as he brushes his teeth while she leans over the edge of the sink to put on a quick swipe of eyeliner. He’s surly and sullen and silent in the mornings, this she’s known for a while now, but he’s also intense and focused on her now. It’s the tired grumpy interest of some narrow-eyed dragon as he watches her apply makeup with toothpaste flecked on his mustache and beard, and even after he’s spit and rinsed his brush and mouth, still he hovers in the background with his arms folded across his chest. Sansa smiles at him through the mirror as she tends to her other eye.

“Well hey there, big guy,” she murmurs as she returns her attention to the sweep of liquid liner she keeps close to her lash line, and despite her anxiety over seeing her family today, she paints thin and smooth and true, ten years of practice to thank for it.

“You could be a surgeon with a steady hand like that,” he says, nodding towards her eyeliner when she’s finished and straightens out of her lean.

Sansa laughs and swishes her liquid pen like it’s a cutlass. “Or an assassin,” she says in a thick faux Russian accent, dragging the closed lid of the eyeliner across his abs as she slips past him to finish getting dressed.

Sandor snags her by the wrist and tugs her back to him, drapes her arm over his own shoulder and drops it there before he slides his hands down her sides around to her low back, and he cups her ass with both hands before smoothing out his t-shirt that she’s wearing. Sansa hums like she’s just taken a sip of hot chocolate, smiles and tips her head back to look up at him. Sandor gives her a scrutinizing frown.

“Assuming you weren’t a doctor or an assassin, what did you do for work before all this shit happened?”

She tilts her head and frowns back, though she smiles all the same as drags her fingernails in circles on the skin of his shoulder. “Well that’s random. After a touch like that I figured we’d have a replay of last night, not a conversation about my employment history.”

“Since when did you become such a fan of unprotected sex?”

“They make Plan B for a reason,” she says with a shrug, gazing at the tattoos scrawled on his chest as she runs a hand through the dark hair that half obscures them, down to his stomach where the hair thins and peters out into that suggestive trail disappearing under the band of his boxer briefs and flannel pants.

Sandor laughs and cups her ass again, gives her a squeeze that makes her lift up onto her toes. “Steady hand and a schemer, huh? Maybe you were an assassin.”
“Only if assassins get degrees in Communications they never end up using,” Sansa says to his chest, and that's enough of an eyeful to turn her on, even though the topic of conversation somewhat tempers the hot little joy she always feels when he’s touching her.

“Well why did you get it then? College is pretty fucking expensive to just waste it, isn’t it? At least where I come from it is. It was easier to go to war than to pay for a bunch of classes I’ll never use.”

Sansa sighs, steps back from him to lean against the counter and look up at him. She drops her eyeliner on the counter, resists the urge to cross her arms over her chest, knowing full well how standoffish it comes across. Instead she rests her hands on the counter’s edge, lifts her chin and tosses her hair out of her eyes as she looks at him.

“Where I come from it was a family requirement to get my education and arm myself with a degree. Parents’ orders. After that, they said, life was up to me. So I did Communications because I wanted to be a big hotshot city girl with a shiny career in PR. Champagne and money and stunning clothes. Jeyne and I were going to open our own firm in a downtown loft we’d also live in,” she says with a faraway smile that fades almost as quickly as it blooms. “But by the time I graduated we were already in thick with the Lannisters. I got the champagne and money and clothes but it was firmly stated that I didn’t need to work.”

“So what’d you do then?” he asks, leaning against the wall in a mirror of her pose, though her feet are still between his on account of the bathroom being so small.

“ Took on the role of poor little rich girl, I guess,” she says, tucking her hair behind her ears when she gazes down at the floor. ‘The Lannisters take care of their own,’ Cersei had said. That was before they tried to kill me,” she says with a roll of her eyes, and her words taste only half-bitter now, she is already so used to saying them.

“Okay,” he says, reaching out to snap her by the shirt, and he tugs on her again, pulls her up out of her lean with the single flex of his arm. “So what are you going to do now? Now that you’re home, now that you’re out from under them? What are you going to do, poor little rich Red?”

Sansa hums a hmmmm, comes willingly and rests her cheek against his chest as she runs her fingers down the curve of his bicep, watches the muscle jump from the tickling touch. Her other hand slides around the breadth of him and she hooks her thumb in the waistband of his pajamas at the small of his back. Suddenly she smiles.

“You know, it’s probably stupid but part of me always wanted to like, be a barista or a waitress or something. I know it’s dumb and I’m probably glamorizing it, but it always looked fun back when I was in college. I never had to work through school but there was something so, I don’t know, Independent-Woman about it. Or maybe work at a department store. There was a girl in Nordstrom when we went who talked about an awesome employee discount,” she says with ill-concealed delight.

Sandor snorts a laugh. “I thought you said you got the clothes already, greedy.”

“They got the clothes for me. I never got them for myself. So hell, maybe that’s what I’ll do. I mean, it’s no PR firm but it’s not like I’m exactly drowning in opportunity now that the whole country thinks- well, thinks I’m an assassin,” she says, lifting her face off the warmth of his chest to look at him.

“And they haven’t even seen you put your makeup on,” he says, chuckling as he pushes off the wall and walks her backwards. “But I could see you working in a little coffee shop or some restaurant somewhere, wearing that little lumberjack dress of yours.”
“Lumberjack dress?” she says with a laugh. “Is that what you call it?”

Sandor makes an affirmative rumble that sounds like a growl or a purr, some delicious dark combination of both. “Though I can’t see you ever wearing shoes sensible enough for a job like that.”

“Hey, there’s more than just one kind of Sansa in here, big guy,” she says with a small grunt in the back of her throat when she bumps back against the counter.

“Oh, believe me, sweetheart, I am well aware,” he says, lifting her up onto counter with the barest of efforts, and his flannel pajamas are a soft rub on the insides of her thighs when he steps between the spread of her knees. “I think I’ve seen damn near every side to you there is.”

“Oh yeah? And what’d you think? Did you like ’em all?”

“Every single one of them, even though some made me sad,” he says, tapping her nose with his fingertip. “I don’t like seeing the crying Sansa as much as the happy one.”

“What about the needy Sansa? Hmm?” she asks, sitting up as straight as she can so she can reach his mouth and kiss him.

He tastes like mint, makes her tongue tingle with the flavor of it when he sweeps his against it, makes her spine arch when he pushes his hips against the spread-open juncture of her and she can feel he’s half hard just at the thought of her.

“At this point I am very familiar with that Sansa, and I like her very, very much,” he says, sliding his hands up her thighs, under the oversized length of his t-shirt she could almost, almost wear as a dress. His fingers burrow beneath the thin bands of elastic on her panties as he kneads into her flesh. He grins. “So what’s this Plan B thing, is that like a backup pill or something?”

“Mmhmm. And it’s very effective.”

“It sounds very handy.”

“Oh, yes,” she says with a smile. “Very.”

He curls his hands around the sides of her panties, and she tilts her hips to one side and then the other as he slowly drags them down and tosses them to the floor. Sansa lifts her arms when he rucks his shirt up and over her head only to abandon it as well. Sandor cups her breasts and watches them sway back into place, rubs his thumbs across her nipples, and he’s close enough that she can feel the heat radiate off of him but not close enough to feel him. It’s lovely to be adored but even lovelier to be active, and so she tugs him free of his own clothing, and since he’s already called her greedy and she’s already claimed needy, Sansa takes the full hard erection of him in hand, is already propping her heels up on the closed cupboard doors under the sink when he stills her by wrapping his hand over hers.

“What’s wrong?” she breathes as she looks up at him with a frown, but he’s looking away from her, up at the mirror, and when she glances over her shoulder their eyes meet via their reflections.

“If I have to fuck in front of a mirror then I want to look at you, not myself,” he says, pulling her off the counter with the firm press of his palm against the divots of her lower back.

“Sandor, I don’t um,” she starts, because how she’s supposed to look at herself while having sex is something she cannot comprehend.
But then he turns her around so she’s facing the mirror, and it’s impossible to look at herself when she can see him, the tall strong building blocks of him, muscle and skin, black hair and the steady burn of his grey eyes as he presses himself against her. There’s eroticism to look at him from the distance of the mirror, a tantalizing sense of voyeurism even though it’s her standing next to his reflection. She suppresses a moan and instead exhales, lets go of whatever feeble, nervous argument she had. She watches him as she braces her hands against the backsplash of the counter when he bends his long back to curve over hers as he uses one hand to open her up and the other to guide himself inside. He knows her well enough to do without taking his eyes off of her, and she watches him as she feels him, feels him as she watches him, both sensations so separate and yet so fused together. And then there is that wonderful shuddering feeling of him inside her where he belongs.

Sansa uses her leverage against the counter and pushes back against him, lifts up on her toes to get the slide of him even deeper, and then he groans out a sigh, pushes his chin against her cheek to tilt her head to the side, and when Sandor begins to pump inside her he presses a hard kiss to her temple.

Her eyes roll back as he slides his hand up to cup her breasts, one and then the other, hips moving all the while, but when her eyes close he pulls back, almost completely free of her, and he does not move until she opens her eyes and looks at him through the mirror. It’s electricity she can almost feel, liquid neon pink and arcing purples, the blue of hot flame, the tingling shock that does not hurt but feels so very, very good. She *Ohs* for more, rolls her spine to lift her hips and push into him.

“Don’t stop,” she says, and even though it’s barely a whisper it’s still a demand, one she knows he will obey, and he hums, sweeps his hand down the length of her back until it finds purchase on her hip to match the other one.

Wordlessly he thrusts inside her again, good long strokes that make her body jerk and her breath leave her body in stops and starts. His hands hold her steady, thumbs on her back and fingers hooked over her hip bones, and he stands straight and tall as he fills her up and slides out, over and over again until she’s moaning and moving in steady time right along with him. They do not take their eyes off each other the entire time, not even when he slips his fingers between her thighs again, not even when her legs start shaking and her hands close into tight fists against the countertop, and certainly not when he leans over her and tells her that he loves her, tells her how very, very beautiful this particular Sansa is.

It’s taken almost three days but finally the beeping of machines around Margaery have faded from the foreground of her awareness, even when she tries to snatch an hour or two of sleep during the deepest depths of Bronn’s drug-induced slumber. The first night was horrible, even after the doctor gave the grim announcement that she gave him a good solid chance of survival, and even when he squeezed her hand sometime in her predawn haze of exhaustion, Margaery still couldn’t sleep for the beep and bustle of life in the ICU.

Still, it was better than the two hours of pacing post-op as she sobbed for her grandmother and wondered if she was going to have to bury two people instead of one. Please don’t leave me, Bronn, she said, over and over, a circle of words to match the circuit she beat into the thin carpeting of the waiting room, and after a while it became not just a mantra but something she *had* to think, because if she did not, if she missed even one word or didn’t turn around right at the table with the outdated *National Geographic* magazines on it, he would surely die. And so over and over again she thought them with the exact same emphasis and rhythm until the surgeon came out and spoke with her and she almost collapsed from the sudden weightlessness of relief.
And then the over and over again was replaced with monitoring machines and the come and go of ICU nurses in a private room with a window overlooking the lake. Which is where she is now, folded up on the armchair in the corner of the room wearing an old pair of sweats and a hoodie with two orange juice stains on it, steadily dozing thanks to a steady diet of cold/flu medicine and Thai soup takeout that makes her cry every time she eats it. She dreams of funeral flowers and old half-remembered voicemail messages from her grandmother, dreams of blood on carpeted stairs and the press of Bronn’s smooth-shaven cheek on her forehead as he checked her temperature the old-fashioned way before he almost died. They make her frown and whimper but at least dreams mean she’s sleeping, and that dimly lucid realization starts to fade as she drops deeper and deeper into the soft gauze of nothingness.

“Look at her, all curled up like a cute little kitty,” a voice says.

It’s the croak and creak of an old man though he’s only 37, and even though it’s hoarse and quiet it is still enough to snap her awake, and Margaery’s limbs jerk as she drops her legs to the floor and launches herself to her feet. She is at his side in a heartbeat, gazes with a frown at the pallor of him that is such a contrast to his dark hair. He still looks so exhausted, so beaten up with the stitches on his cheek and the way the ugly gown washes out his skin tone, but his hand is cool and dry in both of hers when she cups them around his knuckles.


There’s a chuckle, as cool and dry as his skin, and her heart beats and bleeds – god there was so much blood – to see him smile at her. He closes his eyes and squeezes her hand like the thrum of a pulse.

“I just needed you,” he says, opening his eyes and turning his head towards her. He looks like a little boy when he smiles again, and for the millionth time does she hear No, but I am in love in her head. “Although I gotta admit, I love it when you fuss over me.”

“Yes, well, I’ve been fussing over you for days,” she sniffs, trying for haughty and blame-game even though there’s no energy to it, not when he’s been out like a light for most of the aforementioned fussing, not when it’s been a tear soaked bedside vigil while she fielded phone call after phone call after phone call.

“I know you have, baby,” he says. “I’ll get you back once they let me out of this fuckin’ bed.”

“I know you will,” she says, thinking of Thai soup.

When she drags the armchair over they talk about Olenna, Margaery’s chin resting on her folded hands on the edge of the bed as she gazes sadly at him, as he strokes the rise of her cheekbone with his thumb. She wouldn’t have even told him about her grandmother in the first place had he not woken up last night and asked her why she was so sad. The reason she fessed up was twofold; it was simply too hard to hold in and it was simply impossible keeping her heart from him, even in his delicate state, and he soothed her then as well as he could, just as he soothes her now with the simple caress of a fingertip.

“Where will you take her?” he asks when she tells him Olenna’s wish was to be cremated and her ashes spread.

“Down on Tybee Island outside of Savannah, where she was born,” Margaery says, hiding a fading-flu cough in the crook of her elbow.
“When will you go?”

“When you can join me,” she murmurs.

“I was hoping you’d say that. Was gonna say, I could use a little R&R with my girl.”

“Like I’m going to let you rest,” she says, because sex and jokes have always been their way, though the only thing she feels like doing to him in a bed is holding onto him and never letting go.

“Like I’m going to let you sleep, Kitten,” he says with another slow, sweet stroke of his thumb across her cheek, and now she has the lovely thought of them both dozing on a hammock somewhere warm.

They’re smiling at each other when there is a knock on the door so sharp it makes Margaery sit up straight, it is so authoritative and What Do You Think You’re Doing. But instead of one of the nurses there’s a raven-haired woman in black slacks and a plum colored sweater pushing open the door, an FBI badge hanging off her belt next to her gun.

“Oh, hello,” Margaery says with another cough, and this woman is so beautiful that she refuses, absolutely refuses to wipe her running nose on her sleeve. She sniffs mightily instead. “Are you um, are you here to relieve the guard outside?”

“No, I’m not here to do this loser’s grunt work,” she says, pointing to Bronn as she walks in the room and shuts the door behind her. “I’m here to tell him he’s been taken off the case.”

“Ugh, get her out of here,” Bronn says, and the weakness of his voice is enough to cover the amusement that she has to glance at him before she can tell he’s grinning.

“Who is this, Bronny?”

“A pain in my ass,” he says with a happy sigh as the woman comes to stand at the foot of his bed.

“Like I’d get anywhere near your ass,” she says cheerfully.

“This dick is my partner,” he says.

“I rarely go near those, either.”

He chuckles, grunts and grimaces as he tries to sit up using his abs, and when he groans in pain both women immediately come to either side of his bed to help him. “Get off me, now,” he argues feebly, though he surrenders and succumbs to the help when Margaery runs her fingers through his hair.

“Careful, honey,” she says, gaze a flicker between the two of them as the other woman helps to get him situated more or less comfortably, and the tenderness with which she assists him is both heartwarming and also confusing.

My partner, he’d said, but she’s always known him to work alone, the entire time they’ve known each other. The only person he’s ever worked with in any capacity has been–

Margaery gasps and lifts her hand as she points.

“You’re Aunt Mae!”

Bronn’s partner laughs in disbelief and gives him the admonishing look of an older sister.
“Are you still calling me that? Jesus, I let my brother take one picture of me holding his kid and I’m ruined for life.”

She feels like an idiot since she considers herself a card carrying feminist, but Bronn’s FBI presence in her life has always been such a sexually charged and utterly male one that she simply assumed his partner was a man.

“You must be Margaery. I’m Arianne Martell,” the woman says, offering her outstretched hand along with a dazzling smile that instantly melts to sympathetic. “Sorry to hear about your grandmother.”

“Thanks,” Margaery murmurs, hollow and empty like an echo.

She’s still struggling through her befuddlement as she tries to recover a little bit of her usual gloss and polish. She blames her grandmother’s murder, her fatigue and flu, the fact that she’s in disgusting stained sweats for feeling so shatteringly insecure all of a sudden. She tries to channel her grandmother’s sass, and when she reminds herself that she already has that blood in her veins she lifts her chin in true Olenna style.

“You could have told me your partner was a woman, Bronn,” she says loftily despite knowing full well that it was never any of her business, but better to put the blame on him than to stand here gawking like a complete rube. “And a gorgeous one to boot.”

Bronn laughs until he winces.

“I’d no sooner fool around with Arianne than I’d stand in line to get stabbed again. Well, maybe a little sooner, though I’d end up in about the same shape I’m in now,” he says, still grimacing as he lifts his gown and looks down at the still grievous wounds stitched up all over the trunk of his body.

“Don’t worry.” Arianne says with a smile as she drags one of the other chairs from across the room to sit on the other side of Bronn’s bed. “Aside from a recent work-related dalliance I haven’t ridden the stick in years. But I have been partial to blondes lately,” she says, eyebrows lifting as she gives Margaery an appraising look that damn near makes her blush.

“Oh stop,” Margaery murmurs, smoothing a hand over her unwashed hair and tucking it behind her ear as she sits down. She’s never been a blusher but she cannot help a smile as she examines her cuticles.

Bronn sighs.

“Could you not hit on my girlfriend at my sickbed, for chrissakes?”

“Sorry,” Arianne grins, sounding not one bit the part.

“See why I can’t stand her?”

“Hey, I’m here to tell you you’re on an official leave of absence, you should be loving me right now.”

Bronn’s half-flag flippancy and joking around fades completely, and he furrows his brow as he studies his partner, as Margaery studies them both.

“Yeah right, you don’t do grunt work, remember? Why are you really here?”
Arianne sighs and shakes her head, slouches back in her chair so she can rest her feet on the corner of his bed.

“Well, you are going to be taking a little trip. Both of you,” she says, glancing to Margaery with a softer eye, though she is still all business. She looks back to Bronn. “As soon as I can get your surgeon to sign off we’re flying you to the hospital up in Milwaukee to continue your recovery in relative safety. You’re not safe in this city anymore.”

“What about Margie?” Bronn says quickly, and when she slides her hand in his he squeezes it, far more fiercely than he has since this nightmare started.

“Trust me, she’s not safe here, either. She’ll be going with you, I’ll arrange it.”

Some of Bronn’s ferocity dissipates when he hears they’ll go together, and Margaery’s broken heart knits itself together a stitch or two to hear and see and feel the truth of him.

“Will I be able to go home and get some of my things?” she asks while Bronn chews on this new information.

Arianne tells them how they’re neither of them allowed to step foot back in her house in Winnetka since most of CPD will know by now that Bronn was working undercover, and Margaery is almost relieved. She thinks she might sell the damn thing after what happened there.

“I assume there’s no hope in going back to my apartment either?”

“Not a chance in hell, sugar.”

“I guess it doesn’t make a difference.” He slides a tired smile Margaery’s way. “Wasn’t doing much living there, in the end.”

“Don’t say end, Bronn,” Margaery says.

Now he grins, and she leans forward and stretches her arm at full length when he brings her hand to his mouth and kisses her knuckles.

“Beginning, then.”

“Anyways,” Arianne says loudly. “With your attacker dead and Petyr Baelish MIA, I’m not too concerned about any of the higher echelon getting you. Cersei’s been shadowed for a couple of days and hasn’t so much as left her brownstone, but it’s the people on the Lannister payroll who—”

“What do you mean, Baelish is MIA?” Bronn asks, lowering Margaery’s hand and holding it to his mouth and kisses her knuckles.

“He was last seen entering O’Hare, but we lost surveillance of him after he entered one of the bathrooms. I think he changed clothes, and he must be using a fake name and documentation. Rats always flee a sinking ship, and I’m sure he’s compelled to get out of here now that his little flying monkey was killed. Good job, by the way.”

Margaery snorts and lowers her gaze, no longer caring what his partner might think, because while she’s beyond grateful for what Bronn did, it’s not something she can flippantly praise like he’s a puppy who learned a new trick. Despite how mopey and hangdog it must look, she rests her chin on the edge of his bed again and closes her eyes. She hates reliving what happened, the way he seemed to slip right out of her hands, all that lovely energy of his seeping out through her fingers into the carpet. Tears prickle her eyes and she squeezes them, covers up her sniffles with a cough
that’s only partly the flu talking. She shifts so she can face him, opens her eyes to remind herself that he survived. *Only one funeral to arrange,* she thinks, wondering how a statement like that can become the silver lining.

Brons shrugs, all grumpy tired boy as he stares up at the ceiling tiles. “Whatever, I barely remember it.”

“You blew his brains out by emptying the entire magazine of a holstered weapon,” she says cheerfully. “Once you get psych clearance we’re going to throw you a surprise party. I’ve already come up with a cake design.”

“Let me guess: red velvet?”

Arianne beams. “Of course. Now, I better get out of here before I spill any more details. Margaery, walk me out, will you? I need to know where to find the cafeteria.”

“Of course,” she says, and to hell with propriety because this time she does wipe her nose on her sleeve as she stands. “I’ll be right back, Bronny.”

“You better,” he says, resting his head back on his pillow as he watches her leave.

“I can tell he’s getting tired, so I didn’t want to bog him down with any other information,” Arianne says once Margaery has closed the door.

“Have you heard anything from Sansa and Sandor?” she asks quickly, eager for news.

“Yeah, no, I mean, I heard from them before I heard what happened with you guys, so like a day and a half ago. They should be calling me sometime today,” Arianne says briskly, waving the question away like it’s a gnat. “Listen, did you get any information from that guy your client referred to you? Jean Neige?”

Margaery shakes her head. “No, I was too distracted with everything. He just said that Tyrion had given him my number to get Bronn’s contact. So I looked through Bronn’s phone and gave him ‘Aunt Mae’s’ information,” she says. “Was that a bad idea?”

“No, it was a great one. There’s a reason we’re moving you two to Milwaukee,” Arianne says, taking Margaery by the elbow as she walks them down the hall away from the guards posted at the door. “I have an apartment there, and Jean and his, ah, his friend are currently holed up there. Jean was following Petyr Baelish on your client’s orders, did you know that?”

“No, not at all,” she murmurs, lifting a hand to her forehead, wondering if her spinning thoughts are going to spiral right out of her skull.

“Yeah, well, I think you’re going to want to talk to his friend. You hotshot lawyers always do foam at the mouth for a good surprise witness,” and she has the decency to flash an almost-sheepish smile when Margaery gives her an arch look. Arianne leans in to whisper, a waft of honey and calendula as she brings her mouth close to Margaery’s ear. “Does the name Jeyne Poole ring a bell?”

“All right, well, here goes nothing,” Sansa says, unscrewing the cap off a bottle of water she bought along with Plan B One-Step at the CVS on the outskirts of Portland.

“Let’s hope it’s a little more than nothing,” Sandor says dryly as he watches her, body tilted against
the passenger side door.

“Good point,” Sansa says, and even though she’s relieved to know this will take care of any pregnancy risk, her fingers still shake as she pops the pill out of the packet’s foil backing. “Shit,” she says when it falls into the footwell.

Before she can reach for it herself, Sandor reaches over and plucks the little pill from the rubber foot mat and blows on it before handing it back to her. He eyes her suspiciously as she says her thanks and hastily knocks it back before she drops it again, and she closes her eyes as she chugs from the water bottle.

“Are you sure you’re okay to drive? Or that- I mean, that stuff isn’t going to hurt you or anything is it? You’re shaking like a leaf, Red.” He’s furrow-browed and brooding, gruff and mistrustful at anything that might harm her, and despite the tangle of nerves jangling around in the pit of her stomach with only contraceptive and water for company, Sansa smiles.

“Yeah, I mean, no, no it won’t hurt me, it’s just- we’re here now, Sandor. We’re here in Portland, and I don’t know how big a city it is, but I’m pretty sure that means I’ll be seeing them really soon. Like, less than an hour soon.”

She makes a roller coast Oh-Shit face, teeth bared and eyebrows up, and he snorts a chuckle and shakes his head, rests his hand on her knee with a squeeze.

“That’s a good thing, sweetheart, not a bad one.”

“No, I know, but still. It’s insane. Here I am, sitting in a car with the new man I’m in love with, popping birth control right before seeing my mom. My hair’s cut and gone, I’m a wanted woman across the country, I’m- everything is just so different now. What if they don’t, you know, God, Sandor. They might not even recognize me, let alone still like me.”

Sandor rolls his eyes.

“This shit again. Go on, start the car,” he gruffs, shuffling maps as he settles back in his seat.

“All right, fine,” she says, half a snap though there’s no real fire to it, and she turns the engine over with the twist of the key, gives him a frowning look before pulling out of the parking lot.

He guides her back to the I-5 that will take them to the heat of the city, and for a while they drive in silence save for the tinny bluegrass music Sandor finds after fiddling with the radio stations. Finally he sighs and leans back in his seat.

“Sansa, they’re your goddamn family. They’ve loved you their whole lives and a haircut and shitty situation isn’t going to stop that, not even after you’ve been gone so long. Hell, I bet they love you even more now that they know what life is like without you. I wouldn’t want to- well,” he sighs, and she glances at him when he takes an overlong pause. “I fell for you in a matter of weeks and I couldn’t imagine it without you,” he says to the window.

“I couldn’t imagine it without you, either,” she murmurs, smiling like a fool as she gazes out at the road unspooling ahead of them.

“That’s exactly how your family feels.”

“Well,” she says, glancing at him again, grinning when he meets her eye. “Hopefully it’s a little different than what they feel.”
Sandor laughs. “Yeah, I’ll say.”

He guides her off the interstate and through a few neighborhoods before they get turned around, and he swears and flips the map around a few times while they idle at a red light, rakes his hair out of his eyes as he squints at the tiny street names while he compares it to the address she jotted down in Benjen’s office.

“God, I can’t wait to get another phone,” she says when it gets to the point that they have to pull off the road so he can study the map. “GPS has never seemed so freaking necessary before.”

“I caught myself trying to zoom in on the map twice using my fingers,” he mutters, and she laughs as she reaches back for her purse to grab her lip balm.

“I think that’s the cutest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I guess you’ve never heard the noises you make in your sleep then,” he says, and even though he’s mid-mutter over the impossibility of the map, he slides a grin her way when she bites her lip and beams at him.

She twists around to set her purse back with the rest of their luggage when the sheer lack of it makes her pause and frown. It’s a small Jeep and an even smaller hoard of bags that they’ve been lugging around with them, and it doesn’t take her long to figure out what’s missing. Sansa turns back to face front with a frown of confusion.

“All right, I got it now, go on and flip a bitch and then take a left at that light back there.”

She does as he instructs, drumming her thumbs on the steering wheel as she processes what she’s just found out, and after she takes the left she turns to stare at him.

“Why isn’t your bag in the back with mine?”

Sandor freezes, hunched over the map, hair in his eyes again so she cannot see his expression, but she can feel the change in him, the shift in his energy as his guard goes up, not to hide from her but to protect himself, and that’s why she knows they’re about to have a massive disagreement. Her heart pounds when he sighs and tosses the map onto the dashboard. Her jaw clenches when he pulls his hair back and holds it at the back of his head. She shakes her head when he turns towards her and has a wary look of determination on his face.

“I thought about it, and I think it’s best if I go back to the motel tonight. I—”

“Sandor!” She is appalled, mortified, angry, and it is all she can do to keep her eyes on the road and her hands on the steering wheel. She wants to throttle him.

“Now, wait a minute, let me explain. I called the front desk while you were in the shower today and got myself another few nights on the credit card. I’m not leaving the state or anything, but I figure you need time and space while you work shit out with your family.”

“Oh, so all that talk about them loving me was just bullshit? I’m going to need to ‘work it out’ with them first?” she snaps, glaring at him so hotly her eyes feel like they’re burning.

“Jesus, no, I meant settling in, or something. God, you love to twist my words around sometimes,” he says irritably, snatching at the map again. “Hey, slow down and take this next right.”

She swings the Jeep roughly to the right, enough so that his shoulder bumps against hers.
“I’m not twisting your words, I’m listening to them, and what you’re telling me is that you’re going to just drop me off at mommy and damn it, at my mom’s house and then drive away. That’s literally what you’re telling me. You say you can’t imagine life without me and then here you are planning for it.”

“Look, baby, I’m trying to be the sensitive guy here, for once in my life, okay? You’re family’s been through the wringer, you’ve lost your dad and have just had the month from hell, okay? You need time together. I’m not going to just, I don’t know, stand there like a fucking goon ogling you while you have your little family reunion.”

“I want you there with me, dammit. I need you there, Sandor.”

“You need your family right now. Take another right at the stop sign.”

“You are my family now, you idiot. Don’t you see that? How can you not know that? I am in love with you, Sandor, don’t you know what that means?” she says, idling at the stop sign so that it’s safe enough to give him her attention, to make him understand.

She’s looked him in the eyes during a lot of things, most recently sex that made her arch on her tiptoes it was so good, but there’s nothing quite so wonderful as looking him in the eyes when she’s telling him she loves him. Because he’s listening, she can tell, and while the look he’s giving her is no less intense than all the others he has in him it is also one of the most vulnerable. After the briefest moments of stillness, Sandor nods, almost imperceptible.

“I’m in love with you too, Sansa. Of course I know what that means.”

“Okay, well good,” she breathes, still angry, still terrified he’s going to slip away from her, the quick dart of a fish hell bent on escaping the net. “Because I don’t want to live without you if I don’t have to, and right now you are the only thing standing in my way. I’ve waited my whole life for you, dammit.”

His gaze drops as he runs the back of his fingers down her arm, and then he smiles, a vague quirk of muscle in the thick of his beard that she can recognize now.

“I’ve waited longer for you.”

She tuts and rolls her eyes.

“So stop being so stupid and tell me you’re staying.”

“All right, fine, I’ll stay,” he says, shaking his head like she’s told him to clean out the garage or mow the lawn. He lifts his eyes to her, lifts his eyebrow and then grins. “Fuck it, I’ll stay forever. You’re the boss, like you’ve been since the beginning. I guess you’ll want to turn around and go back now for my shit, huh? Little Miss Procrastinator.”

The bundle of apprehension breaks apart in her chest, and she exhales with relief, sags back against her seat with a smile and a shake of her head. That was it, she thinks. That was the final hurdle, it’s us now, for the long haul, she thinks, and now she can’t stop beaming.

“No, no it’s fine. I trust you. I just needed to hear you say it. We’ll get it later. Take a right, right?” she says, shifting the Jeep into first as she eases off the clutch and onto the gas.

“Yeah,” he says, peering at the map again before tossing it back to the dashboard, “but now you’re going to need to stop.”
She does so, not even getting the vehicle into second gear before she puts it back into neutral. There’s a battered old car in the driveway with a tall, skinny mechanic bent under the hood, and she knows this Jeep’s got a leaky radiator or something and now she’s worried Sandor thinks it’s going to break down.

“Why?”

“Because you’re home, Red,” he says.

Sandor reaches over and shuts off the ignition, points to that same driveway, that same house where the front door is opening, where a familiar looking woman is stepping out of it to stand on the front porch, and she’s hugging herself with arms that look so soft, so inviting, so familiar. The woman on the stoop says something and the young man with half his body in car’s innards straightens so suddenly he smacks the back of his head on the hood of the car, and he watches as she trots down the porch steps and across the yard. Sansa sucks in a gasp and shudders out a cry, hand fumbling for the door handle, and she staggers like a drunk when she steps out onto the street.

“Sansa?”

“Mom?”

It’s like a draw at high noon, except it’s two women with tears in their eyes under a blanket of dense cloud cover, arms wrapped around themselves for warmth or comfort or simply to try and hold themselves together.

“Sansa!”

“Mom!”

And then they run to each other.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Part one of the Stark reunion.

First off, I want to apologize for how long it's taken me to update. Secondly, I want to apologize that relatively speaking it's short and in my opinion UTTER SHIT.

Anyways. NOW THAT YOU'RE ALL EXCITED.

Picset
Pod and Arya

By the time Sandor steps out of the Jeep Sansa and her mother have already flung themselves at one another and a fine misty drizzle has picked up where it left off from earlier that morning. Both things serve to weight the air, and despite the breathless little murmurs and noises from the women there is a heavy sort of silence too. The suburban street is deserted, nothing but greens and greys and mud brown without so much as a dog walker or jogger to cut up the continuity. Even the auburn of Catelyn's hair does little by way of splashes of color, muted as it is compared to her daughter's natural color.

He isn’t quite sure of what to do here, knows with every fiber of his being that he shouldn’t even be here, not really, and so he lingers on the far side of the Jeep, his feet buried in damp late winter grass. The tall kid working on the car seems just as rooted to his own spot, and he and Sandor regard each other with squinted frowns as the former wipes his greasy hands on a blackened towel and the latter digs his clean hands in the pockets of his jacket. And between the two of them, a woman and her mother embrace and send little white puffs of breath up to die in the drizzle as they cry, as they laugh. They squeeze each other so tight it makes Sandor miss his own mother more than he cares to admit, more than he can bear to witness.

So instead he watches the teenager across the street text someone on his phone before sliding the device in the back pocket of his filthy jeans, and then he looks up directly at him. Sandor resists the urge to flinch, is happy he managed it when the kid finally folds his arms across his chest and grins with a nod. Sandor nods back, finding odd comfort in the acceptance from a stranger.

You're my family now, he plays back in his mind. Perhaps not such a stranger after all. At least not for long, though that's counting unhatched eggs, something he's always tried to avoid at all costs.

“Oh god, I can’t believe it’s really you,” Cat Stark says, her hands busy as they press into Sansa’s shoulder blades, her spine, her low back, all as if to make sure she’s really there before she finally draws back and holds her daughter at arm’s length to look at her. “And it is, oh my baby, little duck, it’s you, under all those black feathers. It’s you,” she says with a sob of disbelieving laughter.

“It’s me, mom, I’m here, I’m back,” Sansa says, her eyelashes two black fans against her cheeks with her eyes shut as tight as she squeezes her mother once she’s dragged back into her arms.

“And you’re safe and sound, oh, after so long, you’re finally safe and sound,” Cat says.

“I am,” Sansa says, and she does a sort of dance with her mother so that she can look at him over
Cat Stark’s shoulder, and there’s yearning in his heart when their gazes meet, like looking at Christmas morning through a window. “I am, thanks to Sandor.”

He huffs an exhale, and the initial hesitation of alienation translates itself for him, and he realizes that what he feels is nervous right now. So far above and beyond it that it soars dangerously close to terror, especially when Catelyn glances back at him.

“Oh,” Cat says, shaking her head as she reluctantly releases her daughter and turns to him. “Oh my goodness, of course, I’m- I’m so sorry, Sandor,” she says.

“San,” the teenager says now that his sister and mother have pulled apart, and his voice is the deep husky croak of post-pubescence, of emotions too probably, and he jogs into the street with one hand holding up his jeans.

“Rickon!” Sansa cries, a bounce of black hair as she sprints for him, arms outstretched as she flings herself at her younger, taller brother.

And now it’s just Sandor and Catelyn. He clears his throat to stall, bows his head as he trudges out of the grass and onto the asphalt as he walks around the Jeep towards the eldest Stark, though he snaps himself out of it in time to greet her with an outstretched hand and a lifted chin. You’re a grown ass man so fucking act like it, he tells himself as he officially meets Sansa’s mother, though he does not go so far as to beam a smile at her, since that would be in direct conflict to how he feels.

“Mrs. Stark, good to meet you,” he says, because at least that’s the truth of it. Because it means Sansa’s here and he fulfilled his promise and she’s safe now. So yeah, it’s good despite the general feeling of stuck-on-the-bench uneasiness he’s got going on right now.

“Sandor,” she says, her eyes a flicker across his face, though it’s far from that familiar deer-like panicked scamper he is so used to, is instead a lingering drifting gaze full of something he can’t quite put his finger on. “I don’t know how I can thank you,” she says, and despite the tears still tracking her cheeks she stands up straight, strong-jaw and elegant, and now he sees where Sansa gets it.

Sandor shakes his head.

“You don’t have to, the thanks is in the job itself,” he says, lifting his hand between them so she sees he means to do right by this, to do right by Sansa and what they share now.

“Oh for Pete’s sake, Sandor, I think we’re past that by now,” Cat says with the gentle admonishment of a mother hen who doesn’t really mean to scold, and she steps forward with a rush, puts a hand up on one of his shoulders and tugs him down to her level so she can give him a hug.

“Oh,” he says, though he follows her lead and returns the hug with a wary pat to her thin back, and when he glances up he can see Sansa standing a few feet away, hand over her mouth and tears in her eyes while her brother grins at her side.

“You gave me my daughter back,” Catelyn whispers as she squeezes her arms around him. “I’ll be thanking you for the rest of my life, Sandor.”

And that’s when he realizes that the look in her eyes was one of gratitude, of relief, a look that said more plainly than words that she is happy not just to see Sansa, but happy to see him as well.
“I gotta go,” Arya says as she squints with one eye closed up at her phone she’s holding above her head.

She’s in bed even though normally she’d be practicing for hours by now, up at dawn not so much as to greet the day but to tell it to fuck off and dance it to death until the defeated sun sets. Although technically what she’s been doing all morning could count as a sort of dance. Christ knows there are plenty of euphemisms to suggest that.

“What’s wrong?” the naked man next to her asks, rolling onto his side so the sheets are a twist around his able hips. He props his head up on the fist of one hand and runs a smooth-sailing course across her belly with the other.

“Nothing’s wrong,” she says with a sigh and then a small smile she affords herself as she tosses her phone to the floor and turns her head to gaze at him. “Finally something’s right.”

“Oh yeah?” he asks as he lowers his head and drops a kiss to the cap of her shoulder. “I was kind of hoping something was right last night. And this morning. Twice.”

“Oh no, you’re perfect,” she says, running her fingers through his hair, crown to nape, before closing her fist in the shaggy ends of it to gently tug him up. “I just mean that Rickon’s sent out a group text to us. Sansa’s back,” she says, and there it is, the smile that started out small and has ended up so wide it already hurts her cheeks.

Damn it all, but she thinks she might cry.

“Jesus Christ,” he says, sitting up swiftly to swing his legs off the bed and onto the floor, though the lack of a box spring makes his knees jut up like he’s sitting in a toy car. He runs his own hands through his hair this time. “Shit. It really happened, then? She really found you?”

“She did,” Arya says with a sniff, happy for the distraction as she tosses the sheet off her body to crawl across the mattress on her knees towards him. She sits on her ass, spreads her legs and wraps them around him so she can sit directly behind him and rest her chin on his shoulder. “Don’t freak out. Are you freaking out?”

“No,” he says after a moment. "No, of course not. This is wonderful for you guys,” he says, lifting his head out of his hands to turn his face towards her, and she stretches her neck so they can awkwardly kiss over his shoulder. “This is what we wanted, right?”

Arya smiles to hear him say ‘we,’ a word she’s never quite liked out of a man’s mouth until now. “Yes. Yes it is. Now come on, let’s get up,” she says with another sniff, sitting up and away from him as she blinks away the burn of unshed tears. “Help me find my notes on that guy and then I gotta get out of here. It’ll be another hour before I can get over there.”

“You and your notes,” he chuckles. “You know the news stuff is more than a little fiction, right? It’s downright slander.”

Arya shrugs, scoffs as she stands and steps into a clean pair of underwear. “There’s always a kernel of truth to that stuff. If he’s with Sansa then I want to make sure we can trust him. You don’t know what they’re like, the Lannisters,” she says, turning to face him, the messy mattress a sea of tangled sheets between them.

“I’ve heard plenty,” he says, glancing up at her as he pulls up his slacks and buckles his belt.

“That’s still not knowing,” she says, grabbing a t-shirt from the foot of the bed and pulling it over her head, and the tone of her voice is staked somewhere between firm and vicious. “They’re
horrible people, all right? And this guy’s brother worked for them. Nobody really knows what goes on inside a person,” she says, thinking of Sansa.

Suddenly the tears do fall, because she remembers all too well the last time they saw each other and the harsh judgment she laid at her sister’s feet before turning on her heel and walking away.

“Oh, hey,” he says softly, coming around to her side of the bed, and she drops her hands from her face when she can hide against the unflexed muscle of his chest. “Hey, come on now, don’t cry. Or hell, cry if you want, but just— you know, don’t be so hard on yourself,” he says.

If she wasn’t so busy feeling guilty then she’d laugh, because how he can know her so well when she’s drifted so far and deep and dark inside herself is uncanny. But then since the day she met him, he’s always been a listener, always been an observer.

“Come on, time’s a wasting,” she says, inhaling sharply as she barges past the emotion, and she hugs him tightly, briefly, before stepping out of the warmth of his bare arms. “I gotta go.”

“Do you want me to drive you?” he says. Hopeful, open, honest and sweet. All of the things she isn’t, anymore.

Arya exhales and smiles, shakes her head even though she’d love to introduce him to her sister, and then Oh my god, I’m about to see my sister crashes through her thoughts, and she shakes her head more vigorously as if to try and dizzy the roiling emotions right out of her.

“No, but thanks anyways. You’ll probably be in enough trouble, sleeping with your boss’s case assignment. Let’s not link you up to sharing classified information as well, huh?”

Podrick has the grace to duck his head when he can’t help but smile sheepishly.

It’s a strange and wonderful sort of whirlwind to her senses when she finally steps inside the house, hot on the heels of her mother. There is the smell of Catelyn’s cooking, always executed with a pinch of rosemary, the warm bloom of central heating, the feeling of her brother’s arm around her shoulders as he excitedly tells her about the car he was working on when she pulled up. The backward glance over her shoulder as she smiles reassuringly to Sandor, who is following the small procession with her bags in tow, her small clutch purse tucked under his arm like it’s a newspaper. He gives her his classic narrow-eyed glare, and with that quick wink at the end it’s even better than a smile, and it warms her as much as the air, as much as the scent of rosemary, almost as much as when her mother lets slip a little cry of happiness and tugs her back into her arms.

It feels like the last year hasn’t even happened when her mother makes Rickon take Sansa’s things upstairs and he bickers back at her to cool her jets and earns himself a stern and still-flustered look. And it would all be so marvelously normal if the rest of her family were here with the television on full blast and Arya trying out a breakdancing move in the kitchen, with Robb talking sports with her father while Rickon tries popping wheelies in Bran’s chair and their mother good naturedly complains about all of it. She looks around the house now, tries to take it all in and find glimpses of her family’s personality, but it all looks remarkably unremarkable, the clean uncluttered stage of a house that comes fully furnished, and she supposes fleeing under the protection of WITSEC doesn’t give someone a lot of time to invest in interior decoration.

Something about that, something about all of it but something about that in particular, makes Sansa want to cry.
“Would you like tea? Coffee? It’s past lunch time, but I- oh, are you hungry? I’m roasting pork for
dinner but I can whip something up in no time. Lord, I feel so unprepared even though I’ve been
thinking about this moment for days now,” her mother says breathlessly, eyes bright and shining
with unshed tears as she glances from Sansa to Sandor and back again.

They’re standing in the little living room off the foyer, a little huddle of three with Rickon’s
footsteps overhead as he presumably flings her suitcase to the floor, judging by the thud and her
mother’s irritated glare up at the ceiling. But then the overexcited school girl smile comes back,
the trembling hands as Catelyn pulls on the sleeves of her sweater, as she touches her hair and
shakes her watch back down her wrist to where it sits more comfortably. Such nervous, excited
energy that Sansa herself feels, mingling here in her heart along with sorrow and loss and nostalgia.

“I’d love some tea,” Sansa smiles.

“You still take it with lemon?” her mother asks, reaching out to squeeze her hand, another probing
touch to make sure she’s still real.

“You know it,” she says, secretly delighted that this preference hasn’t changed, because the way
her mother’s eyes light up to still know her daughter is better than just about anything in the world.

“Sandor? What can I get you?” her mom asks after a smile and firm nod about the lemon.

“I’d go for a cup of coffee, if it’s no trouble,” Sandor says after a moment’s hesitation.

“Trouble? Are you kidding me? You could ask me for the moon right now and I’d happily oblige
you,” Cat says with a laugh, and she shakes her head to kiss Sansa’s hand before she brisk-
whisks away. “Honestly, the man brings me my daughter and thinks coffee is an inconvenience,”
she says, her voice fading as she disappears into the kitchen. “Besides, it’s a Keurig! It’s beyond
easy,” she says, shouting so they can hear her.

Sansa laughs, and something about that release makes the tears start to fall all over again. Just to be
here while her mother geeks out over something, just to stand in the same house as family, to share
the same air. The reality of it makes it no less surreal, and that is what finally makes her cry. I
could have died. Joffrey could have had me killed, and then I’d never be standing here as my mom
makes me tea. She claps a hand over her mouth when a sob falls out, lest the noise alert her
mother’s attention. The last thing she wants is to upset her mom again. She’s done enough
upsetting for a lifetime.

“Hey, now, come here,” Sandor says quietly, stepping into her, a big wall of a man in soft flannel,
an overwhelming comfort when he wraps an arm around her and cups her face in his other hand,
and how funny it is to her, that this right here is the norm now for her. “You’re all right, Red.
You’re fine.”

“I know, it’s just, it’s a lot to take in right now,” she mumbles against his chest, and she sniffs
sharply as she turns her head to the side and slides her arms around the trunk of his body. “I can’t
believe this is happening, that they’re- I was starting to think I’d never see her again, when you
came into my life. I thought I’d have nobody forever, and now, well. I’m just so glad you’re here
with me,” she sighs.

“Me, too, sweetheart.” he says, kissing the top of her head, his chin a wiry scrub against the silk of
her hair as he rests it on top of the kiss he dropped. “Me, too.”

“Me three, dude,” Rickon says from somewhere above them.
Sandor twists his body and effectively turns them both of them as they look up at the foyer staircase behind them, and she straightens as she looks up at her brother, a lanky scarecrow of a boy with messy hair and slouched jeans, eyes bright like the sky. He already looks like a man, or just about, even though she knows he’s still in high school, and oh how just a year can rob a person of shared experiences, of brother-knowledge. Did he go to prom? Does he have a girlfriend, a college major in mind, does he play any sports? She’s a spreadsheet with the cursor blinking in the first cell, column headers reading ROBB ARYA BRAN and RICKON, and all of the data is outdated. Well, almost all of it.

“Still sneaking up on people, hmm?” Sansa asks.

Her brother shrugs unapologetically and then grins at Sandor before he jogs down the rest of the stairs.

“I’ve watched your video probably like a million times, even though it’s got about a billion more hits than that by now. You’re like a famous person, man.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not exactly thrilled about that part,” Sandor says dryly, and even though he moves his arm from around her, when it drifts down and away his hand remains on the small of her back.

“Well, no, of course not,” Rickon says, crossing his arms over his chest as he leans back against the wall. “But I mean aside from that, it’s really freaking cool. I googled how to break a wine bottle like that. Did it hurt?”

“Let’s talk about something else,” Sansa says hastily; the last thing she wants to think about is that night. “I just want to leave the past where it is and focus on you guys and the present. Are um, are Arya, Bran and Robb coming?”

