The Snow

by geekprincess26

Summary

Sansa Stark thought she was well rid of Jon Snow. Then an untimely blizzard reunited them. Now Sansa wants out, and Jon just wants to explain.

Notes

Written for Day 12 of Jon x Sansa Fanfiction’s 15 Days of Valentine’s challenge. More chapters to follow this one after the challenge concludes.
Chapter 1

Sansa Stark flung the fitted blue bedsheet onto the floor and cursed.

She couldn’t get the damn thing straight for the life of her, and she was fast running out of energy to fight with it.

Under any other circumstances she would laugh at the absurdity of the situation, but being snowbound in the same flat as her ex-husband for the night, no matter how large the flat, made her decidedly indisposed to laughter.

Sansa decided to remove the flat sheet from the laundry basket and fling it, too, to the floor. Mid-throw, she lost her balance and sat down hard. She cursed again.

On the other hand, why not laugh? If this shit show were to happen to any ex-couple in the damn universe, why wouldn’t it be her and Jon?

It had started innocently enough, at a casting workshop they’d attended as teenagers for a film based on the first novel of a hot new young adult fantasy series. Sansa, noticing that Jon was sitting in a corner of the room and being ignored by the other young thespians, had seen her opportunity to practice the calm confidence of Princess Stephana, her character, and gone over to him to introduce herself. Jon had been so flustered when he had risen to shake her hand that he had tripped over one of his sneakers and very nearly fallen to the floor. Several of the other children in the workshop had begun laughing at him, but Sansa had silenced them with a Stephana-worthy glare. One of the casting directors had noticed their interaction, decided they had “a lovely chemistry” (as she told the crew filming the behind-the-scenes footage for the Blu-Ray disc a year later), and paired them together for the first scene in the workshop.

That was where their friendship had begun. It had developed slowly at first, for Jon had been as cautious as his onscreen character was bold. He had proven a much better listener, though; not even Sansa’s mother could hear her out with such patience as Jon’s when Sansa described the events of the Wars of the Roses in detail during workshop breaks. Sansa had returned the favor by being the only other person in the room to show any interest in Jon’s enthusiasm for guitars. When they had attended another casting workshop, this time in York, her London-based mother had let her stay with his family, and Jon had proceeded to show her all of the electric guitars and stereo equipment he’d custom built for himself in his father’s workshop. When she had pointed to one particular amplifier and asked what he’d done to the wiring, he had cracked a wide smile and proceeded to talk more in the next hour than he had in the entire three months they’d known each other. The smile had spread into a laugh the following day, when on a dare from two of their workshop partners they had snuck into one of the few unlocked offices and rifled through an envelope containing the candidates’ headshots so they could see who the directors’ final choices were. They had almost gotten caught, but
Lyanna Mormont, the girl who would later play their characters’ adorable little sister Princess Lysa, had shamelessly distracted the director who had been walking by, and they had all fallen over each other laughing afterwards.

Sansa and Jon had spent many hours on set commiserating over the antics of both Lyanna and Robin Arryn, the boy who had aptly been cast as their characters’ mischievous brother Prince Edmure. In Jon though, Sansa had found not just a fellow exasperated older sibling, but the only person who would listen to her describe the family tree of King Edward III without going glassy-eyed; and in Sansa, Jon found a fellow lover of music. He claimed that her explanations of English history had raised his exam grades by a level; she replied that his patient tutoring had raised her mathematics grades by two. Robin had made faces at them and told them they should just go get a room and kiss as they no doubt did already during on-set breaks, for with the sickening way they looked at each other they surely must secretly be boyfriend and girlfriend. Lyanna had burst into hysterical giggles, and both Jon and Sansa had turned crimson and told Robin to shut up.

Robin, it turned out, had started a pattern that day. From dear friends to tabloid reporters, nobody had ever quite gotten things right about Jon and Sansa, and, Sansa reflected as she crawled over to the laundry basket to begin heaving the pillowcases out of it, that included Jon and Sansa themselves.

To begin with, Robin had been wrong about Jon and Sansa’s being boyfriend and girlfriend, or even having kissed. Jon had not kissed Sansa until they had begun filming the second movie in the series. She had been huddled crying in her trailer after a bad day in which she’d flubbed most of her lines, and he’d held her and murmured encouraging things to her while she’d cried and even handed her tissues afterwards. He’d reached down to kiss her forehead but gotten her lips instead. It was not the way Sansa had ever imagined her first kiss going, but all the same it had been gentle and sweet, and Jon’s lips had felt so soft and nice that when he’d gotten beet red in the face and apologized to her, she’d told him she didn’t mind, and he’d kissed her again. And again and again.

They’d kept up a habit of kissing - both on set and when out in public - throughout the filming of the second and third movies in the series, but the third film had lost a great deal of money, and the studio had chosen not to make the fourth. Sansa, her heart set on attending Cambridge University, had moved to London permanently, and Jon had taken on another film role that had required him to travel to New Zealand, and the distance had proven too much for a fledgling relationship between two teenagers whose lives were already rocketing in such different directions. They had agreed to remain friends, not that the tabloids would print that. Outlandish headlines such as “JON SNOW AND SANSA STARK: THE FIGHT THAT ENDED THEM,” accompanied by an old photograph or two of Sansa sneezing or Jon in one of his brooding moods that would best serve the headline, proved much more profitable.

Both of their careers had stalled in the years after that. Jon had taken on a number of stunt roles and a couple of bit parts, but he had had no more luck at replicating his former success than had Sansa, who had mainly stuck to theater. Then one of the producers on their fantasy film series had literally run into Sansa after watching one of her plays, and in the process spilled his drink all over her dress. He had taken her to dinner to apologize, and Sansa had thought that had been the end of it, but the
next day Mr. Cassel had called her and told her about an indie film project he’d been turning over in
his head for years. He had never been able to find the right leads for it, he’d said, but once he’d seen
Sansa, something had clicked. He thought she might be just the ticket for the female lead, he’d said,
and, by the way, had she seen Jon Snow recently? Flabbergasted, Sansa had replied in the negative,
for it had been years by that point since she and Jon had last seen each other. She’d been even more
flabbergasted when Mr. Cassel had contacted her the following month to ask if she was still
interested in his indie project, and the month after that she’d found herself at a studio in Los Angeles
to read through the script with none other than Jon Snow. He’d turned gorgeous beyond belief since
Sansa had last seen him, and after a warm hug, he’d assured her that so had she. Sansa had always
thought it was fate that made the most embarrassing scene in the script the first one the film’s
director, Quentin Martell, had chosen for her to read, for it had taken that long for the blush to leave
her face. As it was, only a couple of scenes later, Quentin and Mr. Cassel had cast both her and Jon
on the spot.

It hadn’t been long before the tabloids had begun getting Jon and Sansa wrong for the second time.
Photo after photo of them on set had made its way into the back pages (they were not, after all,
famous enough to make the front ones) with article titles suggesting the onset of a torrid affair. Even
Robb, Sansa’s oldest brother, had called her and asked her if he needed to do any background
checking on “that Jon Snow guy.” Sansa had almost laughed him off the phone, since both she and
Jon knew perfectly well that Jon was dating Ygritte North, a Scottish spitfire who had just landed a
role on the latest Netflix hit. The three of them had gone out for drinks with the rest of the cast many
a night, and it had been a common joke among them that the tabloid writers must have been
uncommonly intelligent to name as Jon’s girlfriend a woman who’d had even one simple thing such
as hair color in common with his actual girlfriend.

The film had become an unexpected cult hit after its release, and Quentin Martell had been so excited
that he’d approached Jon and Sansa to co-star in another of his collaborations with Mr. Cassel, this
one a miniseries based on the Wars of the Roses. Both had jumped at the chance. For Sansa, it had
been the fulfillment of her girlhood dream to act in a project that depicted her favorite period in
history. For Jon, it had been a welcome distraction from the broken heart he’d been nursing since
Ygritte had dumped him. He’d channeled his sorrow beautifully into his brooding, mysterious
character, which had proven a challenge for Sansa. Her character, after all, had been the only
character on the show who could lighten the heart of Jon’s, and eliciting a genuine smile from a
genuinely dejected man had taxed her acting abilities considerably, especially since she’d had one
difficult man in her life already in the form of Joffrey Baratheon, her temperamental boyfriend. She’d
tried a bit of the method approach by telling Jon stupid jokes and asking him to go out for drinks and,
when that failed, to at least play games with her during set breaks. Jon, in turn, had responded by
playing as true a protective lord both on and off-set as a lady could have asked for: he had used his
cloak on Sansa as an umbrella during the frequent rainstorms, had always ensured that the caterers
had her favorite lemon poppyseed muffins on hand for breakfast, and had stayed on set after hours to
help her when she had proven a terrible hand at horseback riding. He had even pointed out a bruise
she’d sustained on her shoulder from accidentally smashing into a cabinet in her and Joffrey’s
apartment on a quick visit home and asked if Joffrey had hurt her (strictly speaking, Joffrey often did
hurt her, but only with words).

Fortunately, Quentin Martell had been as encouraging as the circumstances had been challenging.
More than once during the shoot, he had proclaimed Jon and Sansa’s chemistry perfect, and Sansa
had had to learn to rein in the odd blushes that had peppered her cheeks occasionally when he had said it. Toward the end of the shoot Jon’s spirits had finally begun to lift, and he and Sansa had spent almost every evening for the remainder of the shoot playing games and laughing at yet more tabloid headlines proclaiming the “frenzy of lust” they’d ignited with each other on set, although Sansa’s blushes had occasionally popped up again when she’d read one of the articles. Fortunately, Jon had not seen those blushes, or, if he had, he had kept the sight to himself – although sometimes Sansa would turn from grabbing them a pair of beers or look up from one of the tabloid headlines and fancy that she had felt Jon’s eyes on her. He had never said a word, though, so neither had she.

Naturally, the tabloids had had it wrong again. The frenzy of lust had only happened later, on the night of the series’ American premiere – Valentine’s Day, to be exact – and a few months after Sansa had finally broken up with Joffrey. The cast and crew had all gone out for drinks afterward, and most of them had ended up back at their hotel in various states of drunkenness. Sansa and Jon had been the only two still in possession of even half their faculties at that point and had ensconced themselves in Jon’s room with a pack of playing cards. At one point Sansa had accidentally sprayed the cards all over the room while dealing them, and while gathering them, she and Jon had pulled up with inches to spare between their faces. Sansa had never been sure who had started the kissing, but it had not stopped until the gray hours just before dawn, when she and Jon had thoroughly worn themselves out from making love and had collapsed into each other’s arms on the bed. The last thing Sansa had remembered from that night was Jon stroking her hair and whispering that he’d loved her since the day he’d met her at the casting workshop.

They had been inseparable since that night. Sansa had sometimes kicked herself for not snapping up Jon when they’d been younger, so she would never have dated so many jerks like Joffrey Baratheon, but she supposed the satisfaction of proving to her cynical mother that not all men were out to cheat was worth the wait. That, and having a treasure like Jon to call hers.

Of course, the tabloids had begun ringing the wedding bells – this time on the front pages, since Quentin Martell’s miniseries had been a huge hit and its sequel had been greenlit – as soon as Jon and Sansa’s relationship had become public knowledge. The frenzy had only increased when they’d moved in together on their six-month anniversary. Luckily, Joffrey Baratheon had gotten embroiled in a scandalous affair with a still-married starlet not long after that, so that when Valentine’s day had rolled around and their one-year anniversary with it, Jon had been able to propose in relative peace and quiet. Of course, within a couple of days the tabloid reporters had found out. For the next week Sansa, as was her wont, had teased Jon about the baby speculations that were sure to pop up any day, and Jon, as was his wont, had groused about it and then pounced on her and tickled and kissed her mercilessly.

For two years or so after the wedding, they’d been on cloud nine. After they’d finished filming Quentin Martell’s second miniseries together, they’d each done several projects of their own. They’d worked out their schedules so as to be home together as much as possible, and when it was not, they always spent at least the weekend together, and often more. No matter how much Sansa loved any given project – and during that time, she had had the luxury of taking on almost any project she fancied – she loved it more when she could step out of the role, off the airplane, and into the arms of her husband. They would often shut themselves in each other’s trailers for the entire weekend so Jon
Sansa’s father had died just after their second wedding anniversary. He and Sansa’s mother had been divorced for many years, but after the funeral, the attorneys handling his estate had discovered that he had had a large life insurance policy and forgotten to change its beneficiary after the divorce. It had started an unholy row between Sansa’s mother and her ex-husband’s family, and Sansa had found herself playing intermediary, since Robb had had a wife and three children by then. Flying to and from Leeds every other week while filming a sprawling historical drama had taken its toll on Sansa, and she and Jon had begun to argue more than usual and take longer to make up afterwards. Although the makeup sex had remained mind-blowing, Sansa had found herself wishing she could give it up more often in favor of not having to make up with Jon in the first place.

Eventually, Sansa thought later, it might have all blown over. But that was the point at which Ygritte North had re-entered their lives. She had landed a lead role opposite Jon in his latest film, a fast-paced spy thriller, and Jon had begun filming it shortly after Sansa’s father had died. Sansa’s business with her father’s family in Leeds had made her miss one of his first weekends on set. Jon had understood, despite his disappointment, but when she had missed two more weekends the following month, he had been a little hurt. He had spoken less than usual over the following weekend, and she had accused him of giving her the silent treatment. That had resulted in a longer than usual argument and no makeup sex afterward, as both of them had been exhausted. They had managed to drag themselves out of Jon’s trailer the following morning for brunch with the cast, and Ygritte had been the life of the party and had practically every man in the cast hanging on her arm. That had not included Jon, but when he had laughed at one of her jokes, Sansa had realized she had not seen Jon laugh for weeks. She had cried on the way home when she’d thought about Ygritte making Jon laugh, when all she herself had done lately was make him disappointed or sad or angry.

The following weekend, Jon had had to do night shoots for his film, rendering a visit from Sansa all but impossible. The weekend after that, she’d been waiting for Jon to finish his last scene of the day when a friendly grip, seeing her boredom, had shown her some of the pictures he’d taken on his phone during the night shoots. Ygritte and Jon had posed together in a number of them, and while that had not seemed unusual to Sansa, what had seemed unusual was the sheer number of those photos in which Jon had been smiling, even grinning broadly. That was the day Sansa’s jealousy had taken root, she later supposed, if she had been told to choose a day. Jon had almost assuaged it later, when she’d remarked casually to him that Ygritte seemed to be very friendly around her male co-stars, and he had shrugged and replied that she was simply a huge extrovert with a huger personality. But Sansa, watching Jon on set the next day, had not been able to help but notice the eagerness with which Ygritte had laid her hand on Jon’s arm while telling him jokes between takes, or the scant inches she had left between her face and Jon’s while leaning into him as they had bent over the director’s monitors to watch a couple of their takes. Sansa had abruptly turned and left the set after Ygritte and Jon’s third such bout next to the monitors.

Nothing would come of it, Sansa had tried to tell herself as she huddled over her Kindle in Jon’s trailer in a vain attempt to concentrate on a game of Solitaire. Jon was not the cheating type, so even if Ygritte were to try anything, which Sansa at that point thought just as likely as not, he would...
rebuff her. Certainly, he would rebuff her, even if he had dated her and loved her once, and even if her loud jokes and brash wit could make Jon happier at the moment than anything Sansa was able to do –

Sansa put the Kindle on the side table and stalked over to the refrigerator of Jon’s trailer to get a wine cooler.

Three weeks later, after having both coaxed her mother out of starting World War III and signed the last of the paperwork requested by the attorneys for her father’s estate, Sansa had decided to give Jon a more cheerful wife for the upcoming weekend. She might not have the other woman’s magnetism or joie de vivre, but she could be witty and even charming when the occasion arose, and she intended to be nothing but both to cast, crew, and Jon – even Ygritte – for the entire weekend. That is, the entire weekend other than the time she would spend reminding Jon just how good she could be in bed. She’d even booked an earlier flight than the one she’d told Jon she was taking so she could surprise him on set.

However, Sansa’s plane had landed late, and she’d gotten to the set only to find that filming had wrapped for the day. She’d headed for Jon’s trailer, but found it empty. Puzzled, she’d headed outside again, only to see Ygritte striding by, headed toward a point off to the right of the trailer. Curious, she’d headed around the corner to see where the other woman was heading.

That had been when she’d seen Jon following Ygritte. Not a minute later, both of them had disappeared inside another trailer, which Sansa quickly saw was labeled with Ygritte’s name. She’s stopped stock still in the middle of the studio lot, and not until she’d seen the shards of glass scattered amid a rapidly spreading pool of red liquid had she realized she’d dropped both of the bottles of wine she’d picked up on her way to the set. At first she’d thought the noise would bring them both running. When it had not, she’d assumed they were well into their activities.

Sansa never could figure out how long she’d spent in the lot, waiting for Jon to come flying out of the door of Ygritte’s trailer, waiting for him to sweep her up into his arms and tell her he’d told Ygritte to piss off, waiting for him to turn and yell over his shoulder at Ygritte to piss off again just for good measure, waiting for him to whisper how sorry he was that they’d both let tragedy and distance get to them, waiting for him to carry her back into his trailer so he could explain how none of this was what it looked like, how he was not a lying womanizer as Sansa’s father had been, and how much he loved her, oh, so much.

But none of those things had happened, and Sansa had turned and trudged back to Jon’s trailer to retrieve her bags. She’d lingered there for a while in the vain hope that he would return, and then she’d realized that after that length of time had elapsed she didn’t want to be there when he returned, and she’d left the set as fast as her legs could carry her and hailed a cab to the airport, where she’d gotten the next flight home. She’d kept her phone on airplane mode the entire way home from the airport, not wanting to deal with the flurry of text messages Jon had probably sent her by then – or,
worse yet, with the absence of any. She’d finally gotten the courage to turn the phone off airplane mode when she’d returned to the home she and Jon shared in the London suburbs, but only after pouring herself a full glass of wine. She’d breathed out the sigh she hadn’t realized she’d been holding when she’d seen the screen light up with worried messages, in both text and voicemail form, from Jon. She hadn’t had the heart to listen to the voicemails, so she’d deleted them at once. The text messages had been increasingly worried variations on the same theme, so she’d decided one reply to them all would suffice. She had gone through almost the entire glass of wine while composing it, and only hit “send” as soon as she had for fear Jon would contact the authorities if she did not.

*Already came and left, she wrote. I saw you and Ygritte. That was all I needed to see. Going to Leeds tomorrow. Staying till next project begins April in Dublin.*

After sending the message, she’d shut off her phone. She could let her mother know about her plans to stay in Leeds tomorrow. At this point, she was far too buzzed and depressed to care.

“Sansa?”

A gentle tap on the door accompanied Jon’s voice. Both snapped Sansa sharply back into the present. She wadded up the sole remaining pillowcase in the laundry basket and took aim at the opposite corner of the room.

That was when she noticed that it was the blue pillowcase with the yellow flowers.

It had been part of a bedding set given to her and Jon by his parents for their wedding. It had belonged to the first set of sheets on which they’d made love as a married couple, the same set on which they’d christened the bedroom of their new home. And it had been the same pillowcase onto which Sansa had collapsed sobbing after she’d turned off her phone on that horrible night three years ago, when the man just outside the door had smashed her heart into a million pieces.

She decided that when he opened it, his face would be a far better place for the pillowcase to land than in the stupid corner.

Damn that car accident, she thought for at least the hundredth time that night, although not the woman who’d caused it, as she’d died of a heart attack behind the wheel.

But damn the drivers between her and Sansa for not paying attention.
Damn the snow on the road that had caused Sansa’s car to fishtail and Sansa to steer it clear over the curb so as to avoid crashing into anybody else.

Damn the police and fire trucks and medical personnel for taking so long to get to the scene, where Sansa and another driver had had to direct traffic as best they could to avoid worsening the pileup.

Damn the driver who had swerved to avoid that same pileup and taken out Sansa’s car instead, along with her phone, which she had inadvertently dropped on its floor.

Damn the snowstorm for making the medics take so long to attend to everyone else before being able to check her out and clear her so the police could take her statement. And damn it for closing down the roads by the time the officer had done with her, leaving her car by the side of the road and her stuck in the middle of a blizzard alert with no phone and nobody to drive her home.

Nobody, that is, except for Jon Snow.

Damn Jon Snow.
Chapter 2

“Sansa?”

Jon tapped at the door again, this time not quite so gently. “Sansa, are you all right?”

_Do I bloody look all right to you?_ she wanted to scream at him, but that sounded entirely stupid when said to someone who could not, in fact, look at her at the moment, so Sansa settled for, “Piss off, Jon, I’m fine. And no, I don’t need anything.”

She heard him sigh. “All right,” he replied, and she could hear the energy draining out of his voice. “But if you need anything, come get me, all right?”

Sansa very nearly launched the flowered pillowcase she was still holding at the door, but that would have provoked a further response from Jon, and dealing with Jon was the last thing she needed right now. The energy drained out of her arm as surely as it had left Jon’s voice just moments ago, and she set the pillowcase on the floor.

“Sansa?”

Sansa shut her eyes tightly. _One, two, three, four…please, just let him go away_ –

“Sansa, at least promise me you’ll let me know if you’re in pain or if you need a doctor.”

Sansa pushed her forehead into the heel of her hand, which was currently propped on her knee, and sighed.

“All right,” she ground out. “I promise.” _Go away, Jon._

She could hear him shift his weight to his left foot, which he always did when hesitating. Finally, though, he turned around and padded away down the hall.

Sansa slumped against the door in relief. The sigh she emitted as she did so depleted most of her
remaining energy, for it took a good two or three minutes before she willed herself to her feet and trudged into the bathroom to brush her teeth. Apparently her brains had gone too, because she forgot that Jon had shown her the toothbrush in the medicine cabinet and tore out half the contents of the linen closet before she remembered, and she stared at the mouthwash on the upper shelf for a good thirty seconds before realizing it was, in fact, the mouthwash for which she had been looking. Her one resource that remained fully stocked, she discovered, was her ability to sense pain. As soon as she had risen to her feet to head to the bathroom, she had begun to realize just how badly they were aching, and before long her head joined in. She headed back to the bedroom to grab her purse, but a quick search revealed that the bottle of Aleve she always kept there had disappeared at some point during the evening’s events.

Sansa let out a stream of curses, and very nearly forgot to whisper as she did so. As soon as she had climbed into Jon’s car for the very uncomfortable, very silent ride back to his flat from the scene of the traffic accident, she had vowed she would ask him for nothing while there – having to stay with him for the night was more than humiliating enough as it was – but a nasty throbbing had begun to tear at the insides of her skull, and no way could she sleep as long as she felt it. It took no more than a few minutes for the pain to win the battle, and Sansa slowly turned to head for the door. That was when she remembered, albeit through a haze, where she had found the toothbrush for which she’d previously torn half the bathroom apart.

Medicine cabinet. Right.

Sansa found no Aleve in the medicine cabinet, but she did discover a bottle of fast-acting Tylenol pills. She swallowed twice the recommended dosage and sank to the toilet’s closed seat to wait for the medicine to take effect. Eventually, much of the pain subsided – if she had been twenty-one years old instead of thirty-one, Sansa mused sadly, all of it would have vanished, and more quickly at that – and she forced herself to her feet so she could finish preparing for bed. At one point she accidentally dropped the bottle of mouthwash on the floor.

Shit! Sansa quickly righted the container. Luckily, the cap was screwed on tightly, so none of the liquid had spilled, but there was a chance Jon had heard the bottle drop. Sansa tiptoed to the door as fast as she could, but lost her nerve about opening it while her hand was still on the knob. Instead, she put her ear to the crack so she could tell whether or not he was rushing up the stairs to check on her. If she had to yell at him through the door, she would; but she doubted she could handle dealing with him face to face any more that day. Even the idea of throwing the wadded-up pillowcase at his face had lost its appeal.

Eventually Sansa satisfied herself that Jon had heard nothing. Deciding to leave the mouthwash bottle on the floor for the night, she turned off the bathroom light and headed for the bed. It was still unmade, but Sansa was far past caring at that point. Any of her friends from back in Leeds, she thought darkly, would have dragged her to a therapist right then, for she was fastidious about her own bed back in her Leeds house to the point of making it and arranging all of the pillows on it every morning she was home. But this was not her bed, and although she probably did need therapy, she would not get it that night, especially with the wind slapping truckloads of snow out of the sky.
and against the walls of Jon’s flat.

Fortunately, Sansa located the stack of spare blankets Jon kept in the room’s walk-in closet much more quickly than she had found her toothbrush, and within a couple of minutes she had unrolled three or four of them and arranged them into a nest of sorts on the bed. The first breath she took after she climbed into it flooded her nostrils with Jon’s masculine cedar-and-salt smell.

Sansa cursed again.

Damn that car crash. Damn it and damn him.

He had cheated on her. He had left her for his ex-girlfriend. He had done exactly what he had sworn never to do, which, ironically, was exactly what her father would have done. He had not only smashed her heart to pieces, but made sure to stick a knife into each piece when he was through. And now he had the gall to pretend to care about her. He expected her to think he was concerned about her health, or her lost phone, or anything to do with her.

Right. Why hadn’t he cared three years ago, when she had wanted and needed him to do it? Why had he fled into the arms of another woman when his wife had needed his own around her so badly? Why had he spent hours laughing with Ygritte between takes and over lunches when Sansa had still been shedding tears over the toll her father’s death and her mother’s feud with his relatives had taken on her?

If Jon had admitted then that he had stopped loving her, Sansa had thought many times, she could have recovered much more quickly and without half as many scars. She was, after all, an actress and accustomed to outright rejection, although not on this particular scale. But Jon had still pretended to care. For a long time, Sansa had tied herself into knots trying to figure out why he had insisted for so long that he’d never slept with Ygritte despite the evidence to the contrary; why he had sent her flowers and wine and other gifts for months after she’d left him, despite her having warned him through her divorce attorney that they made no difference and would only be tossed into the trash bin; and why he had called, texted, and e-mailed her so many times she’d had to change her phone number and e-mail address not two weeks after leaving him. She’d tried to figure out as well when Jon had gotten so good at lying, for every time he’d contacted her he’d sounded – felt – like the old Jon, the Jon who was always so painfully honest when not putting on a mask for a role. Sansa’s mother, who had watched Sansa’s father go through innumerable mistresses before divorcing him, had opined that Jon, like other men, simply enjoyed the hunt, which in this case meant the hunt to get his wife back. Sansa’s best friend, Margaery Tyrell, who had had more boyfriends than Sansa had pairs of earrings, had theorized that Jon was suffering from guilt – perhaps a sign of a repressed religious streak of some sort.

None of that, of course, explained why Jon had suddenly turned up one day, crying as Sansa had
never seen him cry in her life, and told her he would give her the divorce, no strings attached, if that was really what she wanted. Even then his eyes had been begging her to say that, no, it wasn’t what she’d wanted, but she had assured him that it was, and, true to his word, he had signed his portion of the divorce paperwork the next day. She had thought then that Jon had simply gotten tired of pretending to care for her.

Now, as she shifted to her other side, Sansa wondered if she had been wrong, since Jon was still clearly pretending to care for her. It bewildered her enough to make her shift back at once to her other side and pound the bed several times in succession. If she’d had the energy to scream, she would have, and Jon be damned.

But Sansa did not have the energy, and her body gave up and fell asleep at last.


Sansa awoke to the smell of coffee and the sight of an eerie gray glow permeating her room. Once she had managed to extricate herself from the tangled pile of blankets around her, she heaved herself to the edge of the bed, stretched her still-aching feet gingerly against the thick white carpet, padded to the windows on the far wall, and opened the slatted shades that covered them. At first she could only see an undulating white mist. Then she realized that the mist was in fact made of millions of snowflakes being blown nearly horizontally by a gale whose whistle she could hear through the thick windowpanes. Sansa could see nothing else: not the windows of the next flat over; not the broad lamps that flanked the entrance to the penthouse building; not even the high-powered lights illuminating the back parking lot, which was not fifteen yards away.

Sansa cursed and lowered her forehead against the window in disbelief. She remembered her mother telling her when she was young about a blizzard that had buried half of Yorkshire the winter before Sansa’s birth. She had said the weathermen had remarked then that northern England usually only saw a storm that bad once every thirty years or so: a “thirty-year-blizzard,” they had called it. Now it had come two years late and a day too soon, and apparently it had decided to leave her with Jon for much of the day, and perhaps even another night, to boot.

Sansa’s stomach growled, and she cursed both it and the storm. Pain, apparently, was not the only thing that could force her to venture out of her room and risk interacting with Jon, but it was a risk she would have to take. Starving simply would not do. And perhaps, if she were careful and quick, she could sneak in and out of the flat’s kitchen without being noticed. And the laundry room, she added to herself when the bathroom mirror informed her that she was still wearing a spare pair of Jon’s pajamas from the previous night. The clothes she had been wearing when they had returned to his flat had been soaked through with snow and dirt, and she had reluctantly accepted Jon’s clothes, as well as the use of his laundry machines for her own.
As Sansa pulled her long hair back into a ponytail, she heard a stream of water emanating from somewhere downstairs. She was reasonably sure from what she had seen of the flat the prior night that it came from the direction of Jon’s quarters, and although she could not tell if it came from a sink or a showerhead, she knew either meant that Jon would not be in the kitchen. She set her brush down on the bed and dashed down the stairs.

Two wrong turns later, Sansa finally reached the kitchen and confirmed what her nose had begun telling her since she had opened her bedroom door. Steam wafted from a silver carafe on the counter next to the chrome sink; a mess of scrambled eggs sizzled along several slices of bacon in an enormous cast-iron skillet on the stove; and a dozen perfect lemon poppyseed muffins perched on a platter next to them.

Sansa’s mouth watered. Some time over the past two years, she had forgotten what an excellent cook Jon was. He had been particularly fond of making breakfast, and many a morning between projects or on filming breaks had seen her padding into the restored kitchen of their old country house to see Jon frying bacon at the stove or mixing the batter for the lemon poppyseed muffins. Of course, sometimes he had burnt the bacon or forgotten to put the muffins in the oven because Sansa had snaked her arms around him from behind and not let go of him until he’d made love to her on the counter or the island or against the refrigerator, or even on one of the chairs next to the old oak dining table.

Sansa shook her head hard to clear it of the unwelcome memories. She narrowed her eyes at the muffins as an equally unwelcome suspicion occurred to her. Jon had better have made the lemon poppyseed variety from force of habit, she thought, and not because she was staying with him. He should know much better by now than to expect she could be bribed into showing him more than the barest acceptable courtesy, let alone lulled into thinking he cared –

“Oh – good morning, Sansa.”

Sansa bit back a curse, but let loose a sigh of frustration. She straightened herself to her full height, old pajamas and all, before turning to face her ex-husband.

“Lemon muffins, Jon? Really?” Her voice came out colder than the snow and wind holding her captive in Jon’s flat, colder even than she had planned, but Jon merely raised an eyebrow.

“You still like them, don’t you?” he asked. He sounded as though he were genuinely concerned that his food selection had disappointed her. He sounded as though he actually cared. That brought last night’s anger back with a vengeance and snapped Sansa’s last string of restraint.
“‘You still like them?’ What the actual fuck, Jon?” Jon’s eyes widened, but he said nothing. Fine. “After everything that happened, you think I give a shit about you baking muffins for me? As if fucking muffins make a fucking difference about whether anybody sane would expect me to want to be stuck in this fucking hole with the fucking man who fucking fucked another woman while you made me muffins and pretended to care about me and pretend I was the only woman you wanted to fuck!”

Jon reached up to push a hand into the top of the bun into which he’d pulled his unruly curls – an addition to his appearance that he’d made after the divorce – and scrub the heel of his hand against his forehead. Hurt flashed across his face, but he still said nothing. For some reason, his silence angered her even more than the begging and pleading and denials she’d heard in the months leading up to the divorce.

“I thought you let go of that pseudo-guilt complex when you signed the bloody papers!” she spat. “And now? To bring it back on me now, when I spent yesterday watching a bunch of paramedics try to save a dead woman in front of me while I waved a flashlight around with that other bloke so nobody else would die?” Jon winced, but Sansa took no notice. “And if you really felt sorry for me, if by some chance you experienced a nanosecond of actual fucking caring, you should have let the cop take me home, not played the bloody hero! Fuck it, Jon!”

She did not care that Jon was now blinking rapidly, as if he had enough of a heart to be moved to a tear or two by what she had just said. She did not care that she could hardly have asked the police officer to take her home, since he had already had a plethora of stranded motorist calls to respond to and Sansa had had outside transportation to a source of shelter. She only cared about not letting Jon Snow once again make her a helpless bystander watching her life get ripped to shreds. He’d done it by betraying her; life, fate, God, or whatever else one wanted to call it yesterday by planting her squarely in front of the dying woman whose vacant eyes had blinked against the backs of Sansa’s own for much of the previous night. Sansa knew she could not handle a third occurrence, not now and possibly not ever. Perhaps Mya, her therapist, would have considered it Sansa’s attempt at self-protection, then, when Sansa picked up the wire rack full of muffins and heaved its contents at the last moment so that the muffins flew half at Jon and half at the floor. Perhaps she would have decided that Sansa had simply snapped. Once again, Sansa did not care.

However, Sansa did care when one of the muffins missed Jon, flew through the open doorway between the living room and the kitchen, skidded across an end table, and flew squarely into the antique crystal tea-rose vase that adorned the table. Jon had inherited that vase from his late grandmother, to whom he had always been close and who had wasted away for years with Alzheimer’s disease before dying of cancer, and he and Sansa both shouted in horror as they watched it tip off of the table and shatter on the wooden floor.

Sansa heard neither the tinkling rattle of the vase’s remnants as they skittered across the floor nor the note of alarm in Jon’s voice as he called her name. Only when he grabbed her by the shoulders and
shook her did she register him yelling “Sansa!” from less than a foot in front of her. She tried to open her mouth to respond, but it was already open. That was when she realized she had been screaming since the moment the vase had fallen. She bit her lip and clapped both of her shaking hands over her mouth.

“Are you hurt?” Jon asked, his voice still raised as though he thought she might begin screaming again, and Sansa shook her head mutely.

“You sure?” Jon’s voice had grown quieter, but his gaze was still wary. Once again, Sansa shook her head. Finally, Jon let out an exasperated sigh through his teeth and dropped his hands from her shoulders. He tilted his head in the direction of the kitchen.

“Go ahead and eat what you want,” he said. “I’ll clean up.”

Sansa dropped her own hands and shook her head frantically, and Jon, clearly annoyed, frowned at her.

“I – I – I mean – I don’t – I’m sorry – I’m sorry, Jon,” Sansa gasped. She stumbled over his name, perhaps from the shock of not having spoken it in any way other than as an angry epithet for over two years. Jon waved a hand toward the kitchen.

“It’s done, Sansa,” he snapped. “I’ll take care of it. Just go.”

Sansa bit her lip, which was now trembling. “I – Jon, I’m – I’ll pay you for it, you know I will – ” She bit her lip again, for she knew it had been the wrong thing to say, but she still gasped a little when Jon spun on his heel and looked her full in the face. When they had still been married, Sansa had told him many times that even though he might not speak much, she could still tell how he was feeling because the color of his eyes changed ever so slightly depending on his mood. They turned a lighter shade of brown when he was happy, nearly black when he was aroused (especially when she wore the blue nightie he liked), and dull russet, like a darker shade of taupe, when he was sad. Furthermore, she’d said, she could tell he was teasing when the lighter gold flecks in his irises got just a bit bigger, and angry when the bronze flecks took precedence. Jon had often teased her to no end about accusing him of having “mood-ring eyes,” and she had just as often smugly informed him that as his wife, she knew best, especially since she knew all sorts of tricks to turn his eyes dark in ten seconds flat. Now, though, Sansa took two steps back from Jon. His eyes had faded to an odd, muddy shade of bronze that even she had never seen before, but their color shook her less than their emptiness. If the eyes were the windows to the soul, Sansa thought, Jon’s flickered like the last two fading lamps left burning in a once brilliantly shining house, which had since been overwhelmed by some crushing darkness Jon had tried in vain to stave off. Sansa’s heart fell into her stomach. She knew better than to worry that he would raise so much as a finger to her; but that would neither lessen his anger nor put the vase back together.
“I don’t want the bloody money,” he growled. “I’ll take care of it, Sansa. Go. Please.”

Sansa nodded. She had a fleeting impulse to reach out and put a comforting hand on Jon’s shoulder, but thought better of it. Nothing could have appealed to her less than eating at that point, so she padded through the kitchen and out into the living room. That was where the tears she had been too tired to shed the previous night took over. She barely made it to the nearest couch before she collapsed on it in tears. She choked out a laugh at one point, for seeing Jon’s guilt torment him into depression had been one of her dearest wishes during the first few months after she’d left him, when he’d gone on insisting he’d never done anything wrong as if he believed wholeheartedly in his innocence. Now, seeing her wish fulfilled only made the tears fall faster; for Jon’s devastation had come at the price of her own.

The woman whose name she had never learned was dead.

Sansa’s marriage was dead.

Now some part of Jon was dead, and, Sansa realized, a part of herself with it.

She cried until her chest hurt and her limbs felt heavy and her mucus and tears had soaked the front of Jon’s T-shirt and leaked onto the couch. She did not hear Jon’s footsteps striding back and forth between the living room and the kitchen, or his sighs alternating with the thumps the muffins made as he threw them into the trash bin one by one, or even the noise of the vacuum cleaner he used to clean up the remnants.

By then, Sansa was sound asleep.
Sansa woke shivering and bathed in an eerie silver glow flowing into the living room through the enormous mosaic of windows that lined the far wall. One glance confirmed that the blizzard was still raging.

Sansa sighed and pushed herself up on one elbow. That was when she saw the small wicker laundry basket sitting on the floor just below her. Her clothes from the previous night were now freshly laundered and folded neatly inside on top of a pile of blankets. Sansa immediately grabbed the top two blankets and folded them around herself. While doing so, she noticed the laptop perched on the coffee table nearby. She knelt on the edge of the couch, reached her hand as far as she could stretch it, and grabbed the computer with six inches to spare. That was when she noticed the yellow Post-It note on top, covered in Jon’s strong, geometric script:

UNLOCKED. WIFI PASSWORD ENTERED.

Sansa’s brow furrowed for a moment until she remembered she was still without her phone. When she and Jon had arrived at his flat the prior evening, she had anticipated returning to her own apartment and her spare phone before twenty-four hours had passed. Now, however, it looked as though she would have to spend another night here without any phone at all, and the least she could do to keep from being completely swamped with unanswered communications whenever she ended up returning home would be to check her e-mail.

Sansa opened the laptop, and, sure enough, Google popped up at once when she clicked on the Chrome icon. She quickly accessed her e-mail inbox and groaned out loud when she saw how many unread messages she had. The number was far too high for her to handle without a proper distraction, so she opened another browser tab and checked the Met Office website. That made her groan even more loudly: the blizzard, according to the website, would continue unabated until at least the following morning. All Yorkshire residents were advised to stay in their homes except in case of emergency, and even then were instructed to call 999 and wait for a medical helicopter, as the roads were impassable even to EMS vehicles.

Sansa bumped her forehead against her propped-up fist in frustration. At this rate, she thought, she might as well have a new phone overnighted to Jon’s flat and logon to her carrier’s website to add it to her plan once it arrived. That is, assuming she could remember her username and password. She shut her eyes and allowed herself a further sigh of frustration. Then her stomach growled. Right. Why had she been trying to tackle her e-mails without proper food?

It occurred to Sansa as she stood and draped yet another of Jon’s blankets around her that she had no idea where Jon kept anything in his kitchen. She supposed she would have to poke around a bit and be careful not to break anything, especially considering what had already happened that morning.
The only alternative, after all, was to ask Jon which foods he didn’t mind her having and where he kept the implements she would need to feed herself, and although that choice would show him better manners than the other, she could not bring herself to face Jon after having smashed his grandmother’s vase. Besides, the very idea of asking Jon for permission to do anything made her grit her teeth.

Catelyn Stark’s face appeared unbidden in her daughter’s mind’s eye. *Always ask permission before you eat anything in your host’s house,* she’d said every time Sansa had gone to visit a friend, and at least ten times alone before she’d sent Sansa off to stay with Jon’s family for the auditioning workshop back before they’d been cast in their first film together. *Never touch anything without your host telling you that you may. Even when you get permission, always be careful. Clean whatever you use, and always leave your host’s house looking nicer than you found it.*

Sansa shook her head as she felt along the kitchen wall for the light switch. Even three years after she’d left Jon, it was still strange to think of him as her host, a mere acquaintance to whom she owed proper formal courtesy. However, she’d insisted on having no contact with him after the divorce, and years without contact tended to make strangers of people. Not, Sansa thought, that there had been another alternative; after all, her own mother had made as clean a break from her father as possible following their divorce, only communicating with him through their solicitors and the relatives who had shuttled Robb and Sansa back and forth for custody visits. Nor was he an unusual case, Sansa had discovered the older she had become and the more marriages she had seen break up: most husbands whose wives had divorced them for infidelity were only too eager to get on with their lives and their mistresses once the divorces were finalized. If anything, Jon was the rare exception to the rule, at least according to Margaery Tyrell. She and Jon had acted in neighboring shows on the West End circuit some months after Jon and Sansa’s divorce had been finalized, and according to Margaery, who had an uncanny knack for picking up on the latest rumors (and which of them were true) faster than the rumor mills themselves, Jon had not had a girlfriend since Ygritte. Even Ygritte, according to her, had not been spotted in Jon’s company since their film’s round of premieres, and during Jon’s stint in his West End show, he had preferred nobody’s company and refused countless invitations from his cast mates to go out for dinner and drinks. He’d looked like a “brooding little lost emo puppy,” Margaery had remarked offhand one evening when she’d had quite a bit of wine, although one look from Sansa had silenced her on the subject thereafter.

Despite her eagerness to shut Margaery down, Sansa had briefly allowed herself to wonder at the time why on earth Jon was acting so abnormally. After all, he no longer had the bonds of marriage to tie him to just one woman, not that it had stopped him before. Perhaps he had bored of Ygritte too after his hunt for her affections had ended, she’d decided, or maybe – and she’d let out a perverse giggle at the thought – Ygritte had turned the tables and dumped Jon. She had thought no more of it at the time, and she preferred not to think about it now, but Jon’s odd behavior after the divorce had been the one puzzle she’d never solved about him, and that had always frustrated her. That had come up often in her sessions with Mya, and they had discussed at length various ways in which Sansa could train herself to live with her uncertainty. Sometimes Sansa had actually succeeded for a decent stretch of time. Now, however, stuck in a flat with an ex-husband who had first cheated on her, then lied to no end about it, then decided to do her laundry and make her lemon poppyseed muffins, she was failing miserably. Theoretically, Sansa mused as she flipped the light switch, if anyone she knew could hide a relationship from the tabloids, it was Jon, who had always been even more leery of any and all members of the press than other members of his profession. But no celebrity of Jon’s status
could hide a girlfriend, and even if he had managed to keep it from the tabloids, Margaery would have found out somehow. Certainly, he was seeing no one special at the moment: the living room couch pillows were scattered all over the chairs and the floor, last week’s newspapers were stacked on the kitchen counter, and no trace of a woman’s perfume permeated the flat’s distinctly masculine smell. Granted, Sansa knew, it was no longer her business if Jon were seeing someone, but thinking about it had always made her stomach churn, whether because of some persistent post-divorce jealousy or because it reminded her of her own painful attempts at dating again. In this case, she decided, it was the burning need to eat something as soon as possible.

Sansa sighed again and forced her gaze back to the cabinets surrounding her. It finally settled on a broad door that looked like it might lead to a pantry. No sooner had her hand touched the handle, however, than she heard Jon’s footsteps approaching and snatched her hand away. She whirled around and began, “Sorry, just thought I –” at the same time Jon said, “Oh, didn’t know you were –”

Both of them stopped, and Sansa took a couple of steps backward. She felt her face grow red.

“Didn’t mean to pry or anything,” she said, when she could no longer withstand Jon’s questioning look. “I didn’t want to bother you, so I figured I might find something to eat myself.”

Jon gestured toward the refrigerator. “Help yourself,” he said. “I can wait.”

Sansa’s stomach growled yet again, as if on cue, but she shook her head. “It’s your kitchen, not mine,” she replied shortly.

Jon pinched the bridge of his nose, and a flush matching Sansa’s spread upward from his jaw. He’d always done that when trying to conserve the last of his usually vast store of patience. Finally, he sighed and stepped to the other side of the island, away from Sansa.

“Leftover lasagna and salad from yesterday are in the fridge,” he said in the same polite tone he took when explaining the plot of one of his movies for the umpteenth time at a press junket. “There’s beer and wine coolers, and Coke if you want. If you’d rather not eat my cooking, there’s fruit in the fridge and plenty of other food in the pantry.” He pointed to the door Sansa had almost opened. “Baking dishes are there.” He gestured toward an expanse of dark wood cabinets to the left of the double oven, then turned to indicate another set of cabinets to the side of the gleaming chrome dishwasher. They were shiny with varnish, unlike the oak cabinets back in their house outside London, whose surfaces were raw and fresh and just the way Jon liked them. Raw wood in general had fascinated him; he’d spent hours in his studio in the basement of that house carving boxes and bowls from pieces of oak and walnut and pine.
“Pots and pans are there.” Jon’s brisk voice snapped Sansa out of her reverie. He pointed in succession to more cabinets and drawers. “Spices – utensils – silverware.” He turned back on his heel to face her again, and his jaw was twitching. Three years ago, Sansa could have figured out easily whether it was from annoyance, anger, hurt, or some combination of them. Now she could not quite tell, and that annoyed her as much as Jon’s baffling hospitality – with both her stomach and her energy running dangerously low, she could not allow herself to think of the word caring. Instead, she shrugged.

“Got it,” she said. “Don’t worry, I’ll be quick.”

Jon opened his mouth, but then shut it almost as quickly. He shook his head, as if in disbelief, then turned and strode out of the room.

Sansa would have loved to try cooking anything she could think of rather than depend on Jon’s handiwork, but her hunger quickly overcame her pride, and not five minutes after Jon had left the kitchen, she was eagerly cutting up a slice of lasagna she had warmed up in the microwave. She groaned in spite of herself when she bit into the first piece – Jon’s cooking really was as good as she had remembered. It was so good, and Sansa’s stomach so empty, that she helped herself to a second slice, along with an apple and a bowl of salad. After she’d cleaned her dishes, she strode to the pantry door to raid a box of cookies she’d seen there earlier, but she heard Jon’s steps in the hallway and promptly tiptoed off to the living room to retrieve her blanket and clothes.

The long overdue shower Sansa took after that revitalized her almost as much as the food had. Now she could concentrate properly on checking her e-mail and ordering a new phone, she thought, and then realized she had left the laptop Jon had lent her back in the living room. She quickly retrieved it, but turned one hallway too soon on her way upstairs and nearly collided with Jon.

“Ooh – sorry!” she exclaimed, clutching the laptop so as not to drop it. Jon, having grunted his own “sorry,” merely nodded.

“Did you need anything?” he asked. Sansa shook her head.

“I was just going back upstairs, thank you,” she said, and the formal tone of her voice surprised her. If it surprised Jon, he did not show it.

“Right, then,” he said, and stood back against the wall to let her pass. Sansa stepped around him gingerly, but then she remembered the computer in her arms and turned to face him again.
“Did you need this back?” she asked.

Jon shook his head. “No,” he replied. “You can keep it till you leave.” He managed to sound as though he truly did not care whether she left or stayed, or even went outside to try building a snowman.

Sansa bit her lip. The hallway contained no windows, but when she’d looked outside from her bedroom window not half an hour before, the snow had been swirling as thickly as it had that morning.

“The Met Office says it should stop snowing tomorrow morning,” she said, not quite meeting Jon’s eyes. “I’ll be out as soon after that as I can.”

Jon shrugged. “Best wait till it’s safe,” he said. “I’ll let you know when the groundskeepers shovel out the lot.”

Sansa risked a direct glance at Jon’s face before she headed back upstairs. He had always done well at burying his emotions beneath an ever-present expression of thoughtfulness, but now he looked simply vacant rather than brooding. Something in Sansa’s chest tightened, and she cringed. She lost no time in turning away and mounting the stairs as quickly as she could. When she reached the safety of her bedroom, she set the laptop on the nightstand and flopped onto the bed, feeling suddenly drained herself. Maybe Margaery had been right and Jon did feel guilty about his infidelity after all, but as before, Sansa found herself taking no joy over a prospect that once would have made her giddy. She thought she might prefer this morning’s snapping, angry Jon to this afternoon’s empty shell. The latter very nearly made her want to feel sorry for him, and feeling sorry for Jon was even less appealing than having to stay in the flat with him in the first place.

Finally, Sansa summoned the energy to open the laptop and navigated to her phone carrier’s website. True to her earlier predictions, she had completely forgotten her password and had to request a reset e-mail from the carrier. Unable to wait in silence without drumming her fingers on the keypad, she clicked on the Met Office’s website, which now informed her that the blizzard was expected to last through the following evening instead of the morning.

Sansa let out a groan and leaned her head back against the headboard. If the forecast turned out to be accurate, she would likely have to spend not just one but two more nights with Jon, for the city’s snowplows would take all night to clear the snow from a storm of that magnitude.

Eventually, Sansa leaned her head forward again and clicked on the tab that contained her e-mail inbox. The second entry from the top was the e-mail containing her phone carrier’s password reset
link. *Thank God there’s one thing the storm didn’t delay.*

Had Jon been the one shopping for a new phone, Sansa knew, he would have taken hours to compare the technical specifications of at least a dozen different models, and even entered the information into an Excel spreadsheet for his own perusal. Sansa, who had neither his knowledge nor his patience for that kind of thing, took all of 20 minutes to choose a phone and click on the cart icon to check out. She was immediately directed to the shipping information screen. *Shit.* She had no idea what Jon’s mailing address was, and less than no inclination to ask him for it. Even if she had not been facing the temptation to feel sorry for her unfaithful ex-husband, she was still in his debt twice over, and that rankled deeply. For the past three years, she had been accustomed to Jon’s needing her forgiveness, not the other way around. And besides that, she had to admit she felt horrible about having smashed his grandmother’s vase. She sighed deeply, tilted her head backward again, and alternated between dredging up the guts to knock on Jon’s bedroom door and trying to think of some impossible way to repay Jon for the vase. Eventually she decided that the former would take less time, so she pulled her damp hair into a knot at the top of her head and traipsed down the stairs.

As it turned out, leaving her room and knocking on Jon’s door took more time than Sansa had thought it would. She turned away from the hall leading from the living room into his section of the flat twice before she could force her feet down it, and once at his bedroom door, she lifted her hand to knock three times and drew it back as many times. Whether her fourth attempt would have succeeded she never knew, for Jon opened his door before her hand could reach it. Sansa squealed and jumped backward, nearly crashing into the opposite wall as she did so. Jon barely flinched.

“Yes, Sansa?” he said sharply. Sansa used the wall to straighten herself. She raised her chin as she did so but regretted it almost at once, for the pained look he’d worn when she had smashed the vase that morning had returned with a vengeance, and she still knew Jon well enough to see the moisture gathering in his eyes. She opened her mouth a couple of times to speak, but nothing came out, and each time Jon looked both more pained and more annoyed.

“I – sorry,” Sansa managed at last. “I just need your address here.” Seeing his confusion, she added, “For my new phone. I’m having it overnighted here.”

Jon tilted his head toward the window, which showed the same stream of endlessly blowing snow Sansa had seen outside of every other window in the flat. “You know it probably won’t get here by then,” he said. “Maybe not the next day either, if the Met Office has it right. I’ve got a spare you can use, if you want to.”

*Shit.* He was right, of course, but that did nothing to stem the sudden rush of irritation that engulfed Sansa.
“Well, just in case they do manage to work a miracle,” she ground out, “are you going to give me your address, or should I just give them mine and get a bloody cab out of here as soon as I can find one? Because I’m not using your bloody phone when I can get my own, and I’m not going to stay locked up here forever with you and your phone and your computer, either.”

Jon blinked as though she had slapped him. He shook his head and let out a bitter laugh.

“You’re never going to stop thinking the worst of me, are you?” he spat, and let out another bark of bitter laughter. He threw up both of his hands, and Sansa could see the bronze streaks flashing across his eyes. “You always believed it before. Why would I think you’d stop now?”

If Sansa had had Jon’s eyes, they would have turned completely bronze with rage by now. It took most of her remaining restraint to keep herself from smashing her fist into the wall right beside Jon’s head.

“Oh, fucking come off it, Jon!” she shouted. “Why wouldn’t I stop? Why wouldn’t I stop? Maybe I did actually ‘think the best of you’” – she wrinkled the second and third fingers of each hand into exaggerated imitations of quotation marks, as she sometimes did when angry enough – “until you fucked another woman. That does tend to make a wife start to ‘think the worst’ of her husband, in case you did not understand the concept!”

Sansa felt a few drops of spittle leaving her mouth as she screamed the last few words, but by that point she was beyond caring, and judging from the way Jon’s open hand smacked against the wall behind him, several feet away from Sansa, so was he.

“God damn it, Sansa!” he cried. “You wouldn’t listen to me ever, not even from the first time I explained that I didn’t fuck her or anyone else! You never even tried to think anything but the worst of me! You had your mind made up already, didn’t you, even before I started leaving messages on your bloody phone that night? You couldn’t even wait for me to come home and at least listen to me tell you my side once before you left!”

Now the spittle began flying from Sansa’s mouth almost before she opened it. Once again, she did not care.

“Oh, fuck you to say I didn’t listen to you!” she screamed. “I did nothing but listen to you! I did everything I could to figure out if what you said was true, and you fucking well know it, and you fucking well knew the whole time that it was a lie! Jesus Christ, Jon, where do you fucking get off? You spent three whole fucking years prancing around acting all wronged and grieved and innocent after you humiliated me twice – once when you cheated on me and then again, if once wasn’t
enough, when you lied about it and kept on lying about it! And I spent the same fucking three years in fucking bloody fucking misery, and I will be *fucked* if I spend one more day in it after I leave here!” She felt her own tears forming, and she had decided after this morning’s episode on the couch that she was finished with letting Jon see her cry, so she did him one better and smacked both of her hands into the wall on each side of his bedroom door.

“Fuck your address,” she spat. “I’ll figure it out myself.”

Jon’s shoulders slumped. “You can have the bloody address,” he retorted. “I’ll give it to you now.”

He turned sharply on his heel and stalked off into a part of the room Sansa could not see. When she heard him opening and rummaging through a door, she assumed he was grabbing a pen and piece of paper. *Good. We’re back to strangers writing notes again.*

But when Jon returned to the doorway, he held cradled in his hands not a scrap of paper he’d torn from the yellow legal pads he’d always been so fond of keeping around, but a hinged wooden box with intricate designs carved into its lid. Before Sansa could make them out properly, she heard Jon speaking again, this time much more quietly than he had before.

“Here,” he said, and the bronze streaks had left his eyes, and his jaw was twitching in that inscrutable way it had done when he’d shown Sansa around the kitchen earlier that afternoon. “I was going to have it shipped to you, but now you might as well take it home with you.” He hesitated a moment before he extended the box to Sansa. “You might want to pack it carefully. What’s inside is insulated, but it’s better if the box doesn’t get jostled.”

Sansa merely stared at Jon. After several moments, he squatted and set the box down carefully on the floor next to her. He laid a piece of yellow paper on top of it, trudged back to his room without looking at her, and closed the door behind him. After a few more moments, Sansa picked up the box. She had no intention of bringing it home with her, but she could at least take it back to her room and let Jon find it after she’d left, and she really did need the address. As she rose back to her feet, however, the paper wafted off the box and fell toward the floor. Sansa grabbed wildly at it with her right hand several times, and she finally caught it when it was perhaps eight inches off of the floor, but she lost control of the box and heard a distinct rattling sound as it hit the carpet. Curiosity, along with a desperate hope that she hadn’t broken a second valuable item of Jon’s that day, got the better of her, and she knelt down next to the box and cautiously pried the lid open.

Then she not so cautiously screamed in spite of herself.
First of all, a heartfelt thank you to everyone who has commented on and critiqued this fic and in general made it blow up on AO3 over the last 24 hours! I really appreciate all of the feedback, whether from short comments or from detailed constructive criticism. Seeing my readers' perspectives really helps me to improve and hone my craft as a writer, and I don't take that for granted.

Second, since a picture is after all worth a thousand words, the beauties linked below depict both the emblem Jon used as a basis for the object described in this chapter and a few objects similar to Jon's that were created based on the same emblem.

Twinkling florets of red and white and green reflected the light from the hallway’s overhead bulbs up at Sansa. She recognized the designs in which they were arranged at once, and she knew Jon would have known she would recognize them.

But before her astounded mind could go down that path any further, she heard Jon’s voice calling her name directly above her head. She jumped up, startled, and barely avoided banging the top of her head on Jon’s chin.

“You all right?” Judging by Jon’s worried tone, he had called her name more than the one time she had heard it. Sansa, her eyes still wide from astonishment, merely nodded. She realized belatedly that her mouth was still wide open, so she managed to shut it most of the way. Her teeth reached out to snag her lower lip for the rest.

Jon finally nodded and turned back toward his room. He was reaching to shut the door when Sansa found the ability to speak again.

“Jon,” she said, pointing to the box, “what is it?”
Jon closed his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose, and emitted a long sigh. The pained intensity in
the look he gave her when he was through made Sansa catch her breath.

“It’s what I told you about,” Jon finally said. Sansa, bewildered, shook her head.

“You didn’t tell me about this,” she said slowly. “Not that – not that I remember, anyway.”

Jon’s jaw tightened a few more times, and Sansa could practically see the gears shifting inside his
head. He sighed again.

“It’s what I told you about before,” he said quietly. “I had it made for you.”

The terrible memory of their first face-to-face conversation after Sansa’s disastrous final visit to the
set of Jon’s and Ygritte’s film, back in Leeds three years ago, hit Sansa’s unwilling mind with the
force of the snowstorm still raging outside. Jon had called and texted her nearly a hundred times
during her journey to Leeds, but her only reply had been a brief text message letting him know that
she had gotten there safely and that he could now stop worrying about her and go back to Ygritte.
That, of course, had done nothing to lessen the frequency of Jon’s attempts to contact her; in fact, the
day after she had arrived in Leeds, she had opened her e-mail inbox to find a rare and heartfelt e-mail
from Jon, begging her to let him explain what had actually happened. He had offered to come to
Leeds or London or wherever else she wanted. Sansa had responded with a text message saying he
could come to her flat in Leeds if he were that eager to explain everything. She had been surprised
when Jon had sent her his flight itinerary just half an hour later, and even more surprised when she
had seen that he would be arriving in Leeds the following day. She had thought to have at least until
the weekend to make less of a sobbing wreck out of herself and her flat, and to this day she did not
know how Jon had talked his film’s director and producers into letting him off the filming schedule,
but he had come nevertheless, and Sansa had spent much of the night cleaning her flat and sobbing.
She had had coffee the next morning with Catelyn Stark, who after spending most of the week
feeding her brokenhearted daughter and washing the tears out of her clothing, had encouraged her to
wring every detail possible out of Jon, and then check every detail with a microscope if need be.

“That man gave me every overgeneralized denial in a cheater’s handbook, and I fell for most of
them,” she’d said as she’d sipped her skinny cinnamon latte. Sansa had winced at her mother’s
refusal, even months after his death, to call him anything else, even “your father.” Just as quickly,
she’d reminded herself that whatever pain Jon had caused her, her father had after all inflicted upon
her mother a hundredfold, and she had merely nodded and taken a generous gulp of her caramel
white chocolate mocha, which had always been her comfort drink of choice.

“But,” Catelyn had continued, taking her daughter’s hand across the table, “those were my mistakes.
I am sorry you had to see them, but I have every confidence you will learn from them. You have always been a quick learner, Sansa."

Sansa had not been quick enough to catch the tear that had run down her cheek then, but her mother had wiped it gently with a napkin, as well as the others that had followed.

“You don’t have to do this now, Sansa,” she’d said. “If he’s that serious about explaining everything to you, he’ll wait until you’re ready to do it.”

Sansa had shaken her head. “No,” she’d replied firmly. “His producers probably only let him off set for the one day. Anyway, I’d rather hear it now and have done with it.” She rummaged in her purse until she finally found the tissues she’d been looking for and promptly destroyed them by blowing her nose and cleaning her face as best she could.

Once finished with her coffee, Sansa had returned to her flat to wash her face, apply a fresh coat of makeup, and change into her favorite blazer and jeans. She paired them with a modest draped-neck blouse and her favorite knee-high boots. If she had to cry in front of Jon, and she knew that despite her best efforts she probably would, she might as well look like a million euros during the ordeal, and if he were in fact sleeping with Ygritte, at least he’d get a chance to see what he’d be missing out on permanently because of it.

Catelyn had shown up at Sansa’s flat half an hour before Jon was due to arrive, which had nearly given Sansa a heart attack because she had been expecting Jon and no one else. She’d brought a vase of yellow roses, Sansa’s favorite flowers, to grace the living room coffee table and to wish her good luck. Sansa had seen her mother’s critical gaze sweeping across the remainder of the flat and known her mother had also brought the roses to bring the clean but spare flat closer to her own standards of housekeeping, but had said nothing. She was probably about to fight with her estranged husband, and she barely had enough energy to deal with that, let alone start a fight with her mother in addition.

“You have always deserved a better man than that man, Sansa,” Catelyn Stark had said as she had kissed her daughter on the cheek. “I hope he does tell you the truth. Just don’t forget to check everything he says.”

Sansa had sighed. “I know, Mother,” she’d said. “I will.”

Catelyn had left soon after, and fifteen minutes later, Jon had knocked on Sansa’s door. That had begun two of the worst hours of Sansa’s life. Not only had she cried even more than she had feared she would, but she had discovered that the same now-vanished restraint that had usually relegated her tears to film sets and her father’s funeral had apparently controlled her tongue as well.
“Sit if you like,” had been her brusque reply to Jon’s attempt to hug her, and those had been the kindest words to pass her lips during the entire conversation. Jon had begun it by asking her how she was doing; she had snapped, “Do you really need to ask, Jon?”; and nothing had improved from there. Sansa had forced herself to listen as Jon had explained earnestly that he’d been in Ygritte’s trailer because she had offered to help with the birthday gift he’d been designing for Sansa. He’d brought it up in between takes the prior week, he’d said, and Ygritte had invited him to her trailer that day because she’d wanted to give him information about two artisans she knew who could make what Jon wanted. Sansa had peppered him with pointed questions, which had come out sounding ruder than she’d intended, about the jeweler and the goldsmith Ygritte had recommended and exactly what they were supposed to make for Jon and why Jon had stayed in Ygritte’s trailer for so long. Jon had answered all of her questions without seeming evasive, and Sansa had badly wanted to believe him, but her mother’s words about verifying everything would not leave her head, and her heart had splintered anew every time Jon had spoken Ygritte’s name, and her head had begun to hurt and she and Jon had both begun to cry. He had clearly expected Sansa to be satisfied with his explanation and even return to their house in London, and when she had refused, he had been bewildered and upset, and they had both spat words at each other that had easily topped all of their previous utterances during every fight they had had to date. Nonetheless, Jon had agreed to provide Sansa with the information Ygritte had given him about the jeweler and goldsmith, whom he swore he’d contacted the day after Sansa’s aborted visit to the film set, and she had agreed to follow up on it.

True to his word, Jon had sent Sansa the information, and true to hers, she had made two phone calls – one to the jeweler, one to the goldsmith – on what had turned out to be the worst day of her life. She’d begun the day feeling under the weather, but had convinced herself she was suffering more from the past week’s emotional ordeal than from a virus, and would feel better once she’d called both artisans.

Instead, the bottom had dropped out of her life.

Even now, over two years later, Sansa could not bear to think of that call for more than a few seconds, nor of the fact that she’d spent three days after that agonizing over her decision to file for divorce from Jon. Both the goldsmith and the jeweler had denied everything Jon had told her, and even then Sansa had still wanted to believe him. When Sansa had first arrived in Leeds, her mother had warned her that might happen if she caught Jon lying. “Love makes you want to believe a man’s lies,” she’d said, and the crushing pain that had enveloped Sansa after she’d made those horrible phone calls had ensured she’d learned the truth of that lesson in the worst way possible.

But now the box sat open in front of her, and inside it sparkled a brooch crafted in the shape of the red and white Tudor rose, the famous emblem created by King Henry VII at the end of the Wars of the Roses. He had crafted it to symbolize the union of the two warring houses: first, his ancestral house of Lancaster, whose members, Sansa had explained to Jon and anyone else who would listen, may or may not have occasionally used a red rose as their symbols during the wars; and second, his new wife Elizabeth’s house of York, which had proudly displayed the white rose on its heraldic devices since a century prior to the wars. That union had put an exclamation point to the end of the Wars of the Roses, and although the Tudor rose had been created more for its propaganda value than
Sansa had always found it enchanting. The gleaming brooch in front of her made it even more so. Each jewel had been precisely cut to fit into the intricate white gold setting, whose petals had been cut in just the shape Sansa had always told Jon was exactly the one Henry Tudor’s first propagandists had used. It must have taken months just to get the setting right, she thought, let alone the jewels, and if they were real, the cost—

Sansa quickly drew back the hand she had tentatively reached out toward the brooch. All for the better, too, she thought, as she realized that both of her hands were now shaking.

“It – I – ” Her voice shook too, and she dared not look directly at Jon, who had sunk to sit on the hallway floor a few feet over against the opposite wall. “It’s – I didn’t – the jeweler said, and so did the goldsmith, so I thought – oh – ” She covered her mouth with one still shaking hand and slumped back against the wall.

“Neither of them made it,” Jon replied bitterly. “Neither of them was ever going to make it. They were both just part of Y – her plan to get to me.”

Sansa was startled enough to risk a glance at Jon, who was now gazing down at the brooch.

“Get to you? What do you mean?”

Jon’s jaw clenched again with a bitterness that matched his voice. “She did it to try – ” He hesitated and looked up at Sansa, as if debating whether his next words were worth the effect they would have on her.

“Try to get back with me,” he finally said. Sansa let out an involuntary gasp.

“What? She – ? She – but you never told me she did that!” she exclaimed, unable to keep the bewildered squeak out of her voice. Jon, clearly relieved to that Sansa was not exploding with anger again, shook his head.

“She came onto me later,” he said, “after you’d filed the papers. When I went to the people she recommended at first, I thought they were genuine. I thought she thought they were genuine. That’s why I told you to call them. It was a few weeks later when I asked the jeweler how things were going and he put me off that I realized something was wrong. I asked her about it, and that’s when she threw herself at me. I kicked her out as soon as I realized what she was doing. I told her not to talk to me off set ever again, not that it matters now.” He took a slow, heavy breath, the kind that
meant he was trying to restrain himself – whether from yelling, crying, or both in this case, Sansa was not sure.

“But it –” She gestured weakly toward the jewelry box. “You had it made anyway.” Her voice had begun shaking along with her hands.

Jon nodded slowly. “I found some other people on my own later,” he finally said. “I thought we’d work things out, and I’d give it to you then.” His jaw was working furiously again, and Sansa turned her gaze to the wall next to his head.

“But I never knew – I didn’t know that this one – I didn’t know,” she said, biting her lip in a futile attempt to control her shaking voice. “You could have – you never told – I didn’t know that she…” She clapped her hand over her mouth again, but once again it had no effect on the shaking.

Jon shook his head. “I tried to tell you,” he said. Sansa winced at the pain that had crept into his voice. “By then you had your lawyer. She was a damn good one, too.” Another bitter laugh escaped his lips. Sansa closed her eyes, unable to meet his any longer. Jon was entirely right on both counts: after making the decision to leave him, Sansa had hired Jeyne Poole, the attorney almost everyone she’d asked had recommended as the best for getting as quick and quiet a divorce as possible, and one of her first requests to the woman had been to handle all necessary communications with Jon. She did not wish to speak to Jon in person again, she’d informed Jeyne, and the attorney had done a stellar job of ensuring it, with the sole exception of the final, tear-filled conversation when Jon had agreed to the divorce.

“She never let a thing get past her,” Jon was saying when Sansa allowed her eyes to open again. “It was sheer luck that Sam mentioned seeing you in the park so often after you left.”

Sansa closed her eyes again. As soon as she’d filed the divorce papers, she had done everything she could to leave her married life in the past. She’d moved everything she owned out of her and Jon’s house to the flat in Leeds. She’d changed her phone number and e-mail address. She had not, however, anticipated Jon’s best friend, Sam Tarly, who also lived in Leeds, spotting her in her favorite park one day and trotting up to her to say a shy hello. It was completely impossible to be rude to such a sweet person as Sam, even if he was Jon’s best friend, so Sansa had spared a couple of minutes to make small talk with him before going on her way. She had not thought that incident would lead to Jon’s finding her there one day months later with tears streaming down his cheeks. The look that was on his face when Sansa finally opened her eyes said they were threatening to do it again. When she bit her lip and tasted salt, she realized that her own tears had beaten his to the job.

“But – you found me and said you’d sign the – and you didn’t –”
Jon sighed heavily and buried his face in his hands. It took several moments for him to look back up at Sansa, and when he did, he looked ashamed of himself.

“At that point, I just wanted to see you,” he finally said, “and show you some of the sketches they’d sent me. I thought if I offered to do whatever you liked, you’d maybe agree to talk to me again, and look at the sketches, and then you’d see, and I did try to show you the sketches on my phone – but then…” His voice trailed off, and he turned one of his hands palm upward in a gesture of futility.

Sansa bit her lip. She remembered that day all too well, and she remembered as well as Jon did that once she’d told him she did want the divorce and really appreciated his offer to sign the papers, he had indeed asked to show her something on his phone. At that point she’d snapped at him, pointing out that she had only asked for a divorce and not for anything else he was trying to pull on her, and stalked away. Jon’s clear misery had kept her awake that night longer than she’d cared to admit; and it had reminded her far too vividly of the doubts that had plagued her ever since she’d told Margaery she was leaving Jon. Margaery, ever Sansa’s champion, had listened without interruption, but the first words out of her mouth after Sansa had finished explaining everything had been, “Are you sure he cheated? That doesn’t sound like Jon at all.” Even after Sansa had reminded both Margaery and herself that she had proven Jon’s explanation for the trailer incident was a lie, Margaery’s words had still nagged at her. But then, so had her mother’s, and, as Sansa had informed Margaery and so many of her other friends, she refused to let Jon humiliate her the way her father had done to her mother. At least this way, she’d said, she’d found out Jon’s true colors before they’d had any children to bear the same scars their father’s infidelities had inflicted on Robb and Sansa. That Jon would not have inflicted those scars in the first place was a thought Sansa had refused to entertain, even though it had insisted on shuffling about in the back of her head from time to time.

But if Jon had had the brooch made – if he had, in fact been trying to show her the sketches of it that day in the park –

“She threatened to have me arrested,” Jon was saying, and both Sansa’s attention and her gaze snapped over to him at once.

“She – wait, Jeyne did what?”

Jon briefly raised his hands off of his knees, where he had propped them.

“She said she could get me taken in on stalking or contempt of court,” he said. “But she said she wouldn’t pursue anything if I signed the papers like I’d told you I would.”

Sansa shook her head. “I didn’t tell her to do that,” she protested. “I didn’t know – I just told her I
wanted everything over with as quickly as possible, but I didn’t tell her to threaten you or – or have you arrested, or anything like that. I didn’t mean – mean for her to do that, Jon, I really didn’t.” She blinked away the tears, which had trailed off for the time being, and met Jon’s narrowed eyes. She could not blame him, she supposed, for thinking otherwise, although it hurt that by the look of him, he did not believe her entirely. Then she remembered that she had not believed Jon about Ygritte or the brooch. Much as she hated that thought, it would not be pushed away any more than would the tears, which had begun pouring from her eyes afresh. It was all she could do to keep her gaze on Jon, who was shrugging.

“Either way,” he said, “I wanted to tell her to fuck off. I probably should have.” He shook his head. “No, I really should have. I should have gone to you again. And again.” He grimaced and shook his head vigorously, as if trying to banish the memory from it. “If I’d held out for you a little longer – ” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair, which was beginning to work its way loose from his bun. “At least I’d have been able to show it to you finished.” He gestured toward the jewelry box. “I got it three days after the judge gave us the decree.”

Sansa, unable to meet Jon’s eyes any longer, glanced at the box herself, but she could no longer see the details of the brooch through the heavy sheen of tears in her eyes. She reached up to brush a few of them away and discovered that both of her hands were now shaking uncontrollably. It was all she could do to prop her elbows gingerly on her raised knees and cup the sides of her hands around her nose and mouth. One, two, three, four...

That doesn’t sound like Jon at all.

I’m sorry, Ms. Stark, I’ve never heard of him. As a customer, that is. You understand.

I kicked her out as soon as I realized what she was doing.

Love makes you want to believe a man’s lies.

He’s the strangest cheater I’ve ever known.

She threatened to have me arrested. …I wanted to tell her to fuck off. I probably should have. No, I definitely should have. I should have gone to you again.

…those were my mistakes…but I have every confidence you will learn from them.
He hasn’t had a girlfriend since you divorced him. He looks like a brooding little lost emo puppy.

I didn’t know…

Sansa…

“Sansa!” Jon’s worried voice, which sounded oddly muffled as if shouted through water or on the other side of a closed door, finally brought Sansa’s face out of its cradle in her hands. Now her entire body was shaking.

“Sansa, are you all right?” Jon’s eyes had grown alarmingly wide. Sansa nodded as best she could. Jon still looked troubled.

“Are you sure? Do you have a fever?” He reached tentatively toward her forehead, but stopped himself. Sansa shook her head again.

“I – I – I’m fine, just – bed – I’d rather go – go upstairs – to my room,” she ground out. She managed to plant one hand on the floor and one on the wall behind her. She moved one foot right next to the wall and began to stand, and made it almost halfway before collapsing. She would have hit the floor hard had Jon not caught her under the arms and gently pulled her upright. Sansa let out an unsteady breath and propped an equally unsteady arm against the wall. Jon let go of her, but as soon as he did so, she fell forward, and he caught her again.

“Sor – sorry,” she quavered as she grasped his arm. Jon looked at her as though he might call 999 then and there.

“How about I help you to the couch?” he said, and held up one hand as though to ward off a protest that Sansa did not voice. “Just in case something goes wrong and I need to help – or call into the hospital for you.”

Sansa shook her head and forced a deep breath in and out of her lungs. “I don’t need the hospital,” she said finally. “Just – just blankets and – the couch has them, I suppose – ”

Jon nodded. “Here, then. I’ll carry you.” He dropped one hand from her shoulder. “Or help you walk.”
Sansa merely blinked at him. His words had begun fading in and out again. She tried to turn and walk toward the living room, but instead she stumbled into the wall. Fortunately, Jon caught her before she could hit her head, and in a moment later she was ensconced in his arms and being hauled into the living room. Almost before Sansa could grab him by the shoulders to brace herself, he was depositing her onto the same couch on which she had taken refuge before. He reached into the laundry basket, which was sitting in the same place Sansa had found it earlier that day, and pulled out both of the blankets left in it. Sansa was still trying to unfold the first one with her uncooperative arms when Jon reappeared in her line of vision, this time holding two pillows.

“Here,” he said, and deposited both of them onto the couch behind her head. He shook out the second blanket he had given to Sansa and draped it over her body. Sansa sank down onto the pillows, dragged the blanket’s corners around her shoulders, and pulled her knees up to her chest underneath the thick fleece. *Breathe in. Breathe out.*

“You going to be all right?” Jon, now crouched on the floor next to the couch, still looked concerned. He also looked tired and upset enough to collapse on the floor next to Sansa. She nodded.

“I’m fine,” she said. Jon did not look convinced, but after a few moments he nodded and slowly rose to his feet. Sansa heard him padding back down the hallway and reached for the blanket she had abandoned when Jon had covered her with its twin. Her tears had dried again, and her arms were not shaking as badly as they had been, but it still took a few minutes for her to wrangle the blanket into a halfway decent position.

Exhausted, Sansa flopped back onto the pillows and curled into a ball once more. She could barely move a muscle, but neither could she rest.

*Oh, sweetheart, I’m so sorry. But at least you found out early on. Not like I did.*

*She said she’d help me with your birthday gift.*

*Make him give you details. That way, when you catch him lying, you can prove it.*

*Here. Call them both. They’ll tell you the same thing I did.*

*Get out, Jon. Just leave.*
Thank God you had a prenup.

I’m sorry, Sansa. I thought he was one of the good ones. I really did.

Just don’t talk about it again, Robb.

Shut up, Margaery.

Yes, Mya, I’m sure he was lying. I wouldn’t have divorced him otherwise.

You spent three whole fucking years prancing around acting all wronged and grieved and innocent after you humiliated me…I spent the same fucking three years in fucking bloody fucking misery, and I will be fucked if I spend one more day in it after I leave here!

You never even tried to think anything but the worst of me! You had your mind made up already…

The words spun faster and faster inside of Sansa’s head, along with the wounded expression that had wracked Jon’s face as he had spoken the last of them. Sansa did not realize until it was too late that the leftover lasagna in her stomach was also churning.

Then she leaned over the edge of the couch and vomited onto Jon’s living room floor.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Sansa!”

Jon’s concerned voice sounded as muffled as it had when Sansa had begun to collapse in the hallway. Whether he was standing at the doorway to the living room or directly above her she could not tell, and in any case she could not look up to figure it out, because her roiling stomach had just sent up another helping of its contents. She vomited again, this time even more violently than before. The force of it made her turn her body farther off the couch. Startled, she grabbed for the coffee table, but missed. Her body tumbled toward the floor, but was suddenly yanked backwards and deposited on the couch again.

“Whoa!” Jon’s alarmed voice sounded much closer now, and now Sansa realized that he was indeed crouched directly above her, since she herself was facing half-sideways, half-upward and did not have to turn to see him. She could barely make out his face through the tears pushed into her eyes by the force of her vomiting.

“Hang on, Sansa,” she heard him saying. “I’ll get a bowl for you – and some water – just a minute.”

Sansa did not trust her spinning head to nod when she wanted it to do so. Instead, she let out a softer groan. She hoped that Jon would understand, and apparently he did, for his dark head popped out of her field of vision, and she heard his footsteps running across the floor and into the kitchen. A few banged cabinet doors and rattling dishes later, he was back. He set an object on the floor next to Sansa’s feet. Her eyes were still too covered with tears to make it out properly, although she caught its metallic gleam reflected by the overhead lighting.

“Here.” Jon had crouched down next to Sansa again. “You can use this for – if anything else comes up. But I’ll have to move you, all right? I have to clean everything off the floor right here.” He gestured toward the floor next to Sansa’s head, which was covered in vomit. Now that he mentioned it, thought Sansa, she could smell exactly what needed to be cleaned up. The scent made her retch again, and she heard another startled exclamation from Jon at the same moment she felt him picking her up and turning her around. She promptly leaned over the side of the couch once again, trying as she vomited to position her head directly above the bowl Jon had put there. She heard him dashing off again. When he returned, he set a glass and a filtered water pitcher on the coffee table, along with a stack of towels. He picked up a hand towel from the stack, poured a bit of the water onto a corner of it, and held it out to Sansa.

“Here you go,” he said, then, “Do you want any water right now, or can you not keep it down?”
Sansa, not trusting any part of her body not to shake or churn or tumble over itself, shook her head. She patted the towel over the sweat and tears and vomit on her face as well as she could before she set it gingerly on top of the blanket that covered her body. That action depleted most of what little energy she had left, and she flopped back onto the couch with a groan. Her head nearly hit the arm of the couch as she did so before it sank into the cushions next to the rest of her body. Startled by the lack of the pillows her head had been counting on, she groaned again. She tried taking in a deep breath, and that did help somewhat, but it also forced her to recognize just how rancid the traces of vomit still stuck in her mouth tasted. She let out the breath as slowly as she could and scrubbed at the roof of her mouth with the wet portion of the towel Jon had given her, but it did not have enough water on it to eradicate the taste.

Sansa took another deep breath and pushed her legs halfway off the couch. She leaned her head back for several moments before getting the strength to push them again. Unfortunately, her feet got tangled in the blanket, and the force of her effort pushed all of her body off the couch except for them, and she landed on her knees with a crash right in front of the coffee table, which she grabbed onto for dear life.

“Sansa!” Jon climbed onto the couch and stepped over to the other side of her body, which he pulled gently off of the ground and table and deposited back on the couch. For a moment Sansa wondered why he had not simply stepped around the puddle of vomit he had been cleaning up, until she saw that her knees had landed not an inch away from the vomit.

“So – sorry,” she gasped. “I just was trying to get to the water.”

Jon stepped off to the side, and Sansa heard the sound of water pouring. A moment later, Jon was holding a glass full of water out to her. She propped herself up on one elbow and took it with her other hand.

“Thanks,” she whispered. The vomit tears had begun clearing from her eyes, and enough of them had disappeared for her to see exactly the look that must have elicited Margaery Tyrell’s “brooding little lost emo puppy” remark.

Jon merely nodded and turned back to clean up the rest of the vomit as Sansa took a long sip from the glass, swirled its contents through her mouth as thoroughly as she could, and spit them out into the bowl. She set the glass down carefully on the floor beside the bowl before huddling back onto the couch.

The scent of whatever Jon was now using to clean the carpet at the other end of the couch permeated the air. It smelled of pine and a little bit of lemon and any number of things that Sansa normally
found refreshing, but now found far too strong for her overwrought senses. She had to lean off of the couch to vomit in the bowl three more times before her stomach finally felt as though it might be stabilizing.

“Sorry.” This time, Sansa could clearly sense Jon’s exhausted voice coming from perhaps two or three feet away. She raised her head to find him crouched near her head. “I know that stuff has a strong smell.” He gestured toward the foot of the couch.

Sansa shook her head. “It’s OK,” she whispered. “I’m the reason you had to use it anyway. I’m – I’m – I’m sorry.” Her throat and chest constricted painfully over the last word.

Jon shrugged. “It’s done anyway,” he replied and gestured toward the bowl on the floor, which was now filled nearly to the top. “I’ll take care of that, though.” He glanced over his shoulder at the filtered water pitcher. “And leave that on the floor for you.”

“Thank you,” Sansa whispered. Jon exhaled deeply – the smell, Sansa realized, must be getting to him – and stood up. He carefully picked up the bowl and disappeared for a few minutes. When he came back, the bowl was shiny and clean.

“Let me know if you need me to get you to hospital, all right?” he murmured, sounding as tired as Sansa felt. She nodded.

“Thank you,” she said again. Jon gave her a curt nod. He turned on his heel and strode to the light switch panel on the opposite wall. Ten seconds later, he was gone, and the room’s sole source of light was the faint gray glow of the blowing snow.

Sansa no longer felt like she would vomit, so she slowly sat up and grabbed the pillows that had been sitting at the other end of the couch since Jon had moved her. Halfway through positioning them behind her, her head began to spin in lieu of her stomach. She fell back onto the pillows and shut her eyes. When that did not rid her of the dizziness, she tried deep breathing. One, two, three, four…

*Jon never cheated.*

*Jon never lied.*
Ygritte lied.

The jeweler and the goldsmith lied.

Mother lied.

Jeyne Poole lied.

Jon told the truth.

Jon told Ygritte to piss off.

Jon had the brooch made.

Sansa propped herself up so suddenly that she saw stars. She had left the brooch on the floor in the hallway next to Jon’s room. She couldn’t leave it there overnight and risk anything – but surely Jon would notice it and put it back in his room. Perhaps he would decide to keep it, and as much as she loved it already, Sansa could not blame him. She sighed and fell backward onto the pillows again.

Jon never cheated.

Jon never lied.

Jon never wanted Ygritte.

Her head began spinning again, although fortunately, her stomach did not follow suit this time.

One, two, three, four...

Jon never cheated.
Jon never lied. …

Sansa’s thoughts spun until her exhaustion swept them away and her into a deep sleep.


When Sansa awoke, she discovered that her right arm had fallen asleep. She rolled her weight off of it and distracted herself from the pain of its awakening by turning to stare at the windows. As far as the ever-present gray glow would tell her, the snow was still falling.

Once her arm had fully awakened, Sansa slowly raised herself to a sitting position and worked the blankets off of her feet so as not to repeat her previous fall against the coffee table. Her head and body alike felt remarkably stable, so she cautiously pushed herself to a standing position, leaning on the arm of the couch for support as she did so. She padded over to the windows and confirmed that the wind was still flinging snow out of the sky and into the increasing drifts piled around Jon’s flat.

Thinking of Jon at all made Sansa’s feet itch, so she ambled into the kitchen and leaned against the barrier between the two glass patio doors. A particularly tall snowdrift had piled up next to the full-length windows to the left of the doors; Sansa thought idly that it would perhaps reach her shoulder were she to stand immediately next to it.

Jon never cheated, began the almost ritual chant deep inside her head, and Sansa quickly turned from the patio doors and traipsed into the dining room. She clicked on the light switch that controlled the chandelier hanging immediately above the stained cherry table and chairs and was greeted with a hundred dazzling lights that burned their replicas into the backs of her eyeballs. Sansa recoiled and clapped one hand over her eyes. She used the other to feel for the dimmer switch, which she finally located and pushed downward. Once her eyes had recovered, she removed her hand and opened them.

Jon never lied, she thought, and began pacing in circles around the dining room table.

The brooch was beautiful.

Ygritte lied to him, but he had the brooch made anyway.
Sansa groaned in frustration, strode over to the light switch panel, and plunged the dining room back into darkness. She padded back through the kitchen and living room and turned down the first hallway to the laundry room. The first sight that greeted her eyes once she had turned on the light to assist them was a jumbled pile of jeans and T-shirts occupying a laundry basket on the counter next to the dryer. A plastic grocery sack sat next to them, holding Sansa knew not what.

There had been a grocery sack in the passenger seat of the car, sitting right next to the woman who had died. A bunch of bananas had been thrown out of it, and Sansa had seen them split and sprawled at odd angles against the inside of the door.

She blinked to rid her mind of the memory. It went, but left in its place the unseeing brown eyes of the woman whose name Sansa still did not know. She blinked again and saw a different set of brown eyes, these very much alive with pain and leaking tears.

Sansa felt her own tears coming thick and fast. Her hand caught the edge of Jon’s laundry basket as she collapsed onto the floor, and the clothes inside thumped softly around her knees. When her sobs increased to keening wails, Sansa grabbed onto the first of the basket’s contents her hand reached and clutched it to her mouth to muffle the sounds.

*Jon never cheated.*

*Jon never lied.*

*Ygritte lied.*

*The jeweler and the goldsmith lied.*

*Mother lied.*

*Jeyne Poole lied.*

*Jon told the truth.*
Jon didn’t do anything wrong.

Sansa’s stomach felt as though it were turning inside-out again, but this time without any retching or vomiting to relieve it. The pain spread to each remaining organ in her gut one by one, and last of all, her heart contorted and pulled and spun around itself. Sansa felt she would have welcomed a good knife thrust to let out the blood or lessen the pressure or assuage the agony just one bit, but she got no such relief. All she could do was huddle in a fetal position on the linoleum floor and allow her body free rein to writhe in misery, and her voice the same permission to scream itself hoarse.


Sansa could not have said how long she lay curled up on the floor after the last of the convulsions had done wracking her body. She only knew that when she came to herself, her back muscles were screaming and her throat felt very raw. Slowly, she uncurled her body limb by limb until she was stretched out sideways, and even more slowly, she used the cabinets and countertop next to her to haul herself to her feet. She shook as she folded and replaced the clothes that had spilled out of the laundry basket.

Eventually, Sansa managed to wrangle the basket back onto the counter and her body back into the living room. The dual scents of pine and lemon still lingered in the air, although not as overwhelmingly as they had hours before. They barely registered in Sansa’s mind as she stared at the rumpled blankets on the couch. Instead, she thought of what Catelyn Stark would say were she to see the couch looking so untidy. Her disapproval, however, paled in comparison to how badly Sansa suddenly realized Jon must be inconvenienced by her taking over his living room, not to mention vomiting all over his carpet and being too sick to clean it up herself as she should have done. And should have done with the vase, too, come to think of it.

No wonder Jon had been so curt when he’d been cleaning up after her. Sansa now saw it as a wonder he hadn’t left her to fend for herself. A sudden wave of moisture crested behind her eyelids. It died away quickly, but not before she marched to the couch and gathered up blankets, bowl, and glass alike. No longer would she inconvenience Jon, not when she had a perfectly good room in which to closet herself away so he would not have to see her again. At least, he would not have to see her again after she had tried to let him know how sorry and stupid and awful she had been.

No. Sansa shook her head as she began to mount the staircase to the top floor of the flat. Schoolchildren pelting each other with dirt on the playground were stupid and awful.

No, divorcing her husband over an infidelity that had never even happened went a bit beyond that, especially when she’d had so many doubts niggling at the back of her mind. Even after she’d spoken
to the jeweler and the goldsmith, she’d tried to reconcile what had seemed the cold, hard facts they’d presented to her with the equally cold, hard fact that Jon had had eyes only for her ever since that night in the hotel room after the miniseries premiere. But every time she had thought about reaching for the phone to call Jon (or at least someone who still have the number she’d ditched along with her old phone), she’d thought of her father’s stony face and her mother’s tears, and her resolve had hardened.

Now, her father’s hard gray eyes faded behind her field of vision, and in their place appeared a brown pair that were warm and writhing and wounded.

You wouldn’t listen to me ever, not even from the first time I explained that I didn’t fuck her or anyone else! You never even tried to think anything but the worst of me! You had your mind made up already, didn’t you, even before I started leaving messages on your bloody phone that night?

Sansa collapsed on the bed and shut her eyes futilely against another wave of tears.

You didn’t listen.

Are you really sure there isn’t some mistake, Sansa? He’s always adored you...

No. Not unless his dick “mistakenly” fell inside Ygritte. Hence he doesn’t adore me.

Love makes you want to believe a man’s lies.

If you believe that he cheated, and you also believe that he’s acted inconsistently with a man who cheats, and you’re determined to move on in life without contacting him again, you’ll need to find some ways to help you live with the uncertainty.

The jeweler lied.

The goldsmith lied.

Jon didn’t lie.
I didn’t know.

Once more, Sansa found herself curled up into a fetal position and leaking tears like a broken faucet. She cried until her ribs hurt and the blankets underneath her were soaked with tears, mucus, sweat, and God knew what else.

After what seemed like hours, Sansa cried herself to sleep for the third time in two days.


Sansa awoke shivering and bathed in the now-familiar silver glow emanating from the bedroom window. Several minutes passed before she finally peeled herself off of the bed, rotated her head to work out the kinks in her neck, and padded to the window. One glance confirmed that the Met Office had indeed gotten it right: the snow was still whirling through the air, and Sansa could see no more than perhaps a couple of feet beyond the window. She sighed and turned toward the bathroom, where she helped herself to another dose of Tylenol, and then trudged back across the bedroom, where she collapsed in the chair on the other side of the walk-in closet.

Sansa buried her face in her hands and groaned at the same time that her stomach emitted the mother of all growls. She felt famished and not at all nauseated, which meant that she would have to eat soon. But any foray out of her bedroom meant risking an encounter with Jon, and that made Sansa’s hunger dissolve into panic.

Coward. Selfish, stupid, pathetic coward.

Sansa groaned again. None of the thoughts that had raced about her mind the prior night between her tears and screams had provided her with any viable ideas about what she should say to Jon. He deserved the deepest apology she could offer and then several hundred more, but what words exactly, if any, could make amends for her three-year-long accusation of infidelity, not to mention initiating a brutal divorce from Jon – Jon, who had never been anything but the loyal, honest boy she had met at the film audition all those years ago?

I’m sorry, was the only phrase her throbbing head would produce at first, and that would not do in the least.

I shouldn’t have believed the people you told me to call, whom I couldn’t have known your ex-
girlfriend told to lie to you? Not nearly good enough.

I shouldn’t have flown off the handle as quickly as I did. Better, although still insufficient.

I should have taken more time to think before I changed my phone number and cut you off for good. I should have realized something was wrong when you cut out of filming to see me and answer my questions. I should have listened to whatever told me it wasn’t you – hell, I should have known when even Margaery told me it wasn’t like you – and when Mother said...I didn’t know...

Sansa shook her head, frustrated. She needed food and coffee to help her to unravel her jumbled thoughts – that and the computer. Mya had advised Sansa during several of their sessions to write down her thoughts and feelings every day as a way of clearing her head, and it had indeed helped Sansa on the days when she had actually gotten around to it. And if it had worked then, perhaps it would help her organize her apology – although she cringed at how insufficient the word was – better.

All of those plans, however, were dashed when Sansa entered the kitchen to find Jon pouring himself a cup of coffee. She stopped dead in her tracks, but not without banging into the doorframe with her right elbow. She yelped and clutched it at the same time Jon dropped the coffeepot into the sink.

“Damn!” he exclaimed. He whirled around, saw Sansa in the doorway, and sighed.

“I – sorry,” Sansa said, her voice trembling. “I’m sorry; I can make another pot of coffee, Jon – I’m sorry.”

Jon fished the coffeepot out of the sink and sighed again.

“It’s fine, Sansa,” he replied sharply. He waved a hand toward the island, where Sansa vaguely noticed his phone was perched in its black silicone case. “Besides, now you can tell everyone you haven’t disappeared.”

“What?” Sansa dropped her hand from her elbow. “What do you mean?”

Jon let out another sigh and trudged over to the island. He picked up his phone and unlocked the screen before he held out the device to Sansa. She squinted at the screen for a few moments until her
eyes had adjusted to the incoming glow of the snow blowing outside. Once they had, she saw a photo of herself taking up most of the screen. The rest of it was filled by the headline BRITISH ACTRESS GOES MISSING IN BLIZZARD and the subheading LAST SIGHTED AT SCENE OF CAR ACCIDENT IN YORKSHIRE.

Sansa’s eyes widened, and she reached over to swipe down the screen in spite of herself.

“What in the bloody hell?” she said, but her voice trailed off as she skimmed the article’s contents. They would not have made the cut of a Sixth Form school editorial, Sansa noted dryly, but she could make out well enough that the author had an anonymous informant in the Yorkshire police department. That source had been well-placed enough to give the author both the exact location of the accident and the description of the “mysterious” man who had served with her as a makeshift traffic director until the officers had arrived. Sansa had never gotten the man’s name, but even though she had read more than her share of outlandish articles about herself, she could still feel her ears redden at the author’s implication that he may have had something to do with her disappearance.

At least whatever idiot the author spoke to hadn’t seen Jon, Sansa thought, and the sigh of relief she emitted at the thought caught even her by surprise. She would not have been terribly shocked to see paparazzi descending over Jon’s gated community in helicopters despite the snow had it gotten out that she had last been see with him. But –

“…will be worrying,” she suddenly heard Jon saying.

Sansa shook her head rapidly. “What – I mean who – sorry?”

Jon moved his hand a few inches in a feeble wave toward his phone. “Margaery will worry about you,” he said, “along with everybody else.”

His voice sharpened on the last few words, and Sansa knew they were both thinking of her mother. Catlyn Stark, as both of them knew, would have had no trouble filling to overflowing the text and voicemail inboxes of Sansa’s destroyed phone within a few hours of her arrival at Jon’s flat two the night the storm had begun, especially if the woman had had assistance from Margaery and Sansa’s agent, among others. Sansa shut her eyes and groaned as she realized that they all would have tried e-mailing and instant messaging her next, but she had never gotten around to checking her e-mail inbox, and the events of the past day and a half had banished all thoughts of using the computer’s messaging app from her mind.

Shit. Oh, shit, oh, shit, oh, shit…
“Sorry,” she groaned. When she opened her eyes, she realized she was still holding Jon’s phone. She held it out to him at once. “I’m sorry.”

When Jon reached out to take the phone, Sansa forced herself to look up at him. She bit the inside of her lip because his expression was the same one she’d seen the prior day when she’d accidentally broken his grandmother’s vase. Jon, however, made no reply to her beyond a brief shrug.

“Not me you have to apologize to for that one,” he replied curtly. Sansa wondered if she’d imagined his voice lowering on the last two words, and she did not blame him, since every other offense she had committed since arriving at his flat had been directed at him, whether intentionally or otherwise. Her shoulders drooped.

“I’ll just – I’ll e-mail my – Margaery and everyone else, then,” she said quietly. Jon shot her a mildly confused look.

“That computer’s set up for messaging and FaceTime,” he replied. “That is, if you still don’t want to use the spare phone.”

This time Sansa had to imagine nothing to hear the hurt in Jon’s tone, no matter how deeply he cleared his throat as he finished speaking. She shook her head.

“No – I mean – I’ll – yes, I don’t mind – I mean, no, I don’t mind it, if you’re still willing to lend it out,” she finally said. “I mean, I’ll return it right away, of course, and –”

Jon waved her reply away. “I’ll get it now,” he said, and stalked off into the living room toward the hallway. He stalked back less than a minute later with a smaller phone, this one also in a black case.

“Thank you,” Sansa said, and once again made herself look Jon square in the eye. This time, after a short nod, he looked away first. He turned on his heel and strode out of the room again. Several moments later, Sansa heard the sound of Pink Floyd emanating from his bedroom. One of the first things Sansa had discovered about him after they’d met had been that Jon always played Pink Floyd when he wanted to work on his sound equipment, run through his lines, or otherwise shut himself off undisturbed from the rest of the world.

Sansa stared blankly at the coffeepot resting in the sink for a few moments until she realized that she did not have the energy to refill it any more than she had the appetite to eat any kind of food. The
wire rack from yesterday could have sat in front of her stacked to its limit with lemon poppyseed muffins, and she would not have picked off so much as a crumb. She turned around, clutched the phone so tightly her knuckles whitened within a few seconds, and trudged back up the stairs. She did not realize how tightly her chest had constricted until she breathed a long sigh of relief upon reaching her bedroom and flipping open the computer.