“Yeah, everybody’s on their way,” Rickon says with a blasé wave of his hand. “I sent them a text the second I knew it was you guys.”

“I didn’t even recognize you at first,” Sansa says fondly, leaning in to ruffle his wild, overgrown hair, and it doesn’t escape her attention that she has to reach up now instead of laterally.

“You’re one to talk, with your Hot Topic hair and big scary boyfriend,” Rickon grins, slapping her hand away as he ducks away from the touch and pushes past her into the living room.

“Oh shut up,” she says, feeling the creep of a blush when she can’t help but smile as they follow him.

“How tall are you, anyways?” he says, backing into the room until he bumps into the coffee table, his eyes on Sandor the entire time like he just got dropped into a wild animal park and ran into a bear.

“6’5’’,” Sandor says, glancing at Sansa with a sort of bewildered and wary amusement.

“Sick,” Rickon replies with a nod of impressed approval.

“Whatsoever you say, kid.”

It’s never been so clear to her before, how Sandor is so unused to be appraised in a positive light, and it makes her smile, makes her heart ache and makes her feel oddly proud of her brother for being so casual about Sandor’s scars. But then again he idolizes their disabled brother and so perhaps out of the ordinary just doesn’t faze him, and suddenly she misses Bran so acutely she can’t help but peer around Sandor to gaze out the living room’s bay window.
“When do you think everyone will show up?”

“I don’t know, they just said they were on their way,” Rickon shrugs. “Robb lives in Vancouver though so he’ll be later,” he says, gazing out the window with her, but when she gawks at him and he notices he laughs. “Vancouver, Washington, not Canada. Hey, I meant to ask, is that a CJ-5?” he asks.

Sansa looks at Sandor and shrugs, and he chuckles his grizzly gruff huff of laughter.

“Yeah, but I’m not sure of the year.”

“Looks like a ’78 to me,” Rickon says, jamming his hands in his pockets as he crosses the room to look more closely at the Jeep.

“Tea’s almost ready!” Catelyn calls, and right on cue there is the high tinny whistle of a kettle that pierces the air.

“Thanks mom!” Sansa says, and now she’s grinning like an idiot because she just got to shout at a parent across the house like old times, and it’s as blissful as any kiss, as rich as any dessert, as warm as any sunrise.

“You work on cars, right?” Sandor says, slinging his arm once more across Sansa’s shoulders.

“Hell yes I work on cars,” he grins. “Take ‘em apart, put ‘em back together, the works. As soon as I get that bad boy running it's mine,” he says, gesturing to the car in the driveway.

“That Jeep’s got a leaky radiator hose, mind taking a look at it?” Sandor says.

Sansa bites back a smile, because she knows an attempt to make friends just as well as the next girl, but Rickon is so eager and enthusiastic he doesn’t even catch on.

“Not at all, man, I’d be happy to. That’s a badass Jeep, man, props to you.”

“It’s not mine, actually, it’s a friend’s. She loaned it to us to keep us under the radar.”

“A woman owns that bad boy?” His eyebrows are up as he nearly presses his face to the window as he squints out at the old Jeep.

“Yes,” Sansa says with a smile as her brother lets loose a long, impressed whistle. “Her name is Shireen, and she’s the one who taught me how to make fire with my bare hands.”

“Badass Jeep for a badass lady. Hang on a sec,” he says, gaze dropping as he pulls his phone from his jeans pocket. And then he’s grinning again as he glances at the both of them before he hitches up his jeans and darts out of the room towards the front door.

“Rickon, wait, where are you going?”

Sansa’s heart pounds as she hurries after her brother. Her newfound and extremely healthy paranoia is not one to leave so quickly after everything she and Sandor have been through. God knows they made that mistake once already down in Sedona, the broken-wine-bottle-night that marked them as criminals even more than the Lannisters did. She looks back to Sandor with a worried frown, but he simply shrugs, gestures for her to follow her jumping-bean of a brother with his mayfly attention span.

“Rickon, what are you doing,” she hisses as loudly as she dares as she steps out on the rainy front
Which could be a stupid question, considering she can see perfectly well that he’s swagger-slouching he way down the gentle slope of the front lawn, but she just got back and she’ll be damned if another Stark disappears on her watch. Sansa knows without a doubt her mother couldn’t handle it. Not again, she thinks with a worried frown as she looks up and down the street before nervously following her brother, her ballet flats slipping on the wet grass. Another backwards glance to Sandor; another signature squint but this time with a nod instead of a wink.

“Keep it down with the first names when we’re outside,” Rickon says once she’s at his side on the root-buckled sidewalk between two oak trees. “Aliases and all that bullshit,” he says, a little braver with the swearing now that their mother’s out of ear shot.

“Okay, fine, so what are we doing out here? The rain’s only coming down harder,” she says, and even though Chicago is a thousand times colder right now, she still shivers from the damp.

“We’re waiting,” Rickon grins, rocking on his heels as he looks at her.

“For what?” she asks, linking her arm with his skinny one and resting her cheek on his shoulder, because she is his big sister and has been gone for so long, because he can just get over it for all she cares, because at least this way they are tethered together.

“Not for what, for who. Or whom, whatever,” he says, and he rolls his eyes at the anticipated grammar lesson, lifts his unoccupied arm as he points down the street to an oncoming silver car.

Sansa squeezes his arm and watches as the car slows to a stop in front of them, and when the faces of her brother Bran and sister Arya come into focus, once again she cannot help but run into the street.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

It only takes an offhand comment from Bran about how it feels more like Christmas today than last year’s holiday to get Rickon flipping TV channels to the holiday music station, to get Arya rummaging around for the bottles of champagne agents Tarth and Payne sent them for New Year’s. And then their mother tries to dress up dinner with some Stovetop Stuffing and before Sansa knows it Nat King Cole is crooning while corks pop and Bran loudly insists that because it was all his idea he should get a glass even if he doesn’t turn 21 for another few months.

There’s a jostle and hustle and bustle while everyone gets plates and silverware, Sandor a tall looming shadow in the corner holding a handful of forks, but when they turn to face the tiny dining room table, everyone stops.

“What’s gotten into you kids, come on, I have a hot dish coming through,” Cat says, but when they part like a sea for her she too stops and stares before looking up at each of them, and it’s clear she’s doing a headcount before she frowns and says “huh.”

“There’s only four chairs,” Rickon says.

“Wow, give this kid a scholarship for observation,” says Arya.

“Instead of what, interpretive dance?”

“There are five chairs, actually, if you count ones with wheels,” Bran says dryly.

“Yeah, but we always take one out when you come over,” Rickon retorts. “So it’s still four, smartass.”

“Jesus, Rickon, that literally makes five,” Arya laughs.

“This really is like Christmas,” their mom says with that breathlessly happy tone of voice, all dreaminess despite the bicker and snip of her children. “My cup really does runneth over today. Well, my table at least. Okay now, let’s see, how many of us are there? I don’t– damn, I don’t even think we’ll have enough chairs, even with the ones on the patio,” Cat says, and then she hmms, blowing a wisp of her bangs out of her eyes as she thinks.

“There’s six of us,” Sandor says after clearing his throat, voice a nice back-scratching rumble that makes Sansa’s gaze flick right to him.

“And when Robb and Dacey get here it’ll be nine, counting the baby,” Arya says.

“I’m afraid there’s just me tonight, actually,” a new voice says, and Sansa and Catelyn both gasp as everyone looks up and out of the room to the man standing in the living room.

“Robb,” Sansa whispers, setting her juice glass of champagne on the too-small dining table before she pushes through the cluster of people towards her eldest brother.
She screamed and nearly choked Arya in a death grip when her sister got out of the car an hour ago; she cried and laughed and plopped herself in Bran’s numb lap to hug him when Rickon got his chair out of Arya’s trunk and helped get him out of the car; she stared at her mother like she was a mirage before bolting across the street and throwing herself in her arms. But this is the last piece of her family puzzle and it’s a moment to savor. She drifts like smoke across the room towards him with a soft smile and her hand half outstretched, like he’s a colt about to shy and dart away. He doesn’t, instead simply stands there with a wincing sort of expression on his face, like he’s waiting for a beating instead of an embrace.

“I’m, uh, I’m sorry they couldn’t make it. Torrhen’s got a cold so Dace refused to let him so much as leave the house, let alone the state.” Auburn beard, sheepish smile, blues eyes as full of guilt and apprehension as Sansa’s likely were a day ago. “So it uh, it’s just me tonight. No cute baby buffer for the asshole of the family,” he mutters, bringing his gaze reluctantly to hers when they stand nearly toe to toe with one another.

“What are you talking about?” she says.

He huffs, a little like Sandor in that regard, though he’s slight to the other man’s bulk, and tonight all nervous fidget to the slow still burn of the person she’s fallen in love with. Robb sighs and shrugs.

“I don’t- mom didn’t say anything?”

“Of course not,” Catelyn says from the dining room.

Robb sighs.

“Oh just shut up, dummy,” she says, flinging her arms around him in as tight a hug as she can muster while she’s shaking so hard from happiness.

He is still a moment before he snaps to action, wrapping her up in that kind of big brother bear hug she hasn’t gotten in what feels like a hundred years, and he grunts when he lifts her a few inches off the floor before setting her down, and when they step back from each other she can see his eyes are red.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m so sorry, Sansa. We walked away from you and then I went and thought the worst of you on top of it all.”

“I’m sorry too,” she says, eyes a bright vivid burn from tears and the soreness of so lovely a sight as her brother standing in the same room as she. “For everything. For not coming with you, for taking so long to come to my senses.”

“I’m just so happy to see you,” he says, expression still pained even as he finally smiles.

“Join the fucking club,” Arya says, handing him a pint glass with three fingers of champagne in it, “and come grab a plate.”

An hour later Sansa sits on the floor next to her sister, the two girls wedged in the corner of the L-shaped sofa while Sandor and Rickon flank them on either ends, both in near identical pose as they rest their elbows on their knees, plate in one hand and fork in the other. Bran sits across from them with his plate in his lap and a viciously fought-for glass of champagne, while Robb and their mother sit in chairs on either side of him as everyone finishes their Sara Lee cheesecake that’s still
half frozen on the interior.

“Can I get anyone anything else? Rickon, no? Sandor, what about you? I can’t believe just one helping is enough, I mean, look at the size of you,” Cat says as she stands, already leaning over the coffee table in anticipation of Sandor handing over his plate.

“Jeez, mom, tighten your leash a little,” Bran says into his glass of champagne before taking a sip.

Robb, Arya and Rickon all descend into snorts of laughter though only poor Robb starts coughing on his dessert, and Bran uses his free hand to pound on his brother’s back. Sandor clears his throat and hands over his plate.

“I’d love some, thanks,” he says, glancing sidelong and down to Sansa as she grins up at him, and there’s the faintest tweak of his mouth there in the dark of his beard that she knows how to decipher now, the fleetest of grins, of teases, of want.

In a heartbeat she’s back in their motel room sitting on his lap, his hair in her hands as she kisses the dessert right off of him, all Look at me Look at me and full of love. A bright and prickling flush sweeps its way over her, and she’d love to blame the bubbly but it’s something far richer that makes her blush.

“Would you like another helping?” she asks as she sort-of-almost-gracefully gets to her feet, and before her mother can reach the plate she takes it from him. “Of the cheesecake, I mean.”

“Always,” he says, sitting back on the sofa as he gazes at her, and in two hours it feels like their first real private moment, a little egg of Sansa and Sandor here in the nest of her family. “You know me.”

“Does she now,” Arya says.

Sansa turns to look at her sister with a frown, watches as she sets her plate on the coffee table and leans back against her brother’s knee. Arya is motionless for once, the cool coil and poise of a serpent or tiger, all animal pounce as she looks past Sansa.

“Arya, don’t be rude,” Catelyn says with a sniff. “I need some help with all these plates, come to the kitchen and help your mother.”

“I’ll do it,” Sansa offers, widening her eyes in a pointed glare at her sister before she gingerly steps over Sandor’s feet, collecting plates as she goes. “I’m long overdue to help clear the table, I wager.”

“Thanks, Red,” Sandor says.

“Anytime,” she says over her shoulder, flashing him what she hopes is a dazzler of a smile before disappearing into the kitchen.

She licks her fingers after scooting the last slice of cheesecake on Sandor’s plate, and when she looks up her mother is smiling at her as she dunks dishes in soapy hot water that fills one of the sink’s stainless steel basins. She smiles back before the thing widens into an unstoppable giddy grin, her cheeks little apples of ache as she tries and fails to compose a straight face. Finally her mother laughs.

“I have to admit, whenever I imagined you coming home to me, I never pictured you like this.”

“Like what? Oh, my hair? I know it’s a big change, but I have to admit, I sort of love it.”
“No, not the hair, though—well, no, not the hair,” her mother says, shutting off the water and drying her hands as she turns to lean against the counter. “No, I mean, I never thought you’d come back happy. Strong, yes, or at least I hoped. You always were strong, and something of a chameleon if the situation called for it, but I saw you, Sansa. I watched you up until we were moved, and you were—oh, ducks, you were so unhappy. You thought you were on top of the world but your eyes never really shone. Not like they shine now. I almost can’t believe it.”

Sansa chuckles and shakes her head, turns to lean against the counter next to her mother with the plate of Sandor’s cheesecake still in hand. Absently she brushes her finger against the bright red cherry goo glopped on top and licks it.

“I am happy, mom, I—”

“No, me neither,” Sansa says.

And then the grin does die down, to something sweeter and simpler, the small smile of a little camper under desert stars, of sharing French fries and Frosties, of offering someone trust and having him open his hand to say Yes, I will hold onto this as carefully as he would a bright orange rose petal. Sansa hugs herself and sighs, gazes down at the almost believable faux wood vinyl tile. “Oh,” her mother murmurs.

When Sansa looks up her mother is smiling too, but it’s shrewd and clinical where Sansa’s is all gauze and whimsy.

“So you love him too, then.”

It’s taken her too long and too much sacrifice to get here to lie to her mother now, and the kitchen is too small anyway to house any secrets. Sansa nods. “Yes.”

It is her mother’s turn to grin, turn girlish with the tuck of her dark auburn hair behind her ear, and for a moment Sansa wonders if that’s the way she smiled at her father when they fell in love all those years ago. Cat clears her throat and brushes her fingers under her eyes, blinks a few times before she finally nods too.

“Well, good. I had a feeling when I talked on the phone with him in Sedona, he—well. He may be scary and have no idea how to graciously exit a restaurant, but he’s a thousand times better than Joffrey ever could be, so I’m glad. I’m glad he loves you and you love him back. It’s high time you had something worthwhile to dig your fingers into, and speaking of that,” she says, swatting Sansa’s hand when she plucks a cherry off of Sandor’s cheesecake, and the syrupy thing falls back to the plate as they both laugh. “You better take that to him before you eat it all and have to explain yourself.”

“Thanks, mom,” she says, and her mother swats her on the butt with the dish towel when she turns to leave, and Sansa shrieks and darts out of the kitchen, still licking her fingers and all happy buzzy love when she walks into the living room.

She frowns.

It looks like Sandor’s on trial here, the way everyone seems to have shifted their attention and even
their positions as Arya sits on the sofa next to Rickon, back against him as she faces Sandor on the other side of the L-shaped couch. Sandor’s gaze flicks to her but only for a moment; whatever is happening he’s been put on the edge but he’s never one to ask for help, never one to back down from a challenge. That challenge used to be her. Now, it appears, it is her siblings; namely, Arya.

“Yeah, but the news said—”

“The news also publishes horoscopes, and those are about as much bullshit as what the papers and internet have said about me.”

“So you didn’t kill your brother.”

“No.”

“But you did kill that guy in your apartment?”

Sandor sighs and shifts his large frame on the sofa.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because,” he says, and now when he looks at Sansa his gaze doesn’t drop away. “Because he was there to hurt your sister.”

Her brothers and sister all turn as one to face her, and it would be funny if it weren’t so serious, seeing them all gape at her until Sandor speaks again, and like little birds in a cage they all turn to face him again. Somewhere in the house a phone rings and their mother calls out I’ll get it as everyone ignores it all.

Sandor glances to Arya. “Isn’t that enough for you, for chrissakes?”

The settle of a sharp grey gaze back to her, back here where it belongs, she thinks, and she’d speak up to defend him if she thought he needed it, but she knows that right now he needs to do the talking. This is shapeless clay, here, and he needs to mold the moment for himself.

“You barely knew her then,” Arya protests. “Why kill someone for her when you don’t even know her?”

Sansa’s heart starts to pound and her mouth starts to water around the thick slather of sugar and syrup on her tongue, because it’s not like they’ve really hashed out every little – every huge – thing that’s happened since they met. There’s the heavy way he’s looking at her from across the room, and she knows how he can look when he’s spattered in blood and waking her up, she knows he can feel in the middle of the night when he buries his face in her hair, but this? This she doesn’t.

“She was all alone. She didn’t have anyone and she needed someone. I know what that feels like,” he says, and just like that she gets it, she knows what he means, she remembers what he told her in Benjen’s kitchen, and she wonders if maybe he picked up that baseball bat for his younger self a little bit that night, if he tried to protect a past self as much as he did her, and there is something painfully precious about that thought. “She was by herself and she was scared, so I stepped up. It’s not the first time I’ve done it and I reckon it won’t be the last.”

“And you’ve followed her all the way out here, for what? For money?”

“No,” he snaps before he sighs, and he scrubs his face with his hands, two dry palms that slide
down his face before pushing up, all the way past his forehead and into his hair. “I didn’t do it for money, all right?” he says with a defeated sort of calm to his words, and he looks up at her again, and Sansa smiles because she knows what he’s going to say. “I came here because I fell in love with her.”

“Well that’s a pretty good reason,” Robb says.

“It’s okay, I guess,” Rickon says, making Bran laugh outright with his head thrown back.

Sansa glances over when Bran looks back at her, his intelligent eyes a bright flicker as he lifts his eyebrows by way of question. She nods, bites her lip and grins and he nods back, a *Well I’ll be damned* look on his face.

“Good for you, San,” he says.

“Thanks,” she replies, holding a plate of cheesecake, cherries and sugar, and it doesn’t hold a candle to the sweet spike of heat she feels when she looks back at Sandor.

Arya turns around and looks up at Sansa, opens her mouth to speak until her eyes flick to somewhere beyond Sansa’s shoulder.

“Sandor?” Catelyn says behind her, and Sansa turns with everyone else to face her mother, who is holding a cordless telephone away from her face with her hand cupped over the base.

Sansa looks back at him in time to see him stand swiftly, eager as he is to escape the third degree.

“Yes ma’am,” he says.

Arya snorts a laugh, and Sansa and Bran glare at her as one until she swallows it down, listing to the side when Rickon elbows her.

“Sandor, it’s Agent Martell, your friend Bronn’s partner? She’s at the hospital with him and she’d like to speak with you.”

If looks were needles then he’d be a pincushion, the way everyone stares at him as he extracts himself from the cluster of couch and coffee table and chairs, Robb pushing Bran out of his way so he can scoot his own chair back to give Sandor more room. His irritation and discomfort drop away to give room to the nauseated roil of nerves that sloshes around in his gut while terrifying words fire like bullets in his brain.

Your friend.

Hospital.

*She’d like to speak with you.*

He frowns as he looks at Catelyn, stands in front of her like a fool until she holds the phone out even closer to him, and for a few moments Sandor stares at it, not wanting to touch it, not wanting to hear what this woman has to tell him. They’ve talked to Ariane Martell a couple of times on the road, ever since Sansa’s mother told him to keep in touch with her every day when they spoke on the phone back in Arizona. It all been very clipped and professional, a brisk back and forth of ‘What’s your ETA’ and ‘Not for another day or so’ and ‘Call me tomorrow’ and ‘Sure thing.’
But now?

You can tell yourself to act like an adult all you want but there are some moments when every fiber of your being screams no, screams for your mother and desperately wants to run to bed and pull the covers over your head. But few people have that luxury, and Sandor isn’t one of them. He never has been.

“Can I uh, is there another room I can go to?” he asks finally, hating that his voice breaks like a twig in the middle of his words. “To talk in private.”

“Of course! Oh yes, um, down the hall past the bathroom is a spare bedroom. Well, I tried using it as a sewing room, but you don’t care about that, naturally. I’m sorry, I’m rambling, it’s down the hall there to the right,” Catelyn says, taking a step back once he nods and takes her phone.

Sandor waits until the door is closed before he clenches his jaw and puts the phone to his ear, wondering what Arianne Martell is going to tell him, knowing it won’t be good.

“Hello?”

“Jesus Christ, you took forever. I think I just about died of boredom just now. I already died in the ambulance and on the table, but I think this one was the worst of them,” Bronn says, and then he laughs, and it’s tired and worn out and froggy, but it’s still all him, irreverent and who-gives-a-shit despite his words.

An overpowering sense of relief floods Sandor, makes him feel so weak he needs to sit down, and he does so on the foot of a tidily made twin bed. He rests his elbow on his knee and his head in his hand, closes his eyes against the very real fear that something bad had happened to Bronn. Well, he thinks, something worse.

"Dammit, man, Cat said it was Arianne calling. I thought you were dead."

"I stole the phone from her, and like I told you, I was dead."

“You gonna tell me what the hell happened to you or you just going to leave me with that little tidbit?”

“Well, I’ve never been much good at being a tease. Always more of a sure thing kind of guy, so I guess I can fill you in,” Bronn says, and then there is a feminine murmur in the background. “No, baby, I’m fine. Go call Jeyne and fuss after her for a second.”

Sandor frowns. “Jeyne?” He is overwhelmed and confused, thinking of hospitals and dying in an ambulance, and this only proves to muddle him further.

“Don’t change the subject,” Bronn says before he sighs grandly. “I was about to talk about me.”

And talk he does. Sandor sits there and stares sightlessly at the sewing table against the wall opposite the bed, listens in mute horror as Bronn lists in rather graphic detail his recent ordeal. Multiple stab wounds, self-defense he can’t remember, Thai food everywhere, blood on the stairs in a grand house that almost, almost started to feel like home to Sandor before they left. There’s sorrow in him, to think of that light and airy place being tainted with mortal struggle and that pervasive, inescapable discomfort one feels when personal space has been intruded upon.


“Yeah, talk to me. It fucking sucked. You uh, you remember back in Afghanistan?”
He exhales and nods even though Bronn can’t see him. “Of course I remember,” he mutters, hauling himself to his feet as he crosses the room, the start of a back and forth pace as he picks up tchotchkes here and there, hefts them in his hands before putting them back.

“Yeah, well, I appreciate even more what you did for me back then, because this shit hurts. Although I assume getting shot might be better than getting stabbed,” Bronn muses, as if he is comparing boxers to briefs, mints to gum, coffee to tea.

“I think in the end they both suck about the same,” Sandor says with an incredulous sort of chuckle. “How long are you going to be in the hospital? Are you guys still in Chicago if you’re getting attacked? Is Margaery okay?”

“I just got flown to the hospital in Milwaukee where Arianne lives, and Margaery came with me. The doctor here thinks I’ll need at least another week, possibly two before I can think about getting discharged. It’s a fucking drag but the drugs are good. Besides, when I get out we have to stay with Arianne anyways, unless we gotta throw Margaery and me into WITSEC as well, which she doesn’t want since she’s still working the case.”

“Christ, Bronn, this is all insane. No, wait, this is a fucking nightmare. Can’t her grandmother help her out? What’s her name, the Attorney General.”

“Yeah,” Bronn says with another sigh, a sad one that cuts off the joviality he has even while discussing a near-death experience. “About her.”

Sandor closes his eyes as he learns of Olenna’s demise, winces and hisses an inhale as Bronn gives him ever gruesome, twisted detail, down to morbidly implanted DNA evidence linking Bronn’s attacker to the scene. The macabre drama he’s gotten himself wrapped up in is nauseating, shocking, beyond disturbing. And yet to be free of it would mean abandoning Sansa to the mania of it and there’s no way in hell he’d ever let that happen.

“As shitty as that little fucker was, we’re 90% sure Ramsay didn’t kill Olenna, which means someone planted the uh, well. It means someone tampered with her body to make it look like she was raped.”

“Good goddamn, man,” Sandor says with a wince and an involuntary shake of his head, like he just bit into something sour. “How do you know it wasn’t him?”

“Because he was too busy trying to kill me at the time of her death. There’s grainy footage from Olenna’s office building’s surveillance showing a man entering the lobby around the same time I was blowing that cunt’s brains out. He’s wearing a coat that strongly resembles Petyr Baelish’s, which was positively I.D.’d by a new eye witness on that same night. Anyways, he was the only one to enter her building for a couple of hours or something, until the cleaning crew found her body.”

“Who I.D.’d the coat?”

“A guy named Jon Snow. Or Jean Neige, if you want to get all Ooh-la-la about him, which believe me, there’s plenty of chicks who do. Even Arianne stands up a little straighter when that guy’s in the room, and I’m sure Margaery’s watched him leave a room, not that I mind. I mean it’s going to be months before I’m back to my old self, not that I’m old or anything, if you feel me,” he says, his voice stretching out into dips and drawls as he goes on, the inevitable slur as a fresh round of pain meds likely starts to take hold. “Not that I wouldn’t let her feel me, man. Gotta be gentle though,” he says with a drawn out chuckle. “I don’t know if they told you, but I got stabbed a buncha fuckin’ times.”
“Bronn, wait a second, back up, who is this eye witness? How can you trust him?”

“Well, now that we’ve talked about me a little bit, I guess we can talk about Jeyne and Jon.”

“Jeyne,” Sandor repeats, and he’s heard that name enough times out of Sansa’s mouth to finally click it into place, the importance of that name. “You don’t mean the dead girl Sansa used to live with? The best friend and roommate?”

“Hang on, I’m starting to see double right now. Margie!” he shouts away from the phone. “Margie, come here, baby, I need you to take over. This fuckin’ phone feels like it weighs as much as a brick. Bye, Sandor, it was good to hear from you, thanks for calling.”

Sandor chuckles again, shakes his head as he inhales and looks up at the ceiling, ignoring the tight sort of ache he’s got in his heart right now.

“Anytime, brother.”

“Thanks again for saving my life all those years ago,” Bronn drift-drowsy mutters.

“Anytime, brother,” Sandor repeats because he truly means it, and then he grins because if anyone can take a joke at this time it’s his friend. “Though try not to be so goddamn reckless with it, next time.”

“Next time!” Bronn laughs, and then he coughs, and then he groans. “Ow, fuck. Hey, there’s my girl.”

“Bronny, give me the phone,” a woman says in the background, and there is a rustle and a high feminine sigh before the voice loudens. “Sandor? It’s me, Margaery.”

“I figured as much,” Sandor says. “Hey, is he really okay? I mean, he could have his legs blown off and he’d still be talking about tits and ass. Sorry,” he says after a moment.

“Don’t worry about it,” she says, and for the first time since he’s met her, Margaery Tyrell sounds tired. “And yes, he’s all right. He sleeps a lot which is the best thing for him. The flight here didn’t jostle him much, either, and the doctor says he’s doing a good job of healing up. Plus he tells me he loves me about every thirty seconds, which is nowhere near as annoying as it sounds,” she says, plum pudding sweet and smug mingling now with the fatigue in her voice.

“Bronn said something about a guy named Petyr Baelish,” Sandor says, and he’d be irritated at how goddamn distracted these two are if it weren’t for the reasons behind it. “That’s the guy that was looking for Sansa at my apartment building,” he says.

“Yes,” she says bitterly, the tone of voice changing like the leaves in autumn, the bright green-apple fading to muddy brown. “Yes, that guy. We’re fairly sure it’s him on camera at my grandmother’s firm but it’s inconclusive,” she says.

He thinks of how Sansa described him once. *Super gross and super smart.* Sandor suppresses a shudder. Super gross indeed, after what Bronn’s just told him about poor old Olenna.

“So why don’t you guys arrest him?”

“He’s MIA right now. O’Hare is the last place he was seen, and we think he bailed after ki- after what he did to granny. We think maybe he flew to Arizona since that’s where the video of you was shot. Great performance there, by the way. You made yourself look like a lunatic.”
Sandor bristles.

“Considering what happened to Bronn, I don’t give a shit. The Lannisters and their henchmen are the fucking crazy ones, Margaery, creepy bastards doing unspeakable things. I’ll do whatever it takes to keep her away from those sick little perverts.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” she sighs, and then she chuckles wearily. “Yes, baby, I love you too.”

“All right, so tell me,” he says, and something stirs itself in his short-term memory, something Bronn said before the morphine haze. “Does this have to do with Sansa’s friend, the one who was killed instead of her?”

“Oh, well,” Margaery says. “Is Sansa there? I don’t want you telling her this until I can call her later tonight once I’m back at Arianne’s. I don’t want her freaking out before she has a chance to talk to her.”

“Tell her what?” Sandor says slowly, already knowing the answer, already disliking the idea of keeping something from her. “Chance to talk to who?”

“Jeyne Poole is alive and she desperately wants to speak with Sansa. Bronn, here, drink this before you fall asleep, okay?”

“Jesus Christ, are you serious?”

“Serious as a stab wound,” she says, and in the background he can hear Bronn cough out a laugh. “Sorry, he likes that joke for some screwed up reason. Anyways, that’s not even the half of it, what she’s been through. You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

Sandor’s heart beats and his mind reels with all this new information, with all these new revelations, but in for a penny in for a pound, and so he opens the bedroom door and pokes his head out in the hall. There is nothing but familial chatter, a lazy, cheerful argument over the remote control, the clatter of glasses on a coffee table and then a high peal of laughter that he knows without a doubt is Sansa’s. For a moment he can perfectly picture the look on her face when he will tell her about her friend Jeyne, because there’s no way in hell he’s hiding this from her, no matter what Margaery says, and he’ll make sure she’s braced for the worst of it before talking to her friend. Sandor steps back in the room and shuts the door.

“Go ahead and try me,” he says.

“Tell me again,” Arya whispers in the dark, her forehead not quite touching Sansa’s though they’re lying close enough to one another that Sansa can feel the warmth radiating from her. “I still can’t get over it.”

They are both in their mother’s bed, huddled face to face on what should be their father’s side of the bed while their mother sleeps fitfully on hers, and it is long past midnight in this quiet little house. Robb took Bran home before heading back to Vancouver, and while Rickon sleeps in his bed and Sandor sleeps downstairs in the sewing room, Arya and Sansa cannot sleep. Though that is due as much to the fact that they haven’t stopped talking since they curled up in here as it is to the discovery about Jeyne.

Sansa sniffs against the shoulder of one of her old sleep shirts that her mother held onto for all this time. Her eyes are puffy from crying though she stopped hours ago after talking to Jeyne for nearly
two, laughter and disbelief, happiness and horror and so many, many tears. It’s a miracle. It’s a tragedy. The sound of Jeyne’s quiet voice still blouses and blooms in her mind, the flit and flutter of a sundress on a clothesline, warm and soft despite everything that has happened. Sansa hopes she will dream of it, whenever she manages to fall asleep. She clears her throat as loudly as she dares with her mother sleeping on the other side of Arya.

“They’re all staying together up in Milwaukee. Jeyne and Jon – that’s the man who found her – and Margaery and Bronn. Well, Bronn is still in the hospital, I guess,” she says, frowning in the dark at the trauma he went through, though the split-second struggle he survived is nothing compared to what Jeyne suffered for so many weeks.

“So he got stabbed by the same psycho who kidnapped Jeyne.”

“Yes,” Sansa whispers.

It’s such a strange sad feeling, to be so overjoyed and simultaneously so mortified. With one sucked-in breath she learned from Sandor that Jeyne was alive, and then with a relieved exhale she found out the cost. She pulls the covers higher up her body, up to her chin so she can smell the same old dryer sheets her mother still uses, and she tries to take comfort in the familiarity.

“San, that could have been you,” Arya says after a long pause, and the mattress creaks as she scoots forward, close enough to touch foreheads now. “That monster could have done that to you, or could have killed you.”

“I know,” she whispers, and she doesn’t mean to make Jeyne’s ordeal about her but it would be a lie to even suggest that the thought didn’t cross her mind at least half a dozen times tonight. “I know, but it wasn’t. It was poor Jeyne in the end, all alone until Jon found her. All alone, terrified and hopeless.”

For several minutes they are quiet, and Sansa listens to the sounds of their mother’s breathing mingling with Arya’s, and she’s halfway convinced her sister has fallen asleep when finally she speaks.

“I guess I shouldn’t have given Sandor so much shit, huh,” Arya says quietly, voice muffled against the sheets.

Sansa smiles.

“Maybe not, considering everything he’s done for me,” she whispers. “You can’t believe all the stuff they wrote about him. I mean come on, did you read the crap they wrote about me?”

“His brother worked for them though. And they are horrible, Sansa, you of all people should understand why I immediately thought the worst.”

“I guess my trusting him didn’t help matters then, considering once I trusted Joffrey and Cersei, huh,” she murmurs, and it’s not a guilt trip but just a matter of fact truth that she is painfully aware of, and part of her is desperate to share that awareness.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Arya says quickly.

“I know you didn’t, believe me, I know. And honestly, it was sweet in a way, seeing you get all bulldog and worked up for me. It definitely wasn’t like that between us back in the good old days.”

“Hey, you’re my sister, okay? Whatever happened back then, it’s back then. It’s over and done with. But now after everything’s that happened, I don’t know. Bran was the one to knock some
Sansa thinks of her brother’s bright-eyed look downstairs in the living room earlier that night, the little devious spark of approval for her falling in love with such an intense man, and it warms her heart to think of him defending her all those months ago. Now she wishes he’d slept over too so she could go wake him up with a bear hug.

“Really?” she marvels.

“Yes,” Arya whispers. “How we’re all free to do what we want and to make our own choices. How you weren’t selling us out when you decided to stay but just making a decision for yourself. Not that- well,” she trails off.

“Not that it wound up being a good choice, in the end,” Sansa murmurs. *But it led me to Sandor, so there’s that.*

“Nobody’s perfect,” her sister says, and Sansa can hear her smile. “Least of all your suspicious loud mouth sister, huh?”

Now it’s Sansa’s turn to smile. “It kind of reminded me of Sandor, to be honest.”

“Whatever,” Arya scoffs, but there’s an amused tone to her voice that makes Sansa exhale a laugh through her nose. “So you really love that guy, huh?”


“Hmm,” Arya says, pitch black ponder as she passes judgment. “Well, I definitely like him more than Joffrey.”

Sansa lifts one hand from under the covers to swat her sister’s shoulder.

“Hey!” Arya hisses.

“That’s not saying much and you know it.”

“I know, I know, I’m only joking. Look, he’s big and tough and sort of terrifying, and that’s not even taking into consideration those scars. We all thought there was something wrong with the photo uploads when the newer pictures were posted.”

“His scars aren’t that bad,” Sansa murmurs. She has touched them and kissed them, has watched them move with him when he speaks or laughs, has pressed her face to them when he moves inside her. She is half tempted to say *His scars are beautiful* but she doesn’t want to wake her mother with Arya’s laughter, so instead she just hums and says, “and in my opinion they kind of suit him. He’s so busy. All that texture,” she says, thinking of his beard and his scars, the hair on his arms and the wool of his cap she borrows now more often than not.

“All those tattoos.”

Sansa laughs, turns to bury her face against the soft mattress in order to muffle the noise. “Yes,” she says when she’s recovered. “Yes, those too.”

“I never in a million years thought you’d be with a guy like Sandor,” Arya says.

“He may look all tough and mean but honestly, the way he is with me,” she says, words trailing off into a smile and then a dreamy sort of sigh. “It’s like that song, 'A Sunday Kind of Love.' Sweet
and real, honest and gentle, if you can believe it,” she says, though there are significantly rougher
moments the two of them enjoy that she has no intention of discussing in her mother’s
bedroom. Thank god the lights are off, she thinks as her cheeks burn from the sheer thought of him
above her, below her, all around and inside out, a lovely heady consumption that makes her want to
sigh.

“Sunday kind of love, huh. So he makes you happy.”

“Yes, very.”

“And he makes you feel safe, huh.”

“Beyond a doubt.”

“All right,” Arya says, stifling a yawn. “All right, San, then I approve.”

“Oh well, don’t hurt yourself with all that effort over there,” Sansa says with a gust of quiet
laughter. “And what about you, hmm? Are you single? You guys’ve been out here for a little over
a year, there’s got to be someone.”

“Well, there was this sort of fling I had with one of my roommates, but lately there’s another guy
I’ve been seeing.”

“Oh yeah?” Sansa smiles. “Like, boyfriend/girlfriend-type seeing him or more casual?”

“Like fucking-type seeing him, but I don’t know if that makes it more or less casual,” Arya says
with her grin-voice in full effect.

“All right, that’s enough,” their mother says with a groan, the mattress moving when she rolls over.
“This is the last thing I want to hear as I try to fall back asleep. The last thing I want to hear ever.”

Sansa and Arya erupt into fits of giggles that become so infectious and impossible to tamp down
that soon her sister is out-and-out laughing hysterically with her beet-red face buried under the
pillow. Eventually Catelyn sits up, and though she mutters and complains and groused, when she
finally turns on her bedside lamp Sansa can see the poor attempt at hiding a smile in their mother’s
expression.

“You’re going to wake up your brother if you two can’t get ahold of yourselves,” Catelyn says as
she sips her water and rubs her eyes. “You’re both as bad now as you were when you were in
middle school.”

“I think Arya’s even worse,” Sansa grins, sitting up as well as she looks down at her sister,
and oh, but this little slumber party is what dreams are made of, what they’ve been made of since
she turned her back on them.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” Arya says from under the pillow. “I didn’t think you were awake. I thought
you took sleeping pills for chrissakes.”

“Yes, well, I didn’t want to take one tonight and be all groggy in the morning now that Sansa’s
back. Although right now I’m seriously regretting it,” she says with a sigh as she take a sip from
her glass of water. “Good lord, Arya, the mouth on you these days.”

“What can I say, I’m giddy from all this excitement,” her sister says when Sansa pulls the pillow
off her head, and she twists onto her back and grins up at the ceiling.
“More like horny,” Sansa says.

“Sansa,” their mother gasps.

“Definitely horny,” Arya laughs.

“Girls!”

“Who’s horny?” Rickon asks, all sleepy-rumple and hair standing on end as he leans against the open door, and Sansa and Arya look at each other for a split second before bursting into laughter.

“Mom is,” Arya wheezes.

“Oh for Pete’s sake,” Cat snaps.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

I have a lot of people to thank for this chapter! Sophie for the French, Alice of Alonso for the law talk, and last but most def not the least, my boo Bex for the hockey talk. Clearly I am hopeless all by myself. <3<3<3 Thanks so much lovely ladies!

Picset

“You poor dear heart, I am so sorry for what you have been through,” the woman Daenerys says over the Skype connection on the laptop, her words coming just a hair earlier than her mouth shapes them.

Jeyne winces out a smile and tries to meet the woman’s digitized gaze a moment before giving up and looking down at her hands. Poor thing. Broken thing. How tragic. She has heard so much of this in just a few days and already the words are starting to weigh heavy on her.

It’s late here in Arianne’s place, but none of them are asleep. Jon is here with her and Margaery has been leap frogging from one phone call to the next while Arianne has done more or less the same until she abandoned it all for an hour run on the treadmill in her bedroom. And so there is no reason to be quiet at 2am, here in this dead end full of restless and unhappy people.

“Jon has been very kind to me,” she says by way of reply since a thank you is clearly out of the question.

But what else does one say to the sympathizers? It’s still a strange notion for her to reply in the first place, given how long she was commanded to live in silence. She saved the screaming for her dreams, and apparently still does, given how many times Jon shakes her awake with a look of utter fear in his eyes. Even so, he is the only one who can coax her back to calm; Arianne tried once and Jeyne nearly tore her own hair out in terror, the woman’s full mouth shapes her words so similarly to his.

Jeyne murmurs and closes her eyes, shakes her head slightly and looks back up at the screen. So far this can’t be doing their cause much good, so she tries on another smile, thinks of the countless retail jobs she had in college and all the ways they trained her face to lie.

“I am glad to hear it,” Daenerys smiles, glancing to Jon who sits beside Jeyne, close enough that she can feel the warmth of him. “If he behaved any differently I would be extremely disappointed.”

“I have done my best, Dany,” Jon says, leaning forward a bit in his seat towards the laptop on the dining room table that is littered with papers, file folders and old cups of coffee. “But how are you two doing over there? You know, I’ve been speaking with Margaery and—”

“We are fine,” Daenerys says with her pot de crème voice and a smile to match. “We are fine, aside from being extremely worried about you.”

“No need to worry any more, we are safe, with the FBI and in another city. Another state, even.
I’m sorry we couldn’t contact you until now, Arianne wanted to make sure everything she had was clean, so she had to get another laptop from work.”

Jeyne gazes around the living room as they talk, even though she’s already memorized everything. It’s a lovely apartment, really, soft overstuffed sofas the color of chocolate with plum plump pillows, a couple of orchids in the window with their greenhouse-raised blossoms still intact, but still, Jeyne misses the frankness of the Omni hotel she stayed at with Jon until they were driven to Milwaukee. This place may be the exact opposite from her porcelain prison but it’s still jarring. Sensuality and all it holds and threatens makes her uncomfortable, just as much as standing under a stream of cold water did. Promises, promises. Arianne waters her orchids with ice cubes. Jeyne knows how that feels.

“Dany, please, try to see reason, here.”

“Jeyne? Jeyne, what do you think about that? Jon told me you don’t have any family in Chicago,” Daenerys says.

She blinks and brings her attention back to the Skype session. “I’m- I’m sorry, what did you ask? I um, I lost you a moment,” she says.

I was wondering if orchids are stronger or weaker than shrinking violets. No, she thinks. Surviving violets.

“The connection froze a moment,” Jon adds helpfully, glancing at Jeyne with a serious half smile that she has come to identify as his personality in a nutshell. Humorous and quick-witted but slow to show either, cards played closed to his chest and emotions tucked away. It’s all very relieving to her. She smiles back and looks to Daenerys on the screen.

“I asked if you would be willing to come back to France with Jon, to stay here with me.”

Jeyne’s eyes widen and before she can help herself she sits back in her chair and huffs out a laugh of surprise. France. Collegiate dream, high school fantasy. Her parents were too busy and too poor and now they are too dead. Apparently all it takes for a dream vacation is a kidnapping. She shakes her head, still not quite believing what she’s hearing.

“No? You have family then? A boyfriend, an aunt of your own perhaps?”

There is a middle aged cousin she hasn’t seen since a family reunion in the late 90s living down in Boca Raton. Jeyne shakes her head.

“No, there’s not really anybody.”

“Well then it’s settled. I cannot bear the thought of you staying over there by yourself when Jon leaves.”

“Jon’s leaving?” Jeyne asks, turning to stare at him in full, and her heart beats so loud she’s afraid someone will hear it, and then she’s reminding herself that it is all right to be heard, again.

“I’ve booked his ticket and I will be happy to book yours,” Daenerys says, her eyes leaving Jeyne’s as she clearly pulls up another window on her own computer screen. “First class ticket, direct flight from O’Hare. It’s right here, just give me the go ahead.”

College freshman Jeyne sits forward while survivor Jeyne clasps her shaking hands on the edge of the dining room. Finally visit France. Run away. Stay your ground. Be abandoned. Her headspace echoes like it’s an empty library. The sound of someone in the shower can be faintly discerned from down the narrow hallway. She wishes she had on another sweater.
“W-when is Jon leaving?” she asks, squeezing her eyes shut tight a moment as she wills her voice to stop mimicking the tremor in her hands.

“In two days.”

“No, Jeyne,” Jon murmurs to her before turning to glare back at his aunt. “I am not,” he says a little overloud, so much so that Margaery peeks out of one of the bedrooms down the hall with her phone pressed to her ear and a frown creasing her forehead. She narrows her eyes and disappears after Jon shakes his head at her.

“Yes, you are. I am the one who dispatched you there and I am the one calling you back. Enough is enough.”

“And that is why I think you’re being unreasonable, Tante,” Jon says, something acidic to his voice when he addresses his aunt more formally. “Enough is not enough, we need more. It is painfully clear, at least to me as the only one of us who is over here, that we need to pin them down and make them suffer.”

“How can you suggest that when that poor girl is sitting next to you?”

“She’s not some poor girl, Dany, she’s Jeyne, and she’s a fucking survivor,” Jon spits, and when Jeyne frowns and looks out at the orchids lining up in the darkened living room window, he rests his hand atop the clutch of hers and squeezes her lightly. “She’s sitting here willing to go up against the Lannisters but she can’t do it alone. All she needs is someone to stand up with her, and that person should be you.”

“No, Jon, you don’t understand. I was a victim once too, a poor girl living alone and crying in the dark,” she says. “Believe me, Jeyne, I am truly sorry for what has happened to you, but I will not subject myself to their slinking, foul cruelty another time when all we have is one woman’s testimony against an entire army of those bastards. No offense to you, Jeyne, but it’s not enough.”

She doesn’t bother replying.

“Damn you, Jon, how dare you compare the two! They are utterly incomparable, to be orphaned at a year old and be terrorized for nearly a month. Don’t you dare pull your male simplification bullshit on me right now,” she seethes, her impeccable English tied together and slightly tangled now as her temper thickens her accent.

Tyrion materializes behind Dany with a sort of expression Sansa used to call the ‘Oh shit dad’s home’ look. “I’m afraid that might be some of my fault there,” he says. “One too many times of me trying to cut to the point.”

The shower shuts off with the creak of tired plumbing, and after several moments of listening to Dany and Tyrion snap and parry, Arianne walks out, barefoot and wet in a bathrobe as she towels
off her curling wet hair. She smiles at Jeyne and seems to know to keep her distance, drifting past
the dining table they're seated at and into the kitchen, the smell of shampoo and the warm waft of
humidity in her wake. Jeyne looks away.

Jon waves off his aunt and her boyfriend impatiently with his free hand, raps those knuckles on
the table to get their attention. “It’s not like I have been sitting on my ass over here, Dany. I have hours
and hours’ worth of texts between Cersei Lannister and Petyr Baelish, the man they think killed
Margaery’s grandmother. That’s not just nothing,” he says.

“Actually,” Arianne says with the pop of a cork.

Jeyne and Jon turn as one towards each other, their knees touching as they look back to watch her
pour out a glass of wine, and the movement drags Jeyne's clasped hands off the table and onto their
crowded kneecaps, the cover of Jon's still draped over her knuckles. He's watching her when her
lowered gaze lifts to his, and when she smiles his hand flexes on top of hers a second time before
they both turn to look at Arianne once more.

The FBI agent raises her eyebrows sympathetically as she lifts the glass to her mouth and takes a
sip, as nonchalant and blasé as if she stood before them in an evening gown instead of a damp
bathrobe. “I’ve reviewed the data, Jon, and I’m sorry but it’s not enough to go forward with a
warrant. It’s definitely not enough to pin anything on Petyr or even on Cersei.”

Jon sighs just as a hot and heavy string of what can only be very angry French explodes out of the
computer.

The unfamiliar sound of footsteps on carpet makes Sandor open his eyes in the dark, the sugars
from champagne and frozen dessert having already made sleep fitful and near-impossible, so when
the door creaks open he’s already posting up on an elbow with his other hand on the gun under his
pillow. The familiar silhouette makes him exhale and let go of the grip, and he rolls onto his side
when Sansa steps into the room and blends into the darkness as she closes the door behind her.

“What’re you doing in here, Red? I thought you were sleeping upstairs with your mother and
sister.”