_Breathe in. Breathe out. Mother will pick up on the slightest bit of stress._

That, for whatever reason, made Sansa giggle. Catelyn Stark would be by far the more stressed of the two women when she discovered where her daughter had taken refuge from the blizzard. But that made Sansa think of Jon again, and her giggling stopped as quickly as it had begun.

Jon, who was justifiably under a great deal more stress than Catelyn or her daughter. _No, not stress_, Sansa quickly corrected herself; stress was not half enough of a word, or a phrase, or a book to describe the chaos she had wrought on him. _Pain. Betrayal. Hurt. Torn heart. Torn stomach. Torn mind. Torn everything._

Sansa had to bite down on her tongue to force herself to focus on the phone in her hand. It was unlocked, although that did not surprise her. That, more than anything else she had done that morning, made another round of tears threaten to appear.

_It should be locked. He should have locked the computer too. And let the laundry sit in the machines. And never thought of making lemon poppyseed muffins..._

Sansa wanted to flop down on the bed and disappear into the blankets until the snow and the glass shards and the bronze flecks in Jon’s eyes and the Pink Floyd and the aching in her feet were gone.

Instead, she clicked onto the computer’s messaging and FaceTime apps and watched blankly as their icons bounced up and down on the taskbar.

_The only happy things in this flat, and they’re imaginary. Perfect._

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to everyone who’s stuck with my angsty story thus far! I had planned for this chapter to be much longer, but then realized that a) it would have been impossibly
long had I included everything I'd initially decided to include, and b) Sansa and Jon both needed some "down time" to be really, well, down - for a while, at least. I realize that this half of the original chapter I'd planned out may seem boring or transitional compared to the other chapters, but to me it's just as important an episode in the story as others, although for different and less noisy reasons.

Again, I really appreciate all of the feedback I've received! Thanks so much for taking the time to articulate your thoughts and opinions - it means a lot to me!
“Yes, Mother, I am fine,” Sansa insisted for the sixth time in perhaps ninety seconds. She massaged her temple and forehead with the opposite fingers of her left hand while waiting for the next phase of Catelyn Stark’s interrogation to stop.

“You’re sure? You just told me you weren’t checked out by a doctor, Sansa,” her mother responded in a tone that was every bit as disapproving as it was worried.

Sansa sighed. “Only my car was hit, Mother, not me.”

Sansa could practically hear the other woman shaking her head through the silence that reigned for perhaps half a moment on the other end of the line. “Yes, but you just said you were standing out in the cold for hours, Sansa. Hypothermia is as real a concern in those temperatures as wounds from a car accident.”

Sansa let out a long sigh. “I ducked back into my car every so often. The man who helped me with the traffic did the same thing. And I can assure you I don’t have hypothermia. It probably would have shown up in the past two days if I had.”

“That does not mean you didn’t have a real chance of something going wrong, Sansa Lynn,” replied Catelyn. Sansa cringed, even though her mother rarely used her middle name any more.

“And yet it did not, because I am completely healthy and out of danger.” Sansa was failing miserably at keeping the sharpness out of her tone, but ending the conversation without divulging any details about Jon was worth the risk of further baiting her mother. “I’ll be back home as soon as I can, and don’t worry, I’ll wait until it’s safe to drive.”

“You rented a car, then?” The disapproval in Catelyn Stark’s tone thickened.

“No, Mother, I got a ride.” Sansa massaged her temple more vigorously.

“From whom?” Her mother’s voice sharpened to as fine a point as her gaze no doubt would have
been had Sansa been looking at her in person rather than speaking through the phone, and not for the first time, Sansa was grateful that Catelyn had never gotten the hang of FaceTime.

“The person I’m staying with now,” she replied, “where, as I mentioned, I am perfectly safe.”

“Good God, I hope you at least knew this person before the accident – ” Catelyn’s voice rose with each word, and Sansa hastened to cut her off.

“Yes, Mother,” she said. “I’m staying with a friend. I’ll take care of my car on the way back to Leeds. I’ll let you know as soon as I get back. For the moment – ” she raised her voice to cut off any protests from her mother – “I need to let my publicist know where I am so she can get the tabloids off their conspiracy theories about me.”

Catelyn Stark sighed. Sansa felt the disapproval from her eardrums to her toes.

“Very well,” said the older woman. She may as well have added, I’m sure you prefer her company to that of your boring mother.

Once she had signed off, Sansa buried her head in her hands and groaned. She still had two more phone calls to make, and the next call would incur even more interrogation than the first. Sansa supposed she ought to thank her lucky stars, God, the universe, or all three that her mother did not know exactly where she was, but she knew she would not be able to withhold that detail from the recipient of her next call, and she was not mistaken.

“You’re at Jon’s flat? Back up and tell me how in the hell you got there, Sansa Stark, right now!”

Four minutes into Sansa’s FaceTime session with her best friend, Margaery Tyrell’s soprano screech, which matched her dramatically flabbergasted expression as well as her lipstick matched her dramatically arched eyebrows, flooded the bedroom and echoed off the walls yet again until Sansa’s ears rang. Sansa winced and covered the offended organs with her hands until she could see that her friend had stopped vocalizing, at least for the moment. Thank God Jon’s still in his room.

Sansa sighed. “He came by just at the end of the officer taking my statement after the accident – ”

Margaery did a double take. “So the tabs had it almost half right? Wait – are you OK, Sansa?”
Sansa nodded. “Yeah,” she replied. Seeing the look on her friend’s face, she hastened to cut off the full-scale inquiry it foretold. “I didn’t get hurt or anything. I was just a witness.”

Margaery bit her lip and nodded. “But you and Jon are OK? I mean – with everything?”

Sansa nodded again. “We can co-exist without going insane, Marg,” she said quietly. Margaery arched an eyebrow at her, but Sansa offered nothing more.

“All right.” Margaery’s eyebrow arched a bit more. “So what’s really going on?”

Sansa shut her eyes and sighed. Despite the fact that she had awakened only a few hours ago, she felt more than drained enough for a nap.

“Nothing, Marg,” she said, once she had forced her eyes open. “I’m staying in one of the spare bedrooms upstairs. His bedroom is downstairs. We talk – ” she tapped one thumb against the laptop base next to the track pad – “as little as possible.”

Margaery narrowed her eyes. “Mmm-hmm,” she replied, although she and Sansa both knew she meant exactly the opposite. “And you’re OK with that?”

Sansa threw up a hand in exasperation. “Yes, I’m OK with having a place to stay during the worst blizzard in my lifetime, Marg. I have food, my own bathroom, and a coffee machine, and Jon – ” she huffed out a breath between her closed lips – “has been very nice about it.” Her shoulders sagged. “Sorry to be tight about it, but I just got through talking to my mother, and…” she shrugged and turned a hand palm-up. Margaery’s eyes immediately softened, although the scheming detective look, as Sansa was so fond of calling it, did not quite disappear.

“Ouch,” she said. “You’re right. That would make anyone tight.” Her cheek twitched for several moments, but in the end she pursed her lips and said nothing more but, “Go on, then, clean out his chocolate stash, dear. You deserve it.”

*Only if it’s spoiled rotten and makes me sick,* Sansa wanted to reply, but she only waved back. “Maybe. I’ll call you when I get back to Leeds.”
After ending the call with Margaery, Sansa exhaled heavily and leaned her forehead on the edge of the laptop screen. She knew she should be thanking her lucky stars that Margaery had let her get off easily, but even that had been all she could take. *Breathe in, breathe out.* One call to Ashara Dayne, her publicist, and she could relax, or at least eat.

Fortunately, unlike the prior two people Sansa had called, Ash did not give Sansa the feeling she was being X-rayed. Instead, once she was satisfied that Sansa had come to no harm, her usual good cheer returned, and Sansa ended the call two minutes later assured that Ash, as usual, would handle the tabloids with her usual competence.

Sansa did not want to think about her no doubt overflowing e-mail inbox, so she plunged into the computer’s typing software. At first she followed the advice Mya had given her about the journaling assignment: *If you’re having trouble picking out one thought at a time, just write down the first one that comes to your mind.* Sansa tried that, but nothing she could tap out on the keyboard was remotely close to what Jon deserved to hear from her.

*I am so horribly, badly, awfully sorry* – Backspace, backspace, backspace.

*I don’t deserve for you to listen to me, let alone forgive me* – Highlight, delete.

*I am as horrid a person as I have accused you of being for three years* – delete, delete, delete.

After perhaps the fifteenth such incident, Sansa’s stomach began to growl. She had gotten nearly to the foot of the stairs before she remembered to listen for the telltale signs of Pink Floyd emanating from Jon’s room. She sighed with relief when she heard them, and made a beeline straight for the kitchen. Once there, she cleaned the coffeepot and, to her relief, took only a few minutes to figure out how to fill and set the machine to which it belonged. While the coffee was brewing, she retrieved some fruit, cheese, and crackers, which were the results of her effort to do as little snooping as possible through Jon’s refrigerator and pantry. Unable to find any napkins, she carefully plucked two paper towels from the roll next to the sink and made her way back up the stairs.

When she returned to her room, Sansa elected to eat at the corner desk rather than on the bed. She’d never taken to eating while seated on a bed, even during her teenage years; the thought of the leftover crumbs skittering off of the covers onto her when she was trying to sleep had always made her shudder. Once she had set the computer onto the desk alongside her plate, she decided to find a funny YouTube video or two to help her confused mind refocus itself. No sooner had she pulled up the website on the browser, however, than she realized she was staring at the screen through tears. She quickly closed out of the browser and cringed.
Jon had spent the past three years in misery, and she’d thought she was entitled to watch somebody’s cat chasing a laser pointer on YouTube.

Sansa’s hand slackened off the track pad and onto the keyboard. Her forefinger tapped tentatively against one key and then another.

_Selfish_

The other fingers of her right hand joined in.

_**I’m selfish**_

Her left hand sprang into action, and in a matter of seconds both sets of fingers were flying across the keyboard, first in sputtering bursts, then in longer, more fluid strokes.

_Mean_

_Cruel_

_Judgmental? yes_

_Hurtful_

_Awful_

_I made you feel pain because I wanted to and it hurt you and I was glad because I wanted to hurt you_

_I punished you because I wanted to punish you_

_You didn’t hurt me_
You didn’t cheat

Even after I talked to the goldsmith and jeweler I still thought it was so unlike you, so I shouldn’t have cut everything off so fast.

I should have listened to you again one more time

I just didn’t see why they’d lie even though you’ve never lied to me

It was all wrong

I WAS WRONG

I was wrong, I was wrong, I was wrong, you didn’t deserve that, you didn’t deserve what I did. You didn’t deserve what Jeyne did. It was awful. But I was more awful. I was worse. I was wrong. You are kind, and you didn’t deserve it.

Sansa’s tears flowed with her fingers, but for the first time since she had arrived at Jon’s flat they did not entirely incapacitate her. She had to pause at frequent intervals to blow her nose, but her fingers inevitably made their way back to the keyboard, whether to peck out a phrase or hack away a sentence or two. They did not stop until the silver glow from the window had faded entirely and Sansa realized her need for the desk lamp, which was about the same time she realized her lower back had begun to hurt.

Sansa pulled back the desk chair and rose to stretch, very nearly knocking her long-emptied plate to the floor as she did so. She carried it over to the dresser, where it would be well out of her way, and bent down to grab her ankles. It had been far too long, she realized as she did so, since she had last been to a yoga class.

After a few more halfhearted stretches, Sansa slumped back in front of the computer. Somehow, when she swiped the tracking pad to get rid of the screensaver, she managed to switch task windows and pull up the Internet browser window she had opened during her FaceTime chat with Margaery. Now, instead of reading BRITISH ACTRESS GOES MISSING IN BLIZZARD, the article she’d clicked on was headlined with the words MISSING ACTRESS FOUND SAFE IN SNOWSTORM. The site’s sidebar, she noticed, contained links to a few other articles, but one in particular stood out to Sansa because of its title: FANS HAD DISCUSSED THEORIES
Sansa, who was well accustomed to outlandish and even disgusting tabloid headlines, nevertheless winced. The only “fans” to whom that clickbait line could possibly be referring were a few really horrible, idiotic teenage boys in tinfoil hats who had sick fantasies about her and therefore deluded themselves into smearing any man who actually had won her affections. Not that anyone who knew Jon would even dignify that faux article by so much as glancing it, let alone think about believing it.

But then, all of their formerly mutual friends who had taken Sansa’s side in the divorce had been reeled in by articles just as false.

SANSA STARK BLINDSIDED BY HUSBAND’S ALLEGED AFFAIR WITH COSTAR.

JON SNOW SNOWED UNDER WITH DIVORCE PAPERS: SOURCES CLAIM TRYST WITH EX

STARK RAVING MAD: SANSA STARK FILES FOR DIVORCE - WAS JON HAVING AN AFFAIR?

Sansa, of course, had made no such statements to the tabloids. But she had made them to people who now believed every word.

Oh, Jon.

Sansa felt like vomiting all over again. Fortunately, her body settled for a few gags, but even after they had passed, she found herself trembling. She folded the computer screen down and her arms on top of it and rested her head on top of them in a futile attempt to stop the shaking and the wincing and the tears that poured down her cheeks once again.

Sansa thought she must have nodded off, for all of a sudden she started and realized that her left arm was half numb. Once she had shaken it awake and mopped her eyes and nose with tissues, she reopened the computer screen, immediately closing out of the browser window as she did so. The word processing software window popped up again, and Sansa and discovered that she had produced more than twenty pages’ worth of typing. That number shot north of twenty-five in remarkably short order as Sansa’s fingers flew in response to the tabloid headlines and shocked friends’ faces that flashed before her eyes over and over again. Finally, the words trickled to a stop. For a time Sansa sat staring numbly at the screen, but then her fingers began to tap nervously against
the desk. Finally, she settled her right hand on the track pad, scrolled up to the beginning of the document, and began to read through it. The first couple of pages were nearly incomprehensible, and the next several improved on that only mildly. In a few places she had formed sentences, even paragraphs, that had begun to articulate what heretofore she had only been able to say with tears. Those tears rolled down Sansa’s cheeks freely as she read, and by the time she had reached the end of the document, she had given up the idea of ever being able to read through even a more coherent form of it to Jon without crying. But he still deserved to hear it, if he would voluntarily sit in her presence long enough for her to read it.

No. Even if Jon did agree to hear the entire document – it was far too raw and jumbled at this point to be called a letter – he deserved more than her simply reading off a piece of paper to him. If Jon and not she were doing the apologizing, Sansa knew that he would at least do her the courtesy of looking her in the eyes and finding his own words, even if he had to fumble with them. That thought infused her with a fresh round of nerves; she had always placed a high premium on being prepared, since she lacked Jon’s naturally succinct candor. Perhaps if she edited the document and ran through the most important points in her mind – but then she scrolled through the work again, and most of the ideas she had listed seemed equally crucial to the crux of the letter. And all of them made her want to cry again, although this time for Jon perhaps just as much as for herself.

Sansa sighed again. If she had been less of a coward, she would have knocked at Jon’s door hours ago and spoken to him already, or at least tried. Certainly, he would have been well within his rights to slam the door in her face or shout invectives at her as she had at him, although that possibility did not let her off the hook in the least.

Sansa was surprised to feel her stomach growl again, at least until she checked the alarm clock on the nightstand and discovered it was after seven o’clock. She reluctantly stood up, padded over to the dresser, retrieved her plate, and headed downstairs once again. So lost in thought was she that she did not notice that the kitchen light was on and the room itself occupied until it was too late.

“Oh!” she squeaked when she came to her senses and saw Jon pulling something out of the oven. That startled Jon, who yelped and dropped his pan on the stove at the same time Sansa let her dishes clatter to the island.

“I – sorry!” Sansa exclaimed as she grabbed the edge of the island for support. “I didn’t even see you – I’m sorry, Jon, I’m sorry.”

Jon turned to face her from the other side of the island, and Sansa suddenly realized that Catelyn Stark’s vocal cords had met their match for conveying disapproval. She shrank back involuntarily an inch or two before dropping her eyes again.

“I’m sorry,” she said yet again. “I – I’ll just – I’ll clean up my dishes after you’re done – sorry.” She
made herself look back up at Jon, whose gaze had not softened one bit. Sansa bit her lip. She supposed she should only have been surprised it had taken him this long to join her in wondering why he had tried to be civil, let alone hospitable, in the first place.

“Sorry,” she mumbled before she could stop herself, but that only intensified his glower. Sansa shrank back another two inches or so.

“I just meant you don’t have to clean up after me any more,” she managed and turned to leave.

“Clean what up after you?” Jon snapped. Sansa whirled around, startled. Jon had raised his voice to such volume only a handful of times during all the years they had known each other. “My muffins? My Gram’s vase? My heart? My fucking life?”

His face grew redder with each exclamation, and his voice had such a raw edge to it that Sansa was not sure whether he would burst into tears or begin flinging dishes across the kitchen. Jon must not have been sure either, because he settled for striking the surface of the island as hard as he could with both hands half-open. He winced and swore loudly, and Sansa stepped toward him in spite of herself.

“Are you all right?” she asked. Jon snorted.

“‘All right?’ A bit rich, isn’t that?” he spat. Sansa cringed at the disdain dripping from his every word. She nodded.

“You’re right,” she replied quietly. “I – I’m – ”

“Sorry.” They said the word at the same time: she with sadness, he with scorn. The two tones jarred Sansa’s ears when they clashed against each other, and she gave an involuntary shudder. She retreated to where she had stood before Jon had struck the island.

“I – I – I know it’s a stupid word,” she continued, once again making herself look Jon straight in the incensed brown eyes. “I know it’s stupid, and so is apologize, and so is every word in the English language, because they’re all useless, because at the end of it I hurt you and I left you and I didn’t listen to you and I told all of our friends – ” Her chest constricted when she saw the look on Jon’s face, and she gripped the edge of the island’s counter tightly to steady herself. “Oh, God, I hurt you, and I – ”
“Hurt?” The word left Jon’s mouth on the wave of the terrible snorting noise, and Sansa stopped cold. Jon himself stood stock still on the opposite side of the island, but his hands, now balled into fists, were trembling, and his knuckles were white. “Hurt? Is that another stupid English word for ripping someone’s heart out with a chainsaw and grinding it to a pulp with a bloody meat cleaver? Is that what you call hurt?” The snort made its third appearance. “If that’s what you call hurt, then we’ve done the damn impossible and found something we agree on! Jesus Christ, Sansa!” He pounded the island again, but this time with only one hand. He swiveled his upper body a quarter turn to face the stove for a moment, which was when Sansa noticed that the muscle directly next to his temple was twitching. That meant he was fighting tears, and he was fighting them hard if the twitches’ tempo was any indication.

Sansa’s mouth opened, but she found herself unable to close it or reply or indeed do anything other than feel the tears gather behind her eyes. Jon had rarely cried even as a teenager, let alone as an adult, and it had always broken Sansa to pieces when he had. He must have no idea, even now, how close she had come that last day in the park to relenting when he’d sobbed his heart out in front of her despite their not having spoken in months, or how excruciatingly difficult it had been for her to harden her own heart and walk away when he’d tried to show her the sketches of the brooch he’d commissioned for her. Now, as then, the fault for all of it lay squarely on her shoulders, and now, as then, she owed it to him to say something, anything, about how right he’d been and how wrong she’d been. Instead, Sansa found her mouth opening and closing silently, like that of the proverbial goldfish.

But he had been right.

“You’re right,” she said at last, and Jon pivoted sharply to face her. A bit of the bronze glow left his eyes and was replaced by something Sansa could only describe as relief, as though he had been locked for years behind a door that would only open when somebody spoke the magic words and Sansa herself had just said them.

“You’re right,” Sansa repeated, a little more firmly. “I was wrong, and I didn’t believe you, and I hurt you badly and worse than badly, and I put you in the worst sort of agony on purpose because I thought that’s what you’d done to me, even though you hadn’t.” She bit her lip and inhaled a long breath, both to keep the tears at bay and to try to remember any of the more lucid things she’d typed on Jon’s computer over the last few hours.

“I shouldn’t have done it,” she finally continued, lowering her voice so that it would not shake. “I shouldn’t have done any of it, or I should have thought better of it before I did so much, and – ” She shook her head again. If nothing else, Jon deserved to have her speak in coherent sentences. “I should have waited longer before I – before I just stopped talking to you like that, and even when I did – ” She bit her lip and lowered her eyes. “I should have listened more when people told me it wasn’t like you. And I know better now, but you’re right – I had a chance to know better then, but I was just so angry thinking you’d done – and you didn’t want me any more, and – oh, Jon, I – I didn’t know, but you’re right anyway, and then I went around thinking and talking like you had done all those things, and making everyone else think – ” She winced. Images of the headlines from
that day and two years ago flashed before her eyes, and she winced again. “And they probably still think it, even though they shouldn’t, and that’s my fault, because Shae and Grenn and Jory and the rest of them thought I was right about you, and – ” She twisted her right hand through the air as if trying to pull an answer out of it. When the answer came, it brought the tears with it. “And your whole life, which got upended and – and – and it wasn’t what you wanted or what you deserved, and you deserved so much better, Jon, and I – oh, I ruined it all, and I thought – but it doesn’t matter, because your life still got – ” She made an odd gulping noise, which did nothing save to squeeze more tears out of her eyes, down her face, and off her chin onto her twisting hands.

“Destroyed? Wrecked? Smashed?” Jon’s voice cut caustically across hers. If the old cliché about somebody’s eyes being able to bore holes into somebody else were true, Sansa thought she would have two brown holes drilled straight through her head at the moment. Whether they would be filled with water she could not tell, for Jon’s temple muscle was still twitching a bit.

“Any? All?” Jon threw both hands into the air. “The English language has some pretty damn good words if you try, Sansa.” Both his jaw muscle and his temple muscle twitched at the same time, and Sansa flinched. “Obliterated? Demolished? Killed? Because that’s what happened to my bloody life after you hacked it to pieces and sucked it out of me!” He slapped his hands back down onto the island counter, although not as hard as before.

Sansa wiped the tears out of her eyes, but more immediately replaced them. She covered her face with both hands and huddled over her elbows, which were propped on the counter, to contain the sobs that had overtaken her again. On occasion, she’d allowed herself to imagine Jon begging her forgiveness for doing to her life what she knew now she had done to his. Now all of the words she’d imagined him saying seemed utterly empty and shallow and ridiculous. More than possibly, Sansa thought, any words he could have said, or any she could say now, would have come across as empty and shallow and ridiculous.

But Sansa would try, so after a few moments she caught her breath and pushed off the counter into a standing position so she could look at Jon again. This time there was no mistaking the tears that had gathered in his eyes. That made Sansa’s own tears run afresh, but she paid them no mind.

“I – yes, I did,” she finally replied, her voice still shaking. “You’re right. I – I – I did. I shut you out, and I didn’t let you explain even though I didn’t think you were happy with me any more – oh, Lord God have mercy, because I did everything to make sure you weren’t happy, and I wanted to destroy your happiness, and I let the tabloids drag you through the mud, and I split you apart from your friends.” Her hands shook along with her voice, and she clenched them into fists in a futile attempt to make them stop. “I did everything I could to make you miserable and suffer, and I want to undo it, and un-shatter it all because you deserve it, and you deserve the opposite of everything I did, and now I – ” She blinked hard, and several more tears ran down each cheek. “I know it’s a stupid English word, Jon, but I am sorry. I truly am. I’m so, so sorry – I’m sorry – I’m sorry.” Unable to keep back the sobs, she covered her face in her hands and leaned heavily against the side of the island.
“What the bloody hell do you mean, you thought you weren’t making me happy any more?”

Sansa gulped again – an ugly sound, every bit as ugly as her tears – and looked back up at Jon, who was staring at her as though he couldn’t believe her nerve.

“I – I thought – well, because you were so happy on set with everybody, and you guys were always laughing together, especially when you were watching playbacks with – with the others, and you weren’t happy or laughing that much around me – at home,” she explained after wiping her eyes again. “I couldn’t make you laugh like they could any more, and I know I was caught up with everything about Father’s estate, but I saw how happy you were when we were out at brunch with everybody that one day when I was visiting you, realized I hadn’t made you that happy in months.”

Jon looked nonplussed. “Watching playbacks?”

Sansa nodded. “I got there early one day. You were still watching playbacks with – with everybody.”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. “With her, you mean.”

Sansa nodded. “Yes,” she replied quietly. “You were laughing and smiling, and you were happy.”

“So you thought that meant I was – ” Jon’s voice rose sharply – “doing anything with her? Good God, Sansa, I was having a laugh with somebody I thought was a friend! Nothing more! You go to a friend to have a bloody laugh, but your wife – ” his tone took on its raw edge from earlier again – “your wife you go home to, and laugh with, and cry with, and cook with, and play stupid games with that make no sense to anyone but you, and everything else in life that you can’t do with all of your friends, because you count on her and she counts on you, and that was you, Sansa, nobody but you!” He bent over the island as Sansa had done and took a few shaky breaths before he could continue. When he straightened again, the look he’d gotten when Sansa had broken his grandmother’s vase had returned, and several times as broken. “It was you, and I thought I’d spent years proving that to you, and you threw all that proof away for, what, a stupid lie or two that I didn’t even tell you? That you could have disproved if you’d given me more than four fucking days before you filed papers on me?”

“I know.” Sansa’s cheeks and neck were now thoroughly soaked, and her ears were dripping off of her chin onto the counter, but she made no effort to wipe them away any more. “I should have waited, but I had no reason to think they’d lie, after you’d said to talk to them, and – and I’d really
thought they’d say the same thing you’d said, and when they didn’t – ” Her voice broke. “I thought I’d – I’d – I’d end up like my mother, and I couldn’t, and I couldn’t breathe or think or anything else, and you’re right that I should have waited, but all I could think of was her and my father, and it’s still not an excuse for what I did to you – Jon, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

Jon smacked the counter again. Sansa’s head snapped up so fast she felt dizzy.

“And you think I’m anything like your fucking father how? Why? Bloody living fucking hell, Sansa!” He pulled one hand off the counter and shoved it through his hair, almost completely dislodging the band that held it in its bun. “No disrespect to the bloody dead and all that, but – your father? Really?” His temple muscle worked furiously, and for a moment Sansa thought he would start crying along with her.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “No, I – I – I never – what I meant was I – my mother – well, she thought something might be wrong with my father before, but when she found out was when she got home early from taking me out to dinner because Robb was at his friend’s house, and she found him in the bedroom with – and after that…” She wiped her eyes on her now-damp sleeve yet again.

“And when I was standing outside the trailer with those bottles of wine, all I could think of was her, and how I had come home early, and I could hear her screaming all over again, and I – I couldn’t do it myself, so I ran away, and I kept on thinking about it over and over and over, and – ”

“And all you’d ever had to do was bloody knock, for Christ’s sake!” Jon yelled. “Or even if you couldn’t then, at least give me more than a week – not even a week – after I’d never betrayed you in two years and, what? Two again before that? Four bloody years, Sansa! And even more than that, because I – after we did that first film together, and I – ” His chest contracted and released rapidly for a few beats, and his temple muscle spasmed, and two tears ran down his cheeks. He snorted again as though that would chase them away.

“I never wanted anything to do with anybody else after that,” he ground out. “Not her, not anyone. It was always you.” He blinked, and two more tears followed their cousins down his cheeks. “Glad to see all that bought me – what? – four days, anyway.” He shrugged and turned to make his way around the island toward the door to the living room. At first Sansa could not move a muscle save to squeeze out more tears of her own, but when Jon was within a few feet of the door she called out his name. He turned to face her.

“It wasn’t – I still didn’t want to think it,” she gasped. “I didn’t want to believe it. I never did.”

The anger sprang back into Jon’s expression. “Then why in God’s name, Sansa?” he cried.
“Because I thought I’d proven it.” Despite her best efforts, Sansa’s face contorted into another sob. “I thought – and I thought wrong, and now I’ve made everything wrong. I was wrong. I was wrong. I was wrong.”

Jon shook his head. For a moment, his whole face twitched. Then he shook his head and scoffed again.

“Yeah,” he finally said. “One bloody good way of putting it.”

He turned away and strode off down the hall. Sansa turned away, collapsed on one of the kitchen chairs, laid her head on the table, and cried.

She dozed off again, and when she woke, there was no sign of Jon. Even the chicken and roasted vegetables in the pan he’d pulled from the oven just before she’d entered the kitchen were untouched. Still, Sansa took as little time as she could to grab a cup of yogurt from the refrigerator and a glass container of Jon’s homemade granola bites from the pantry and tiptoed back up the stairs. She cringed as she ate them, and wished she could force the hunger from her body so she would not need to take anything else from Jon. Perhaps she could get a cab to the market before she left, she thought, and replace the food she’d eaten and the Aleve pills she’d taken and the cleaner Jon had had to use on the carpet when she’d thrown up on it. But that was stupid, really, as stupid and insufficient and pathetic as was saying the word sorry to try and atone for any of the past three years.

Sansa finished eating as quickly as possible. She remembered to check the kitchen from the bottom of the stairs this time to ensure Jon was not there before she tiptoed in and cleaned her dishes, as well as the bowls and cooking utensils Jon had left in the sink. It was a pitiful way to repay Jon for his hospitality, she knew, but it was an improvement on nothing.

By the time Sansa had finished washing the dishes, she felt more exhausted than she ever had as a girl, even after a full day of skiing or snowball fighting with Robb and their friends. She barely had the energy to wash up and change into her pajamas before collapsing on the pile of blankets on her bed.

Maybe, she thought as she drifted off to sleep, there was something she could do to let Jon see how much she had meant when she’d said she wanted to undo every disgusting thing she’d done to him. It was still paltry and still pathetic, but it would directly address and maybe even alleviate some of the damage she had caused, and it improved greatly upon washing dishes and buying food, although of course she would do those things too. None of them gave her the right to expect Jon to so much as look at her, let alone speak to her, again, and she would not blame him for that, although her chest tightened at the thought. But he deserved every bit of restitution she could possibly make, even the paltry bits…
Sansa awoke the following morning to a golden glow rather than a silver one. A glimpse out the window showed her lampposts and fences and other bits of black wrought iron sticking out of an undulating sea of snowdrifts. One look to the side of the building confirmed that at least three to four feet of snow had been emptied out of the skies, since all of the windows on the first floor were covered at least one-third of the way up by even the shallowest parts of the drifts. But the drifts were glimmering in actual sunlight, and the only snowflakes flying through the air were those gusted off the tops of their drifts every now and again by the wind.

Sansa padded down the staircase and wrinkled her nose. The smell of coffee was noticeably absent, and when she peered into the kitchen to ensure it was empty, she noticed that the chicken and vegetables from the prior night were still sitting on the stove. Sansa frowned. That was completely unlike Jon, and so was the lack of any evidence that the coffeepot had been used since the prior morning.

Sansa checked the clock on the oven, which informed her that the time was 10:39 AM. She frowned more deeply as she listened for the strains of Pink Floyd or the sound of Jon’s shower running or any other indication that he was awake. All she heard instead was dead silence.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to everyone who’s read this far! The past couple of chapters have proven particularly tricky and thorny for me to produce. I've never been divorced, let alone had to spend time cooped up in an apartment with an ex-spouse, and so I cannot fully understand exactly what Jon and Sansa, or others like them, are experiencing here. It’s been tough trying to give that fact the respect it deserves but still pull back the curtains into their minds and hearts, and I hope I have not done too terrible a job of it.

If I could, I would subdivide this story into larger portions, but since I can't find a way to do that on AO3, I will simply state here that the end of this chapter represents the end of Act I of the story. Act II will begin with the next chapter.
Sansa stood just inside the kitchen doorway for the next several moments, unsure of what to do. Jon had always been an early riser, but perhaps the past few days had exhausted him as badly as they had exhausted her. Still, it was almost 11:00 in the morning.

Sansa’s eyes spent a minute or two darting alternately among the coffeepot, the food resting on the stove, and the doorway that led into the living room. Finally, they settled on the food. She could at least store it in the refrigerator before it spoiled. If Jon had not shown himself by 11:00, she decided, she would brave knocking on his door to ensure that he was all right. It would probably only get her more of Jon’s glares, but better safe than sorry, and anyway, he was perfectly entitled to give her more than a couple of nasty looks.

It took a bit of rummaging through drawers and cabinets, but Sansa finally discovered some glass leftover containers big enough to hold the very full pan of food sitting in front of her. She rattled the containers rather loudly while trying to extract them from the bowls stacked below them, so when she finally stood up to place them on the counter she turned around, half-expecting the noise to have brought Jon out of his room demanding to know what on earth she was up to. But Jon did not appear, and after a moment Sansa busied herself with wrangling the chicken and vegetables into the containers.

Once she had emptied the roasting pan and removed the foil, Sansa tackled the coffeemaker. She had never operated it before – Jon must have bought it after the divorce – but it was similar enough to Margaery’s that she figured out how to work it within a couple of minutes. This time she did not have to look hard to find the other piece of her puzzle; Jon, as he had when they had been married, stored his coffee in the cabinet directly above where the coffeemaker was sitting.

Oh, bother it! Jon!

One glance at the oven clock confirmed that it was almost 11:15. Sansa quickly punched the last of the series of buttons on the coffeemaker necessary to begin the brewing process and dashed through the doorway into the living room. When she entered the hallway leading to Jon’s room, however, she began tiptoeing out of instinct. She stopped directly outside his bedroom door and strained her ears for any kind of noise, even so much as the click of computer keys, but she heard nothing.

Sansa clenched the fingers of her right hand several times, only to uncurl and flex them. On perhaps her seventh or eighth try, she finally kept them curled and rapped quietly on Jon’s bedroom door. She backed away instinctively and waited for him to either open or yell through the door, but again
she heard nothing. Finally, she tiptoed back to the door and rapped on it again. Still, nothing happened. This time, Sansa waited directly in front of the door before knocking yet again and more forcefully.

“Jon?” she called hesitantly when it was time for her fourth knock. “Jon? Are you OK?”

Still, Jon gave her no response, and Sansa began to worry. She did not hesitate at all to pound on the door forcefully this time.

“Jon,” she called, “I’m coming in, OK? Just to see if you’re all right. Unless you don’t want me to.” She waited a few seconds in what silence the roaring of her heartbeat inside of her eardrums would allow her, then reached for the handle. *Please, God, let it be unlocked.*

To Sansa’s relief, the knob turned easily, and she slipped through the door and into Jon’s bedroom. The blinds were drawn and all of the lights turned off, so it took Sansa’s eyes several seconds to adjust to the faintness of the glow that filtered in through the window shades. Once they did, they immediately made out an enormous bed that took up half the right-hand wall and that, more importantly, was occupied by a solid body huddled in a fetal position. Without thinking to so much as look for the light switch, Sansa dashed to the side of the bed. She tripped and stubbed her toe on something solid as she did so, but paid it no attention except for a wince and a couple of whispered curses.

“Jon!” she whispered loudly once she had reached the bed. He did not respond, which pushed Sansa over the edge of worry into alarm.

“Jon!” she yelled. She grabbed one broad shoulder and shook it vigorously. A low, rasping groan emanated from somewhere closer to Sansa’s face, and she almost collapsed onto the bed from relief.

“Jon.” She bent to draw her face closer to his. “Are you all right? What’s the matter?”

That only earned Sansa another moan. After a few seconds of indecision, she rose and tiptoed to the room’s entrance, then felt along the wall until she found the light switch. When she flipped it, the room was instantly bathed in the soft golden glow of the overhead light fixture. Sansa retraced her steps to Jon’s bed at once, although this time she took especial care to avoid the box over which she had tripped before.

The overhead light revealed that Jon was not only curled in on himself, but shivering. Sansa’s eyes
widened in alarm as she realized that his usually pale face was flushed to a crab-colored pink all over, and so was the one bare arm she could see. Her hand reached out automatically to feel Jon’s forehead, and, just as she had suspected, it was much too warm. She withdrew her hand as though she had been stung, and Jon moaned again.

“Jon?” Sansa crouched so that her face was directly in front of his. “Jon, can you hear me?” She shook his shoulder again, more gently this time, but still only got another moan.

Sansa bit her lip. Jon rarely took ill, but when he did, he usually got a fever that lasted a day or two before breaking. Once the fever had gone, he would be back to his old self within another day. This was probably another such case, Sansa thought, but maybe Jon should be taken to the hospital just to be safe. But God only knew how long it would take to get him there; now that the snowstorm had ended, the clinics and hospitals would probably be overrun with patients who had not been sick or hurt enough to warrant emergency helicopter trips during the blizzard. Still, waiting several hours to see a doctor would be preferable to seeing no doctor at all if in fact this was not merely one of Jon’s usual illnesses.

Finally, Sansa rose and headed for Jon’s bathroom. Any doctor she called would ask for Jon’s temperature, and she should know it at any rate. At their worst, Jon’s fevers had always run to about 102 degrees, or perhaps half a degree more, and his doctor had always told him to come into the hospital if they ran higher than that.

Sansa strode into the master bathroom and headed straight for Jon’s medicine cabinet. She rummaged through it hastily, which caused several bottles of medicine and shaving cream to clatter onto the counter and floor. As she picked them up, Sansa found herself interspersing her curses with sorry, Jon. Then she heard him groaning again, and a twinge of guilt shot through her, followed by an equally sharp pang of relief that he was still there and breathing. Nevertheless, she proceeded through the drawers next to the sink a bit more cautiously until she discovered the thermometer for which she had been searching. A bit more rifling produced a box of probe sleeves. Sansa’s fingers shook as she grabbed one out of the box and dropped it onto the floor. Cursing, she tossed it into the trash can and sat back against the cupboards.

Steady it. Jon needs this.

Sansa’s next and more careful attempt succeeded, and she managed to attach the second probe sleeve to the thermometer successfully. She turned the device on and padded quickly across the bedroom as it calibrated itself.

“I need to take your temperature, all right? Can you wake up? Please?”
Jon groaned but did no more. Sansa crouched next to the bed and out of instinct reached for a dark curl that had fallen over his eye. She pulled her hand back just in time, but it was enough to awaken a reflex that had been dormant for the past three years. When Jon had had his fevers before, she had almost always been able to wake him up by stroking his cheek. Only hours ago Sansa would never have dared to try it, but this was not the time for delicacy. She willed her hand forward and brushed her thumb gently in circles on Jon’s left cheekbone, nearly recoiling as she did so at the heat that emanated from his skin.

“Jon,” she said, this time more loudly, “I need to take your temperature, all right? Can you open your mouth? Please?”

That only got her another moan, and another few minutes of rubbing and pleading and shaking Jon by the shoulder got her nothing more, so finally Sansa reached for Jon’s mouth. Halfway through the motion, she stopped and headed for the bathroom. After all, she need not add whatever bacteria lurked on her fingers to his misery.

Sansa took care to wash her hands thoroughly before she returned to Jon’s side. Gently, she pried his mouth open and inserted the thermometer. When she withdrew it, the tiny digital screen read 102.1 degrees.

Damn.

Sansa felt her hands shaking as she discarded the thermometer’s probe sleeve into the trash can next to the nightstand. Jon’s fever was not enough to warrant a trip to the hospital, at least not yet, but he was still in a bad way. She lost no time in running upstairs to retrieve the phone Jon had lent her. She looked up the number for the nearest clinic, dialed it, and then spent almost ten minutes on hold; apparently the clinics were just as busy as she had thought the hospitals must be. Just as she was about to hang up, however, a harried-sounding nurse picked up the line and listened as Sansa described Jon’s symptoms.

“Did you take his temperature?” she asked briskly.

“Yes, it’s 102.1 degrees,” Sansa replied, just as briskly.

“And you said he’s had temperatures this high in the past on a regular basis?”
“Not on a regular basis, but yes, he has had them that high,” Sansa admitted as she rearranged the pillows on the living room sofa where she had spent the night before last.

“And he hasn’t vomited, you say?”

“No.” Sansa almost wished she had said “yes” so the woman would tell her to bring Jon to a hospital, but instead, she was graced with a curt suggestion to feed Jon as many fluids as possible and bring him into a hospital if his temperature cleared 103 degrees, followed by the click of her suddenly disconnected call. She dropped her head into her hands and sighed.

However, the nurse had been right about Jon’s needing water, so Sansa headed back to Jon’s bedroom. She shook him, rubbed his cheek, yelled his name, and even slapped his shoulders and chest, but he did not move, let alone groan.

Shit! Sansa rubbed her temples in frustration. A lump rose unbidden in her throat, and moisture rose at the back of her eyes. No. She could not help Jon if she were soaking yet another pillow or T-shirt with tears.

Wait. Maybe soaking something would help.

Sansa dashed back into Jon’s bathroom, where she grabbed the glass next to the sink and filled it with cold water as fast as she could. She forced herself to go more slowly enough on the return trip not to knock half the water back out of the glass, so that when she returned to Jon’s bedside she had a full pint’s worth to dump onto his face.

This time Jon spluttered instead of moaning. He flailed his arms, as if anticipating another dumping, and blinked rapidly. His gaze settled on Sansa, and he looked confused. Sansa clapped one hand to her mouth out of pure relief and promptly dropped the glass out of the other hand, which she then settled on Jon’s shoulder.

“Oh, thank God,” she breathed. Then she realized how warm Jon felt through his T-shirt. “Jon, here – oh, shit – ” She glanced at the empty glass lying on the carpet. “I’m getting you water, all right? I’ll be back in five seconds. Stay awake, all right? Please? Please stay awake.” Her hand moved from his shoulder to cup his cheek. “Stay here; I’ll be right back.”

Jon merely blinked at her. Sansa hesitated for a moment, not wanting to look away for fear that if she did, he would sink back into that terrible stupor. Then she stepped back, grabbed the glass from the
floor, and sprinted for the bathroom. Once again, she counteracted her urge to dash heedlessly back to Jon in favor of leaving the glass full. When she reached him again, he was still blinking, to Sansa’s everlasting relief.

“Here you go,” she said, and cupped a hand behind his head. Then she remembered that with a fever as high as his, he could hardly be expected to sit up of his own accord. She set the glass down on the night table and reached around Jon’s body to push her other hand behind his shoulder. He moaned again, and this time Sansa could feel it through her own shoulder, which was pressed against his chest.

“One, two, three…” On “three,” she dug the opposite heel into the carpet and pulled on Jon’s upper body until it rose to meet hers. She let his head loll against her left shoulder and grabbed the glass from the night table with her right, then held it against Jon’s lips.

“Jon, here you are,” she said, but she got no response. His head was a dead weight on her shoulder, and his eyes had closed again.

“Jon!” Sansa snapped, fighting the urge to panic. “You need to drink it – come on, here. Don’t make me splash you again, all right? Please?” She set the glass down again and rubbed his cheek as she had before. When that produced no results she slapped it, perhaps a bit harder than she had intended to. But it worked long enough for Jon to blink and moan again. In one swift motion, Sansa had grabbed the glass and tipped it backwards against his mouth. He spluttered again at first, although Sansa could hardly blame him, since in her eagerness she had splashed perhaps a quarter of the glass’s contents down his front. Her second try, though, proved more successful. This time, some of the liquid made its way into Jon’s mouth. When she saw his neck muscles contract to swallow it, Sansa closed her eyes and breathed a deep sigh of relief.

“Good job,” she said, smiling into his still-bleary eyes. “Here – more, all right?”

Sansa spent the next few minutes pouring the water down Jon’s throat bit by bit. No sooner had she emptied the glass than she headed off to the bathroom to fill it again.

Idiot. Purified water would be much less likely to make him sicker.

Sansa could feel her face flushing to match her hair as she dashed to the kitchen to refill the glass with water from the filtering pitcher sitting in Jon’s refrigerator. She took both back into the bedroom with her and wasted no time in propping Jon back up in bed, where she gradually emptied the glass into his overheated body. He moaned more this time, which encouraged Sansa.
“Good job,” Sansa whispered as he gulped down the last of the water. She slowly let him back down onto the pillow and reached for the pitcher. “Here – one more glass, all right?”

By the end of the third glass, Sansa’s arms and shoulders were shaking from exertion. After lowering him to the bed, she sank to the floor, propped her knees in front of her, and rubbed the sweat off of her forehead and palms with her jeans. Eventually, she pushed herself up to retrieve the thermometer from the bathroom so she could check Jon’s temperature again. It was still 102.1 degrees.

_Damn it._ Sansa shook the probe sleeve into the trash can a little more vigorously than necessary. But Jon had only just drunk the water, so perhaps his temperature would take a bit more time to lower.

_Please lower. Please, please, please lower._

Once she was back by his bedside, Sansa’s hand reached instinctively to brush Jon’s sweaty curls off of his forehead. Her fingers had gotten to within millimeters of his skin by the time she remembered to stop them. Muscle memory could be such a stubborn thing, she thought. Three years of estrangement had not been enough to make her body follow her mind entirely. She still awoke in the midst of some nights feeling the ghosts of Jon’s arms around her, and on the rare evening she had to herself when she would stretched her legs along the length of her couch to read instead of onto the coffee table in front of it, she would instinctively curl her toes because Jon had always tickled them when she’d done it during their marriage.

But they were not married now, and Sansa had no right to touch Jon’s forehead or any other part of him. She barely had the right even to worry about him. That did not stop her, of course, but she spent the next few minutes pacing back and forth between Jon’s bed and his doorway, wondering whether she should sit with him or wait in her room until it was time to take his temperature again. If Jon were to wake up, he would not appreciate her presence, but at the same time, at least she would know he was on the mend – or, alternatively, whether he was getting worse and needed immediate medical help.

The last consideration outweighed all of the others, and within five minutes Sansa had transplanted her borrowed laptop and phone, along with the entire nest of blankets and pillows from her bed, into Jon’s room. Once she had taken his temperature yet again and confirmed it had not changed by so much as a tenth of a degree, she ensconced herself in the armchair across the room from the bed – close enough for her to rush to Jon’s side should he need it, but too far away to grab the thermometer and insert it into his mouth every three minutes as her nerves wanted her to do. Still, she could only wade through the hundreds of unread e-mails in her inbox at a snail’s pace because her eyes kept darting off the screen and onto Jon’s flushed face.
Several dozen deleted e-mails later, Sansa decided to try and get Jon to drink more water. It took a good deal of shaking for her to get him blinking and borderline coherent again, and her back and arm muscles were screaming loudly at her by the time he finished his second glass. No sooner had Sansa lowered him back to the pillow – a little more quickly than she had intended, since the muscles between her shoulder blades were threatening to spasm – than his head lolled sideways, signaling his return to unconsciousness. Sansa took his temperature at once, only to get a reading of exactly 102 degrees. *Shit. And that was after he just drank a load of water.*

Sansa picked up the filter pitcher and took it back to the kitchen for a refill. Her gaze traveled idly to Jon’s shiny silver refrigerator-freezer unit. *Freezer. Right.*

As soon as Sansa had shut off the faucet, she opened the freezer. Fortunately, it took her very little digging to unearth not one but two ice packs. She rooted through the drawers next to the sink for some towels, then carried the lot into Jon’s bedroom, where she wound the towels around the ice packs and set them on the bed.

“Jon.” She shook him a few times but received no response, so she worked his shirt off his body of her own accord. By the time she had finished, both of them were sweating, and Sansa could have sworn that the flush on Jon’s face had gotten deeper. She set one towel-covered ice pack on his chest, then gently swept off the hair that had fallen over his forehead and put the other pack there. After that, she wasted no time in checking his temperature again.

102.2 degrees. *Shit.*

Sansa retrieved a glass from the kitchen to fill with water for her own use, then settled down uneasily into the chair to work through the remainder of her e-mails. This time, she set the phone’s timer for half an hour so she could check Jon’s temperature at regular intervals.

After only a few minutes of wading through the concrete monster her inbox had become, Sansa remembered the pot of coffee she had brewed not an hour before. Pouring the drink into one of the mugs she’d found in the cabinet above the coffeemaker reminded her that Jon would eventually need to have some broth or soup, which she had fed him often during his past bouts with the fever. She spent several minutes rooting through Jon’s pantry and, to her immense relief, finally retrieved a carton of chicken broth from the bottom shelf. She would try feeding it to him, she decided, once he had had a couple more rounds of water.

Back in Jon’s bedroom, Sansa removed the ice packs from his forehead and chest and replaced them.
in the freezer. As she ate the bowl of cereal she’d poured for herself, she scrolled through the latest headlines, having given up on her inbox for the time being. The Met Office was reporting a record snowfall and still encouraging all residents of Yorkshire to remain in their homes unless absolutely necessary. Margaery’s latest film had come in third at the weekend box office, doing much better than had been expected. The two houses of Parliament continued to bicker over the newest budget bill. Sources connected closely to prominent Scottish government officials had predicted that yet another independence referendum would take place before next year ended.

Jon moaned loudly and kicked the bed, and the sound startled Sansa so that she almost flung her cereal bowl through the air. She dashed to the bed, shook his shoulder, and called his name, but received the same lack of response as she had before. Just then the timer beeped, and Sansa undertook another round of force-feeding Jon water and taking his temperature, which had not changed at all. She retrieved the ice packs and applied them to his forehead and chest once again. Instead of re-seating herself in the chair, however, she laid down on her side in the thick carpeting next to the bed facing Jon’s bookcase and began rolling back and forth to relieve some of the tightness in her arm and shoulder muscles. Her eyes began to drift idly across the bottom row of titles and eventually settled on a volume of plays by Shakespeare’s contemporary and friend Christopher Marlowe – no, Kit Marlowe, Sansa could hear Jon correcting her playfully. Jon loved Marlowe’s works, and although Sansa had never read any of them, perhaps they would engage her fluctuating attention and help her keep away her simmering worries about Jon better than her e-mails had.

However, when the phone’s timer went off to remind Sansa to remove Jon’s ice packs, she found herself reading through the first paragraph of the introduction to Marlowe’s Edward II for the third time without comprehending a word of it. She was only too glad to get to her feet again to retake Jon’s temperature. However, the number had risen by a tenth of a degree, and Sansa worried her lip tightly between her teeth as she returned the ice packs to the kitchen.

Please get lower. Please get better. Please.

Jon was groaning again when Sansa returned to the bedroom, and this time she saw the reason in the form of the dark yellow fluid spreading rapidly from his sweatpants to his sheets. Sansa swore loudly, which made Jon groan again.

“Sorry,” she muttered as she let out an exasperated sigh. She shook Jon by the shoulder again, but as before, he only laid there limp. Sansa let out another sigh before she turned and marched resolutely back to the bathroom.

Luckily, Jon had a spare set of sheets in his linen closet, along with an abundance of towels and washcloths. Sansa grabbed as many of the latter as she could hold and set the entire pile on her chair before retrieving some clean clothes from Jon’s dresser. She stood next to Jon’s bed for a good minute or two trying to decide which to change first. Finally, she began pulling the sheets off the bed; better, she thought, to tackle the bigger mess first.
That proved to be easier said than done. It took the better part of ten minutes for Sansa to crawl onto Jon’s bed, pull the sheets and blankets off the bottom half and the corner opposite Jon, divest the bed of the blankets, and figure out which ones were stained and which could safely be piled back atop the new sheets. Yanking at the blankets, however, did jog Sansa’s memory four years back to the month-long boot camp session she’d undergone to prepare for her role in a futuristic sci-fi film. One scene in particular had required her character to shove several barrels of stardust out of her way while climbing frantically through a hidden passage leading her to her love interest, and while her stunt double had handled a good deal of the work, Sansa had had to learn how to apply her body weight effectively against a heavier object without straining her back. Jon, of course, was not an object, but at the moment he was as inert as every last barrel in the film, so Sansa set to work. Once again, it proved easier to remember the training than to execute it, but a quarter of an hour’s worth of heaving and panting and straining later, Sansa had successfully wrestled Jon off the remainder of the sheets and mattress pad and yanked them off of the bed. She did not try to mute her exclamations of “Sorry, Jon!” this time, and by the look of him, Jon was none the wiser.

Removing Jon’s clothes proved less strenuous, but Sansa felt her face flush a much brighter red than it had all day as she pulled off his boxers. Not that she had not seen him nude too many times to count, and even several times in this same context when he had taken ill during their marriage; but three years apart had that sight as awkward as it had been the first time she and Jon had made love. But Jon’s condition left no room for Sansa’s embarrassment, and she quickly threw his dirty clothes on top of the sheets and set to work wiping his body down with the washcloths.

Once she had dressed Jon in clean clothes as gently as she could, Sansa deposited his old clothes and the stained bedding into the washing machine. On a hunch, she checked the shelving units behind the laundry machines, hoping she would find the tarp and stack of buckets that Jon had kept stashed in the garage of their London house back when he and a couple of his friends had taken on a sudden enthusiasm for camping. She let out a long sigh of relief and let her body relax against the shelf for several moments when she found them. After all, she did not want to keep changing Jon’s sheets, and she could not haul him to the bathroom whenever he needed it even if she could somehow telepathically sense his need, so unpleasant as it was, the tarp and bucket approach seemed the best option. She second-guessed that notion a few times as she wrangled the tarp onto the bed and Jon onto the tarp, but in the end she managed to secure both. She even tied the center section of the tarp to the opposite bedpost with the twine she’d found next to the buckets so as to form a rudimentary trough directly over the bucket.

Sansa checked Jon’s temperature again before she embarked on a fifteen-minute stretching routine courtesy of YouTube. Her back still ached at the end, but the soreness was preferable to the spasms that had been threatening to envelop it after she’d secured the tarp. Staying on her feet a bit longer would not hurt, she decided, and headed to the kitchen to heat some of the chicken broth she’d found in the pantry. Unfortunately, while waiting for the broth to heat, she detoured to the bedroom to check on Jon and took too long in an unsuccessful attempt trying to wake him fully when he let out an especially loud groan. By the time she gave up, she could hear the sounds of the pot boiling over all the way from the bedroom.
Once she had cleaned up the broth, she fed what she could salvage to Jon, but he took longer to drink it all than he had to drink any of the glasses of water he’d had that day. It had been just cool enough to be safe to feed him, although Sansa had to admit that her standards for determining safety at that point were quite cautious, and it was only lukewarm when he finished it.

Once she had settled Jon back down onto the pillow, Sansa, having realized she would get nowhere with Marlowe’s play, tried sorting more of her e-mails. Those proved just as futile in holding her concentration, and almost in spite of herself pulled up the document she’d written for Jon the prior day.

_Mya would call me ridiculous for thinking I made you sick_, she found herself typing. _I’m sure I didn’t. But you’re sick, and the fever’s high. Please get better._

_I know you told me the truth. I didn’t believe you, and I don’t blame you if you didn’t believe me yesterday when I told you that the English language really doesn’t have any words for how sorry I am. I don’t blame you if you don’t believe that for a lot longer than three years._

That put a bigger lump in her throat than Sansa could handle, so she returned to reading the news. However, she had to keep re-reading the articles in order to understand them, much as she had with the introduction to Marlowe’s play. She had just read the first paragraph of a piece about the discovery of a Viking hoard in Northumbria perhaps three or four times before her phone’s timer went off to inform her that Jon needed his ice packs changed out.

Sansa sighed with relief. She’d changed the rotation of the ice packs from twenty minutes of sitting on Jon and forty in the freezer to twenty on Jon, ten tucked against her still-tender back and shoulder, and thirty in the freezer. That meant it was her turn with both packs.

Slowly, the golden glow outside the windows faded. Slowly, Sansa added to her document sentence by sentence. Each one pinched like the history books Sansa loved said leeches caused a person when sucking out poisoned blood, and perhaps some of the thoughts bursting onto the screen belonged better in the oblivion of electronic haze than inside of her, especially those she had not realized she was harboring. She could only handle emptying them out for so long, however, until tears began seeping down her cheeks and she shut off the computer; Jon, after all, did not need the only person who could take care of him breaking down altogether. Slowly, the tears stopped. Slowly, Sansa’s eyes readjusted, and she busied herself with playing game after game on the phone Jon had lent her so that she wouldn’t have to think about the document or the divorce or her nagging impulse to click onto WebMD and find out exactly how many illnesses Jon might have based on his symptoms, no matter what the nurse had said. Slowly, the pastel pink and orange of the sunset that had overwhelmed the golden glow faded in its turn, and by the time Sansa headed into the kitchen to help herself to the chicken and vegetables Jon had cooked the previous day, it had given way entirely to the brilliance of white stars against a clear night sky.
Between changing out the ice packs and blinking for minutes on end at the phone screen, Sansa had to warm her plate in the microwave several times before finishing her dinner. By the time she had cleaned her dishes and returned to the bedroom, Jon had begun shivering and had gotten the tarp dirty. She cleaned everything thoroughly and spread a couple of Jon’s blankets over him (not too many, she kept reminding herself), but by the time she had finished, she was exhausted and ready to drop into her own bed. That, Sansa had decided hours ago, would not happen; so she trudged back into the laundry room and took thorough stock of all the shelves in search of the air mattress Jon had kept during his camping phase. She finally found it, but not until she had gone through several of the flat’s closets first. While it inflated, Sansa returned to the computer and clicked into her e-mail inbox to compose a new message. Dragging the mattress out of its hideaway had jogged her memory about yet another project, a heart-wrenching, semi-biographical miniseries about a mother who had fled the UK illegally with her three children to avoid their abusive father. At one point, all four characters had slept on the same air mattress in a cramped apartment, and although brief, the scenes involving that bed had taken forever to shoot because getting all three of Sansa’s young costars to lie still at once had proven quite a formidable task. Besides that, in between those scenes Sansa had been practicing feverishly on the dramatic courtroom confrontation near the end of the show with her other costars and the series’s legal consultant. Sansa could not remember the woman’s name for the life of her, but she knew that Podrick Payne, one of the project’s producers, could. She and Pod went back about a decade; he had produced half a dozen of her projects over the past several years, and he had a memory like a steel trap and more connections than a computer factory. Even though it had been three years since they’d filmed the miniseries, Sansa knew it would take Pod no time at all to either remember the consultant’s name or find someone who could.

Sansa had typed only a line or two when she heard the mattress’s air pump shut off. She unplugged the device and, deciding it had been long enough, headed out to the kitchen to heat up more of the chicken broth for Jon. This time it did not boil over, but Sansa would gladly have traded another such incident for a more responsive Jon. She had to douse him with water twice to keep him awake long enough to swallow half the bowl of broth she had prepared for him, and finally decided to refrigerate the rest until the following morning rather than drench Jon’s head and pillow for a third time. She already felt cruel enough as it was, although she supposed that was more than a bit rich.

Changing out Jon’s pillowcase and setting a towel over it proved to be the last two tasks Sansa could handle without her eyes threatening to shut any second. She wearily climbed the stairs to wash up, and barely managed to take Jon’s temperature one final time – 101.9 degrees. Thank God. – and reset the timer on her phone before collapsing onto the air mattress.

Sansa got up faithfully every half-hour that night to take Jon’s temperature, change his ice packs, and give him his water. She also cleaned the tarp twice more before the sky began to turn gray. Gradually, the grey began to bleed into a hazy blend of pink and indigo and every shade in between. Normally, Sansa would have marveled at it, but now the more color seeped into the sky, the more leaked out of her. Some time during sunrise, she accidentally turned down the phone’s volume, and when she awoke next, almost two hours had passed.

Cursing, Sansa leaped off the mattress and fetched the thermometer from the bathroom. Jon’s
temperature had risen to 102.3 degrees, which made Sansa curse again before heading to the kitchen
to refill the water pitcher and warm up more broth. This time, she had to splash Jon three times
before getting the broth into him. She set the empty bowl on the floor next to the equally empty filter
pitcher and sank down next to the bed, exhausted.

*Please fight it away. Please get better.*

It took a few shaky breaths for Sansa to keep from sobbing again. She decided to call a different
clinic for a second opinion on Jon’s condition, even though his current symptoms were identical to
the ones he’d always had before when ill. Apparently, however, the clinics were still quite busy, for
Sansa spent nearly as long on hold as she had the prior day, and the nurse who finally answered the
line sounded just as harried as yesterday’s nurse, if not more so. She also gave Sansa the same
advice.

“Bring him in if he’s still not showing improvement by tomorrow morning,” she said, and Sansa felt
like shouting at her.

Sansa briefly considered brewing some coffee after that, but decided it would only fray her already
exhausted nerves. She settled instead for more dozing between alarms and only got up around noon
to force another bowl of cereal into her stomach; appetite or not, she could not afford to get sick for
lack of food or anything else.

The food gave Sansa just enough energy to finish typing her e-mail to Pod Payne, then edit it to her
satisfaction before hitting the “send” button and collapsing back onto the air mattress. She could not
have said whether it was the alarm or Jon’s unusually loud groans that woke her. In either case, she
sat bolt upright and saw at once that the tarp was dirty again. Jon not only groaned but fidgeted
restlessly as Sansa cleaned up the mess, which resulted in some of that mess ending up smeared on
Sansa and her clothing. She muttered a stream of curses while heading off to fetch a plastic bag from
the kitchen to hold the dirty laundry.

“No, at you, Jon, it wasn’t your fault,” she whispered apologetically when she returned to the
bedroom. Jon, of course, showed no sign that he had heard her. But he was moaning softly when she
came downstairs after having showered in her bathroom, and a lump formed in her throat out of thin
air. This time, she could not refrain from sweeping a few dark curls off of his forehead, and when he
moaned again, Sansa leaned over before she could stop herself and brushed her lips against where
the curls had been only moments before. She was just raising her head when Jon stilled, and she
jumped back as though his forehead had burnt her lips to a crisp. But he did not wake, and after a
few moments Sansa sank back to the mattress and let the lump in her throat dissolve in the form of
tears.

The alarm went off again just then, and Sansa, grateful for the distraction, changed out Jon’s ice
packs. Once finished, she wiped the remaining tears out of her eyes and, looking for anything she could to distract herself, settled her gaze once more on Jon’s bookshelf. She gazed at it for a few minutes before any of the titles began to make sense.

*Holy Bible.* That was interesting, to put it mildly; Jon, like Sansa, had never been religious in the least. However, Sansa began to understand why he had bought that particular book when she saw a few of the titles around it.

*The Broken Heart (You Can’t Fix)*

*When You Didn’t Want the Divorce*

*After You Shatter: How to Pick Up the Pieces of Your Broken Life*

This time, neither deep breaths nor anything else could stop the tears from spilling down Sansa’s cheeks. She bent her face into her propped-up knees to keep her sobs from reaching Jon’s ears, deaf though they might be at the moment. Deaf right along with the ears of God, or karma, or the sun or moon or stars or any other higher power that might exist, because according to almost everything Sansa had ever heard, higher powers were supposed to reward people for doing the right things and punish them for doing the wrong ones. Yet there lay Jon, burning with fever after having spent the past three years being punished for something he hadn’t done, and here she sat, perfectly fine except for lack of sleep.

And some of her mother’s friends still had the nerve to wonder why she wasn’t religious.

It was a little odd, though, Sansa later reflected, that it was just at that moment she heard an earsplitting *crack* followed by the sound of shattering glass on the other side of the wall.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! Act II begins with the story's longest chapter yet. But Sansa and Jon refused to be rushed, as much as I tried. Sigh.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Sorry to have taken so long to update this fic! Real life and health conditions got together, laughed evilly, and collectively decided to demand pretty much all of my time and effort this month. Things are on the upswing now *fingers crossed*, so without further ado...

Sansa covered her mouth just in time to muffle the startled shriek that burst out of it. She whirled around to check on Jon, who only moaned and shuffled his body a quarter of a turn toward the wall. But it was the most movement she’d seen from him since he had stomped out of the kitchen after their shouting match two nights before, and Sansa smiled wanly. Then she remembered that someone might just have broken into the flat. She frantically pawed through Jon’s chest of drawers to look for a hammer or a pocketknife or anything she could use to defend herself. When she came up empty, she opened the door and peered out cautiously before scampering into the laundry room, where, after all, she had found the tarp, bucket, and other purely utilitarian items.

Before she had gotten halfway across the hall, it occurred to Sansa that, for one thing, even if there were in fact any burglars idiotic enough to risk going out and plying their trade with the sheer amount of snow on the ground outside, they would be doubly and triply idiotic to try it in such a well secured community. For another, she could not be entirely sure that the noise had not come from the neighboring flat. None of that stopped her from rifling through the drawers of Jon’s utility shelving, though, or from grabbing the first hammer she could find. She realized belatedly that the sound, if it had originated from Jon’s flat at all, had come from the utility area behind the laundry room, which meant that any intruders present in the flat had had more than enough time to attack her already. That, however, did not stop her from brandishing the hammer, inching open the door leading out of the laundry room until she could reach the light switch, and hitting the switch as hard as she could while kicking the door back into the wall.

To Sansa’s utter relief and embarrassment, the light revealed a few boxes arranged in neat stacks against the opposite wall and nothing else. She leaned her head back against the wall behind her and let out a long sigh.

Dusty as the room was, Sansa felt very much like slumping onto the floor and shutting her eyes, but she knew she would probably fall asleep at once in spite of the blow to her nerves, and she doubted she would be able to hear her phone’s alarm from that distance. She sighed again and slowly peeled herself off the wall and back into the hallway and, as much to keep herself from succumbing to her fatigue then and there, decided to have a look around outdoors to ensure the noise had not signaled anything terrible happening immediately outside the flat.
Five minutes later, Sansa had bundled herself up in her coat, scarf, and boots, as well as two pairs of Jon’s jeans, which she had borrowed from his dresser and fastened with a belt. She armed herself with the shovel she had found in one of the flat’s hall closets and headed around the corner to the front door. It would not move, and, due to her fatigue, Sansa was initially alarmed, but then her eyes traveled to the tall side windows flanking it, and she saw at once why it held so fast. Several million frozen white reasons sat piled in drifts up to half the windows’ height and, Sansa confirmed by standing on her tiptoes and craning her neck, half the height of the door as well. After a few moments, she replaced the shovel in the hall closet and traipsed up the stairs to the spare room across from hers, which overlooked the front side of the flat. She stepped onto the balcony and gave her overwhelmed eyes a minute to accustom themselves to the brilliant white glow that made up much of the world around them before she looked down. That was when she saw the source of the shattering noise.

Jon’s neighbors had a side porch several yards to the left of the wall separating the two flats. A set of glass double doors led onto it from their flat. A gigantic snowdrift had piled up nearly to the tops of the doors – or, more precisely, to the top of the right-hand door. In place of the left-hand door stood a doorframe surrounding a smashed pane of glass, through which the snow had visibly piled into the room beyond the wall. Sansa stared at it for several moments before she thought she saw movement on the other side of the drift. Probably one of the neighbors, she thought, and turned away so as not to gawk. As she did so, her eyes swept over the curves of the drifts piled against Jon’s flat. They were not so tall as the one that had smashed the neighbors’ door, except in one place, and – Oh, shit!

The snow was piled so high that it almost obscured the top of the doorframe, but a doorframe it was. Sansa spent a few moments trying in vain to blink the drift out of her tired eyes, but every time she opened them it sat there stubbornly.

Oh, shit. If that door’s made up of the same type of glass as the neighbors’, we’re screwed to hell.

Maybe it was replaced somewhere along the line.

Sure, it was.

Unwilling to stare at the unwelcome sight any longer, Sansa trudged inside, shut the balcony door, leaned her head against it, and let out a miserable sigh.

Misery doesn’t matter. Jon can’t shovel the snow. There’s only one way out of this.

Sansa blew out another sigh as she headed across the hall to her room in order to find out whether any of the downstairs doors on that side of the flat could be opened. Fortunately, the snow was piled
only about thigh high, as well as Sansa could judge, in front of the side door on the end of the flat. She made her way to the deck outside of the largest upstairs bedroom, which was a couple of rooms down and situated over a drift almost as high as the one encumbering the glass door, and rubbed her gloves over the wooden slats that formed the sides of the deck. *Thank God they’re not metal,* she thought as she gripped one of the slats to gauge whether she could comfortably fit one had across its width. It was a bit thick, but after a few moments she decided she could handle it. Before she could think too much about how many ways she could slip and fall off the tops of the slats instead of dropping gracefully into the towering drift below, she headed back downstairs. First, she unlocked the door in front of the lower snowdrift so that she could open it and travel in and out of the flat to check on Jon. Then she retreated to Jon’s bedroom to check his temperature, which had fallen to 101.8 degrees. She almost cried with relief, and then almost cried again a few minutes later when Jon’s blinking eyes focused on her and crinkled in confusion when she was helping him with another glass of water.

“Jon,” she said softly, but he only looked more confused for a few seconds more before his eyes glazed over again. Still, it was more than he had done in two days, and Sansa could not suppress a smile as she headed back to the hall closet to get Jon’s shovel.

Only a few minutes later, the smile had disappeared from Sansa’s face and been replaced by grim concentration, for she was staring over the railing of the master bedroom’s deck and into the snowdrift. It looked at least a foot or two lower than it had a quarter of an hour before, and Sansa squinted intently at the trajectory of the shovel as she tossed it over the edge of the deck railing. Some of the snow splashed upward around it as it landed, but it still managed to roll half a turn sideways before coming to a stop. Sansa hoped that meant that the snow was packed sufficiently tightly for her not to drop through it like a stone and injure herself on the ground. She stared over the side of the deck for a long moment, half hoping for a secret ladder or fire escape to materialize. But none did, and Sansa hauled herself to a standing position on the deck chair she had dragged against the railing. Carefully, she lifted one leg over the boards, whose rounded tops made her glad that if she had to avoid slipping as she straddled them, at least she was not a man.

But Sansa’s feet did not slip. Instead, her right hand’s grip on the railing boards loosened just enough as she swung her legs clear to make both hands skid down the height of the boards at lightning speed. She just barely managed to grab one right where it intersected with the floor of the deck. That caused her shoulders to jolt and Sansa to curse as her body swung haplessly inward toward the deck’s underbelly. Luckily, she retained her grip long enough to stabilize herself before she let go and plunged into the snowdrift.

The snow was not packed as loosely as Sansa had feared, and she sank down only a foot or two. She came up spluttering and swearing that if Jon did not petition the flat’s managers to install built-in ladders on all of the decks in the building, she would slip a note under the door of the manager’s unit herself before she left.

After she had wiped most of the snow off her face, Sansa retrieved Jon’s shovel. She pushed it in front of her like a makeshift plow as she made her way to the end of the flat, but it still took her
several minutes to get there, not only due to the snow’s depth but because her shoulders still ached. By the time she had reached the door, they hurt too badly to shovel, so she had to spend the next several minutes rotating them slowly, then just as slowly adding her arms until she resembled a bizarre windmill.

Finally, enough of the pain had subsided for Sansa to get to work. She still could not handle the amount of snow per shovel stroke that she otherwise could have done, however, especially since the snow was so heavy and wet: a true “sea snow,” as her grandfather, a lifelong naval officer, had called it. Worse, she kept having to stop in order to give her shoulders a break. After perhaps the tenth such occurrence, she lost her balance while leaning on the shovel, collapsed on the ground, and had to kick away a good deal of snow with her legs before she could get up.

That fall proved to be a blessing in disguise, for Sansa realized that she could move snow with her legs perhaps more effectively than with her weakened arms. She shuffled her body right next to the door and carefully sat down. It still took her several minutes and a good deal of repositioning to kick most of the remaining snow off the threshold, but at last she was able to roll over onto her knees and push the door open. Her body immediately followed the door’s trajectory, and out of instinct she threw her arms in front of her to cushion her fall. This jarred both of her shoulders again, and she swore aloud as she rolled over onto her back.


For a few minutes, Sansa ignored the open door, as well as the bits of snow that had come flying through it. Not only were her shoulders aching, but her face had begun to thaw, which hurt almost as badly. Eventually, though, the thought of Jon lying miserable and hungry in a bed free of ice packs got her to pull herself to her feel and shut the door. She shed Jon’s thick snow boots, which she had donned in lieu of her own fashionable but completely impractical suede pair, and dragged herself up the stairs.

Jon was moaning again when Sansa entered his bedroom, but he did not awaken – not then, not when she wiggled the thermometer under his tongue and swore when she got a reading of 102.4, and not even when her groans exceeded his as she jammed her throbbing shoulder underneath his to replace the thermometer with a stream of cool water. By the time Sansa had managed to fish a jar of bouillon cubes out of one of the kitchen cabinets and stir half a cube into a pot of hot water, he was out cold, and she had to splash him twice in order to feed him.

The late afternoon sunlight was fading fast by the time Sansa had finished pouring three-quarters of the makeshift broth down Jon’s throat and changed into two fresh pairs of pants to replace her soaked jeans. So was Sansa’s stamina, but the mountain of snow pushing at Jon’s door would not shift itself out of pity, or so she told herself as she gulped down the remaining broth and applied Jon’s ice packs. That, however, did not stop Sansa from yawning deeply or from gingerly rubbing her shoulders against the corner of the doorframe before she left the flat.
When Sansa opened the door, she was greeted by a wide swath of glittering snow courtesy of the floodlights surrounding the back doors. She thanked her lucky stars even as she reached up to cover another yawn, for pair of floodlights sat directly over the snow-covered door she was attempting to clear. *This would have been ten times worse in the dark*, she thought when she craned her neck to look at the top of the drift, which must have cleared her own height by at least two feet.

Soon enough, though, Sansa found herself wondering how the job could possibly have been ten times worse than it was. Her decision to attack the snowdrift from the bottom and let the snow above the cut collapse onto the remainder of the drift meant that her repeated digs at the glittering mountain looked like mere scratches on its surface and yielded about the same results. The only significant effect Sansa’s shoveling was having, in fact, was on her shoulders, not on the snowdrift. She had to stop and let her cramping muscles relax every two or three minutes, then every one or two, and finally they ached so badly that she decided to take a trip back inside the flat. Jon, after all, would need his ice packs changed out again if as much time had passed as she thought.

When Sansa got back indoors, the kitchen clock informed her that she had taken even more time than that to make barely a dent in the surface of the snow imprisoning Jon’s door. She hurried to his bedroom, removed the ice packs, and, as soon as she had taken his temperature, collapsed onto the chair in the corner and pushed both sacks up against her shoulders. Both packs were still chilly to the touch, and Sansa let out a sigh of relief and leaned her head against the back of the chair as the cooling sensation seeped into her muscles.

The next sensation Sansa felt was a falling motion. Her stomach swooped downward with the rest of her body, then pulled up with a jolt. *Shit!* She should have known she would nod off, she thought, and retrieved her phone from its perch on one of Jon’s bookshelves. Fortunately, only ten minutes had passed since she had gotten inside, so she supposed she had nodded off mere seconds previously.

Sansa yawned. *Right. No more sitting.* She trudged off to Jon’s bathroom to retrieve a box of temperature probes and almost hit her head on the medicine cabinet when she stood up from bending over the drawer. *Medicine.*

*Oh, right.*

A few seconds of rooting through the cabinet landed Sansa a bottle of Aleve identical to the one in the bathroom next to her bedroom. Her shoulders protested as she twisted open the cap, but the prospect of imminent relief dulled their screaming considerably. She popped twice the recommended number of tablets and padded into the kitchen to put the ice packs back into the freezer. Only then did she realize that her legs felt wet, not to mention cold. She glanced downward and sighed. Of course the snow had soaked through both of the pairs of jeans she’d donned less than an hour ago.
At this rate, she’d blow through Jon’s entire dresser in less than half the night.

Sansa sighed again, then trudged off to Jon’s bedroom. Halfway through changing into her fifth and sixth pairs, she decided to give the flat’s hall closets a once-over. After all, Jon had kept his tarp and twine; why should he not have retained those awful, bulky outdoorsman overalls as well? For that task, though, she needed more energy, so she set the kitchen coffeemaker for another brew cycle before cracking open her first closet door.

Luck was with Sansa, for the second closet yielded the treasured cargo she sought. Thank God, she thought, despite the fact that it took her several minutes to fasten the shoulder straps without making her shoulder muscles scream again. By that time the coffeemaker had finished its brew cycle, and Sansa poured its contents into one of Jon’s vacuum-sealed mugs, which she toted back downstairs and outdoors with her.

This time, Sansa decided to attack the snowdrift by kicking at it much as she had at its infant cousin several yards toward the end of the flat earlier that day. She kept having to wriggle her body uncomfortably to the side every minute or two, but it was still far superior to slowly wrenching her arms out of their sockets. At one point she rolled over farther onto her right shoulder than she had intended, but the pain she expected never materialized.

Sansa let her head drop back against the ground out of sheer relief. About time that stuff kicked in.

The Aleve worked well enough in tandem with the coffee for Sansa to carve a yard-deep trough into the snowdrift, and even to begin working on the snow immediately above the odd trench, before her arms tired and she had to sink to the ground to do a few minutes’ worth of kicking before heading indoors once again. She was so intent on taking Jon’s temperature that she forgot to retrieve the ice packs from the freezer on her way to his bedroom, nor did she bother until she had confirmed that his fever had dropped to 102.1 degrees.

When Sansa headed back out to the kitchen, the microwave clock informed her that it was now almost 7:00 in the evening. Eleven hours, that’s all. Not even that. If Jon’s fever hasn’t broken, a doctor will have to see him no matter what any nurse says.

Please let it break. Please.

To distract herself from the tears that threatened to push past her eyelids, Sansa emptied the grounds out of the coffeemaker. The smell made her stomach grumble, and she realized how hungry she was. She hastily helped herself to more of the chicken and vegetables from the refrigerator before heading back into the bedroom to give Jon his water. He blinked at her once or twice while she helped him
drink it, but no true recognition sparked behind his eyes, which were as bright with fever as the curls along his hairline were with sweat. At least she could do something about the latter problem, Sansa reflected, wondering why she had not thought of it before. When she had gotten as much water into Jon as she could, she turned his head gently to one side and even more gently brushed his hair back with her fingers into a loose knot, which she fastened with a stray rubber band she had grabbed off of his night table. Once again the impulse she had had before overwhelmed her, and once again she bent to touch her lips to his forehead. This time she closed her eyes and lingered for the space of a few breaths before she could manage to tear herself away.

When Sansa got back outside, she realized that she had left the coffee mug sitting on the kitchen counter. She swore under her breath but headed back indoors, yawning profusely as she did so, and drank from the container the entire way back down the stairs and out to the snowdrift.

The Aleve dulled the pain in Sansa’s shoulders well enough, but it could not prevent them or any other part of her body from tiring, and as the night wore on, her muscles preferred tiring to shoveling, shuffling, or anything else. No matter how much coffee she brewed or how often she stopped for a minute in the middle of her activities to rest, her arms moved the shovel more and more slowly, and her temples began to ache from the frequency of her yawns. After a while, the Aleve wore off, and she dragged herself indoors to take another double dose. She nodded off again while waiting for another pot of coffee to brew, and for a few moments after rousing herself she wondered whether a short nap might do her good. The thought was tempting, but the thought of Jon’s door collapsing while she slept won out, and she headed back downstairs to tackle the snowdrift once again.

The next few hours dragged on in a hazy blur. Sansa’s eyes tried to close every few seconds, which more than once resulted in her throwing the snow from her shovel right back onto the drift by accident. Eventually she felt the grit of sheer fatigue build up, and blink as she might, it remained. She stumbled more and more often, and when she failed to catch herself in time, her predominant impulse was to stay lying on the ground just for a bit longer because it felt so good to rest for a moment instead of driving her muscles into spasms. Every time she resisted the impulse, but every time she lay back for a round of kicking at the snowdrift, she felt it again. Every time, it took more energy to move her legs, and every time, she took longer to rise to her feet. Eventually, she took to swearing loudly with Jon’s thick gloves covering her mouth, but that made Sansa realize how much Jon’s scent had lingered on them, which in turn brought on the tears she had successfully stifled with food a few hours previously. They refused to stop, and when Sansa returned to the flat to retrieve tissues, she was struck as she had not been before by how Jon’s scent permeated the entire flat, as well as how entirely it overwhelmed his bedroom. She cried softly even as she took his temperature, and she barely managed to do that before she headed back out of the flat and away from Jon’s smell, still crying. She cried for Jon, burning with fever on a bed covered in tarp to catch his filth – Jon, who had done less than nothing to deserve it; Jon, who had done less than nothing to deserve three years’ worth of abandonment and recrimination from a wife who, as he had so aptly pointed out, had given a marriage founded on over a decade of friendship and devotion a mere four days before cutting it off on the word of two strangers. A wife who was his wife no longer because she had refused to believe the simple truth that she had finally found the kind, gentle, loyal good egg in a chicken coop full of wreckage. A wife who sat crying over her inability to clear out a snowdrift with her aching shoulders while Jon lay sick and suffering indoors as a partial result of her actions.
But then, since when had her actions not caused Jon pain? Even before the divorce, she’d let the strain of dealing with the fallout of her father’s death make her miserable and Jon unhappy as a result.

*Maybe the divorce was a blessing in disguise for him. Maybe he’s better off now. Maybe he’ll be happier now. No, not maybe – definitely happier. At least once he gets over being sick.*

*But he’s so sick.*

Sansa sank to her knees into the snow. Halfway down, she tried to stop herself. The result was a jolt to one shoulder as at the very last second she rolled to her side, rather than trying to break her fall with her hands.

*No. Not now. Cry later, after the snowdrift is gone, or at least smaller. Jon doesn’t need some squalling idiot who can’t shovel worth a damn.*

In order to avoid crying again, Sansa turned to singing the happiest, cheesiest songs she could think of in time with her shovel strokes. She soon began alternating that with yawning and grunting and swearing under her breath. On occasion, she would then beg for leniency and help from the universe or God or anything else that could help her. It made her feel like an idiot, but even that was preferable to crying, or to giving up her attack on the snowdrift, much as Sansa wanted to do both. She was in the middle of begging again when she finally felt the top of the drift begin to collapse against the top of her shovel, which she immediately flung as far to the side as she could. Her legs sprang to life, and she flung herself after the shovel. Even as she stumbled, her momentum carried her into a forward somersault, which carried her just far enough to avoid the mountain of snow that had flung itself forward and crashed in a gigantic white wave upon the ground.

Once Sansa recovered the wind that had been knocked out of her, she turned and saw that her shoulder pain had been a blessing in disguise. Had she been able to lift her arms higher when she had first started attacking the snowdrift, back before she had taken the Aleve, she would not have cut it off so close to the ground, and the snow would still have been covering at least half of the glass door, rather than barely one-third, as it did now, and she would have had a good deal more shoveling to do in the long run. Now, as long as the door had not cracked or otherwise weakened, Sansa thought it should hold up well against the remaining snow.

Having lost the strength to lift her shovel, Sansa dragged it behind her as she headed indoors. She inspected the glass door carefully and even ran her fingertips over its surface to ensure that she could not detect any cracks. To her everlasting relief, she found none. Even remembering on her way up the stairs that she had left Jon’s coffee mug outdoors to be buried by the avalanche did not fluster her in the least.
Sansa’s right leg began to cramp as she ascended the stairs, so she resorted to dragging herself on her hands and knees. She limped all the way into Jon’s bathroom, where she rooted out a bottle of Advil along with yet another thermometer probe cover. She propped her throbbing leg on the side of Jon’s bed as she leaned over to push the thermometer into his mouth.

Seeing the number 100.7 on the device after she withdrew it, however, obliterated Sansa’s pain at once. She dashed off to the bathroom to retrieve another probe so that she could double-check her results, and when the second reading produced the same number, she buried her head on Jon’s chest, felt its steady rise and fall, and let her tears of relief soak them both.


“Sansa! Bloody hell –”

Sansa woke so suddenly and sprang up so quickly that she slid off of her air mattress backward and landed on her elbows. She winced as she stared up at Jon, who was now very much awake and staring at her as though he had caught her rifling through his drawers.

“What are you doing?” Jon’s voice, still hoarse from disuse, cut through the remaining layers of the sleepy fog that still clouded Sansa’s mind. So great was her relief to see the life back in Jon’s eyes, despite the fact that those eyes were half confused and half glaring at her, that for a moment she forgot to answer him. Then the furrow in his brow deepened, and she cleared her throat.

“I’m – I was staying in here until you felt better,” she began. Jon only looked more confused, and Sansa’s voice softened.

“Wait,” she said. “Do you not remember bringing me here – to your flat, I mean, in the snowstorm?”

Jon shook his head. “No,” he replied. “I remember that. But what are you doing in –” He shifted slightly, and the tarp squeaked underneath him. He looked down at it, and his expression became even more puzzled. “Wait, what –” He gestured toward the tarp. “What happened?”

Sansa followed his lead and shifted her own body back onto the air mattress. She opened her mouth to answer Jon, but he spoke before she could get any words out.
“Wait.” His brow furrowed again, but concentration and a spark of memory replaced some of the confusion. “Did I get sick?”

Sansa nodded, and before she could say anything, Jon spoke again. “How long?”

“Two days,” Sansa replied quietly. Jon stared at her, nonplussed, and Sansa continued. “Or maybe a bit more, because the last time I saw you was dinnertime two days before yesterday, when – ” She decided not to mention the row they had had right before Jon had stomped out of the dining room. “When you went to your room. When I came in to check on you the next morning, you were sick. Oh!” She finagled one knee under her in case she needed to stand. “Would you like to read your temperature again? I mean, obviously it’s much lower now, but…” She turned both hands to the side, palms up. Jon’s eyes widened.

“I had another fever,” he said. It was more of a statement than a question, but Sansa nodded anyway.

“How bad?” asked Jon quietly as full understanding seeped into his gaze. Sansa had to clear the lump out of her throat before answering.

“Close to 103 degrees,” she answered, and Jon’s dark eyebrows shot upward. Sansa supposed he was wondering why he had not awakened in the hospital rather than in his own bed, and hastened to explain. “I almost had you taken into the doctor’s office; I called two different ones, but they wouldn’t let me bring you in unless the fever hit 103 or you didn’t get better by this morning.” She tilted her head. “That is, assuming it’s still the 19th – oh, God – ” She turned carefully to grab her phone off of the bookshelf behind her. One press of the home button informed her that it was indeed the nineteenth day of the month, but perilously close to noon. Sansa sighed with relief; at that point, it would not have surprised her terribly if she had slept for an entire day. She turned back to Jon, who had just pulled himself to sit fully upright.

“Anyway, they said they were overflowing with people from the blizzard,” Sansa continued, and Jon’s eyes turned back to hers. “I should have had them come and get you, anyway; I had no way of knowing if your usual high temperature changed since we – since the last of these I was around for,” she finished lamely. Jon only shook his head.

“No,” he said. “It hasn’t. At least, that’s what Sam and everyone else tells me.” He saw the confused expression on her face and gestured outward with one hand. “I’ve only got sick three times – since then till now,” he added. “Twice on set, once when Sam was over.”

Sansa nodded. Jon swung his legs around to dangle off the edge of his bed. “Anyway, I’m here now,” he finished. Sansa nodded again. A few silent moments passed before Jon gestured toward the
“I supposed I must have ruined the sheets,” he remarked, “but – ”

“Oh, shit!” Sansa clapped a hand to her mouth and sighed. “I mean, the sheets aren’t ruined,” she said quickly, “but I think I left them in the dryer.”

Jon’s brow furrowed again. “But you got this instead,” he said. This time, it was more of a question than a statement.

“Oh.” Sansa felt her face flush ever so slightly. “Well, I’m not strong enough to help you to the bathroom, and I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable with a – a pan, and I couldn’t find the one you used to have, and I remembered your having these, so – ” She shrugged and gestured toward the bucket. Jon followed the movement of her hand and scratched his head.

“That’s – I’m glad you remembered it,” he finally said. “I know it must have been a pain for you, though.”

Sansa shrugged in her turn. “It’s all right,” she said. “Besides, you were out of it, so you didn’t fidget or fight me or anything.”

Jon gestured outward with his hand again. “Still,” he said, “I’m glad you did. I owe you one for that.”

Sansa shook her head vigorously, but before she could reply, Jon squinted at her again. This time he was staring at her legs. Sansa flushed again, but Jon only looked bemused.

“I didn’t think you’d find remember my having those, though,” he remarked, and Sansa realized he was talking about his bulky overalls, which she had forgotten to remove in her utter fatigue of the prior night.

“Oh,” she said, and smacked her forehead lightly with the heel of her hand. “Shit! I should check the door, and – oh, I forgot, and I shouldn’t have – I’ll get you more water. And do you want any food, or more broth? I found your bouillon cubes.”
Jon stared at her for a moment with an expression all too familiar to Sansa. During their marriage, whenever she had remembered several things at once and verbally recalled them scattershot, his lips would turn up in a wry, loving bemusement of which Sansa had never seen the like on anyone else. Now his bemusement was interested more than loving, but his lips still turned just a bit upward. It was the first time Sansa had seen them do it in over three years, since the last weekend they had been together before her disastrous visit to his film set.

“The door?” he asked, keeping Sansa from getting too caught up in her reflections. She felt her face redden again.

“The patio door,” she replied, and, seeing Jon still confused, related the story of the previous night’s events. Jon buried his face in his hands at some point, and only looked at her over his fingertips when she told him about how the snowdrift had collapsed. She could not keep a slight quiver out of her voice when she recounted how she had discovered Jon’s fever had broken, but if he noticed it, he said nothing.

“Jesus,” he muttered as she reached the end of her tale. “Sansa, you didn’t have to do that. You were tired. You could have – ” He leaned his elbows against his knees and covered his face entirely again.

Sansa shook her head. “The door could have collapsed just as easily as not,” she said, “and anyway, I’m fine.” She sighed. “And you’re fine too, so no harm, right?”

Jon mirrored her sigh and propped an unconvinced face on top of his hands.

“I’m sorry you had to deal with all that,” he said, his voice softer than Sansa had expected. “You shouldn’t have had to.”

Sansa shook her head again. “It wasn’t your fault,” she replied. “It was the least I could do, anyway.” She did not bother mentioning why, and by the look of him, Jon did not need to be reminded any more than she did. He brought the heel of his hand up to scrub his forehead, and Sansa noticed how much paler his previously flushed face had become.

“I’ll get you some water,” she said and leaned forward to prop her arms on the floor in front of the air mattress. “You shouldn’t over – ooowh!”

She made the last exclamation as her shoulders, now completely unaffected by pain medication, felt the impact of her body weight, and her leg muscles, still stiff and overworked, nearly had spasms.
when they moved to assist their counterparts.

“Sansa!” Jon sounded alarmed, and Sansa, anticipating his next move, held up her hand to stop him before he could jump out of bed to assist her. She took a deep breath to steady herself.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Just not used to that much shoveling at a go, is all.”

She used Jon’s bed to pull herself mostly upright. Her right hand missed the bedpost near the top, but instead of stumbling forward she caught hold of the warmer, gentler, but just as firm support of Jon’s hand. Her head swerved to catch Jon’s gaze, which was as steady as his grip with a flicker of something not quite definable. The corner of Sansa’s mouth twitched in a nervous tic of which she had never quite managed to rid herself.

“You all right?” asked Jon, and Sansa straightened herself fully. The tension in her leg muscles receded, as did the screaming of her shoulders, and she nodded.

“Thanks,” she said softly as Jon let go of her hand. He merely shrugged, but she had barely gotten to the doorway before she heard him say her name. She turned, still stiffly, to meet his softened gaze.

“Thank you,” he said. Sansa’s lips turned up to mirror his expression from earlier before she turned and exited the room.
Chapter 9

The chime of Jon’s doorbell interrupted Sansa in the middle of typing her e-mail to the legal consultant whose information she had requested from Pod Payne. As Sansa had predicted, Pod had replied to her inquiry within hours of her having sent it. Now she found herself seated in front of the island in Jon’s kitchen formulating her missive to Jeyne Westerling, a Leeds barrister whose first name Sansa had decided not to hold against her.

Sansa sighed and flipped the top of her laptop downward. Jon, as far as she knew, was still in the shower, and at some point he would have to know she had contacted Jeyne anyway, and almost certainly, but now was not the time, and Sansa could not take the chance, however slight, that he would meander into the kitchen and catch sight of her e-mail by mistake. Even the minute or two it would take for Sansa to sign for the new phone she had finally ordered during Jon’s illness – and she could think of nobody who would be ringing the doorbell at the moment other than the delivery person – was too long a time to risk.

But when Sansa opened the door, from which Jon’s landlord had had the snow cleared some time after the previous evening, she saw two men there, not one, and neither of them was carrying a package. Instead, the younger of the two was wielding a large and expensive-looking camera, and the elder, a stout, friendly-looking fellow with thick-rimmed spectacles and curly, whitening gray hair, a clipboard and pen.

“Hello,” began the older man. Sansa did not let him get any further. She took a step forward onto the doormat at the top of the expansive stone staircase and shut the door halfway behind her. Each of the men took a corresponding step backward. Sansa, accustomed to having the paparazzi dealt with by her security detail, felt her heart begin to race and her palms to sweat; but, if the flat complex had security personnel, they were nowhere in sight, so she lifted her chin and did her best to summon the Princess Stephana-worthy glare with which she had dispatched the children who had laughed at Jon during their first audition together all those years ago.

“This is private property,” Sansa informed the men, lowering her voice by half an octave to disguise her nerves. One could not go too soft on the paparazzi, and after all, she was not an actress for nothing. “If you’d be so kind as to leave now, I should appreciate it.” She raised her chin by another fraction of an inch and shot them a tight-lipped smile.

“Oh, no –” began the older man affably, but Sansa cut him off.

“Seeing the roads are this clean,” she said, nodding toward the sidewalk leading to the brick stairs at the front of the flat, “I’m sure the police will have no trouble getting here quickly, and –”

“Ma’am,” the older man tried again, still quite affably. Sansa pulled her stiffening right leg forward and planted it half a step in front of her left. Both men backpedaled once again.

“– they still don’t mind arresting people who trespass on others’ property, from what I’ve been told,” Sansa continued, a bit more loudly. The older man shook his head.

“You see, I’m –” he began again. He was still smiling, and Sansa flushed with annoyance.

“So if you don’t mind leaving, I’m sure I don’t mind not calling both them and building security on you both!” Her voice came out a bit sharper and much louder than she had intended. Her left leg shook as it swung another step forward, and Sansa was relieved to see that both men backed up once again in response. One could never be too careful with the paparazzi, however, so she forced her
right leg to stand nearly even with the left, but far enough back of it to keep her stiffness-impaired balance.

“And if you really don’t mind,” she continued, once again a bit more loudly than she had intended, “you can see to it your employer understands that anyone else who get sent out here without any right to be on this property whatsoever – ” she raised her voice deliberately this time on the last word because the older man looked very much about to speak again – “will have both police and security called on them, and your employer hearing from m – J – the owner’s attorney as well!”

Both men’s eyes widened, but their gazes had shifted to the doorway behind her. At first Sansa refused to turn around, thinking they might be trying to get her to do so in order to distract her.

Then she heard an amused chuckle behind her and the sound of Jon’s voice.

“Hello, Leigh,” it said, and Sansa pivoted as quickly as she could to see a grinning Jon standing on the doorstep, clad in his boots and nothing else save for a towel wrapped around his waist. Sansa, feeling very much as though a pack of red dye had exploded across her face, stood stock still for a moment as Jon raked a hand through his damp curls. She had more than half a mind to reprimand him for stomping outside half-naked while still recovering from a fever; but she had already spent enough time shouting at Jon, and in any case the rest of her mind was too busy realizing just how much more lush and beautiful his curls, not to mention his body, had gotten over the past three years. At any other time, that thought would have annoyed Sansa, who had after all spent two days undressing and redressing Jon without so much as a blush after her initial discomfiture. However, the discovery that Jon apparently knew the two men she had just spent the last few minutes treating like paparazzi relegated it to oblivion.

Partly because she knew she would have to do it at some point and partly to avoid having to stare at Jon any further, Sansa slowly turned back toward the two strangers. The elder one had the good grace to look past her, and the younger followed his lead after a few awkward seconds.

“Jon.” The older man’s affable smile widened into a grin, and he held out his hand to shake Jon’s.

“Leigh.” Jon nodded as he returned the gesture, then glanced over at Sansa, who finally realized her mouth was opened and hastened to shut it. “Sansa, this is Leigh Harris, the PM here onsite – property manager, not Prime Minister,” he added, “although if you ask him, he’s both.”

The other man’s grin mirrored Jon’s. Sansa wished the brick on which she stood were a magic brick, just like the ones in first movie she and Jon had acted in together as teenagers, which would flip around when someone stood on it for long enough and immediately transport the person to another world in another dimension. But the bricks on Jon’s doorstep were entirely ordinary, and Sansa swallowed a grimace in favor of a very sheepish smile as she force herself to look directly into the property manager’s twinkling green eyes.

“I am so sorry, Mr. Harris,” she said, but the man waved away her apology.

“Not to worry,” he replied genially. Far from being offended at her rudeness, he looked as though his grin would splinter into laughter at any moment. Sansa guessed that if she were to glimpse her reflection in the lens of the other man’s camera, her eyes would stare back at her out of a face roughly the color of a black cherry. Jon, who actually could see her, must have thought the same, for he stepped forward to stand next to Sansa.

“Sansa Stark,” he introduced her to Mr. Harris, who shook her hand at once. He did not look starstruck in the least, however, and Sansa felt the blush begin to recede from her face. After a moment, he gestured to the younger man, who still looked a bit nonplussed at the entire exchange.
“Jon, Ms. Stark –”

Sansa shook her head. “Oh, no; Sansa, please.”

Mr. Harris nodded amiably. “This is Neal Brown of Casterly Rock Insurers. He’s here to take photographs to document the property for insurance purposes in light of the blizzard. Outside photos only, of course.” He inclined his head slightly toward Sansa, whose eyes had widened. “If now does not suit you, I can arrange a time that will.”

Sansa risked a sidelong glance at Jon, who did not seem at all perturbed. “Right, Leigh,” he said. “If you don’t mind giving me a few minutes, I can get whatever you need.”

Mr. Harris nodded, and Jon headed back inside. Sansa stayed rooted to the spot.

“I am so sorry again, Mr. Harris – Mr. Brown –” she began, but the younger man shook his head and muttered, “Don’t mention it,” while the older man merely waved away the apology and said, “I’ve been called worse in my day, Ms. Stark.”