“Couldn’t sleep,” she says, though her voice is smooth and sweet and low, not the grouchy whine it
takes on when she’s unhappy.

He scoots back once she’s crossed the room and rests a knee on the edge of the mattress, and his
back presses to the cool wall when she crawls into the little twin bed after him and drags the covers
up and over her, up to her shoulder.

“Careful now, my gun’s under the pillow,” he murmurs as she shifts around to get comfortable in
here with her head resting half on his bicep and half on the pillow in question.

“Probably one of the top five things I never thought a man would ever say to me,” she mutters as
she lifts her head up again, and he huffs a laugh as he shifts the gun more so it’s under his head
instead of hers, and then they both settle back down to face each other.

The familiarity of her washes over him, the scent and the feel and the warmth and the weight, all
these strange happy things he’s grown so used to in such a short finger-snap span of time. Sansa
sighs and he has that sensation too, the sound of her as she settles in against his chest, one arm
folded between their bodies as the other comes sliding up and over his ribs as he pulls her in to
“So, you couldn’t sleep, hmm? Could that have something to do with all that squealing and laughing I heard about an hour ago?”

“Maybe.”

“And what was the cause of all that squealing and laughing? Do I even want to know?” He’s not fool enough to think of slumber party fantasies with girls in their underwear having pillow fights with feathers floating everywhere, but he has a feeling something salacious had to occur to get that little honey badger of a sister giggling like a schoolgirl.

Sansa tips her head to rest her cheek against him, and he lifts his hand to smooth her hair away from where it’s snagged in his beard, and because it’s feels good and because he wants to he keeps his hand cupped against the back of her head.

“Probably not,” she says, and the skin on his chest warms when she exhales a laugh.

“I figured.”

“I mean, Arya fell asleep eventually but I couldn’t. I think I’ve already gotten used to, you know, being with you. Sleeping with you.”

Sandor blinks into the dark with his chin resting against the crown of her head as he lets that sink in, as he remembers that he’s the first guy she’s ever slept next to all night, and he smiles before he can help himself.

“Well, get ready for a rough night, Red. This is a tiny bed and I’m not such a tiny guy.”

“Don’t I know it,” she says with a purr to her voice that makes him laugh louder than he means to.

“Your mother’s going to throttle me if she finds us in bed together, and that’s if your sister doesn’t get to me first,” he says.

“Do you want me to go?” she murmurs, all contradictory cuddling thing as she nuzzles her face against his sternum.

“No,” he says, and he is about to roll over and wedge his back between the bed and wall to have her drape on his chest the way they so often wake up, but then she stops him.

“Wait, stop,” she says, her arm bracing around his ribs to keep him on his side.

“What’s up?” he asks, smoothing his hand from her hair down the length of her back. “You all right?”

“No, yeah, I mean I’m fine, but just, here,” she says, moving his arm and manually returning his hand to the back of her head. “And then come over here, like on top of me.”

“I’m plenty familiar with where that is,” he grins.

“Oh shut up,” she says, though he can hear the smile in her voice.

He more or less obeys, tries to at least, as she guides him into position with her legs between his knees, one arm pinned to the mattress beneath her neck and the other curved around her, his palm cupping her head like it’s rainwater. His hair hangs down so they couldn’t see even if it weren’t nearly pitch black in here, and he’s about to ask her what the fuck she’s up to until she wriggles
down and turns her head, presses her cheek to his chest. Muscle memory, the sound of bullets and glass and Otis Redding, the shivery, shuddery breath of a beautiful woman, scared to death and all alone.

“Sansa.”

“This is how we first met,” she whispers.

Sandor closes his eyes.

“I remember,” he says, and there’s something of a shudder to the way he sucks in a breath now, and even though his arm burns from the weight of her skull and the lovely thoughts inside it, even though his elbows complain from his own body’s weight and the thread count pressing into his skin, Sandor doesn’t move. “I was such a fucking asshole to you that night.”

“To be fair,” she murmurs as she scoots and wiggles her way back up until her face pops out from under his shoulder, “you were an asshole to me for a bit longer than just that night. But you had every reason.”

“Did I?” he asks, finally moving when she squirms again, and now he’s got the relief to be on his back, the comfort of her resting her cheek on his chest. “You just needed some help, that’s all.”

Sansa laughs, skates her hand down the plane of his bare chest and stomach before it lifts off and starts all over again. He huffs, gruffs, snorts and lifts a hand to sift his fingers through her hair, lovely lovely hair he still remembers carding with his fingers before he cut it all off. What a long, winding history they have already. Has it even been a month yet?

“It’s funny what a handful of good orgasms can do to a guy’s memory.”

“Only a handful? You must be really shitty at math, Red.”

She ignores him. “I brought the Lannisters to your doorstep. You should have turned me away.”

“Nah,” he says, shaking his head as he gazes up at the ceiling in the almost black, mostly blue-gray room. “I couldn’t live with myself. Even if you were a snob. The world needs more Sansas,” he murmurs, and then he remembers calling her singular. “Well, maybe just the one. The one perfect Sansa.”

“That’s the champagne talking,” she whispers, but the sweep of her hand has turned into a single fingerprint tracing curlicues on his stomach, and then Sandor feels the unmistakable, a fingerprint kiss sliding like a tongue in the shape of an I, a heart, a U.

“Nope,” he says, and he inhales deeply, a big long sigh that promises sleep will come if only she stays, if only she keeps drawing her silly little daydreams on his skin. “Just me.”

“Well that’s all I want.”

“Good,” he murmurs, and then he laughs, and maybe a few weeks ago it would have crushed him to know the truth of it, but right now it feels like a fine thing to say, “because that’s all I’ve got.”

When he wakes up later it’s to the gentle shush and hush of his name on her mouth, the Sandor, baby, hey Sandor, and finally he hums, frowning even with his eyes closed because if this is another 6am Q and A he’s going to get grumpy real fucking quick.

“What.”
“I don’t want you to go back to the motel. Please? I don’t- I have a bad feeling about it, is all.”

He squeezes his eyes tight a moment before blearily, cautiously opening them, half expecting an egg yolk morning bleeding in through the single window above the side of the bed. But no, it’s blissfully fuzzy like the sweaters she wears, soft grey like a predawn sky.

“I got my stuff there, babe.”

“I know, but, look, I know the record is your mom’s,” she murmurs, and there is something deep and sweet in him that opens up to hear her remember that, to hear her acknowledge that. Nothing so sweet as a flower, but a closed fist maybe, a fist the size of his heart, opening up palm to the sky to catch winter rain.

“But I will buy you another record. I’ll buy you four. Or we’ll- hey, look, we’ll get Arya or Bran to open a P.O. Box, okay, and ask the motel to mail it, okay? Just- we just got here, we just got safe. They’ve got the witness protection people to keep us safe now. I don’t want to go, and I don’t want you to go.”

“Sansa,” he starts, but she gropes her way up to his face, fingers almost up his nose before she finds his mouth and clamps her palm down on it.

“No. No, don’t argue with me. You wouldn’t let me go, would you?”

Momentarily muzzled, he shakes his head in the negative.

“Of course not. You’ve been protecting me since the minute I walked into your shop. And I bet you probably wouldn’t even let me go with you, either.”

Another head shake, reluctant as it may be.

“Well then I’m not going to let you either. So promise me. Promise me we’ll call the motel in the morning and tell them to take the room back.”

He loves that fucking record, that perfect song.

“I promise.”

“Good,” she says with a sigh of relief, burrowing a little lower on his chest as she hikes the covers up and over her shoulder.

Pale blue eyes, indeed. Doesn’t matter now, he thinks as he closes his eyes again, though there is the slightest of aches to think of him losing his mother’s record. But he’s got the real thing now, the real flesh and bone woman here who would make his mother smile if she were still alive, and so come hell or high water, he will keep her, and he will keep her safe.

Skyping turns to an angry, seething overseas phone call that makes Jon excuse himself from the room, much to her disappointment. Eavesdropping had been fun. Arianne sits in one of her armchairs and sips her wine, texts Assistant Director Hotah about last night’s hockey game, watches Jeyne as she eventually falls asleep on the sofa while Jon paces back and forth on her snowy balcony. Not as much fun as listening to hot angry French women tear their nephews a new asshole, but hey, a Tuesday night is a Tuesday night.

Areo: I can’t believe that fucking sin bin crap last night
Arianne: IKR? Such bullshit

Areo: at least Hossa did a good job

Arianne: oh please, that guy couldn’t shoot his way out of a fucking paper bag. Toews was looking hot as hell though

Areo: down girl

Arianne: I would totally go down

Areo: Jesus Martell keep it in your pants

“No, please,” Jeyne murmurs in her sleep.

Arianne flicks her gaze from her phone to the slight woman stretched out on the sofa next to her. Jeyne’s mouth is smooshed open in a pouty pucker as she presses her face against the cushion, and it would be sort of adorable if Arianne couldn’t guess what sort of nightmares plague her. She looks up at the sliding door leading to her balcony, watches Jon gesticulate in angry French fashion just before he turns his back towards her and slams a fist on the railing. Part of her wants to wake the poor woman, but the last time she tried that Jeyne nearly had a heart attack, and it took Jon several minutes of calm talk to get her to relax. She’d be somewhat offended, reminding someone of a psychopath, but her line of work has brought her into plenty of contact with triggers and PTSD, and that’s just amongst her coworkers. That reminds her.

Arianne: You able to text on your phone yet or are you busy having phone sex with Margaery

Bronn: Sexting

Bronn: Want to see the hot pic she just sent me

Arianne: if I want to see your girlfriend naked I can just knock on her bedroom door

Bronn: I am serious goddammit don’t you dare swoop in you asshole

Arianne: oh yeah? Whatcha gonna do big boy

Bronn: call you every night drunk and crying for a fucking year

Arianne: that does sound like a shitty way to spend an evening

Bronn: try looking at sexy pics in a fucking hospital bed. My heart rate went up and set the machines off and four nurses came running in to check on me and my big stupid boner

Arianne laughs as she replies, shakes her head as Bronn sends her a bizarre array of emojis (though no sexy pics, unfortunately), and not for the first time does she send up a little prayer of thanks to whatever gods run the world that her partner survived. She sighs, tosses her phone onto the coffee table and reaches for her glass of wine. It’s chilled Bardolino but it’s nothing compared to the sudden blast of frigid air when Jon finally pushes open the door and steps inside.

“Putain de bordel de merde, fait chier!” he says as he slams the door shut behind him.

“Fais gaffe, Jon, elle dort,” Arianne murmurs, gesturing to Jeyne with her nearly empty wine glass.

Jon freezes, and not just from the warning, but from the French she finally uses in front of him for the first time. She grins when he stares at her with his mouth open.
“You know French? This entire time, you’ve known French,” he mutters as he shakes his head and shrugs out of his jacket.

She can practically see him do a run through of everything he’s said in supposed confidence in front of her, and she’d tell him he has nothing too bad to worry about, but watching his expression change is too much fun.

“Un petit peu,” she says, and she laughs when he rolls his eyes.

“Putain, I’m so mad right now,” he mutters, but when he lifts his eyebrows and points at her he’s almost, almost smiling. “I don’t need another tough as nails woman giving me grief right now. I just got a fucking earful from my aunt that probably cost me ten dollars,” he says, glaring at his phone before tossing it onto the kitchen counter. “There anymore of that wine?”

“In the fridge,” she says quietly, tucking her legs beneath her as she settles in. “And bring the bottle.”

He takes a seat in the other armchair across from the coffee table, Jeyne on the sofa between them, and Arianne watches him watch her for a moment before pouring herself another glass.

“So,” she says, pushing the bottle to the middle of the table, and she pauses to take a long sip of wine. “Back to France, I assume?”

He sighs and closes his eyes, rubs his forehead with two fingers like he’s trying to wipe out his own thoughts.

“She wants us to but it makes everything seem so pointless. Since when did she get so goddamn timid? She sent me here to dig stuff up, and I’ve done that. I’ve more than done that,” he whispers fiercely, tipping his head meaningfully towards Jeyne.

“She sent her only surviving family into a lion’s den,” Arianne says. “Jeyne is just further proof of how high the stakes are. She’d be crazy not to feel a little nervous, knowing you’re over here.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he says, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees as he dangles his glass of wine between them and stares down into it. He sneaks a glance to Jeyne that makes Arianne smile. “It just doesn’t seem worth it though, to bail now. So she just experienced all of that for nothing?”

“She experienced it because the world is a sick, shitty place, and she survived it. Sticking it to the Lannisters doesn’t suddenly validate the experience.”

“Tante Daenerys, is that you?” he quips with a surly little snap to his deep voice.

Arianne chuckles. “You can’t make it go away, Jon, no matter how much you want to.”

“No,” he says after a moment, and his eyes are closed as he takes a long swallow of wine. “No, but it would feel a lot fucking better if someone was held accountable.”

“Bronn killed him, the one who did that to Jeyne. He’s gone.”

“Yes, but it all trickles down from the Lannisters, doesn’t it? And there’s the shit they did to Dany, to my family, all those years ago. Nobody has paid for that crime yet. I could have sworn I had something from Cersei’s records, but no. No, they get off scot-free.”

Jeyne whimpers and flinches and jerks in her sleep and the two of them watch her a moment, though her position on the sofa means that Arianne catches it and not Jon, when she suddenly stills.
and her eyelids flit and nearly open. Arianne smiles sadly, frowns a moment before she lifts her gaze back to Jon.

“I dated a guy once, back before Quantico,” she says after a moment, and as expected the sudden shift in conversation snags Jon and makes him double take as he finally looks her in the eye, and she is ready and waiting with her gaze when he does so. “Hostage situation at a bank. I was one of the first officers in.”

“Okay,” he says uneasily, not liking the insecurity of a conversation aimed in an unknown direction.

“Instant connection,” she says with something of a sigh, something of a memory. His hands, his mouth, his quaking fear and his adoration. “It’s hard not to, you know? Sharing something intense like that, life and death.”

Jon drinks his wine and looks away.

“But the relationship wasn’t healthy, in the end. It was defined by the very thing that brought us together. I felt responsible for him, after killing the man who was about to kill him. I felt responsible and then I felt trapped by that. Like I had to take care of him, had to love him. You know?”

“No,” Jon says coldly. “No I don’t.”

“Don’t you?” she says, tipping her head just the slightest towards Jeyne.

“I don’t feel fucking responsible for her. I feel- I’m- it’s not responsibility, Arianne. It’s awe. I’ve never been through what she has and yet I get this feeling, this sneaking suspicion that she’s still a better, nicer person than I ever will be, even now with the best excuse on the fucking planet to be the biggest bitch in the world. She’s kind and she’s bright. And she’s beautiful,” he adds almost as an afterthought.

He drains his wine and stands to pour himself another glass, and once more she finds herself watching him as he gazes at Jeyne, so long that he nearly pours wine to the brim before he remembers himself and tips the bottle back up.

“You just seem to take this vendetta shit pretty seriously for an outside observer.”

“Outside observer?” he says incredulously. “You think I’m on the outside? I’m in the fucking thick of it, Arianne. I’ve lived in it my whole life, raised with a dead father I never met because a fucking Lannister decided to kill him. I’ve lived in it for the past five years, getting groomed by my aunt, and I’m living in it now after meeting a remarkable woman who lived through the unspeakable. I’m not a fucking observer, Arianne, I’m a participant. And I’m mad as hell, knowing that I’m about to be pulled out of the game.”

She’s already smiling at the icy indignation and the fire-flicker of rage, but when he looks at her again with that slow burn grey glare she grins.

“So stay, then. You want to take them down then we have to do better. And I have to admit, I’ll be sorry to see you go without at least one more valiant attempt.”

“You’re the FBI agent, why do you need me?” he says roughly, something of the petulant child in the surly tone of his voice. Playing hard to get even after such determination to see it all through, and it makes Arianne want to laugh so she does, lightly.
“Fourth amendment, sweetheart. I can’t get involved or else the evidence would be inadmissible. But you, you can waltz in there and hand over whatever you find, clean as a whistle. Well, not clean, necessarily, but you get what I mean.”

“What do you want me to do?” he asks, sinking back down to his armchair.

“What you do best,” she says with a grin as she finishes the last of her wine. “And with Petyr Baelish MIA, there’s no finer time to do a little more breaking and entering.”

His shitty mood turns on a dime at that, and for the next ten minutes they discuss it, the location of Baelish’s apartment and what she wants, the fact that she can’t be seen anywhere near the place while Jon does his thing. He’s eager now, excited, blood pumping for another attempt, for redemption maybe, he feels so stymied by his previous hit and miss. And then 3am happens and she yawns, and he seems to remember himself and the time when he rubs his eyes and stands up again.

“I’ll go back to the city tomorrow, after I talk to Jeyne and tell her what’s up,” he murmurs, more to himself than to Arianne.

They rarely touch, the two of them, more of a precaution on Jon’s end, she wagers, but he forfeits all pretense in a moment that Arianne can only describe as tender. Warmed and emboldened from the wine maybe, Jon stands beside Jeyne and gazes down at her a moment before he lowers his hand and rests his fingertips on her temple. There’s a sweet pause that makes Arianne’s eyebrows lift and mouth open, and then the subtlest drift of his fingers into her dark hair, gentle as a kiss and as wistful as a farewell.

“Fais de beaux rêves, Jeyne,” he says quietly, clucking his tongue against his teeth before he walks out of the room. “Je vais pieuter,” he says over his shoulder, his announcement of going to sleep far rougher than the sugar-spun murmur he offered to Jeyne.

Arianne smiles again when Jeyne opens her eyes, and for a moment the two women gaze at each other.

“You knew I was awake,” she says, and it isn’t a question.

“I did.”

“Why did you say all that stuff then? Were you trying to like, make me feel dumb or something?”

Arianne’s smile turns sad, and she shakes her head. “No, not at all. I said it in case you were thinking it. Because everyone deserves to hear that they’re adored. Everyone. Especially you, right now.”

They look at each other for several beats, and then finally Jeyne smiles too.

“Thank you.”
“I dreamed about you all last night,” Sansa whispers with her cheek pressed to the pillow. “I hoped I would and I did.”

She’s back in Sandor’s bed after saying goodbye to her mother and Rickon they drove off to high school, after Arya regaled her with a bit more salacious love-life detail as Sansa walked her to her car out front. The sleet and spitting snowfall made her scurry back inside as much as the nervousness of being seen, and the warmth and steady of him made her crawl back in his bed as much as all the love. He breathes deep and slow and steady behind her, one arm curled around her with his nose buried in the hair at the nape of her neck.

But she’d been wide awake after the jarring cold outside and so after the hilarity of waking Sandor up with the press of her cold feet to his shins, she got up and found the house phone. First she called the motel, a very trying conversation that was extremely one sided where manners are considered, before she dialed the safe number Agent Martell gave them.

“Sanny, stop, you’re going to make me cry,” Jeyne says, sweet soft low because even though she’s two hours ahead it’s still on the early side for the both of them.

“No, I don’t mean it like that, I mean they were good dreams. I woke up thinking of our old apartment and of shopping at IKEA,” she says, and even though they were good that doesn’t stop the bright burn of tears in her eyes.

“Oh god, let’s not- let’s talk about something else,” Jeyne says with a quiet groan. “Don’t get me wrong, I loved our place, but let’s just say my dreams of that place aren’t so hot.”

Sansa closes her eyes and tips her face further into her pillow, feeling like an idiot; all she wants is to reconnect in some small way. They’ve known each other so long and inside and out, and now in the short span of a few weeks there is so much dark newness to discover and understand and navigate like a little ship through the ice. And she’s always been a fast learner, though before all of this happened she would have been less likely to do much searching through the wooly depths of another person’s inner workings. Sandor grunts in his sleep and the muscle in his arm jumps and makes him twitch, a nice reminder of the reward a person can get if she looks past a cover and starts really reading someone. So Sansa tries again.

“Okay, so want to hear something sort of juicy?”

“I love juicy,” Jeyne breathes with eager sincerity and not just a little relief. Sansa grins.

“I guess Arya is sleeping with one of the family’s witness protection people, their WITSEC marshal or whatever,” she whispers with something of a husky squeal when Jeyne gasps.

“Are you kidding me? That’s- really? Arya? Like Arya Stark, your sister. Three times suspended, always skipping school to dance downtown, made out with the lead singer of a punk band on
“Well, I guess she goes by Nymeria now, but yes. That same sister, in love with a federal agent! I mean, she didn’t say love but her eyes got all starry the way they do whenever she’s talking about Sergei Polunin or Mikhail Gorbachev.”

There is a pause, and then out of the blue Jeyne laughs, a lovely sound, an out-and-out burst of laughter, church bells on Sunday and children playing in the street.

“I think,” Jeyne says breathlessly, “I think you mean Mikhail Baryshnikov.”

“Well, whatever, Mikhail Dancer-face, you knew who I meant,” Sansa says.

Where before she would have huffed before at making such a dumb mistake now she can only grin with warmed up cheeks to hear her friend. Who, apparently, cannot get over the slip up, and after each new sigh of die-down laughter there comes a new peal of it, so it is sigh and laugh, sigh and laugh, the loveliest case of the giggles Sansa thinks she’s ever heard.

“Oh my god, you just made me laugh harder than I have in months, I think,” she says with one long final sigh, and Sansa can imagine her looking up at the ceiling and wiping her lower lashes with the knuckles of her index fingers. “So what’s this guy like?”

“Quiet and kind, she told me. Smart and observant. He likes to watch her dance.”

“Everyone likes to watch her dance,” Jeyne says, smile to a voice that has deepened from her laughter, darkened like freshly watered soil.

“Yeah, but I guess the way he does it different. All serious and sweet, she said. He sounds like good people.”

“Well, good. Everyone deserves good people. Everyone deserves to be adored,” she murmurs with a faraway little drift-off after a moment, and then she chuckles again. “Even little miss hip hop don’t stop.”

“Yeah, she does,” Sansa smiles, remembering her sister pirouetting in the street before doing a rather suggestive hand thing before blowing Sansa a kiss and getting in her car.

“You do too, Sanny,” Jeyne says after a moment. “After Arianne and Margaery filled me in on what happened to you, I was so happy when you called and told me you were back with your family. It’s been too long, babe.”

“I know.”

“Not that you weren’t—hang on a sec, Sansa. What’s up? Wait, you’re going now? No, I know, I just, let me get off the phone first, okay? Thanks, Jon.” There’s a jostle and rustle and then she’s back. “Sorry about that.”

“No, it’s fine, what’s up? Everything okay?”

“Yes it’s fine. I mean, let’s be honest, it could be better right?” Jeyne says dryly. “Jon’s just um, he’s going back to Chicago to do a little more poking around to see if he can’t get anything better on the um. Well, on the you know who’s.”

“Yes,” Sansa says. “Yes, of course. Do you need to go?”
“Well, I hate to, but I think I better. Sending off the troops and all that crap,” she says, and then she pauses and then she laughs again, a small gust of breath into the phone, and her voice is softer when next she speaks. “Quit it, you’re not crap, you know what I mean.”

They say goodbye shortly thereafter, lots of I love yous and call me soons, a few damp-eyed whimpers of another farewell, and Sansa lies still for some minutes after hanging up, runs a fingertip across the number buttons on the cordless phone as she thinks about the people she loves being adored.

“Just so you know,” Sandor rumbles from behind her, groggy and rusty like an old engine being goaded back to life.

She gasps and jumps and presses her hand to her face, sighs out a shaky breath at being so startled, but it’s not like he makes much noise when he’s curled up on his side.

“God, Sandor, you scared the hell out of me,” she says.

“Just so you know,” he repeats, his body moving behind hers in slow stretches and starts, the balloon of his bare chest against her shoulder blades as he draws in a deep breath and exhales it out into her hair. “I would watch you dance, too.”

Sansa smiles.

“I don’t dance,” she says, twisting in his arms to face him, and he’s squinting at her with one eye closed as she rests her hand on the twisty plane of his scars. “Not like Arya.”

“Good,” he says with a fair amount of passion for him considering how early it is.

“Oh stop it,” she laughs, running her hand up through the messy fall of his hair as he makes a myriad of grumpy expressions before he turns his head away from her to yawn up at the ceiling. “You two will be fast friends in no time, I bet.”

“Why, did hell freeze over?”

“Such a grump,” she says.

He rolls onto his back when she pushes him with two hands to his chest, is busy wiping the grit from his eyes and rubbing his face when she sits up swiftly and straddles him like a horse. He hums initially but when she plops her weight down on his lower stomach without warning his eyes fly open and he wheezes out a groan that makes her laugh.

“Whoopsadaisy,” she sing-songs, resting her hands on his chest as she peers down at her prey, so easy to snare when he’s still so sleepy.

“Jesus Christ, Sansa, what the fuck,” he snaps, and there is no humor to the slate and gravel of his tone.

Sandor grips her by the hips, hard enough to make her squirm, and sits up quick as a flash despite the way sleep still pinches at the corners of his eyes. His hands remain firm, fingertips a dig, and the muscles in his mounts of Venus feel like bone, they are that strong on her. It’s been a while since she’s pissed him off, and though she still sucks in a gasp when he rises up she does not flinch when he puts his face into hers and glares at her.

“That hurt,” he bites out, his narrowed gaze flicking from her one eye to the other back and forth.
“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet. You’re always fucking with me in the morning, for fuck’s sake, and it annoys the shit out of me.”

“I said I’m sorry,” she murmurs.

But then his expression softens somewhat like a big beast mollified with a single cube of sugar, and his hands loosen that grab and snatch of possession, and suddenly she aches for the fight again. Sansa finds herself lifting her chin as she gazes down at him from this higher perch on his lap.

“I guess I didn’t think a big man like you could be so easily wounded,” she says, clucking her tongue she shakes her head in mock sympathy.

Immediately his eyebrows cap down over his squint in a firm dark line, fingertips clamp back into place, and he jerks her towards him, a quick tight motion that makes her head bob back even as she slides closer to him. Sansa realizes she’s breathing through her mouth so shallowly she could almost hyperventilate. Her hands are pinned between them, palms on his chest and knuckles to hers, and she tests him with the faintest push against the pads of his pectorals. He doesn’t budge. Thrill arcs in her like late season lightning.

“Oh, so you’re calling me a wuss now?” he grates out, as mean and nasty as that Friday night one hundred years ago, and, she realizes with a hot-blooded sort of marvel, just as sexy. “Is that it?”

“You tell me, you’re the one complaining,” she says, giving the bear in the zoo a good solid poke.

“Because you’re the spoiled brat sitting here ruining my morning,” he says, the mustache of his beard a lift as he sneers up at her.

“Who knew it could be so easy?” she murmurs, watching his mouth a moment longer before she remembers herself and looks into his eyes.

Scathing heat and anger there in the grey, so much so that she has to wonder what it feels like to be his enemy, if he can look at her this way. But then there is betrayal in his hands that she slowly but surely becomes aware of, the way his fingertips lift so his palms can press flat to her body over the long sleep shirt she’s in. When he slides his hands off her hips and down to her thighs she spreads them, and once he’s past the hem of her shirt his fingers dig in again, skin on skin and flesh to flesh, and that’s not anger in his eyes, that’s want.

Sansa lets go of a breath, sets it free so it comes out a moan, and he is stock still even when she slides her hands up his chest and over his shoulders, to the nape of his neck and up into his hair. Still as a statue until she rolls her hips forward and brings herself into direct contact with his halfhearted erection, and that singular action is like cracking a whip over the back of a horse, he is all instant motion. Sandor’s hands push up under her shirt swift as a river, and it rucks up with the movement until she’s bare from the chest down with her arms still tangled up in it.

Her hands leave his hair so she can stretch her arms up, and in one fluid motion he’s got her shirt up and off and tossed to the floor by the little bed, has his hands full of her breasts as he cups them and pushes them together to give his face a little valley to bury itself in. Hands back to his hair to hold him there, and she rubs herself against him until he lengthens out to the full rock hard stretch of him. The entire time he ignores her mouth to rub kiss after lick after nip into her skin, beard-scruff and tongue and teeth, heavy breathing as his hands roam up too her shoulder blades only to slide down to cup her ass inside her panties.
Sansa lifts her hips and lowers a hand to help him shimmy out of his pajama bottoms and boxer briefs, takes the time out to press her fingernails to the middle of his back and rake up. He hisses in pain and grabs her by a fistful of hair at the nape of her neck, tugs it to give him full access to her bared throat, and she grins when he sucks a kiss over her vocal cords because she’s a beast too, just as ruthless and *just* as hungry.

“Wicked little thing,” he says, the upward jut of his hard cock firm against the cotton of her underwear until he pushes it out of the way with his free hand. "You're the absolute *worst,*" he grunts as he shifts his hips beneath her.

“No, you are,” she says, "you big jerk," she pants head tipped back with her hair in his hand.

He laughs darkly. "Is that the best you've got?"

"You um, oh," she says, eyes closing as he rubs her with the head of his cock, and it’s like he’s rubbing the thoughts right out of her skull. "Oh, you *fucking* bastard, just fuck me."

"*There* she is," he hums, "there's my girl," he says, and it just takes one more tilt of his hips and he’s right there, *theretherethere* just like she is, and she arches her back in anticipation.

And then the phone rings there on the bed beside them. It’s the loud metallic ring of near-extinct land line phones that’s echoed by another phone somewhere in the house. Both of them jump about a foot out of their skins, the smooth sleek prowl of appetite coming to a messy and clumsy halt as she nearly bends his penis in half when she smacks back down on his lap. Sansa’s ears ring as she squeezes her eyes shut out of reflex.

“Motherfucker,” he grits out, lifting his head and turning to look at the damnable phone beside them.

“Oh my god that scared the hell out of me,” she gasps, chest heaving now from the jarred hammering of her terrified heart. “Are you okay? Did I hurt you? I didn’t break it did I? Oh my god, did I break your *penis*?”

“No, it’s not, it’s fine, it’s just, here, get off of me for a second,” he wheezes with high strain to his normally deep voice.

“I’ll just let the machine get it,” she says hastily once she’s crawled off him.

“Yeah,” he huffs out, half exasperated and half amused as he lies back and gingerly pulls his underwear and pajamas back up into place, and then he takes the phone and buries it under the covers. “Yeah, you do that, Red.”

She leans over and picks up her t-shirt, sits back on her heels as she pulls it on over her head as the muffled phone rings, and then there is the click of the machine in the kitchen. After her mother’s obviously scripted greeting, Robb’s voice plays throughout the house.

“Hey guys, it’s me, uh, Greyson, or whatever. Anyways, I left my phone over there so I’m going to swing by and pick it up on my break, if that’s cool. I’ll be there in about an hour. See you soon.”

“Yes,” he says with a defeated sigh once the machine clicks off and the house is silent once more.

Sansa gives him an arch look of frank appraisal before rising up on her knees and crossing her arms over her chest.
“What, is that all you’ve got, old man?” she says imperiously.

Sandor blinks and stares up at her nonplussed a moment before he narrows his eyes and scowls at her a moment, and she thinks that’s it, that really is all he’s got, but then he lunges for her and grabs her around the waist.

“Come here, you little shit.”

The window is frosted over with steam and it glows wan and gloomy from the wintery midmorning sky, but inside the little upstairs bathroom it is warm and humid and wet, a little white tile heart that beats in rhythm with the water coming down from the showerhead. Sansa hums while she tips her face up towards it but when Sandor reaches up and tilts the showerhead so it rains on his face instead, the tune stops and she swats him on the stomach.

“You’re hogging all the hot water,” he complains with a grin, bowing his head over her shoulder to get his hair wet.

“You look like a wild animal in a stream,” she says, laughing as she rubs her hand down the length of his sopping beard. “Here, grizzly, want a salmon?” she says, waving her hand to and fro like a fish in front of his face.

He grunts deep in the back of his throat, snags her wrist in his hand and sticks the edge of her palm in his mouth where he bites down lightly, an echo of the way they sank their teeth into each other half an hour earlier.

“Don’t tempt me, woman,” he says, stepping forward into the stream of water when she slides between him and the tile wall, shoulders rolling forward as he vigorously rubs his hands through his hair to saturate it. “There’s still life in me yet.”

“Oh?” she says from behind him.

He grins again as he turns to let the hot water beat down on his back, and the pain from Sansa’s nails on his shoulders flares up like little streaks of fire, wildflower blossoms of stinging heat flanking his spine. Then there’s the fact that he hasn’t yet eaten and is standing in dizzying heat; depleted just might be the word for him. “Well just barely.”

She rode him like a wild animal herself downstairs on that little twin bed, fingernails leaving scratch marks in the paint where she clawed at the wall over his head. If he still had a cell phone he’d take a picture of it and send it to Bronn. Instead the mental imagery will have to suffice; claw marks in the paint and in his skin, the sight of her writhing above him, the weight of her and the feel of her, the sound of her and the way she makes his name sound like something he actually wants to hear.

Sandor watches as she turns away from him, her feet doing a slow dance and her legs two long stretches of pale skin, water running down the length of her, beads on her back and rivers on her arms, slick shine on the upside down heart of her ass. Watercolors, he thinks all of a sudden, and if he had a single artistic bone in his body he would utilize it to paint her. Not on canvas, but on her skin. Every color under the sun, thick like cream, and he would use every one of his fingers as the paintbrush.

Wordlessly he lifts his hands and rests them on her hairline, drags his fingertips through her wet hair to gather it up and squeeze the excess water from it. Sansa’s hands still where they were
lathering up the bar of soap, and he smiles when he watches her sightlessly grope for the built in soap dish to set it back down.

“God I love it when you touch my hair,” she murmurs, head tilting back into his hands as he combs the shortened length of her hair with his fingers.

“So do I,” he says, running one hand down to the nape of her neck where he squeezes her lightly while he reaches around her for the bottle of shampoo. “Here, let me.”

“It doesn’t remind you of work?” she asks, one hand resting on the tile to their right.

Sandor chuckles as he squeezes a dollop of shampoo in his palm, and after he returns the bottle to the corner caddy he lathers it briskly before rubbing into her scalp.

“What makes you think that what we’re doing right now has a single goddamn thing in common with me scrubbing dandruff shampoo into middle aged men’s hair?”

Sansa laughs. “Good point. I guess I should be relieved it doesn’t, huh.”

“You and me both,” he says.

They’re quiet for a while as he works diligently and slowly, massaging from her temples to the base of her skull, curling his fingers around her ears to get to the baby fine hairs there. It’s sufficiently scrubbed by this time but it’s too nice a moment to just let it end, and so he keeps it up, dragging his fingers through the suds to scratch her like she’s a kitten. Now and again he glances over to the hand she’s got on the tile; each pass of his hands on her makes hers slide further down the wall until finally she’s barely holding on with her fingertips.

“My mom told me something, when we were still in Sedona,” Sansa says after moment.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. She said something about you and Bronn back in the military, that Arianne had told her Bronn owed you one.”

“Oh,” he says.

He twists around to reach the showerhead behind him, and he steps as much to the side as he can when he aims the water at Sansa’s head. He uses his fingers to work the water and suds from her forehead to the ends of her hair until it runs clean.

“It was back in Afghanistan. And let me just start off by saying I don’t feel bad for what I did to the guy.”

“What guy?”

“The guy I killed.”

“Oh,” she says, voice a hush like the sound of water that fills the air around them along with the heat and steam.

“Yeah, ‘oh,’” he sighs, and even though he’s pulling conditioner through the ends of her hair it’s like he’s looking through a window right back to that morning ten years ago.

“Janos Slynt was this guy in our squad and I could tell that he was sort of going crazy, there, towards the end. I mean it’s a fucking monotonous world over there. Sand and fucking sun, a lot of
sitting around doing nothing punctuated by IEDs and never knowing if a civilian was really trying to offer you food or was planning on shooting you.”

“Oh my god,” Sansa murmurs.

“Yeah, well,” he says.

He sticks his head under the water again before he trades her places, and she stands under the water as she rinses the conditioner from her hair, watching him with wide serious eyes as he scrubs shampoo in his hair.

“So, you know Bronn. That crazy ass is a joker and always has been. There are worse ways to deal with a deadbeat dad and a drunk for a mother, I guess, but man, Slynt couldn’t stand the constant one liners and sarcasm and uh, getting called a cunt face fifty times a day.”

Sansa rolls her eyes.

“Anyways, it was one joke too many, and while we were sitting around bullshitting at the end of our watch, Janos just stands up and aims his gun right in Bronn’s face. Made the jokes dry up pretty effectively, and Bronn probably did deserve to get his ass handed to him, but Slynt’s weapon was loaded and ready to go. I don’t know if you know this about me, but I’m not exactly crawling with friends.”

She widens her eyes in a No shit Sherlock expression, and they both crack half-smiles at each other, since the air and the topic of conversation are both too heavy to do much more.

“So you killed him to protect Bronn?” she murmurs, tilting her head back as she pushes the clean water through the slick slip of conditioner that glosses her dyed hair like it’s lacquer.

“There was no question about it. He’s as close as I’ll ever get to a best friend. Hell, to a brother, considering how that shit turned out.”

“Yeah,” Sansa murmurs, and she reaches up to rest her hand above his heart, a wet, warm press of her palm that makes his blood pump a little faster, just for the feel of it.

“So what happened afterwards?” she asks after they’ve both rinsed off and he’s turned off the shower, and they stand facing each other as they towel themselves off in air so steamy it looks and feels gauzy.

“We were both discharged. Without honors for me, and a flag sent to Slynt’s folks.”

“That doesn’t seem fair! You were only protecting your, you know, your fellow man or whatever.”

“At the expense of another,” Sandor says with a shrug. “Look, it got me back home, didn’t it?”

“Didn’t Bronn defend you?”

“Yeah, of course, but in the end we were just a couple of low level grunts. He did tell me he owed me one. Wasn’t ever sure how seriously he took that promise until, well—”

“The shit hit the fan?” she says, tucking in the corner of her towel after she wraps herself up.

Sandor smiles at her. “The Sansa hit the scene.”

“Same difference,” she says, smiling when he laughs.
“I guess you could say that,” he says, and then they both freeze as they hear a door slam.

“Hello? You guys here? Mom’ll be pissed if you aren’t, considering.” Robb shouts from downstairs.

Sandor and Sansa both look at each other with matching looks of relief to hear her brother, though soon enough Sansa groans.

“He’s going to give us so much grief when he sees we’ve showered together, just you wait.”

“Believe me, I’m starting to get used to it from you Starks.”

“Oh ho ho, what do we have here,” Robb crows when the pair of them descend the carpeted stairs. “Don’t tell me there’s some sort of drought now? Are we supposed to take showers with each other now? Wait ’til I let Dace know.”

“Oh just shut up,” Sansa sniffs, regal even in terrycloth that barely covers her ass, divine even with her hair dripping down the nape of her neck, and there is something lovely and warm, brandy-smooth and just as soothing when she shoulders past Sandor to walk in front of him like she’s his willow-legged bodyguard.

Sandor is relieved to see Robb focuses the majority of his attention on his sister, though there is a horrifically awkward moment when they reach the main floor and he catches Robb staring at the bulk of him, bare chest and all. There is a wary mortified glance up before he clears his throat and hastens out of the foyer.

“Is there any coffee? Torrhen kept us up half the night and I’ve been at work since seven, I can barely keep my eyes open,” Robb calls out from the kitchen after locating his phone on the coffee table.

“Yeah, I made some earlier,” Sansa says as she heads through the living room and disappears down the hall towards his guest bedroom. “I couldn’t really sleep last night, either.”

“I’ll bet,” her brother says, and it’s just barely discernible from the other room, as well as the self-amused chuckle that is followed by the opening and closing of cabinet doors.

Sandor rolls his eyes and follows Sansa to the bedroom.

“I don’t know what’s worse, sexual innuendo from your brother or getting put through the ringer by your sister,” he mutters, closing the door behind him before he wrenches the towel from around his hips, and he stands in the center of the room, vigorously rubbing his wet hair with it.

“I’m about to sexual innuendo you if you keep that up,” she says.

He pauses a moment before he remembers himself, and he lowers the towel from his head and face to give her what he hopes is a stern and unamused glare. He’s lightheaded enough from her and the lack of breakfast; he’ll probably faint dead away if she tries anything, not that he’d much mind.

“What would your mother say, hmm, missy? This is a respectable house,” he says, and he would never, never admit it out loud, but he drops his voice lower the way she’s told him she loves.

Sansa smiles serenely at him.

“That sounds about right,” she murmurs, and then she drops her towel to the floor, far lower than
“Goddammit, Red,” he mutters as she walks towards him, and he is painfully aware that her brother is a closed door away, is painfully aware of her effect on him, is painfully aware of how aware of it she herself is. “What are you trying to do to me, here,” he says, and it’s not a question because it’s pretty fucking clear.

“Whatever it is, I think I’m doing it,” she says, confirming his suspicions.

“Hey, I can’t find the creamer,” Robb shouts. “Don’t tell me you guys poured it all over each other or something. San! San, where’s the creamer? I gotta get back to work here in a minute.”

“Cock block,” Sansa whispers as she runs her fingertips down the plane of his chest.

“Yeah, well, it worked wonders,” Sandor mutters, pressing the towel over the organ in question and its rapidly flagging interest. “Go on, baby, get your brother his creamer. If I do it I might dump it on his head,” he says, drying off his groin before dropping the towel again to pull on his jeans and his shirt. He’ll need to buy some fresh underwear today; if Sansa has anything to do with it he’ll waltz away with a whole new wardrobe.

“Shit, I can’t,” Sansa says, and he turns around as he zips up his fly to frown at her. “I left my- I left my clothes up in the bathroom,” she hisses.

“So just wear your towel. He already saw you in that.”

“That thing?” Sansa says, crossing her arms over her bare chest as she kicks the damp towel towards him. “It barely covered my lady parts, thank you. Could you please just go grab some stuff from my suitcase? It’s in my mom’s room.”

He goggles at her for a minute but then she plops herself on his bed and crosses her legs, arms still folded protectively over her breasts even though they were both in his mouth less than an hour ago, and it’s so bratty and imperious and Do-As-I-Say that before he can help himself he grins.

“Fine,” he says, stooping to swiftly pick up both their towels. “I’ll even take these back to the bathroom while I’m at it,” he says.

“Hey!” she says, half standing until he opens the bedroom door, and then she shrieks and backs up the length of the bed until she can wriggle under the covers and cover herself up.

Sandor laughs as he steps out into the hall.

“Jerk!”

“You’re welcome, princess,” he says, shutting the door behind him.

He barks at Robb that his sister will be right there with the creamer and doesn’t wait for an answer, opting instead to move quickly in case he really pissed her off. He likes the fire in her eyes when they snip and snap at each other but only when it’s paired with the warmth that’s built up in the blue of them since they met. Absently he shuts and relocks the front door from where it stands slightly ajar, bitterly cold air pebbling his skin, and then he takes the stairs by threes as he launches himself up to the second floor.

“Jesus fuckin’- here,” he says after staring into the shallow depth of her cherry red suitcase, into the flimsy swish and flip of silk panties and a lace bra, and finally he opts for her jeans and a shirt, the bra and a pair of underwear that feels like water in his rough hand.
“I’ll be right back, just bringing some stuff for your sister, and then she’ll find your Coffee-Mate or whatever it is you need,” Sandor says as he crosses the living room.

“I don’t need any creamer, thank you,” a new voice says, smooth like silk but the wrong kind, not the lovely stuff in his hands. “However, I will go ahead and take those to Sansa. I have been aching to surprise her.”

Sandor turns around in time to be struck in the face. Hard. Hard enough that he drops whatever it is he was holding, hard enough he sees stars as the pain explodes like a firework across his cheekbone, and before he even touches his fresh wound he knows it’s bleeding. The jitter and jangle of caffeine in his bloodstream mates nauseatingly with the flare of adrenaline, and his vision swims, a single sickening black-starry blur.

“What the fuck,” he says stupidly, staring down at the blood on his fingers before he looks up at a man he’s never met, slight in build and clever the way good people shouldn’t be. “Who the fuck are you,” he snarls, taking two swift steps forward. It’s a decent neighborhood but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t get cracked out burglars. Though this guy doesn’t look like a meth-head.

The intruder darts away, steps nimbly to the side as Sandor swings a wide-arced punch towards him, and the pain and the roil and the spike of angry fear make him lurch as he turns around to follow his attacker’s retreat.

“Consider me the cleaning service,” the man says.

He comes out of nowhere and strikes Sandor again in the same place so deftly that he can hear and feel and practically taste the fracture in his cheek, and the word pain doesn’t belong here because it’s too small.

“I’ve had to clean up a lot of your mess lately.”

Ah, Sandor thinks as he staggers and drops to his knees, as he catches the sparkle and glitter of metal on the man’s hand. Brass knuckles, he thinks, and hey, he should remember those well since the only time he was ever brought down in a fight after high school was with a pair of those. It brings it all rushing back, the alley outside of a bar, the smell of wet summer asphalt and the pound of a boot in his stomach while he swayed on his hands and knees after getting punched three times in the face. And I’m back down here all over again, he thinks.

There is wild fear in him, wild fear like the nigging thought of something he’s forgotten, especially when he is so mired in bitter old memory and flashback. The firing of a military issued weapon, Bronn’s laugh, the thugs beating him up outside of a bar. And then like the rapid blooming of a flower on one of those time release videos, he remembers.

“Sansa,” he says, pushing himself off the heels of his palms to stand up on his knees. “Sansa.”

“She was never yours,” the man says, just before something filmy and plastic is yanked down over Sandor’s head. “But she’s going to be mine.”

Sandor sucks in a breath to shout for her but the rush of air into his lungs is painfully short-lived, shockingly so before the bag sucks into his mouth and shuts off all oxygen and all ability to save her, to rescue her at the very least. His hands scrabble at the plastic over his face but his fingers slip from sweat, and it is pressed so close and tight on his face that he cannot gain purchase. It is terrifying, how useless he is to something so small. It is terrifying, how far away everything seems to feel after just a few reflexive, impossible-to-stop attempts to fill his body with air. It is terrifying, how—wait, what’s terrifying again? Where is he? Back in the alley, back in the shop,
back with Gregor, back with a terminally ill mother who was the only other woman to love him, back with pale blue eyes.

“Go to sleep, Clegane. Go to sleep and keep her idiot brother company along with yours. Sansa is mine now.”

No, he thinks as his vision goes black, the name triggering a memory, the feel of a slender ankle in the palm of one hand and a steering wheel in the other. His hands close of their own accord, and then Sandor slumps forward, falling to the floor to the ground to the dirt to the snow, but whatever it is he doesn’t know because he never feels it.

“Hey, moron, you in here?” Wally asks as he rounds the corner into the motel room, its door yawning open to let in the chill and the damp. The only reason he tracked down his stupid big brother is because it’s one of the rooms facing the parking lot where he just pulled up. “You can’t leave the front desk, I don’t care how close it is to my shift. One of us has to be there.”

“What’s five fucking minutes?” his brother asks, not bothering to look up. “It’s not like we’ve got a lot of guests.”

He’s standing in the middle of the room by the unmade bed, digging through a nondescript duffle bag, and he tsks his tongue against his teeth as he tosses boxer briefs and t-shirts to the floor before he freezes and looks up at Wally.

“Holy shit,” he says, breathing out a shocked sort of guffaw.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“I’m clearing out the room. There was a um, a whatcha call it, a police inspector dude here who’d gotten in last night right after my shift started. He waited all night in the lobby for them to come back, but they never did. Didn’t even come out this morning. She called at like 6am or something to cancel the room,” he says, eyes widening as he pulls out a handful of bullets.

“Jesus Christ, Walder, what the fuck,” Wally says, backing up until he bumps into the doorframe.

“Holy shit, it really was them,” he says, looking up with so much excitement that his beady little eyes are lit up with it. “That detective said the couple who had this room stole the credit card they were using for their room and were wanted for arrest, and when I told him that was the chick calling, he asked for the number and reverse-traced it. Isn’t that cool as hell? He had a warrant and everything.”

“Like you know what a warrant looks like,” Wally says, trying in vain to calm himself down at the sight of ammunition and the mention of a policeman. “And would you put those things back? You hurt yourself with mom’s kitchen scissors, for chrissakes.”

“Hey, I watch Law and Order,” Walder snaps, though he puts the bullets down on the bed because there is more than a kernel of truth to Wally’s words.

“So what the hell are you doing looking through these guys’s stuff? It’s illegal. You could get fired.” Wally didn’t read the employee handbook for nothing.

“Like dad’s gonna fire me,” Walder sniffs. “Anyways, the girl, she asked me to hold their stuff for them, but the cop guy, he gave me $200 to get rid of it.”
Slightly mollified by the knowledge that the authorities have approved of this snooping and stealing, Wally slinks further into the room. There’s a beat up looking old record next to the duffle bag, and he picks it up to look at the back and then the front again. The Velvet Underground. *Whoever that is*, he thinks.

“Watch it now, finder’s keepers,” Walder says, snatching the record out of his hands.

“Hey, give it back, shithead! You don’t even have a record player,” Wally says.

“Neither do you,” Walder says, lifting his knee just as he slams the record down on it, and even though the album cover only bends, there is a brittle snap from within.
“Sansa,” Sandor says from the living room, just barely discernible through the closed bedroom door.

Sansa frowns and then huffs. If he wants to strand her naked in his room then he can damn well suffer the consequences of it and find Robb’s creamer himself. She cinches the twin bedsheet tighter around herself and peers in the tiny oval mirror hanging on the wall, trying to see if it looks as toga-like as it feels.

“Sansa,” Sandor repeats, something louder and more desperate in his voice.

She smiles, imagining him holding up a thong and a pair of bikini brief panties in his hands, more mystified and horrified than turned on since the decision of which to choose falls on his shoulders.

“Silly old bear,” she murmurs, all Christopher Robin silly as she wonders if Sandor would ever, ever let her call him Pooh Bear.

It doesn’t take long for her to decide that Never Ever is the answer to that question, though the thought does make her laugh as she opens the bedroom door and shuffles out into the hall, yanking up the short train of sheet so she does not trip on it.

“All right, I’m coming, hold your horses, big man,” she says, cinching up the sheet a bit in one fist to make it easier to walk, and she shakes the damp hair out of her eyes and lifts her chin as she tries to strut the hallway like it’s a catwalk.

And that’s when she sees them.

Smiles and goodness and love and laughter dry in her mouth the way saltwater dries on the skin as she stares, the sight before her barely registering it is that far beyond the realm of normalcy and goodness that Sansa lived in prior to this moment. Petyr Baelish, skeezy slippery yes man has found them. Petyr Baelish, ultimate creepster, is here in her mother’s house, and he has a knee shoved into Sandor’s back as he pins him to the floor. Her big strong man, her brick wall and her bright happy bloom of love, he’s felled like a tree and that crack in her empirical knowledge of him breaks her heart in an instant. Silently, too terrified and horrified to make a peep, she claps a hand over her mouth. As if she had the strength to scream. As if she had the strength to breathe.

There is blood smeared on the inside of a plastic bag that is wrapped so tightly around his face she can almost make out his eyes. His hair is stuck to his face like pressed flowers between the pages of a book. One arm is outstretched towards the hallway, towards her, and it is that frozen pose of beseeching longing that snaps her out of it. She has to do something. Anything. But what?

What would Jeyne do?

She would hide, quiet as a mouse, and there is the cowardly sliver of her that is desperate to do the same thing.
What would Bonnie Parker do?

She would storm in with guns blazing, fire in her eyes wearing nothing but a sheet. Sansa has been playing at cops and robbers for a while now but it’s one thing to call yourself Bonnie to his Clyde and a seriously different thing altogether to try and fill her bloodstained, bullet-riddled shoes.

What would Sansa do, she thinks desperately as she presses her back to the wall, her hands shaking so hard despite the fists into which she’s clenched them. But then it hits her like a brick. She didn’t live with the Lannisters for over a year all by her lonesome without picking up a thing or two.

Sansa would make believe.

Her cheeks are soaked with tears she didn’t know she was shedding, here in the semi-dark hallway, though it’s only been all of ten seconds that she went from rose-colored happiness to rain-gutter misery. She wipes them with the backs of her hands and closes her eyes briefly before she exhales with a rush and pushes herself off the wall.

“Oh my god, let him go,” she says in a rush as she hurries into the living room. “Let him go, now.”

It startles Baelish like some sort of nefarious alley cat, and he jumps as he looks up at her with a shocked expression on his face, as if Sansa standing here is somehow a more alarming sight than the wicked crime he’s in the middle of committing. She takes instant advantage of his off-kilter surprise and with one hand clutching the sheet to her chest she sinks to her knees and yanks the bag off of Sandor’s face.

“What are you doing to him? Is he- did you kill him? Sandor, wake up. Please wake up,” she says, allowing herself, forcing herself to sob out his name, to let the buildup of panic and fear bubble up and over.

The bigger the better, here.

“I’m doing this for your own good, Sansa,” he says, putting oil to the thick slither of his voice when he says her name.

It sounds like profanity to her ears.

“Sandor, wake up, please,” she says, ignoring Petyr save for a quick glare cast up at him.

She shakes him by the shoulder and lets go of the sheet to brush the hair from his face and smear some of the blood off his scarred cheek. Her fingers come away slick with it, and she wipes her hand clean on her stomach before touching his face again. Some divers can hold their breath for minutes at a time, she thinks wildly, desperate internal bargaining, and she wonders if Sandor ever went diving in his lifetime, and she prays for big strong lungs, tells herself he’s just as strong and tough and mean on the inside.

“Breathe, Sandor. Breathe for me, please,” she says, grunting as she pushes at him with both hands to get him to roll onto his side.

“He’s no good for you, Sansa, but I am. I can keep you safe, far better than this man.”

“You’re the one we’re running from,” she spits out, gasping from effort as he finally rolls on his side. “You’re on the other team.”

“No, not really. I’m on my own team, and I’ve cut ties from the Lannisters. I came here for you, to take—”
He cuts himself off when Sandor sucks in a breath and sputters out the exhale in a wet sounding cough. Sandor hacks and wheezes and spits out a spray of bloody saliva on the carpet, and Sansa doesn’t think she’s ever heard or seen anything so perfectly and purely beautiful in her entire life.

“Oh my god, you’re okay. Oh god, Sandor,” she says, tears welling up afresh just to see him move, just to watch his chest rise and fall with big lovely breaths, sweet wonderful oxygen.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” he mutters as he rolls onto his back, eyes closed as his chest heaves and the color returns to his face in ruddy patches streaked over with blood.

“Well you’re better off than I intended,” Petyr says dryly, and Sansa’s stomach lurches with nausea at how he can crack a joke right now.

The sound of his voice snaps Sandor to attention, and his eyes fly open as he stares up at Petyr’s face.

“Run, Sansa. Run,” he says, immediately sitting up and hauling himself to his feet, and he staggers so violently that she fears he will fall again, but he just manages to make it to the sofa where he sits heavily on the arm of the couch. He pants weakly as he stares warily at Baelish.

“No, Sansa, don’t run anymore, just come with me. I’ve come all this way for you. I’ve been waiting so long for you,” he says, and there it is, the strain of pleading in his voice that she was hoping for.

“Don’t listen to him, the sick fucker,” Sandor says, his thick fingers pressed to his forehead as he hunches over his legs.

Sansa gazes sadly at Sandor, at the beaten down look on his face as he lifts his head and looks at her. The burn of love in his eyes and the brittle flint of fear, too. He’s scared for me, she realizes, and despite the blood on his face that oozes from two lacerations she almost smiles. Even after what he just went through, he’s scared for me, and it’s all very gift of the Magi here because she’s only thinking of him.

“Will you promise not to hurt him, Petyr? Whatever other henchmen you’ve got on your payroll, will you swear not to set them on him, if I go with you?”

“Sansa, no.”

Sandor looks at her aghast, and it’s like a knife wound in her belly, but that makes her think of Bronn and the dangerous, dangerous game they’ve been playing against their wills, and so she slides her gaze away from him as she looks over at Petyr.

He is eager, to hear her words, practically trembles like a puppy at chuck wagon time as he takes a tentative step in her direction. She holds him off with the lift of her chin and the recoil of her shoulders as she leans away from him.

“I promise you, I won’t hurt him. If he says he’ll leave us alone and won’t follow us, I swear. I’ll give you anything, Sansa. Anything you want. If you want him to live that badly, I’ll do it, I’ll let him. Just do as I say and come with me.”

She nods, hugging herself in her bloody sheet and her tears and the dizzying pound of her own heart.

“Okay. Okay, I’ll go, Petyr. I just- I need to get dressed.”
“I’ll go with you,” Sandor says quickly, getting to his unsteady feet.

Petyr turns to face Sandor squarely and lifts a hand to point at him, and Sansa is no street thug but even she can recognize what is a large, square set of brass knuckles. She shivers.

“You stay put or the fucking deal is off,” Petyr says. He’s a slight man, a wisp compared to Sandor, but there is something about the cool calm collection of him that chills the blood. Cold and calculating, clever and ruthlessly, cruelly greedy. “I don’t need you trying to talk her out of her choice.”

“I’ll be okay, Sandor,” she says, nodding at him as Petyr quickly crouches down and picks up the dropped articles of clothing she sent Sandor to fetch for her, and with Baelish’s attention diverted, she widens her eyes as she stares at him and mouths Trust me.

“Here, go put these on and let’s go,” Petyr says. “Unless you want to linger and get your family even more involved instead of just your hired help.”

“Okay,” Sansa murmurs, arms full of her clothes as she stares at Sandor.

It feels like an eternity, but finally he nods.

“Okay,” he says. “Go on, now. Go.”

The pain is unbelievable, an intense, near-blinding throb that worsens with each pump of blood from his heart, and as if the fracture on his cheekbone is not enough, it’s also helped make one bastard of a headache crop up, too. Pain is a powerful distractor, and even though Sandor swears there’s something he was supposed to tell Sansa, even though he can feel it right on the edges of thought, the excruciating pound and pulse from his face and his migraine fills the periphery of his mind until that’s almost all he can feel. Even so, the sight of Sansa crouched over him when he came to is almost enough to make it okay.

Almost.

“You broke my fucking face, you prick,” Sandor says once the bedroom door closes.

“It wasn’t in very good shape to begin with,” Petyr says lightly as he gazes down at the knuckle dusters still on his right hand. He frowns and lifts his hand closer to his face, tsks as he uses his sleeve to wipe off some of Sandor’s skin and blood.

“You better not hurt her. You better not even touch her,” he says with a glower.

“I found her earring in your bed, you know,” Petyr says, still with the light dangerous tone of a creature who is tolerating a nuisance and only just.

He finally lifts his eyes and looks at Sandor, and if Sandor thought the man would display a scrap of remorse for trying to kill him, he’s sorely mistaken. Emphasis on sore.

“I think I know the one,” Sandor says.

“I found her earring in your bed,” he says with scathing weight to that word. “So don’t you talk to me about touching Sansa Stark,” he says, rummaging in the interior pocket of his coat with his left hand, and he grins like a shark when the sparkly bauble emerges dangling from between his thumb and finger. “You see, I bought her these when Joffrey was too busy with his nose candy and
strippers to get her the gift. I’ve been thinking about her, I’ve been taking care of her for far longer than you.”

“And yet she fell into my arms trying to get away from you,” Sandor says with a dark grin of his own as he watches Baelish’s expression turn sour. “You can throw that piece of shit away now anyhow. That’s what I did to the other one when Sansa told me to.”

Petyr frowns for a moment before he smiles again, car salesman slick, and he shrugs and pockets the earring again.

“No matter. I’ll buy her more. I’ll buy her anything she wants, all the finery you could never afford,” he says as he takes two steps towards Sandor. “I will wine her. I will dine her. And I will fuck her, Clegane. She will submit to me, she will give me every inch of her lovely, lovely body. Your girl will become mine, sure as shit.”

He has half a mind to stand up and punch the little shit, but then a lovely vision distracts him.

“Is that right?” Sandor says, nodding towards the hallway where Sansa has emerged.

Petyr turns around in time to see Sansa advance towards him, fully dressed with Sandor’s gun in her hand, eyes hard with fury and jaw set with determination. Sandor’s heart swells with pride and love and relief, with all that trust she asked of him not five minutes prior, and his face doesn’t even hurt anymore, to see her in her glory.

“Get the fuck out of this house,” Sansa says with a snarl to her voice as she lifts the gun and points it right at Baelish.

“There’s my girl,” Sandor says triumphantly.

“Now come on, Sansa, let’s just, let’s just calm down now, all right?” Petyr says, hands up in the sign of surrender as he backs up a step away from her.

“Don’t talk down to me, asshole. Get out, now. You think I’m stupid enough to really go anywhere with you? You think a pair of earrings is enough to win me over? You’re a murderer.”

“Allegedly,” Petyr says with an upward twitch of his eyebrow and the curl of a smile on his face.

“You tried to murder the man I love,” she snaps, incredulous at his blasé demeanor even with a gun in his face. “So shove your earrings up your ass and get out of here.”

“You won’t shoot me,” he says with a shake of his head. “Not the girl I know, sweet soft Sansa with the—”

She points the gun towards the wall a foot to the side of him and fires, and the air around them explodes with noise. Sandor jumps and Petyr claps his hands over his ears, and Sansa is grimly, darkly pleased to see that he’s shaking. Her ears ring but she doesn’t care.

“Good shot, sweetheart,” Sandor says, even though he’s wincing from the gunfire, and he gets up from the arm of the couch to come stand beside her.

“You need to leave, and you need to know that if you ever come back, we will kill you. I don’t ever want you near us or my family, ever again. So go run back to Cersei with your little tail between your little legs and tell her it’s over. Okay?”
“Now you’re being rude for the sake of being rude,” Petyr says. “This man is rubbing off on you; you were never like this before.”

“You know she just shot at you, right? And you’re sitting here arguing with her like a dumbass,” Sandor says, lifting up his shirt by the hem to staunch some of the blood.

“Go on, get a towel from the kitchen. You probably need some ice too,” she murmurs as she glances at him.

“You sure you’re okay?” he asks, peering at her over the press of black t-shirt to his cheek.

She smiles, wants to say Of course I am because you’re here. “Yes, I promise. I’ll get him to leave and we’ll figure something out from there.”

“You see?” Petyr says quietly as Sandor heads back to the kitchen. “He leaves you to do all the dirty work. I would never do that, Sansa.”

She rolls her eyes. The list of things Sandor has done for her reads like a Jason Bourne movie.

“Just go, Petyr,” Sansa says wearily. Her arms ache from holding up the gun for so long, and she gestures with it towards the door. “Get out and go back to Chicago.”

“You’ll regret this, Sansa,” he says, though he does as she suggests and starts to edge towards the front door. “I would treat you like a queen.”

“I don’t want to be your queen,” she says, and then she smiles. “I’m already his.”

“Sansa, come on,” Petyr says, hand on the knob of the front door, disaster in his wake, blood on the carpet and a bullet in the wall.

“Shit! Robb!”

Sansa glances back when Sandor shouts from the back of the house, and he knocks over a chair as he bolts out of the kitchen and through the dining room. He’s breathless from shock, from trauma, and his chest heaves as he tries to speak.

“What?” She totally forgot her brother was here, in all the chaos and mayhem. “Where’s Robb?”

“Sansa, he killed Robb. He did the same thing to him he did to me, but- but he’s dead. He’s in the kitchen and he’s dead.”

“No,” she whispers, her aching arms lowering as she blinks in disbelief.

Sansa turns around to face Petyr, and their eyes lock as the warmth and blood drain from her face. Robb. Her brother. She has heard that when you think you’re going to die your life flashes before your eyes, but she’s not dying and it’s not her life she sees but his. All in the span of one beat from her broken heart, she sees him. Robb at ten with his first black eye from softball, grinning ear to ear. Robb right before prom in his fancy tuxedo drinking water out of a martini glass to be James Bond. Robb talking about his son Torrhen and how he can’t wait to teach him how to tie his shoes, how to catch a ball, how to treat a woman. Robb looking like their mother and talking like their father, a man who is also gone, taken from them by the Lannisters. Sansa sobs, one huge wracking sob that hurts her ribs the back of her throat.

“You son of a bitch,” she ekes out as she crosses the room on legs she can’t feel anymore, but her words aren’t hard enough for the agony she’s in, not cruel and bitter and wounding enough for
what he has done to her, for what he has taken.

Wordlessly Petyr wrenches open the door and turns to leave, and the door bangs against the wall from how hard he’s flung it, and she stares at the retreating form of him, the traitorous back and the guiltless shoulders, and she’s fed up with nobody else suffering except for her family. Sansa lifts her hand and points the gun, and she fires and he falls, there on the front stoop, and there is a jogger screaming from the sidewalk but she doesn’t care.

Sansa fires again and again at the slump of his body, again and again to make him suffer and make him bleed and die and burn in hell, and her ears are ringing so horribly she can barely hear Sandor shout for her to get back in the house, can barely hear herself screaming. But it’s okay. Even when the bullets run out and all the gun can do is click in her hand, it’s okay. Because she is Bonnie fucking Parker after all, and she’s tired of running.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Picset

“Sansa, come on now,” he says as he wraps his arms around her and drags her off the front porch and back into the house.

There’s nothing to be done for Petyr, though.

“No! I need another gun, I need more bullets,” she shrieks at the top of her lungs. “No! Don’t you-stop it, let me go, let me go,” she screams as Sandor hauls her inside and kicks the door shut, lest another jogger run by and see her standing over a dead body.

His ears are ringing and his face aches and his eyes burn, from the beauty and horror of Sansa stalking her prey and taking it down with the ease of shredding a tissue. He is dizzy, starving despite the feeling that he could vomit at any moment, and once she wriggles free and darts away from him to find her brother, Sandor submits and slumps against the closed door.

“Robb! Oh, god, Robb, no,” Sansa sobs, high keening wails piercing and puncturing her nonsensical babble that he can barely discern.

“Sansa, come on, we have to get out of here,” he mutters in vain, knowing full well she can’t hear him above her heartbreak, knowing full well how hard it will be to tear her from her brother’s side.

Besides, the idea of more running is starting to sound more and more exhausting and just as futile.

He pushes himself off the door with effort, clutches his head with his hand as he makes his way back to the kitchen and what he knows awaits him. Robb on his back from where Sandor had rolled him out of the prone position he discovered him in, eyes and mouth open with a plastic bag on the floor beside his body. Except now there is Sansa on her knees with Robb’s head in her lap as she brushes his hair off his forehead, back bowed as she hunches over him, her black hair hanging like a flag in her face.

“Sansa.”

“He’s gone, Sandor,” she sobs, sucking in a lungful of air as she looks up at him, as if she could do the breathing for Robb. “He’s really gone.”

“I know, baby. I know.”

“Jon? Is that you?”

It is Jeyne’s voice he hears muffled from behind Arianne’s apartment door, asking for him before he’s even unlocked the deadbolt – with a spare key instead of his toolkit – and Jon finds he’s smiling when he pushes open the door and finds Jeyne standing there.
“Oui, c’est moi,” he says, glancing back as he shuts and locks the door behind him, and by the time he has fully turned back to face her she’s already gone and flung her arms around him.

Automatically he lifts his arms to embrace her in return, a puppet on a string, a man mindless of movement because there’s no room or reason to think yes or to think no. Only to do.

“Oh thank god,” she says with her chin tucked up on his shoulder, her breath moving the unkempt hair by his neck like the beating of a bird’s wing, and she’s strong despite what she’s been through or maybe because of it, and he is momentarily taken aback by how tightly she hugs him. “I was so scared.”

Jon exhales a laugh, smooths a hand down the narrow of her back as they slowly pull apart.

“You have a much nicer way of showing it than my aunt. My ears are still ringing.”

She bows her head as she tucks her hair behind her ears like a shy little sprite, but she smiles all the warmer for it when she lifts her gaze up at him.

“Speaking of your aunt, I just got off Skype with her. We talked for over an hour after Margaery was done talking with Tyrion.”

Jon gives her a mock serious frown and crosses his arms over his chest where he is still warm from her hug.

“And what did you talk about?”

Jeyne’s smile breaks out into a wide happy beam, brighter than he’s ever seen her.

“France.”

A minute, an hour, a day. She can’t tell how long she sits there with Robb in her lap, his face wet with her tears as they fall endlessly from her eyes and the tip of her nose. This is all my fault, he’s dead because of me, she thinks over and over again, and that singular thought is interrupted only by the fresh realization that he is actually dead. She keeps expecting his eyes to widen and come back to focus until Sandor squats down beside her and uses his thumb and forefinger to close Robb’s eyelids.

“Come on, Sansa, let’s get you up,” Sandor finally says.

“No,” she says weakly, stroking the scruff of her brother’s unshaven cheek, but at the same time she says it she also knows it’s pointless because he’s gone, and he can’t feel her touch or her tears or her sorrow.

Just as Sandor stands and gently tucks his hands into her underarms, Sansa carefully cradles the back of her brother’s head in her hands and slides him off her lap and rests him as gingerly as she can on the kitchen floor. And then there’s the flex of Sandor behind her and up she goes, off her folded knees, and even though he grunts from the exertion he doesn’t let her go until she’s back on her feet.

“What are we going to do,” she moans when she turns to bury her face into his chest. “I feel so broken.”

“We’re going to get you back with your family, and we’re going to do it now,” he says after a long
moment of silence, his fingers running through her hair while he holds her snugly to him with his
other arm. “They can’t come back here, it’s not safe.”

“I know,” she murmurs, and then she frowns and lifts her head to look up at him, at the horrific
wounds that add another layer to his scars, the congealing blood and the swollen rise on his
cheekbone. He’s broken too, she thinks, distracting herself as her heart breaks for him too.

“You need to get your shoes and the keys to the Jeep. And get Robb’s phone, too. It’s high time
you had one again.”

That niggling feeling again, the sick drop of dread in her stomach, and like the crash of an ocean
wave a nauseating drench of hot-cold prickles sweeps her over from head to toes. Vertigo. She
grabs him with two fists of his t-shirt.

“What do you mean ‘we’ are going to get ‘me’ back to my family? What does that mean, Sandor?”

He sighs, looks up briefly to the ceiling before he looks down and smiles sadly down at her.

“What sort of things did you discuss about France? The food, the strikes, the wine?” Jon asks her,
and he is equal parts confused frown and warm smile as he lightly teases her.

Jeyne takes a breath and lets it go, feeling oddly intrusive now even though she just had an hour’s
worth of reassurance, but she’s never been one to invite herself to the party.

“About me going there with you. I um, I really want to. I mean, if that’s okay with you and
everything,” she adds hastily, twisting her hands in a tight-fingered clasp as she winces and shrugs
and looks up at him. “I mean, before she left for the hospital, Margaery said I’d probably need a
fake passport since everyone thinks I’m dead. But then Dany said you should have plenty of those
lying arou- oh,” she says, cutting herself off with a gasp when Jon steps forward and pulls her
against him once more in a bear hug.

“Of course it’s okay with me, Jeyne,” he says with a laugh. “Christ. I wouldn’t have gone without
you.”

There’s something so deliciously warm about hearing that, all Stand By Me and comforting, as
relieving as the sincere way he hugs her, but it’s nothing compared to the way he inhales deeply
and lifts his head away from hers to kiss her temple. Right there where his short beard drags
against her hair. It makes her shudder out a sigh and close her eyes, this small tiny thing, this itty-
bitty show of affection and friendship and care that is actually so monumental it makes her
tremble.

“Putain, Jeyne, I’m sorry, I just- oh, it’s just such a relief to hear you say that,” he whispers against
the crown of her head. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have.”

“Please don’t say sorry for that,” she says, smiling with her closed eyes.

She is about to stupidly launch into how long it’s been since someone kissed her on the forehead,
how it could have been Sansa for all she recalls or maybe even her father. But then she is saved by
the bell, or rather, by the agent.

“I’d say get a room but I’m basically all out of spares these days,” Arianne says dryly from behind
them.
Jeyne and Jon spring apart from one another at the interruption, and he clears his throat and coughs into his fist, and Jeyne stares down at the carpet before she glances up at their hostess. Arianne is grinning and when she catches Jeyne’s eye she winks. Jeyne’s cheeks flare hot and, she knows from past experience, likely a bright strawberry pink. But she still can’t help smiling.

“Anyways,” Arianne says to Jon. “Welcome home, dear. Did you get anything good?”

Jon grins, rests a hand on Jeyne’s shoulder briefly before he walks past her towards the kitchen table, and she watches as he shrugs free from the messenger bag slung across his broad shoulders.

“You tell me,” he says, and he overturns the bag completely as a wide array of CDs and flash drives and cell phones and one iPad come sliding and scattering out onto the table.

“No,” Sansa says as she shakes her head so hard her hair falls in her eyes back and forth like windshield wipers. “No, you can’t be serious. We have to leave together.”

She is distraught and hysterical, hands clutching either side of her head like her skull might split in two. Sandor knows exactly how that feels, and the hard blow of his decision feels like another crack of knuckle dusters, it pains him as much as it so clearly pains her. But he has made up his migraine-addled mind.

“If we leave together, we’re going to get caught eventually, all right? There was a woman outside who saw you and Petyr, and there’s currently a dead man on the front porch. You know we can’t run forever, not together. But- hey, listen to me,” he says, stopping her from pacing past him with a hand to her shoulder.

“I don’t want to listen to you,” she snaps at him, wiping her wet face with her fingers before glaring wetly, angrily, up at him. “You’re talking nonsense.”

“No I’m not, Sansa,” he says, putting some of the old bully back in his words, putting a little more fight than he really even has at this point. “If I stay, I can give you enough time to leave, all right?”

“No,” she sobs, voice cracking.

It kills him. It’s killing him to say and it might literally kill him to do but he understands now. He gets it, and while there are a thousand things he wants to tell her they’ll only make her stay by his side, stubborn as a mule. And he needs her to run.

“Yes. Listen, we have no idea who Petyr told, we have no idea who else in the Lannister camp knows that your family lives here now, all right? What happened to Robb- do you want that to happen to your mom or your brothers and sister?”

“No,” she says again, shaking her head and crying harder.

He can’t take it anymore, and so instead of just standing there he tugs her back against his chest and kisses the top of her head, rests his uninjured cheek against the crown of her hair, hair he’s cut and dyed and loved.

“So you have to tell them not to come back. You have to leave and make sure they stay safe. All right? You take Shireen’s Jeep and you call your sister, get that marshal guy she’s been sleeping with to help you all move together this time. Somewhere safe and out of this city. Will you do that, sweetheart? Do it for me. Do it for Robb.”
“Sandor, I love you,” she says as her arms come sliding around his middle.

“I love you too, Sansa,” he says, blinking away a sudden sting in his eyes as he stares sightlessly across the empty, bloodstained room. “Tell me you’ll go, baby. Tell me you’ll stay safe for me. I couldn’t bear it, if something happened to you.”

“I will,” she says, and then she cries harder, and damn it all if he doesn’t feel like crying too, until they both freeze from a new noise that mingles with the sounds of her sobbing. “What is that?” Sansa whispers. “What’s that sound?”

She lifts her head off his chest and he cranes his neck to gaze down at her, and he doesn’t answer because there’s no reason to, because they both know that sound well enough.

Sirens.

Margaery is all click-clack stilettos on hospital tile when she pushes into his room, a dazzle of blonde and a fitted trench coat that makes Bronn think of romantic shit like *Casablanca,* but that could also be the medication talking, or else it’s simply because he loves her.

“There’s my duchess,” he says from the side of his bed where he’s standing up and hanging onto his IV drip stand.

“What are you doing out of bed?” she gasps once she registers the sight, and she closes the door and immediately trots towards him on her high heels.

“Doctor’s orders,” he says, waving her off weakly before outstretching his arm to beckon her closer. “I mean, they’re not going to let me out of here if I can’t get up to take a goddamn piss, you know?”

“Do you want me to help you?”

“The only reason I want my dick in your hand is if you’re about to put it somewhere else,” he grins as she scowls up at him. “No, I’m fine, Margie, the nurse just helped me out and left me to my own devices. I’m just standing here enjoying being upright,” and it’s only a little bit of a lie, considering how fucking lightheaded the ordeal made him.

“Well let me help you back in bed at least,” she fusses, untying her coat and tossing it into the chair in the corner of the room, and she’s jeans and a tight sweater, slick and expensive and as lovely as ever.

“Sight for sore eyes, duchess,” he grunts as she helps him ease down and back, as he lets her do what he refused, out of pride, to let the nurse do. “Send me a picture of that outfit, will you?”

“Considering how many nurses gave me funny looks, I’m never sending you another picture in your lifetime, buster,” she says, easing herself onto his bed once he’s settled, and she lies on her side facing him as he grins at her.

“They caught me with a boner after last night’s picture,” he laughs.

“You might actually be the literal worst, Bronn Blackwater,” she huffs, though she’s got a little smile peeking through her lawyer poker face. “Anyways, I’m glad you’re in high spirits, because I have great news.”
“You are going to send me more pictures,” he says hopefully.

“No, but it does involve media. Arianne called me on the cab ride over here. We have them, baby. Jon broke into Petyr’s apartment and found all sort of incriminating evidence. The man kept records of everything. Arianne said there’s literally days and days’ worth of phone conversations and even a few videos that aren’t worth mentioning,” she says with the wrinkle of her nose. “But we’ve got them.”

There’s a weight that flies right off of him, the weight of nearly dying for his job without it coming to fruition, the weight of literal years’ worth of living two lives that weren’t much good until Margaery sauntered into one of them. And there’s the weight of his friend – no, his friends, plural – finally being safe, so long as they stay hidden. Because it’s not over yet. Fat ladies and singing and all that bullshit.

“When can you get your case together?” he asks, knowing the FBI can’t step in and alleviate the charges against Sandor and Sansa until they can lift the veil and reveal themselves.

She shrugs happily, chewing on a fingernail as she gazes across the little hospital room. “A few months maybe? God. I can’t believe it’s over. We’re finally going to nail these fuckers to the wall.”

“I love it when you talk dirty to me,” he says, and this time for his cheek Bronn earns himself a kiss.

“You have your stuff?” he asks her gruffly.

They’re standing in her mother’s backyard in the rain, and the bleak pale light makes the deep red of his bloodied cheek all the more dramatic, the dark circles under his eyes making him look more haunted and hunted than before. She’s got his wool hat on, Shireen’s keys in her hand and Robb’s phone in her pocket. Magpie Sansa. Heartbroken Sansa. Sansa-All-Alone.

“Sandor, please don’t do this,” she says with a feeble shake of her head. “Just come with me.”

“I can’t. They’ll I.D. Petyr and your brother and it will get out that it’s us, Red. It’ll all come back to us, the Lannisters will make sure of that. There won’t be a place we can go in this city, in this state let alone the rest of the country.”

“We can- we can leave the country then,” she begs, and there is a fleeting image of them on a desert island drinking out of coconuts and getting tanned browner than berries.

The sirens get louder.

“I don’t have a passport and I don’t think there’s a single airport or border that would let us through.”

“Please,” she begs him. Will she ever stop crying? “They’ll- they’ll still want to know where I’ve gone.”

“I’ll make something up,” he says, all adamant and unwavering, as stubborn as she can be and twice as big. “Look, Sansa, all I’ve done since I met you is kept you safe, and all I’ve ever wanted to do since about five minutes after meeting you is to keep you safe. All right? So let me do that here and now. Let me finish what I started.”

“You were supposed to finish it with me.”
The clouds open up a little more, cracks in a glass until it’s completely shattered like her heart, and the rain comes down in earnest now as they stare at each other.

Sandor smiles, the expression and the rain making the cuts on his face weep a little more blood.

“I’ve got you in here, Red,” he says, tapping his finger to his chest over his heart. “And I’m never letting you out.” he murmurs, glancing over his shoulder through the sliding glass door into the house. “Listen, they’re getting closer. You need to leave now before they get to this street. Please, for me, Red, go. I need to know you get away safely, okay?”

“Oh god he’s letting me go, I’m all alone, I’m all alone. Sandor backs away from her, big boots trampling the wet grass as he retreats. “Go on, call your sister the second you get out of the neighborhood and you make sure nobody comes back here. It’ll be crawling with cops in a heartbeat.”

“Sandor,” she calls out when he turns to go, and all she can think of is My heart, he’s my heart, he’s all that’s left in there when he turns around to face her.

“Yes, Red?” he says, raking the hair out of his eyes to gaze at her one last time.

“You’re my favorite color, too,” she says.

He smiles and nods at her, takes a step towards her, but then the sounds of the sirens go from loud to full blast and the look on his face turns to terror.

“Go, now, Sansa. Run,” he barks at her, and so run she does.

He watches her tear down the lawn and almost slip once before she regains her footing and darts across the street, and he stands there and watches her turn over the engine and put the Jeep into gear. He watches as she stares at him one long, mournful moment before she hits the gas and tears off down the street, and satisfied she’s gone, he walks back to the house.

Sandor leaves the sliding door open for added sense of chaos, quickly crosses the living room and picks up the gun. He cleans the grip and barrel as thoroughly as possible with his bloodstained t-shirt, and once he’s more or less satisfied he holds it and presses his fingers into it, hoping for a good clean transfer of prints. Holding it in his right hand, he opens the front door just in time to see a third and fourth cop car screech to a halt in front of Cat Stark’s house.

“Drop your weapon and step forward out of the house,” says one of the cops as he aims his own piece at Sandor and advances up the walk, three more officers in hot pursuit as they jog up the yard.

Sandor does as he says, dropping the gun at Petyr’s motionless feet and putting his hands up behind his head in anticipation of what’s to come. They’re rough with him like he knew they
would be, two of them shoving him off the porch as a third one yanks his hands down and twists
them behind his back to cuff him.

“Is this your doing?” one cop asks as he takes responsibility for putting Sandor in one of the white
SUVs with the lights still flashing like it’s some macabre dance party.

_I don’t dance_, he remembers her saying.

“Yeah, I killed him,” he says, rain making his shirt heavy and cold and stuck to his skin. “I shot
him.”

Christ how he would have loved to see her dance.

Sandor is shoved up against the side of the wet SUV and frisked, and there’s the sick moment of
hang-time when the policeman finds his wallet, and he digs his elbow in Sandor’s back to pin him
place as he opens it. As if Sandor couldn’t tear this little prick in half even with his hands bound, as
if Sandor actually wants to run at this point. Given the option he’d crawl into the backseat of his
own volition, but he has a part to play here. Sandor glances back at him.

“Holy shit. Hey, you guys know who this sonuvabitch is? It’s that Clegane guy, that killer from
Chicago.”

“No shit?” says another cop, sidling down the sloped front yard. “Jesus, I know the reports said he
was big but I had no idea he was this fucking huge. Hey killer, where’s your little girlfriend? The
pretty redhead, whats-her-name.”

“Sansa Stark,” he says, turning to look forward over the top of the SUV, and he takes a deep breath
and thinks about his favorite color and lets the rain wash the blood off his broken face. “And I
killed her, too.”
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Picset

It’s been nothing but noise, lately, and while Arya normally loves dancing to the good loud boom of bass and the crash of percussion this noise has been nothing but chaotic and depressing.

No one can seem to stop crying though Sansa and their mother are by far the worst at it. Her sister will lock herself in the one bathroom and run the shower but they can all hear it, and if their mother has managed to calm herself down, she only need the combined sounds of rushing water and Sansa’s sobs to get her going all over again.

It is heartbreaking and it is also starting to drive Arya up the fucking wall.

The television is always switched on to the news in fear and anticipation that their cover has been blown, but so far all they’ve learned is that the groundhog says there’s going to be six more weeks of winter and that gas prices are down. Rickon and Bran argue nonstop about changing the channel while all Arya can think of is what Robb would try to watch.

(Sports).

Nevermind baby Torrhen who is teething, who cried so incessantly the first night that WITSEC sprang for another hotel room just so Dacey and the baby could mourn in soundproof privacy. Still, even with Torrhen it was far quieter than when Podrick finally confessed to Brienne that he told an FBI agent their location so that Sansa could be reunited with her family. Now that was an explosive discussion.

“You did what?”

“I divulged classified information, sir,” he said.

Brienne bristled.

“And why exactly did you do that?”

“Well, agent Martell got me drunk and- ah,” he said, glancing to where Arya sat on the edge of one of the queen beds. He slid his gaze back to his superior. “Pillow talk, sir. I was inebriated, and to her credit she’s very uh, very persistent, in her own way.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

There was a long, tense conversation about whether or not she should report him and whether or not she should tear him a new asshole but in the end Brienne got over it, or rather stormed out to get coffee. That was three hours ago. It still wasn’t loud enough to wake their mother from her drug-induced slumber, even when Brienne manually yanked the heavy door shut to slam it. Now, with Sansa dozing on the little loveseat by the hotel room’s window and Rickon and Bran playing cards on the bed unoccupied by their mother, there’s only the noise from the TV, and when Arya realizes it she looks up at where Podrick is leaning against the wall looking at his phone.
“It’s almost quiet,” she murmurs, getting off the bed to stand next to him.

Pod immediately slips his phone in his pocket and smiles sadly at her, lifts his arm to draw her closer.

“Relatively speaking, yes,” he says quietly. “How are you holding up?”

“I don’t know if I am, to be honest,” she sighs, tipping her head to rest it against his chest. “It’s sort of like I’m in a state of limbo. I just can’t believe he’s gone. I didn’t, you know, I didn’t see him like Sansa did. It’s so hard to believe. The last time I saw him he was so vivid, so alive. So Robb. And now he doesn’t exist anymore.”

“Jesus, Arya, would you shut up?” Rickon says, red eyed and surly as he glares at her over his shoulder.

“She has a right to speak her mind,” Podrick tries gently, and Arya squeezes him with the arm she’s got around his back to show her gratitude.

“Yeah, well, she’s speaking all of our minds, and it’s already bad enough that it’s going through my head. I don’t need it going through my ears or whatever.”

“Come on, Ric, it’s your turn,” Bran says with his low measured voice from where he’s propped up against the headboard. “We don’t need your little outburst waking up Sansa. She hasn’t slept since we got here.”

“Still haven’t,” Sansa says from where she’s curled up in the fetal position on the too-small couch.

“Goddammit, Rickon,” Arya snaps, lifting up on her toes as she turns back to Pod and kisses him before she leaves the comfort of his embrace to try and transfer some of it to her sister.

“No, it’s fine, I wasn’t really um, wasn’t really asleep,” she says, unfolding her long legs to sit up and rub her face with her hands. “Or at least I don’t think I was. I can’t tell if I was thinking or dreaming.”

Bleary is the only word for her in her current state, and it’s wild and surreal for Arya to see her normally poised and put-together sister in such a state of disrepair. Wrecked like some fancy sports car on the side of the road, spattered in mud and rain. Beautiful and utterly broken, a crying shame.

Sansa winces and puts a hand on her stomach.

“You okay?”

“My stomach hurts,” Sansa says, and she gets up groggily and crosses the room, a little wraith-traipe that Arya has practically done step for step during a contemporary number she based on sorrow.

At least I nailed the choreography, she thinks sadly as her sister shuts the bathroom door behind her.

“Ten bucks says she turns the shower on,” Rickon says.

“I’m not betting against those odds,” Bran replies, tossing down his cards. “Gin rummy.”

Which is too bad for Bran, since there is no sudden creak of faucet fixtures and subsequent rush of water, but there is the sound of a sudden weary sob as the toilet flushes, and her cries are quiet but
persistent even after the toilet tank refills and the plumbing quiets down.

“Jesus Christ,” Rickon says, and Arya thinks it’s because he lost the game or maybe because the sound of crying has become as nails-on-chalkboard as it has to Arya, but then he drops his head in his hands and sniffs hard.

“Oh Rickon,” Arya murmurs, rubbing his back a moment before she heads after her sister.

She knocks lightly on the door and waits a moment, frowning at the sounds of heartache coming from the bathroom, and when there’s no answer she glances back at Podrick. He shrugs and nods and gives her another one of his sympathy smiles, all somber sincerity from him and none of the platitudes that Arya so despises. She smiles back in equal measure, nods as he lowers his gaze and pulls his phone out again, and then she turns back to the task at hand.

“San? You okay, babe?” she asks as she pushes open the heavy door.

She blinks in the over-bright florescence of the little room, light bouncing off the white counter and tile floor, the white shower curtain and walls, and then she focuses on the sad slump of her sister on the floor between the toilet and tub. Tears and short black hair, the fold of her arms on the caps of her bent knees, utter dejection and misery, and now Arya is crying too.

“Hey, come on back to the room, you don’t have to be alone. We all miss him,” she murmurs, but then her sister lifts her head and looks at her, and then she gets it and feels like an idiot for forgetting, but then again there’s been an awful lot to be sad about lately. “Thinking about Sandor?”

“I got my period,” Sansa says with a rush-gust sigh that is froggy from so many tears. “We had-before we- before he- we slept together. I forgot until just now when I wiped and I saw the, um,” she says, hesitating.

“I know what you saw,” Arya says as she sits down in front of her sister on the floor. “I get the same thing too, you know.”

Sansa lets her head rest back against the wall and laughs, a sudden ring that echoes in the little room, a nice clear peal that dies almost as soon as it’s born, and it’s buried under the mud of another sob.

“Are you telling me you wanted to get pregnant? I mean, I know you love him but you just met him and with everything falling apart, like, that’s not the way to go.”

“No, god no, Arya, I didn’t- I don’t want a baby, I just, it’s just, oh, I don’t know,” she says, shaking her head as she gazes up at the ceiling. She sighs and sniffs against her sleeve before she sighs again and looks back at Arya. “It’s just that he’s really gone now, you know? There’s no more Sandor, not even- not even inside me.”

“Oh Sansa,” Arya says, tugging her sister’s arms off her knees and pulling her forward, and even though Sansa’s always played at refinement she comes willingly, a limp noodle of grief with her arms draped around Arya’s shoulders. “He’s in your heart, though, isn’t he? And he always will be.”

A high keening sound fills the air.

“That’s just what he said before I ran away,” Sansa says.

She breaks down into another series of sobs and Arya does her best to rock her sister the way
Dacey does Torrhen, side to side with little shushes and murmurs, and as Sansa weeps Arya thinks of lost love and dead brothers, and then suddenly she’s weeping too until there’s a knock on the door.

“What,” Arya says bitterly, half turning her head towards the door behind her as she smooths her hand down the back of Sansa’s head over and over.

“I hate to bother you two,” Pod says through the door, and Arya softens to hear him.

“No, it’s okay. What’s up?”

“Sansa, there’s something on the television I think you might want to see. It’s uh, it’s about Sandor.”

**Think Zen thoughts**, Arianne tells herself as she knocks sharply on the Assistant Director’s office door, though the pounding of her heart is way more kickboxing than it is downward facing dog. She and Areo are on good, friendly terms, something she’s worked hard to cultivate ever since she left Quantico, but the way he just snapped at her over the intercom to get her ass in his office was no playful prank. And while she’s never been the kind of shrinking violet when it comes to men in positions of authority, she hates to admit that there’s more than a little shrinking going on in her heart right now.

“Come in,” Areo barks from behind the door.

**Here goes nothing.** Arianne arranges her features into a neutral expression and steps into his office. A.D. Hotah has his back to her behind his desk, or rather the back of his office chair. She can just make out the top of his head.

“You asked to see me?” she asks lightly as she can, as if she did not suffer from wave after wave of snickers while walking through her department’s cubicles after his overhead announcement.

“Shut the fucking door and sit down,” he says, turning in his chair so that Arianne can see that he’s on the phone of all things, and the lack of privacy adds insult to injury. “I’ll call you back. Little Miss I Do What I Want walked in.”

Arianne narrows her eyes at the disrespect but takes a seat when he gestures impatiently to the two chairs in front of his desk.

“If I really did what I wanted I’d be sunbathing on St. Thomas right about now,” she says before she can help herself.

“Well hey, you’re going to have plenty of time to do that, considering the fact that I’m suspending you as of today.”

“What? Why? What the fuck did I do?” she says, gripping the armrests of her chair as she immediately sits forward in her seat. She flips through her thoughts like cards on a rolodex, thinking back. Paperwork in order, callbacks made, emails answered. **What’s his fucking problem?**

“You fucked a WITSEC marshal and used the leaked information he gave you to attract the attention of two fugitives,” he bellows, banging his fist on the desk like it’s a gavel. Judge, jury, executioner.

Arianne winces.
“Oh,” she mutters as she sits back in her seat. “That.”

“Yeah, that,” Hotah snaps.

“In my defense, those fugitives aren’t actually guilty of anything, and one of them was related to the family I directed her to.”

“Well, one of them was recently arrested in a house with two dead bodies in it. One of the victims was a participant in the witness protection program. A Robb Stark,” he says, yanking open his desk drawer to pull out a file and toss it on his desk.

It slides across the width of it and Arianne has to lean over again to snatch it before it falls to the floor. Robb Stark. *The one with the son,* she thinks sadly as she opens his file and gazes at the photo from the morgue.

“Sansa wouldn’t murder her brother, this is ridiculous.”

“Oh, Stark wasn’t the one who confessed. It was Clegane. *Stark* is the one he murdered, though her body hasn’t turned up yet. Three fucking murders, Martell, and one of them in WITSEC. No rules-compliant member of the protection program has ever been killed. *That* right there is on your head,” he says, gesturing to the file she’s got in her hands.

The blood and feeling leaches from her face but she tries to get some of it back as she shakes her head vehemently.

“Sandor wouldn’t kill Sansa. Bronn knows him in and out. Sandor’s in love with Sansa, he was there to protect her. He wouldn’t kill her.”

“Well he confessed to it willingly enough. It was the second documented statement he made at the scene.”

“This is insane. No, this is *inane,*” Arianne says, still shaking her head as she stares down at the coroner report on Robb Stark, and the words swim and bob on the page until she squints and focuses on one word in particular.

*Asphyxiation.*

“You said there were three murders. Sansa’s not accounted for, so who was the second body? Who else was killed?”

“A John Doe with no identification on him,” he says, pulling out another file and tossing it on his desk. “Probably some Mormon or Jehovah’s Witness knocking on the door trying to spread the goddamn word.”

Arianne would point out the humor of such a phrase but she’s too busy staring down at the face of a very dead Petyr Baelish. She sucks in a breath and holds onto it a long moment as she tries to put two and two together.

“No,” she says on the wake of a long exhale. She frisbees both files back to his desk so that he has to scrabble to catch them this time. “No, he didn’t do it. That asphyxiation shit is Petyr Baelish’s M.O. That’s how he killed Olenna Tyrell. Allegedly,” she adds with a roll of her eyes.

“Well, fuck, Martell, I haven’t gotten a report on that, have I?”

“Because I’m not finished with the case, *sir,*” she snaps right back. “It’s an active case, one you’re
suspending me on even though my partner just got poked up like a goddamn pincushion. Look,” she says as she stands and snatches the John Doe file back, and she flips it open and jabs a finger at the morgue photo. “I bet you that this man asphyxiated Robb Stark and came after Sansa, so Sandor told her to run. Maybe Baelish came after him too so Sandor shot him.”