“Still, I – I –” But both men were already waving off her next apology, and at last Sansa, feeling that her face would turn blue next, thanked them for their understanding and returned to the flat. Jon was donning his coat as she did so.

“Oh! The door,” she exclaimed, remembering. When Jon merely stared at her, she added, “The downstairs door, where the snowdrift was – here, I can show them, if you like.”

Jon nodded, although why his eyes twinkled with amusement at the idea Sansa could not tell.

“Good idea,” was all he said, however, and a few minutes later, he and Sansa both headed downstairs to meet with Mr. Harris and Mr. Brown. As soon as Sansa had shown the door in question to the two men, she hastened back indoors, slumped on Jon’s living room couch, and buried her still beet-red face in her hands. She raised it only when she heard Jon’s footsteps entering the room.

“Oh, God, what your property manager must think – I am so sorry –” she began, but was cut off by the sound of Jon’s chuckling as he sank into the chair nearest the couch. Her mouth shut abruptly, but Jon’s chuckles only expanded into a full belly laugh the like of which he had rarely produced even during their marriage, except for when she’d tickled his feet. Sansa could not begrudge him that, not when his cheeks were pink with amusement rather than red with fever and his eyes sparkling with laughter rather than delirium, but she still threw both of her hands into the air and groaned.

“I called him and the adjustor paparazzi – I threatened to call the police on them, and your attorneys – oh, they must think I’m some sort of delusional freak, and what they must think since I landed on your doorstep – and the manager’s used to you being all calm and gentlemanly with him –”

The word gentlemanly sent Jon into another burst of laughter. Sansa narrowed her eyes at him, but the expression had no force.

“It’s just – the expression on his face,” Jon gasped when he finally caught his breath. “He probably just thought it such an irony, is all – he’s called more police on the paparazzi here than anyone. Don’t worry; he won’t take offense to it,” he added with a wave of his hand. “He doesn’t offend easily, and this isn’t exactly the strangest situation he’s ever had to deal with. He’ll probably just think it funny that you were trying to defend my honor the whole time.”

His eyes twinkled with dry humor as he said the last bit, and he could not restrain another chuckle.
Despite her reddened face, Sansa, to her shock, heard one of her own escape, and then another. After all, she must have sounded so ridiculous screaming about calling the police and attorneys on the man whose job it was to call them to protect Jon in the first place. The longer she thought about it, the more ridiculous it sounded, and soon she was laughing as hard as Jon, and Jon laughing was a sight she had not seen since even longer ago than she had last witnessed him smiling. She had forgotten how many years dropped off his face when he laughed, how flushed and smoothed his cheeks got, how the left corner of his mouth quirked upward farther than the right and almost dimpled his cheek as it did so. She had also forgotten that his laughter was infectious as it was rare, that the room always brightened around her when she saw him that happy, that every time she felt like kissing his head or rubbing his shoulder, or –

But she could not do that now, and Sansa’s laughter trailed off at the thought. Jon, fortunately, did not seem to notice.

“Well, I’m sure I’ll be one of his livelier pub stories with the boys for the month, at any rate,” remarked Sansa drily once they had both stopped laughing altogether. Jon shook his head. Sansa had also forgotten how quickly his expression could switch from mirthful to sober.

“No, you won’t,” he assured her. “Leigh’s seen a lot livelier than this, and anyway, he knows how to keep things quiet better than anyone I’ve ever met – except maybe for Sam.”

Sansa tilted her head in acknowledgement. “Well, Sam is Sam,” she said, and Jon nodded. Both of them knew that the closest Sam had come to betraying either of their confidences, even after Sansa had left Jon, was when he had mentioned having seen Sansa at the park in Leeds near the end of the divorce process, and Sansa suspected even that reference had been more than half accidental on Sam’s part.

“How is he doing?” she asked, unwilling to let her mind wander down that particular rabbit hole again for the moment.

“Really good,” replied Jon, sprawling back into his chair. “He and Gilly are having their first child together next year.”

Sansa leaned forward slightly. “Gilly Craster? The nurse he met in the emergency room – what, four years ago now?”

Jon grinned. “That’s Gilly. They got married about two years ago. Sammy’s in primary school now.” He shook his head, as if not quite able to believe the mathematics that told him a child who had been two years old when his mother had first met Sam had now attained the age of six years. Sansa smiled.

“Maybe this one won’t have quite as much energy as Sammy,” she remarked. She had been even more surprised than Jon when placid, introverted Sam Tarly, who had always been more at home around books than even well-behaved adults, had first met the boy even Jon had described as a little hellion and taken every one of his tantrums in stride.

“Or maybe he’ll have more,” said Jon drily, but he could not say it without smiling, and soon both of them were chuckling again.

Jon’s stomach growled so loudly then that Sansa could hear it, and she immediately got up and offered to make coffee and grab whatever Jon might want from the refrigerator or pantry. He, however, insisted on following her lead, and soon Sansa was cutting up apples and Jon scrambling a pan of eggs.
“How is that project of yours and Sam’s going, anyway?” she asked after several silent minutes. Jon looked puzzled.

“You know,” she continued, “the one where you and Pyp Knight were outfitting that one machine with extra hookups to feed into the machine that read Sam’s production software, and you kept on rearranging the cables on it.”

Jon’s brow retained its furrows for a few moments before he spoke. “Oh, you mean the Nightwatch interface?”

Sansa nodded. “Yes! That’s the one.”

Jon shook his head. “We haven’t worked on it for a while,” he replied. “Not since I moved here, anyway.”

He turned back to the stove to give the eggs another scrambling, and Sansa regarded his back for a few moments. The machine had been Jon’s pet project for years, ever since he had convinced Sam, a professor of sound engineering at the University of York, to help him with it. The two had spent countless hours in the basement of Jon and Sansa’s London residence both before and during the marriage – so many hours, in fact, that Sansa had teased Jon a few times about whether the machine was his real wife. Almost every time, his eyes would turn dark, and he would growl something about showing her who his wife really was and then spend the next hour or two keeping his promise in very satisfying ways. The memory made Sansa flush so red that she thanked her lucky stars Jon’s back was turned. She sobered quickly enough, however, when she recalled that it was her fault the memories were just those, and not ongoing occurrences. A lump began to fill her throat, but she swallowed it.

“Oh,” she finally said, managing to brighten her voice a little. “Any other joint ventures you’re working on with Sam, then?”

Jon shook his head. “One or two, but nothing big. Sam’s been pretty busy lately.”

Sansa’s lips turned up when she remembered the times she’d watched Sam play never-ending games of Tag with Sammy in the park and wrangling him into the car seat afterwards. “If Sammy’s anything like I remember him,” she replied, “I can see why.”

Jon smiled wryly. “Oh, he is,” he assured her, and Sansa’s smile widened.

“Perhaps he’ll calm down if you and Sam teach him how to play a guitar,” she said, and Jon raised an eyebrow.

Jon chuckled again. “I don’t think we could get him to stand still long enough,” he replied. “Gilly says she’ll have to attach strings to him one of these days to keep track of him.”

“Attach strings. Clever.” Sansa grinned. No wonder Sam had fallen in love; Gilly clearly appreciated guitar humor.

Jon tilted his head. “Exactly.”

Sansa pulled two mugs out of the cupboard above Jon’s coffeemaker. “Did she ever ask Sam why a crowd cheers at an American baseball match when the groundskeepers bring out home plate?” she asked. When she looked back around at Jon, he was staring at her quizzically. She smiled again. “It’s because the base has –”

“– Turned up,” they finished in unison. One corner of Jon’s mouth twitched as he switched off the
stove burner. He turned up one hand in a gesture of mock surrender and reached for the salt shaker with the other.

“I know you wouldn’t string me along about it,” he said, and Sansa laughed; it was an old joke of theirs to try and beat each other to that line after cracking particularly bad puns. Jon, however, said nothing else until Sansa had poured the coffee and arranged the cut fruit onto the plates of eggs he had produced.

“Any writing, then?” he asked, so quietly that Sansa, who had expected him to head off to either the table or another room in silence, barely registered the question at first.

“I mean – ” Jon gestured as best he could with the hand holding his plate, “for you. Lately.”

“Oh. No, not really,” she answered after several moments. “Just an occasional poem or two – or what tries to be a poem, anyway.” She shrugged. “And a couple of sketches. Nothing worth a lot of polishing up, anyway.” And just as well, she added to herself. Jon had been one of the few people she had trusted not to make fun of her for admitting that she often busied herself between takes or wound down at night by scribbling down irreverent limericks or scenes from parody sketches, all lampooning the more ridiculous parts of life in the Middle Ages, onto the notepad she always carried with her. He had been one of the even lower number of people she had trusted to listen without laughing when she had read some of the least awful of her works aloud; he had even encouraged her to do it, as well as to try publishing them anonymously as she had sometimes offhandedly mentioned doing. On occasion, the urge would still strike her, and she would stay up ridiculously late writing a bit of blather about Shakespeare’s love-hate relationship with Lady Anne, his temperamental computer. The impulses had struck her far less often since the divorce, though; Sansa had taken on as many film projects as she could possibly handle since the day she had left Ygritte North’s trailer in her rearview mirror, and long hours on one set after another facilitated very little creativity.

But Sansa had not been on a project for nearly a week now, by far the longest such lapse since the divorce, and with Jon in front of her, it took all the effort she could muster to keep her mind from wandering further into daydreams about cuddling with Jon in front of the wood stove in their London home on a rainy day, daydreams in which she read him one or another of her works aloud as he drew his finger in lazy patterns along her back, then began placing open-mouthed kisses along her neck and gently tugging her shirt over her head while she gladly divested him of his own, and –

“How about you? Any new guitars, or speakers, or – or machines you like to work with now?” she heard herself ask. Jon turned where he stood, halfway between the kitchen island and the entrance to the living room. Jon’s brow furrowed, but he answered her anyway.

“Just the AT-LP120,” he replied. Sansa raised an eyebrow. Four years of living with Jon had taught her many of the acronyms and slang terms to the world of electric guitars and sound machines, but this was one she had not heard.

“Electronic record player,” Jon offered when he saw her confusion. “Works like the older kind, but they connect to computers and tablets and that sort of thing – anything you store sound files on. You can hook them up to a lot of the same things I connect my guitars to, but I’ve been working on a dual hookup between mine and the iMac and the newer Waldorf, and – ” He stopped and shrugged. “That sort of thing,” he finished, as if expecting Sansa to be crying with boredom already.

Sansa, however, only leaned back against the island and took a sip of coffee. “You mean newer than the one you liked hooking to your Gibson?” she asked. Jon looked mildly impressed.

“Right,” he said, nodding. “It can connect to a larger variety of machines, so I sold the other.”
Sansa smiled. “You sold Craig?” she replied. Jon had a habit of naming each new sound machine he purchased. Every new machine had a name beginning with the letter next in the alphabet to the first letter of the name of his most recently purchased machine. He had already gotten through the alphabet a couple of times.

“So who’s the new one?” asked Sansa. Jon’s cheeks flushed a little.

“Nymeria,” he said. Sansa raised an eyebrow at him, and he continued hastily. “After my cousin Arya’s dog. She got her two years ago. Arya says she makes up her own mind about who to like.” He shrugged. “She decided to like me for some reason. She’s a terror if she doesn’t like you, though.”

Rather like her owner, Sansa thought as she recalled the fierce glare of Arya Winter, the petite firecracker with two brown braids and eyes as big as saucers who had been a flower girl at her and Jon’s wedding. One of the guests’ children had taken it upon himself to bully Benjen, Robb’s older son, and Arya had leaped to his defense and bloodied both the offender’s nose and her own dress in the process. Sansa grinned at the memory.

“So how are she and Nymeria doing?” she asked.


“Sorry,” she said once she had finished swallowing the contents of her mouth. “I didn’t want them to get cold.”

Jon merely shrugged and took a bite of his own eggs, then set his plate down on the kitchen table. It stayed there for the next twenty minutes as their conversation lulled and turned; he talked about his young cousin’s latest adventures and the records he planned to buy and play on Hannibal, his new record player, and she about Robb’s children and her forays into glass-blowing classes taught at a studio just a quarter-mile away from her flat in Leeds. They were safe enough subjects, Sansa decided, but she paused whenever Jon furrowed a brow, determined not to vex him by talking too much or referencing anything that might dredge up the fights of the past several days.

“Oh, bloody hell!” Sansa exclaimed suddenly, snapping her fingers over her empty plate. “I’m sorry, Jon, I forgot – I need to get the mattress out of your room, and everything else – and make the bed for you – ”

Jon waved away her apology at once. “I can take care of all that,” he said. Sansa shook her head.

“You’re not twelve hours off a bloody horrid fever,” she countered. “You shouldn’t be lifting things all over the place.” Not waiting for an answer, she turned to set her dishes next to the sink. But her right leg cramped as she pivoted on it, and she doubled over to clutch the counter. Had it not been for her leg, she would have laughed at the irony.

“You OK?” she heard Jon asking, and managed to nod in response.

“I just need some Aleve is all,” she answered. “Give it a few minutes to kick in and I’ll be able to move everything back where it belongs.”

Jon looked skeptical. “You could twist something and just not feel the pain that way,” he argued. Sansa turned gingerly to face him and sighed.

“I’ll be fine,” she said, a bit more sharply than she had intended. “I’m the one who made that mess and inconvenienced you; it’s only fair I clean it up.”
“You made that mess saving my ass,” retorted Jon. “We’re even. I can handle an air mattress and a laptop.”

“Oh, God, you’re worse than Robb,” Sansa moaned. Jon drew back as though she had just told him that her laptop was made of blueberries.

“If you’d rather have bugs in your pudding every day for a week than have help carrying your things, you can,” he said drily. Sansa merely stared at him for several moments until she remembered one particularly rainy week on the outdoor set of their first film together, a week during which the crew had planned to shoot two or three expansive outdoor scenes. Instead, Jon, Sansa, and Robin and Lyanna, who had played the two youngest members of their sibling group, had been relegated to yet another week in the studios, and Robin had gotten cranky and spent the week pulling any number of pranks on his castmates. She could not quite refrain from cracking a smile.

“Oh, God, no. I said Robb, not Robin,” she clarified. “I’m not sure anybody’s worse than Robin Arryn, at least not that week.”

Jon scratched the back of his head, and Sansa caught the corner of his mouth twitching. “Probably not,” he agreed, and Sansa thought he would have broken into another laugh had the doorbell not rung and made them both jump a little. This time it was package carrier bearing Sansa’s long-awaited phone, and all thoughts of Robin Arryn and his pranks were driven from her mind at once.

Jon headed back to the kitchen to get more coffee. Sansa ducked into his bathroom to take the Aleve pills she needed; she did not trust her bad leg on the stairway just yet. Back in his room, she settled herself onto the armchair that had been her home for the past two days. She tried to activate her phone while waiting for the Aleve to kick in, but she had never been particularly adept at such tasks, and Jon appeared at the doorway, empty coffee mug in hand, to find her cursing as she input her password into the carrier’s website after her second failed activation attempt.

“Here,” he said and held out his hand. Sansa jerked upward, startled, and Jon took half a step back. “Sorry.”

Sansa shook her head. “No, I should be sorry,” she said. “I’m still in your room – I had thought to have this done by now.” She gestured at the computer screen and sighed.

Jon extended his hand a bit farther. “Here,” he said. “Who’s your carrier?”

Three minutes later, Sansa’s phone was up and running, and she was mumbling her embarrassment-riddled thanks to Jon. He only waved them off.

“It’s fine,” he said. Another silence ensued until Sansa stood and bent to turn the switch on the air mattress. Luckily, the Aleve had kicked in and she felt no pain in her leg, although she could feel its muscles contracting with more force than usual.

While the mattress deflated, Sansa collected as many of the items she had brought in from her room two nights previously as she could. Jon, however, insisted on dealing with the bulky blankets, and Sansa did not press the issue.

“Just – oh, shit!” she exclaimed, nearly dropping her phone. “I forgot – your bedsheets are still in the dryer, and that means all of your jeans have been sitting in the washing machine; I’ll grab them as soon as I’m done with these.”

“Jeans?” Jon looked confused, and Sansa hastily explained about her use of his clothing the previous night.
“Oh.” Jon shrugged. “I’ll get them, Sansa. Don’t worry about it.”

Sansa opened her mouth, but then thought better of it. “All right,” she said, “but let me know if you need any help.”

That earned her a brief nod, and she turned to head out of the bedroom. Her elbow caught the corner of one of Jon’s shelves as she did so, which very nearly knocked off a small box perched at the top.

“Whoa!” Sansa turned just in time to see Jon, arms suddenly free of the blankets, lunging forward to catch the box. It stopped short of falling, but Jon hastily pushed it as far back on the shelf as it would go. Sansa stepped backward, but not in time to keep his momentum from pushing her against the wall. She let out a startled “oof!” and clung to her arms’ contents, which after all included the laptop, for dear life.

“Sorry.” Jon carefully steadied the box, then turned to Sansa. “It’s just – ” Satisfied that she was unhurt, he turned back to the shelf and picked up the box. Sansa stepped backward to allow him to pass back into the room and disappear into his walk-in closet. He emerged empty-handed.

“It’s just – ” Jon gestured back toward the closet. “It’s where I put the pieces of my gram’s vase.”

“Oh.” Sansa stared down at the floor for a moment. Then her head snapped back upwards. “Wait – ”

She bit her lip to hold back the rest of the words that had jumped into her mouth, but she could tell by the way Jon raised his eyebrows that she had piqued his curiosity. She took a deep breath and willed her thoughts into line.

“I – and – you don’t have to,” she said slowly, “but I we had a guest teacher at one of my glassblowing classes. Her name’s Alys Karstark, and she’s based out of Leeds. Our teacher says she’s one of the best glass artisans in the world, and she’s one of the top experts in antique glass. She’s done work for a couple of Quentin Martell’s projects, so I could get in touch with her if you want and ask her to look at it to see if she could fix it. Even if she couldn’t, she might know somebody who could.”

Jon’s eyes narrowed as she spoke, but she could not quite read the expression they finally assumed, so she shifted her eyes to the closet door next to him. Oh, no, you don’t. You look him in the face.

She forced her gaze back to Jon, who stood motionless for a few minutes. Sansa, unsure whether he would take offense and either start shouting or wave her out of the room in disgust, or tell her he would prefer not to discuss the matter further, or perhaps say nothing at all, leaned back carefully against the wall. That proved enough movement to made Jon blink and give his head a barely discernible shake.

“So you want to take it back with you?” he finally asked. “To Leeds? And you’d give it to her there?”

That startled Sansa, who had not even considered the idea that he would simply hand over the vase right there. It took her a few moments to generate a reply.

“If you like,” she finally said. In any other situation she would have chastised herself for sounding like a little girl begging her mother to let her play with a favorite toy for just a few minutes longer, but this was hardly the time. “Depending on her schedule, I might not be able to get it to her right away; I know she travels to give lectures sometimes. But I can contact her as soon as I get back home, or even sooner.” She shifted her weight back off the wall and made to set her computer on Jon’s bed. “I can find her website now and have a look at her speaking schedule if you want, so you
can get a better idea. Or I can send you her contact information if you’d rather be the only one handling the vase.” She gestured toward the closet door.

“You don’t have to look everything up right this second,” said Jon. “But if you can get the information before you go…. ” He scratched the back of his head. “I’m glad you thought of it, though.”

Sansa shook her head. “It’s only the least I could do,” she replied. “It was my fault, after all.”

Jon mirrored her gesture. “It’s already done with,” he said. His voice lowered almost to a whisper when he added, “I appreciate it.”

He could not keep the relief out of his voice when he said it, but for a moment Sansa caught a flash of the not quite definable look she had seen earlier that morning, when he had caught her as she had stumbled while pulling herself out of bed. She only nodded and retrieved her laptop, however, and he bent to pick the blankets up off the bedroom floor. Sansa turned and headed out into the hallway, and he followed her.

“Don’t trip over those,” she called over her shoulder as they began to ascend the stairway.

She could practically hear him rolling his eyes. “Not unless you pull a Robin and wire-trip me,” he replied, and Sansa could not help but giggle at the memory of Robin Arryn’s favorite on-set trick.

“Except for the time Lyanna found the wire and paid him out for it, remember?” she said, and they spent the next quarter of an hour intermittently recalling various of some of their very first co-stars’ most memorable escapades. By the time everything had been carried up the stairs to Sansa’s room, Jon had almost begun chuckling again.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

A huge apology to all of my readers for making you wait this long for the next installment! I won't bore you here with tales of my writer's block and health problems. I can only thank you for your patience and hope that my longsuffering audience considers this chapter worth the delay.

Also, a huge thank-you to AliceInNeverNeverLand for the generous listening ear and feedback she provided!

Half an hour later, Sansa was still sorting through the voicemails now stored in her newly activated phone. Margaery and her mother had left several apiece, and Sansa deleted all but the one or two that had come in after she had last spoken to each. Hannah, her publicist, had left one the day before, and Sansa quickly returned the call to let Hannah know that she was quite all right but still stuck in York, and that she would alert the other woman as soon as she returned home.

Several other voicemails had originated from the same number. Sansa did not recognize it, but she could tell by the first few digits that the number belonged to someone who lived in York. Her finger hesitated over the “play” button on the newest message before she finally pressed it to the phone’s touch screen.

When a gravelly male voice identified itself as belonging to Officer Glover of the York Police Department, Sansa nearly dropped the phone. When she heard the officer state that he was following up on all of his earlier messages, she set it on the bed and leaned forward onto her arms, which had begun to tremble. So thoroughly had the events of the past few days engrossed her that she had barely thought about the car accident that had brought her to Jon’s flat in the first place, but it was the only thing she could think of that would have precipitated such a call, unless she had done something over the course of that night to run afoul of the law.

Sansa’s arms shook harder as her mind’s eye returned to the night the blizzard had begun. She could see the snow falling thicker and faster, the vehicles swerving closer and closer to the road’s edge and the cars that had already skidded onto it. She could hear the voice of the hulking man who had stood next to her and helped her direct traffic, which had begun as a booming roar and hoarsened thickly as the minutes had dragged into hours. She could see the woman in the blue Ford Focus again, eyes wide and brown and so empty that Sansa had turned away horrified after only a few seconds, even then, before she had known for certain that the woman was dead. Perhaps Mya would have said Sansa had focused so thoroughly on Jon because her mind had been trying to block out the images of life and death flashing before it. Perhaps she would have had some advice for what Sansa could do when they returned. But Mya was not there, and Sansa’s rapid-fire blinking was doing nothing to remove the resurgent memories, so after a few more moments of shaking, she did the next best thing and hit the callback button on her phone.
Not a minute later, Officer Glover’s voice was assuaging Sansa’s most immediate fears. She was in no trouble, he assured her; he merely wished to ask her a few additional questions about the car accident, and she could come by the police station when she liked, although the sooner the police could generate their final report, the better. Moreover, her car had been towed to their lot, and she could retrieve it when she stopped in to see him. Sansa managed to reply that she would come as soon as she could before her shaking finger pushed the button to end the call. She dropped the phone back onto the bed and wished very much that she could join it, but she knew her mind would probably only insist on unspooling its every recollection of the accident. No, scratch that. Her mind would play that trick regardless, but at least she could get up and go to the police station rather than lie huddled up on the bed forever. She picked up the phone again and forced herself off the bed and onto the stairs, and had made it halfway through the living room before she remembered to bring up the phone’s browser and search for the nearest cab company. After all, Jon was still recovering from his fever and should not be out in the cold, and she had inconvenienced him too much to reasonably expect him to drive her – or have his driver drive her – anywhere at all.

Twenty minutes later, Sansa padded down the stairs and past Jon’s room. She heard the sounds of Pink Floyd emanating from it and sighed with relief. No, bothering Jon right now would not have been a good idea, she thought as she slipped out the doorway and began the trek up the building’s winding private drive to the main road. She had instructed the cab company to send its car to the address two driveways over on that road – it was, after all, the least thing she could do to safeguard Jon’s privacy, especially if the cab driver recognized her – but she was still shivering and sneezing by the time she got there. Gods, she hoped she wasn’t catching a cold.

However, Sansa did not cough or sneeze during her interview with Officer Glover. It was perhaps the only good thing about the meeting, during which Sansa racked her brain for every detail she could recall about the night of the traffic accident. The face of the dead woman – Sarah Mordane, a grandmother of five, according to the officer – had begun flashing in front of her mind’s eye during the cab ride, and now trying to remember everything else was like trying to wade through three feet of snow mixed with wet concrete.

The woman’s brown eyes had stared vacantly at the ceiling of her car. The car had a navy blue carpet interior. There had been a brown stain, perhaps from coffee, on the passenger’s seat near the gearshift.

Sansa could not remember the colors of any of the other cars involved in the accident, and it took a moment for her to think of the color of her own vehicle.

The groceries had splattered out of the three white plastic bags on the passenger’s seat. Sansa could remember the style and color of the writing on them.
She had to think for almost five minutes before she could remember even the genders or rough ages of any of the other drivers who had stopped to offer their assistance, except for the man who had helped her to direct the traffic until the police had shown up.

She didn’t even remember his name.

Officer Glover was very patient at first, offering her coffee and telling her to take her time when her mind refused to focus. He was also clearly exhausted, though, and as the interview wore on, he yawned more and his questions grew sharper. He caught himself a couple of times and rephrased a question or reassured her that she could have a break if she wanted one; but the dark circles under his eyes told Sansa that he longed for home, a shower, and proper sleep even more than she did.

Eventually, Sansa’s mind wandered past the car of the dead woman and into the road and onto the neon-pink hats worn by two of the young women who had stopped to help her and the other traffic director, and onto row upon row of headlights and taillights stopping and starting carefully along the road and through the next intersection. By the time Officer Glover stopped the interview and thanked her for her time, she felt more exhausted than she looked, although she could still see Sarah Mordane’s eyes staring at a navy blue ceiling.

But remembering the other woman’s car made her think of her own, and she asked Officer Glover to direct her to the impound office before she left. There she spent fifteen minutes filling out paperwork that she normally could have completed in five, and another fifteen minutes waiting for an officer to escort her to the impound yard. She cringed when she saw just how badly the back of its left side had been crumpled by the truck that had hit it, and she cringed again when she turned the key in the ignition and got only a faint whine before the motor stopped. She let out a very long sigh as she rested her forehead against the steering wheel.

“Would you like to call for a tow, Ms. Stark?” The cheerful voice of the officer who had brought her to her car, an officer whom Sansa thought looked younger than most university students, revived her enough for her to turn her head and sigh again.

“I’ll have to, I suppose,” she said at length. “Do you recommend any particular towing company or shop?”

The boy shrugged. “Haven’t lived here long enough to say,” he replied, “but I could ask some of the other officers for you.” He gestured back across the lot. “Come on in. I can get you more coffee while you wait.”

Half an hour later, Sansa was sipping the last of her coffee. It must have been her sixth or seventh
cup that day, she mused, but she had needed every drop of the caffeine in order to stay upright. As it was, she found herself barely able to give the tow men the address of one of the few car shops open this late at night. Fortunately for Sansa, it had also gotten the second-highest rating on her phone’s Yelp! app, which she had spent most of her wait time scanning; and fortunately, the woman manning the shop’s counter was quite friendly, even though she did not appear to recognize Sansa.

“They’ll have it looked at tomorrow morning,” she said as she handed Sansa the intake receipt. “We should be in contact before noon with the diagnostics and estimate.”

“Thanks.” Sansa gave the girl a weary smile and trudged back out into the cold. The wind had picked up, and she scurried along the sidewalk to the first open shop she could find, which turned out to be a 24-hour diner. The interior was a bit run-down and the odors of grease and coffee clamoring loudly for dominance, but it was warm, and that was all Sansa cared about for now. She collapsed into a chair at one of the corner tables, and before she could stop shivering, a waitress stopped at the table and asked if Sansa wanted coffee. Before she could stop herself, Sansa answered, “Yes, please,” and chided herself as she watched the girl stride away. At this rate she would never get back to Jon’s flat, let alone sleep. But perhaps at least the latter was for the best, she thought. If she could only remember Sarah Mordane in flashes in her waking moments, she was bound to get much worse in her dreams, which had a history of turning ugly when Sansa was suffering from severe stress.

She hadn’t gone a day without nightmares between her father’s death and the year after she and Jon had divorced. That thought alone was enough to make her shiver again and snatch up the cup of coffee practically before the young waitress had set it down on the table in front of her.

Once her fingers had been sufficiently warmed, Sansa removed her phone from her purse. If she was going to spend the next several hours fighting off both sleep and Sarah Mordane, not to mention the tears that threatened to gush out of her at the thought of the poor woman’s children and grandchildren, she could at least use them productively. She clicked her e-mail app and spent the next hour or two sorting her messages, as well as checking her remaining voicemails. Myranda Royce, her agent, had left her four or five of the latter, all consisting of requests that Sansa contact her about a potential project or two. Sansa entered a quick reminder into her phone to contact Myranda the following day and returned her attention to her e-mail inbox, where her message to Jeyne Westerling was sitting in the drafts folder. Tired as she was, she had to read it through three times before she had caught up with her own trail of thought, but focusing on her phrasing meant focusing away from her memories, and so she began typing another paragraph. The going was slow and interrupted by Sansa’s frequent trips to her browser app to pick through the Solicitors Regulation Authority website and the newest online edition of its Code of Conduct publication. After all, she did not want to come off as completely ignorant and uninformed in her e-mail.

After two more cups of coffee and two scones, Sansa could barely stack one coherent thought on top of another. She saved the draft of her e-mail and pulled up a game of Pac-Man on her phone. Two or three rounds, she thought as she reached up to cover a yawn, and she would think about returning to Jon’s flat. She lost the first round so badly, however, that she decided to try a game that would
require less of her flagging coordination skills. Maybe a round or two of solitaire instead, with the card backs set to that lovely pastel pattern that soothed her eyesight just so…

An insistent buzzing noise, accompanied by a vibration jarring her shoulder, pushed Sansa bolt upright against her seat. She had to gaze at her phone for a few moments before realizing that it was ringing and she had fallen asleep against the table, pinning it against her shoulder. And judging from the silver glow of the sky outside her window, she had been asleep for some time.

The still-buzzing phone lost its balance on the edge of the table and crashed to the floor. It stopped ringing just as Sansa bent to pick it up. Shit. She turned it over and saw the screen peppered with text messages from Margaery Tyrell.

*Are you OK? Call me, babe. I’m getting worried.*

*Sansa, just checking to make sure you’re OK. Let me know for real, so I can get Jon and Ash off my back, OK?*

*Oh, double shit. Nope, triple shit.*

If Jon had noticed her absence and gotten worried enough to contact both Margaery and Ashara Dayne, who served as publicist to them both, to get them looking for her – right, how about shit times a million?

Sansa sighed heavily. Yesterday’s truce had been more than a bit awkward after their years of estrangement, but it certainly beat fighting and tears and praying like crazy that Jon would snap out of the fever that had overwhelmed him the day before that. She sighed again. Jon was no doubt fit to be tied at this point, and Sansa did not have the energy for another argument. She wanted a warm shower and her bed. She wanted to forget about Sarah Mordane and the accident and the fighting and, hell, everything about the past week. *Well, not quite everything,* her mind amended, thinking of the brooch and Jon recovering and helping her up and laughing with her. And never cheating.

Sansa blinked hard and swiped the home screen on her phone to return Margaery’s call.

“Good gods, you better have had one hell of a night out,” said Margaery as soon as the line connected, but she sounded almost as panicked as Sansa had felt upon finding Jon sick with his fever three days prior. Sansa sighed.
“Sorry, Marge,” she said quietly. “I didn’t mean to set off a three-alarm fire – ”

“Um, try five,” Margaery interrupted her. “If not six. My dear, do you realize how many bottles of wine Ash will require as a bribe for having her beauty sleep interrupted at three in the morning? Not to mention the storage upgrade I’ll have to get my phone just to hold all the texts Jon’s been sending me since then?” Her voice shook over the last few words, and Sansa heard a distinct gulp on the other end of the line. She was not fooled in the least when Margaery covered it with a cough.

“Sorry,” she offered after a pregnant pause. “I really didn’t mean to scare everyone. I just had an interview with the police about the accident that stranded me here, and then I got my car taken in to be fixed. I figured I’d get back to the flat before Jon knew I was gone.”

“Then what happened? You are OK, right?” This time Margaery did not bother concealing her concern.

“I’m fine,” Sansa answered. “I just stopped at a diner to grab some food and fell asleep.” She cut off the reply she could hear Margaery starting to utter. “Really. I fell asleep. That’s all. I was just tired.” She sighed. “You can let Jon know I’m coming home right now, as soon as I can get a cab. And tell him I said to stop bothering you.”

Sansa could practically see her friend’s eyes rolling on the other end of the line. “No shit,” she replied. “He’s a bigger pain in my ass right now than Ash. And that’s saying something.” She paused. “Which, really, he hasn’t been this way, I mean this worried about you, since before – well, in a few years.” Another pause. “Maybe – well, you’re sure things are OK with you two?”

Sansa gritted her teeth. Clearly Margaery was relieved of enough worry to start prying again, and Sansa was in no mood for prying.

“It’s fine, Marg,” she sighed. “I’ll be back at Jon’s shortly, OK? I’ll even text you to let you know. Pinky swear.”

That got a giggle out of Margaery. Good. No prying. “You’d better, darling,” she said. “And really, stay safe, all right?”

Half an hour later, Sansa swung her legs, which felt more like stones by now, out of the taxicab she had called immediately after hanging up with Margaery. They had not yet recovered from her night of shoveling the snow away from Jon’s patio door, and fatigue had rendered them even less capable.
It was cold, and the light of the rising sun reflected off the snow into Sansa’s slitted eyes, but even those things would not speed the slow trudge at which her legs had contented themselves. Sansa did not blame them, for she was in no hurry to face Jon’s worry or, more likely, anger. She did not have the strength left to fight either. So when she heard Jon calling her name, she looked up, startled, to find herself already only ten yards from the bottom of the stairs leading to Jon’s flat’s main door. When she saw Jon himself perched at the top of the steps with nary a coat or hat on them, she gulped and stopped in her tracks.

Then Jon sprinted down the stairs and, before Sansa could react, engulfed her in his arms. He lifted her so that her feet dangled a couple of inches off the ground. Thrown off balance, Sansa clung to him and emitted a startled squeal, which was muffled by his thick sweatshirt. Then she felt his cheek against hers and his warm breath on her neck and heard his stuttered gasps of Sansa, oh, God, Sansa, Sansa, sweeping past her left ear. His arms trembled around her in tandem with the rapid rise and fall of his chest, and every time they did, the lump in Sansa’s throat grew. Sansa, oh, Sansa, he muttered, and she squeezed her eyes shut and clung to him even more tightly. One of Jon’s hands reached up to cradle the nape of her neck, as he had done when her father had died, and when one of the massive overhead lighting fixtures had crashed right next to her during a shoot for one of her films and she’d been unable to stop shaking afterwards, and when Lady, the dog she’d had since the age of thirteen, had died. Tears rolled out of Sansa’s eyes and froze on her cheeks, and she tucked her head further down into Jon’s neck. She inhaled the smell of cedar and salt and Jon and cried harder. His other hand rubbed up and down in a slow rhythm on her back until her tears subsided.

At length, Jon set her back down, but they clung to each other for a few more minutes before Jon drew back and cupped Sansa’s face in his hands. Her eyes widened when she saw how bloodshot his were, and how dark the circles under them, as though he had not slept a wink.

“Jesus, Sansa,” he gasped. His hands were still trembling. “What in bloody hell were you thinking? I – are you sure you’re not hurt?” His eyes darted downward to check for any sign of injury on her. Sansa shook her head.

“No – I mean, I’m not hurt, I’m fine,” she said. “I didn’t mean to be out for the night. I just – the police wanted to talk to me about the accident, and I had to get my car towed out of their lot, and I fell asleep.” Her shoulders drooped. “I just meant to be gone a couple hours.”

Jon pinched the bridge of his nose and huffed. He opened his mouth, but then closed it with another huff before letting out a long sigh and shaking his head, apparently unsure of whether he wanted to snap at Sansa or hold her again. Perhaps at one time she would have been able to tell. Now she simply waited until Jon sighed again and stabbed a hand through his unruly curls. He grimaced as one of his fingers hit a snag.

“Bloody hell, Sansa,” he said at last. “Just – I’d have taken you myself. You didn’t need to call a cab, for Christ’s sake, and not if you were that tired.”
Sansa shook her head. “I didn’t want to bother you,” she replied softly. “You were listening to your music, and anyway you’re not over your fever – you’re not even wearing a jacket, Jon.” She gestured at his sweatshirt. “Or a hat.”

Jon waved it off. “I’d still have bloody taken you,” he said. “You shouldn’t have to be out anywhere alone – God, if – Sansa, just – and to the police – what were you thinking?”

Sansa lifted her jaw. “It was only for a couple of hours, Jon,” she repeated. “I wasn’t even tired when I left. Besides, you never would have known I was gone. It was an accident that I fell asleep.”

“Exactly!” Jon retorted. “An accident, and if you’d fallen asleep in the wrong place and I hadn’t gotten Ash Dayne to get a hold of Marg so she could find you while I was – we were both thinking you might be in a ditch or snapped by some crazy – or in some hospital’s intensive care, or God knows where –” His hand reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose again, but this time it was shaking, and so was the hand he stretched out to rub Sansa’s shoulder.

“Jesus Christ, Sansa,” he murmured, and drew her back into his arms. “Just – please don’t do it again, all right? Please don’t do it again.”

Sansa was still trying to form a coherent reply when a gust of wind blew her hood down. She stumbled over one of Jon’s boots when she reached up to fix it, and she would have fallen into the snow had he not swept her off the ground. Sansa yelped.

“Sorry!” exclaimed Jon. “I just didn’t want you to fall – here.” He bent to release her, but another gust of wind blew her hood clear down her back and whipped her long red hair in front of Jon’s face.

“Sorry,” she said, but Jon merely shrugged against her shoulder and turned to carry her up the apartment steps.

“No problem,” he grunted, and within no time he had swept her into the apartment and set her down in the hall.

“Thanks,” Sansa murmured. The rest of what she had been about to say dried on her tongue when she saw Jon’s eyes burning into her. They were wide and moist and frantic. His hands slid up from her shoulders to cup her cheeks. His fingers were trembling.
“Are you sure you’re OK?” he asked. Sansa nodded mutely.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered after a few moments. “I really didn’t mean to fall asleep or upset you.”

Jon sighed and shut his eyes, which made the dark circles underneath them all the more pronounced. Sansa wondered if he had slept at all the prior night.

“Just – ” Jon shook his head once more before opening his eyes. They had taken on much of the russet hue they got when he was sad, but this shade was darker and flickering and kinetic.

“Please,” he murmured, “if you need to go anywhere, just say it, all right, and I’ll take you wherever you need. Anywhere. Just – please, don’t go off like that again, sw – Sansa, please, just tell me first.” He raised his lips to rest near her temple, and Sansa felt them contract in a trembling half-kiss.

The lump had re-formed in Sansa’s throat, and this time yanked something from her chest cavity, like a rotten apple being pulled out of a bushel. Jon had not called her “sweetheart” or “sweet girl” in nearly three years, and she knew she had not imagined the beginning of both words forming on his lips.

_Sweet girl_, he’d murmured in kisses across her body the last time they’d ever made love. _Sweetheart_, he’d breathed into her mouth, which had still been gasping and gulping from the aftershocks of the peak his mouth and hands had wrought just seconds before, as he’d reached up to caress her cheeks. _My Sansa, my sweet girl…_

Sansa blinked away the memories. Only they and the habit, and possibly the worry, could have made Jon’s mouth form the odd fragment. Still, she felt the lightening sensation spread clear through the top of her head before she could manage to draw back and nod.

“I will,” she murmured. The flickering settled behind Jon’s eyes, and he let out a deep breath, and his fingers began to steady.

“Thank you,” he whispered and gathered her back against him, one arm encircling her body and the other hand reaching up to cradle the back of her neck. Sansa, whose heart and nerves were spinning in time with Jon’s still skipping heartbeat, buried her face into his shoulder and nodded. She twined her arms around his back and closed her eyes as his lips murmured comforting whispers into her hair.
Jon’s heartbeat had resumed its usual steady thrum for some minutes before he drew back. Sansa let out a startled gasp and stumbled forward again. Jon caught her at once and raised a concerned eyebrow.

“Are you sure you’re OK?” he asked again. “You’re still shivering.”

Sansa opened her mouth to tell him she was not. That was when she caught sight of her right arm shaking out of the corner of her eye. She tried to still it, but could not. She looked at her left arm and saw the same. Then she felt her teeth chatter. She bit her lip to try and steady them, but it was no use. Neither was wrapping her arms tightly around her middle in order to calm her trembling body.

“Here, Sansa.” Jon’s voice had gone gentle and his eyes, when Sansa glanced up at him, had gone gentler still. “I’ll get you a blanket and – um – some tea, here – ”

Before Sansa could move, he had swept her up in his arms, carried her to the living room, and set her on the plush beige couch where she had spent so much of her second night in the apartment. He immediately left her field of vision but returned just as immediately with a couple of blankets.

“Here,” he murmured again and draped first one, then the other over Sansa’s shaking body. “Do you want another one?”

Sansa shook her head. She tried so say no, but the lump in her throat would not allow it. Jon, looking even more concerned, opened his own mouth, but then shut it just as quickly.

“I’ll go get the water on,” he said on his second try. “You still like the chamomile, right?”

Sansa nodded, and Jon padded off to the kitchen. She could neither see nor hear him for what felt like the better part of an hour. When he finally returned, she was still shivering. Jon sank to his knees next to her head and reached tentatively to cup the back of her neck again.

“Any better?” he asked. Sansa shrugged. His hand was warmer than the blankets, though, and it felt so good when his thumb began rubbing soft circles at the nape of her skull. Part of the lump in Sansa’s throat loosened, and she inhaled deeply. She closed her eyes and let the air escape slowly, past the lump. Jon reached over to brush a strand of hair out of her face, and she took another slow breath, and then another.
The shriek of the teakettle brought Jon to his feet at once. Sansa squeezed her eyes shut and pulled the blankets more tightly around herself. When Jon returned, he had to say her name twice before she heard him.

“Tea?” Jon asked, but he still looked worried, and when Sansa just kept shivering, he reached down and slowly moved her till she was sitting most of the way up. He sat down beside her even more slowly, as though she might order him off the couch at any moment. Sansa, however, did not. Instead, she buried her head into the warmth of his shoulder and closed her eyes so she could better feel his heartbeat.

“Here,” Jon whispered again. He hesitated a few moments before encircling her in his arms. They were solid and strong and real, and Sansa clung to them as hard as she could. Sarah Mordane’s eyes looked a bit fainter in her mind now, and the lump in her throat a bit smaller. She kept trembling, but Jon kept holding her, and his heart kept beating. At first his pulse was almost as quick as hers, but they both slowed at length – probably about the time the tea went cold, Sansa thought later – and every now and then he would give her arm or shoulder a gentle rub.

The last thing Sansa remembered before she drifted into sleep was the sound of Jon beginning to snore.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Many thanks again to AliceInNeverNeverLand for her feedback and willingness to help me wrangle the monster that first was one enormous chapter, then got split into this chapter and the next!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon Snow blinked. Then he kicked at his comforter.

Only this was not his comforter, and when he tried to sit up in bed, he discovered that he was already sitting up, and that this was not his bed.

He blinked again and yawned. He tried to stretch his arms, but something soft and warm was pinning his right arm to the couch. Something soft and warm that smelled sweet and rainy and just like –

Sansa.

The sight of her red hair spilling down his right shoulder startled him the rest of the way awake. She should be in her room – but no, she hadn’t been there when Jon, unable to sleep, had wandered aimlessly through the upstairs hall and past her door the prior night. He hadn’t even meant to walk past her room. After all, she was half the reason he couldn’t sleep. Not that he missed the nearly three years of silence and three days of shouting matches they’d had before he’d taken ill, but his brain was having one hell of a time adjusting to Sansa’s being so nice all of a sudden. So after he’d helped her carry her things out of his room, where she’d been staying to take care of him during his illness, he’d decided there was nothing like a little Pink Floyd to clear his head. It didn’t, though, and he’d finally gone to bed around one in the morning, drained and irritated.

But he still couldn’t sleep, so he’d wandered about the flat, hoping the movement would calm him down. Instead, he’d seen Sansa’s door wide open. A tentative knock and call of her name had produced nothing. Neither had turning on the light. That had thrown Jon for a loop, but he hadn’t gotten too concerned until he’d failed to discover Sansa elsewhere in the flat. He’d checked every room twice and called her name into each one. That was when he’d gotten concerned. The Sansa he’d brought here after the car accident might have taken off in the middle of the night simply to spite him, but he didn’t think she would now, even though he still didn’t know entirely what to make of her. He’d grabbed for his phone out of instinct only to remember that she probably hadn’t kept his number in her phone, and he didn’t have her current number. She’d disconnected it as soon as she’d disconnected from him almost three years ago.
That was when he’d begun to panic.

His heart had raced, and the room had gotten unbearably hot, and his curses had gone from silent to voluble in seconds. *Fuck, no, no, no.* He’d reached for his phone again, this time to call the police, although he doubted they’d do much at that point. Unless, of course, he threw around his name and Sansa’s to get them to do something. He usually hated doing things like that.

*Fuck “usually.”*

He swiped open the phone screen, which was open to his list of contacts. Maybe he had the number of someone who could give him Sansa’s. Not likely, since they’d basically split their friends in the divorce. Margaery Tyrell, of all people, had proven an exception, and she’d definitely give him Sansa’s number, but a thorough search of the *T* and *M* categories on his contacts screen failed to turn up Margaery’s.

*Fuck.*

*Wait.*

Wasn’t Ash Dayne still her publicist?

He’d pulled up Ash’s number, hit the green button, and prayed to God she was.

That prayer had been answered, but the next two hours had been among the worst of Jon’s life. He’d retraced his steps through every room of the flat, yanked God knew how many hairs off his head while running his fingers through his snarly curls, and, when his head had begun to hurt too much, turned the Pink Floyd back on and set to untangling the miles of sound device cables that had collected in his bedroom and office space over the past few years. It was painstaking and annoying as hell, but it also required little patience or forethought, and Jon had been short on both. At one point, even Pink Floyd and the cables combined had failed him, and he’d grabbed the nearest empty gadget box he could find – even when he’d been married to Sansa, he’d held onto far too many of the boxes his smaller electronics had come in – and flung it at the wall.

He’d kept at it until his phone lit up with an incoming text message. For a few heart-stopping moments he’d thought it was Sansa until he read the text, which had come from Margaery Tyrell. *Shit.* But at least she’d taken up Jon’s offer to contact him, which he’d passed through an audibly
frazzled Ashara Dayne.

_Marg Tyrell, babe. Just called Sansa and left a voicemail. Let u know when she calls._

_Fuck_. If Sansa wasn’t picking up for Marg, that could be trouble. Sansa answered Marg’s calls even when she wouldn’t answer her own mother’s, which was saying something.

“Fuck,” he’d muttered aloud, then swiped over Marg’s text message to respond. Their exchange had lasted in scattered bursts for just under two hours. In between texts, Jon alternately wound cables and threw boxes and, when his fingers began cramping, hunched over with his hands flat on the floor and begged God or whoever else would listen to bring Sansa back. He vaguely remembered reading a few chapters from the Bible that now sat on his bookshelf. He’d heard somewhere that they’d been written by some king who’d lived three thousand years ago and loved to compose songs and poems to describe his colorful life. Some of the chapters had sung praises about how beautiful the world was and how great God had made the guy’s life, but in even more of them, the king had waxed poetic about how God had ditched him and let his son die and his friends stab him in the back and his other son throw him out of his palace onto the streets. The man had suffered through a hell of a lot, and some of his words had resonated deeply with Jon. He may not have been a king or fought in a bunch of wars, but he sure as hell could relate to abandonment and backstabbing and despair.

Now he could really relate to despair.

Then, when Sansa’s text reached his phone just before six in the morning, he understood the praises the angsty king had sung to the skies. When she came back to his flat and he threw his arms around her and she hugged him back instead of shoving him away, he really understood.

Now Sansa was still huddled up to him and wearing one of her sleep smiles, as Jon still thought of them despite himself. Her lips had had a way of turning slightly up at the corners sometimes when she slept for as long as Jon had known her. When they’d befriend each other on the set of their first film, he and Robin Arryn had always teased her for it, telling her she must be having dreams about all of her boy band crushes. He’d never thought to see that expression on her face again, and if it weren’t for his right arm feeling so stiff and dull, he might have thought he himself was still asleep.

But his arm was stiff, and so, he realized, was something else.

_Oh, brother._
Sansa sighed and turned her head to burrow more deeply into his shoulder. Jon inhaled at the same time and caught a nose full of cinnamon and rain and Sansa. That only made his pants tighten further.

\textit{Shit.}

Jon wriggled and pulled and squirmed, but Sansa did not want to let him go. The more he struggled, the farther she leaned into him. Finally, he managed to work himself free with one arm while holding her in place with the other. He pushed a pillow beneath Sansa’s head, readjusted the blankets around her, and crept off to the closest bathroom, where he leaned his head against the wall, let out a very long sigh, and cursed his traitorous body. It had no bloody right to act like this after he’d just been sicker than a dog for the past couple of days, especially not in front of the same woman who’d subjected him to days of conflict and whiplash before that. Not even if it had gotten accustomed to reacting at the sight or scent of her once upon a time.

Jon sighed again and whispered a few curses. Clearly, that instinct had run deeper than he’d thought. And he still had far too much of last night’s adrenaline in his system. That, and he hadn’t been with a woman in a very long time. A very, very, very long time.

He shook his head, cursed again, and turned to the toilet.

He stalked back into the living room with more force than was necessary, but stopped in his tracks when he saw Sansa sitting up and stretching on the couch. He’d forgotten how long her arms were. And her hair. And how soft it was, and how many times he’d caressed it and run it through his fingers as kissed her throat and her breasts and down her body, and…

“Jon? I’m sorry, did I wake you?”

She was regarding him with concern and that apologetic look that had never left her face since he’d shown her the brooch he’d made for her, except maybe for a little while yesterday, when they’d been acting almost like friends for a change. Jon shook his head and realized he’d been scowling.

“No, I was awake,” he replied. He glanced at the table in an attempt to avoid the sight of her kicking his rebellious body into gear again. God knew she didn’t need to deal with that right now. That was when he saw the mugs he’d filled with tea before they’d fallen asleep.

“I can warm these up – ” he began, at the same time she asked, “Do you want me to make some
Both fell silent to let the other proceed. Jon gestured for her to continue.

“I figured maybe you’d want some,” Sansa said. Then she smiled faintly. “After all, it’s still before noon.”

Jon smiled back in spite of himself. They were both such night owls that, back during their marriage, they’d often slept into the late morning hours on their days off. It hadn’t been unusual for them to wake around 11:00 in the morning and for Sansa to have the coffee ready half an hour later. “At least it’s before noon,” she’d say, and they’d both laugh.

“Sure,” Jon said now. “I’ll sort out the eggs, unless you’d rather have something different.”

Sansa shook her head. “Eggs are good,” she said. She regarded him for a moment as though she would say something else, but turned after a moment and padded into the kitchen.

Jon ran a hand through his hair and sighed again. She still had that haunted look she’d brought back from the police station with her. He wanted to follow her into the kitchen and hold her until whatever had given her that look was gone. He wanted to stroke her back and her hair and tell her she was safe and he’d let her stay as long as she wanted. He wanted to scream at her for what she’d put him through last night. And for the whiplash she’d subjected him to since he’d driven her to his flat in the snowstorm, almost a week ago. He wanted to ask when she’d turn against him and start screaming at him again. He wanted to scream at himself for being enough of an asshole to add to her burdens. He wanted to blast Pink Floyd for hours on end and then cut it off and have some peace and quiet. But peace and quiet might only make him want to scream more loudly at Sansa and himself.

His hand hit a particularly stubborn snag in his curls, and Jon swore aloud.

“You all right?” Sansa’s voice drifted in from the kitchen. When Jon looked up, she’d gotten most of the way across it and near the door to the living room.

“Yeah,” Jon grunted as he worked loose the rubber band he’d forgotten to remove from his hair the prior night. “Be in in a minute.”

Sansa’s footsteps faded back toward the kitchen. When Jon finally managed to wrest his hair to
rights, he took a deep breath and joined her. She was holding her phone and frowning at it.

“Sorry, that was Hannah. My publicist,” she said when she looked up at him. “She wanted to know when I’d be back in Leeds. I told her I still have a broken car.” She set her phone down and grimaced. The apologetic look had planted itself firmly back onto her face.

“Look,” she continued, “I know you’ve put me up a lot longer than you’d planned. I’m sorry; I didn’t even think to ask if you’ve got to go to a shoot or anything else.”

Jon waved the offer away. “Nope,” he replied. “I haven’t got anything scheduled till next week. Even then, it’s a bunch of sound tests.” Seeing the questions written on Sansa’s face, he continued. “Theater thing.”

Sansa’s mouth quirked at both corners. “Really?” she asked. “I – that’s my next project too. Not your particular project, I mean. But I am doing ‘An Ideal Husband’ at the Bridge Theatre next month.”

Jon raised both eyebrows. “Didn’t know you’d gone back to theater,” he said. Sansa flushed, which only made her look prettier. Jon smashed an egg with extra force against the glass bowl he’d just retrieved from one of his cabinets.

“Well, I figured I’d best go back before I rusted out entirely,” Sansa said. “It’s been –” She frowned. “– at least five years, I think. Maybe six.” She shrugged. “Anyway, Jason Mallister’s directing, and as soon as I found that out I signed on.”

Jon nodded. “I always liked Mallister,” he said. “Actually, he was mentor to the director I’m working with.”

“Oh? Which one?”

They spent the next hour discussing their upcoming projects. Sansa, Jon learned, had two films scheduled to begin shooting within a few months of her play’s run ending. Both storylines sounded intriguing to Jon, who found himself offering up the details of his own project, a biographical piece of sorts about an eccentric computer programmer who had not only pioneered the synthesized electronic music movement a few decades back, but also struggled with a drug addiction and been accused of a murder that was still unsolved to date. Whether the accusation had merit or had been generated out of jealousy by one or more of the man’s professional rivals or husbands of the women he’d slept with, no one really knew. Jon was not only acting a role, but also heavily involved in the
sound engineering, which was being run by Pyp Knight with input from Sam Tarly. Jon and his friend and fellow actor Beric Dondarrion were hoping to expand the play and make an indie film of it if they could get the financial backing. He was in the middle of explaining how he and Beric were trying to rein in Beric’s manager Thoros’s overenthusiasm about approach Brotherhood Without Banners Films for funding when he remembered the eggs.

“Shit!” Jon dug his spatula into the pan and turned the eggs at once. They were browner than he would have liked, but not burnt, and Sansa assured him that she did not mind. Soon they were seated at the snack bar munching on bacon, sipping coffee, and poring over the crossword puzzle in Jon’s morning edition of the *Yorkshire Post*. The kitchen clock had run far past noon by the time Sansa’s phone buzzed again. She smiled at the message, but uncertainty replaced it on her face as she turned to Jon.

“Jon,” she said slowly, “were – are you still thinking of having Alys Karstark look at your vase?”

It took a couple of moments for Jon to recall the conversation they’d had the prior day when Sansa had nearly knocked the box containing the broken vase off the shelf in Jon’s bedroom, but he nodded.

“Right – yeah,” he said. “Of course.”

Sansa nodded. “Is it all right if I give her your contact information?” she asked. “I got through to her assistant yesterday, and Alys is back in Leeds for now and ready to look at it if that’s what you want.”

“Sure.” Jon was mildly surprised Sansa had proceeded that quickly, not to mention that the woman she’d told him about had already responded and was willing to see if Gram’s vase could be repaired.

Sansa flushed again. “I don’t have your phone number,” she said, “or your e-mail address.”

“Oh, right. Hang on.” Jon padded into the living room to retrieve his own phone. When he returned, Sansa was holding her phone out to him. The “New Contact” screen was open and his name typed in at the top.

“Right.” Jon scratched the side of his head and held his own phone out to her. “Trade you.”
They finished the meal in the middle of trying to piece together the final words of the crossword puzzle before Sansa began clearing the table. She insisted on washing the dishes, so Jon headed off to his bathroom to shower. He tripped over a box lying on his bedroom floor, then sighed when he realized just how many of its companions he had flung about the prior night. He kicked a few of them aside to pave a path to the bathroom. Usually he’d want to cuss out whoever had made him clutter his private space like this, but that was impossible with Sansa right now. She’d been through more than enough over the past few days. And she’d seemed so interested in his theater project. And she’d giggled over those puzzle clues in a way Jon hadn’t seen her do since they’d been married. He’d probably been inside of her the last time she’d giggled that way, come to think of it.

Jon closed his eyes as bits of the last few times they’d been together flashed through his mind – bits of her smooth white throat, bits of her perfect breasts, bits of the ecstasy in her cries as he’d thrust inside of her and brushed his hand just the way she liked over where his body met hers. Thank God Sansa couldn’t see what he did in the privacy of his own shower – or how fast it made his mind spin back to the warm, rustic house he’d shared with Sansa in London, back to the one place he’d thought of as home since he’d left his parents’ house as a teenager. Back when his sessions in front of his computer and sound equipment had been interrupted a hell of a lot more than they were now, but more often than not for a good reason. Like cooking and laughing with Sansa over crossword puzzles and the video games she couldn’t master, which had always made her laugh more hysterically than anyone had a right to, and making love to her in front of the living room fireplace and on the kitchen counter and – her favorite – up against the faux-marble wall of the shower in the master bathroom.

Jon punched a key on the keyboard to wake up his computer and navigated on his music software to the first Pink Floyd song he could find.


A couple of hours later, Jon thought he heard a soft knock on his door. He frowned, turned down the volume on his speakers, and waited. Sure enough, there it was again. He opened the door to find Sansa biting her lip on the other side.

“I – sorry to bother you,” she murmured. Jon shook his head.

“You OK?” he asked. Even during their marriage, she’d rarely interrupted him when he’d retreated to his office or workshop to play Pink Floyd. If she was interrupting him now, it must be serious.

Sansa nodded. “You said you’d rather know if I need to head off anywhere,” she replied. “I just got a call from the car shop. They’re a bit swamped and they had to order in two of the parts they need, so they won’t have my car ready till tomorrow afternoon at the earliest. So I’ll be leaving then. I can take a cab to the shop.”
Jon quickly shook his head. “No, I can drive you there;” he answered. “Like I said, I don’t have any plans.”

“Are you sure?” Sansa turned her eyes directly on him. They were wide and blue and worried and stunning. Jon shook his head dumbly before realizing his mistake.

“I mean – sure. Yeah, I’m sure,” he said, shaking his head in the correct direction this time. A smile flashed across Sansa’s face, and some of the worry left her.

“Thank you, Jon,” she said. She turned and padded back down the hall. It took several moments for Jon to stop staring after her.

Chapter End Notes

So...I finally reached the point in this story where it felt right to do what some of my readers have inquired about: namely, writing a chapter seen through Jon's eyes. I usually write my Jonsa fics from Sansa's perspective, so this chapter represents somewhat of a deviation for me. It was a necessary deviation because it's critical for my audience to see the events from both characters' points of view, and I hope you believe that I did Jon's justice here.
Later that afternoon, as the sun completed its descent behind the hill next to the flat, Jon emerged from his room to find Sansa retrieving a box of pasta noodles from his pantry. She jumped half out of her skin, and he apologized at once.

“No, it’s fine,” she said when she had caught her breath. “I should be the one apologizing anyway. It’s your kitchen, and I’m messing it up.” She tilted her head toward the stove, and Jon smiled.

“You should be messing it up if you’re hungry,” he said, and gestured to the pasta box. “Did you want me to – ?”

Sansa shook her head. “It’s one of my special dishes, after all,” she said, and Jon smiled again. Sansa had left the lion’s share of the cooking to him when they’d lived together, since her own culinary repertoire consisted of about three or four recipes. One of those was pasta with salt, pepper, and Parmesan cheese, which even Jon had to admit was a better comfort food than most of what Sansa terms his gourmet cooking.

Jon retrieved a pot from one of the lower cabinets and handed it to her. Sansa dropped it into the sink and began running the faucet. Her cheeks had gone pink by the time she turned to face him.

“By the way,” she said, “I talked to Myranda today – my agent – and she mentioned that the girl playing Sophia from Wolves R Us dropped her role.”

“Oh.” It took a few moments for Sansa’s comment to register. Jon had performed the voice of Ghost the direwolf from a new animated feature based on an old fairy tale. It centered around a family with four children who discovered an orphaned litter of mythological creatures called direwolves, which were twice as large as normal wolves and ten times as fierce except with their owners. Each wolf formed a telepathic bond with one of the children, and Jon’s friend Wylla Manderly, the director, had asked him to perform the role of the eldest direwolf, a red-eyed albino named Ghost. The actress set to play Sophia, the second eldest child, had quit the project abruptly the prior week after recording less than half of her part.

“Yeah, she did,” he said, and Sansa nodded slowly. She looked nervous.

“Well, Myranda’s been contacted by Wylla Manderly, and they want me to read the lines for Sophia,” she said. “I’d just be reading with the crew for the audition, and even if I get the part I
wouldn’t have to read in the same room as you, even if they do rereads with your part. But I told her I’d let you know anyway.”

Jon stared at her. Sansa had been known to take the roundabout way to a point, but this time he could not see one.

“What do you mean?” he asked finally. “I mean – you don’t need to ask me for anything. Unless Wylla put me in charge of casting without my knowing it.” He raised an eyebrow and leaned back toward the counter. “Which I doubt.”

“Well, no.” Sansa opened the pasta box. “But she didn’t – well, she wanted to make sure we were OK working on the same project, even if we weren’t going to be in the same room. I didn’t tell her I’m here or anything,” she added hastily. “And anyway, you were in on it first, so – ”

Jon shook his head, nonplussed. “That doesn’t mean that they can’t pick whoever else they want,” he replied. “If they like you for it, they should have you. Who cares what I think?”

The words left his mouth more sharply than Jon had intended. Sansa’s flush deepened, and he sighed.

“Look,” he said, “what I mean is if you want to take it, then take it. I don’t mind.” He held out one hand palm-up. “Here.” He nodded toward the pasta box, which Sansa was holding upside-down in midair after having emptied its contents into the pot. She reddened a little more and handed it to him.

“I mean it,” Jon said, willing his voice to soften. Sansa’s answering look was almost shy – that was one he hadn’t seen in over a decade – but she nodded.

“Thanks,” she said softly, and reached toward the stove-side crock of utensils to retrieve a wooden spoon. Jon reached into the cupboard directly above him and handed her a jar of salt, and Sansa thanked him again.

“Have you worked with Wylla before?” he found himself asking. Sansa shook her head.

“No,” she said. “I’ve heard good things, though. She loves ad libs, from what I’ve been told.”
Jon grinned. “You could say that,” he said. Wylla sometimes gave the actors versions of the film’s scenes that were twice as long as the cuts she planned to include and paired them with intentionally vague direction just to get as many possible interpretations and improvisations as she could. Jon, who had known Wylla for some time, had not been entirely surprised, but her methods had mildly annoyed a couple of the other actors at first until they’d gotten used to it. Sansa, however, would have fit right in with those of his colleagues who had used the extended scenes as a chance to improvise silly monologues about life on Mars and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.

Jon spent the next few minutes sharing anecdotes of his time on set with Wylla, which induced more giggles from Sansa. Only after she had drained the pasta and cut part of a stick of butter into the pan to melt did she stop short.

“Oh,” she said suddenly. The smile left her face at once. “I forgot to ask you earlier, when we were eating – I can go to the store while I’m in town tomorrow, just to get some food and other things for here. Since, you know, I’ve used them.” She shrugged again. Jon shook his head.

“You don’t need to do that,” he said. “I always get those things delivered, anyway.”

Sansa still looked worried, and another thought occurred to Jon. “Wait, you’re going to be in town anyway? Did the police ask you to come back?”

Sansa shook her head. “No,” she said quietly. Her shoulders slumped. “The officer I talked to yesterday said they didn’t have any more questions. They just had to talk to me again after the accident because it’s standard procedure for anyone who’s witnessed a death.”

Jon gaped at her. “Witnessed – wait, you saw the woman – I thought you said she was dead when you got there?”

“We were.” Sansa’s shoulders slumped farther down. “She had a heart attack behind the wheel. That was what started everything. They think she died of it right away, I only saw her afterward, when I pulled over to see what had happened and found her dead on her seat.” She turned to the sink and picked up the strainer full of freshly drained pasta, but made no move to transfer it to the pot. “They said that her name was Sarah Mordane, and she had five grandchildren.”

She upended the strainer over the pot. Jon drew back to avoid the drops of boiling water that splattered out of it. When Sansa turned around to set down the strainer, the unshed tears in her eyes glittered icy blue in the rays of the stove light.
“Sorry,” they murmured at the same time. Sansa closed her mouth at once and hung her head. Jon ran a hand across his.

“Jesus, Sansa, I didn’t – I’m sorry.” That sounded pathetic. “I’m so sorry.” Still pathetic. Sansa shrugged. She must have agreed with him.

“It wasn’t any of your doing,” she said, and turned back to the pot. “Don’t blame yourself, Jon.”

Jon shook his head, even though he knew she could not see it. “It’s not that,” he replied. “It’s just that nobody should have to – you shouldn’t have to go through it at all in the first place. Let alone twice.”

Sansa shrugged again. “At least I got out alive,” she said, her voice surprisingly steady. “And don’t worry, I’ll be talking to my therapist as soon as I get back home.”

“No, that’s not what I – but if it helps,” Jon began, but found nothing else to say except, “I’m still sorry, Sansa, I’m so, so sorry.” He wanted to reach out and wipe away a few of her tears himself. He wanted to hold her and rub her back and keep telling her how sorry he was. However, the rigid way with which Sansa was holding her shoulders told him she would welcome none of it, and so he stood rooted to the spot.

“Anyway,” Sansa said after a few minutes, “I – I can still call up whatever shop you use to order the food and everything, or go online if that’s what you want.” She retrieved a plate from the drying rack and dished some of the noodles onto it. Her hands shook when she reached for the salt and pepper shakers, though, and she ended up dropping both. Jon grabbed them both off the floor and held out the one with the salt.

“Here, I’ll grind it,” he said. “Just tell me when.”

He repeated the process with the pepper, and then with the Parmesan cheese he always kept in the refrigerator, a habit left over from when Sansa mixed it with her pasta during their marriage. Sansa thanked him quietly.

“So about the food,” she said, “I really should – ”

Jon waved it away. “No,” he replied firmly. “Don’t worry about it, Sansa. I mean that.” He set one
hand gently on her shoulder. She jumped back, startled, and Jon held both hands up palm forward.

“Sorry,” he said. Sansa shrugged.

“If you change your mind – ” she began. Jon shook his head.

“I won’t,” he assured her. Sansa nodded and turned to trudge out of the kitchen.


Jon did not see Sansa again until half-past eight the following morning. She entered the kitchen to find him cleaning up the dishes he’d used making the oatmeal cinnamon muffins that sat cooling on a wire rack on the countertop.

“Morning,” he greeted her, and reached into the cabinet for another coffee mug. “Coffee?”

Sansa nodded. She murmured a quiet thank-you when Jon handed her the full mug, but she looked nervous, and her eyes darted about before settling on him.

“I contacted Pod Payne while you were sick,” she said. “He put me in touch with a lady who did legal consulting on one of my projects from a few years back.” She took a sip of coffee. Jon’s eyebrows rose. Sansa never drank her coffee black. Now she was drinking it black and barely even flinching.

“Her name’s Jeyne Westerling,” Sansa continued, “and she’s a barrister in Leeds. She knows a lot about the Solicitors Regulation Authority.” Seeing Jon’s confused look, she added, “The agency that handles a lot of professional misconduct complaints against lawyers.”

That did not clear up much of Jon’s confusion, but he nodded anyway.

“So I sent her an e-mail yesterday,” Sansa continued, “and she responded today. She told me how to – ” She took another gulp of coffee, set down her mug, and rubbed one hand around the other. Jon’s frown deepened. It deepened again when she did not say anything further.
“She told you how to what?” Jon asked gently. Sansa blinked, shook her head, and looked back up at him.

“To file a misconduct complaint against Jeyne Poole,” she said. The words spilled out so suddenly that it took Jon a few moments to string them together.

“For what?” he asked.

“For threatening you,” Sansa replied at once, as though the answer were the most obvious thing in the world. “You know, when she told you she’d have you arrested after you found me in the park.” She twisted her hands around again. “Even besides that, she was lying because it would have been a false charge and she knew it. So I want her to be professionally disciplined.”

Jon merely stared at her. He supposed she was right, although he’d never have thought of such an action himself; after the divorce had been finalized, he’d been far too eager to forget Sansa’s lawyer had ever existed. But if Sansa was telling him about it now, she probably needed –

“The thing is,” Sansa continued, “Jeyne – I mean, Jeyne Westerling – told me I’d really only have a chance at it if you participated – you know, we’d both have to write statements for the complaint, because I didn’t witness what she said to you. So if it was just me bringing the complaint, they’d probably reject it.”

Exactly.

“So,” Sansa went on, “Jeyne said if you were willing to see her with me, she could talk to us both, although she’d understand if you wanted to talk to her through your own lawyer, since it was a divorce case between the two of us.” She bit her lip. “I told her I’d talk it over with you and get back to her.”

“My own lawyer – what? Why? We wouldn’t be going to court, would we?” He’d never had to go to court, not even for the divorce, and the hell with all of it if he’d start now.

“Well, not really,” Sansa replied, her voice lower. “But we might have to talk to the review panel if there’s a hearing and tell them everything that happened. It wouldn’t be for a while, though; Jeyne said the review process can take six months or more.”
Jon stared at her, incredulous. “And you’d do all that?” he exclaimed. Sansa nodded. Her face was
paler than it had been when she’d gotten back to the apartment the prior morning.

“What she did to you – ” She shook her head. “It isn’t right, and I know how rich that sounds
coming from me, but I can’t – I’d never have asked her to do it, and I didn’t want her to do it. I don’t
want her to get by with it.” She took a deep breath. “You shouldn’t have had to go through that,
especially not with everything else going on.”

“You mean everything else that you did ask her to do,” Jon reminded her more sharply than he’d
intended. “That makes the whole complaint sound rich, Sansa, not just you.”

Sansa’s shoulders slumped. “I know,” she said, “but Jeyne said if you went along with it, we could
still have a good case because the point is that she went to an unethical distance in representing me.”
She bit her lip again. “Especially if I can say I didn’t get a divorce because you were hurting me or
robbing me or committing a crime.”

“And what? You’ll tell them you got a divorce for infidelity instead? You realize that doesn’t sound
a hell of a lot better, right?” Jon’s voice got louder with every word. “So the whole bloody review
board will get our dirty laundry, is that it?”

“No!” Sansa leaned forward to brace her hands on the snack bar. “They don’t have to hear that part
of it; Jeyne just said it would help if they knew I didn’t divorce you for a criminal reason. And even
if you’d – cheating isn’t a crime, anyway.” Her voice began to tremble. “But I can tell them you
didn’t cheat, if you want, and that the divorce was entirely my fault. It’s the least I can do, anyway,
because it is the truth – ”

“Oh, Christ almighty.” Jon speared his hand through his hair so hard it ripped the rubber band half
out. “Ow!” Sansa flinched and backed away from the counter as Jon reached back to massage his
head. The stricken look she wore reminded him all too well of the screaming match they’d had the
night before he’d gotten sick, when he’d screamed at her and she’d apologized so many times for
hurting him. Jon swallowed the retort screaming on the tip of his tongue, clenched his eyes shut, and
sighed.

“Is that what this is about?” he said once he thought he’d gotten a bit more control of his voice.
“Going out at all bloody hours to avoid bothering me? Going to the store and getting that Alys
Karstark to fix Gram’s vase and filing this complaint and all that? You want to stack one thing on top
of another till you can make up for things? Stop feeling guilty? Make the last three years never
happen? Make the last week never happen? Jesus.” He shook his head. It felt heavy. So did his arm
when he reached up to rub his forehead with the heel of one hand. “Did anyone ever tell you things
“I’m sorry.” Sansa’s voice was shaking worse than his. “You’re right. Nothing I do will make up for any of it. The last few days – I wasn’t trying to make it worse, then, I was only trying to do whatever I could not to make it worse for you. And I know I made it worse, because as much as you hated it when I was gone, I hated when you were sick, and whether or not you believe it, if anything had happened to you, I couldn’t have – I’d never be able to handle it – I couldn’t breathe – I’d never get – Jesus Christ, Sansa.” Unable to look at her, he turned and leaned heavily into the counter next to the sink.

“Fuck’s sake, Sansa,” he ground out. “Do you want to kill yourself at doing this stuff? I bloody get that you feel bad, but bloody hell.” He exhaled again, but that only made his breathing more ragged.

“You could have frozen three yards from the door out there the other night,” he continued, and gestured back toward the kitchen’s glass doors. “You could have broken your back trying to shove me around in my bed with that fucking tarp. And last night, you could have been been mugged – worse – God – you could have been grabbed and – ”

His voice shook harder. When he tried to talk over the shaking, it came out as an ugly rasp. “Did you ever think you were making it worse? Did you ever think what I’d think – the person you’re trying to make this shit up to – if anything ever, ever, happened to you, I couldn’t – I’d go – I’d never be able to handle it – I couldn’t breathe – I’d never get – Jesus Christ, Sansa.” Unable to look at her, he turned and leaned heavily into the counter next to the sink.

“I’m sorry.” Sansa’s voice was shaking worse than his. “You’re right. Nothing I do will make up for any of it. The last few days – I wasn’t trying to make it worse, then, I was only trying to do whatever I could not to make it worse for you. And I know I made it worse, because as much as you hated it when I was gone, I hated when you were sick, and whether or not you believe it, if anything had happened to you, I couldn’t have – I just couldn’t think – and I didn’t mean to make you feel like that, ever.” Her words gave way to sobs, and it was several minutes before Jon could force himself to

He almost choked over the last word. At this rate, she’d tear them both apart if she thought what they’d undergone over the past week could make anything that had happened since he’d signed up to do that film with Ygritte North better. Sansa flinched again.

“No,” she finally responded. “I’m not stupid enough to think I could ever make up for what I did. I couldn’t make up for a millionth of it if I spent the rest of my life trying.” She took a deep breath and let it out in a shaky huff before she continued. “That doesn’t mean I won’t take the chance to right a little bit of the consequences if I can. You were right. Jeyne never would have done what she did to you if it hadn’t been for me. So if I can right even that little bit, and that’s all I ever get the chance to do, I’ll do it. I’ll do it every time. Anything I can. I don’t care what it is.” One tear rolled down her cheek, then another.

Jon sank his elbows onto the snack bar, buried his forehead into his hands, and blew a long, harsh breath through his clenched teeth. He heard Sansa’s shaky gasps across from him. Part of him wanted to reach out and hold her. Part of him rejoiced that she might just understand some of the three years’ hell she’d put him through. Part of him wondered if she was actually trying to match him hell for hell.

“Fuck’s sake, Sansa,” he ground out. “Do you want to kill yourself at doing this stuff? I bloody get that you feel bad, but bloody hell.” He exhaled again, but that only made his breathing more ragged.

“You could have frozen three yards from the door out there the other night,” he continued, and gestured back toward the kitchen’s glass doors. “You could have broken your back trying to shove me around in my bed with that fucking tarp. And last night, you could have been been mugged – worse – God – you could have been grabbed and – ”

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“Don’t work that bloody way? Ever? Or are you just going to keep sitting there and banging your head against the wall to try and make things better?”

He almost choked over the last word. At this rate, she’d tear them both apart if she thought what they’d undergone over the past week could make anything that had happened since he’d signed up to do that film with Ygritte North better. Sansa flinched again.
turn and see her reaching up to swipe the tears off her cheeks with the sleeves of her sweater. A wordless murmur arose from his throat, but Sansa did not notice it.

“And I’m not trying to do anything so I can stop feeling guilty,” she whispered before Jon could say anything else. “I’ll always feel guilty, but that’s not on you. It’s never been on you. It’s on me. And I’m not just guilty, I’m sorry, Jon. I’m — ashamed and horrid and *sorry.*” Her face crumpled. “Sorry,” she gasped, and clapped her hand over her mouth before she turned and fled the room.

Jon stared after her into the dark, empty hall. He stared into it long after the sounds of running water and Sansa’s shuffling feet had stopped. He wanted to yell at her to stop beating herself over the head. He wanted to yell at her to stop beating him over the head. He wanted to sit down with her and hold her and anchor them both to the floor so their heads would quit spinning and the whiplash would just stop.

When he finally mustered the energy to trudge back to his bedroom, he slapped the left-click key on his computer mouse, turned off his music, collapsed onto his bed, and cried.
This chapter is longer than usual, but it's also an exceptionally important and pivotal one with lots of moving parts - and the introduction of a couple of characters I think you'll enjoy.

Buckle up, folks. This ride's about to get wild.

Some time later, Jon was jarred upright by a loud thumping noise from the direction of Sansa’s bedroom upstairs. He leaped off his bed and down the hall and took the steps two at a time until he had reached the second floor hallway.

“Sansa!” he called, slapping his fist against her door. “Are you all right?”

Just as he reached for the doorknob, the door itself opened to reveal Sansa, whose eyes and face were nearly as red as her hair. A glow emanating from the floor bathed her legs and feet in a brighter light than that of the afternoon sun streaming through the room’s blinds. Jon glanced quickly behind her to see the lamp that usually adorned the bedside table lying lengthwise on the floor. Its shade had rolled off somewhere beyond his line of sight.

“Sorry, I’m sorry.” Jon looked back at Sansa, who was twisting her hands together. “I was just stripping the bed so I could wash the sheets, and I knocked it down and kicked the shade off by accident – I don’t think it’s broken, though. I’m sorry.” She bit her lip. Jon shook his head.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “Here, I’ll help you with the bed.”

“Oh, no, I can handle it – ” Sansa began. Jon shook his head harder.

“It’ll go faster with two people,” he said. Sansa hesitated for a moment, but stepped aside.

“Sorry,” she murmured again when Jon replaced the lamp on the table. He waved it off curtly as he strode over to the dresser and snatched the lampshade from the wall behind it. Sansa, who had bent down to retrieve it, drew away quickly and returned to the bed. Jon rejoined her once he had fixed
the lamp, and they worked together in silence until they yanked too hard on the mattress pad and tumbled simultaneously onto the floor.

“You all – ” Jon’s inquiry was cut off by a giggle from Sansa, and then another. He sat stock still watching her shoulders shake and her eyes crinkle for several moments before he realized his mouth was wide open. He shut it at once and felt himself flush. When he looked back at Sansa, she was on her feet and holding out her hand to him. One corner of his mouth twisted sheepishly, and he took her hand without thinking of it and scrambled to his feet.

“Sorry,” they both said at the same time. Sansa’s lips twitched, and Jon felt half the blood in his body rush to his face. He’d always found it next to impossible to keep from responding when she smiled like that, especially now, after all she’d been through. Not, of course, that he’d helped matters by being an ass to her.

“Look, Sansa – ” Jon’s thumb rubbed across the knuckle of hers before he could stop himself. His flush deepened, and Sansa stared at him, clearly taken aback. At just that moment, however, both of their phones rang. Their hands broke apart at once to reach into their pockets, and they uttered hasty twin “hellos” as Jon straightened up and made for the doorway, leaving Sansa in the privacy of her room.

“Jon Snow?” inquired the crisp female voice at the other end of Jon’s call. That raised both of his eyebrows. Nobody but his friends, family members, and a few trusted publicity handlers had that number, and none of them ever used his full name.

“Who’s asking, please?” He hated to sound rude, but withholding his proper name from a caller he didn’t know had become a necessary habit after two of his prior phone numbers had leaked somehow. The tabloid reporters had had a field day spamming his phones.

“My name is Alys Karstark,” answered the woman. She hadn’t missed a beat. “I’m calling on behalf of Sansa Stark, who gave me this number. I apologize if I have the wrong one.”

“Oh, no.” Jon’s hand stopped halfway down its trajectory through his curls. “No, this is Jon Snow. Thanks for calling.”

“Yes. Is this a convenient time to talk?”

Jon strode into the room across the hallway from Sansa’s and shut the door. “Yes, it is.”
Five minutes later, they had arranged for Jon to deliver the remnants of Gram’s vase to Alys’s studio in Leeds for her inspection. Jon headed back across the hall after he hung up, but Sansa’s room was empty of both her and the sheets. Jon padded downstairs to find her setting the dial on the washing machine.

“Really – well, thanks,” he said, cutting himself off before he could remonstrate her yet again for cleaning another part of his apartment. Seeing that he would not, Sansa nodded.

“That was the car shop that called, by the way,” she informed him. “They’ll be done with the car about 4:00 this afternoon.”

Jon returned her nod. “Good,” he replied. “I’ll drive you.”

Sansa opened her mouth, no doubt to protest once again that she could take a cab, but she closed it without saying a word. Neither of them spoke for several moments. Then Sansa’s hands began twisting around each other. Jon scratched his head.

“Oh – that was Alys Karstark on my line,” he said. Thank God he’d remembered something that would end that silence. “She agreed to look at my gram’s vase.” Another pause, not quite as long, ensued. Jon raked his hand through his curls again.

“I appreciate you giving her my name,” he said finally. “Thanks for doing that.”

A wan smile flickered across Sansa’s face. “It was the least I could do,” she replied. “I’m only glad I met her before. She’s supposed to be the best. I’m sure – I hope she’ll be able to do something lovely with it.”

Jon nodded. He had his doubts about even Alys Karstark’s ability to repair Gram’s shattered vase, but voicing them would do no good for either Sansa or himself. Saying anything more about her at the moment would do no good – or Jeyne Poole, or anybody else that would get either of them upset again, especially not now, so close to when Sansa had to leave. He stole a glance at the clock on the shelf above the dryer. She had only a few hours left, which was far too much time for her to spend in any more pain than she’d already gone through. It was too much time that could be stuffed with awkward silences and arguing and feet in their mouths and longing for numbness. But it was still far too little time to spend with Sansa.
His stomach rumbled, snapping him out of his reverie. Not five seconds later, Sansa’s stomach echoed it. Both of them snorted, Sansa much more gracefully, and Jon gestured to the kitchen.

“Muffin?” he asked, and off they went.

As it turned out, Sansa wanted more than just one muffin, and so did Jon. Over the next hour and a half, they devoured more than half the pan’s worth while completing the *Yorkshire Post*’s crossword puzzle. They alternated between silent and spoken guesses, but as they got toward the end of the puzzle, Sansa was doing more of hers volubly, as had always been her wont during their marriage. By the time Jon returned from the laundry room just in time to grin at a new text message from Sam, Jon saw the ghost on her face of the bemused smile she’d sported so many times before, when he and Sam had made some breakthrough on one of their sound projects or he’d beaten his own high score at Tetris.

“Hmm?” She raised her eyebrows, then flushed when Jon looked up from his phone. “I mean – if it’s not prying.”

Jon shook his head and gestured to the phone.

“Just Sam,” he said, “wanting to play Scrabble. Gilly’s out with a friend, and Sammy’s at nursery school.”

“Oh, he’s coming here?” Sansa’s smile broadened. “That’s good; you haven’t seen him in a while, right?”

Jon shook his head. “No, the online version,” he said, and began to tap a reply to Sam. “I’m telling him some other time.”

Sansa’s brow furrowed. “Why?” she asked. “Don’t put him off on my account. You two used to go at your old board set at all hours. You should have some fun with him.”

Jon raised an eyebrow at her. “The way I remember it,” he replied, “you did join us. And usually beat us.” He tilted his head. “You know, you could play together with us if you wanted to. Or just help me beat Sam. He’s a sight better at this than I am.”

The corners of Sansa’s lips turned up, if only a little. “Perhaps,” she said. “After all, I’ve still got your laptop in my room.”
Jon spent the next hour and a half at the kitchen table, alternately replying to e-mails, reviewing a computer program he and Sam had written for one of Jon’s sound machines, and getting beaten silly at Scrabble by both Sam and Sansa, the latter of whom had curled up on the living room couch with his spare laptop after vacuuming out the room she had used. Jon’s phone rang in the middle of the second round. He frowned and picked up when he saw that it was Leigh Harris.

“Jon.” Leigh’s tone was apologetic. “Sorry to have to let you know, but you’ve got photographic company again outside the gates.”

Jon swore silently. “How many this time?” he asked. He’d occasionally gotten a few paparazzi camped outside the boundaries of the gated community, but Leigh sounded almost ruffled, which probably meant there were more of them than usual. Apparently the snow had settled enough for them to slither out of their holes again.

“I’d say a couple of dozen at least,” Leigh replied. “The guards are on shift, but if you’re going out – ”

Jon sighed and rattled off a few more internal curses. “I’ll take care of it, Leigh,” he said. “I appreciate your letting me know.”

“Sure thing,” replied Leigh. “Just let me know if you need anything.”

“Right,” said Jon. “Talk to you later, Leigh.”

His finger stabbed the disconnect button so hard he felt a jolt to the pad of his thumb. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. Then he swore again, this time aloud.

Sansa. She needed to get her car and go back to Leeds. Of all the bloody days, he thought, and shoved both hands through his hair. Bloody hell.

He picked his phone back up and dialed Tormund Giantsbane’s number. He had first hired the burly, bearded redhead to serve as his driver and bodyguard just after he and Sansa had split up and his friends had insisted it was high time he had both. Jon, who despised most of the trappings of celebrity, had always been reluctant to hire long-term assistants of any type, but his dislike for the paparazzi had outweighed his resistance. And a good thing too: Tormund had given Jon not only first-rate security, but also pizza, a listening ear, and an occasional unfiltered verbal kick when he
deemed that a particularly deep period of what he called Jon’s “whining brooder” had gone on long enough, and the two had become fast friends. As Jon could have predicted, Tormund answered his phone on the first ring.

“Going adventuring in the snow, Snow?” he asked, guffawing. Jon rolled his eyes.

“Glad you survived, too, Tormund,” he replied. “Look, if it was me I wouldn’t bother you, but Leigh says I’ve got a couple dozen paps outside the gates, and S – I have a friend here who needs to get back home out of town as soon as her car’s fixed, which could be any minute.”

Tormund grunted. “She someone they’ll recognize?”

Jon ran another hand through his curls. “Yeah,” he answered. “She didn’t come with her security, though. They’re back home. Where she lives.” Not that Sansa had ever mentioned personal security guards, but she had less of an aversion than Jon to working with assistants, so he assumed she’d have guards. He didn’t want to think about the idea of her not having any.

“Snow? You there?”

Jon cleared his throat. “Yeah, Tormund. Look, if you’re in the middle of something, take your – ”

“Time,” the other man finished. “You’re just lucky I’m not in the middle of Hawaii, Snow.”

Jon snorted. Tormund hated any temperature warm enough to make him take off his leather jacket. “Nice try.”

Tormund chortled. “Figured I’d give it a shot. I’ll be there in fifteen.”

“Thanks, Tormund.” Jon let out the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “Don’t kill yourself speeding here.”

“I will, Snow,” replied Tormund and hung up.
“Jon?”

The sound of Sansa’s voice just behind him made Jon whirl around so quickly that he bashed his elbow against the table. He winced as the force of the blow jolted up his funny bone.

“Oh, God, I’m sorry!” Sansa clapped one hand over her mouth and brushed the other against his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Jon! Are you OK?”

Jon rubbed his elbow and nodded. “Yeah,” he eventually ground out. “Just hit the funny bone is all.”

“Do you want some ice?” Sansa asked, and Jon shook his head out of habit before realizing that ice would probably help matters quite a bit.

“I’ll get it,” he said, making to rise, but Sansa’s hand stiffened against his shoulder before he could get up.

“No, I’ve got it,” she said, and within thirty seconds she had retrieved an ice pack from the freezer and offered it to him. It occurred belatedly to Jon that she had probably learned the location of every ice pack he owned when she’d been nursing him through his fever.

“Thanks,” he murmured. Sansa only shook her head.

“I shouldn’t have snuck up on you like that,” she said. “I just – I heard you on the phone, and I wanted to say I can get a cab to pick me up again. You don’t have to let them see you or bother your security. If I can manage to dodge them just far enough out of the gate to get picked up – ”

Jon swung both legs off his chair. “Oh, the hell no you won’t,” he snapped. Sansa’s eyebrows rose at his sudden vehemence, but she did not flinch as Jon straightened to his full height.

“I’m not taking bloody chances with you like that, Sansa,” he growled, willing his voice to lower. “Besides, I don’t trust some random cab driver who might care more about getting on the cover of some tabloid himself than do his bloody job. And Tormund’s got experience driving around people like that. He’s a sight better than any cab driver you can think of, and I trust him with my life.” He paused, half expecting Sansa to continue protesting, but she only gave him a resigned sigh. Jon nodded.
“So we’ll get you back to Leeds,” he began, and – ”

That earned him two sharply raised eyebrows. “I’m not asking you or your driver to take me back to Leeds, Jon,” Sansa replied. “He’s doing enough by taking me to the shop. I’ll be fine to drive home.”

Jon shook his head emphatically. “Not with dozens of paps following you,” he returned, “like some Princess Di thing – ”

Sansa snorted. “I’m hardly the target Princess Di was,” she said, “and I’m not exactly drunk. I’ll be fine, Jon.”

“The hell if I’ll risk that,” Jon snapped. “I’m not about to take a chance anything might happen to you. Yesterday was more than bloody close enough.”

Sansa huffed. “I know that,” she replied. She sounded as though she had had to say it five times already. “And I get that I got careless, and I’m sorry, but at this point we’re in broad daylight – ” she pushed at the index finger of her left hand with its twin on her right – “and I’m not sleepy – ” she pushed her middle finger back against the first one – “and again, I’m hardly important enough for them to follow all the way out of York.” She ticked her ring finger off to match the others. “And if they get a couple pictures of me, they get them. It’s hardly the first time.”

She looked so resigned. Jon sighed and shoved a hand halfway through his hair so that the heel of it was resting on his forehead.

“Look,” he said, his voice gentling, “I get yesterday was an accident. It wasn’t your fault you fell asleep. But if anything went wrong today – ” He shook his head, trying to will away the image of Sansa’s crumpled car, this time with her in it. “I’m not risking that. Sorry if that’s not what you wanted to hear, but I’m making sure you get home in one piece.”

Sansa sighed and crossed her arms over her chest. “Look, Jon – ”

She was interrupted by the ring of her phone. Jon turned and padded into the living room to give her privacy. She followed not long after.
“That was the car shop,” she said. “My car’s ready for me to pick up.”

Jon nodded. “Good,” he said, although he felt anything but. “Tormund should be here any minute, and –”

Sansa opened her mouth again, presumably to protest, but Jon’s phone buzzed. One glance at the screen told him Tormund had just been let through the front gate of the apartment community, which was now swarming with at least three dozen paparazzi, according to the red-bearded giant. Jon swore under his breath.

“Speak of the devil,” he said, and strode off to the front door. He opened it to find a grinning Tormund on the other side.

“Good God, you look awful, Snow,” said Tormund after letting Jon out of another of the bone-crunching embraces he was so fond of inflicting on the shorter man. “Maybe you should accompany her out of town, eh? How about Hawaii?”

Jon rolled his eyes. His mouth opened to reply, but shut when he saw Tormund’s eyes glance between him and widen like saucers. Sure enough, when he turned around, they were both facing Sansa. There was no way Tormund wouldn’t recognize her. Jon grimaced. There was also probably no way Tormund wouldn’t dislike her, although he was more than professional enough to protect Sansa in whatever way Jon asked.

Still, Jon grimaced again before turning to Sansa. “Sansa, this is Tormund Giantsbane,” he said. “He handles security for me. Tormund, this is –” He stopped his tongue just in time. The words my wife had almost rolled off of it. Jon flushed. The last time he had introduced Sansa to anyone, she had indeed been his wife. That had still been over three years ago, however.

“Sansa Stark,” Jon finished. Tormund’s eyebrows had almost reached his hairline, but Sansa had the good grace to offer him her hand.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Giantsbane,” she said. Tormund only waited a moment before he returned the gesture.

“Pleasure,” he replied. He dropped her hand and turned to look severely at Jon, who narrowed his eyes and shook his head. If Tormund wanted to let him have it over Sansa’s visit, he could bloody well wait until after she’d gotten home safely.
Anyway,” he said, “Sansa’s car’s ready to be picked up at the shop.” He tilted his head toward the front door. “You said about three dozen paps?”

Tormund suddenly all business, cleared his throat and nodded. “Aye,” he replied. “You thinking mine or the Escalade?”

Jon, who had already decided that his larger SUV would be safer for Sansa than would Tormund’s smaller Range Rover, nodded. “Escalade,” he answered at once.

Tormund returned his nod. “Right, then,” he said, and turned to acknowledge Sansa again. “Let me know when you kids are ready.”

“I’m ready,” Sansa replied, then turned to Jon. “Except for your laptop; I’ll grab it from the room. Do you want it in yours?”

Jon shook his head. “Just leave it in the living room,” he replied. “I’ll deal with it.”

Sansa nodded and made a beeline out of the hallway. Jon turned to the closet to grab his coat. Tormund cleared his throat.

“Not now, Tormund,” Jon growled. “And it’s not what it looks like.”

Tormund merely grunted. Jon glared at him.

“She was in a car accident when it snowed last week,” Jon continued. “She saved a bunch of people’s lives. Least I could do was have her here.”

Tormund raised an eyebrow. “A week, huh? I suppose I should be impressed you two didn’t kill each other.”

Jon shook his head. “No,” he answered. “We wouldn’t – ” He sighed. Neither Tormund nor anybody else needed to hear all the bloody details.
“We can behave like civilized people,” he said shortly, seeing the other man’s eyebrow rise even further. “And she’s – she understands more of what happened now. We both do.”

Tormund’s eyebrows relaxed after a moment. When he realized Jon would say no more, he nodded. He opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted when Sansa strode back into the hallway.

“The laptop’s on the coffee table,” she told Jon. “And I stacked the dishes in the kitchen; I really could wash them before I leave.”

Jon shook his head. “I’ll take care of them,” he replied. “Besides, Dale bloody Earnhardt over hear can’t wait to get his hands on my car.”

Sansa graced Tormund with a wan smile. “Thank you, Mr. Giantsbane,” she said. “I really appreciate your taking the time to do this.”


“Just ‘Sansa’ is fine, Mr. Giantsbane,” she said. Tormund gave her a brief nod and turned to Jon.

“All right, Snow,” he said. “Let’s put that pretty toy of yours to work.”

Five minutes later, Jon and Sansa had settled into the back seats of Jon’s sleek black Escalade, with a grinning Tormund up front revving the engine. He backed slowly out of the carport and turned up the winding main drive out of the community. When they took the steep turn near the end of it, Jon saw that Tormund had told the truth. If anything, even more paps had huddled next to the fence after the bodyguard’s arrival.

“Bloody hell,” Jon muttered as his friend slowed to a stop to allow the complex’s security guards to open the gate. That was when the lens flashes began peppering the crowd around it. Jon winced, ducked his head down, and threw an arm in front of his eyes. His glance darted to the right, where he saw Sansa doing the same.

God, he’d forgotten how much he hated paps. And how many beers he owed Tormund. Jon owned
five cars and considered himself a pretty daft hand at driving each one of them, but Tormund had a
knack for maneuvering in tight corners that Jon could not hope to match.

The Escalade began crawling again, and Jon darted a glance out the window, where he found
himself facing a camera not two feet from the vehicle. Its lens flashed full in front of his face. He
swore again. Once his eyes had recovered a bit, he looked over at Sansa. She was still leaning
forward covering her face with one arm. The other was braced against her knees, allowing her to
hold her back remarkably straight. Jon felt a stab of reminiscent pride. They’d been accosted
countless times by paparazzi over the course of their relationship – well, both of their relationships,
counting the time they’d spent together as teenagers – and Sansa had always said she’d be damned if
she’d let the paps make her slouch or slump, as if living, breathing, or walking the face of the earth at
his side were anything to be ashamed of.

“Hang on.” Tormund’s rumbling voice yanked Jon back to the present. “Might be a bit touchy here.”

Jon instinctively reached for the support handle just above the door at his side. Next to him, Sansa
reached over to check her seatbelt.

That was when the vehicle lurched to a sudden stop. Jon’s seatbelt stopped his forward trajectory,
but Sansa’s had apparently not fastened correctly, because she tumbled out of her seat and onto the
floor, crashing against the front passenger seat in the process. She cried out just as a whoop sounded
from just outside her window. Another camera flash went off from somewhere above Jon’s head. As
he frantically pulled his seatbelt loose, he caught the grinning face of the camera’s owner. The dick
had clearly just gotten a shot of Sansa sprawled out on the Escalade’s floor. Jon wanted nothing
more than to throw open the door, knock the asshole out cold, and pitch his camera off into the
nearest snowdrift. Instead, he swore loudly, hurtled forward onto the floor, and grabbed Sansa off of
it.

“Sansa!” he shouted. She winced and grabbed her left elbow. “Sansa, are you OK?”

She merely blinked at him. Jon’s eyes widened as quickly as his heart was racing. He released her
left shoulder and reached up to cup the side of her head.

“Sansa, can you hear – ” he began, but was cut off by Tormund’s shouted warning. The Escalade
shot forward like a bat out of hell. Jon curled his arms around Sansa as he lurched backward against
the passenger seat. He braced his feet on the floor to keep them as steady as possible, cupping the
back of her head protectively as he did so.