“He was shot six times in the back.”

“We can work out the self-defense angle later,” she says impatiently.

“That doesn’t explain why he confessed to killing the girl,” Hotah says as he rubs his temple with his fingers.

Arianne laughs. “That’s easy. Love. Love makes people do the dumbest shit. And the best shit, too,” she says with a smile, thinking of Margaery, of Jon, of all of them.

“Shit like sleeping with a WITSEC marshal?” he says drily.

Arianne shrugs.

“Sure. I did that for my job. And I love my job. Don’t take me off the case, sir. Please. Please don’t suspend me.”

Areo gives her a baleful glare that she holds with a steely gaze of her own, eyebrows raised in challenge. Finally he sighs and leans back in his chair.

“They’ll think I’m giving you special treatment, Arianne.”

“Fuck ‘em. Say it’s because Bronn still leaks when you fill him up with water.”

Hotah chuckles and shakes his head, mutters a few swear words under his breath when the cell phone next to his office landline buzzes with a text. They both lean over the desk to read it though he bats her away with a light push to her shoulder to get her to mind her own business.

“Well, it looks like Romeo’s confession has hit the AP newsfeed,” he says, turning to his computer to pull up MSN.

Sure enough there’s a photo of Sandor Clegane on the front page and a link to an article titled “CHICAGO CRIMINAL ARRESTED, CONFESSES TO KILLING LOVER.”

“He’s going to attract Lannister men like flies to honey with that kind of exposure,” Areo says, clicking the link. “Hope they put him in solitary or else he won’t survive one night in the clink.”

“I don’t know,” Arianne murmurs as she skims the article. “Maybe it was a smart move after all. Now sir, am I really suspended? I’ve already gotten wind of crucial evidence and I think Margaery Tyrell is gearing up to put together an indictment. You wouldn’t transfer the case to some green kid just because of a teensy tiny little fling, would you?”

Areo Hotah heaves another big sigh and waves her off. “Just get the fuck out of here. Tell them I made you cry or something, anything so I can save face.”

Arianne puts her hands and a knee on his desk and hoists herself up onto it, and when she smacks a kiss onto his bald head he only grunts and mutters and grumbles.

“Go on now, get out of here and fuck off, Martell,” he says, and she’s grinning as she slides off his desk and practically sprints to his door. “And I don’t mean that literally!”
Her grin fades once she shuts the door, and hastily she takes her phone out of her rear pocket and pulls up her texts.

**Arianne:** Tell that girlfriend of yours to get her cute little ass in gear on this case. Sandor's been arrested, Sansa is MIA, and we need to get a move on it.

**Bronn:** I'm on it. And stop looking at my girlfriend's ass!

“He hasn’t called me since, but still, I know we shared something. He was very sophisticated and impeccably dressed, you know,” Cersei says to Taena, who is scrubbing the callouses off of her heel.

She’s sitting in the raised pedicure chair like it’s a throne, chin up even as the little knobs knead into her back with dull mechanical rhythm. It’s nothing compared to her usual masseuse but still, she likes this little back alley salon where they let her drink in peace and don’t charge her thanks to the Lannister name. Her father always raised her to show respect to her name and demand it from others. It feels like she’s making him proud here, in some small way, with people literally bowing over her feet. Maybe if he saw her now he would stop being so demeaning in his emails.

“Well, he can’t be that sophisticated, if he didn’t call you back,” her pedicurist says as she sits up and pats Cersei’s foot dry with a white towel.

Cersei frowns. Waking up alone in her bed without that sexy Frenchman was a harsher slap to the face than the splitting headache she had. She’s mixed her liquors plenty of time without getting such a crippling hangover; the bitter part of her, and it’s a big part these days, wonders if it’s not the sting of rejection that so soured her stomach and pierced her skull with pain. *He was still drawn to me, though, no matter how it ended.*

“Who knows how they do it in France,” she says with a sigh as her phone buzzes on the little table next to her chair. She smiles and sets down her travel mug of Sauvignon Blanc and picks up her phone. “Joffrey! What a pleasant surprise. I thought you were going to Aspen for the latest snowfall.”

“I am in Aspen, mom, or did you forget that cell phones work in different states?”

He sniffs loudly and then laughs, and the raucous in the background is of a far more rowdy kind than typical for ten o’clock in the morning, if she has her time zones correct. *So it’s back to whores and cocaine,* she thinks with the downturn of her mouth. Clearly she needs to give him a refresher on moderation.

“Well then, mister smarty pants, to what do I owe the pleasure? I never hear from you when you’re skiing and only ever know what you’re up to thanks to Instagram.”

“You’re kidding, you mean you haven’t seen it?”

“Seen what?”

“Jesus, mom, the news? The internet? The world outside of your little bubble?”

Taena scrubs her other foot a little over-hard, making Cersei jump, and with a flare of temper she uses her dried foot to nudge the woman on the shoulder, hard enough that she almost slips off her little stool.
“Then you tell me what’s going on outside of my little bubble, which includes amongst other things funding your little ski trip,” she snaps, sick and tired of the snub and underestimation that seem to be the building blocks of every man who walks the earth.

“Oh, don’t get mad, mom, you know I’m only kidding. I’m just surprised I had to call you. It’s like, everywhere.”

“What is?” she huffs, glancing down at Taena just in time. “No, I told you, I wanted the French pedi,” and then she’s thinking about Jean Neige all over again, at least until Joffrey laughs.

“So it’s a mani-pedi bubble, hmm? Anyways, I guess that big ugly dude Sansa ran off with has been arrested.”

Cersei raises her eyebrows and hums, pins the phone to her ear with her shoulder as she leans over for her mug of wine. The flavor floods her mouth like she’s salivating to bite into this new and interesting turn of events.

“Really, now?”

“Yeah, really. He killed a couple more people after they skipped town. And here’s the best part. Remember that weirdo I hired to uh, you know, take care of Sansa for me after that little stunt she pulled?”

“Oh, you mean the stunt that got us all into this mess? Yes. Yes I do, I remember him.”

“Well it turns out I should have hired this Sandor dude, because he’s the one who’s killed her.”

“What?!” Cersei says, loud enough to be a shriek though not as a vulgar.

“Right? It’s unbelievable. I guess the fucker had more in common with his brother than we knew.”

“Well we didn’t know anything about him. Petyr did, but, ugh, that man,” she says with a roll of her eyes and a wave of her hand. She takes another deep swallow of wine. “He hasn’t called me in two days and I’ve never been more delighted.” Finally the right man forgot to call.

There is a swell of music and chatter in Joffrey’s background, and then the unmistakable sound of him snorting a line of cocaine. She wonders if it’s a rolled up twenty or hundred dollar bill he’s using, knowing full well she’s the one who gave him the money.

“Well look,” he says with another series of loud sniffs. “Look, here’s what I’m wondering. That Sandor guy is in custody, right? It would be nothing, just like, a piece of cake or whatever, to send someone over and get rid of him too. We can get Detective Moore to do it, splick- spit- licky-split,” he rapid fire tongue-trips.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Cersei says lightly, and she sets her mug down to properly gaze down at her freshly manicured fingernails. “I mean, Sansa’s dead. That’s the only one we cared about in the end, isn’t it? And now the problem is gone. There’s no reason to waste more of our manpower on a piece of working class garbage like another Clegane. We already killed his brother so let this one pay for his crimes. Let him rot in jail, for all I care.”

“Suit yourself,” her son says, and then there is the sounds of broken glass erupt in the background and he lets out a shout and a laugh. “Shit, mom, I gotta go, one of the guys just shoved the waiter through the window.”

He hangs up rudely in her ear and she’s left to sit there stupidly as she stares down at the black
screen of her phone. She’s done her best but she has a feeling he’s going to end up like the rest of them. *Men.* Cersei sighs heavily, all weight of the world and the mantle she’s got on her shoulders, all weary rests the head that wears the crown. It doesn’t matter. She doesn’t need anyone else. The Sansa situation has been resolved and if she *really* thinks hard about it, it was all sort of set in motion by her. She’s the one who raised Joffrey to suffer no fools, and he’s the one who made that Stark girl run right into another Clegane. *Bitches get things done.* She once saw that on Myrcella’s Tumblr after a late night of stalking her children through social media, and she is inclined to believe it. After all, she lives it every single day of her life.

“Anyways,” she says as she settles back and increases the tempo of her automated massage. “Where was I? Oh yes, the French guy. I told you he saw me from across the room, didn’t I?” she says, sighing dreamily to remember it. Christ, she looked so good that afternoon. “He couldn’t take his eyes off me.”
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Picset

MAJOR THANKS to my boos Bex and Bookhoor, and to my bb Alice of Alonso for, in order, info on jails and help with 1-1 (hahaha), and courtroom shenanigans.
THANK YOU LADIES.

One month later

“All right, you two, soup’s on,” a guard says as the buzzer sounds and the cell door opens.

It’s as grating and dull a sound as the rest of his cell looks, two concrete slabs for beds and a metal sink and conjoined toilet he has to share with his massive Chinese cellmate who demands to be called 1-1 even though the guard calls him Winston. The prick’s so huge Sandor didn’t think twice about arguing with him. Watching the man try to take a dump would almost be comical if it weren’t so disgusting, and besides, as big a guy as Sandor is, he’s pretty sure laughing at 1-1 would be a real dumb fucking idea.

The door slides open and it’s a sight Sandor has grown accustomed to over the past month. Two armed guards, one with his AR-15 at the ready while the other waits to escort them.

“You first, Winston,” the guard says, shaking out a set of cuffs that makes Sandor think of being hog-tied.

He watches as 1-1 is cuffed first at the hands and then around the feet, and due to his size he almost has to stoop in order to walk with any sort of comfort. 1-1 leaves the cell and then Sandor is made to stand and suffer the same humiliation. This is the bed he made for himself and he must lie on all eight feet by two feet concrete slab of it.

They’re escorted down the corridor, a florescent-lit tube of walls and plate-glass windows looking out at Chicago’s finest doing pushups and smoking cigarettes in the yard. Another buzz and another door, lather rinse repeat another two times until they’re brought to the cafeteria.

“Half an hour,” the guard says as he undoes the hog ties. “Enjoy, boys. There’s beef tonight.”

As violent offenders they eat with the other men of their ilk, and at times his own crimes are so outmatched by the depravity of his fellow inmates that Sandor has to remind himself that he has killed men before. He puts it in the forefront of his mind every time someone other than 1-1 talks to him in the hopes that they can see murder when they look him in the eye.

Dinner is a cup of beans and cornbread inexplicably matched with a scoop of oily beef fried rice and shriveled peas, a slice of cake that looks better suited for a funeral than a birthday party. There are two pats of butter that Sandor immediately swipes his cornbread through before shoving half the muffin in his mouth.
“Hey fellas, anybody got a cigarette?” Mance says as he sits down at their table with the clatter of his nearly empty tray.

“Yeah, here,” Sandor muffles around his food, sliding one from behind his ear. He found out real quick how priceless a cigarette can be behind bars. Good thing he isn’t tempted to smoke them.

“Thanks, brother,” Mance grins as he leans over and snags the cigarette. “Dinner’s not so bad tonight. Just don’t, you know, mix the flavors. Hit the tray left to right, in my opinion,” he says, eying Sandor’s tray that he attacked from the center, and then he chuckles. “Hell, it’s all cardboard at the end of the day.”

“Hey, Chinaman, you should be happy today,” a new kid says as he passes by with his full tray. “They got beef flied lice for dinner,” he says, and just like that 1-1 leaps to his feet and yanks the food out of his hands.

“Then I’m gonna need your fucking share just to make it feel like home again,” he says in clear-as-a-bell English that is no less ominous for its eloquence.

The guards do nothing.

“He killed a guy in a bar fight for racist talk like that,” Mance says conversationally as he pinches some rice with his fingers and scoops it into his mouth. He looks up at the kid. “1-1 used to go by One Ton until a little panty-sniffer like you tried calling him Won Ton Soup. That poor bastard is buried upstate somewhere, so now to keep the confusion at a minimum our buddy here goes by 1-1. Personally, I think that’s pretty fucking generous. Don’t you?”

“And I don’t even like soup,” 1-1 says as he scrapes the food from the shit-talker’s tray onto his, and Mance sighs sadly as Sandor’s cellmate stirs the beans and broken up cornbread into his fried rice.

“Aways, they’re all saying you’re some big bad criminal,” Mance says as he turns from the epicurean failure happening on 1-1’s tray to face Sandor. “Said you killed a mob guy and a couple of other dudes, as well as a chick.” Mance’s voice takes an edge. “Two types of folks we don’t like in here, and that’s kiddy-diddlers and rapists. D’you rape that girl before you killed her? Huh?”

“I didn’t kill her,” he says after the briefest moment of hesitation. He’s seen the movies and he wonders if the old adage is true. “I took the fall for her,” he says, thinking of red hair dyed black and the flash of her eyes, how blue they are when they are full of tears, how bright they shine when she says that she loves him.

There’s a pain in his heart that has nothing to do with indigestion.

Mance blinks in surprise for a moment, greasy rice sticking to his fingers as they hover halfway between his tray and his mouth. Even 1-1 looks up in mild, stuffed-face shock before returning his attention to his plate.

Finally Mance throws his head back and laughs. “Yeah, man, me too. I didn’t do it either. We’re all fuckin’ innocent in here aren’t we?” He sucks the rice off his fingers, still chuckling, and then he lets his gaze wander to Sandor’s food. “Hey, you gonna eat that cake?”

Sandor thinks of bloodied baseball bats and grins, ruthless and mean. “Don’t forget, old man. I did kill a few other guys. Touch that fucking cake and I’ll break your fucking fingers.”

“Fair enough,” Mance says coolly, standing fluidly from the picnic-style table. “Thanks for the smoke.”
Bronn has always been more of the shark kind of man and has always considered himself a pretty damn successful one at that. The world might be an oyster to another man but to him it’s all chum. Except for today. Today he’s the bucket of fish guts dangling off the back of the crazy-ass boat this case has turned into. He’s been stabbed and has technically died twice, will receive the Star and the Shield of Bravery on account of it, but those upcoming accolades don’t do much to make him feel any better about what he’s about to do.

“And you’re sure this Mya chick is good for it?” he asks his partner.

“I’m positive. You should have seen her when she came across me in Sandor’s apartment. If CSI hadn’t been there I think she would have torn me to pieces,” Ariane says as a sudden gust of still-frigid wind, The Hawk of Chicago, blows her hair from behind her ears, and she grins as she glances at Bronn and drags it out of her face. “Or stabbed me.”

He gives her a glare.

“God, your sense of humor is deplorable,” Bronn mutters, turning his head away from her to gaze down the sidewalk.

“You’re one to talk. Are you scared or something? You love stab humor, these days.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a time and a place for everything.”

“Says the idiot who told two nurses and a surgeon that his dick could have done a better job than that bastard’s knife.”

Bronn exhales a chuckle despite himself. It was funny.

They are standing side by side on the sidewalk of a narrow one way street across from a bar where Sandor’s neighbor Mya Stone works, waiting for her and Arianne’s plan to unfold. Despite his anxiety he wishes they could just hurry up and get it over with; it might not be snowing at the moment but it’s still colder than hell. He might not remember much from the night of his attack but he does remember feeling so cold there, in the end. Bronn shivers.

“We’ve been here twenty minutes already,” he says impatiently, pulling back the sleeve of his heavy overcoat to glance at his watch. “Are you sure she even ran into Moore?”

“Yes, for the fifth time. She went down to his precinct to report a stolen car. She flirted and gave him the name of the bar. He told her he’d come today at four.”

“Which was twenty minutes ago.”

“So what? There could be a thousand reasons for his tardiness. Traffic. Nerves. Getting held up at work. Pulling a There’s Something About Mary.”

“What the hell is that?”

Arianne lifts her hand from her pocket and makes a loose fist, pumping her arm up and down in the international sign of onanism. Geez, I must be losing my touch, he thinks with a snort and a roll of his eyes. He’ll miss the excitement and the thrill but there’s a large part of him that’s relieved this will be his last job before early retirement and pension checks and sleeping in late next to the same woman every morning.
“Hey, Bronn, snap out of it, look,” Arianne says, tugging his sleeve with one hand as she points with the other. “The uniform rounding the corner. Is that him?”

“Yeah, that’s him all right,” Bronn says when he trains his eyes on Moore.

“Perfect,” she murmurs. “Time for the other shoe to drop.”

He hasn’t seen the man since he came to Sandor’s aid a couple of months ago, back when all of this stuff started snowballing into a full-fledged shit storm. There’s an odd feeling that accompanies the realization, a strange sort of sense of completion and coming full circle. Suddenly the grey slush of his apprehension melts away and is replaced with grittier stuff, black soil fertile enough to let things like intrepid gumption take root. His heart still pounds from adrenaline but it is far less sour, now.

“Well come on, you asshole, what are we waiting for? Let’s get Margaery some motherfucking evidence,” he says when the crosswalk light flips to WALK, adjusting the collar of his overcoat against the beak-and-talon wind as he strides across the street.

The warmth and humidity of the bar is initially a comfort but soon becomes miasmic with him in all his layers, and he stands just inside the door undoing the buttons of his jacket while Arianne slips through the mediocre crowd towards the back of the bar. Bronn catches the look she shares with the dark haired woman tending bar and takes it the pretty bartender must be Mya. He has to hand it to the ladies; this sort of setup is a lot easier and less time consuming than setting up a tail on the intended target and waiting around. Plus he gets to drink on the job.

He scans the scatter of low tables and chairs for a second or two before he realizes how stupid it is. Moore is here in the hopes of having sex with a woman so far out of his league it’s laughable; there’s no way he’d sit so far away from her. It only takes a heartbeat – a hard heavy one at that – before he sees the dirty cop sitting at the bar right next to her drink station, the long box of citrus wedges and maraschino cherries the only thing between him and his would-be conquest. Bronn represses a snort of laughter. Hope may spring eternal but it also springs stupid as hell.

“Hey there, can I get a black and tan?” Bronn asks as he commandeers a stool two down from Mandon. “Heavy on the black,” he says like Arianne told him.

Mya pauses a moment before assessing him, and to her credit it really is just a moment before she regains her nonchalance. She flashes him a dazzler of a smile and Bronn almost gets Moore’s optimism, it’s that winsome.

“Sure thing, hon,” she says between the snapping of a piece of neon blue chewing gum, and she goes to work pouring him a stout from the tap. “You wanna start a tab?”

“Nah, just the one should do it,” he says, shifting on his stool to take his wallet out of his back pocket. It better.

“So how long have you worked here?” Mandon says on the other side of the mousy looking girl sitting between them.

“A couple of years,” Mya says with another snap of her gum and a smile made just for Moore as she sets down a coaster and his black and tan on top of it. “How long have you been a cop?”

They chit chat back and forth while the darker parts of Bronn grow surly, unsettled beasts that rankle under the irritating and oppressive yoke of small talk. Notice me, you dumb fuck, he thinks as he swigs his beer, the bitter of the IPA and the cream of the stout mingling on his tongue the
way emotions roil in his gut. Notice me so we can settle this.

He flicks his gaze up from his beer to Mya and waits for her to notice him, and when she does he jerks his head slightly towards the mousy girl. Just as he hoped she understands him.

“Here, let me just clean this up,” Mya says briskly as she lifts the woman’s martini glass with one hand and swipes the already clean bar with a damp rag, but before she can set the glass back to the bar she tips it forward and dumps the contents neatly into the poor woman’s lap. “Omigod, I am so sorry!”

“Jesus Christ!” the woman says, far louder than her meek looks suggest, and far angrier too, judging by the glare she gives Mya. “I should ask for my fucking tip back, you idiot.”

“The bathroom’s in the back if you need to clean up,” Mya says sweetly, turning away with both glass and rag and not one single fuck to give.

And then there’s nothing but air between Bronn and Mandon.

*Here we go, here we go, here it comes,* Bronn thinks as he inhales a deep steadying breath. He exhales through his nose the same time as he takes another long swallow of beer, gazing benignly at the rows and rows of liquor bottles across from the bar. As he waits with his heart racing and his thoughts blurring, it strikes him how absolutely unready he is for this shit, and once again he’s starting to regret insisting on helping. *I’m the only one he’d recognize, he said. I’m the only one they all know, I’m the only one who could get him to break character.* Bar noises buzz and hum and blend and bleed together like blood and rainwater until there’s only the rush of pulse in his ears. There is the shadow feel of a blade in his gut and his chest, the slice of a dagger point down his cheek. He represses the urge to rest his fingers against the scar running down his face. Bronn drains his beer.

“Holy, fucking, shit. You’re supposed to be dead,” he hears Moore say to his right, a low sound of seething animosity and betrayal and surprise.

*Good. Hope you enjoy the feeling. I sure as shit did.*

Just like that the sounds around him bloom back to normalcy, and all his years of training come back to him, and the phantom stabs recede and he is left whole and (more or less) hale and full of just as much spite as the man next to him. He grins.

“If this is dead then I make it look pretty fucking good,” Bronn says as he sits up straighter on his stool and swivels it so he can face his one-time colleague. “You’re a sight for sore eyes, Moore. Still masturbating in the locker room?”

“You stupid son of a- I should kick your ass for what you did,” Moore spits out, dead-colored eyes narrowing as he slides from his stool onto the empty one right next to Bronn’s.

In his peripheral vision Bronn can see Arianne drifting towards them. Ten feet, six, four and then two feet away, right behind Moore with her phone in her hand. *You’re covered, you’re covered, he’s not going to stab you in this bar,* he tells himself over and over again as he shrugs and gives Moore his biggest shark grin.

“You couldn’t kick your way out of a fucking paper bag.”

“Shut your dirty traitor mouth, you son of a bitch. I should kill you for what you did,” Moore whispers, but it doesn’t matter, because either Mya or the booze or Bronn himself is enough a distraction that he doesn’t notice Arianne stretch her arm and hold the iPhone closer to the back of
his head.

“What exactly did I do to you, huh? What, get stabbed? Sorry to ruin your day, brother,” Bronn says sarcastically as he lets the feigned lightheartedness drop away.

“You betrayed us over at the CPD, you betrayed Tywin and Cersei and you fucking deserved to die. Did it hurt, Bronn, when that kid stuck you like a pig over and over again? I hope it did, and so do the boys down at the station. We laughed when we found out. We laughed our fucking asses off and took bets on whether or not you cried like a little bitch as you died.”

Bronn glances at Arianne, who is standing with her thumb hovering over the screen of her phone. She nods as she taps the screen and lowers the phone, and Bronn grins, stands, and sucker punches Moore so hard in the jaw he falls off his stool. Mya tosses the rag to the counter behind the bar, turns on her heel, and walks down the length of the bar.

“Harry, we got clean up on aisle one.”

“You’re the one who’s going to be crying when we throw you in prison,” Arianne says.

She and Bronn squat down to where Mandon lies on his back with a bloody nose and one foot still tangled up in the rungs of his barstool. Arianne lifts her phone and waves it in Moore’s face. “I’ve just gotten you on record linking the entirety of your police department to the Lannisters. I also have you on record threatening the life of a special agent, which will all work beautifully in the case we’re bringing against your precious Cersei and Tywin.”

Moore does pretty well in the long run, considering that in the past ten minutes he’s seen what he figured was a dead man, has gotten his nose broken, and has just been threatened with jail-time. He blinks and he sputters and spits out bloody phlegm on the floor but he pulls his shit together quickly enough.

“You would have already put cuffs on me if you really wanted to drag me away,” he groans as he shakes his head and stares up at the ceiling, not bothering to make eye contact with people who so clearly despise him. “So give me immunity and I’ll give you whatever you want.”

“’Atta boy,” Arianne says.

“Now who’s the little bitch?” Bronn asks cheerfully as he soundly smacks Mandon on the cheek.

Margaery’s foot bobs under the desk so rapidly she forces herself to uncross her legs and sit up straight in her chair with her feet tucked beneath it, ankles crossed. That particular fidget put to bed, now she must resist the urge to tap her pen on her stack of files like she’s a drummer in a metal band.

“You look nervous,” Jon whispers to her from where he sits, and he’s all pressed tailored suit and tied back hair, the calm steady hand of a man who picks locks and rescues people.

Margaery slides on a smile and glances at him, honey and butter and the thick amber sap sweetness she uses to trap defendants mid-lie.

“I’m not nervous,” she murmurs. “I’m angry. I’m about to see the people behind my grandmother’s death and my boyfriend’s attack for the first time.”

“Ah, well then,” Jon says, sitting back and clasping his hands in his lap. “Carry on.”
The courtroom is one of the ugly, dim, boring ones, not the high gloss Romanesque beauties she fell in love with thanks to prime television when she wanted to be Ally McBeal. The droning conversation between Judge Selmy and his bailiff is muffled against the wood-paneled walls and carpeted floor. The lighting is shoddy and the Illinois and American flags standing attention behind the judge probably have a thin layer of dust on them, but still, this is a room of power. This is her room and her time to shine. Her time to begin.

“Your Honor, I’m so sorry we’re late,” a well-oiled voice says from behind them.

Margaery just stops herself from wheeling around in her seat to stare, and Jon must sense it because he lightly rests a hand on her arm, giving the faintest squeeze and press to her silk blouse before he removes the touch. Margaery thinks of Olenna and Margaery gets her shit together.

“Not as sorry as you’re going to be, if you’re not the slightest bit prepared. Ms. Tyrell and her witness have been here for ten minutes. I have been here for ten minutes, Mr. Qyburn.”

“Apologies, Your Honor, sincerely,” he says with saccharine emphasis.

Judge Selmy rolls his eyes.

“Just be seated and let’s get a move on. You’re not the only hearing I have today, for god’s sake.”

Margaery hears the scraping of chairs to her right and finally deigns to turn her head towards the sounds of settling in, papers and files and briefcases on the desk, the muffled drag of chairs against medium pile carpeting. There in their glory are Tywin, looking as Thin White Duke as does in the Lifestyle section of the paper, and Cersei, looking vibrant and regal and, when she finally glances over at them, utterly and hysterically shocked.

“Jean? What are- what is this? I- oh, oh no, no you don’t you little bitch,” she spits out as she points at him, mad as a wet cat as she looks from Jon to Margaery and back again, so quickly she almost looks cross-eyed.

“No, dad, listen, they’re- they are setting me up. He’s- that man- I- Objection!” she shouts as she turns to face the judge with her outstretched finger still pointing at them.

It is all Margaery can do not to laugh.

“Not that you are in any position to do so, but overruled,” Selmy says dryly. “Do yourself a favor, madam, and take a seat. Now,” he says, glaring at her over the wire rims of his spectacles.

“No, dad, listen, they’re- they are setting me up. He’s- that man- I- Objection!” she shouts as she turns to face the judge with her outstretched finger still pointing at them.

It is all Margaery can do not to laugh.

“Not that you are in any position to do so, but overruled,” Selmy says dryly. “Do yourself a favor, madam, and take a seat. Now,” he says, glaring at her over the wire rims of his spectacles.

“Dad, this is- we can’t,” she hisses as she and Tywin sink in their chairs, graceful and leonine even with the younger Lannister’s state of panic as she keeps giving half-fearful, half-furious glares at Jon and Margaery over her shoulder from where she sits between Qyburn and her father.

“You must, madam,” Selmy barks from the bench. “And you must keep your mouth shut or else I will hold you in contempt.”

“Please, Cersei,” Qyburn murmurs all meek and mouse and mousse.

“Now, since I have been here for ten minutes longer than necessary, thinking of more and more foul language with which I will not sully our transcript, I have had time to review the request for suppression in regards to the evidence submitted by Ms. Tyrell.”
“Her evidence is supposed to be from some man named Jon Snow, not this man. I know this man, Your Honor, and his name is Jean Neige. Neige, Your Honor, not Snow.”

Selmy removes his glasses and sighs as he pinches the bridge of his nose.

“If I may, Your Honor?” Jon asks, his accent only a little thicker than it usually is when he’s talking amongst friends.

“For the love of god, you may.”

“Jon Snow is simply the Americanized version of my name,” he says lightly. “I simply submitted it as such out of deference for the primary language used for legislation.”

“You did it to hide who you really are from me!” Cersei shouts, leaning forward to see Jon past Qyburn and then back in her seat when that fails.

She’s thrashing around like a fish on a line, Margaery thinks with grim satisfaction.

“One more outburst and I will place you in contempt, Ms. Lannister,” Judge Selmy announces with the deep boom of authority that seems to do the job in silencing at least one Lannister. Not so the other, but then Tywin’s suits have always come with extra cards sewn inside the sleeves.

“Your Honor, I hate to bring this up now, but please try to forgive her. I’m afraid my daughter suffers from, ah, how to put it delicately,” Tywin attempts, and the look on his face when the judge interrupts him is enough to make Margaery and even Jon smile.

“We are all well aware of your daughter’s addiction to alcohol. If you can’t see it on her you can certainly smell it. Now, I myself am a friend of Bill W and yet you don’t see me ranting and raving like a lunatic in your office, do you?”

“Your Honor, might I remind you,” Tywin tries again, more ice to his voice than before, but finally Selmy picks up his gavel and raps it twice next to his glass of water.

“No, you may not. I’m not one of the judges on your payroll, so while you may get away with that tone in another judge’s court, you will not get away with it in mine.”

“Good job, you,” Jon whispers in her ear.

Margaery simply hums by way of reply, not daring to speak up now, but she’s pleased nonetheless. It was a massive bribe to the bailiff to assure Selmy sat this hearing, and it was one she’d gladly pay twice over for this kind of spectacle.

“I am disappointed and not a little angry that I have to remind you that this is not a dog and pony show, here, ladies and gentlemen. This is a court of law. As judge in that court of law who has reviewed the evidence at hand, it is my turn to speak. Pertaining to the audio recordings and documentation saved on seven flash drives and three CDs that were obtained at Petyr Baelish’s residence as well as the emails and text messages found at Cersei Lannister’s residence, the defense’s motion to suppress is denied.”

Another bang of the gavel though it’s more halfhearted, the enthusiasm of a midday yawn, but still Tywin leaps to his feet.

“And what about my fourth amendment rights? They are being violated with such a motion.”

“Young man,” Barristan says to Jon.
“Your Honor?” Jon says as he stands.

“Are you a member of any government affiliation? Federal Bureau, any numerous one of America’s police departments? Fish and Game?” Judge Selmy asks with a squint to one eye that looks an awful lot like a twinkle.

“No, Your Honor.”

“Then the only thing being violated is the use of my time. Do yourself a favor, Mr. Lannister, and review the constitution before you try using it wipe away your transgressions. The denial stands. Ms. Tyrell, you may proceed with your case, and quite frankly, I hope I’m free that day to spectate.”

“Likewise, Your Honor,” Margaery says as she flashes Tywin a triumphant grin.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Picset finally!

Forgive me for any typos! I am going to try and clean it up before I head off camping for the weekend. I just wanted to post this before we left. Also sorry but this bitch is LONG.

ALSO: Thanks to AsbestosMouth, the bailiff is Hot Pie because of WHAT SHE DID at the Cruise and because now Bex can't see Varys without Hot Pie.

XOXOXOXO happy weekend everyone!

Late March

Two weeks after Sandor defended his right to cake he walks out of Cook County Department of Corrections flanked by Margaery and Bronn, having been bailed out by the pair of them. It is surreal to be back in Illinois wearing the clothes he was arrested in back up in Portland, to be back with his friends like nothing has changed even though everything that possibly could has. Bronn walks slower and flinches at sudden movements, Margaery’s cat-with-the-cream smirks have all but disappeared, the snow is gone and so is Sansa.

That one stings the worst, an acute slap like lakeshore wind in the face, and it takes most everything he has to remind himself that it is for the best, that she is safe with her family, wherever that is. It doesn’t make it any easier. Even when they stop for burgers and he wolfs down two in the car like an animal, he’s thinking of the countless fast food joints they hit up together. He sucks down his Coke and thinks about the way she licks her fingers after squeezing the wedge of lemon in her ice water.

“And you haven’t heard from her?” he asks for the fifth time once they’re on the interstate headed back into the city to, as Margaery explained, hide in plain sight.

Bronn frowns up at Sandor through the rearview before he looks sidelong to Margaery, who twists in the front seat to look back at him with sad sympathy, grey-day eyes that reflect the overcast afternoon sky outside.

“No, honey, I’m sorry. But you know what they say, no news is good news.”

“Yeah,” he says, nodding to himself as he slouches in the backseat and turns his head to stare out the window. “Yeah, sure.”

They end up on Deming Street in Old Town, Bronn driving like a bat out of hell to get through the yellow light when he sees a flower delivery van pull out of its parking spot right in front of a slate stone apartment building sandwiched between a grocery and a laundromat. A far cry from the sprawling mansion Margaery had in Winnetka. I put it on the market last week, she said when he asked where they were headed. I can never look at that house the same, she said as she slid a hand over the console to find Bronn’s and squeeze it.
Selfishly he wished she hadn’t. He thinks of listening to Velvet Underground on the library step with Sansa, the sift of her hair in his hands as he cut it, the nudge and the scent of her, the shocking smack of her fist in his face. He chuckles before he can stop himself, and he lifts his hand to ghost a touch over his scars, the old and the new, and he wishes he still had the shiner she gave him.

“We’re going to have to buy a new car,” Bronn says after he parallel parks the huge Range Rover between two sedans, nearly clipping the bumper of one before he throws the vehicle in park. “I am never giving up this parking spot. Ever.”

He showers in solitude and silence for the first time in six weeks, in a small little bathroom that’s still bigger than the cell he called home. It feels like a luxury with the window between the shower and the counter, and due to his height he’s able to gaze out over the shower curtain at the windy sway of naked tree boughs as he scrubs incarceration out of his hair. He thinks of the outdoor shower and the weight of her in his arms and how empty and useless they feel in her absence now. Nothing to do with them anymore except scrub soap into them, and so Sandor does.

“We need to put your case together,” Margaery says once he’s stepped out of the bathroom wearing his own clothes that Arianne managed to snag from his apartment the last time she was there.

She is all business sitting at the dining room table, hair pulled up with a pencil in it, stacks of files covering the table like they’re squat downtown buildings in some miniature city she’s built out of manila and paper.

“When’s the trial?” he asks, feeling stupid for not thinking of it before now.

“Six months,” Bronn says as he emerges from the little kitchen juggling three glasses and an open 1.75l bottle of wine.

“This shit all for my case?” Sandor asks, nodding his thanks when Bronn fills a glass to the brim with dark red wine and hands it to him. It’s sweeter than he likes but he still drains half of it before taking a seat next to where Margaery sits at the head of the table, a captain at her helm. Bronn sits across from him.

Margaery laughs. Good humored like she’s always been but laced through with a bitterness that wasn’t there before. “God, no. This is you,” she says, gesturing with one hand to three stacks as she uses the other to lift her glass to her mouth.

“The rest is for the Lannisters,” Bronn says.

“When’s that case?” Sandor asks.

“Don’t worry about it,” Margaery says with a stern look at him. “Let’s focus on getting you out of a prison sentence right now, okay?”

“I’ve made my bed,” Sandor says after a moment of staring down into his wine. He sets it down and wordlessly Bronn hefts up the bottle and gives him a refill. “I knew what I was doing, I knew what I was giving up.”

Margaery shoves aside one of the stacks of files, plants her elbow on the table hard enough to hurt, and points a finger at him. It’s then that he finally sees how worn out she looks, how worn out and angry she is.

“If you think that whole resigned defeatist thing is somehow heroic, you’re fucking wrong, all right? I saw that YouTube video of you in Arizona. I want that guy right now, okay?”
He waves her off with a listless gesture. “You should be focusing on the Lannister case.”

“You don’t think I’ve done that?” she says incredulously as she gestures with her glass towards Bronn. “I’ve turned this poor guy into a paralegal and I’m averaging like four hours of sleep a night.”

“Three,” Bronn corrects her, lifting his gaze to meet Sandor’s when the latter man glances at him, and there’s more haunt and shadow there than there was even in Afghanistan.

Everyone has a harder edge to them these days, it seems, except him.

“I am basically working around the clock right now, Sandor. I don’t lose cases, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to lose this one because of my own goddamned client, all right? Besides,” she says, sitting back with a grim sort of smile on her face as she takes another sip of wine. “Sansa would kill me if I let you rot in prison. Don’t tell me you’d be happy if she pulled the same stoic horseshit you’re doing now.”

Sandor narrows his eyes. He knows full well what she’s doing and part of him wants to dig in his heels just to show her that she can’t pull his strings like he’s some sort of puppet. But he’s had a lot of free time to think lately, and Sansa’s been more than a little on his mind during the solitude and silence, the sleepless nights spent staring up at a cement ceiling. She’s taken over every thought that hasn’t been consumed with surviving jail, and now that he doesn’t have that to worry about he lets himself sink for a moment in the quicksand of her. Finally he exhales a laugh and shakes his head.

She would kill Margaery for letting him rot in prison. And then she’d break him out of the slammer just to kill him for it, too.

“Fine,” he finally says, taking another long swallow of wine. “Let’s talk about my case.”

Six Months Later (October)

“How much longer do we have to wait, you think?” Sandor asks.

“No fuckin’ clue,” Bronn says.

They’re waiting in a wide hallway inside the courthouse, hands in their pockets as they stand side by side watching various clusters of lawyers, accusers, and condemned mill about and whisper to one another or talk on their cell phones. Margaery is one of the latter, head bowed as she paces to and fro in front of them with a hand on her hip and her phone to her ear. Sandor glances at Bronn. His gaze never leaves her. Sandor knows the feeling well, or at least he used to. There’s not much for him to keep an eye on anymore, at least nothing that counts so much as it used to.

“Case No. 194125, The State vs. Sandor Clegane, will be seen by Judge Varys now in 2936,” someone announces.

Instantly Margaery hisses something into her phone and ends the call. Bronn and Sandor both turn as one to see a young man standing in the door of courtroom 2936.

“You ready, brother?” Bronn asks as he straightens Sandor’s tie for the fiftieth goddamned time since they left the apartment on Deming Street.

Sandor bats his hands away. Bronn may have paid a pretty penny for the tailored suit Sandor’s in, but that doesn’t make him a personal Barbie doll or anything.
“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Sandor mutters as he digs a finger between his Adam’s apple and the half-Windsor cutting off his circulation.

“That’s the spirit,” Bronn says, clapping him on the shoulder, and then he chuckles. “Well, it’s actually kind of a shitty spirit, but I’m pickin’ up what you’re puttin’ down.”

There’s a couple dozen people in the gallery as he and Margaery make their way to the defense table, but when he tries glancing back she stops him with a hand on his bicep. He glances at her and she shakes her head, but doesn’t explain until they’re seated, and when she does it’s not with words but with a hasty scribble on an unused notepad on the table between them.

*Don’t gawk. Makes u look paranoid or narcissistic. U R here for 1 thing only so show it.*

Sandor stiffens immediately, sits ramrod straight and stares at the judge’s bench.

He keeps his cool until they’re asked to stand, and as the jury files in he cannot help but stare at them with mounting panic. They’ve already seen him at the Voir Dire process and have already been deemed impartial, but still he can see the unease in some of their expressions when they glance warily at him. *Fuck fuck fuck* chases itself like a crass carousel in his head, over and over and over again, even when the chubby bailiff says ‘All Rise’ and they stand.

And just like that they sit and his murder trial begins, the prosecution making the first cut with a string of testimony from the Chicago Police Department, which is about as dependable and trustworthy as getting a health insurance quote from a garbage can. He listens and their words do a fade in-fade out, though instead of thinking of questions for Margaery to ask on cross-examination, he simply remembers.

“Could you please explain to the jury what you found at Mr. Clegane’s apartment the early morning after the murder of Polliver Harrenhal?”

*Long red hair and lip gloss on a whiskey glass,* he thinks as he stares down at his hands clasped on the edge of the table. *Solomon Burke and the sound of rain on my window. She filled my apartment with her smell and she slept in my bed. And then—*

“Tell me more about this baseball bat,” asks Mr. Pycelle, the prosecuting attorney.

*That fucker broke into my apartment and was going to kill me. And then he was going to kill her, or worse.*

“Were there signs of a struggle?”

“No.”

*Because there wasn’t any.*

“Signs of violence? Gore?”

“Objection. Leading the witness,” Margaery snaps from his side.

“Sustained.”

“Thank you. No further questions.”

“Detective Moore,” Margaery says while she walks towards the witness stand with her hands clasped behind her back. “You held my client and badgered him for *hours* after the night he
successfully defended his home, his person and his companion, correct?”

“Objection, Your Honor,” Mr. Pycelle says from the prosecution’s table.

“On what grounds?” Varys says with a miniscule shake of his head and a near comical tilt of his eyebrows.

“‘Badger’ is a leading word to the- for the jury, Your Honor.”

“I’ll omit it,” Margaery says smoothly. “You interrogated my client for hours that night. Will you tell me why you questioned him for so long?” she asks, glancing at Mr. Pycelle when she says the word question.

“I was instructed to do so by my superior, Sergeant Trant.”

_Holy shit_, Sandor thinks, because this must be that witness Bronn and Margaery mentioned all those months ago. He slides a glance over at prosecutor Pycelle to gauge his reaction in having one of his major witnesses suddenly switch sides mid-testimony. It’s hard not to bark out a laugh at the way his mouth opens and closes like a turtle’s.

“Why is that, Detective Moore?”

“Because,” he says with a heavy sigh of reluctance that snaps Sandor from his reverie, and for a searing moment their eyes meet, and like a flashback Sandor can almost taste that shitty CPD coffee. “Because Cersei Lannister instructed him to do so.”

“Do you believe my client was guilty of first or second degree murder?”

“No. The evidence strongly suggested self-defense. The initial report stated it, until word got out that Polliver worked for the Lannisters.”

“I see. And do you believe my client killed Robb Stark and Petyr Baelish?”

“Objection!”

“Sustained. Ms. Tyrell, come on now. This isn’t _Law and Order_, and you’re going to make Mr. Pycelle turn purple if you showboat.”

“Sorry, Your Honor,” she says all Miss Manners sweet before her voice drops back to the iron tone she used before as she glances at Pycelle. “I have no further questions.”

Ten minutes or twenty and the prosecution rests and it’s time for the short list of Sandor’s supporters.

Arianne testifies that Sandor Clegane freely admitted to manslaughter in the case of self-defense and used a baseball bat, that he has no reason to resort to using a plastic bag.

“I mean, _look_ at him,” she says with a grin to the jury. “He’d probably rip the bag to pieces before he could even shake it open.”

“But you _are_ saying the defendant is violent enough to bludgeon a man to death with a blunt weapon?” Pycelle asks later from his half-stand behind the table, as if this isn’t even worth fully extending his legs.

“No, what I’m _saying_ is that there’s no connection to—”
“Agent Martell, please answer the question. Mr. Clegane has the capability to bludgeon a man to death with a blunt weapon, yes or no?”

She glances at the judge, who shrugs lightly and nods. Arianne sighs.

“Yes.”

“Not only that but he’s freely admitted to doing so, correct?”

“Now who’s leading the witness,” she snaps.

Bronn testifies that asphyxiation is a method used – allegedly – by Petyr Baelish, a man they’ve been tracking and gathering evidence against for years, a man they believe they have on camera approaching Olenna Tyrell’s office, a woman who was murdered in an identical fashion to Robb Stark.

“You can call it a coincidence, Your Honor, but we have two individual situations of suffocation, and both of them have evidence of Petyr Baelish’s presence. That, in my experience, is enough to call it enemy action, the kind belonging to Baelish, not Clegane. I mean, he followed the two of them up to Oregon, for god’s sake.”

“Where Baelish’s bullet-riddled corpse was found slumped and defenseless on a front porch, correct?”

“The man was obsessed, Clegane had no choice. It was self-defense,” Bronn says, though he’s frowning and knows he’s stepped into a big pile of shit with those two words.

“He was shot in the back, Agent Blackwater.”

Sandor sighs and wonders what the chances will be that 1-1 will be his cellmate after he’s convicted.

Mya and Lothor testify to simply being friendly neighbors who heard the commotion and witnessed Sandor call the police himself. “It’s not the move of man who is guilty of anything other than self-defense.”

He closes his eyes.

She slept through it all, he thinks, and he remembers waking Sansa, remembers the brush of her fingers through the spatter of blood on his face and the upstairs climb. He remembers holding her for the first time that night, breaking her phone, the way they looked at each other with four stories’ worth of nighttime air before he ducked into the cop car.

Inexplicably he thinks of her mouth.

Margaery rests a hand on his knuckles where the tattoos show without cuff or jacket to hide them. Sandor opens his eyes to the bruising reality unfolding all around him and tells himself to snap the fuck out of it. The witness stand is empty and he blinks in confusion as he looks at his lawyer.

She scribbles something else on the notepad and his heart sinks like a stone in the queasy pit of his stomach.

_Time to take the stand. U have this ok? We ALL believe in you._

Too bad he doesn’t believe in himself. Still, he nods twice and stares back at his hands, how the
faded color and black outlines of his tattoos disappear beneath the fine heavy weight of Armani, all sow’s ear turned to silk purse. She gives him a determined smile and stands.

“The defense calls Sandor Clegane to the stand.”

Sansa sits in a short row of chairs behind the courtroom gallery, wedged between an empty flag stand and the double doors, and she sits with her hands clasped so tightly together in her lap that her knuckles burn. It’s all she can do to keep her mouth shut, to keep from shouting his name and bounding down the narrow aisle towards him. But Ms. Tarth to her right and Podrick to her left have done nothing but stress to her how vital it is to keep quiet and stay incognito.

For the sake of surprise.

For the sake of his demeanor in court.

For the sake of his freedom.

She nearly sank to her knees when she glimpsed him in the hallway, broad shoulders like she remembered him though nearly everything else is different. Expensive suit cut to kill on him, tapered to the narrow of his hips, wild tousle of black hair smoothly brushed and tied back into a short ponytail that exposes the grown out shear of hair on the right side of his head. Clean and glossy and none of the flannel and wild burr of him, the thorny bramble and scowl she fell so in love with. But you’re in there, I know it, she thinks as she presses her knees together and clenches her jaw, cinches her shoulder blades together and squeezes her waist with the press of her elbows into her ribs.

Everything to keep from screaming look at me, Sandor, I am here, I am here for you.

“Mr. Clegane,” Margaery says, all clipped tone and business as she strides towards the witness stand. “In order to offer some clarity to the jury, please give a brief summary of how you and Sansa Stark became acquainted.”

“Oh, why?” Podrick whispers in her ear.

Startled, Sansa looks up from her hands and up at the marshal. “Yes, why?” she murmurs.

Pod smiles sadly, the teddy bear cherish that Arya has come to love so well. “You’re crying.”

She frowns and dabs her fingertips along her lower lash lines and then draws them away from her face to inspect them, and sure enough they are wet and tinged with the faintest trace of black from her mascara.

“Oh,” she says.

“Shh, Ms. Stark,” Ms. Tarth whispers not unkindly, and to temper the soft scold she rests a large,
warm hand on Sansa’s shoulder.

She catches herself before she apologizes and keeps mum, not to follow instructions but because she isn’t all that sorry for it. Instead she lifts her gaze and fastens it into Sandor as he details the shooting at his barber shop and the decision he made to take her to his home.

“And why did you do that, Sandor?”

He pauses again and looks at Margaery. Spreads his hands apart and shrugs. “The Lannisters were after her. I knew what would happen to her. They had my brother killed.”

“Objection,” the old, watery eyed prosecutor says. “The Lannisters are not on trial here, Mr. Clegane is.”

“Sustained.”

“Take us back to that evening in January of this year, Sandor.”

That’s easy, Sansa thinks, because she’s been reliving that period of her life over and over for the past ten months, squeezing each moment dry like the segments of an orange. All of the lovely tenderness but also the initial angry bitterness and alienation that he is rough-draft recounting now with his shoulders slightly hunched forward. Good thing that suit fits him so well or else he’d split the back of it like the Hulk.

“At first I told her to get the fu- uh, to get the eff out,” he says, glancing warily at the jury, and Sansa can’t help but smile when she sees a couple of the younger jurors hide their laughter behind their hands. “But it didn’t sit well with me, turning her out like that, so I ran after her and took her back home.”

God, how he scared her that night running after her in the rain, filling her with enough terror that she tripped and fell. Barefoot and scuffed up, drenched and all alone, until he caught up to her and, in that single moment, changed their lives forever.

Hey, Red.

What she would give, what she would do, just to have the mean rough side of him for five minutes. Five seconds even, so long as it meant they were together again.

“And what happened then?”

“I doctored her up, we ate some food and went to sleep. She took the bed and I took the couch, and I’m glad of it, because that Polliver son of a—”

“Language, please, Mr. Clegane,” Margaery says, though the smile in her voice can be heard all the way back here.

A few people chuckle in the gallery and in the jury box. Even Judge Varys looks vaguely amused.

“Sorry. So uh, that’s when that guy showed up. I’m a relatively light sleeper,” he adds, and he’s about to pick up where he left off when Margaery interrupts.

“Why is that, Mr. Clegane?” she asks quickly and softly like a scarf being pulled through a fist.

Sansa is sure they’ve rehearsed the questions and his replies, that they’ve gone over and over and over the details just like she and Margaery have done in secret phone conversations, but still Sandor
frowns at her, disliking the pry into his past. Her heart aches to be with him. Her heart aches to kiss him.

Her heart just aches.

“I had a tour in Afghanistan a while back,” he mutters after another of his pauses. “Minor active duty, but it was still active.”

“I see. Thank you, by the way, for your service, Sandor,” Margaery says as she clasps her hands behind her back and walks away from him towards the gallery a few paces. She lifts her eyes and looks directly at Sansa for a moment, and it’s like being touched with a branding iron, to be so picked out of the crowd. “Please continue.”

Sansa scoots to the edge of her seat and leans forward with her elbows resting on her knees, because these will be details she’s never heard before. He’s never lied to her but he’s also protected her in a dozen different ways, and keeping the gruesome away from her is one of them. Wordlessly Ms. Tarth puts her hand on her shoulder and gently, firmly, eases her back in the chair, as if that small closure of the distance between Sansa and Sandor could garner his attention. Who knows, maybe she’s right.

“I grabbed my bat and eased towards the door. By the time I got there he’d already opened it, and the first thing that came into my apartment was the gun he had. It was aimed directly at my face so when the door swung open, I hit him. He got up to his knees and cocked the gun – it was a revolver – and aimed it at me again. So I hit him again. That uh, that time he stayed down. So I woke up Sansa and we- we left,” he says, lying by omission as he skips over Mya and Lothor’s involvement, and instantly Sansa absolves him, knowing how earnestly he cleaves to straightforwardness.


“Objection.”

“Sustained.”

“Now let’s skip forward a bit,” Margaery continues without a single feather ruffled, and she turns back to face her witness. “Take us to that morning in Portland.”

A haircut and a box of hair dye, Route 66 and a milkshake with fries, a trip up to Oregon and the infinitesimal thing of falling in love with each other. He omits it all and she’s happy for it because those little gems and jewels belong to the two of them, and it already feels like their connection and relationship is being cracked apart and dissected. He does, however, admit that he and Sansa stayed with Margaery while trying to stay safe, that she sent them on their way with a credit card and some information about a family member. Margaery helps him with the bolder lies, explaining to the jury through questions to Sandor that Benjen Stark was discovered after an exhaustive internet search instead of a ballsy information leak from a WITSEC marshal and an FBI agent. Another lie dressed up like a question reveals that Cat Stark contacted her brother-in-law randomly.

Sandor looks uncomfortable the entire time.

“And then you found Sansa’s family.”

“Yes, we did, and we drove up there that night. It took a few days and we tried to stay off the radar but one night we had to get a hotel room.”

“At this point you had fallen in love with Ms. Stark, correct?”
“Objection. This isn’t a romantic movie, Your Honor. A uh- a rom-com, if you will,” Pycelle says, clumsy and halting with the slang.

“Overruled,” the judge says with a frown of piqued curiosity. “Ms. Tyrell, get to the point, if you have one.”

“Thank you. Is that true, Sandor? You were in love with her?”

It is strange to Sansa, watching this like a sort of dream or out of body experience, and even though he professed his love to her on several occasions it is still heart-skipping-sweet when he shifts in his seat, staring down at his hands before he lifts his head and looks at Margaery with a pained sort of expression. Sandor nods.

“Yeah, at that point I was- Yeah. I’m in love with her.”

While it might not be a rom-com here it’s still sensational enough to get a few murmurs rippling through both the gallery and the jury box. Sansa realizes she is grinning with an almost feral sort of joy. That’s right, you bastards. He’s in love with me. He’s mine and you can’t have him. You can’t take him away from me.

“Let’s all settle down now,” Judge Varys says, though there is a flicker of amusement as he takes a sip of his water.

“Would you kill the brother of a woman you’re in love with, Sandor?”

“Fuck no!” he says without thinking, and the murmur turns to an outright laugh out of one juror. Sandor blanches and glances up at the judge. “Sorry, I meant uh, you know, no. Christ, no. Robb was a good guy. He had a son. He had a son and that sick son of a- that Petyr Baelish guy, he’s the one who killed Robb.”

“Objection, Your Honor. Petyr Baelish is not—”

“Yes, yes, Mr. Pycelle, we know Mr. Baelish is not on trial here. But this is still a recounting of the incident that happened on February 6th, and the man is allowed to testify. Overruled. Please continue, Mr. Clegane.”

While she is hanging on Sandor’s every word Sansa finds she cannot bear to pay this any mind. And so instead of listening to credit card trails and plastic bags, she closes her eyes and thinks on everything she and Margaery have discussed over the past eight months. She thinks of her broken, broken-hearted mother and if she’ll be cognizant enough for a phone conversation later this afternoon. She thinks of poor Bran having to finish his college coursework online and thinks of Rickon trying to learn how to horseback ride up where they live now in Coeur d’Alene, thinks of Arya dancing in a wheat field in the summer rain a few months earlier. She tries not to think about Robb and she fails. Miserably.

Podrick sneezes beside her, snapping her out of her thoughts and convincing her that they’ll be discovered by Sandor, but when she looks up at him she sees he’s altogether preoccupied with Mr. Pycelle. At some point while she was doping off Mr. Pycelle started his cross examination, and judging by the angry look on Sandor’s face, it’s not going well. Sansa frowns. If she didn’t hate the lawyer before now she loathes him.

“Ignoring the fact, for the time being, that you freely admit to killing not one but two men,
Polliver Harrenhal, survived by a mother in a nursing home who now has no one to visit her—"

“Objection,” Margaery says harshly.

“Sustained.”

“—and Petyr Baelish, a man who was only trying to help Sansa Stark return to her family, let’s focus on the fact that you are trying to tell the court that you were in love with a girl you later murdered.”

“Objection.”

“I’ll rephrase,” Pycelle says. “A girl you later confessed to murdering.”

“I retracted that confession,” Sandor says, shifting in his seat and leaning over his knees with his elbows on his thighs, much like Sansa did earlier, much like Sansa does now in perfect mirror of him. “I only said that because—”

“Oh, so you lied to the police?”

“Yes, but only to give her a chance to—”

“Yes or no, please, Mr. Clegane.”

“Yes,” he practically spits out, and there’s the snarl of him she met in January and fell in love with a couple of weeks later, there’s the big bad beast who bristles and glares and glowers.

*Kick his ass, baby,* she thinks to herself.

“Then how can we be so sure you aren’t lying now? About any of it or all of it?”

“I am *not* a liar,” Sandor snaps.

Instantly Sansa changes mental tacks. *Stay calm, Sandor, don’t let him rile you.*

“And yet you *just* testified under oath that you lied to the police. Which is it, Mr. Clegane? A liar or an honest man? Which is it, Mr. Clegane? Did you love her or kill her?”

“I loved her then and I love her now!” Sandor says in a half-shout.

“So you say,” Mr. Pycelle says, gaining courage in the old man feeble of his voice now that he sees he’s gotten to Sandor. “So says the man who killed two men *and* the woman he swore to protect.”

“Objection!”

“Sustained.”

Sansa squeezes her hands into fists so tightly her nails dig into her palms. Numb noise in her head roars like waves breaking on a rocky shore as she watches this snake of a lawyer nip and gnash into Sandor, into her lover, her protector, her everything, all that’s been taken from her for so many months. Vaguely she’s aware of how hard she’s breathing, like she’s running a race, but it doesn’t matter, let her hyperventilate, let her die, because *she* doesn’t matter, not now.

Only him. Only Sandor.
“But she’s gone, isn’t she, Mr. Clegane? She’s gone because you killed her, just as you killed Robb Stark and Polliver Harrenhal and Petyr Baelish.”

“Bullshit,” Sandor snarls.

“Watch your language in my courtroom, Mr. Clegane,” the judge says. “Mr. Pycelle, talk about badgering the witness. Get on with it or sit down.”

“Forgive me, Your Honor. I’m an old man and I must be getting myself confused. The defendant testifies that he lies and then asks us to believe him with the same breath. This man tells us he’s in love with a woman he confessed to killing, and then he retracts his confession. So which is it, Mr. Clegane? Where is the truth here in this court of law?”

“It’s right here,” Sansa says as she stands up. “It’s right here, waiting to answer these idiotic questions, so just leave him alone,” she says, and even though her voice trembles it’s still loud, and to her that’s a win.

“Ah, fuck,” Podrick mutters as Brienne sighs heavily.

“Who are you?” Mr. Pycelle says as he whips around to find the source of interruption.

She’d reply to him if she gave two shits about him but she doesn’t so she just stands there as Judge Varys beats his gavel at the dull roar of conversation that sweeps through the room, and she smiles despite the huge mess of it all because Sandor slowly gets to his feet. He grips the edge of the low partition separating the witness stand from the rest of the room and leans over his hands, frowning with such delicious, beautiful wonderment as he stares at her.

“Sansa?”

The dull roar erupts into disjointed clamor and the incessant banging of a gavel, the arguing of two lawyers and the spectator stares of the jurors as some of them stand and all of them talk, but she doesn’t care. Sansa nods and smiles, and when Podrick and Brienne try to grab her wrists she shakes free of them like they’re restraints and starts to walk towards him.

*Man Eater.* Those are the first two words that come steamrolling through his brain when he sees her, because it’s that expensive McDonald’s dress she talked about back in Nordstrom, blocks of black and pale icy pink that hug her the way she deserves, so wonderfully snug and seamless that it looks like she and the dress are one. It’s severe and powerful and yet all woman, and she stands there like some vengeful goddess come to rain down punishment, like some soft skinned nymph come to seduce him and steal his soul.

Already hers.

It’s like a vision, however cheesy and trite that sounds, but it’s true. He’s transfixed and the rest of the room seems to melt away from her and from him, even with the commotion bursting on all sides. Because it’s her, she’s here, and she’s walking right towards him as he stands like a helpless mook rooted to the floor. He opens his mouth but no words come out, and he sucks in a breath when he realizes his head is pounding from lack of oxygen.

“Order, now,” Judge Varys says with imperious authority and one final firm smack of the gavel, and even though he barely raises his voice it does the trick, first with the jury who all instantly sit down like dogs on command, and then with the rest of the court as they quickly follow suit.
“Your Honor, what on earth is going on?” Mr. Pycelle says with geriatric indignation as he glares back at Sansa with his hands on his boxy hips like he’s some sort of fishwife.

“Ms. Tyrell, since you’re the one that has turned this courtroom into some sort of scene out of a Sweet Valley High book, I’d like you to explain to the jurors and Mr. Pycelle what exactly is going on. Mr. Clegane, please return to your seat at the defense table. I’m declaring your testimony finished. Ms. Stark, you’ll do the same and sit down, if you would be so kind.”

Sandor nods dumbly as he takes a step back towards the set of two steps leading down from the stand, bumping the chair with his calf so that he stumbles slightly. He cannot take his eyes off her, even as he turns around to take the stairs and slowly crosses the floor towards his and Margaery’s table. Man Eater. He wishes she could devour him whole right now just to get him out of here and put him out of his misery.

She lifts a hand to her mouth and presses it there as she sits as well at the back of the room where she’s been, it would seem, all along. He is dumbfounded, and, as Margaery starts to talk, and awareness sinks in through the shock of seeing Sansa, he is more than a little infuriated, because it’s clear that his lawyer knew the entire time.

“I want to apologize first and foremost to the jury, as well as to Mr. Pycelle,” Margaery says, spun sugar and measured cadence to her voice as she addresses the jurors. “I suppose surprise witnesses are more of a television trope than in real, everyday courtroom procedure. However, Ms. Stark and her family are members of the witness protection program, and in order to protect her safety at all and any cost, it was decided by me and by Judge Varys that her inclusion in this trial be kept under wraps from everyone save for the judge. No one else knew. Not even my client,” she says, gesturing to Sandor before she finally hazards a look over her shoulder in his direction.

She flinches when their eyes meet and quickly looks back at the jurors.

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“Mr. Pycelle asked my client if he loved Ms. Stark. But I think you the jury can tell just how much he cares for her, which is precisely why I kept this information from Mr. Clegane. There is simply no way he could have testified with any sort of clarity, had he known Ms. Stark was here. And,” she adds with a little drip of wry humor that wets her voice down. “Considering that Ms. Stark just interrupted his testimony even though I told her to wait until I introduced her, I think you can tell that she feels just as strongly about him.”

Another round of muted laughter.

"That’s why she’s here, to testify on behalf of my client. Your Honor?"

“Ms. Stark, please take your oath and then take the stand.”

Sandor turns around in precisely the way Margaery instructed him not to, and he watches the sway of her as she stands again and picks her way past the young man sitting next to her. Her black hair is swept up in some fancy twisty hairdo, but he can tell by the bias-cut fall of her bangs that the haircut is more or less the same one he gave her, and yes he’s on trial for murder and his future hangs in the balance, but that sliver of realization is enough to make him smile. He rotates in his seat as he follows her with his eyes until he’s sitting facing forward again, and he rests his elbows on the table, leans over them as she swears on a bible to tell nothing but the truth, soaks her up like a heel of bread soaks sauce when she lifts her gaze and settles it on him.

Oh, how good it feels, to be seen by her. Oh, how much it fucking hurts, to be so close and yet so fathomlessly far away. Sandor’s conception of time blurs and even though it’s been months of agony, suddenly it feels like yesterday when he watched her drive away. He can almost, almost
feel the rain, and then he realizes he’s got goosebumps, even in a fancy ass dress shirt and suitcoat. He wonders if this is what a heart attack feels like.

“Ms. Stark,” Margaery says, and then she stops herself and smiles. “May I call you Sansa?”

“Of course.”

“Sansa, would you please give us your account of what happened on February 6th of 2016?”

She is beautiful even under the leech of florescent lighting, pale pink skin and pale pink dress, black hair and black dress, chin lifted high as she walks the entire room through waking up, finding Sandor and Petyr, convincing the latter she’d go with him once she was assured the former was alive and well. He touches his cheekbone, which took weeks and weeks to knit itself from the fracture of Baelish’s brass knuckles. *Not so well, but alive enough,* he thinks.

“And- and then Sandor told me about my brother, and I- I um,” she says, the moment where she turned murderer getting stuck in her throat like a crumb.

It’s a moment he thinks about a lot himself, and he wonders if she has sweet dreams or bad about squeezing the trigger, he wonders if she has PTSD over it and if anyone holds her until the bad thoughts fade.

She coughs into the loose fist of her hand and then drops her gaze to her lap. When she looks up she looks at him, and just before she opens her mouth he shakes his head, the slightest of shakes, and he hopes she remembers that morning back in Portland, remembers that look she gave him and he understood, because it looks an awful lot like she’s going to through in a little confession of her own, and he’ll be damned if he lets that happen.

“Sansa?” Margaery asks gently. “I know it’s a difficult and painful thing to recall, but it is vital that the jury hear from the only other survivor who was there that day.”

Sansa swallows and nods, presumably to Margaery though her eyes linger on him the briefest of moments before she looks back at the lawyer. She nods again.

“I was so upset about Robb, and distracted, and- I dropped the gun,” she says, and Sandor listens rapt with disbelieving attention as she weaves them a story that sounds so real he half wonders if he’s remembering it or envisioning it. “I dropped it and Petyr grabbed me. He- I- he dragged me towards the front door and shoved me through. I fell down and he was going to take me, and he had said such *horrible* things to me. The things he was going to do to me. I got up and turned around to fight him off and that’s when I saw Sandor holding the gun.”

Sandor glances at the jury. They are all as engrossed as he is, some sitting forward over their notepads while others are taking hasty notes, and it’s all bullshit but he realizes what she’s doing. He looks back at her and watches as she absolves him for shooting a man in the back, paints a pretty little lie that turns her anger and her pain and her loss in that moment into a case for self-defense.

“He did it to save me, from god knows what Petyr would have done to me. I don’t- you can’t punish him just for protecting me. It was a split second and Sandor did the only thing he could think of. He saved my life so many times I can’t even count them anymore,” Sansa says, and now that it’s all out she lets real tears chase the fabrication, and she bows her head as mascara tracks her cheeks and Margaery takes a box of Kleenex from the corner of the defense table and hands it to her.
“No further questions, Your Honor,” Margaery says after reaching over and resting her hand on Sansa’s. When she turns and sees that Sandor is half standing she shakes her head and comes to take her seat next to him.

*Sit down and be COOL ok??* she writes on the notepad, underlining it three times, and he grits his teeth and complies, hands braced on table like he’s about to vault himself over it as Pycelle stands and walks towards Sansa.

“Your Honor?” Margaery asks suddenly.

She squeezes Sandor’s wrist in a silent plea for him to just chill the fuck out, but it’s impossible after what that piece of shit lawyer did to him, because what sneaky, snaky shit will he try with Sansa? *Over my dead fucking –

“Yes, Ms. Tyrell?”

“The defense requests that the defendant be removed for the cross examination of Ms. Stark, please.”

Sandor turns away from Sansa to glare first at her and then at the judge, though he eases up on the hostility when Margaery digs her high heel into the toe of his dress shoe. He flinches, clears his throat hastily as he tries a more neutral expression as he regards the judge.

Varys eyes him coolly, an eyebrow arched as he studies Sandor. Finally he inhales and nods with the exhale.

“I think that’s likely best for both your client and the record. Lord knows we don’t need another outburst; this has already turned into a circus as it is. Go on, Ms. Tyrell, escort your client to the hall and then return. Ms. Stark, remain seated. In fact, *everyone* remain seated except for Mr. Pycelle, Ms. Tyrell and Mr. Clegane. In case anyone else is compelled to, I don’t know, profess undying love for someone else in this courtroom,” Varys says dryly, and a few people laugh.

“What the fuck are you doing to me right now, Margaery?” he hisses once they’re out in the hallway and the doors have shut behind them.

Or rather, *almost* shut behind them, since Bronn squeezes through like an eel at the last minute.

“I couldn’t tell you, Sandor. I mean look at you right now,” she says, gesturing impatiently at the whole of him.

Stupidly he looks down, can still see the scuff mark of her stiletto on his shoe, but then he catches the sight of his hands, which have closed into fists and are shaking like they’re holding on to a live wire. He has no recollection of making them, and hastily he shakes them loose as he walks away from her.

“That was a low down dirty trick, Margaery,” he snaps as he spins on his heel to face her.

“Yeah, but it worked, didn’t it?” Bronn says, stepping in front of Margaery as Sandor strides back towards them. “She read you like a book, so just accept that she made the right call.”

“But she’s—” Sandor glances at a pair of security guards chatting idly across the hall. He steps towards them both and lowers his voice. “She’s lying up there,” he says, something like desperation leaking through.

“I beg your pardon,” Margaery snaps, poking his chest with a finger as she steps around Bronn and
gets in Sandor’s face as best she can from a whole foot below him. “My clients don’t lie, Sandor, get that through your skull right now. Look, just, ugh,” she says with a sigh as she pinches the bridge of her nose. “Just stay out here, okay? I’ll send the bailiff out to get you once Sansa’s finished.”

“He’s going to tear her apart,” Sandor argues.

“That old man? Please. He just got a second wind digging his feeble claws into you. Besides, the jury will hate him if he tries it with her. They’re in love with her,” she says with a smile as she walks backwards towards the courtroom doors.

“Hey, our man Sandor knows all about that, don’t you, buddy?” Bronn says with a squeeze of Sandor’s shoulder.

“Shut up,” he says weakly, and then the doors close and he’s once more cut off from the woman he loves.

“It’s going to be fine,” Bronn says. “Pycelle had no idea Sansa would show up, he can’t have formulated many questions for her.”

“Yeah,” Sandor says.

It feels like an eternity before the doors open and he can see Sansa stepping down from the stand, and even though everyone is watching him he lingers in the little aisle that cuts through the gallery.

“Mr. Clegane?” the bailiff says at his side.

But Sandor doesn’t move. Instead he waits for her, and if he was shaking earlier it’s nothing to the tremble in Sansa’s chin as she looks up at him, and the pain in his heart earlier is nothing to the acute ache he feels when she passes him by and brushes his fingers with hers. Sansa, he wants to say, but the judge is watching him and the jury is too, so instead all he does is close his hand around hers, around the push of her fingertips into his palm and the squeeze she gives him before a tall blonde woman and a nondescript young man step forward. She’s crying as they lead her towards those damnable doors, she’s looking over her shoulder at him as he turns on his heel to watch her leave, and when she stumbles because she’s not looking where she’s going it’s the tall woman who holds her up and steadies her when it should be Sandor by her side instead.

I love you, he thinks, and he wonders if she can hear it, here where it beats out of his heart like blood.

“Mr. Clegane,” Judge Varys says.

“Yes, Your Honor,” he answers automatically, turning around to face forward.

“Please be seated so I can dismiss the jury for deliberation.”

“Yes, Your Honor,” he murmurs, snapping to attention as he heads back to his seat.

When he glances back Sansa is gone and the doors are closed, and he is alone in a crowded room, alone in a trial for murder, alone with his future in the balance, but he doesn’t care because she’s gone and it doesn’t even matter anymore.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Picset

Chicago, IL – November

“Well,” Margaery says with a sigh as she practically collapses in her seat across from Judge Varys. "I have to say a clandestine meeting is better suited over drinks in a dive bar than a cup of tea at some high class restaurant.”

He snorts and to her it still comes off as dainty, and whether that’s because he’s as groomed as a peacock (though hairless as a rat) or because she feels about as glamorous these days as one of Bronn’s sweat socks strewn about their apartment, she isn’t sure. Margaery tucks her feet under her chair and surreptitiously tries to stretch out her arches in her four inch heels. She’s been wearing them ten hours already, and it’s not even happy hour yet.

“How very cloak and dagger of you, in a seedy sort of way. That FBI boyfriend of yours must be rubbing off on you, and not in the lascivious way,” Varys says from behind his magazine.

He asked her via intern to meet him at The Allis on Green Street, and judging by the college kid’s hushed tones Margaery half expected trench coats and fedoras, but instead it’s ladies who lunch and clean airy light, enormous chandeliers that hover above them like crystal jellyfish in an otherwise industrial sort of space.

She recognized the judge instantly from across the room, here where he sits at ease in one of two plush cream armchairs at a little table crowded with tea things. Or rather, she recognized the top of his bald head; he is currently ensconced in this month’s issue of Vanity Fair, but there was no mistaking that pate.

“Maybe he has,” Margaery says as she shifts in her seat until she’s comfortable, not quite reclining and not quite sitting ramrod straight, but something in between, because whether it’s from heaven or hell or some other ethereal plane, she knows her grandmother is watching.

“And it’s not just a cup of tea,” he chides lightly as he sits up from his relaxed repose and tucks his magazine between his thigh and the arm rest. He uses his freed hand to gesture grandly to the spread before them. “Afternoon tea, to be precise. Although if you’re hell bent on drinking during the day this does come with two glasses of rose prosecco. I’ll even let you drink mine,” he says in a tone that skates effortlessly between unctuous and condescending.

“No, thank you. Wine will only make me fall asleep at this point. Caffeine is what I need, since sleep doesn’t seem to be on the menu anymore.”

“Lucky for you there are plenty of other delicacies on this menu. Shall I be mother?” he says, hefting a porcelain teapot that looks like it’s spun from sugar and gold.

“Yes, please,” Margaery says, and she’s delighted with a homey aroma of hot cocoa when he slides over a cup and the curls of steam waft and drift and sigh her way.
“I decided to indulge with the Hot Chocolate Pu-erh,” he says after she lifts the cup and takes a sip. “Nothing like a little pampering every now and then,” the judge says as he refills his own cup and settles back in his chair, crossing one leg so it balances on his kneecap just so. “Forgive me for saying it, Ms. Tyrell, but it looks like you’ve been cheating yourself in that department.”

“Yes, well, I’ve been a little fucking busy, haven’t I,” she snaps.

Varys lifts his eyebrows in silent admonishment for her lack of manners and she sighs and gives up and slumps back in her seat, bringing her tea with her. Her grandmother spent a lot of time with this man, and even though they’ve always had faint suspicion that he’s funded by Lannister money, he has also always seemed to be relatively fair when it comes to judgment. And he’s looking at her frankly with none of that wry sly judge amusement he always exudes in court, and he’s a link to Olenna and he bought her tea that smells like sepia-tinted home. So Margaery takes a long sip of tea and sighs again as she looks at him.

“I’m sorry, I just- it’s so close, Varys, I can taste it. I can feel it, in my bones, and I don’t want to fail. I’ve been working like a dog and it’s starting to make me fray at the edges.”

“And do you think you will?” Varys says lightly as he picks up the tea tray of finger sandwiches and turns it in order to peruse. “Fail?”

Margaery frowns. “No. No, because I can’t. So there’s nothing more to it.”

“Good,” he murmurs, selecting a cucumber sandwich the width of Margaery’s middle finger.

“‘Good?’” she asks with a huff of surprised laughter. “Aren’t you supposed to be impartial?”

“Ms. Tyrell, please,” he says as he gazes at the delicacy before taking a bite from it. He looks up at her finally with a small smile like the twist of lemon in a martini. “Is anyone truly impartial?”

“Well, I never,” she says with a gust of laughter as she sits up and sets her tea down. “I knew you and granny had your lunches but I had no idea you had your own interests in this case. How perfectly scandalous.”

“Careful now, dearest, is that any way to repay me for the tea?” Varys leans in amongst the tea trays and cakes like a tiger through the bush. “Or for Mr. Clegane’s sentence hearing?”

Margaery’s eyes widen and then immediately narrow. *How dare you.* Gone is the pain between her shoulder blades as she immediately leans forward, forgotten is the ache in her arches as she digs the heels of her stilettos into the plush rug beneath them and yanks her chair closer to the table.

“You sent him away for two years,” she hisses. “Two years for protecting that poor woman when he should have gotten a goddamned medal,” and thank god there’s still a sharp edge to her voice because suddenly she’s struck with the memory of Sansa sobbing over the phone at the news, and it damn near brings tears to her eyes.

Varys arches one eyebrow while firmly capping the other and briskly dusts invisible crumbs from his fingers. Gone is the snippy humor and catty tone; here is the severity of the man behind the bench, the brain in the robes, the man behind the curtain.

“I sent him away for his own protection, Ms. Tyrell. And, instead of the IDOC where everyone thinks he is, and I do mean everyone, I’ve got him tucked away in another facility.”

“Which facility?” she asks quickly, thinking of black holes of Calcutta.
He shakes his head. “Just know that he’s doing just fine.”

“He’s still in prison!”

“Would you rather him be free and murdered in the street the way Cersei Lannister’s manicurist was after she tried going to the police with information on her most faithful client?”

Margaery pales, and suddenly the tea has nothing to offer her; no alertness, considering how much this information has just shaken her awake; no warmth or comfort either, considering how she shivers.

“I never- there wasn’t any- how do you know this?”

“Oh, please, Margaery. You think you’re the only one with an inside man? I have eyes and ears all over this city. You don’t survive on the Lannister payroll for long without them.”

“But- but that’s corruption!” she hisses, and then she wags her finger at him like she’s scolding a child. “I had a feeling about you. I knew it.”

“Did you, now? Tell me, how much did you pay to get Barristan Selmy to sit your suppression hearing?”

Margaery sucks in a gasp and covers her open mouth with one hand. Varys chuckles and shrugs a shoulder as he pushes the plate of scones and tiny cakes towards her.

“You look like you’re about to faint. Please, eat something. I’m not the kind of man who handles swooning women very well.”

Hastily she reaches past the cakes and grabs a few sandwiches, and her hand shakes as she drops them onto the little plate next to her cup and saucer.

“What I did wasn’t corruption, it was to ensure a fair trial,” she whispers as she tears a sandwich into two, popping one half in her mouth while she squeezes the other between her thumb and finger. “And thank god I did, considering what I’m hearing right now.”

“Ends justify the means?” he asks.

Margaery hesitates and then nods, glancing down at the mangled sandwich before eating that half, too.

He shrugs again. “It appears we have more in common than just excellent taste in shoes.”

She glances over her shoulder towards the restaurant entrance, over her other shoulder at the Green Street window, half expecting to find the CPD crawling in like a hoard of ants. Varys, however, is all nonchalance despite his confession, and she watches as he butters a scone.

“Why are you telling me this?”

Finally he drops the pretense and sets down the scone, slides the blade of his butter knife against the rim of his plate to clean it before setting it down on the ivory tablecloth. Varys sighs as he looks up at her.

“Your grandmother and I have had plans to corner the Lannisters and remove them from power for years now, my dear girl, and I’m worried about you and your ability to keep your ducks in a row. Don’t be offended now,” he says with a shake of his head and a raised hand when she opens her
mouth to argue. “We started this long before you became a lawyer, back when nearly every Targaryen was killed under suspicious circumstances,” Varys says as he makes air quotes around that emphasized word, and for the first time a little bit of real emotion leaks into his tone by way of bitterness. “And I’m determined to see it through.”

“But why? Were you on their payroll before the Lannisters came into power?”

“I’m on everyone’s payroll, my dear. If it were just about money then I’d be content to sit here and get richer off the Lannisters just as I got rich off the Targaryens. But even we ‘ends justify the means’ people have a conscience. Do you know how many guilty men I’ve let go free? Do you know how many innocent people I’ve been strong-armed into convicting? Three of them are on death row.”

“Jesus,” Margaery murmurs, and she’s sort of wishing she’d accepted those two glasses of prosecco.

“Yes, well,” Varys says. “I’ve no problem being a servant to the law, but I do have a problem being a servant to the Lannisters. I was never under so tight a yoke as I am now. So, when I hear that Daenerys Targaryen will return with prodigal son bravado, I want to make sure it’s true. She’s truly coming to testify?”

“Yes,” Margaery says, managing to find her words now because she’s proud of what she’s accomplished when it came to convincing Daenerys to come to Chicago. “Yes, she’s coming with her nephew and the young woman who was kidnapped by Baelish’s lackey.”

“Good,” Varys says with a nod. “Good. We’ll need her here, her testimony and the sort of crippling affect she can have just by showing up. I want to make sure she’ll have ample protection as well. Have you seen to that?”

“Yes, as well as we can overseas. The FBI has been in contact with—”

“And how well did the FBI thing go for you and Bronn?”

Margaery flinches.

“Listen. They’re getting scared and sloppy, what with that salon woman murdered in broad daylight. But sloppy doesn’t mean less dangerous. I have people who can help, people who can protect Daenerys and you.”

“Me?” She almost laughs.

“Yes, you. I didn’t bring you down here just to ask you a question about your witness. I have assistants who can do that,” he says, sitting back and shifting up onto one hip as he digs something free from the pocket of his slacks. “One of my eyes and ears found this in Mr. Qyburn’s secretary’s desk.”

Margaery takes the Micro Stick recorder he hands her and when she presses play she gets the shakes all over again. It’s a recording of her and Bronn chatting inside the little apartment on Deming, and while there’s no case information discussed, it is still blood-chilling. Instantly she thinks of her grandmother’s murder and tears spring to her eyes.

“Someone was in there?”

“So far just to try and incriminate you. Next time, who knows? We need you, Margaery, and we need you alive to bring them down. No one has gotten this close before you.”
“W-what do I,” she says, trembling so violently it’s like she’s outside in the frigid autumn afternoon and not tucked away in a tearoom. Margaery swallows and tries again, lifting her eyes to Varys, who is studying her with sincere concern. “What do we do?”

“Ditch your apartment, your phones, take the files you need off your computers and scrub the hard drives. Get rid of that ridiculous SUV and tuck yourselves away. I will help you as much as I can. The young kids like to call it living off the grid. I think it’s high time you ditched the grid, before it gets you and your beau murdered. Don’t you agree?”

Suddenly the ordeal Sansa and Sandor went through seems all too real now. This will be her third move with someone snapping at her heels. But she’s already nodding by the time she steels herself and roots around her spinning thoughts for the words to say “Yes, yes, okay, we’ll go. When?”

Varys glances at his watch and then out the window, and when he nods and lifts his hand in a gesture, Margaery looks outside and sees a nondescript sedan with a chauffeur standing attention beside it. The rear window rolls down and she catches the faintest glimpse of Bronn, whose eyes are pinned on her, and when he nods grimly she stifles a sob of mingled relief and terror.

“Shall we?” Varys says mildly as he dabs his mouth with a napkin.

Coeur d’Alene, ID – December

Clouds cluster and crowd above while lazy snow falls and fills the air like winter faeries, and while Sansa is no stranger to winter weather it’s still so different out here. The sky for one, because instead of peeking between countless skyscrapers it is an endless yawn that stretches like a dry, upside down ocean above her, sometimes pale and troubled, other times so robin’s egg blue it hurts to gaze up at. It’s a sky of possibility. A sky of solitude. A great big western sky that fits the terrain all around her. Big lake, big plains, big mountains. CdA, however, is still small, a little nest of a city made up of a tiny downtown and a lakeside resort that almost dwarfs it, and thanks to the season, about a billion Christmas lights that are turned on now even though the sun won’t set for another hour.

Sansa used to find Christmas lights ugly during the day, a tangle of ugly dark wires and tiny lights that blink feebly in wan, pale winter light. But here with the snow and the old-timey feel of quaint downtown streets and brick buildings, here where it’s been all about family ever since they renamed themselves and relocated, she finds that she likes them. Even the swags of faux pine and illuminated candy canes stuck in storefront windows have a sort of nostalgic charm. They make her think of Christmas movies from her childhood when her father and Robb were still alive, and that in turn makes her smile. She’s not crying so much these days anymore, though there are black spots on her heart that stay open and empty like dead caves, with none of the trickle and sparkle of life that used to be there even on her saddest days.

But it is our imperfections that set us apart, she thinks, and she has long ago learned to embrace them, especially the little hole that a man once filled, a man she hasn’t seen in almost a year, a man she cannot find no matter how many fruitless times she’s googled his name or how to email inmates.

Sansa sighs and rounds the corner onto Sherman Avenue, head down as it so often is these days, and she runs smack dab into someone. The softer sensations of the impact startle her as much as the impact itself and the realization that it’s a man she’s run into, the firm of muscle and oversized pea coat.
A pair of hands come up to hold her gently by the shoulders, to draw her lightly away from him, and it’s so similar, so big-man-careful, so familiar that she’s sure of it, sure of him, and as she steadies herself she rests her hands on the cuffs of his coat and grasps him lightly around the wrists.

*You’re back,* she thinks as she stares breathlessly down at his boots. *You got out and you found me.* And then she looks up at him.

“Whoa there,” he says, twinkle-eyed like all the Christmas lights around them, Eddie Bauer smile and the peak of plaid shirt to match, blonde hair too light and face too clean shaved, skin too blank a canvas to even pretend for a minute that he’s Sandor.

“Sorry,” she murmurs as her hands fly off of him and she steps back to free herself from his snare.

“It’s all right,” he says amiably, frowning down at the listless fall of her arms to her side. “But I’m not poisonous though,” he says with a smile.

Her thoughts clear and so does the air around them, as if the sky had dimmed itself for some Idahoan mood lightning here on a damp street corner. Suddenly she realizes she’s staring up at him with what must be acute disappointment, and she feels a warm flush of embarrassment on her cheeks. Sansa briefly closes her eyes and chuckles, shakes her head as she rests a hand on her chest to show him the impact startled her.

“I’m so sorry, I was about a mile away in my own thoughts, I didn’t mean to- well, sorry I ran into you, first off,” she says.

“Don’t be sorry for that,” he says, one smooth cheek dimpling as he grins. “I’m not.” All smiles as he steps back and regards her, and he’s about as clean cut and sweet as a golden retriever.

Too bad she loves junkyard dogs who bark and bite, these days.

“Well, anyways, sorry about that,” she says, sidestepping around him to keep to her path. She smiles at him. “Have a nice day.”

“It’d be nicer if I could maybe buy you a cup of coffee,” he says as walks away. “Unless you’re seeing someone, that is.”

Sansa stops in her tracks and looks down at the snow melting into the wet of the sidewalk, because it’s a funny phrase that she could say yes or no to. *No I’m not dating anyone, but I still see him every night,* she thinks, because even if she doesn’t dream of Sandor he’s almost all she ever thinks about at night, gazing up in the dark in her little twin bed, as lonely as it is small.

Finally she inhales and looks at him over her shoulder. He’s hopeful and seems nice enough, definitely the kind of guy you drag home to meet your folks because he’s just that good a catch. Doesn’t swear like a sailor in front of kids. Doesn’t snore when he’s on his back. Isn’t in jail for murder.

“No, I’m not seeing anyone anymore,” she says after a moment. “But I’m not over him, either.”

“Ah,” he says.

“Yeah.”

She smiles and shrugs and walks away, caring not a whit if he stands and watches her or simply leaves, though about a hundred years ago she would have given him a coquettish glance back just to make sure he was.
Her destination, Shenanigan’s Toy Emporium, is more than just a toy store, and it smells heavenly when she pushes open the door. Coffee and chocolate and Christmas trees, of central heating and that sugary smell that practically wafts from the wall of taffy and candies. Sansa inhales deeply with her head tipped back before sighing luxuriously and stepping further inside.

“Welcome to Shenanigans, hon. Can I help you with anything?”

“Oh, I’m good, thanks. I think I’ll be able to finish my Christmas shopping in one fell swoop,” she says as she takes a basket and tucks its handle in the crook of her elbow.

She’s here for Torrhen but in a heartbeat she has a pound of taffy and a vintage toy car for Rickon, three different types of ground espresso for Bran and the fancy new machine he got for his birthday. Torrhen, for his two years of expertise, will be the proud owner of a hand stuffed and stitched teddy bear that Sansa is fairly certain he will destroy in ten minutes. She’s already gotten her mother and Dacey covered and has an Agent Provocateur gift card to send Margaery once she can track her down. That just leaves Arya, impossible Arya who refuses to eat sweets unless it’s a cheat day and who stays away from caffeine altogether.

“Will that be all, hon?” the motherly cashier asks when Sansa sets her basket on the counter.

“Yeah, I guess so. Do you guys have any funky thrift stores or anything down here? I’m relatively new to the area and haven’t really poked around downtown much. We live on the outside of the city.”

The woman frowns up at the ceiling and chews her lip as she takes the items out of the basket. “Well now, let’s see. Funky, huh? I’m a little old for funky, but I’ve got a wild granddaughter I have to shop for. There’s a few boutiques down on Front that have stuff in their windows raunchier than I could ever imagine, and a record store a few blocks west where one of my employees spends most of his paychecks.”

“Perfect, thank you,” Sansa says, bending over her receipt to sign her name.

“My pleasure. Merry Christmas, young lady,” she says as she wraps up the toy car before placing it with the rest of Sansa’s purchases.

“Same to you,” Sansa murmurs as she slings her bag onto her wrist and steps back out into the snow.

The record store is close to where she’s parked so she saves that stop for last and heads for the boutiques, though the first one is so astronomically expensive she can’t help but trot out of it a little over-quick, much to the sneering disdain of the employees. But the next one is secondhand and a little more earthy, a little more eccentric, a little more Arya, and it only takes her a few minutes before she has to make up her mind. Sansa laughs as she looks back and forth between a soft old t-shirt that says “FUCK IT LET’S DRINK” and a necklace with a pendant that says ‘AAARRRRGH!’ in glossy, pop-art comic book lettering.

She goes with the necklace.

Christmas shopping completed, there’s really no reason to stop again, not with the snow falling harder and wetter, making her feel even colder and clammiest than before. She walks briskly with bowed head and downward gaze as she hustles past the record store until for some reason she glances at the little storefront window covered in skull-and-crossbones stickers wearing Santa hats.

It’s Sandor’s record.
Sansa gasps and comes to a standstill so quickly it’s like she’s run into a brick wall instead of another person, and tears prick and tingle in her eyes as she stares at the black and white The Velvet Underground record sitting on a little easel in the window next to an Alvin Richardson album. She walks towards the window, tucks her hair behind her ears and beneath his wool cap before she rests both hands on the window, bringing her face so close to the big pane of glass than her breath fogs it. *Pale Blue Eyes.* What she wouldn’t give for a glimpse of slate grey ones.

“How much is that doggy in the window, huh?” someone says from behind her.

Sansa whips around and presses herself against the glass as she looks up at a black haired young man leaning against a parking meter. He’s got his hands jammed in his coat pockets and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

“Jesus, you scared me. I didn’t even see you there,” she says before waving her hand in front of her face. “Or smell you,” she quips lightly with the wrinkle of her nose, but sure enough she had been so utterly stunned and transported by the sight of that record that she didn’t catch a whiff of his smoke.

Unfazed by what could be construed as an insult, he nods towards the record store behind her. “You see something good in there? Must’ve, since it stopped you dead in your tracks.”

“Yeah, the um, that Velvet Underground record,” she says, glancing over her shoulder to make sure the thing hasn’t sprouted legs and run away from her. Sansa frowns as she looks back to give the guy a stern look. “This isn’t where you tell me it’s not actually for sale, is it?”

He laughs. “I wouldn’t make rent each month if I pulled cruel shit like that. Nah, sister, that record’s all yours. Come on,” he says, sucking down the last third of his cigarette before flicking it into the slushy snow gathered against the curb. “Let’s go get it.”

He heads behind the checkout counter butted up against the store window, unbuttons and shrugs out of his heavy coat, revealing a yellow LCD Soundsystem shirt. Sansa smiles as he tosses his smoky jacket onto a stool behind the counter and turns to lean over a low wall to grab the album out of the window display.

“You like LCD Soundsystem, huh?”

“Favorite band,” he says as he straightens and turns around, setting the record on the counter with careful reverence. He raises his eyebrows as he looks up at her. “You?”

“I mean I like what I’ve heard but it’s all been from my sister. She loves them.”

“She's got good taste,” he says, ringing her up for the record. “That’ll be fifty bucks. So, if this record isn’t for your sister, who’s it for?”

*My boyfriend, if he ever gets out of jail,* she thinks with a searing sharp pain like a hot knife right in her heart. The last she heard was that he was sentenced to the IDOC, but all attempts to contact him have come up short. That was two months ago. All she has of him now are those aimless google searches and lonely dreams, and then Sansa blinks and realizes the clerk is staring at her waiting for her to reply.

“For me,” she says hastily as she hands him her debit card, and because it’s his record here she can’t help but be honest. “And on the off chance I ever see him again, for my man.”

“Gotcha,” he says, as he nods. “Well, I hope you get him back, and if your sister ever needs some
good music, you tell her to come on down to Gendry’s Records. That’s me by the way,” he says with a proud grin and the jab of his thumb against his sternum.

“I will, thanks, Gendry,” Sansa says with a smile as she hugs the record to her chest, and she can’t wait to take it home and listen to it and cry her eyes out as soon as she buys a record player.

“No sweat, uh,” he says, glancing down and reading her name on her receipt once she signs it and hands it to him. “No sweat, Bonnie.”

Stateville Minimum Security Unit, Joliet, IL – Late March

“Hey shit dick, get the fuck back over here, you’re not done with my trim,” says a fellow inmate from one of three old barber chairs.

“Shut the fuck up, Tormund,” Sandor says, waving his hand over his shoulder at the bearded ginger giant, the pair of scissors still stuck on his finger and thumb, and he stares at the television bolted to the corner of the room. “I’m trying to watch something over here.”

“I don’t blame him,” Sigorn says from where he’s sitting on a small sofa against the rear wall of the small, brightly lit room. “There’s nothing but hot chicks.”

“Hot chicks?” Tormund says, the irritable grumpy scratch in his voice smoothing out some at this new topic of conversation. “I thought you were watching the news.”

“Shut up,” Sandor says, even though it’s true; all the women milling around are attractive, but then again it’s been awhile since any of them have seen any women, period. “We are watching the news,” he says irritably, wishing the crowd could part so he could see if one woman in particular is in attendance.

They’re in the main rec building in one of the vocational training rooms, one where Sandor has somewhat inexplicably become a sort of teacher in barbering, ever since the head trainer discovered he had prior training and experience. Fine, Alliser had said, tossing his scissors on the counter. I’m taking a coffee break.

That was four months ago. He hasn’t bothered to come back since.

“Holy shit, I thought you were just talking about the reporter,” Tormund says as he comes to stand next to Sandor with half his head trimmed.

She’s decent looking, Sandor can give her that, but it’s nothing head-turning. Just a bland blazer and vapid expression despite the legalese she’s throwing around. Like you’ve ever been on trial, he thinks with a frown as he folds his arms over his chest, careful of the scissors that dangle from his thumb and finger.

“Nope,” Sigorn says happily from the couch. “Just wait.”

The sky is that bald blue that happens in early spring and late autumn, all the more vivid for the lack of warmth in the air, a bleached out blue without a cloud in it though he knows full well that the wind whipping the poor reporter’s hair is likely as cold as Lake Michigan. It’s not that far away from him where he is but still, to see the bright life of the city when he’s stuck at a standstill here in a Joliet prison makes him feel about a thousand miles away. In more ways than one.

“Matt, we’re live here down at the courthouse on La Salle where we’ve been waiting for over an
“hour while the jury deliberates for the case of Illinois vs. Lannister, and let me tell you, it’s been a madhouse here all morning.”

The screen splits to a 50-50 view to show the news anchor Matt sitting in front of a green screen and the field reporter on the steps of the courthouse.

“Go on and fill us in, Mary. It’s special event coverage, so leave no stone uncovered.”

“There’s more than just my fellow journalists here, there are over a hundred people waiting to hear news on one of the biggest trials to happen here in Chicago, in this country, for at least the past 15 years. As you likely know, the Lannisters have been linked to several high profile cases and crimes committed since they rose to fame and fortune over 25 years ago. They have always credited a firm hold on the stock market as the source of their wealth, but there have been rumors and failed trials in the past that say they are linked not only to a corrupt police department but also to shady bank dealings, as well as a massive and intricate system of money loaning and laundering, violent retribution and in several cases, cold blooded murder. The allegations have been astounding. It’s a far cry from the benevolent façade of a charitable family they’ve always maintained.”