“Sorry ‘bout that!” hollered Tormund from the front seat. The Escalade slowed, and the engine
“Fine,” Sansa gasped, lifting her head off of Jon’s shoulder. Her body was quivering – or maybe, he realized, he was just feeling himself quivering. He guessed it was both.

“Good,” he said over his shoulder. Tormund, eyes still trained on the road, gave them a thumbs-up. Jon turned back to Sansa. His other hand slipped upward to hold the other side of her head.

“You sure you’re OK?” he asked, and stroked a stray strand of red hair behind Sansa’s ear. She nodded. Jon looked down at her elbow, which she was still cradling.

“What happened to your arm?” he asked.

Sansa grimaced. “I banged it against the seat when I rolled out of mine,” she replied. “My fault – I should have checked the stupid seatbelt before we reached the gate.”

Jon shook his head at once. “It was the fucking paps’ fault you fell,” he growled. “Especially that fucker at your window.” He clenched his jaw to keep from yelling about what he wanted to do to the wanker. Sansa did not need that.

It still didn’t stop him from wanting to march all the way back home and knocking the guy’s lights out.

“It’s probably just a bruise,” said Sansa. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Jon searched her face for any sign that she was battling pain that could only come from a more serious injury. He could find none, but then it had been so long since the time he’d awakened to that face and those wide blue eyes every day.

“Do you want to go to a doctor first,” he asked, “before the car shop? Just in case something’s broken?”

Sansa shook her head. “No,” she said. Jon must have looked as unconvinced as he felt, because she hastened to add, “Remember when broke my ankle when we were doing reshoots for Swords and
Jon nodded. While filming one of her final retakes for the first miniseries they’d done together, back before they had begun dating, Sansa had hit a bad pothole while running across the rugged Scottish terrain and twisted her ankle. The director had insisted she go to the nearest hospital, where X-rays had confirmed she’d broken it. That had been the first time Jon had gotten her flowers. He’d meant them purely as a gesture of encouragement, but she’d blushed all the same.

“Well, this isn’t anything like that,” Sansa finished. Jon stared at her for a few more moments before he finally nodded.

“All right,” he said. “But you didn’t hurt anything else?”

Sansa shook her head. “No,” she said. She narrowed her eyes in concern. “What about you?”

“No, I’m all right,” Jon replied at once, shaking his own head. Sansa nodded but said nothing. Jon wanted to hold her as tightly as he could without bothering her elbow and tell Tormund to drive them all straight to Leeds. God knew how many paps they’d find at the car shop.

But he could not do that without upsetting Sansa further, and he could not find anything to say. Instead, he cleared his throat and offered her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. One corner of Sansa’s mouth twitched, but she said nothing. Jon felt his cheeks begin to redden and glanced back down at her elbow.

“Well, I don’t want you to have to drive all that way yourself if it makes your elbow feel worse,” he finally said. “I’ll drive you home, and Tormund can follow us to take me back here. Unless you’d rather ride with him.” Please don’t say you want him to drive you.

Sansa sighed. Jon expected her to protest the idea. Instead, she asked, “You don’t need to be anywhere?”

“No.” Jon shook his head at once. Sansa nodded slowly.

“All right,” she said, her voice quiet. She bit her lip with a little more force than usual, which meant she was in a good deal of pain. Jon felt a twinge shoot through his chest.
“Oh, for God’s sake,” he muttered. “I forgot – Tormund!” He turned to look at his friend. “Is there a water bottle up there? And some Tylenol? Maybe in the glove compartment?”

“Hang on,” said Tormund, reaching for the glove compartment. A white bottle clattered out, and the bodyguard reached out just in time to seize it and pitch it in Jon’s direction. As Jon reached to catch it, his eye caught the water bottle, which was sitting on top of the compartment between the two front seats. He leaned over, grabbed it, and offered it to Sansa, who rewarded him with a wan smile.

“Thanks,” she said. Jon popped the lid of the Tylenol bottle and held it over her hand.

“Two or three?” he asked.

“Three, please,” she said, and Jon complied at once. Sansa gulped the pills down with a mouthful of water and sighed.

“I’m sorry,” Jon murmured, but Sansa shook her head.

“Not your fault,” she replied. “For all I know, somebody might have recognized me at the diner or the car shop the other night and figured out where I was staying from there.”

She pushed in vain at the same strand of hair Jon had handled before, which had slipped out of place again. Before she could try again, Jon had reached out and gently tucked it back where it belonged. Sansa’s eyes widened, but before she could say anything, the Escalade ground to a halt and shut off.

“We’re here, kids,” boomed Tormund. It was only then that Jon realized he had been holding onto Sansa the entire time. He released her at once.

“Anyone follow us, Tormund?” he asked, clearing his throat.

“Not for now,” his friend informed him. Jon opened the door and helped Sansa out of the vehicle.

“Thanks,” she murmured, and strode toward the door of the shop. Jon darted over and opened it for
her before she reached it. Sansa’s lips twitched again.

“Thanks,” she repeated. Jon walked back over to the Escalade, where Tormund was standing.

“You good to follow us back to Leeds?” he asked. Tormund merely raised an eyebrow.

“Long as I get to drive your pretty car,” he said. He glanced at the door of the car shop and opened his mouth, but shut it again. Jon, who did not want to give him another chance to open it, headed indoors.

It look less than ten minutes for Sansa to pay her bill and retrieve her car keys, which she handed to Jon without much hesitation. Fortunately, they exited the shop with nary a photographer in sight.

“You know,” Sansa said when they reached Jon’s Escalade, “you don’t have to take me all the way to Leeds.” Jon immediately opened his mouth to protest, but she beat him to it.

“I should have thought of it before,” she said, shaking her head, “but I forgot – anyway, on the chance we pick up any paps on the way, I’d rather we meet with Brienne before we hit Leeds. My security guard,” she added, seeing the questions on Jon’s and Tormund’s faces. “The fewer that know where I live, the better.”

Jon could not argue with that, although his chest tightened a bit at the thought of not seeing Sansa safely to her own door. But the longer they sat out in the open and talked, the greater the chance they’d be seen, and Sansa definitely did not need that, even if her pain was not etched into her face as it had been right when she’d injured her elbow.

“All right,” he said. “Where would you like to go?”

A few minutes and a quick phone call from Sansa to her security guard later, she and Jon were ensconced in the front seat of Sansa’s car. Tormund and the Escalade followed them as Jon pulled out onto the street.

Sansa did not speak during the ride to the restaurant where she’d arranged to meet with her security guard. Nor did Jon, whose tight grip on the steering wheel matched the tightness of his focus on the road ahead of him. Occasionally, he glanced into his rearview mirror to see Tormund frowning at him. No doubt the other man was getting impatient at Jon’s refusal to budge over the speed limit, but
Jon would be damned if he got them pulled over, or, worse yet, into an accident. His friend could rib him all he wanted and drive back to York like a bat out of hell for all Jon cared, as long as Sansa got to Brienne safely.

Eventually, his GPS chirped at him at the exact same moment Sansa’s soft voice instructed him to move a lane over on the highway. She smiled at the unintended coordination. Jon glanced at her long enough to see the lack of pain in it, and silently thanked God for whoever had invented Tylenol.

Sansa and the GPS both gave excellent directions, and within a few minutes Jon had pulled into the restaurant’s parking lot and parked two spaces over from a shiny black Lexus. As he did, the driver’s side door opened, and a tall woman in a neat pantsuit and short blonde hair stepped out.

“That her?” Jon asked, and Sansa nodded. Only then did Jon unlock the doors. Not that it was anywhere near likely that some pap or other impostor had stolen the vehicle belonging to Sansa’s security guard, but Jon would not take any remote chance he didn’t have to. He allowed himself a derisive laugh when Sansa’s back was turned. How pathetic was it that an actor had to tell himself he’d been watching too much television lately?

“Jon,” Sansa said, turning back in his direction, “this is Brienne Tarth. Brienne, this is – Jon Snow.”

She hesitated just as he had done when introducing her to Tormund. Jon grimaced internally. No doubt Brienne was far less disposed to like him than Tormund had been to like Sansa.

His chest muscles tightened again and even more painfully. Over the past week, he’d gotten used to everyone around him believing that he’d never been unfaithful to Sansa, even if “everyone” only meant Sansa herself. That, however, did not keep him from reaching out to shake Brienne Tarth’s hand.

“Good to meet you,” he said politely. The woman gave him a thin smile and nodded.

“Likewise, Mr. Snow,” she said. Her voice was clipped, professional, and every bit as tight as her grip. Ouch.

Luckily, they were interrupted by the sound of someone’s throat being cleared very loudly. Jon turned to see Tormund standing at his side, appraising the woman as intently as he did any stranger who approached Jon. The woman returned his gaze with an icy one of her own. Jon was only too glad to release her hand.
“Ms. Tarth, this is Tormund Giantsbane, my security,” he said. “Tormund, this is Brienne Tarth, Sansa’s security.”

In the time it took him to make the introduction, Tormund’s gaze had softened from appraisal to something like admiration. Jon, who had seen perhaps two people earn that kind of approval from his guard over the course of their three-year friendship, could only stare. His jaw nearly dropped when he saw Tormund raise an eyebrow and give Sansa’s guard a slow grin.

“Very pleased to meet you, Ms. Tarth,” he said. His smile only widened when Brienne Tarth’s eyes narrowed at him.

“The same, Mr. Giantsbane,” she replied. If her grip surprised Tormund, he did not show it.

“Call me Tormund, Ms. Tarth,” he said, and winked. Brienne Tarth’s expression did not change. After a moment she dropped his hand and turned to Sansa.

“Dacey will be right out,” she said, and Sansa nodded. “She’ll take your car, if you don’t mind.”

Sansa shook her head. “No, go ahead,” she replied. As if on cue, a young woman as short and brunette as Brienne Tarth was tall and blond approached them. Sansa introduced her as Dacey Mormont, another of her security team.

“No relation to Lyanna,” she added, seeing the question on Jon’s face.

Brienne Tarth turned her back on Tormund, who had clearly been about to say something, and turned to speak to Dacey. Sansa was smirking at him when Jon turned back to her.

“I think your security has taken a liking to mine,” she said. Jon rolled his eyes.

“I apologize for him,” he said, “to both of you. I’d trust him with my life, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t act like a cocky arse.” He nodded toward Tormund, whose shoulders had deflated just the slightest bit.
Sansa shook her head. “Don’t worry,” she said. “Brienne’s dealt with worse than that. If she really wanted to let him have it, she’d find a way.”

Jon’s lips twisted despite themselves. He had no doubt that Brienne Tarth could find a way to let anyone have it if she deemed it necessary.

A gust of wind whipped through the gap between the vehicles. Sansa shuddered, and Jon reached over to steady her. Her eyes softened and then widened. She looked like she might say something. She looked like she might throw her arms around him. She looked nervous and hesitant and angelic. Jon could not tear his eyes away from her, even when he heard Brienne Tarth and Dacey Mormont approaching them.

“Please let me know when you get home,” he murmured, and after a long moment Sansa nodded, her eyes still boring into his.

“You too,” she whispered back. The knot in Jon’s chest returned with a vengeance. He could not have said anything, even if he had known what to say. Instead he released her shoulders and moved his hands to cup the sides of her face. His thumbs rubbed her temples as he leaned in to press his lips to her forehead. The warm scent of cinnamon and jasmine and Sansa overwhelmed him, and for several heady moments he felt nothing but her the heat of her body and the smoothness of her forehead and the softness of her hair, and he heard nothing but the dancing rhythm of her breath.

When he drew back, Sansa had closed her eyes. If she opened them, he might stay rooted to the ground, so he turned, thanked both of her guards, and stalked off to the Escalade.

“Don’t bloody start, Tormund,” he growled when the other man entered the vehicle grinning like a Cheshire cat. Tormund raised both hands in mock surrender, but he kept that stupid smile pasted to his face the entire way back to York.

It was not until they were almost there that Jon realized he had never bid Sansa goodbye.

Chapter End Notes

- END OF ACT II -
It took the consecutive slams of the Escalade’s two front doors to jar Sansa Stark’s eyes open. The vehicle’s windows were tinted, and Sansa could not get so much as a glimpse of Jon, though she squinted and held a desperate hand to her forehead to block the glare of the sunlight reflecting off the snow around her.

Not a minute ago, Jon had held her in his arms as gently as if she’d been his gram’s vase, and had kissed her more gently still. For a moment, she had been surrounded by his heat and his evergreen scent and his hands and his lips. For a moment, she had been transported back to their house in London, where Jon used to hold her and kiss her every day and make love to her nearly as often and neither the divorce nor the ugly years since had blighted their lives.

Now he was gone, and now Sansa’s thumb was rubbing the spot on her forehead where Jon’s lips had rested.

“Sansa.”

Sansa watched the Escalade’s taillights disappear out of view before she turned to face Brienne Tarth’s piercing gaze.

“What happened to your elbow?” she asked with a slight nod toward Sansa’s injured limb. She looked as though she wanted to say more, but contented herself with, “You’ve been favoring it since you got out of that car.”

Sansa sighed. “I banged it on the seat of Jon’s car,” she said. “Tormund was swerving to avoid the paps, and my seat belt wasn’t fastened completely, so I fell out of the seat.”

Brienne pursed her lips. “And that’s the man who drove you all the way from York?”

Sansa grimaced. Where distrust of anyone with whom he client had contact was concerned, Brienne could get even testier than Catelyn Stark.
“Yes,” she replied. “There were almost forty paps, Brienne. He had to avoid them somehow.”

Brienne sighed. “How bad is it?” she asked, nodding once again toward Sansa’s elbow.

Sansa shrugged. “Probably just a bad bruise,” she said. Brienne shook her head.

“Best get you to a doctor to make sure,” she said. Sansa thought it was best too, partly because it would get Brienne off her back, but she could not help rolling her eyes.

“You’re almost as bad as Jon,” she said as the older woman waved Dacey off and opened the passenger door of her Lexus for Sansa.

“At what?” Brienne’s eyes narrowed. Sansa sighed. Right. She had forgotten that her guard, along with almost everyone else she knew, still thought of Jon as an unfaithful, untrustworthy git.

“Worrying,” she said quietly, training her eyes on the road ahead of them. “He did it almost the whole time I was there.”

“He worried?” Brienne sounded as though she wanted to ask the doctor to scan Sansa’s brain as well as her elbow.

“Yes,” Sansa replied, still staring at the road. “He was always worrying.” She bit her lip. “He – ” A lump appeared in her throat, and Sansa bit her lip harder. A simple fact, she thought, should not cost so much effort to speak. But the longer she waited to speak it, the less chance it had of escaping, of being known by more than just her and Jon.

There. Just think of it as an obvious fact. Brienne has blonde hair. The sun is shining. Jon was wearing a black T-shirt this morning.

Jon didn’t cheat. Jon didn’t lie.

“He was right.” Sansa sighed and willed her throat to squeeze out something more. “I was wrong.” And more.
“He didn’t cheat.” Her voice was so low, she could barely hear herself speak. “He worried because he’s – that’s what he’s always done with me.” Now that she thought of it, she could not come up with a better reason than that, although God knew he’d worried far too much considering they’d spent the last three years apart because of her; but Sansa could not think of why else he would, and she certainly could not explain it to Brienne. “Because he’s the same person he always was, and not a cheating dick.”

Brienne raised her eyebrows. “I’m sorry,” she said, her voice softer than Sansa had ever heard it. Tears sprang into Sansa’s eyes, and she turned her head away.

“It’s nothing you did,” she replied. “It was my fault, really.”

Brienne drew in a breath, but the words Sansa expected never came. Instead, her guard fell silent, which Sansa preferred anyway. Every word she’d spoken had drained her energy, and now, after fewer than two dozen, she was exhausted.

She leaned her head against the window, rolled the hood of her coat between her hair and the cold glass, and closed her eyes. She did not open them until Brienne shook her gently by the shoulder and informed her that she had slept all the way to the doctor’s office in Leeds.

As Sansa had hoped, the X-rays the physician took showed no broken bones. She left the office with a bottle of painkillers and strict orders to bathe her affected elbow with ice water every hour. By the time Brienne and Dacey had left Sansa’s flat, however, she felt even more tired than she had during the trip to Leeds. She stayed awake long enough to text her mother, Margaery, Hannah, and Myranda to let them know she’d arrived safely back in Leeds.

*Going to bed early,* she added at the close of each message. *Talk to you tomorrow.*

She hesitated a bit longer over her text to Jon. Eventually she decided on *Home OK. Dr says elbow fine. Thank you.* She chewed her lip for a few moments before adding *very much* and then *for everything* before she sent the message.

She filled a bowl with ice and cold water and carried it with a towel to one of the end tables by her couch so she could dip her elbow into it. No sooner had she set both items down than her phone buzzed with a message from Jon.
Glad 2 hear it.

Three dots blinked in a gray bubble across the left-hand side of her screen. Sansa plunged her elbow into the bowl and yelped when her skin made contact with the freezing mix of ice and water. She gritted her teeth and pushed her elbow all the way in, then grabbed her phone again to set the timer. No sooner had she done so than Jon’s next message popped up on her screen.

_I forgot to give you the brooch. I’m sorry. Can bring it 2 you if you want._

Sansa blinked. She’d completely forgotten about the brooch. Guilt twisted her stomach.

_I should have remembered, _she typed back. _I’m sorry. Don’t need to come all the way here. We can meet later._

She hit the send button and sighed. That probably sounded like a brush-off. She should know better than to try texting anything of much substance when she was this tired and holding back screams over her quickly-freezing elbow.

_I’m in London @Bridge next month, _she typed. _Maybe meet then?_

Jon replied at once. _Sure. You can pick a day._

_Will let u know, _Sansa replied. _Good night._

She hit the send key, but her thumb slid over and the message sat still on the composition screen. Sansa bit her lip again and added his name to the end of the message.

_Good night Jon, _read the green bubble with her sent message in it.

_Night, _popped up beneath it. Sansa stared at the screen for a few moments, then put down her phone. She should have remembered that Jon had never been the type to use three words where one would do. Still, it was just one word. One word for all the illness, fighting, misery, miscommunication, and even friendship they’d been through together over the past week. Maybe Jon was just glad to return to the peace and quiet he loved so much.
How could she argue with that, after all she had done? Even if she’d thought he might have more than one word after the way he’d kissed her when they’d said goodbye that afternoon?

Sansa sighed, leaned her head back against the couch, and begged her timer to speed the hell up. Her traitorous fingers spent the entire time ghosting over her forehead.

Eventually the timer did go off. Sansa snatched her fingers from her forehead and her elbow out of the bowl, dumped the contents into the kitchen sink, and headed off to her bedroom.

She was bloody exhausted.

When she woke up a few hours later, she visited the bathroom and settled back into bed. It was so quiet, Sansa could have heard a pin drop.

It was far too quiet, so quiet that Sansa turned over in bed several times just to break the stillness. She realized with a start that she’d gotten accustomed to the ventilation system and the dishwasher and the fans and the faint sounds of Pink Floyd from Jon’s apartment. She’d even gotten used to the hum of the toilet tank in the bathroom next to the bedroom she’d occupied there.

She’d slept better over the past few nights, ever since Jon had recovered from his fever, than she’d slept in years, probably since before the divorce. Back when she’d still been able to curl herself up against Jon’s warm body and fall asleep to the low, steady beat of his heart. Maybe – she felt her face growing red – maybe that explained why she’d slept so peacefully the morning she’d returned to his flat from the café and he’d carried her to his couch and cradled her in his arms. Arms she very much missed at the moment. Arms she could have had around her for the past three years, had she not been such a blindingly brainless ball of idiocy.

Arms she missed, even now. Especially now.

Her body clearly agreed, because it fell asleep only to wake up again and again.

So did her mind, because every time she woke up, it chanted the same things over and over and over.

*Jon never cheated.*
Jon never lied.

Jon didn’t throw me out. He should have done, though.

I’m the worst fucking fool in the bloody fucking history of goddamned, brainless, spineless, worthless fools.

Jon got hurt. I hurt Jon.

I took away his friends. I took Shae and Grenn and Jory. I bled him dry and sucked the life out of him like a bloody fucking vampire.

He never hurt me. Not once.

By about 4:00 in the morning, an aching knot had begun to form between Sansa’s eyes. She sat up wearily and massaged it with her fist.

Jon should have hurt her. He should have told everyone who would believe him just how easily the wife he’d loved had turned to hating him, and how easily she’d believed and spread Ygritte’s lies about him, and how little time she’d given him to explain everything before she’d changed her phone number and moved out of their house and cut him out of her life like some kind of criminal or stalker or abuser.

He should have started dating every girl he laid eyes on as soon as the judge had awarded them the divorce decree just to show her that even if she couldn’t appreciate him, many others would. After all, Sansa herself had shown up at several awards shows after the divorce with a few different actors. Not that much of anything had happened after the cameras had gone away – every time she kissed another man, she felt dirtier and sadder and lonelier. Lonelier for Jon and his lips on hers and his beard lightly scratching her chin and his hands caressing her waist through the fabric of yet another flimsy gown and his mouth whispering about how badly he wanted to get off the red carpet and away from the cameras and back to their home, where they could find much more exciting things to do than field inane questions from a battery of journalists.

She was lonely now.
Sansa scoffed at the thought. She hadn’t seriously dated anyone since the divorce, let alone moved in with anyone. She’d been single for almost three years. She’d been staying with Jon for only just over a week, and for a good portion of that time he’d been sick enough to scare her stiff.

She had no reason to be lonely, or to miss a bunch of strange sounds in an apartment she hadn’t visited before last week and probably never would again.

Sansa’s heart beat nearly out of her chest at the thought. What if she never saw Jon again?

Two weeks ago, the thought would have made her cheer. Now she wanted to cry.

She flopped back onto her bed, heart still hammering, but the tears refused to come. She groaned in frustration and punched the pillow next to her and blinked ferociously, but her body refused to produce the good cry her mind needed so badly.

*Jon never cheated.*

*Jon never lied.*

*Jon should never want to see me again.*

The sky was turning from silver to pink when Sansa finally fell back to sleep.


Sansa was awakened a couple of hours later by the blaring of her alarm. She slapped the snooze button on her phone, only to see a notification pop up on her calendar app reminding her that she was due at the Bridge Theatre for a rehearsal on “An Ideal Husband” in an hour and a half. She groaned and buried her head into the pillow.

*Bloody living hell.* Of all the days to have her first rehearsal.

But the session did not go as badly as Sansa had feared. It went even worse.
She spilled half a cup of coffee all over her clothes not ten minutes after entering the theater. She spent so much energy fighting off yawns that the director had to repeat some of her instructions more than once. She drew back startled when Loras Tyrell, Margaery’s brother and a fine actor in his own right, bent to kiss her a line before she had been expecting it. She flushed beet red when she realized she had had the wrong line in mind.

“Sorry!” she whispered to Loras when the director called for a halt to the scene. “My mistake.”

At least the director had liked the idea of Sansa’s character pulling away from the kiss because it would recall the argument she’d had with her husband earlier, Sansa thought as she exited the theater. That meant one good thing had come out of the whole mess.

She glanced at her phone and saw voicemails on it from Myranda Royce, Hannah Freeman, Margaery Tyrell, and her mother. She decided to return home and sit down with some food and tea before dealing with any of them. That turned out to be the best decision Sansa had made all day, since the first ten seconds of her publicist’s voicemail had her scurrying to the first celebrity news website she could find. Sure enough, it was peppered with pictures taken by the paps who had followed her and Jon out of his flat the prior day. Most of them featured her or Jon ducking and shielding their eyes, but one or two lucky photographers had managed to obtain shots of Jon grabbing for her as she tumbled out of her seat. They were hardly the most compromising photos in the world, but the headlines made up for that.

SANSA STARK AND JON SNOW: BACK TOGETHER?

LATEST SIGHTING POINTS TO BLIZZARD OF LOVE FOR EXES SANSA STARK AND JON SNOW

Oh, holy mother fucking shit...shit...shit...

Not until Sansa’s phone rang did she realize she’d been moaning the words aloud. She checked her phone screen and groaned even more loudly before hitting the connect button.

“Hello, Mother,” she said as politely as she could. “Sorry I didn’t get back to you earlier. I’ve been a bit busy since getting back from York.”

“So I hear,” replied Catelyn Stark. It never ceased to amaze Sansa how much disapproval her mother
could inject into just three words. “You didn’t tell me you’d been staying with your former husband, Sansa.”

Sansa cringed. She should have known the older woman would see the photos. *Fuck the paparazzi. She never would have known otherwise...fuck, fuck, fuck...*

“No, I didn’t,” she replied. “I didn’t intend to, anyway. I got stuck in the blizzard after the accident I told you about, and Jon offered to take me to his flat to wait it out. It wasn’t as though the police didn’t have a hundred other stranded people to take home as it was.”

Sansa could practically see Catelyn Stark pursing her lips. “And that may well have been preferable,” she answered. “At least the police are usually trustworthy.”

“And Jon is trustworthy all of the time,” Sansa retorted. *Shit.* She had hoped to wait some time before having this particular conversation with her mother.

“Excuse me?” Catelyn’s voice was sharp enough to carve an ice sculpture. Sansa let out a breath through gritted teeth.

“I said that Jon is trustworthy,” she repeated, trying to keep her voice steady. “He’s never lied to me in any way. I found proof of that while I was visiting him. He didn’t cheat, and he would never mistreat me, if that’s what you were trying to say.” She was nearly shouting into the phone by the end, but at least her words weren’t wobbling out of her mouth.

“I am always concerned for your welfare, Sansa,” her mother answered, “especially when it involves a man whom you had informed me was unfaithful to you with his former girlfriend. Even your father never had the gall to do that. So I naturally wonder what sort of proof he gave you to change your mind so suddenly.”

Sansa wanted to scream, but that would solve nothing; if anything, it would only lead to more lectures and clucks of disapproval. She exhaled again, turning away from the phone as she did so.

“I appreciate your concern, Mother,” she bit out at last, “but my welfare is fine, especially since I do have proof that Jon never cheated on me with that woman or anyone else. It was proof I should have waited for before deciding to leave him so soon. I was the one in the wrong, not him.” Her voice began to tremble again. *Shit.* “And it’s not refutable. He didn’t do what Father did, Mother, but if you’d rather not believe that, I won’t tell you what to think.”
“Hmmm.” The tone of Catelyn’s voice had lowered by at least an octave. Sansa shuddered. Her mother’s voice lowered more the less she liked something, and right now it was nearly as low as Sansa had ever heard it.

“But thank you for calling to check up on me,” Sansa managed. “I appreciate it. I’ll call you later this week with an update on my projects after I talk to Myranda.”

“Yes, and perhaps after you’ve had more time to settle down and think after all this running around,” Catelyn Stark replied. Sansa felt yesterday’s headache making its way back to the front of her skull.

“Goodbye, Mother,” she choked out and pressed the red button. She flopped to the side and buried her head in the couch’s armrest.

She wanted to scream, but suddenly she had no energy to do it. Just as with yesterday’s conversation with Brienne, explaining Jon’s innocence and her own guilt, even in brief, seemed to suck the life out of her.

Maybe she was even more fucked up than she thought.

Sansa napped fitfully for the next hour, but woke feeling groggy and uncomfortable.

It was still way too quiet. And the quiet was really starting to wear on her nerves.

She sighed and picked up her phone to call her publicist. Then she realized how rich it would be of her to do that without ensuring that she and Jon both told their publicists to make identical statements about the photos. The media were both sharp and ruthless when it came to finding and investigating discrepancies in multiple statements about such pictures.

She pulled up their text thread, sent Jon the most emphatic apology she could think of, and waited for his response. In the meantime she called Myranda Royce, who had two new role offers for her and agreed to schedule an audition for Wolves R Us posthaste. Sansa heard the faint buzzing indicating incoming text messages during the phone call, and, sure enough, once she ended it she saw a smattering of them from Jon.
Nothing to be sorry about, they began, and Sansa felt a warm lump form in her throat. She also felt like smacking the phone screen, as if it were responsible for Jon’s refusal to acknowledge the possibility that the paps had only come along because of her. Instead, she scrolled through the rest of his messages. At least they showed more common sense. Jon did not want to give the media the satisfaction of a comment, and Sansa heartily agreed, but they both knew that would only invite more scrutiny. In the end, they settled on a brief statement acknowledging that Sansa had had car trouble and Jon had graciously allowed her to stay with him. The assertion that the two had been discussing business matters was a bit less accurate, but they added it anyway. After all, the media had no need to know that the business matters had been entirely personal.

Sansa related the results of the discussion to Hannah Freeman, whose voice never lost an ounce of cheer. Within ten minutes, she had e-mailed Sansa a statement for her approval and copied Jon and his publicist on the e-mail. Sansa scanned it and sent a reply-all message approving it. She clicked through a few more of the dozens of e-mails sitting in her inbox while waiting for responses from Jon and his publicist. They were identical to hers. Sansa sighed with relief and shut her laptop.

She needed a drink. She needed a distraction. She needed therapy.

She needed to keep at least one of her promises to Jon. Besides, she was a fucking mess.

Sansa sighed, reopened her laptop and typed a quick message to Mya Stone asking for a meeting. She reviewed and re-reviewed her lines for “An Ideal Husband,” then practiced them in front of the enormous floor-length mirror she kept in her bedroom just for that purpose. Eventually, though, she lost her focus. She got the same result when she tried to go through her e-mails, and again when she attempted a few rounds of Sudoku on her tablet. She even did an online kickboxing workout, hoping the physical exertion would refocus her mind, but all she wanted to do afterward was collapse into bed, so she did. She even opened the Pandora app on her phone to play a quiet stream of music, just to drown out the silence that had become so deafening from the moment she’d returned home.

She supposed that was why she ended up sleeping longer than she had the prior night. She still woke when the sky was dark, however, and she still only managed to doze between bouts of wakefulness.

At first she turned her music off. She also checked her e-mail inbox, which contained a reply from Mya. Sansa typed a quick reply accepting her therapist’s offer of an appointment later that day, then headed back to bed.

Back to bed and that deathly quiet. The quiet her mind was only too happy to fulfill.

Jon didn’t cheat.
I hurt Jon.

Jon didn’t lie.

I said that he did.

I made people believe that he did.

I didn’t listen to Jon.

I hurt Jon.

Jon didn’t hurt me.

After half an hour of tossing and turning, Sansa restarted the music on her computer and turned down the volume a bit. That allowed her to doze off, but she woke less than an hour later. She pawed through two closets before she found an old fan that she’d used half a dozen times since she’d moved into the flat almost three years ago. Its noise helped, but Sansa woke several more times before the alarm on her phone blared once again.

By the time she arrived at Mya’s office, she was exhausted, irritated to hell, and on her third cup of coffee. She caught her reflection in the hallway mirror and cringed at the sight of the bags underneath her eyes. Ugh. I look every bit as lovely as I feel.

“It’s all right,” Sansa blurted as soon as she had seated herself in front of her therapist. “You can tell me I look awful.”

Mya, who had just picked up her notepad, gave Sansa one of her therapist looks, the one that combined the aura of a patient listener with the X-ray vision of a cartoon villain. It meant her brain was working about fifty times faster than Sansa’s, which just irritated Sansa more.

“Or that I have cognitive dissonance,” Sansa remarked. “I totally believe in the concept now.”
That, she thought, should get a real reaction. Mya had explained the idea of having or trying to have one set of beliefs while acting according to another all the way back when Sansa had begun her therapy, back when she’d still been so stung and hurt over Jon betraying her. Stung and hurt and wishing desperately that she could have found proof that he hadn’t. And wishing that she could make that wish go away. Jon had cheated on her, pure and simple. He’d fucked his ex-girlfriend so he could be rid of her. There was no use in trying to pretend he hadn’t. No, she believed just one thing about Jon and acted accordingly, as far as she could tell. Neither cognitive dissonance nor the agonizing her mother had done long ago, when she’d finally made the long-overdue decision to divorce Sansa’s father, was a problem for Sansa.

But some defiant shard of her shattered heart would unearth itself and murmur in Sansa’s ear far more often than she liked, wondering what if and Jon wouldn’t and it’s just not him. She’d almost listened to it at first, almost let herself believe Jon when she’d met with him back in her Leeds flat and he’d explained everything so convincingly and begged her to believe him and looked so wounded and genuine and sad.

She’d been so close to throwing herself into his arms and not bothering to call the jeweler or the goldsmith whose names Jon had given her. Even when she’d screwed up her courage by reminding herself sternly about her father’s lies and her need to make sure Jon wasn’t telling her any, she’d hung up the phone twice on the first ring when she’d called the jeweler. Only on the third try could she manage to squeak out actual words.

God, she wished she hadn’t. She wished she’d chased Jon down, thrown herself into his arms, and never let him go.

Mya’s voice echoed into her consciousness then, and when Sansa looked up, the other woman had clearly just spoken to her. Judging from her expression, she’d called Sansa’s name more than once.

Sansa shook her head quickly to rouse herself from the memories. “Sorry,” she said. “What was the question?”

“What happened to change your mind about the idea of cognitive dissonance?” asked Mya, placid as ever. That only irritated Sansa.

“What? No asking me how I feel about it?” she snapped. Mya merely raised an eyebrow.

“Feelings aren’t the only way we process the world and the event around us,” she said. “But if you’d
prefer to talk about your feelings, I’d love to hear them.”

Only Mya could have said a sentence like that with a straight face and no hint of sarcasm or subterfuge. Sansa wanted to scream at her.

*Or maybe I should be screaming at me.*

“So what do you want to hear?” she snapped. “Do you want to hear that I got stuck in a blizzard and Jon was the one of all bloody people that showed up to help me? Do you want to hear how I spent the next day screaming bloody murder at him for cheating me and humiliating me only to find out he never did and I was wrong the whole time? Do you want to hear how I based the last three years of my fucking life on a fucking lie from hell and made his life hell because I was bloody stupid enough to believe it because I should have known better and I even *wanted* to know better before I dumped him out of my life? Do you want to hear that he got so sick I was afraid he’d – that I’d – and then after he got better he was nice to me? Even before? And that the whole reason any of this happened is that the woman in the car in front of me died at the wheel and crashed and loads of other people almost crashed too? And the police – the police – told me I couldn’t have done anything about it, but every day I imagine her face from when I stopped to check on her and call 999? And that I was afraid I’d see Jon like that every day too if he had – and him I *could* have done something about because I should have listened to him, I should have given him more than four days before I filed for divorce, and I should have – I should have thought more about it.”

Not until she paused to take a breath did she realize that the hot lump in her throat from the previous day had returned, or that two more had sprung up in the backs of her eyes.

“I should have *known,*” she whispered. “Jon never cheated. Jon never lied.”

Then the lumps gave way and the tears poured out freely.

Sansa was not entirely sure how long she spent alternately weeping into her hands and emptying half of the box of tissues Mya always kept on the side table. Eventually the tears stopped, although fortunately the supply of tissues did not, and Sansa blew her nose one more time before she forced herself to look the other woman in the eye. She expected to see the same placid expression; but, if possible, Mya only looked sad. Sad, and concerned. *A bit like Jon, really,* Sansa thought, and blew her nose again.

*I’m fucking pathetic.*
Only when she looked at Mya again and saw the other woman’s raised eyebrow did Sansa realize she had spoken the words aloud.

“Why do you believe that?” asked Mya gently. Sansa arched a brow back at her.

“Because I should have known,” she replied. “If I’d just listened to him a little more, and checked for myself beyond the first layer of things. Or, bloody fucking hell, to myself, even. You were right when we talked before. There was always something – some part of me that knew Jon better than that, but I didn’t listen.” She took a shaky breath. “I didn’t listen, and I didn’t try long enough to figure out that it wasn’t Jon’s fault; it was all a setup by his ex-girlfriend trying to get him back.” Two tears welled out of her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. “I should have known. I really should have known.” Another set of tears joined the first. Sansa reached for another tissue.

“So you were lied to,” Mya said. Sansa’s head snapped upward to face her.

She’d never considered that. She nodded anyway.

“I guess – yeah, I was,” she replied.

Still looking sad, Mya nodded.

“Sansa,” she asked, “have you ever been to a mirror house?”

Sansa’s brow crinkled. “What?” she said.

“You might have heard it called a fun house instead,” Mya continued. “They used to have them at carnivals and circuses. They were small buildings whose hallways and rooms were covered with mirrors. Each mirror distorted your image in a certain way: some would show you upside-down, some would make it look like you’d been sawn in half, others would magnify your head and face…”

“Oh. Right.” Sansa had been to one or two as a child. She’d been terrified, and Robb had had to hold her hand during their entire time inside.

“Some mirror houses have normal mirrors at the end or right outside,” Mya went on. “Many people
get confused or can’t believe it when they see those true reflections because their brains have gotten accustomed to the warp ones.” She gestured, palm barely upturned, toward Sansa, as if offering Sansa an invisible object. “You’ve been living in a mirror house for three years, Sansa. It’s normal to get overwhelmed when you see a real mirror.” Her voice softened. “Especially in the context of having witnessed a death.”

Sansa shook her head. The lump had returned to her throat, and it took a few moments for her to be able to speak.

“I didn’t actually see her die,” she said. “I just saw her right afterwards, when I went to her car to check on her.”

Mya nodded. “You did see her right after she died,” she said, with just enough of a question in her voice for Sansa to nod.

“It’s normal to be overwhelmed by that sort of experience as well,” she said. “And you told me Jon was very ill?”

Sansa nodded again. “He had a really high fever,” she whispered. “He’d had them back when we were married, but this one was worse.”

“Then that’s three difficult, high-stress events in a row,” Mya observed. “Being overwhelmed by one is perfectly normal, let alone three. So is showing that you’re overwhelmed. In fact, from what I know of you based on our time together, I would be more concerned if you weren’t visibly upset. What you’re doing is valid and healthy.”

“Healthy.” Sansa shook her head as another set of tears spilled down her cheeks. “I’m anything but healthy. I’ve spent three years poisoning Jon’s life, no matter what bloody lies I believed. I’m – for the love of Christ, I accused him of being like my father.” She spat the last word out, along with several more tears. “I mean, I told him when I found out the truth that I knew he wasn’t anything like that and how sorry I was that I ever did, but it’s – he’s still – it’s still done. I still damaged him and hurt him so, so, so badly, and it doesn’t matter that he was so much nicer about it than he should have been – he’s still so hurt, and it’s my fault. It’s completely my fault.” She reached for another tissue and wiped her eyes, which immediately filled up again.

“So you took responsibility for your actions,” Mya said softly. “That’s also valid and healthy, Sansa.”
Sansa shook her head. “It still can’t make things right, like Jon deserves,” she whispered. “It can’t make me go back three years and just listen and not poison everything.” She blinked, producing two more tears. “He just – he didn’t even want me to – when I brought up some things I wanted to do to make up for it, he didn’t want me to. He said it doesn’t work that way. I – I’d rather keep going because he deserves at least that much, but…” She shook her head. “It still doesn’t turn things back. He’d still be hurt because of me.”

Mya nodded. “No, nothing can change the past,” she affirmed. “That doesn’t have to doom your future, though. You’ve already taken ownership of your actions to both Jon and yourself.” Her voice softened as she lowered her gaze to meet Sansa’s, which was obscured by the tears flowing down her cheeks. “It’s OK to let yourself grieve over the consequences now that you know what kind of mirror you’re looking into.”

Sansa managed a nod before dissolving into sobs once again.

-Fuck, she thought two days later as she strode into Hot Pie’s, her and Margaery’s favorite brunch spot, and saw her best friend chattering merrily with their friends Shae Lorath and Beth Cassel in the corner booth. She’d forgotten that Margaery had texted her after she’d gotten home from her therapy session asking if the other two women could join them on their coffee date. Sansa, whose head had felt like it weighed a hundred pounds at that point, had numbly typed “yes” and then collapsed on the couch to cry herself to sleep.

But she pasted a smile onto her face and greeted the other women warmly. It wasn’t their fault that she’d been walking around in a fog for the past few days.

“So glad you’re back from York, Sansa,” Shae remarked when the waiter had left the table with Sansa’s coffee order. “Especially since you were stuck with him. God, I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

Sansa shook her head. “I’m fine,” she said, although her stomach had twisted at Shae’s words. The other woman had been befriended both Sansa and Jon while they had been dating, but after the divorce she had firmly sided with Sansa and had, as far as Sansa knew, cut out all contact with Jon.

Sansa supposed Mya would say that Shae had been looking at the wrong mirror. That, however, was not Shae’s fault.
“Jon didn’t cheat,” she said, and three wide-eyed stares turned to face her. “Jon never lied.”

Chapter End Notes

And so Jon's and Sansa's paths diverge for now. Of course they'll meet again, but for now they need to get back to their own individual lives for a bit and adjust to how the events of the last 13 chapters will change those lives. Now that you've seen the beginnings of that process in Sansa's life, stay tuned for the fallout on Jon's, which will happen in the next chapter.

As always, please feel free to hit that review button and let me know what you think!
Chapter 15

Jon Snow gave the box one last yank to free it from its confines on the shelves of his workroom. The force of its momentum made him reel backward into the shelf behind him, which sent a small cloud of dust into the air. Jon sneezed loudly. He set the box carefully onto one of the room’s dozen tables and was just about to open it when his phone rang. Shae Lorath’s picture leaped onto his screen, and he frowned.

He hadn’t seen or heard from Shae in almost three years. He had Sansa had met her on the set of *Blades and Thrones*, his and Sansa’s second miniseries together. Shae had done only TV commercials and bit parts before signing up for *Thrones*, and Sansa, as was her way, had taken the other woman under her wing at once. Shae and Jon had shared plenty of scenes and had bonded over their identical dry, skeptical senses of humor, and she quickly became a fixture at the pub nights and bowling alley parties in which Jon, Sansa, and several of the other cast members regularly indulged. Shae had proven to be one of the few people Jon knew who could beat him handily at his favorite video games, and she loved taking the mickey out of him for it. She was a kindred spirit who not only never tried to make a romantic move on him, but also built a strong friendship with Sansa to boot.

They’d continued to hang out together after *Blades and Thrones* had wrapped, and Shae made a great addition to Jon’s and Sansa’s growing circle of mutual friends. But then the divorce had happened, and Shae had cut off contact with Jon not too long after Sansa had. He’d had to discover that when she’d sent him a brief text message refusing an invitation he’d sent to a number of his friends for a bowling and pub night shortly after Sansa had moved out of their London home.

*Sorry, no thanks. Prob best if I don’t show to these things any more.*

Jon had been shocked for a solid minute or two, and it had taken at least that long again for him to connect the dots and realize that Sansa must have talked to Shae about what had happened – or, more accurately, what Sansa thought had happened – between them. He could still feel the swoop of his heart sinking to his stomach when he’d realized he’d lost not just his wife, but one of his best friends as well.

Jory Cassel and Grenn Wall, two of Jon’s other good friends, had sent their regrets for Jon’s gathering shortly after Shae had provided hers. Their messages had been even blunter than Shae’s, and Jon felt a sting like the remnant of a slap across his face when he’d read each one. By the time Sam had arrived to pick him up for the night out on the town, Jon was already miserable, and he’d spent the entire evening alternately downing beer and trying not to cry into his glass.

So much for having a night out with friends to cheer him up.
The phone’s ringtone, which Jon had programmed to increase in volume the longer the phone remained unanswered, finally hit a high enough decibel level to jar him out of his memories. He swore and glared at Shae’s picture, torn between his desire to talk to Shae if for no other reason than to get some bloody closure, and his impulse to let her have exactly what she’d said she wanted, which was him out of her life. After all, she’d had almost three years to give him that closure, and the hell if she or anyone else thought he’d just sit there and wait for her to give it to him.

So it mildly surprised him when he watched his finger reach over and punch the green button on his ringing phone.

“Hello,” he said, although his tone said, *Piss off.*

“Jon?” Shae’s voice wobbled just a bit, which was very unlike her.

“Right,” he answered. He tried to sound a bit less abrupt, although he doubted it had made any difference.

“It’s Shae – Shae Lorath,” said the voice on the other end of the line. It was still unsteady – so unlike the confident, decisive woman Jon remembered. “I know it’s been a while, but I thought I’d call – is this a bad time?”

Jon sighed and scrubbed the heel of his hand against his forehead. It certainly felt like no time to be having whatever conversation Shae wanted to have, but the sooner he got it over with, the sooner he could get back to reassembling his sound machines.

“Y – nope, not a bad time,” he grunted. After an awkward pause, he added, “How are you?”

“Not too bad,” replied Shae, sounding utterly relieved. “What about you?”

“Fine,” Jon answered. He swore at himself internally. He hated that word, not least because it was one he’d grown so accustomed at flinging in the face of every inquisitive reporter he encountered at premieres and press conferences. It got them off his ass without giving them an ounce of real information. It was the most convenient and painless lie he could think of, with an emphasis on *lie.* This time was no exception – since when had he actually been *fine?* Shae could no doubt tell – she’d always been able to read him better than most people – but she didn’t sound ready to pry, either. *Thank God.*
“Anyway – um – well, I hoped we could get together, maybe for drinks at The Wolf and Lion, some time soon?” Shae got a bit steadier as she continued, although the last few words stumbled over each other on the way out of her mouth. When Jon said nothing, she took a deep breath and continued. “I mean, it’s fine if you don’t want to, but I feel terrible about the way I left things off with you, and I know now that I had no good reason for it in the first place. So I wanted to begin making it up to you, if I could.”

The plaintive tone to her last sentence hit Jon square in the chest, and harder than he’d expected. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes.

“No good reason, huh?” were the first words that stumbled out of his mouth.

“Yeah,” Shae replied, her voice so soft that Jon almost did not hear her. “I mean, I had a reason, but I’ve just learned it was based on something that didn’t actually happen.”

Jon cleared his throat. “Just learned?” Oh, for God’s sake, if Sansa...

“I spoke with Sansa.” Jon still had to strain his ears to catch his friend’s words. “She told me she’d been wrong about the divorce and why it happened, and that you weren’t to blame for anything she’d thought you’d done.” She paused again. Jon, torn between smashing the nearest empty box on the work table and asking Shae what she was up to apart from hearing more of Sansa’s insane attempts to make the reparations she was so hell-bent on handing him, could not squeeze a word out for the life of him. It took several moments for Shae to speak again.

“I feel terrible,” she said again, “and I’m really, really sorry, Jon. I don’t blame you if you’d rather not see me right now.” Her voice steadied. “But if you ever feel like smashing my arse at Oblivion Online – my e-mail address is still the same.”

Jon exhaled a long breath. He doubted he’d be able to smash Shae that easily, even if he wanted to. And right now, he wanted to do nothing except collapse into bed.

“So you want to go to The Wolf and Lion?” The words left his mouth before he intended them to, but he let them hang in the air without backpedaling. If Shae was willing to hear him out, he’d let her do it – even if he did want to scream at Sansa for making him bear the brunt of her insatiable drive to dredge up three years’ worth of misery.
“Sure!” He could practically see Shae perking up on the other end of the line. “When do you want to go?”

After they’d made their plans, Jon slumped onto the nearest chair and rubbed a hand over his face. His head had begun to throb, and he was far more exhausted than he had a right to be before 9:00 at night.

Eventually, he forced himself to his feet. He still felt like smashing any number of empty boxes, but he needed all of the ones in his workroom intact, and he was far too tired to pick up any mess he made with the available boxes in his bedroom. Besides, he noticed when he turned off the workroom lights and made his way to his bedroom, his energy would be better spent diminishing the pile of dirty clothes that had accumulated in his laundry hamper. Come to think of it, he hadn’t yet washed the sheets from the guest room Sansa had stayed in, either. So after dumping most of his clothes into the washing machine, he trudged up the stairs to the guest room, whose bed sheets would combine with his remaining clothes to form the next load.

He was halfway up the stairs when the smell hit him. Cinnamon and spring rain filled his nostrils before he knew what had hit them. Cinnamon and spring rain and flowers and Sansa.

Sansa.

It took him a few moments to realize he’d spoken her name out loud. He sighed, shook his head, entered the room, and stripped the coverings off the bed as quickly as he could.

If her smell had been noticeable in the hallway, it was downright overwhelming in the room. Jon shut his eyes and gritted his teeth, but all that brought was the image of Sansa sitting cross-legged on the bed in front of her laptop, twisting a strand of her never-ending red hair around her finger, humming to herself as she’d done every day of their marriage; Sansa, doing yoga poses in front of the bed; Sansa, grabbing a towel out of the closet and throwing her clothes on the bed before she headed into the bathroom to take a shower –

Another wave of cinnamon hit Jon’s nose. He felt himself stiffen at once. He yanked the last sheet off the bed with a loud curse.

For fuck’s sake.

He thought of how she’d ruined his friendships with Shae and Jory and Grenn. He thought of the
hesitation in Shae’s voice as she’d informed him that Sansa had just regurgitated three years’ worth of dirty laundry and a searing headache to boot – all, of course, without bothering to mention it to him.

His body began to deflate. But breathing was a natural reflex, after all, and he was rewarded for it by a nose full of more rain and flowers and Sansa. He stiffened again and ran for the laundry room as if Sansa herself were chasing him.

Good God, he was pathetic.