“This is fucking boring,” Tormund says with a yawn as he scratches his balls and turns to head back to his chair. He shoves Sandor in the shoulder but the latter man doesn’t budge. “Come on, finish me up. I want to go work out before I have to scrub the toilets.”

“Just give me a goddamn minute, would you?” Sandor snaps, glancing away from the television screen to glare at him. “Your two bucks an hour can wait, all right?”

“There are more than a few dozen folks out here who feel they’ve been wronged by the Lannister family, and let me put it this way, Matt: to say they’re looking for blood is an understatement. Perhaps the most famous, or infamous, person here looking for justice is the last surviving family member of an incident that is thought to have been a premeditated crime instead of an unfortunate accident. What’s that? Oh, yes, good, good. Ms. Targaryen? Ms. Targaryen! Mary here, from WGN Channel 9! Could I get a few words?”

Sandor’s never seen her before but he’s gotten enough of a description to know exactly who he’s looking at. Blonde hair the color of ouzo on ice, teased and dragged from the upswept hairdo so that it whips across her forehead and the stony, determined gaze of eyes so blue they’re violet. Liz Taylor eyes, his mother used to call them. Daenerys Targaryen, head held high and chin lifted so she looks like she’s gazing down her nose despite being shorter than the reporter.

“I came from France, from that “accident” I know Tywin was behind all those years ago, and I came for the truth. I testified to that effect. Now it is up to the judge and jury, but I hope to god they see it for what it is and throw the book at the whole lot of them.”

“Holy shit,” Tormund says, and the barber chair behind Sandor creaks as he walks back over.

“Yeah, I told you,” Sigorn says. “Hotter than hell on payday.”

“No, not that waif, her,” Tormund says, walking up to the television to point at a tall blonde woman in the back, not blonde as Ms. Targaryen, more like the straw in a barn than the pale of the sky. ”Who the hell are you, goddess?”

Sandor sucks in a breath. He recognizes that woman. She’s one of the marshals who took Sansa out of the courtroom last year. Quickly he turns on his heel and strides across the room and snatches one of the metal fold-out chairs butted up against the wall by the door. He hefts it up in his left
hand and walks back to the TV corner, slaps it down to the floor and straddles it with his forearms folded on the back rest.

Because if that woman is there, then there’s a chance Sansa is too.

There’s a fleeting interview with a man and a woman both dressed to the 9s, and when the woman is introduced as Jeyne Poole, kidnapping victim, Sandor now has a face to go with the name.

“I prefer the term ‘survivor,’ thank you,” Jeyne says, and she looks as soft and as kind as Sansa described her, but there’s a firm edge to her tone that Sandor approves of, and when the reporter defers with an embarrassed gesture, Sandor can’t help but nod.

“She’s all right, but where’d that blonde chick go?” Sigorn says.

“Yeah,” Tormund says. “Yeah, where’d she go?”

“Not the sequoia, the French chick,” Signorn dismisses.

“Would you two shut the fuck up?” Sandor snaps, glaring between them before returning his attention to the screen. “Jesus Christ, it’s like trying to watch something with a couple of Myna birds in here. This is fucking important, okay?”

He wants to know the outcome of the trial. He wants to see if Margaery and Bronn are there. But mostly? Mostly he just wants one glimpse. One sliver of screen time. One eyeful to reassure himself that she’s okay, that this wasn’t for nothing. There must be something about his intensity that comes off like a scent, because like a couple of pack dogs the talking birds turn into bloodhounds.

“Holy shit, is this your case, big lover?” Sigorn says, and he laughs and sits forward with his arms folded on his knees. “Tell me, please tell me your little girlfriend is the French chick. Hat’s off to you if it is.”

Sandor rolls his eyes and squints as he stares at the television, tries to tune them out because Jeyne is gone now and he missed what the reporter said.

“Ms. Tyrell, this is arguably the case of your career regardless of the verdict. Tell me how you’re feeling, tell me what’s going on your head right now.”

And there she is. The million dollar tumble of fancy hair is hidden in a tight bun of all business, all shark in the swimming pool, and her eyebrows are arched so sharply it looks like they could kill. She’s got faux fur on the lapels of her overcoat and it gives off an effect of royalty, but despite the rich bitch look of her he can still remember her kindness from over a year ago when she speaks.

“I gave this case everything I have. Everything I will have for lord knows how long after today, and I’m fiercely proud of it, proud of myself and the team who helped me, proud of every single witness that came here to speak out not just against the Lannisters but for themselves. The Lannisters are bullies. Deadly, hateful, selfish bullies who need to finally be told ‘No.’ The age of the bully has to end. I want the Facebook and Twitter bullies to see that even a bully like Tywin Lannister can be brought down.”

There are scattered whoops and rounds of applause at her words, and Sandor can’t help but grin at the sentiment, and then Bronn drifts past the screen as he snags Margaery, equal parts FBI and boyfriend as he gives a stern look to the camera and ushers her offscreen. Christ, he misses his friend.
“Well spoken words from Ms. Tyrell, the prosecuting attorney in this case who suffered the loss of her grandmother, District Attorney Olenna Tyrell, early last year. And speaking of witnesses, Matt, there were more than a few who surprised us bystanders on their way into the courtroom early this morning. We already spoke with Jeyne Poole, the young woman who was attacked and kidnapped in lieu of Sansa Stark. Joffrey Lannister, slated to go on trial for the incident later this year, allegedly put out a hit – yes, Matt, a hit, like on The Sopranos, I know how you love that show – on Ms. Stark, and when she wasn’t found, the man Joffrey hired apparently took it out on Ms. Poole.”

“Was Ms. Stark there today to lend testimony, Mary?”

“Yes, Matt, as was her mother, who reportedly spent several months of 2016 hospitalized after the murder of her son. We don’t have footage from the closed trial but we do have sources that say her testimony was one of the most heartbreaking that the jury heard. A recess was called shortly after, and when court resumed her daughter Sansa Stark took the stand.”

With another groan of metal on linoleum tile, Sandor stands and kicks the chair away from him.

“Dude, they’re talking about you right now!” Tormund says.

"Holy shit, our boy's famous for more than giving shitty haircuts," says Sigorn.

The split screen changes to a shot of the courthouse and his own mug shot but Sandor hardly registers himself, and if they’re discussing him he can’t hear it, even as he walks slowly towards the television, until he’s so close he has to crane his head all the way back.

Because he sees her.

“Well hot damn, there’s another fine ass looking broad,” Sigorn says.

That he hears.

“You shut your filthy fucking mouth when you talk about her,” he says, turning his body in full to face where Sigorn is still hunched over on the couch.

“I’m only guessing here,” Tormund mutters, his voice a graveled roll that is all amusement, “but I think that’s Romeo’s Juliet up there.”

Yes, that’s her, Sandor thinks as Sansa drifts warily towards the reporter, the tall woman and dark haired young man in her wake. His heart pounds and his body moves with the violent shudder of a single shiver, like they turned the heat off for a minute, because she’s made eye contact with camera and for a split second, for one supremely beautiful moment it’s like they’re looking at each other again.

Hey, Red, he thinks. Long time no see, beautiful.

She is as gorgeous as she always was, more ghostly in a way now thanks to the poor quality of the TV set, and it’s like looking at a mirage but then again she always kind of had that effect on him. But she’s Sansa, all real loveliness in a soot grey overcoat, and her hair is red again, that deep ruddy natural auburn that he found so bewitching all those many, many months ago. And then he lets slip a sigh, the breath that leaves a dying body, because she glances down and takes something from her purse, and then she’s pulling on his wool hat over her head and ears while the wind tugs on her loose, grown out hair.

His heart beats and his lungs fill and his blood pumps, and in that moment it’s like she’s doing it all for him.
“Ms. Stark, this has been quite a harrowing year for you. What will you do now that this stage of the nightmare is behind you?”

Sandor reaches up and punches the volume + button with his finger, over and over until the sound is nearly at full blast. Her voice fills the room the way it fills his head at night.

“I’m not at liberty to say, unfortunately, due to the terms of the program I’m currently in. But—sorry, is this um, is this live? And on national television?”

“Yes, Ms. Stark, it is. Is that all right?”

“It’s more than all right, it’s perfect. I just um, I have a message for someone. Someone I lost contact with a while ago.”

The scissors drop from his fingers and clatter dully to the floor at his feet. He wraps his left arm around his ribs and rests his right elbow in the cup of his left hand while he covers his mouth with the other. All to hold himself in, because now it really is the two of them looking at each other, even though she doesn’t know it. Please know it. Please know it, Sansa. I’m here. I’m watching you.

“Buddy, I think she’s talking to you.”

Sandor doesn’t answer, doesn’t even bother to move or to glare or to react. All he does is stare.

“Go ahead, Ms. Stark, I think I know who you’re talking about. Half the country probably does, after the sensational story broke last fall.”

“Well, um, I just wanted to say that no matter what, I’ll be waiting. And we’ll find each other, no matter what, we’ll—”

“Excuse me, Ms. Stark, just a moment, there’s a— Matt, we have a clerk with the verdict!”

“No,” Sandor says against his own hand, and he drops it as he steps back and squints. “No, for fuck’s sake, go back. Go back to her, goddammit.”

But the camera pans away to a man in a suit jogging down the few steps that aren’t swarmed with onlookers, and he’s got a piece of paper in his hands, all official documentation even though it’s a simple fucking answer of not guilty or—

“Guilty! THE LANNISTERS ARE FOUND GUI—”

But whatever the paralegal has to say is drowned out by the sudden roar coming from the crowd. It’s like the baseball games Sandor’s been to when someone catches a fly ball and everyone feels like the guy caught a falling star instead.

The camera pans back to the reporter where Sansa, Margaery, Daenerys and Jeyne are all clustered together next to her, with their arms linked like they’re sister suffragettes or about to pose for prom. And they all look at one another and then they all laugh, and they all cry, and then they all hug. It’s ridiculous and theatrical and more than a little intrusive of the camera crew but right now Sandor doesn’t give a shit, because it means that in this small way he’s there, and he can’t help but laugh, and he shakes his head and pinches the corners of his eyes with his thumb and forefinger before anyone else can see he almost teared up just then. There is a close up of a ferociously triumphant Margaery Tyrell just before she flings her arms around Bronn and then the camera pulls back and sweeps over the crowd, and just like that, Sansa is gone.
I’ll be waiting, she said. No matter what, she said.

Sandor squats down and picks up his scissors, wipes their edges on the thigh of his uniform before he stands, sniffs once, and turns back to the chair Tormund is easing back into.

She’ll be waiting. She said it on national TV. She'll be waiting no matter what.

I hope so, Red, he thinks as he lifts his gaze at stares at himself through the smudged mirror. Because I got whole ‘nother year to go.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

This is LONG, I know, and the format is basically like two chapters smooshed together, but the two halves really went together, I thought, and I didn't want to add another chapter and stretch this shit out any longer than necessary, haha. SORRY.

Picset

Jon and Jeyne

Coeur d’Alene, ID – May

“I don’t know, you two,” Catelyn says with a shake of her head. “It’s a long way and that Jeep is on its last legs.”

“Come on, mom, I’ve been working on it all winter long. And you know me. I don’t do crappy work,” Rickon says.

And it’s true. He’s smelled like motor oil and the faint waft of gasoline every single day. Even now if Sansa sucked in a deep breath she’d catch a whiff of Eau de Texaco.

“If we drive back-to-back and don’t take stops we’ll get there in less than 24 hours,” Sansa says, knowing immediately from their mother’s expression that that was the wrong tack to take.

“Oh you’re going to take stops, young lady, or else nobody is going on this trip. Driving on no sleep is not safe.”

“I just turned eighteen and Sansa’s an old maid. You can’t legally keep us from going,” Rickon says.

But it’s churlish and sour and all kick your toe in the dirt because he knows just as well as Sansa does that there’s no chance they’d leave their mother behind without her express consent. Not after what happened to Robb.

The three of them are standing in a row on the little postage stamp lawn of their clapboard house, arms crossed over their chests in perfect mirror of one another as they gaze at the Jeep in the driveway. It’s not just their mode of transportation but their reason for a road trip in the first place, because it’s been over a year and it’s high time Shireen Baratheon got her beloved Jeep back.

Sansa taking it alone, however, was out of the question, even though their mother has been medication free and stable for months. It’s not a matter of my mental health but a very real matter of your physical health, she’d said incredulously. Who drives over a thousand miles all alone?
Rickon’s grand offer of joining her was only met with an indignant snort and a wave of dismissal before their mother walked out of the room.

But Sansa is nothing if not patient and persuasive, and Rickon is nothing if not dogged and determined to an exasperating fault, and over the course of a month they’ve slowly worked their mother down to a more reasonable level of maternal paranoia. That’s why they are standing outside on a cheerfully blousy spring afternoon while Rickon bounces on his heels and Sansa chews her lip as they wait for yet another verdict.

“And you swear to me you won’t do anything stupid? Rickon?” Cat says, brushing her hair from her eyes as she turns to regard Sansa’s brother.

He scoffs and looks mortally offended. “What have I done? Talk to crazy ass, road trippin’ Imperator Furiosa over here,” he says, and then he frowns with exaggerated concern. “No wait, don’t. Yeah, focus on me instead, your good kid.”

Their mother laughs, all poplar breeze and evergreen bright before she shakes her head and sighs.

“Come on, mom,” Sansa says, unfolding her arms to link one with her mother’s. “We all need to shake out the cobwebs. You should go visit Dacey and Torrhen this summer down in Jackson Hole. Arya and Bran will be fine here and you should see your grandson. We’ll put in a good word for the family down with Benjen, Meera, and Jenny.”

But there’s more than just a sense of duty to bring Shireen’s car back or to meet her little cousin, here in the yearn and pull of Sansa’s heart, though she’s not quite sure what to call it. It’s not like he’s going to be there but there will be memories of him haunting the place like lovely ghosts, there in the red sand of Sedona and in the tinkling of wind chimes, in the gentle buck of a porch swing and the sun-heated water of a lovely outdoor shower. And they were happy there. So blissed-out, call-yourself-stupid happy that Sansa has to go back, if only to dip her toes in the saltwater memory and hope her feet stay wet enough to leave tracks all the way back to Idaho.

“You know, I’ve been on the lam ever since I was sixteen. I didn’t go to any prom, I didn’t do any epic spring break with friends,” Rickon grouses. “I was home schooled my last year. My senior skip day was a movie night with my mom and my sister-in-law while my nephew cried the whole fuckin’ time.”

Sansa glances behind her mother’s head with widened eyes at her little brother, but whether Catelyn has gotten used to his slow increase in foul language or she just doesn’t have the same definition of what’s truly a calamity as she did before, their mother simply huffs out a laugh and another sigh.

“Oh, all right, fine. Go ahead and go to Sedona for the summer. But when you get back I want you to have made up your mind on which trade school you’re going to, young man. And as for you, Sansa,” Cat says as she rests a hand on the one Sansa has tucked in the crook of her mother’s elbow.

“Yes?” Happy happy happy, her heart beats out. Happy happy happy.

“You’ll watch over him, won’t you?”

"I'm eighteen, I'm not a little kid anymore. And besides, I can hear you," Rickon complains, but already the tone of his voice is different, low deep croak of post-pubescence but still lighter, like a balloon full of sunshine.
Sansa feels like a little balloon of sunshine, herself.

"Of course I will, mom, and he'll look out for me. C'mon, Ric, we've got work to do," Sansa says, kissing her mother's cheek that still smells like Ponds cream after all these years.

"Wait, where are you going?" Catelyn is hustle bustle mother hen after them, and it makes Sansa think of chickens running around a little adobe house, and she's grinning so hard it hurts when she answers.

"We've got to pack if we want to get out of here tomorrow morning."

"Yes!" Rickon whoops, punching a fist in the air like he's in a Gatorade commercial before he hitches up his pants and books it into the house.

"Sansa," their mother says as the two women sling their arms across each other's shoulders.

"Mom, I promise we'll be fine. There's nothing to be scared of, anymore."

"Oh, sure," Cat scoffs, bumping Sansa's hip with her own as she holds open the screen door and ushers her daughter in before her. "You try that philosophy when you have children. I've been scared every day since you kids came along."

She means it as a joke but the heavy implication settles around them like the snow that just melted away last month, and they both stand in the foyer gazing at each other. There is a real potential for tears, here, and the happy happy happy of Sansa's heart thuds out her brother's name instead. Robb. Robb. Robb. Lord, how missed he is.

"Mom, I'm, um," she murmurs, and she's tempted to pull her mother in for a reassuring hug. It wasn't so long ago that such a comment would send Catelyn Stark into a spiral of self-destruction.

"No, you know what, don't worry about it," she says, chin lifted as she inhales a sharp breath through her nose and lets it out through a brave smile. Cat grasps her daughter by the shoulders and squeezes gently. "Just promise me that nobody’s getting arrested on this road trip, okay?"

**Chicago, IL – May**

"Okay, I’m back," Margaery says with a breathless sort of huff as she plops down in the barstool next to Bronn’s, as if she’s run a marathon instead of powder her nose in the bathroom. “Sorry that took so long, I decided to call Varys and make sure he delivered my little package.”

“Did he?”

“Yes, he did, the silly sly fox. Ooh, what’re you drinking? Gin or vodka?” she asks, tapping the base of his martini glass with her index.

“Bombay Sapphire, baby,” he says with a glance that dissolves into a lingering look.

Christ, she’s pretty.

“Oh, the strong stuff, I see. I was going to take a sleeping pill before the flight but getting drunk with you sounds much more fun,” she replies with a grin as she commandeers his drink with her pinky and ring fingers raised, all dainty long throat as she tips the glass against her lower lip and closes her eyes and drinks.
They are in one of the bars in O’Hare International Airport, killing time before they fly first class to Paris where Bronn hopes he doesn’t make a huge ass out of himself. He’s already pretty sure she’ll make fun of him for the cheesy cliché but he doesn’t give a shit about that. It’s the other half of the equation that makes him nervous, even here where he still stands on native soil.

“Yeah, it does,” Bronn says, knocking back the rest of the martini when she hands him his glass. “Two more, man,” he says when the bartender gives him an appraising look.

“Sure thing,” the bartender says, wiping the bar as he removes the empty glass.

“So,” Margaery says brightly as she swivels on her stool to face him, and he’s got the smooth nudge of her knee against his thigh when she crosses her legs in that fine little dress of hers.

“So,” Bronn says, clearing his throat and turning to face her as well. He rests an elbow on the edge of the bar and lets his hand dangle over her legs where they’re just, just out of reach.

Margaery laughs, the sound a lovely mingle with the rattle of ice as the bartender shakes up their drinks.

“Aren’t we a couple of idiots,” she says with a shake of her head, eyes a warm shimmer like melted chocolate as she gazes at him. “It’s just so nice, having the time.”

“What, the time to be idiots?” he says, nodding his thanks when the bartender sets down two fresh martinis, the sides of the glasses foggy from the chilly condensation.

“Yes,” Margaery says with enthusiasm.

She’s bright and shiny like a brand new penny, sleek cat glossy like she was before everything went to hell. It’s been nice, watching her put herself back together, watching her sleep past sunrise the way she did before she was logging 120 hour work weeks. There is very, very little he misses about the fast-paced lifestyle they were stuck in like flies in a web. Carrying a gun was cool, but he’d be a fucking idiot if he tried telling himself it was worth the trauma of actually having to use it.

No, this new way of living is far better. Slow, slow, slow. The only thing that’s given even a modicum of stress is all the traveling they’ve done recently. First a trip to Savannah to spread Olenna’s ashes and then a trip up to Milwaukee to visit Arianne, and now Paris.

He clears his throat again when it runs dry at the mere thought.

Margaery frowns and leans forward, sets her drink down to rest her hand on his leg. “You’re not getting sick, are you?”

Bronn shakes his head. “No, duchess, I’m fine. You don’t gotta baby me anymore, I swear.”

“Well it’s not like I would mind it. I’ve got all the time in the world now,” she says, squeezing his thigh before she sits back against the low back of her stool and re-crosses her legs, and the sly little look she gives him does not escape him. “I’m very well rested, Bronny. I can take care of you just fine.”

“And you’re sure you’re happy with that? Leaving the practice, I mean. I don’t- when I threw in the towel at work I didn’t mean to suggest you do it too.”

“Like you could make me do anything I didn’t want to,” she waves dismissively as she takes another long swallow of gin and vermouth. “It’s like I said before, after that reporter interviewed
me. She said it was the case of my career and she was right. And believe me, it was enough. I’m all lawyered out for right now, and I promise you, I don’t miss it. If I do later, then who knows? But right now, I want to just laze around like a housecat.”

“You do make a lovely kitten, Margie,” he says fondly, reaching up to tug a lock of her hair.

“And you can be my new best buddy,” she grins, biting her lower lip when he leans in. “The stray dog that decided to stick around.”

“Woof,” he murmurs against her mouth before he kisses her.

She tastes like a martini, tongue still cold from the chilled liquor, lips still soft from whatever chapstick crap she reapplied in the bathroom, and it comes off on his own mouth like a little love note to be savored later. Oh, how happy he is that he decided to stick around.

“Well thanks for taking me in, kitten,” he says before he kisses her once more. “Thanks for keeping an old mutt like me.”

“Mutts like you are my favorite,” she says, capturing him and keeping him close with a hand to the back of his neck, but just when she goes in for another kiss, their flight is announced on the overhead.

“Shit, we’re boarding soon,” he says, glancing at his watch before he drains his drink in one long burning swallow and stands.

“Roger that,” she says, following suit with her own martini before she hops down beside him.

The liquor’s doing the job keeping him mellow, and the Eiffel tower and Paris are a distant concern for him, and he’s got a relaxed, two drink strut underway with Margie on his arm by the time they get to the shortish line for the metal detectors, but then the false sense of confidence dissipates.

“Please remove your shoes and empty your pockets before you step through, ma’am,” the no nonsense security guard says.

“I always forget to wear shoes that require socks,” Margaery says, all cheerful complaint as she hangs onto his shoulder to take off first one high heel and then the other. “I hate walking in airports barefoot.”

“Pretend it’s the beach,” the guard says dryly, rolling her eyes as she waves Margaery through the detector.

“Sir, you need to empty your pockets, too,” the guard says after Bronn sets his shoes and wallet in the bin.

Panic. Boozy, woozy panic and the sudden spike of adrenaline as his heart starts racing.

“I can’t,” he says, shaking his head vehemently like a little kid asked to show what he’s got behind his back. “I can’t take it out.”

The guard raises her eyebrows. “Excuse me?”

“Not like, I mean, not my dick or anything. I’m not trying to be a pervert. I mean, I can’t take out what I have in my pocket.”
“Nobody was thinking about your dick, sir,” she says with a little more aggression as she rests a hand on the walkie-talkie clipped to her belt. “But I will find out what’s in your pocket.”

“Bronny, what’s going on?” Margaery says, and she takes a few steps towards him.

“Nothing, duchess, I’m fine, you go on ahead,” he says quickly. Goddammit, you’re already fucking this up, Blackwater. You’ve lost your edge. “Please ma’am, it’s not a weapon or anything, but I can’t- she can’t see it, not yet. I gotta do it at the Eiffel Tower.”

“Sir, you will remove what’s in your pocket or I will remove it for you.”

“Come on, man, I’m gonna miss my flight,” whines a frat boy behind him.

“For the love of Christ, ma’am, please don’t make me,” Bronn hisses to the guard.

“Now,” she snaps, pulling her walkie-talkie out of its holster.

Bonn sighs and pulls the ring box from his pocket. “There? Are you fucking happy now?”

“Open it,” the guard says, gesturing with the walkie-talkie.

“Are you fuckin’- goddammit,” he mutters, shaking his head as he opens the box, and it’s almost worth it, to see the look of realization and embarrassment wash through the security guard’s expression when she sees the engagement ring. But then he hears the gasp he knows so well from when he gooses her in the shower or pushes into her from behind or on top or below, and he closes his eyes because it’s not a fun gasp, it’s a gasp that means he’s botched this proposal up. The words ‘royally fucked’ come to mind as he turns to face the woman he hopes will be his wife.

“Bronny? Is that- are you- is that what I think it is?”

“Omigod this is soooo romantic,” a young woman says from the growing line behind Bronn.

“Yeah, duchess, it is,” he says, walking towards her in his socks until the only thing between them is a metal detector.

Paris it ain’t, here.

“Are you asking me to marry you?” she squeaks through her fingers as she covers her mouth with both hands.

“Well I’m definitely not asking her,” he says with a quick glare to the security guard.

“Thank god for small miracles,” the guard replies dryly, though to her credit she’s got a smile on her face now.

“Well go on, then, baby, ask me,” Margaery says, stepping up so that her pretty toes in her pretty shoes are just in line with the detector.

There is scattered applause and a general murmur of Awwww when he sinks down on one knee and holds up the opened ring box. Platinum and diamonds, enough carats to set him back for more than a few months’ salary he’s not earning anymore, and, he hopes, enough glitz and glam to lure her into a dull life with him until they’re old and grey.

“Marry me, Margie, if you think you can stomach it. Please?”
“Well that is the magic word,” she whispers, tears in her eyes that finally fall when she starts to nod her head like crazy. “Yes, baby, I’ll totally marry you.”

Yes, he thinks with a grin so broad it instantly makes his cheeks burn, and he feels like he has gotten away with something so big and so fine that even the Eiffel Tower couldn’t bear its weight.

The crowd behind him claps in earnest when he takes out the ring and slides it on her finger, and he is going to kiss the hell out of her when he stands up, but then he and Margaery seem to think of the same thing, and with their hands clasped under the arch of the metal detector, they both turn to look at the security guard.

“Oh, just go on through,” she says as she waves him through the detector.

He’s grinning when he steps through and even though the fucking thing goes off he doesn’t give a shit because Margaery’s launched herself in his arms and she said yes, and she’s kissing him like he’s a breath of air at the bottom of the sea, and she said yes, and she’s his now, and she said yes.

**Joliet, IL – May**

He’s sweeping up hair cuttings when he hears the heavy metal door yawn open on creaking hinges, and it’s so like his old life, such a concrete memory that he almost turns around and barks *We’re closed, man, come back in the morning.* But he remembers himself in time, and he’s probably got the prison uniform to thank for that, and so instead of complaining he simply stands and turns to see who’s bothering him.

“Holy shit, it’s you again,” he says when he sees who it is.

Middling height, middling brown hair, middling brown eyes, nondescript and easy to slip through any crack. He’s got high level federal government agency written all over him.

“I see you’ve missed me,” Jaqen says.

“Since you’re the son of a bitch who delivered me to the clink, not fucking likely,” Sandor says gruffly as he walks the dustpan of hair to the metal trashcan in the corner.

“Judge’s orders,” Jaqen says with a shrug. “You should be glad it was minimum security instead of max where you should’ve gone.”

“Still prison,” he says, tossing the emptied dustpan onto the trashcan lid. “What’re you doing here, man? Going to take me to some other institution? An asylum this time, maybe.”

Jaqen grins. “Wouldn’t that be amusing,” he says as he drifts further into the room, hands in his pockets. “But no, I’m not. I’m here to tell you you’re free to go,” he says lightly.

Sandor freezes and stares at him in mute disbelief, and for a moment the only thing he can hear is the quick pound of his own heart and the monotonous ticking of the classroom style clock mounted over the barber shop mirror. And then his faculties return and he shakes his head, lifts a hand up in the international sign for Just Fucking Quit It Already and takes a step backwards.

“Don’t mess with me now, pal, all right? That’s- that’s not fuckin’ funny.”

“It is not intended to be funny,” Jaqen says, boredom lacing his tone of voice like he’s reading from a grocery list instead of handing over a big slice of freedom. “Like I said before, judge’s
orders.”

“I’ve got like a year and a half left though,” Sandor says, still stunned from this information. He can’t feel his feet or his hands or his face, he’s that floored.

“You’re getting released on good behavior. You have been a good boy, yes?”

“Fuck off,” Sandor snaps, angry with the condescension.

“Ah,” Jaqen says from where he’s inspecting a set of combs on the counter. “So, you’re good, but not polite. Well, come on, let’s get a move on. Though I can’t imagine you have much packing to do.”

“This is crazy. This is fucking nuts. I haven’t even had a- I mean, aren’t I supposed to have a parole hearing or some shit?”

“Are you truly arguing with the person who’s telling you that you are free to leave prison? Do they poison the water with complacency here or something? It doesn’t take much to institutionalize you, does it,” Jaqen says with a tinge of exasperation that suddenly snaps Sandor out of his misty-brained confusion.

I’m free. And for the first time in his life he doesn’t take those two little words for granted.

Instead he throws his head back and laughs, doubles over and rests his hands on his knees as he stares at the old linoleum he’s been walking on for seven months, the linoleum he’ll never have to see again, and he laughs until he’s breathless and wheezing.

“Got it out of your system?” Jaqen says.

“Yeah,” Sandor says with another chuckle as he straightens and wipes his eyes with a thumb. “Yeah, I think so.”

“All right then, Nina Simone, freedom is yours. Let’s get the fuck out of here before I catch something.”

Sandor’s heart still pounds as they head through the network of hallways leading through the main building towards the room where he was checked in back in October, because he’s convinced that any minute a guard’s going to notice them and throw his ass back in the dorm room. But the hallways are deserted and the few guards they do walk past seem utterly unfazed by the sight. Jaqen scrolls through his phone with a hand in his pocket as they walk, all boredom and blasé authority while Sandor sweats in his uniform like a whore in church.

“So, any plans on what you’re going to do with your life now?” Jaqen asks and Sandor signs for his belongings.

“Well, let’s see,” Sandor says, the apprehension in his chest melting like spring snow when the guard behind the desk nods at Sandor’s paperwork and disappears into the back room. “I’ve got no job, no money, no apartment and no truck,” he says, ticking off his losses on his fingers. “So I guess you could say I’ve got nothing,” he says, because he’s got no woman either, because if he knew Sansa was on the other side of the Stateville doors then he could say he had everything.

“Nothing’s still better than this shithole,” the guard mutters as he sets down a box of Sandor’s stuff. “Count your lucky stars, Clegane.”

Lucky stars. The last time he remembers counting stars was in Sedona when he was high as a kite.
with Sansa, back before they kissed, back before they loved, back before they lost. It feels like a hundred years ago but it all comes back when he’s greeted with his clothes, and he rifles through the box with a strange sort of giddy nostalgia. His jeans and his long-sleeved thermal, an undershirt and thick winter jacket since it was late October when he checked in. Wallet still in his jeans, laces still in his shoes, and—

“What the fuck is this?” he mutters when he feels a thick pad of something in his jacket pocket, and he frowns as he pulls out a small manila envelope.

“I don’t know, man, I just collect signatures. Have a nice life,” the guard behind the desk says, pushing away from the counter on a wheeled office chair.

“Huh,” Sandor says, rubbing his beard with a hand as he turns over the envelope. ‘I hope this gets to U!’ it says in very familiar handwriting. ‘I promised it would. XOXOXO, Margie.’ Sandor shakes his head and chuckles before he shrugs and opens the envelope.

It is stuffed to the gills with cash, a countless stack of what are apparently all twenty dollar bills.

“So,” Jaqen says with a sliver of interest as he peers around Sandor’s arm to catch a glimpse. “A little bit of money after all then.”

Sedona, AZ – June

It’s been two weeks of hilarity, driving through the states with her little brother who has the enthusiasm and eagerness of a two month old puppy, and they have stopped at every roadside attraction that caught his eye, have eaten burgers at every diner they’ve passed just to, as Rickon put it, taste the culture.

It all tasted like grease to Sansa, but Rickon was convinced each place had its own flavor.

It’s been two weeks of staying up late watching shitty television and drinking beer Rickon swore up and down he’d keep a secret from their mother, two weeks of bonding that was far less annoying than she’d thought it would be. It’s been two weeks of really getting to know her littlest brother, and it’s been two weeks of boisterous chatty fun.

But now, now that she’s back on that long rambling driveway kicking up red dust behind the rear bumper, now it is quiet because she’s not sure she could even put two words together, she is that lost in sad-happy memory. Rickon seems to pick up on it and well he should, considering how much time they’ve spent together recently, and he even goes so far as to turn down the radio while Sansa navigates the Jeep down the drive.

*It all looks the same,* she thinks with a faraway smile as she takes a curve with a one-handed, relaxed turn of the steering wheel, and she means the dark scrubby trees and the endless blue sky, but those words really ring true when the house comes into view.

Because there in all its shiny dusty glory is the chrome camper she and Sandor slept in, and parked behind it is Sandor’s truck.

“Oh, my god,” she says, hitting the brakes a little too soon before depressing the clutch, and the Jeep stalls out a few feet behind the truck.

“Well that’s one way to park,” Rickon murmurs, unclicking his seatbelt.
But Sansa barely hears him as she shifts the gear into first and puts on the emergency brake, and she leaves the keys in the ignition because she’s got a one track mind and it’s to put her hands on that beloved truck again.

“You’re still here,” she murmurs as she hops out of the Jeep and slams the door shut.

She’s grinning with her lower lip pinned between her teeth as she walks along the length of his truck, and she’s got tears in her eyes when she rests a hand against the side of it and runs the touch from bumper to bumper. It’s beautiful and it’s his and in a weird little Sansa-way of thinking it’s him, because it’s the closest she’s gotten to him in months save for news stories showing his mugshot. But she couldn’t put her hands on that the way she can his truck right now, and so even though she’s weary from the road she thinks she could stand out here in the heat all day, touching the side view mirror, the windshield, the hood that burns hot from the bright sun above.

“You’re still here,” she says again, all shaking-head disbelief and acutely painful happiness, because it’s an almost. A sad, beautiful, almost; almost-Sandor, almost-reunion, almost, almost, almost.

“So are we,” a woman says, and Sansa jumps in her skin when she looks up and sees who it is.

“Shireen!” she says, and even as she jogs around the front of the truck she runs a hand along it until she can wrap her arms around the young woman in an affectionate hug.

“Wasn’t sure when you’d get here,” Shireen laughs as she hugs Sansa back. “We didn’t think Idaho was that far away.”

Sansa laughs with her and gives Shireen another squeeze before stepping back to regard her friend. She looks good, as healthy and hale and tanned as before with her black hair pulled up in a ponytail and her cargo shorts sitting on her narrow hips. True to the Stark-Reed way of living she’s barefoot, and it makes Sansa want to kick off her own shoes and run around like a little girl set wild and free.

“We took our time so we could see the sights,” Sansa says. “My brother Rickon really wanted to get a feel for the American west, I guess,” and the mention of him reminds her of his very real presence, and she turns around to see her brother walking towards them with the Jeep keys in his hand. “Here, come over here, Ric, let me introduce you.”

“This the badass girl who owns the CJ-5?” he asks, all rambly wolfy long-legged stride as he ambles up to Sansa’s side, and he’s got a grin on his face so wide that Sansa wonders if a canary feather might poke out of his mouth.

“One in the same,” Shireen says, grinning herself as she holds her hand out for the keys.

“She treated us well.”

“I hope you treated her well.”

“I spent like six months working on her so yeah, I think if you asked her she’d say I treated her like a princess.”

“You work on cars?” Shireen asks with the arch of an eyebrow and the undeniable sound of interest in her voice.

“Lady, I breathe cars,” Rickon says, tossing the keys towards her like he’s James Dean or some other vintage Hollywood hotshot. “Want me to show you what I fixed?”
“I’d love it,” Shireen says as she catches her keys. “That Jeep used to be my dad’s and I want it to run forever.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll just leave you guys to it,” Sansa says with the roll of her eyes, but Rickon and Shireen are already on their way to the CJ-5, and she laughs when she hears Rickon ask if Shireen can really make fire with her bare hands.

It’s dark and cool and peaceful inside the little adobe house when she walks in past the porch swing, and she leaves memories behind on it, a ghost of her and a ghost of Sandor sitting side by side talking.

“Hello?” she whispers, because she knows this is a house with a baby in it now, and she knows babies sleep a lot, and she knows full well she’ll be in deep shit if she wakes up that baby.

“Yo,” a man says from the kitchen.

Benjen pokes his head out into the dining room and instantly breaks out into a wide, genuine smile when he sees it’s Sansa. He steps out and that’s when she sees he’s got a sleeping baby wrapped to his chest, and it’s so adorable and so oddly masculine in a feminine sort of way that she peeps out a little Aww and waves her hands in front of her face like she’s about to cry.

“You guys are too cute,” she whispers, and he grins and waves a sort of Aw shucks gesture as he walks up to her.

“Sansa, hey,” Benjen says, outstretching his arm to hug her against the side of his body, and he smells like sage leaf and sunshine, is warm and strong like a summer stone. “We’ve been watching the driveway for days now, hoping to see you guys come rattling up. Did you have a good trip?”

“Yeah, it’s been amazing, honestly. It just felt good to sort of mosey and take our time, you know what I mean?”

Benjen laughs quietly. “Yeah, I know exactly what you mean.”

Sansa laughs too. “Yeah, I guess you sort of live by that philosophy, huh. Where’s Meera?”

“She’s napping like little Jenny down here,” Benjen says fondly, the laid back sparkle in his eyes brightening as he gazes down at the little tuft of dark hair sticking out from the baby-wearing wrap. “I’ll wake her up in a few minutes. She’d kill me if I let her sleep through your arrival. Is Rickon still outside?”

She tells him he’s showing off for a girl and Benjen laughs again, this time loud enough to wake baby Jenny, and he lets Sansa give her a bottle of pumped breastmilk while they sit and talk, Sansa on the little living room sofa while Benjen sits on the floor with his back against the wall.

“So have you heard from Sandor at all? Last we heard from your mom was that he was still in prison but you couldn’t contact him for some reason.”

“No, I haven’t.” she says, gazing down at the eager little pucker of a green eyed baby, and she smiles sadly as the little tyke finds one of Sansa’s fingers and gives it a hearty squeeze. “I um, I couldn’t help but notice his truck’s still here.”

“Of course it is,” Benjen says with a smile as he watches her and his daughter. “Once a week I fire it up and drive it into town just to make sure it’s got life in it. Kept the camper dusted and aired out too so it doesn’t get too musty in there. I figured you might want to stay in it for your visit. Rickon can take that too-small sofa bed.”
“I would love that,” Sansa says, her voice hitching as she very nearly bursts into tears at the mere thought of it, much to her surprise. She thought she was past crying about him, but seeing his truck knocked it all loose inside her, all over again.

“You miss him, don’t you,” he says gently.

“I do. My god, do I miss him, Benjen,” she says, looking up from Jenny to shake her head as she gazes at her uncle.

“Well, don’t give up hope, San,” he says after a moment of studying her. Benjen groans a little as he gets to his feet and stretches, but he smiles as he gazes down at her. “It probably sounds a little hokey coming from your weird old uncle, but life and love, these things have a way of working themselves out.” He nods down to the baby. “Jenny’s proof of that.”

“Hope, huh,” Sansa says with a sniff.

“Hope is her middle name,” Benjen grins. “Come on, come with me while I go wake up Meera, she’ll be stoked to see you.”

“Yeah?” Sansa says, setting the nearly empty bottle on the end table next to the sofa.

“Oh, yeah,” Benjen says with a chuckle as he takes the baby from Sansa. He holds her with one arm while he extends his free hand to help Sansa to her feet. “She’s got it in her head we can convince you guys to stay longer than just the summer, and she’s much more persuasive than I am.”

“I don’t know about that,” Sansa smiles as she follows him down the hall. “You sort of had me with the whole camper thing.”

Benjen laughs again. “Yeah, but see, that was all Meera’s idea.”

St. Lo, France - June

Happy.

The afternoon is dark with the scud of fat clouds above and the occasional halfhearted spatter of rain, but it’s still all dizzyingly beautiful to Jeyne. It doesn’t hurt that she’s sitting in a half-timbered manor house with ivy crowding the pastoral view through the window, or that she’s gained back the weight she lost in Chicago by eating cheese and drinking fine red wine. It doesn’t hurt either that she’s watching Jon throw a stick for Fantôme out on the low tumbling lawn out back.

They’ve been staying here in St. Lo for a couple of months now to get away from the hustle and bustle of Montmartre, just the two of them though Dany and Tyrion have visited three times already. They’ve been staying here, sleeping here, laughing and talking here and—

“Jeyne?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes, I’m sorry, what?” Jeyne says, shifting in her armchair to face her therapist with the guilty smile of a student who’s been caught daydreaming during a test.

“My dear, I asked if you were feeling happy these days,” Dr. Mordane asks in her deeply, richly accented English that is still more proper than Jeyne does as a native speaker.
“Oh! Oh, my goodness, sorry. Yes,” Jeyne says, still smiling as she nods. “Yes, happy. Not so many nightmares anymore, and I’m totally fine taking showers by myself now.”

Lord how embarrassing that had been while staying at Dany and Tyrion’s house down near Nimes.

“Good, good,” Dr. Mordane says as she jots something down in her journal. “So you are sleeping well? All through the night?”

“Oh, yes,” Jeyne says, and she knows she’s blushing now because her thoughts of course went skipping happily down a little path of sensory memory.

Three nights ago she woke up, not from fear or a nightmare but from loneliness and from want, and it wasn’t the first time she felt those things but it was the first time she acted upon them. She sneaked across the hall of the little rental cottage into Jon’s room and crawled into his bed, and even though he was surprised he didn’t say a word, simply stretched out his arm and beckoned her closer. And she went willingly, and since then they’ve slept in his bed with her back to his chest and his arm snug around her waist.

*Happy.*

“I see,” Dr. Mordane says with approval, and Jeyne wonders just how much she can see, or at least, she wonders until her therapist asks with a smile, “And how about intimacy? Have you been intimate with Jon?”

“Intimate,” Jeyne says, letting slip a high giggle of girlish nerves before hastily clearing her throat and swallowing her own lunacy. “What, like sex?”

“Like anything,” the older woman asks, all careful bun of grey hair and a pair of glasses with one ear piece taped in place. “Hugging, holding hands? Kissing, anything, just some physical display of affection and, more importantly, trust?”

“Oh,” Jeyne says, and she laughs again before confessing about the whole sleeping together thing. “But just sleeping,” she adds quickly. “I mean, I’d— I want to, I really do. Like, you know, the sex thing. I think what scares me most is—and it isn’t Jon, I mean Jon is *amazing*, and so patient and gentle with me—but what scares me is, I’m worried we’ll do it and then in the middle of it I’ll think of—of him.”

And that is the truth of it. Sex doesn’t terrify her, far from it. She aches sometimes, to the point of agony, and in those moments it’s all she can do not to run up to him and tear his clothes off and strip herself bare and beg him to fill the cups of his hands with every inch of her. But then she thinks about being naked and then she thinks of being locked away, and then she sees him and his dead eyes, and then she starts to shake. It happened once after some of that fine red wine she’s been enjoying, when Jon leaned in with his eyes half closed, and even with the numb happy buzz of wine still she thought of him and shuddered. That was a couple of weeks ago, but so much has happened since then.

*Like the whole sleeping together thing,* she thinks, and then she’s smiling and blushing and looking out the window again.

“Well,” Dr. Mordane says, and the Frenchwoman’s voice is peppered with amusement now instead of just the rich spice of her accent. “Just leave yourself open to possibility. Try not to let fear keep you from enjoying all facets of life.”

“I will,” Jeyne says with a nod. “I promise.”
“Don’t promise me, promise yourself. To your own heart that deserves love.”

“I promise, Jeyne,” she says softly, and she wonders, she wonders, she wonders.

They talk a few more minutes until the hour is up and then Dr. Mordane sends her on her way with a warm hug and a kiss to each cheek, and the breeze is billowy and lazy and the rain is just the merest suggestion when Jeyne steps outside.

“Fantôme, assis,” Jon commands with a finger pointed to the grass at his feet as he holds up the stick in his other hand.

The shaggy white dog dances on his paws before he finally manages to rein himself in and sit. Jon grins and flings the stick across the yard, and with a sharp bark Fantôme springs to his feet and streaks after his prey.

“Nice throw,” Jeyne says as she crosses the lawn.

She feels that ache again when Jon spins around to face her, when the breezes nip and tug at his tied back hair, and she can’t help but blush again when he heads toward her. She’s got the sway of his shoulders memorized now, the way he gazes down at the ground or the floor as he walks like he’s on some sort of tightrope, which she sort of loves because it’s like being struck by lightning whenever he finally looks up and settles his gaze on her.

Like right now.

Jeyne just manages to keep from pressing her hand over her heart, to keep from saying Mercy me and swooning right into his arms. Knowing he’d be ready to catch her is more than a tiny temptation to say the hell with it and just go for it.

“Hey, you,” Jon says. “How did it go?”

“It went great,” Jeyne says.

Together they watch Fantôme run in zig zags with the stick in his mouth before he finally settles down with a growly whump to chew on his prize.

Jeyne would like a prize, too.

“I made a promise to myself,” she says finally, looking down where she slips her hand in his, pushing her fingers between his so they are effectively laced together.

“Oh?” he asks, and she lifts her gaze to watch as he stares down at their hands, and she doesn’t blame him because aside from stealing into his bed it’s the boldest she’s been with him without prompting.

“Yes, Jon,” she says, breathing shallow and quick now, because she’s about to be a lot bolder.

“What kind of promise, Jeyne?”

“To enjoy life,” she says, stepping into him so their chests and their hips touch.

“Ah,” he murmurs, and his serious mouth looks so lovely with that light smile there.

Jeyne rests her free hand on his shoulder and lets it slide to the nape of his neck, and Jon bows his head when she lifts up on her tiptoes to kiss him, and their open mouths are a lovely, lovely fit, and if this is life than she is enjoying it very much. When he slides his hand out of hers to wrap his
arms around her she winds her other arm around his neck and holds on tight, and when their tongues slide together she’s only thinking of Jon and nobody else.

Nobody but Jon.

Nothing but enjoying the fathomless possibilities living life has to offer.

Happy.

Chicago, IL – June

“Afternoon, sir,” the clerk at the ticket counter says, eyes on his computer screen until he finally gives Sandor a perfunctory glance. “Holy shit,” he says, startled by the scars, and he stares open mouthed for a moment before he remembers himself, or rather, until Sandor remembers for him.

“You trying to catch flies?” Sandor says. “Go on, get it over with.”

“Shit, I uh, I’m sorry. Sorry, sir,” he says hastily, lowering his gaze to shuffle a few papers on his desk. “W-welcome to Greyhound, sir, where would you like to go today?”

Sandor shifts his shoulder under the strap of his duffle bag and pulls out his wallet. “Arizona. Sedona, Arizona, to be specific.”

“Okay, cool,” the kid says, eyes back to the computer and cheeks beet red from embarrassment. “Ooh, looks like we don’t have a station there. The closest we can get you is Flagstaff, Arizona, is that okay?”

“Sure, that’s fine. I’ll get an Uber or something when I’m there,” he says, opening his wallet and pulling out several of those twenties Margaery left him. Lord knows he’s got more than enough to spend, though he’s opting for a bus instead of a plane to stretch it as far as possible.

“You going for business or pleasure?” the kid asks as the ticket prints out.

“Neither,” Sandor says with a frown, because he’s not even sure what’s waiting for him there; the little survivalist school had no phone number on their website and an automated ‘Gone fishing – or camping, or hiking, but definitely surviving! Be back in a week’ message he got after sending them an email. But fuck it. He is going, no matter what he’ll find. He’s got plenty of time on his hands.

“Oh yeah? How so?” the ticket guy asks.

“Because I’m going on a long-ass errand,” Sandor says as he hands over the cash and takes his ticket. He thinks of driving down Route 66 with an ankle in his lap, and despite himself Sandor smiles. “I’m gonna go get my truck.”
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Picset

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Birdsong is the first thing Sansa is aware of when she wakes up, the trill and the chirrup and the warble, the cluck of chickens and their occasional squabble just outside the little camper. The second thing she is aware of is how godawful early it is, and while it’s all very Snow White with her little woodland buddies out here she wishes the damned things would just shut up and let her sleep.

But then she remembers she’s alone, and after living for over a year in a small house with her mother and siblings (and a love struck WITSEC marshal on the weekends), the thought of solitude is enough to make her roll onto her back and kick away the top sheet she’s tangled up in.

The camper is the dusky grey light of five minutes past sunrise, and sure enough the paling sky is still streaked with pinks and lazy hazy oranges when she peers out of one of the little windows. Breezes kiss her face and make her smile but in no way do they promise mild weather later in the afternoon, something she has learned very quickly in the three weeks she and Rickon have been here. But by the time she turns in each night the evening has cooled so that sleeping outside is more or less bearable as long as she dresses light and foregoes blankets.

Because nothing, not even the heat, will pry her from her little love nest of sheets and pillows and sundresses hanging from the tiny kitchen’s two cabinets, her little den of sweet smelling incense that Meera gave her one afternoon when a thunderstorm brought back some of that mustiness Benjen tried so hard to keep at bay. And she can’t be certain but she has a hunch that just sleeping here is enough to bring on the sweet dreams. Scars and the good scrub of a dark beard, of strong arms covered in ink and the firm way Sandor held her throughout the night. Oh, how good her dreams are. They’re worth the heartache of reality each morning, and that’s why she’s in a good mood even with those silly birds outside.

“Morning, ladies,” she murmurs to the chickens when she pushes open the camper door and steps out barefoot into the dirt driveway, and it’s isolated and remote and hers all hers, and she’s barefoot and braless and without a single solitary care as she walks through the scuttle of those ladies to the house.

Sansa brews herself a few cups of coffee and hums tunelessly as she does so, and the empty house is a serene little hub of silence that soaks up the sound like a sponge. Shireen, Benjen, and Meera are off on a survivalist expedition, their adorable baby strapped securely to her daddy’s back and Rickon amongst the students, and Sansa promised to hold down the fort during their absence. Meera offered to pay her before they left but Sansa just laughed and shook her head. Me time is payment enough, believe me, she replied, ignoring Rickon when he rolled his eyes.

But the money thing has been on her mind the past couple of days, and so she sits on the porch swing with her sweet milky coffee and listens to “I’m Set Free” on the record player Benjen moved
out here for her, and she taps her foot in time to the beat and rocks herself to and fro as she plots out her day.

“I think,” she says to one fat black hen pecking her way across Sansa’s line of vision. “I think I need to get a job,” because one thing she’s definitely decided is that she’s moving to Sedona.

Sandor sits in the backseat of the Uber driver’s Ford Focus and tries not to think about how cramped his legs are, but the drive through Oak Creek Canyon on the way from Flagstaff to Sedona is that takes him on a long, unspooling ribbon of asphalt. It’s unabashedly beautiful, a dramatic distracting descent from high mountain pines to the scruffy juniper below. The last time he took it with Sansa, and she sang along to music and danced in the truck, and if he closes his eyes he can almost transport himself back to that January afternoon, and it is so vivid that he is so convinced that he’s behind the wheel and is about to careen off the road.

“Not much of a talker, huh?” the middle aged guy asks him with a glance through the rearview mirror.

“Nope,” Sandor says.

Because he’s beyond nervous, and the closer they get to Benjen and Meera’s the more he’s thinking he might be making a huge mistake, coming out here without establishing some kind of contact. And he’s been traveling for two goddamn days and he’s tired and stoved up and cranky and has no desire to chat about the fucking weather. And then there’s the fact that he’s far too busy berating himself in his head to make small talk.

*What if they got rid of the truck?*

*What if they moved?*

*What if they know where Sansa is?*

That third nagging question, though, that bad boy is enough to make him soldier on through his concerns over the first two, and he’d travel a week in a stupid bus if it meant he could see her again. So Sandor watches the species of trees change and the flicker of mid-morning sunshine on the burbling creek as he gets closer and closer to the inevitable answers to his questions, and his heart beats out to the rhythm of *What if, what if, what if.*

“So, no experience, hmm?” the wiry old café owner asks her, hand on a bony hip as she reads Sansa’s very short job application.

She’s in the Red Rock Café in downtown Sedona and she’s nervous, but more than that she is determined. She’s got a plan now, and she’ll be damned if she’s pushed off track before it’s even started.

“Well, no, not really, *but,*” she says, shifting weight from one wedge sandal to the other as she stands in front of the woman with her hands clasped like a school girl. “But, I have a communications degree, and waitresses have to do a lot of communicating, right?”

To her luck the half-joke, half-desperate stab at approval makes the Whistler’s Mother lookalike crack a smile.
“Well, you’re certainly persuasive, aren’t you?” she mutters with a sigh as she looks up from the application and peers into Sansa’s face. “Are you afraid to get your hands dirty?”

“Not anymore,” Sansa smiles, thinking of chicken crap and feathers stuck to the eggs she collects every day.

“You look pretty soft, honey. Waiting tables and hustling can be back breaking work,” the woman says.

“I am not soft,” Sansa says with a frown, and if her voice comes across as a little icy it’s because she’s thinking of everything she’s gone through, and there isn’t a job application long enough for her to fill out that sort of experience. “I’m the toughest girl you’re ever gonna meet, ma’am. I’m a quick learner and I’m serious about staying here and earning my keep, so I really, really think you should give me a chance.”

The old lady’s eyebrows lift as she listens to Sansa’s mini-rage tirade, and Sansa is half expecting to get kicked out right then and there, but then the café owner hums and gives her the frank appraisal of a ranch hand inspecting cattle.

“You got anywhere to be today?”

“No, ma’am,” Sansa says with conviction, her heart doing a little flip and leap at the implication.

“All right, fine. Get back there and wash your hands and find an apron and show me what you can learn and what you can do. I’ll give you a couple hours to put your money where your mouth is. We open in ten minutes.”

“Oh, thank you! Thank you, seriously, so much,” Sansa says, digging in her purse for a hair tie to pull her loose hair up and out of her face, because ponytails mean business and she means business.

“Don’t thank me yet, Red. Those shoes are going to be killing you in about an hour.”

Sansa stops rummaging for a hair tie and looks up at the old lady with a frown. “What did you just call me?”

“I called you Red. All that hair,” she says, waving a bony-knuckled hand in the general vicinity of Sansa’s head. “Why? That offend you or something? I can’t have hypersensitive in my café, not during the dinner rush.” Hands on hips, geriatric glare.

Sansa smiles. “No, not offended at all. You can call me Red all you want. It’s been forever since anyone has,” she says, and if anything could be taken as a sign that today’s going to be a good day, it’s that.

“You sure you don’t want me to take you all the way to the house?” the Uber driver asks, leaning over the console and half shouting through the open passenger window. “That driveway looks long as hell.”

“Not a chance,” Sandor says as he slings the strap of his bag over his head and across his chest. “I just paid you $150 and that’s plenty.”

“All right, well, have a good one, man,” he says, and the window rolls up and the Ford Focus flips a bitch on the lonely little highway, and just like that Sandor is alone.
He’s got the shakes like he’s had too much coffee, can see the tremor in his hands when he lifts them for inspection, and he wonders if he’s going to pass out, he’s that buzzy lightheaded and so afflicted with nerves. The hot sun and lack of a single solitary cloud above him doesn’t do much for him either, but it’s either stand out here like an idiot or start walking, and Sandor’s felt stuck for far too long to do the former, so he squints down the length of the driveway, shrugs and starts moving.

There’s the metallic whine of cicadas and the shushing movement of occasional gusts of wind through the cypress and pinyons, the crunch of small desert debris beneath his feet and the sounds of his own breathing. There is the prickle of sweat on his low back and between his shoulder blades, the sticky snare of his plaid button down all along his arms, and he’s not even walked five minutes before he shrugs out of his bag and takes the damn shirt off. Even though the sun hits more of his skin in just his undershirt the breezes feel good, and it lends him a strange sense of being lighter somehow, less weighted down with worry, and soon he’s swinging his arms with the rhythm of his own pace and looking around at the wild scrappy landscape. Huge red rock formations rise like still, silent mammoth creatures here and there all around him, jutting up in stark ruddy contrast to the bleach-blue sky.

It’s nice, here.

He’s able to blank out a bit and focus on how good it feels to move his body after so many long hours of travel, able to enjoy the sweat of his skin and the pump of his blood while he follows the rambling driveway, but when he finally catches sight of the house it all comes flooding back to him.

**What if they got rid of the truck?**

**What if they moved?**

And then

**What if they know where Sansa is?**

But there’s the hot honest sun and the guileless life all around him, the sincere sway of the trees and the straightforward lizards sunbathing on pale rocks, and they all seem to beat down his apprehension one question at a time.

Of course they wouldn’t have gotten rid of his truck. That girl Shireen gave them her Jeep and barely even knew them. They’re not the kind of people to just up and get rid of a man’s truck behind his back.

Of course they wouldn’t move. He just checked the website a couple of days ago and the address was the same.

And then the best answer, the one that seems to filter down like sunshine through fog, the one that seems to whisper past his tied back hair and right into his ear.

Of course they know where Sansa is. They’re her family. They will know, and he will find her. All he needs to do is get his truck and then he’s free to track her down, and that’s why he’s grinning by the time he sees the camper.

But then he stops in his tracks when he realizes.

“Son of a bitch,” he says to nobody but the chickens scuttling around, because he’s got the answer to the first question and it sucks.
His motherfucking truck is gone.

He stands there like a brain dead knuckle-dragger, mouth open from surprise and that uneasy feeling of getting the rug pulled out from under you, and he stands in the middle of the widened mouth of the driveway right in front of the empty carport and turns in place, staring in every direction as if an old truck could materialize right before his eyes.

“Well, shit,” he mutters, stepping over the low little fence, crossing the weedy yard to climb up the porch steps and knock on the door.

“Hello?” he calls.

There is no answer.

Sandor takes off his shades and cups a hand around his forehead as he leans in to peer through the little window in the door, and the house is just as he remembers except it is completely empty. He doesn’t know much about babies but he knows they’re loud and cry a lot, and he doesn’t hear so much as a coo from inside. He knocks again, louder and harder so the door rattles in its frame, but it’s to no avail. He can’t quite remember the automated reply he got after emailing the SurvivorAZ@gmail address, but he’s pretty sure they should have come back by now.

“Goddammit,” he sighs, turning around to slump against the door, because he’s got no truck and he’s got no information, and he’s got no fucking idea how long it’ll be before they come back. Now he really does feel like an idiot.

All this way for nothing.

It’s still warm on the covered porch but at least it’s shaded, and he supposes that out of all the other possible places to park his sorry carcass this one isn’t so bad. There’s a garden hose off on the far side of the porch, and he’s thirsty enough that it looks beyond appealing, and he takes two steps towards it when his gaze inexplicably drops, and that’s when he sees a record player with The Velvet Underground still on the turntable.

He freezes.

“What the,” he breathes, and he frowns down at the crowded wrought iron table butted up against the brick sill of the living room window.

There is a half full coffee cup full of stuff the color of caramel and an old wine glass with a dried ring of red in the bottom of it, a couple of succulents potted in tiny brightly painted bowls, and there are a handful of other records stacked and standing upright in a slight lean against the pane of glass, and his heart races as he tilts his head to the side and reads the cover.

Solomon Burke. Sandor can still remember her standing in his living room with the rain coming down, with Burke asking her to cry to him while she sipped his whiskey.

No, he thinks. No, that’s impossible. It’s probably Benjen’s, he thinks, but then he remembers a lot of Nick Drake and white guys with guitars coming from that guy. Meera’s maybe.

He shakes his head and takes his bag off his shoulder, lets it drop to the porch floor before he rolls his neck and turns to sit on the porch swing. It sways from his weight, the slow rock of a lullaby, and he’s out of breath and back to shaking hands when he picks up the handful of records and rests it on his lap.

Chuck Berry. Duffy. Otis Redding and Alvin Richardson, and then the record that makes him suck
in a breath, the soundtrack to The Great Escape.

What’s your favorite movie?

**Bullitt. No, The Great Escape. No, Bullitt.**

He hangs onto that breath for a second before it spills back out of him in the rush of a gust of disbelieving laughter. Because he highly doubts Meera’s into Steve McQueen movies, but there’s someone who **would** go out and get that record for the sake of a good memory.

Sansa.

It has to be. Sentimental blue eyed Sansa, lovely girl with the big heart and the long legs, sweet-tooth Sansa who drinks her coffee with enough sugar to give a bull elephant diabetes. He remembers Benjen drinking beer and funky green tea, remembers Meera drinking only the latter, but never coffee as trussed up as the cold sugary sludge at the bottom of that coffee cup next to the turntable. Sandor picks up the mug and stares into it, moves it back and forth to swirl the contents, and then he bows his head over it and inhales through his nose like he’s sniffing a bouquet instead of hours-old coffee.

It smells like her. Sandor grins, and then he laughs, putting the records back in their place. *She’s here,* he thinks as he twists in his seat to turn on the record player and set the needle in place, and he knows this album so well he knows exactly where to set it, and “Pale Blue Eyes” fills the small little porch. He makes himself comfortable, slouching some in the swing with an arm stretched out along the back and his long legs cocked out, and he rocks himself patiently because he’s got no intentions of leaving now, truck or no truck.

He swallows and his throat burns from thirst, and he looks down at the cup he’s still holding here against his knee, and he grins and knocks back the rest of her sickly-sweet coffee concoction, and it tastes like Sansa and it’s the finest stuff he’s ever had, save for the woman it reminds him of.

Well, there are two things for sure, according to Sansa, and that’s that Mrs. Celtigar, her new boss, was right about the shoes but wrong about not thanking her, because while Sansa’s feet are killing her she is still above and beyond grateful for her trial period, because she’s the brand new waitress over at the Red Rock Café and already has thirty bucks in tips in her purse. Not too shabby for two hours of running around like a chicken with its head cut off.

*Not too bad, Red. You need a lot more training on the job but it’s nothing I can’t handle. I’ll see you here next Monday when I get the paperwork ready.*

But **god,** are her feet killing her. She kicked her stupid wedge sandals off the second she hauled herself up into Sandor’s truck, and the traitorous things roll around in the footwell as she pulls out of the parking lot in downtown Sedona and heads home.

Home. That word is a real one now, because she’s got herself a job and a little camper to live in, and she’s got Sandor’s truck and she’s not leaving this state until he comes back for it, and she knows him. He’ll come back for it, and she’ll be waiting.

The only problem is she’s going to have to wait until 2018, but still, a long term goal is still a goal, and he’s the only thing she’s missing in her life, the only puzzle piece she’s waiting on, and he’s worth every lonely night it’s going to take. He’s even worth the shitty phone conversation she’s going to have to have with her mother, but that still doesn’t mean Sansa isn’t going to put it off for
a couple of days. Maybe when Rickon comes back so he can help with much needed distraction, if he can keep his tongue out of Shireen’s mouth long enough.

“Stupid damn shoes,” she mutters when she’s pulled up behind the camper and thrown the truck into park, and she groans when she leans down to pick them up.

She smells like coffee grounds and grease and sweat and is starving from skipping lunch in order to serve it, and her vision blurs a bit when she sits back up too fast, which is why she’s blinking like a ditzy little owl when she sees a man stand up from the porch swing.

“Oh fuck,” she whispers to herself, terrified of the solitude that has had her so rapturously overjoyed for the past few days, because she doesn’t have anything to defend herself.

But then.

“Sansa?”

It’s faraway but she can hear it clear as day through the truck’s open windows, and it’s gritty and gruff and rough and low, deep down low like the bottom of a dry well, and then he steps off the porch and she sees him clearly, and Sansa is fairly certain her heart has stopped beating all together, because it is him.

It is Sandor.

“Oh my god,” she breathes, and her hand shakes so hard she can barely switch off the truck let alone yank the keys from the ignition, and she’s breathing like she ran all the way home instead of drove here.

He walks towards her as she opens the door and slides out of the truck, and he’s so wonderfully perfectly him in a white sleeveless undershirt and a pair of aviators, tattoos and black hair and stature and height. Christ, he looks so good and so vivid, right here walking the same earth that’s beneath her naked toes.

“Sandor,” she says, testing out the taste of that name and the reaction it gets her, and tears flood her eyes when he nods.

“Yeah, sweetheart, it’s me,” he says, coming to a stop in the middle of the driveway.

She lingers at the front bumper of his truck, hand on the hood like it’s a spooked wild horse that she’s got to keep calm.

“H-how?” she asks with a shake of her head. She blinks and stammers a minute. “I mean, is it 2018 somehow?”

“I got out early,” he says, taking another step towards her. And then he grins. “Good behavior.”

“Good behavior,” she echoes, and this is impossible, this can’t be real, this can’t truly be him standing here talking to her like they haven’t been kept apart for over a year.

“I see you stole my truck,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck as he nods his head towards it.

“Oh, yeah, I um, I’ve been driving it.”

“Bonnie’s not supposed to steal from Clyde, you know. Supposed to steal with him.”

Sansa laughs weakly, lifts a shaking hand to pat her hair like an idiot, like that little grooming
gesture could right all the wrongs of how she probably looks and smells right now. “Yeah, well, you were gone.”

“True,” he says, taking another almost-cautious step towards her. “But I’m here now, Red.”

And it’s that what breaks this strange stuck-in-quicksand spell she’s in, that lovely nickname that has twined itself around her heart like an agonizing, gorgeous vine of thorns.

“Yes,” she gasps as the tears spill over onto her face. “Yes, you are.”

She lets slip a strangled sort of sob, a mingle of disbelief and miraculous proof, of relief and sorrow and heart-piercing joy. It’s all far too much to handle all on her own, though, so Sansa drops the keys and sprints towards him, red dirt soft under feet that don’t seem to hurt anymore. Sandor seems to feed off the sudden burst of activity and he takes two quick steps towards her, but she’s running as fast as she can and so she’s already launched herself into his arms before he can get any closer.

*Oh god, he’s real.*

They collide while he’s mid-stride and so even as he catches her with the wrap of his arms he staggers, one step two step three steps back until the weight and the sheer force of her sends him backwards and down on his ass in the dirt.

Her knees smart from the impact of the ground now that she’s effectively straddling him in his lap, but she doesn’t care because she’s got better, finer things to focus on. The warmth of his body and the smooth of his skin, the bristle of his hair as she runs a hand up the back of his head, the firm strength of his arms around her as he holds her to him, so tightly it’s like he’s trying to draw her right into his chest.

“You’re real,” she whispers, and she laughs because what a ridiculous thing to say out loud but it doesn’t matter anymore.

Nothing else matters, anymore.

“So are you,” he murmurs against her shoulder, and she wants to rip her stupid dress off just to feel the rub of his beard there on her skin, there where it belongs, but then he draws his head back to look at her. “And you’re even prettier than you are on TV,” he says.

“What? When did you see—” she starts, but then he lifts a hand to the nape of her neck and stretches up in his sit to kiss her.

He tastes like coffee. He smells like sun and good clean sweat. He feels like the hundreds of dreams that have plagued her ever since she left him. He feels like Sandor, and if Sansa thought she was hungry for food before, that was nothing compared to the starvation she feels now that she has him to feast on once more. And there is so much to savor, here.

Tongue and teeth and a mouth that she is still an expert on finding through the thicket of his beard. He hums and he moans and he breathes, drops one hand to her knee to burrow under the short skirt of her dress, and with one back-arching upward slide against the skin of her thigh, he’s got his hand cupping her ass, thumb rubbing against the lace trim of her panties. It’s enough to make her squirm, enough to make her suck on his lower lip so that now she’s got him hissing through his teeth.

“I didn’t know if I’d ever see you again,” he says against her mouth, drawing back to look at her again.
“I had hope,” Sansa says, and when he cups her face with a hand she butts her cheek into it like a cat, lifts a hand to hold his in place as she turns to plant a kiss in the center of his palm. “I hoped and I hoped.”

“All this time?” he says, pulling his hand free to cradle the back of her head again, to pull her down for another kiss, all these hungry, hungry kisses that seem to stoke more than slake. “You held out hope for me this whole time?”

“Yes,” she whispers, and she wants to tell him there was despair as well, happy heartache and miserable memory, but it’s too many words to get in the way of all this kissing. “You’re it, for me, Sandor.”

“All these months, you’re all I’ve wanted,” he says in her ear, hands on her hips under her dress, hands on her face, hands on her thighs, hands to her back as he drags her against him again. “You’re all I want now.”

“You’ve got me,” she breathes, hands a busy wander from his shoulders and biceps and back up to hold his face, down the back of his neck to slide down between his shoulder blades, as far as she can reach.

“Jesus, I’ve missed you, Sansa.”

“Oh my god, I missed you,” she breathes when the kiss breaks, and she holds his head to her chest when he drops eager wet kisses to her throat, but it’s no fair letting him do all the tasting, and so she whimpers and squirms again and pushes him back until he’s lying on the desert floor with her above him. “I missed you so much it ached.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” he murmurs as he pulls her hair free from the ponytail holder, and he sinks his fingers in it, makes a light fist as she kisses him, and he sighs into her mouth when he opens his hand and runs his fingers down the growing out length of her hair.

“I think I definitely know at least some of it,” she says in his ear before she sucks his earlobe into her mouth, and to show him what she means she rolls her hips back and presses herself against the hardened length of him.

Sandor laughs, turns his head to the side so his cheek is resting in the dirt, and he gives her ass a squeeze so hard it makes her jump, and that makes him stifle a groan. “Go easy on me, baby, I’ve been locked up with a bunch of men. I got hard the second you got out of the truck.”

“What, because I’m not a guy or because it’s me?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Sandor says.

He sits up slightly with a grunt as he lifts her off her hips and sets her on the ground beside him, and before she has a chance to complain he rolls over and on top of her, and the sun’s in her eyes as she blinks up at him, half blind. Sandor gives her his narrow-eyed glare once he pulls off his sunglasses and tosses them to the side, and even on her back she feels weak in the knees, and she’s pretty sure she’s still got tears leaking from her eyes, sliding down her temples to the ground beneath her. When she lifts her legs and wraps them around his hips she’s got the delicious feel of him, and when he lowers himself to his elbows she has the tantalizing weight of his chest pressed up against hers, and when he brings his face mere inches from hers it blocks out the sun and she can see him so wonderfully, blissfully, miraculously well.

“Of course it’s because it’s you. It’s always been you. It always will be.”
“Don’t ever leave me.”

“I won’t,” he murmurs, pressing his open mouth to hers. “So long as you never leave me.”

“I don’t think I’m physically capable,” she whispers, squeezing her legs to show him she means to snare him for good.

“Good,” he says with some of that snarly emphasis of his that she loves so much, that she has missed so acutely.

She whimpers when he kisses her throat, pushes her head back in the dry soil and rocks her hips against him, and he responds in kind, a good firm press of his hips into her, so solidly she can feel his belt buckle as well as his erection. Sansa moans and drags her nails down his back, and even though they’re in the dirt like a pair of animals it just doesn’t matter anymore, so she wedges a hand between them and slips it down to cup the hardness of him.

“Jesus Christ,” he grits out just before he hisses another breath through his teeth. “Sansa, wait, just gimme a- just- oh fuck,” he says, pushing his cock against her hand, and then he shouts fuck again and groans loud enough to echo throughout the red desert.

Sansa bites back a tear-stained laugh. “Are- are you okay?” she whispers.

She can feel the sweat on his brow soak through the thin plaid of her dress when he lowers his head to rest it against her shoulder, and he pants out with another shudder as he chuckles ruefully.

“Oh, I’m fine, aside from being fucking embarrassed as hell.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

Sandor sighs, lifts his head as he shakes it and gazes down at her. And then he laughs. “I just came in my pants.”

“Really?” It’s comes out before a squeak of dizzy giddy laughter as she pulls her hand from between them to wrap that arm around his shoulders again.

“I told you, you lit me up the second I laid eyes on you.”

Sansa doesn’t think she’s ever felt so flattered or proud or elated in all her life.

Once he’s more or less gotten over his flashback to adolescence Sandor pushes up off of her and gets to his knees, pulling her up with him as he then gets to his feet. There is this strange mix and mingle in him to have her in his sights again, to be here with her. Confusion and depthless disbelief that this is really happening, all paired up with the very real supple feel of her in his arms. In his hands. Right here before his eyes, and it’s beautifully bizarre, this disconnect of his thoughts from his hands and his mouth, this disconnect of the logic in his brain telling him this is impossible from the tactile truth that no, no it isn’t.

“I got you all dirty,” he says, frowning and squinting in the bright yolk yellow sunshine as he brushes her dusty hair from her eyes.

“I was dirty to begin with,” she says, still breastless, still eyes-bright and all a glitter in that little lumberjack dress of hers.
“I do like it when you’re dirty,” he says, grasping a fistful of her dress just below her breasts and pulling her closer. A foot apart from her won’t do, these days. Even inches feel too far away after all this time.

“I have to admit, you look pretty good all covered in dirt,” she says.

When she sweeps a hand down his front he looks down and sees sienna smudges of dirt down the length of his undershirt, the long streaks from Sansa’s fingers, and it looks like he’s been clawed open by a wolf. Sandor grins.

“I do look good,” he says despite having just shot a load in his jeans, and it’s probably the first time he’s ever dropped a compliment on his own doorstep, but she’s got that effect on him.

“But,” she says, rucking the hem of his shirt up his abs and chest until he’s forced to lift his arms so she can drag it off him completely. “I think you look best when you’re clean. And wet.”

“I think I’m supposed to say that last one to you,” he says, lowering his arms so he can get to work on the buttons of her dress that go from between her breasts down to her navel.

“I’m sure you will in a minute,” Sansa says as she steps away from him with her dress half unbuttoned, but not before she grabs one of his hands and laces her fingers with his. “Come on, baby. Let’s go take a shower.”

It’s been almost a year and a half but he still knows the way, through the empty carport to the back yard. Still he lets her lead the way, follows her like a puppy after the chuck wagon, and he lets his gaze drop and lift and roam. The sway of her hips and the curve of her calves, the dip of her waist and the drift of her auburn hair.

“You grew your hair out,” he says as they cut through the backyard towards the outdoor shower.

Sansa glances at him over her shoulder, all cheeky grin and one-armed shrug. “I didn’t want anyone else to touch it.”

He tugs a lock of it when she turns around, drops his hand to her hip to snag her and drag her staggering backwards against him.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey yourself,” she sighs, head tipping back to rest against his chest.

“I love you.”

She turns around at that, and her half-bared breasts push together in her bra when she lifts her arms to wind them around his neck.

“Oh, Sandor. Sandor, Sandor, Sandor.”

“What?”

“I don’t think you have any idea how much I love you.”

Blue eyes, red hair, more freckles on her sun-browned skin than he ever saw before. The sweat smell of her and the flush of arousal in her cheeks and on her half-exposed chest. So much to adore. So much Sansa to look at, to touch and to rememorize.

“So come show me,” he says, and she’s already cinching her arms around him when he squats
down and grabs the back of her thighs, and she squeals in his ear when he hoists her up into his arms.

“Oh thank god, my feet are killing me. I’ll show you all you want, up here,” she says as she wraps her legs around him.

“You better,” he says against her throat.

He takes his time carrying her the rest of the way to the shower, and she kisses him on the mouth and blocks his view so that he nearly walks her into an ash tree. When she reaches up and steadies herself by grasping a branch, he pushes her up against its trunk so he can free one of his hands to cup her face, to drag the touch down to her breast, her hip, the back of her thigh again. He could stand here all night. He could kiss her until he starves. He could hold her up until he dies.

But eventually he lets her down, and he watches her unbutton the rest of her dress and push it off her shoulders and down her body so it puddles around her feet. He watches her unclasp her bra and shimmy out of her panties, stands there like some unabashed rube staring at his first skyscraper. All to soak up the sight of her, unadulterated by the grasp and grab of his inferior and needy hands. He stands there and lets her undress him just to soak up the feeling of her hands on him, because aside from getting roughed up by the cops and occasional frisks in prison, he hasn’t really been touched since he last saw her. And fuck, does it feel good, to be touched and to be loved.

“Come on, big man,” she murmurs once he steps out of the pool of his dusty jeans, and she takes him by the hand again as she pulls him into the three-walled shower with the glossy wood decking that’s still springy underfoot, just like he remembered.

“Lead the way, sweetheart,” he says.

His eyes close when the hot water hits him, and the second his skin is soaked the halfhearted breezes turn cool against his flesh and damn near make him shiver. Sandor inclines his head to get his hair wet, and then much like he did hers Sansa reaches up and unties his bound up hair, and she runs her fingers through it until it’s drenched, and once that’s done she wraps her arms around his middle and hugs him. Water runs down his face and drips off his beard, and it pools up between her arms and his back, and it washes off the dirt and the loneliness and the weariness of travel, and he feels like a tree soaking up life and water and Sansa.

“I love you,” she says again. There’s the slightest hitch of a sob that chases those three words. “I love you so much.”

“I love you with everything I’ve got, Sansa,” he replies, wrapping his wet arms around her. A good firm squeeze, one she reciprocates.

It’s impossible to judge how long they stand there under the water, but the sun does its slow slide along the bowl of the sky and the shadows draw out, and as the breezes pebble their skin the kisses start and warm them back up. Slow and sweet and lingering, all take your time and what’s the rush, long open mouthed kisses with tongues that drag against each other before lips close and reopen. Breasts in his hands, the heavy swell and drop and bounce of them as he cups them and kneads and lets them go only to start it all over again. And then she’s sighing out his name, the Sandor he’s heard in his thoughts for so long, and then she’s moaning, and then he’s hard again.

“I don’t uh, I didn’t bring any condoms or anything,” he says, though that truth does nothing to stop him from sliding his hand between her legs.

Sansa gasps and tilts her head back as he pushes his fingers inside her, and yes she is wet for him,
and then her mouth parts to sigh and to smile to gust out a laugh.

“You keep making that mistake,” she murmurs, her own hands dragging down the length of his chest and abs until Sandor has to stifle a groan when she takes him by the cock. “Lucky for you, mister, I’m on the pill now.”

And his eyes roll back in his head when she pushes and pulls up and down the length of him, and now he’s actually grateful he came earlier because had he not, this single touch would have brought him to his knees under the weight of an instant orgasm. But that thought gives him an idea.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she asks, all coy linger when he sinks down and kneels in front of her.

She stands like a queen in front of him, the water hitting her on the collar bones and breasts as she puts her hands on her hips and smiles down at him, and her hair shines like a copper halo from the late afternoon sun filtering through the trees behind her.

“Nowhere without you,” he says, kissing the thatch of auburn between her legs before he rocks back into a sit and leans against the rear shower wall. “Come down here and love me, Sansa. I can’t tell you how much I’ve needed it.”

It’s her dream all over again when she straddles him and sinks down on his lap, with his dripping wet beard and the intense burn of his eyes that she has missed so much, with the water raining down on his outstretched legs and the curve of her back when she positions herself above him. Then the slow sink where their hands meet to hold him still, and then their fingers move so she can settle into place right here where she belongs. She sucks in a breath just as he exhales and lets his head sag back against the picket fencing of the shower wall, and she watches him as he closes his eyes and almost, almost smiles.

“Jesus Christ,” he whispers, the rough scrape of his voice run ragged from getting what they both want.

“Oh my god,” she says through her teeth, and for a moment she can’t even move, it is that exquisitely overpowering a sensation, the stretch and the full feeling from the thick of him inside her.

Sandor slides his hands down her back to grasp her hips and pull her forward, making her breath hitch and her spine arch, but if she thinks it’s time to move then apparently she’s wrong, because with a sudden jerk he sits up and wraps his arms around her, resting his forehead against her shoulder as he clings to her.

“Don’t move,” he murmurs against her wet skin. “Just for a minute, just- just stay right where you are. I can feel every inch of you and I want to savor it.”

“Okay,” she whispers, sliding her arms around him, though when she lowers her head to rest her cheek on her own shoulder, even that slight movement makes him groan from the way it angles his cock inside her.

His back is as strong as she remembered and she unwinds one arm to let her hand drift across the breadth of it, to trace the designs and the splashes of color, watches them move from the expanse of his ribs every time he breathes. He’s beautiful. He’s real. He’s hers. He is her, as close as he can be, connected the way they are, and the thought that they’re not only together again but perfectly
joined is enough to bring the tears back, and Sansa cries because she’s so endlessly, fathomlessly happy.

“You’re perfect,” she whispers through her tears, lifting her head to kiss the side of his just above his ear, and even though he told her to be still she can’t because there’s too much loving to be had and to be done.

“So are you,” he says, and it doesn’t escape her, how he didn’t shoot down the compliment or argue with her.

Sansa sits back to cup his face and lift it so she can kiss him and he does as she bids, and they kiss once, twice with their eyes open before they both close them and kiss once more, and then he leans back and takes her by the hips again, and Sansa rocks with the push and the pull of his hands, rolls with rhythm of him. He does the lifting himself so she doesn’t have to dig her knees into the decking, two hands under her thighs to help her rise up the length of him, and each time she sinks back down he moans.

“I don’t think I’m going to last much longer,” he pants out, head back against the fencing and face tipped up towards the sky, but he gazes at her with a sex-drugged half-lidded look in his eyes that turns her on even while she’s having sex with him. “I’m trying but you just feel too fucking good.”

“Make me come first, Sandor, please,” she whimpers, scooting herself forward to get him deep enough to hit that dull point just below pain that makes her moan. “Please make me come.”

She watches him clench his jaws in a valiant attempt of self-mastery, watches as he moves his head to look down at her body, and if she weren’t so lost in the fog of sensation she would laugh when he runs his thumbs across her nipples and groans in self-inflicted torture.

“Fuck, Sansa,” he says, dropping a hand to rub her with his fingers, to do his level best at giving her what she wants, and there’s a lovely thrill of power she feels to have torn him so asunder and yet bring him back from the edge with a simple demand.

“Yes, like that,” she moans, digging her fingers into his shoulders as she pushes her knees to the wood and lifts herself up, and she rocks herself against his cock and his fingers and the warm buzzy tingle he’s giving her.

“You better hurry up, sweetheart, I can’t- oh fuck, fuck, it’s too much, you’re- fuck,” he stutters out, eyes shut tight as he rubs her rubs her rubs her, and then he calls out like he’s dying, his fingers still moving while he pushes her hip down with his other hand, pinning her down against him as he comes inside her.

“Don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t stop,” she cries.

Her head sags back as she squirms against him, and then she helps him out with two fingers of her own, and then she’s got it, and as the orgasm tips over like a glass of water, Sansa jerks forward and claws at his shoulders like she’s falling off a cliff and he’s the only earth left to cling to.

“Oh god, yes, yes, Sandor, yesyesyes.”

“There she is,” he says, breathing out the shaky words as she gets herself off and pulses around him, and he slings an arm around her back and drags her against his chest as he slumps against the wall. “Good goddamn, woman.”

“Oh my god,” she pants. “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god,” over and over with her forehead thumped against the fencing and her wet hair plastered to her forehead and neck, and he’s still
inside her and it all feels so good, it all feels so perfect that she cannot imagine existing outside of this little space and moment. She lifts her head and looks at him, chest still heaving from the exertion. “Can we do that again?”

Sandor huffs out a chuckle and a sigh, ragged and breathless, and then he laughs, a noodle-limbed rag doll laugh that booms out deep and dark like the very best parts of him, and he lifts a hand to brush her hair off her forehead.

“You’re going to have to give me a minute.”

It is dark and cool and quiet out here at night, nothing but the creak of the porch swing and the low scruff of Ray LaMontagne’s voice drifting from the record player’s speakers. Sandor is wedged up in the corner of the swing and he rocks them with the occasional push of his bare feet to the red cement floor, and he takes it in turn to either drink his beer or to run his fingers through Sansa’s sun-dried hair. She’s leaning against his chest with her feet up on the swing’s other armrest, and her hair smells like the shampoo they found in the shower once they used it for its intended purpose. His hair smells like it too, and he is musing on how much that silly fact pleases him when Sansa tips her face to look up and back at him.

“Was it horrible?”

“Hmm?” he asks, tucking in his chin to look down at her.

“I mean going to prison,” she says with a frown. “Was it horrible?”

“Ah,” he says.

They’ve been sitting out here in silence, more or less, content for the time being to just be, not that they haven’t spent the past couple of hours catching up. They talked about Benjen and Meera and Bronn and Margaery, about Rickon and Shireen and how Sansa’s mother is doing, they talked about Jeyne’s Instagram account which, according to Sansa, is basically one giant ad for France. They talked about the trial. They talked and touched and kissed and groped while they cooked spaghetti and turkey sausage that Sandor halfheartedly complained about. They laughed and talked more across the table until a lingering gaze made Sansa stand up and walk her plate and glass of wine over to his side, where she set them down next to his and then crawled in his lap.

But out here in the dark, with the spray of stars overhead that he can just make out here and there between the potted plants hanging from macramé nets, out here in the still peace of a moon-cooled desert, they haven’t really done much talking at all. Until now. Sandor kisses the crown of her head and reaches for his beer.

“Sandor, tell me, please.”

“Yeah, it sucked,” he says after a long swallow of IPA, and he rests the bottle on his knee as he rocks them again. “It could have been worse but still, it was no walk in the park.”

“I’m so sorry,” she murmurs, lifting her wine to drain the rest of the glass. “I haven’t stopped regretting it, not admitting to killing him myself. I should have done it, they probably wouldn’t have sent you if I had just confessed.”

“Hey,” he says, lowering the arm he’s got stretched along the back of the swing, and he rests a hand on her cheek to turn her face up towards him. “Hey, now,” he says, frowning when he sees how troubled she is. “Don’t. Don’t, Sansa. I knew exactly what I was getting myself into when I
told you to leave, up there in Portland. I knew what I was doing. I was prepared for it. I didn’t even want Margaery to take time from the Lannister trial for mine, I was already that sure of the outcome.”

“I would have killed her if she hadn’t. Jesus, Sandor, I would have killed you.”

Sandor laughs.

“What’s so funny, huh?” she says, pushing her elbow into his ribs, and when he tells her that’s exactly how Margaery forced him into compliance, she laughs too.

“So you didn’t like, hate me, sitting there in jail because of me?”

“I could never hate you,” he says, rolling his eyes at the idiocy of such a question. “And I would do it all over again, if it meant keeping you safe.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“So I’m still your favorite color?”

Sandor smiles and kisses the top of her head.

“Yeah, Red. You’re still my favorite color.”

“So,” he says later when they’re lying in bed side by side, a full set of pajamas between them since he’s deliciously shirtless and she’s only wearing one of his t-shirts and a pair of underwear.

She rolls onto her side and rests her head on the soft place between his shoulder and his chest, and he draws her closer with the press of his arm across her shoulder blades. There’s a tiny little lamp on a tiny little bedside table, both of which she found at a thrift store, and it’s by virtue of their combined effort that she can see him, dark as it is at this midnight hour. The lamp casts a milky warm glow from where it is behind Sansa, and the light is a weak splash across the network of scars on his cheek, across the black of his beard and his hair. He’s real, and oh, how beautiful he is.

“So, what?”

“What’s your favorite movie?”

Surprised by the out-of-nowhere quality to the question, Sansa blinks and laughs, and it takes her a moment to remember because it’s been that long since she’s thought about that kind of thing, because she gave up on rom coms a long time ago.

“Ever After.”

He gives her a frown and a puzzled look.

“Drew Barrymore? Dougray Scott? It’s a retelling of Cinderella.”

“Ahh,” he says, nodding his understanding. “That’s the fairytale with Prince Charming, right?”

“Yeah,” Sansa says, and she grins as she posts up on an elbow and rests a hand on his tattooed chest.
“Although these days I think I’m more into Beauty and the Beast.”

Sandor snorts and rolls his eyes. “Aren’t you funny.”

“I’ll have you know that I am hilarious,” she says loftily, twisting onto her back to turn off the lamp, pinning his arm to the mattress.

“You’re ridiculous,” he mutters in the dark, flexing his arm to drag her back to his side.

“Yeah, well, you’re the one who loves me, so that makes two of us.”

He chuckles. “Fair enough.”

God, it’s bliss to be back here with him. Sansa drags her hair back and away from her face so she can rest her cheek right on the bare skin of his chest, and she takes her time sliding her arm across his stomach to fully immerse herself in the warmth of his skin and the steady rise and fall of his breathing. And then she gets greedy and possessive and she has to make sure, so even though he’s told her about ten times tonight how exhausted he is, still she nuzzles her face against the hair on his chest and murmurs his name.

“Hey, Sandor?”

“Mmm,” he hums.

“I want you to move in with me.”

Another hum and then, “What, in here?”

“Yeah,” she says, realizing that she is basically asking him to play house with her in a tiny-ass camper, that it’s a step above asking him to come be homeless with her, and she’s wincing while she waits for his answer.

“Sure,” he says.

Her face clears and she blinks in the darkness.

“Really? Just like that? I don’t have to convince you, or talk about how cheap the rent is or how safe the neighborhood is?”

“Sweetheart, it took me a long time and a lot of miles to get back to you. There’s no way in hell I’m leaving you without a fight.”

Sansa smiles, her heart a warm little puddle of strawberry flavored goo. “Wild horses, huh?”

“Wild horses,” he says, voice all rough gruff tough even as he turns his head to kiss her forehead, “couldn’t do shit.”

“Same here, baby,” she whispers, closing her eyes to fall asleep to the beating of his heart.

Sandor wakes with a start, heart racing as he blinks owlishly up at the camper’s ceiling, and it’s got to be late morning considering how overwarm it is in here, but it’s not the stuffy heat that woke him up. It’s the sound of crying.

“Sansa?” he croaks out groggily, sitting up like a jackknife when he realizes she’s not by his side.
“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you up,” she says from where she’s sitting at the edge of the bed, red hair a messy tousle of bedhead. “I just, I couldn’t help it, I’m sorry.”

“What the fuck happened, are you okay?” he asks, scooting himself down the length of the bed to sit beside her, and she shakes her head no, much to his alarm, before she looks up and sees his mortified expression, and then she gusts out a laugh and starts to nod.

Sandor is beyond confused.

“Yeah, I’m fine, I just um, I’ve been dreaming about you a lot lately, and I always wake up alone, but this time I wasn’t alone, and you were there, and it wasn’t a dream, and it was so amazing to see you and it was such a relief that I just, you know, I couldn’t help it. I just started crying. Ridiculous, I know, right?”

He’d like to smile and kiss her but instead Sandor just shakes his head solemnly like he’s full of pity. He can’t help but crack a grin, though, when she rolls her eyes and shoves him in the shoulder.

“Is this what living with you is gonna be like?” he teases, squinting at her as he gives her leg an affectionate squeeze. “Waking up to tears?”

“Maybe,” she laughs, wiping her cheeks with her hands before she sniffs against her wrist. “Why, does that make you change your mind?”

“Sorry,” he says, taking her by the waist and half tossing, half dragging her back towards the pillows at the other end of the bed. “Not even close, Red.”

She shrieks when he crawls after her and up the length of her body, thrashes like a fish out of water when he yanks up her shirt and rubs his beard across her ribs where he has found she is so ticklish. But she whimpers and arches when he pushes into her a few minutes later, and there are still tear tracks on her cheeks when she wraps her legs around him and tells him how much she loves him, but when he tells her how much he worships her, Sansa smiles.

“So what should we do now?” Sansa asks from where she’s sitting tailor style on the blanket covering the hood of Sandor’s truck, and she smells like sunblock and summer vacation.

She is in a sunhat and glasses and a pair of Benjen’s hiking boots, eating grapes from a colander lined with damp paper towels, doing what she does best. Supervising.

He glances up at her as he walks backwards across the driveway dragging a huge dead tree branch, and the afternoon sun bounces off the mirrored lenses of his aviators, and he is still shirtless, much to her arcing delight.

“You could get off your ass and help me, Little Miss I Want a Bonfire Tonight,” he says, twisting the trunk of his body as he yanks the branch and flings it into the carport where there are about a dozen other branches.

“I’d just get in your way,” she says, waving a hand dismissively as she pops a grape in her mouth. Sandor snorts out a laugh. “No, I meant like, what should we do. Like, with our lives.”

“Well, you asked me to move in with you last night and I said yes, so that’s a pretty good start, right?” he asks, dusting his hands on the thighs and seat of his jeans before he bows his head and wipes his sweaty forehead on his forearm.
“Yeah, but like, there’s nothing holding us back. We could do anything. We could go anywhere. We’ve got your truck and the camper.”

“That’s not our camper, sweetheart,” he chuckles as he walks towards her.

“Yeah, but they’d totally let us take it,” she says, dropping her feet to rest on the bumper when he steps up between her knees.

“And where do you want to take it?” he grins, running his hands up the sides of her legs until they’re buried under the loose cuffs of her shorts.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she says, picking up a grape and offering it to him. Sandor opens his mouth and she pops it in and they grin at each other while he chews. “Road tripping was really fun with you, despite the whole, you know, fugitives running from the law thing.”

“If I recall correctly, and I have a mind like a steel trap,” he says, kneading his thumbs into her thighs, “you were starting to get a pretty big kick out of the whole fugitive thing, Bonnie Parker.” Sansa laughs and drapes her arms luxuriously over the warm, muscled bands of his shoulders. “Maybe. But still, you have to admit, it was fun.”

“Yeah, sweetheart, it was fun. The open road, the hotel sex, the cheesecake,” he says, laughing when she swats his back with her hand. “Okay, so where would you want to go? Someplace with a Nordstrom, I reckon.”

“Ha, ha,” she says, scooting forward on the hood of the truck to get closer to him, and she hums as she thinks of what would take the absolute longest time, sitting next to him in his truck. “Well, off the top of my head, I have never been to Maine.”

Sandor throws his head back and laughs, takes his hands out of her shorts to squeeze her ass. “Maine, huh? That’s just about the farthest we can go in the continental United States. All right, then, fine. Let’s take another fucking road trip.”

“Really? Like, really?”

“Well, we’ll probably have to stop and get work here and there to pay for it, but fuck it. Why not?”

“Just like that, you’ll go to Maine with me? No questions asked?”

Sandor hums and shakes his head, tsk-tsk-tsk as he leans against the hood and puts his face a few inches from hers, his arms a loose loop around her hips when she hooks her legs around his. “I don’t think you’ve been paying attention. I’ll do whatever it takes. I’ll do whatever you want, so long as it’s you and me.”

Sansa grins, and because she’s elated and full of giddy love she sweeps the sunhat off her head and plunks it down on his. “You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Sandor.”

And now it’s Sandor’s turn to grin, and he yanks her hat off and Frisbees it across the driveway. “Yeah? Well you’re the worst thing that’s ever happened to me,” he says, kissing her soundly before he drags her off the truck and up into his arms, and she squeals and flings her arms around him as he turns on his heel and marches them towards the backyard. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”
song inspiration for the last scene: "You Are the Best Thing" by Ray LaMontagne, though the song they listened to on the porch at night was "Shelter" by the same artist.

Oh my god, it's over. I don't know how I feel! Happy, relieved, sad?

I just wanted to say THANK YOU SO MUCH to each and every one of y'all who clicked the link and read it, left kudos and comments and your awesome support, ideas, and kind words. I LOVE YOU ALL.

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