He turned on his Pink Floyd music stream and navigated to the website that sold his favorite specialty sound equipment, where he clicked around aimlessly until the first load of his clothes had finished the wash cycle. As soon as he’d moved them to the dryer and flung the second load into the washing machine, he headed to bed.

But his body was still aroused, and his mind’s eye kept rotating among images of Sansa screaming names at him when she’d first gotten to his flat over a week ago, then Sansa staring at him as though he’d come back from the dead when he’d awakened from his feverish stupor later on, and Sansa staring at him with such guilt flowing out of her blue eyes when she’d returned from the café just after dawn, and Sansa stretching in front of the couch after she’d awakened later that morning, lithe and gorgeous and curved and vulnerable and perfect –

Jon swore and threw his pillow across the bed for the umpteenth time that night.

It took another umpteen times and then some for him to fall into a restless sleep.


Jon entered The Wolf and Lion the following day to see Shae Lorath perched at a table near the back. He’d gotten halfway to her before she saw him. She hesitated a few moments before standing and offering him a tremulous smile, along with her hand. Jon reached out to shake it, but at the last moment he flung his arm around her shoulders instead. Shae’s eyes went wide as saucers for a moment before she returned the gesture and squealed like she’d just beat him at Oblivion Online.

“Jon Snow, how are you doing?” she exclaimed when Jon released her. She was beaming, and Jon could not keep his lips from curving upward in response. It was damn near impossible for anybody in a room not to smile when Shae grinned like that.
“All right,” he said. “What about you, though? Still avoiding medieval shows like the plague?”

Shae’s grin widened. Her horse had thrown her on her first day shooting _Blades and Thrones_ with Jon and Sansa, and it was only by dint of sheer dumb luck that she hadn’t been seriously hurt. She’d dislocated her shoulder, sprained her wrist, and sustained a number of cuts and bruises, but she’d only missed two days worth of filming. However, the heavy dresses she’d worn had irritated her damaged skin throughout the shoot, she’d shuddered whenever they had to film on horseback, and at the end of reshoots she’d sworn she’d have to be offered her weight in gold to accept a role in another medieval-era project.

“Pretty much,” she replied. She paused so Jon could order his food and beer from the waiter. When he turned back to her, her grin had disappeared.

“But really, how are you, Jon?” she asked, her voice lower and her lips wrinkled over toward one side of her face as they did when she was discussing anything particularly serious. “I mean, I know the past three years may not have been great, and I get that I contributed toward any answer involving ‘bad’ at that point.” Her lips wrinkled again. “It’s my fault, and ‘sorry’ doesn’t really cover it. But I am sorry. And I have missed you.”

Jon sighed. He’d heard enough variations on _sorry_ over the past week or so to last him a lifetime. Not, of course, that that gave him the right to be a jerk to Shae for apologizing to him, especially since what she’d done hadn’t been entirely her fault. And he’d missed her too, and Grenn and Jory. It was no use pretending he’d liked being estranged from any of them. A dull pang crept further through his chest the longer he thought about it, one he thought might disappear if he found the right words to reply to Shae. But his mind came up blank, and he shrugged.

“I’ve been – busy,” he said at last. Shae looked disappointed. She took a sip of her ale and set the mug back down on the table just as the waiter brought Jon’s drink to him. Jon murmured his thanks and took a long draught of some truly satisfying mead. At least The Wolf and Lion never let him down.

“I’m finishing _Wolves R Us_ over the next couple months,” he finally said, “and running sound for the East End Youth Theater Troupe for _Much Ado About Nothing_ at the Rose Theatre.” Seeing Shae’s questioning look, he added, “Secondary students who get picked from the lower funded schools in the East End based on their theater talents. They do a Shakespeare show every spring at the Rose.”

“The owners work with the donors for the troupe,” he explained. Jon himself had been a donor for many years, but only he, Sam, Gilly, and Sansa knew about that. Jon frowned.

“Just – how’d you know?” he asked. Shae merely stared at him. “Or change your mind and call me?”

Shae did not flush easily, but she was doing it now. She glanced down at the table before she looked back up at him. She looked more than a little embarrassed.

“Sansa told me,” she said. “She – we were having lunch with some friends the other day, and she said she’d been wrong about you, and that she left you on a misunderstanding.”

“Misunderstanding?” Jon blurted out. That was one hell of an understatement. Shae seemed to understand that, judging by the words that came tumbling out of her mouth next.

“I mean, she put it in harder terms than that,” she said. “I could tell she felt really bad about it. She said it was the least she could do to tell me in person that what she’d said before about you was wrong. I – to be honest, I was glad as hell to hear it, because I hadn’t wanted to believe things had happened the way she said at first. But that was my fault. I should have asked you directly, not listened to things secondhand. I mean – I didn’t want to get in the middle of you two.” Her shoulders slumped a bit. “I didn’t want to choose between you. You were my friend, too. But I did choose, and I don’t blame you if you’d rather keep things the way they have been. After, I mean.” She took a very long sip from her mug, and Jon caught the glint of moisture in the corner of her eye. He picked up his own mug again to cover his sigh, which felt like it was draining him of his energy along with his breath.

_The least she could do. Bloody hell._ He’d heard his fill of variations on that one, too.

He wanted to shut his eyes and wake up back in his flat and not venture outside for a month or two. But Shae was looking at him again, and so sadly, and it reminded him of her fake pouts whenever he or Grenn or Pyp or Sam or Val had managed to beat her at _Oblivion_ by some miracle, or won one of their ridiculous late-night Tetris tournaments. He sighed again and put his mug back down.

“She was right,” he finally said. “The latest time, that is. It’s – well, a long story, but I’m glad you called me about it. And thanks for showing up today.” A yawn burst out of nowhere, and he hastily covered it with his fist.
“Sorry,” he said when he’d finished. “Anyway – yeah, I wish you’d talked to me too. Can’t pretend I don’t. We were friends, you know.”

Shae nodded, but did not speak. She still looked sad.

“But – yeah, I’m glad you came,” Jon continued after a very awkward pause. “Thanks for doing that, Shae.”

Her name sounded awfully strange coming off his lips. He bit back a sardonic laugh when he realized how unsurprising that was. It had been nearly three years, after all.

“You’re welcome,” Shae said, looking a little less sad. Another pause ensued, but it was not quite as awkward.

“So what are you up to?” Jon asked, and Shae jumped at the chance to tell him.

Three-quarters of an hour and a plate of fish and chips later, Jon left the pub with a generous tip and a promise to look Shae up for more Oblivion Online some time soon. He had half a mind to start playing that or, more likely, a different game when he returned to his flat, but when he did, he discovered he was too tired to do anything except take a nap. He was tempted to sink into the living room couch and let sleep overtake him. Although he thought better of it, he got close enough to the couch for the laptop perched on the edge of the coffee table to catch his eye.

Oh, right. It was the laptop he’d lent Sansa during her time at his flat. Jon picked it up and took it to his bedroom with him. He set it on one of his side tables before collapsing into bed.

The following day, Jon headed for London to do the first of his crew’s preliminary sound checks for Much Ado About Nothing at the Rose Theatre with his tablet and paper notebook in tow. He’d done sound work for the youth troupe’s last two annual shows, but not much in between, and having his notes with him made him feel a bit less like he was jumping into a lake from a helicopter 20 feet above it. The notes made the distance more like ten feet, although he suspected that Olly Black, the sixth-form student who had been the student head of sound engineering for the past four years, knew
more than he did about quite a few things.

Jon’s phone buzzed several times to alert him of incoming text messages on the way to the theater. When he arrived, he glanced through the list to ensure that he hadn’t missed anything important. Nothing stuck out at him until he reached the second message that had arrived during his drive to London.

*Jon, hey, it’s Grenn Wall. My fault. Found out what happened w Sansa. I was wrong. Would like to apologize in person. I owe you a lot. Up 4 drinks @MoleTown? Or just chat?*

Jon blinked hard at the screen, as if that would make Grenn’s words disappear and replace them with a message that made sense from a person who would actually contact him. He hadn’t heard from Grenn in three years –

Jon swore loudly and slapped the steering wheel. *Found out what happened w Sansa, indeed. She had to have talked to Grenn. No way in hell would he be hearing from the second person he hadn’t spoken to in three years if she hadn’t.*

Jon banged his head backwards against the headrest of his seat. *Fuck. It had to have been Sansa. He sure as hell hadn’t told anybody other than Tormund and Sam that Sansa had even been in his flat within the past three years. Tormund kept his mouth shut for a living, and Sam would never say a word to anyone. Besides, Sam didn’t know much more than Tormund, and only because Sansa’s presence during their online Scrabble round the day she’d left had warranted an explanation. Even then, Jon had not said much other than that Sansa had decided to believe he’d never fucked Ygritte North, and that she’d helped him when he’d been sick and they had parted on decent terms. Sam had looked like he wanted to ask about a thousand questions, but after seeing the look on Jon’s face had thought better of it and said he was always ready to listen if Jon wanted to talk. He’d gotten the courage from somewhere to mention the therapist he’d seen a couple of years before, when things had been rough between him and Gilly.*

*“Then you can get all the therapy you bloody well please, Sam,” Jon had snapped. “Some people like airing their dirty laundry off their conscience and some of us don’t fucking need to bother.”*

He’d left the café booth abruptly to pay for their meals. He’d ground out an apology to Sam when he’d returned to leave the tip. Sam, being Sam, had accepted it, but he’d given Jon an odd look. They’d only exchanged texts a couple of times in the days after that, and the conversations had been shorter and brisker than usual, especially on Jon’s end. Guilt nagged at the back of his brain whenever he sent out another one- or two-word reply, but he couldn’t stop the annoyance that inevitably rose up to match it.
Jon’s phone buzzed again, snapping him out of his reverie, and he snatched it up, cursing. The message was not from Grenn, but the phone’s time display reminded him that it was high time he got stepping. He cursed again, retrieved the bag with his equipment and notes from the passenger seat, stepped out of the car, and slammed the door behind him.


Luckily, Jon’s memory and notes took him a lot further than he had thought, although Olly’s adeptness at using his mobile phone and iPad to control half the theater’s sound devices never ceased to amaze him. Still, Olly and his mates admired Jon’s skill quite a bit, and their sheer level of energy and humor raised his spirits to the point where he almost forgot about Grenn and Sansa and the events of the past few weeks. He got home late and had just enough time to set the alarm on his phone so he could get up the following day for a phone call with Satin Flowers, his agent.

The alarm kicked Jon out of a dream in which he’d been running around his workroom like mad trying to find the source of a high-pitched noise somewhere between a buzz and a whine. Its frequency had clearly been set to whatever place on the sound frequency scale would annoy human ears the worst, and Jon had been ripping apart boxes and even smashing pieces of sound equipment in vain to discover its source. It was one of the few noises in the world that could make the sound of his phone’s alarm a welcome relief.

Jon paced around his bedroom during the phone call with Satin, and he found himself staring absently at the computer he’d lent Sansa as he finally hung up the phone. He really should put it away, he thought, and opened the top so that he could properly shut it off if Sansa had not.

She had not, he discovered, for when the computer screen turned itself on, he found himself staring at a Word document. He navigated toward the top of the page to hit the save button when his eye caught the phrase Please get better. His eye traveled down the screen to read the rest in spite of themselves.

I know you told me the truth, he read. I didn’t believe you, and I don’t blame you if you didn’t believe me yesterday when I told you that the English language really doesn’t have any words for how sorry I am. I don’t blame you if you don’t believe that for a lot longer than three years.

So that was how Sansa had spent some of her time when she’d been waiting for him to recover from his fever. Jon was far too curious to know what else she’d written to resist the impulse to scroll downward and read more.

Please, please, please get better, not that I have the right to beg you for anything.
I only have the right to tell you I'm sorry.

Sorry.

Sorry.

Not good enough. Never good enough.

A lump had suddenly appeared in Jon’s throat. He quickly navigated back upward. As he did, the information pane at the bottom of the page informed him that he was now on page 28 of 29.

29 pages?

The impulse to tear himself away from the screen strengthened, but it still did not nearly match his morbid curiosity. He navigated to the top of the document and began reading.

Selfish

I’m selfish

Mean

Cruel

Judgmental? yes

Hurtful

Awful
I made you feel pain because I wanted to and it hurt you and I was glad because I wanted to hurt you

I punished you because I wanted to punish you

You didn’t hurt me

You didn’t cheat

Even after I talked to the goldsmith and jeweler I still thought it was so unlike you, so I shouldn’t have cut everything off so fast.

I should have listened to you again one more time

The lump mushroomed and twisted and scalded the insides of Jon’s throat. He sprang away from the computer as if it had turned into a shark. Too late, though, because now the burning had spread to his eyeballs. Twisting around, he grabbed the first box he could find – he’d never properly put away the lot he’d banged around the night Sansa had gone missing – and flung it against the wall as hard as he could. Then another, and another. And another. When he’d gone through the pile, he picked one up off the floor, heaved it across the room, and started the process all over again, this time with most of his missiles sporting tears and crumpled corners. Then he grabbed the pillows from his bed and added them to the fray. Not even the ringing of his phone slowed him down.

Finally, panting hard, he yanked the box with the least damage off the floor. It was only half caved in, but a hard collision with the laptop screen took care of the rest. The computer, however, merely sat there, cursor blinking on Sansa’s Word document just as it had been twenty minutes previously.

Jon cursed and stormed down the hall toward the kitchen. Fuck the weather, and fuck the trash chute. He’d drag his garbage to the damn dumpster out back on his own.


Stomping through the snowdrifts cooled Jon’s head a little, but it did nothing to help him sleep, even after he shoved Sansa’s borrowed laptop into a corner of his utility room. That was perhaps why he
showed up to the squash court where he played weekly with Sam, Pyp Knight, and their friend Cley Cerwyn late, tired, and irritated.

“Stuck in traffic,” he muttered as he set his equipment bag on the floor of the court. “Sorry.”

That was true enough: Jon’s car had been one in a long line backed up by the wreck of a traffic accident in the middle of town. Of course, neither Jon’s fatigue nor the headache currently pounding at the insides of his skull had helped matters, but he said nothing about either.

“You good?” Pyp asked, and Jon nodded brusquely and pulled out his racket, anxious to start exerting himself and dull his headache.

They had barely taken their places when Pyp’s phone went off. He gestured apologetically to the others. Jon gritted his teeth. He gritted them even harder when he heard Pyp say, “Hey, Grenn.”

Fuck.

Jon had forgotten about his message from Grenn, whom he knew was still close with Pyp. Sansa had called the three of them and Sam the “Four Musketeers” due to their shared interest in sound machines and late-night experiments with guitars. Jon, Sam, and Pyp had continued their sound sessions and squash games after the divorce, but things hadn’t been the same without Grenn’s particular brand of snark or the way he could spark a room full of quiet nerds to life with the snap of his hands, which everyone knew meant he’d just gotten one of his wilder ideas. It had hurt almost as badly that Grenn had been the one to bow out of their gatherings.

He hadn’t wanted to be around Jon any more than Sansa had. Except that now he did due to Sansa and her blessed conscience and the bloody havoc they were wreaking in the middle of his life.

Fuck.

Jon wanted nothing more than to heave his racket at the wall, like one of his boxes from the prior night. As it was, he swung so hard missing his first couple of hits that he almost lost his balance. When first Sam, then Pyp, asked him if he was all right, he barked “Yeah” back so loudly that both of them raised their eyebrows.

Oh, bloody hell. If one more person tried to coddle or apologize or help him –
He smashed the next ball so hard that the racket flew out of his hand and went skittering across the court. The ball took a hard bounce and ricocheted straight into Pyp’s elbow. Pyp howled in pain, and Cley rushed to his side. Sam stared wide-eyed at Jon for a moment before he did the same. That stirred Jon out of his momentary shock, and he dashed after Sam, apologizing profusely to Pyp the entire way.

“I’ll drive you to the doctor,” he offered. “There’s one just a couple blocks down.”

Pyp gritted his teeth and shook his head. “I’ll be – OW!” he yelped as Sam, leaning in to inspect the injured elbow, accidentally brushed up against it. Pyp moaned and clutched his elbow, and Sam took up Jon’s trail of apologies.

“Gilly works at that hospital, Pyp,” Cley said. “It’s a really good one – come on, I’ll get crutches or a stretcher or something from the trainers…”

Pyp finally agreed to visit the doctor, although he flat-out refused a stretcher, and the four men piled carefully into Jon’s car for the short ride to the hospital. The staff whisked Pyp in for X-rays in no time flat, leaving Jon, Cley, and Sam in the waiting room. A few minutes later, Cley’s wife called, and he wandered off into the corner for some modicum of privacy. Jon had dropped his head into his hands, but he could still feel Sam looking at him. Still, the sound of his friend’s worried voice next to his ear startled him upright.

“Sorry,” Sam said, and shifted backward in his seat. “Jon, are you OK?”

Jon stared at him. “Pyp’s the one that got hit,” he said, “thanks to me.”

Sam did not blink. “I haven’t seen you take a hit like that – ever, really,” he replied. “And something’s been bothering you since you got to the match. You’ve been – off ever since the storm. Usually you return at least one of my texts per week.” One corner of his mouth took a hopeful quirk upward. Jon continued to stare at him.

“Jon.” Sam’s voice had gentled. Jon wanted to scream at him. “Look, I won’t try to make you tell me any more about what happened when Sansa was with you, but you’ve not been yourself since then.”

Jon gritted his teeth, but Sam kept on going. “I’m just asking if there’s a way I can help my best friend,” he said.
That stopped Jon cold. A new wave of guilt washed over him, and his usual annoyance could not quite drown it out. He sighed and bent over to scrub his sweaty forehead with his hands.

“Pyp’s the one hurt right now,” he said. Sam’s answering look only brought on second waves of both guilt and annoyance. Jon sighed again.

“But yeah,” he said, “I – look, if you have that guy’s contact information, just send it to me.” Seeing the question on Sam’s face, he added as quietly as he could, “The – the therapist. The guy you saw before.”

Sam looked mildly surprised, but he nodded.

“I’ll send it to you when I get home,” he said. His phone buzzed, and Jon saw Gilly’s picture flashing on the screen. He nodded as Sam answered the phone and headed off toward the lobby.

Jon slumped forward, elbows resting on his knees, and buried his face in his hands.

*Good God.* He’d just asked his friend out loud for a therapist’s phone number. He didn’t know which was stranger: that, or the fact that he couldn’t say he’d done it purely to get Sam off his back.

Or the fact that his ex-wife could literally crash into his world and flip it upside-down for the second time in less than three years.

Or the fact that he was so torn between wanting to call her just to yell at her about it on the one hand, or throwing his arms around her and inhaling the scent of her perfect hair and her perfect body and soothing her and kissing away all of the tears she’d shed during their week together, on the other hand, that he’d almost forgotten which bloody way was up.

*Bloody hell.* Maybe he should consider calling Sam’s therapist after all.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I know it's been a wait, readers, and I would have made it shorter if I could! My offline life, however, has a real mind of its own sometimes. Thanks for hanging in there with me, and I hope this chapter does not disappoint you!

Also, a special word of thanks to Lori, Dena1984, SansaStarkSnow, and arin_arryn for your incredibly kind words of encouragement! They made my day and week and gave me that last burst of inspiration I needed to finish this chapter and crank it off the press. Your kindness has meant the world to me! Thank you so much, sweet friends!

Aemon Targaryen looked old enough to be Jon’s great-grandfather.

A neatly trimmed mane of pure white hair framed a wrinkled face and piercing eyes that were the closest to purple Jon had ever seen. He was nattily dressed in a white collared shirt, black-and-gray patterned sweater, black slacks, and freshly-polished black shoes. A roaring fire blazed in the fireplace at his back as he ushered Jon into his office, whose walls were crammed with bookshelves and a few ancient-looking swords and knives. A hodgepodge of couches, chairs, and footstools dotted the Persian carpet, interspersed with two coffee tables. Both were arrayed with yet more books.

“Very nice to meet you, Mr. Snow,” said the old man and held out his hand. Jon was too busy wondering if he hadn’t wandered into some history professor’s office by accident to tell the man to call him Jon.

“Um – yes, nice to meet you, too,” he managed after an awkward pause. His eyes darted to the biggest sword, which hung majestically over the mantelpiece. It had to be more than half his height, and the growling head of a white wolf adorned its handle.

“You’re fond of Longclaw, then?” The sound of the old man’s voice at his elbow made Jon whirl around to face him, flushing as he went.

“It’s – well, yeah, it’s – not every day you see a sword like that,” he replied. Dr. Targaryen’s eyes gleamed, and for a moment Jon pictured him sitting astride a fearsome black stallion and holding the sword aloft above his iron crown on the set of Swords and Stones.
“No, not usually,” the older man agreed. He smiled affably, and the warrior king vanished, and the old history scholar took his place. *Therapist,* Jon had to remind himself twice as he sat down in the chair closest to the fireplace and began to fill out the intake forms Dr. Targaryen had given him along with a cup of Earl Grey tea – Jon’s favorite, although he doubted the man knew that. The papers were standard privacy and disclosure forms, the old man assured him, and Jon read enough of the first one to discover that Dr. Targaryen faced harsh fines and the loss of his professional license, not to mention one hell of a lawsuit, if he ever disclosed what Jon told him.

*At least this dirty laundry won’t go public. Probably.* Jon sighed; he’d learned the hard way to regard even the most ironclad of confidentiality agreements with a grain of salt. Still, from what little he’d heard, the mental health profession seems to take such things more seriously than did the entertainment profession. Jon sighed again. *More or less probably. Unlike whatever Sansa said to Shae. And Grenn. And Jory too.*

Jon finished his last signature so forcefully that he made a tear in the page. Dr. Targaryen waved off his apology, tucked the papers neatly into a manila file, picked up a legal pad and a polished brass pen, and turned to face Jon. His expression was mildly curious, but his eyes had all the sharpness of the blade of Longshanks, or whatever that sword’s name had been, and they bespoke a man who missed nothing. Jon swallowed.

“So,” said Dr. Targaryen, “why are you here, Mr. Snow?”

Jon froze. He could answer that question in any number of ways, but he found himself ill-prepared to speak any of them. And depending on how he started, he might not stop for quite some time, and the last thing he wanted was for his own therapist to think he was crazy.

“Sam Tarly recommended you,” he finally said. “He said he saw you a while back – I mean, he was a patient of yours.”

Dr. Targaryen nodded, but his expression did not change.

“I cannot confirm or deny the identity of a patient due to confidentiality requirements,” he remarked, “but I am honored to have had anyone recommend me, of course.” His gaze sharpened just a bit. “But why did you come, Mr. Snow?”

Jon cleared his throat. “Well,” he began, and could not decide what to say again, except for, “You can call me Jon.”
The old man nodded again. “Why are you here, Jon?” he asked. He did not look at all starstruck, merely curious, which raised him a notch in Jon’s esteem at once. Still, the man was a stranger, and Jon was not about to spill his guts at their first meeting. So he settled for a portion of the truth. He reached behind himself to scratch the back of his neck.

“I hit one of my mates with a ball playing squash,” he said, then added hastily, “It was an accident, but Sam’s already been worried about me, I suppose, and that made him more worried.”

Dr. Targaryen gave him a slight nod and made a note on his legal pad, but said nothing. Jon scratched his neck again.

“He thinks I’ve been – off – since I saw my wife – my ex-wife last month,” he added. Dr. Targaryen nodded again. Jon thought of the wounded look Sam had given him when he’d stormed from their table at the café. The resulting twinge of guilt made him flush.

“Which – I’ve been a bit of an ass to him,” he admitted. “It’s been an odd month. I guess he figured talking to someone would help me. And it saves him from me grousing at him. Or my friends.” He shrugged to relieve his nervous tension, although it did very little.

Professor Targaryen leaned backward in his chair. “Odd?” he asked, as if inquiring about a band a friend was going to see that night. Jon shrugged again.

“Well,” he said, “my ex-wife got caught in the blizzard we had, so she stayed at my flat for a week. I was sick for a couple days of it. Then afterward, I dug back into the – an old sound project I had. It’s been giving me fits. That, and I’ve heard from a couple of people I haven’t heard from since the divorce who want to be friends again now.” He could not stop himself from sighing. “Which is because Sansa’s been talking to them.” Ouch. That last sentence shouldn’t have snapped out, and of course Dr. Targaryen noticed it right away, judging from the quizzical look he was giving Jon.

“My ex-wife,” Jon clarified when he could trust himself to open his mouth again. “Some of our friends became just her friends during the divorce.”

The old man nodded and made another note on his pad. The silence stretched out for over a minute. Jon shifted his feet. Sansa had always been able to tell he was uncomfortable when he did that, and she would notice the slightest wiggle.

This time, the wiggle was none too slight. Jon felt more out of his depth than he had in years,
perhaps even since that first audition at which he and Sansa had met.

“And your friends have mentioned they want to resume their friendship because your former wife spoke to them?” Dr. Targaryen’s voice provided a merciful interruption to Jon’s thoughts. His feet stopped shifting for a moment. Only for a moment, however. It wasn’t exactly an easy question to answer. Jon sighed.

“Yeah,” he replied. “I get it sounds backward, but she said that because she’s stopped believing I cheated on her.” He took a good glance at the older man’s face to gauge his reaction, and realized that perhaps the only reaction he had not expected was none at all, which was exactly what he got. Jon did not know whether to be wary or impressed, but he went on.

“So they all believed what she’d said before – about me cheating – and now a couple of them don’t,” he said. The other man nodded.

“How many is ‘a couple’?” he asked. That was a less awkward question than Jon had expected, and he did not hesitate to answer.

“Two,” he said, “and I’d be bloody shocked if she hasn’t talked to Jory as well. The other one who took to her side of things before.”

Dr. Targaryen made another note. “And you and – Sansa – ” his lips slowed over the name, as if he had just heard it for the first time – “encountered each other in the snowstorm last month how?”

“It was an accident,” Jon blurted out. “Actually, there was a car accident. The car – I think right ahead – of her crashed. The driver died of a heart attack. Sansa pulled over to help, and then more people crashed. She said she and some other people helped herd people over – direct traffic, basically, to keep more people from crashing. By the time I got there, the police had almost totally cleared things up. I turned too soon onto the road they were directing traffic on, and I slowed too much and stalled and had to pull over. That’s when I saw her talking to one of the officers.” He shrugged. “Somebody had smashed into her car and she couldn’t drive it, and the police had a bunch of stranded-motorist calls, so I offered to have her stay with me.”

Dr. Targaryen looked more interested than he had since Jon had arrived. “And despite the circumstances, she did come home with you,” he observed, folding his hands. Jon stared at him for a few moments, nonplussed.
“Well, yeah,” he finally said. “She didn’t exactly want to, though. I thought she’d refuse, even if it did mean risking the paps.”

“The paps?” Dr. Targaryen looked genuinely confused.

“Paparazzi,” Jon hastened to add, but the older man’s expression did not change.

“Photographers. Magazines. Tabloids. All that.” Jon turned his hand outward more emphatically with each word. Finally Dr. Targaryen’s eyes lit with comprehension, although he waited a few moments to speak. Jon scratched a sudden itch behind his ear.

“Your wife is well known, then?” the older man asked with perfect sincerity. Jon’s eyebrows shot nearly to his hairline, and his hand dropped limply to the armrest of his chair.

“Uh – well – yeah,” he responded when he could formulate the words. “She’s Sansa Stark.”

Dr. Targaryen merely raised an inquiring eyebrow.

“You know, Sansa Stark,” Jon continued. His next words, however, died on his lips when he saw Dr. Targaryen shaking his head.

“No, I’m sorry; I don’t,” the older man replied. Jon stared at him. Only belatedly did he realize that his mouth had fallen open.

“Wait, you didn’t – ” Jon fell silent again. It had been several years since anybody he’d held any significant conversation with had not recognized him. He’d thought Dr. Targaryen had merely been extending him professional discretion at the beginning of their meeting when he hadn’t shown any particular excitement upon seeing his new client’s face. *Huh.*

Dr. Targaryen shook his head again.

“I haven’t heard the name before,” he admitted, “but I confess that popular culture is a bit of a weak point for me. No offense, of course, Jon.”
Jon shook his head to bide time while he grasped for some response that didn’t make him sound like
a complete idiot. He supposed he shouldn’t be so surprised to hear those words from a man of Dr.
Targaryen’s age, and one who so clearly preferred books to television. Still, he wondered when he’d
last encountered somebody who hadn’t heard of him. It must have been years. Huh. As
intimidating as both the man and his office seemed, his stock had just shot way up in Jon’s favor.

“I do films and television,” he finally answered, “and so does Sansa. I’ve done more sound
engineering lately, though.” When Dr. Targaryen still said nothing, he added, “And some theater.”
He snapped his fingers. “God – as an actor, I mean. I do films and TV as an actor. You can do any
number of things other than act.” He shook his head. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” The older man waved away the apology with a flick of his wrinkled fingers. He gave
his legal pad a brief glance before continuing.

“You said you were surprised when Sansa accepted your offer of a ride,” he remarked, and for a
moment Jon did not know how to answer him.

“I guess I was,” he finally said. His jaw tightened. “She doesn’t exactly like me, you know. Or
didn’t. Or whatever.” He tapped his heels on the thick carpet. “Or, like I said, she didn’t want to
risk the paps having a go at her.”

Dr. Targaryen nodded. “And you made the offer,” he continued. “What were you thinking when
you did that?” He sounded not at all exasperated, but only as if he were asking a friend to clarify a
minor point. Once again, Jon found himself having to scramble for the first answer he could come
up with.

“I – well, she was cold, and she was tired, and she’d had enough trouble already,” he said. “Like I
said, she’d have been stuck in a police car for hours rather than in a solid flat with a room and a bed.
And it was getting nasty out. I didn’t like to think of her being driven out on those roads for that
long.”

Dr. Targaryen nodded slowly and jotted a note on his pad. “And how long had it been by then since
your divorce?” he asked. His tone was oddly soft for such a pointed question.

“Three years,” Jon said at once, caught off guard. He scratched behind his ear again. “Well – three
since she left. Two and change since the judge approved her petition.” He saw the old man raise an
eyebrow and rolled his eyes.
“Yeah, quick divorce for someone like us, I know,” he snapped. “And yeah, I get I could have fought it. And it’s not that I didn’t try to convince her of it – that I didn’t cheat on her. I tried plenty. But I took a gamble on that part and lost.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair.


“And now she believes you.” Dr. Targaryen’s voice was surprisingly gentle. Jon looked up far enough to see the concerned light in the older man’s eyes. He ducked, a bit ashamed at his own rudeness, and ran his hand through his hair again.

“Yeah,” he sighed finally when he could look the other man in the eye again. “She does.”

“And she came to believe you during her stay with you.” Once again, it was more a statement than a question, and once again Jon nodded.

“Only when I showed her the brooch, though,” he said, and gave the older man as brief an account of Sansa’s time at his flat as he could. Dr. Targaryen got an odd look in his eyes several times, as though he were on the verge of making some discovery, but when Jon would stop in response, he would nod for Jon to continue, as though he actually needed Jon’s help to find whatever he was looking for.

“So not a week after she left, and I heard from Shae,” Jon finished at length.

“One of your friends from before the divorce?” Dr. Targaryen clarified, and Jon nodded.

“Sansa told her the truth,” he said, and grimaced. “So, now she believes me.”

Dr. Targaryen tilted his head. “She told you that when she contacted you?” he asked. Jon shook his head.

“No,” he replied. “She told me when I met with her.”
Dr. Targaryen nodded. “And how did the meeting go?” he asked. A sharp, mirthless laugh escaped Jon before he could stop it.

“Well, I wasn’t going to bite her head off in public,” he said. The reply came out sarcastic, although at that point a rather large part of Jon wished he had bitten Shae’s head off. Still, Dr. Targaryen only raised one eyebrow slightly.

“Do you wish you had?” he asked, and Jon flinched, his eyes widening. “Dr. Targaryen’s almost scary insightful, but in a good way,” Sam had said. Damn if he hadn’t been exaggerating after all, Jon thought, running another hand through his hair.

“Well, I wasn’t going to anyway,” he muttered after a few moments. He knew he must sound like a spoiled teenager. His mother would have been horrified and told him to shape up and enunciate his words better, and for God’s sake look the person trying to help him in the eye. Sansa would have twisted her face into its most exaggerated pout, as she did when she decided he was “over-brooding,” and then grabbed his arm and mock-growled, “Brood harder, Grumpy!” and kissed him on the cheek and left him surrounded with the cinnamon scent of her hair when she withdrew –

A lump sprang into Jon’s throat, and he deflated and shook his head.

“It just would have helped if she’d believed me in the first place,” he said. “I should have told her that straight off, I just – she was sorry, and I didn’t want a scene.”

Dr. Targaryen’s eyes narrowed for a few moments before he addressed Jon again.

“You wish she had believed you on your own word, rather than someone else’s?” he asked.

Jon straightened and stared at him. He’d never thought it in those exact words, but –

The lump rose higher in his throat, and his eyes stung, and he nodded until he could get his voice under control.

“Yeah,” he said, barely above a whisper, and Dr. Targaryen nodded back.
“You wish Sansa had believed you the first time as well?” he asked, his voice gentler even than it had been before, when they’d been discussing the divorce. Jon nodded again, this time without speaking at all.

Before either one of them could say another word, a beeping sound emanated from the table next to Dr. Targaryen. He retrieved an iPhone Jon had not seen earlier and gave the screen a few surprisingly fluid taps.

“One of my few modern investments,” he said, seeing the startled look on Jon’s face. “That’s our time for today. I have paper cups on the table just there if you’d like to take your tea with you.” He gestured toward a cherry end table near the door whose top was no bigger than a small laptop screen. Jon blinked a few times before shaking his head.

“No, I’m done, thanks,” he replied. “I – oh – ” He fumbled for the jacket pocket where he kept his wallet. “I forgot to ask you whether you have Square, or how much – ” How much he wished he’d let Olly, his assistant, set up the appointment and payment at this particular instant, he wanted to add, even though there was simply no way he would ever let anyone but Sam know he was going to see a therapist. Even Sam only knew because he had to.

Jon finally dug out the wallet, which promptly tumbled out of his hand onto the floor. When he finally stood, flushing beet red, it was to see Dr. Targaryen waving away his apology.

“I never accept payment for a client’s first session,” he said as if he were reciting the time. “I’ve always thought it only fair to leave people that much room to decide whether I am the best psychologist to assist them with what they’re looking for.”

Jon stared, then began to open his mouth, then shut it again. He’d been around long enough to know fawning when he saw it, and Dr. Targaryen was nowhere near fawning, not unless he was a better actor than Margaery Tyrell herself.

“Thank you,” he said, and shook the other man’s hand briefly before leaving the room.


_I should have listened to you again one more time_
The last words Jon had been able to read from the Word document Sansa had written blinked in front of his eyes like a cursor for the entire ride home. When he finally reached his room, Jon’s eyes were stinging worse than ever.

Maybe he shouldn’t have quit after reading that sentence. Maybe she’d written something even more apologetic, like, *I was a blind fucking idiot, or I should have listened to you again lots of times, or I should have not only listened to you a hundred thousand fucking times, but believed you too.*

Jon snorted as he flipped the laptop screen open and debated over whether to torture himself with reading further. He wasn’t sure he wanted to explore to just what depths Dr. Targaryen’s insight went. What the hell was it anyway with people having such a hard time believing him, especially Sansa – Sansa, who’d sworn to love and cherish him, which meant giving him the benefit of the doubt, right?

*Fucking why?* he wanted to scream at her, but she was not there, and anyway his phone was ringing.

“Yes?” he barked after punching the green button on his screen.

“Jon?” asked a voice he couldn’t place at once. Not until the woman on the other end introduced herself as Alys Karstark did Jon remember he’d left the remnants of Gram’s vase at her studio in Leeds the prior week.

“I’ve examined the piece thoroughly,” said Alys, and Jon’s stomach somersaulted, and the next five seconds seemed to stretch out forever.

“I can repair it,” Alys continued. Her words were measured, but just the same, Jon blew out a sigh of relief that echoed back at him from her side of the line.

“Sorry,” he said. “You can repair it?”

Alys didn’t miss a beat. “I can,” she said. “I cannot restore it one hundred percent to its former condition. However, I have two substances that I can use to weld most of the fragments together, and I have also located several shards identical to the lot from which your piece was made. I can use them to repair the remaining portions and then re-glaze the piece in two layers. I’ve prepared five sketches of the projected finished piece, which I can send to you now for you to review if you’re interested.”
Jon nodded dumbly into the phone, then caught himself. “Yes. You have my e-mail address, right?”

Alys read off the address, and Jon nodded again. “Yes. Thank you very, very much, Alys.”

“Great. I’ll send them now,” Alys replied. “I should caution you that even the sketches show that the repairs will be visible. You may notice the marks even more on the finished product.” She paused, and Jon’s stomach shifted unexpectedly. “It won’t be the same vase you had before. It will be similar and, I hope, beautiful again, but beautiful in a different way.”

Jon shook his head. “I get it,” he replied.

Three minutes later, he was staring at Alys’s 3D projections of the vase. She’d been right, Jon saw at once. The new vase wasn’t quite Gram’s, or rather, it was Gram’s with a few curved cracks. They formed an odd shape, almost a heart shape, and the gloss looked different. He clicked onto Alys’s price quote, which made his eyes go wide. But then, he hadn’t really had a number in mind, and he’d told Alys to spare no expense.

His finger hovered over the mouse, whose arrow was poised over the “Accept” button that would approve the quote and send an automatic e-mail to Alys’s inbox.

**But for a different vase? Not for Gram’s, just mostly Gram’s?**

His finger moved left, then right.

Still, it was a vase, not a collection of shards. And hell, at least something about his life would be fixed. Mostly.

*The hell with it.*

His finger tapped the mouse button, and a moment later a pop-up message informed him he had a new e-mail.

*Thank you for choosing A. Karstark Studios. Your quote has been approved.*
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

So...I did not drop off the face of the earth, but over the past 11 months I did some things. First I planned a wedding, then I got married. I wouldn't change it for the world, but it meant setting aside my fics for a while, and during the snatches of time I had to write, I wrestled a lot with both the direction and the dialogue in this particular chapter. But my wonderful new husband kept encouraging me to continue writing it, so I finally did, and this story finally got back on track.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A week later, Alys Karstark e-mailed Jon to inform him that she had just found the glass she needed to repair the vase. Jon, however, did not read it until much later, for it hit his inbox in the midst of his second session with Dr. Targaryen. In fact, Jon was so focused on recounting the tense conversation he’d had with Sansa in her Leeds flat the week after she’d left him that both of his hands were clenched into fists, his fingernails had dug solidly into his palms, and he did not even hear his phone buzzing.

Dr. Targaryen listened raptly to Jon for the entire session as the latter recounted every moment between the evening Jon had left Ygritte North’s trailer on the film set to find Sansa missing, to the following morning and her fateful text message, to the day her divorce attorney had threatened to bring charges against him for meeting with Sansa in the park the prior afternoon, to the day he’d left the country house he’d still hoped against hope to get Sansa to return to and moved into his York flat. He left out the part about how he’d screamed curses that rivaled the booming sounds of Pink Floyd that night in the studio, as well as the part where he’d started flinging boxes and bundles of wire around the room in an effort to keep his mind one step ahead of the sensation of the rest of him getting ripped and spliced and torn apart from core to coating, and finally, unable to cope with either, flung himself onto the dirty floor and beaten the ground and screamed in agony and watched his tears pool onto the treated concrete in front of him.

That was one thing he did miss about having a house. There hadn’t been any neighbors to knock on the door and ask who was being tortured to death inside it, not that he told Dr. Targaryen about that either.

The older man said little during Jon’s litany but did jot quite a few notes on his pad. In fact, he had to turn the top page over and begin writing on another as Jon told him about his meeting with Sansa in the park the day he’d tried to show her the jeweler’s sketches of the brooch he’d had made for her. When Jon finally stopped speaking, he scribbled a few more things in silence and fixed the younger man with a look of concern.
“Does your jaw hurt, Jon?” he asked quietly. Jon, taken aback, raised his head and stared nonplussed at Dr. Targaryen.

“No,” he muttered before he could think about it. That was when he realized how tightly he’d clenched his mouth shut. *Ouch.* All right, so maybe his jaw joints did ache a little bit.

“How about your hands?” Dr. Targaryen nodded downward towards Jon’s tightened, bloodless fists. Jon released his fingers and almost swore aloud as the blood rushed back into them. He regarded his palms, which were littered with the angry red marks of his fingernails. He had to touch one or two of them to ensure they weren’t bleeding. When he looked back up at Dr. Targaryen, the other man’s eyebrow was raised, like that of Jon’s teachers when they’d called on him in school to answer a question without his having volunteered.

Jon sighed. “Fine,” he ground out.

Dr. Targaryen nodded. “And what did you think when you moved into your flat?” he asked.

Jon blinked. “What, after she emptied the house and left me to sell it with her lawyer badgering me to hurry the hell up the whole time?” he snapped. He winced when he realized how loudly he had spoken. He glanced at Dr. Targaryen, but the old man did not so much as raise an eyebrow.

Before either man could say another word, Dr. Targaryen’s iPhone chimed. He silenced the alarm and turned back to Jon, whose jaw had clenched again. He expected the older man to announce the end of the appointment, but Dr. Targaryen merely stared at him as if he expected Jon to answer his last question.

Good God, his eyes were an unearthly shade of purple. He could never sit and look at them for very long without feeling the need to say something. Maybe that was part of why the old man had gotten him to talk so easily.

“Fine,” he said again. “I thought I’d get my head straightened out in peace and quiet.”

He regretted how blunt and snappish he sounded the moment the words left his mouth, but therapists wanted honesty, after all, and his answer did not seem to have offended Dr. Targaryen, who merely jotted down another note before setting his pad on the end table beside his chair.
“Would you like to make another appointment?” he asked, and Jon nodded. He pulled out his iPhone, and the two men agreed to meet the following week.

“Jon,” Dr. Targaryen remarked before Jon could bid him goodbye, “do you prefer to write by hand or electronically?”

Jon stared at him for a moment, nonplussed.

“The reason I ask,” the older man continued, “is that recordkeeping has long been proven an excellent tool to assist people in working through past or present events that have caused them hurt. Some people prefer the pen – or pencil – and paper for that, others the keypad.”

“Uh – um – paper, I guess,” Jon replied once his plodding mind understood the question. Whenever he worked with Sam or anyone else with a design idea, he always kept a notebook handy.

“Do you have a notebook at home, then?” Dr. Targaryen inquired, and Jon nodded.

“Then,” replied the older man, “this next week, if you notice yourself becoming unusually upset or angry or short-tempered, whether at yourself or your friends or anyone else, I would encourage you to write down what you are thinking of at that moment. You do not have to do it every time this happens, but the more often you record your thoughts, the better.”

“You mean a journal?” Jon asked. He hadn’t kept one of those since he had been about twelve years old, before he’d met Sansa.

“Not in terms of writing down the highlights of your every day,” Dr. Targaryen replied. “Think of it as a record book a scientist might make of the results of his or her experiments. In your case, however, you are documenting your thoughts in relation to the patterns of behavior and feeling that you are experiencing.”

Jon shifted in his chair. He’d never been good at journaling, but then again, at the moment he wasn’t very good at refraining from being an ass to Sam and a good few other people.

“Sure,” he said at last. “I’ll try it.”
He got his first chance even before he’d managed to dig a notebook out of his desk, for as soon as he returned to his flat, he opened his laptop to check his e-mails. There near the top of his inbox was one from Alys Karstark. It contained a few photos Alys had taken of the pieces of the glass she’d chosen to patch Gram’s vase where necessary. Jon scrolled through the photos and shut his eyes. Something about it, whether the color or the thickness, seemed wrong. He tried to picture in his mind the exact appearance of the vase before Sansa had broken it, but all he could remember was the sound it had made as it shattered on his living room floor, and how quickly the color of Sansa’s face had turned from porcelain to paper white, and the pleading pitch of her voice as she’d blurted out apology after apology. His jaw clenched, as it had on that awful day, that day when the only happy feeling he’d had was the satisfaction of hearing Sansa apologize for something for the first time in three years.

Now, however, the satisfaction lasted only a few moments before Jon felt the guilt hit him. After all, at the time when Sansa had broken the vase, she hadn’t yet seen the brooch Jon had had made for her. She hadn’t collapsed in a river of tears and vomit, hadn’t spent days taking care of him when he’d had his fever, hadn’t spent all night shoveling snow out from in front of his downstairs door so the glass panels would not collapse from its weight, hadn’t gotten that startled look in her eyes whenever he began speaking to her.

She hadn’t left his flat to get her car fixed, fallen asleep in some random pub, and nearly given him a heart attack over his worrying for her.

Jon blinked hard. Trying to remember what Gram’s vase looked like at the moment was useless. He kicked the leg of his computer desk, felt the pang through his big toe, and cursed. Then he grabbed a black marker off of the desk, threw it at the wall, and watched as it sailed through the air, and left a jagged mark on the flat’s ivory wall paint. He cursed again, this time more loudly. He hadn’t noticed the marker’s cap had been on the wrong end. He hobbled over to retrieve the marker and smacked the wall with his fist, which missed its intended mark and hit the corner next to the staircase.

Jon swore the entire way back to the desk. When he saw his phone, he let out another string of curses. It showed a missed call from Jory Cassel.

He should have known.

“For fuck’s sake,” he muttered, tossing his phone on the couch and collapsing almost directly on top of it. That was when he remembered Dr. Targaryen’s suggestion about the notebook.
The old man would have a field day with him if the last five minutes were any indication about how this week was going to pan out.


Sure enough, when he met with Dr. Targaryen again, the first question the older man asked after they’d both gotten settled with their tea was whether Jon had written anything in his notebook. Jon grimaced as he held out his old composition book, one of an unopened set he’d discovered while packing to move out of his and Sansa’s house two and a half years prior. Between trying to write notes in it and also utterly ignoring Jory’s voicemail, Edd’s text messages, and Shae’s invitations to play Oblivion Online, he had spent far too much time thinking about the clusterfuck that had been the last three years of his life. He flushed as he did so, and then flushed again when Dr. Targaryen shook his head.

“Why don’t you read it aloud?” he said. “I’ve found that it helps people look at what they’ve written in a new way.”

Jon blinked at the older man for a few moments until he remembered to shut his gaping mouth. Then he opened his notebook, blinked again, and stared at the first entry, on which his eyes refused to focus. He reached back to scratch his neck, wishing as he did so that the floor of Dr. Targaryen’s office would open up and swallow him and his notebook whole.

Good God. He was an actor. He’d done hundreds of script reads over the past fifteen or so years, and he hadn’t frozen like this at any of them, except for his first few reads with Sansa on the very first film they’d done together back in their teens and he’d had a crush the size of London on her.

He cleared his throat, forced his eyes to focus on the page in front of him, and began to read.


“And what feelings did you write about after that?” asked Dr. Targaryen after Jon had read his account of his reaction to Alys’s e-mail.

Jon cleared his throat again and turned back to his notebook.

“Uh – unhappy and shaken up. And – ” he squinted at the last bit – “confused and – upset.”
“Confused about what?” Dr. Targaryen asked quietly.

“Uh –” Jon scratched his neck again. He could feel the heat spreading across it. “I just was trying to picture the color of it in my head, and my head couldn’t see anything except Sansa breaking it. I just – I couldn’t even remember what color the pieces were afterwards.”

He shrugged, as much to buy time for the lump in his throat to recede as to signal Dr. Targaryen that he had finished speaking.

“And what made you unhappy, shaken up, and upset?” asked the older man after he had finished jotting down another note. Jon cleared his throat and lowered his voice to force it around the lump, which had not shrunk one bit.

“Well, yeah, the only thing I still have from my Gram is broken in pieces – I think that’d make any bloke unhappy,” he replied. “But it’s been weeks since Sansa broke it. You’d think I’d be over getting so warped over it to the point where I remember Sansa smashing it more than I remember Gram giving it to me. It’s fucked up.” He paused for a moment, half expecting Dr. Targaryen to admonish him for his language. The older man, however, remained stock still, so Jon continued.

“So that’s your bloody shaken up,” he finished.

Dr. Targaryen tilted his head. “Do you notice the increase in the volume of your voice since you began speaking?” he asked. Jon, abashed, shook his head.

“I have also noticed that your voice gets louder when you say Sansa’s name than it does at any other time,” the older man continued, “both in this and in our other sessions.”

Jon stared at him.

“I have?” he finally asked. The older man nodded, but for several moments he did not reply. Jon had begun shuffling his feet on the floor before Dr. Targaryen spoke again.

“When you say you were upset at the point you just described,” he inquired, “was it sadness? Anger?”
Jon sighed. “Both, I guess,” he finally answered.

Dr. Targaryen tilted his head again. “Some time ago,” he said, “I heard a very wise man speak about anger being both a weapon we humans use to attack one thing and a shield we use to defend ourselves from another. It helped me to understand anger, both in my own case and in those of my clients, in a new way. For instance –” he turned slowly to set his pen and pad on the end table before shifting back deliberately toward Jon – “on the day that the man who had killed my wife was found not guilty of manslaughter and I tried to attack him, I was attacking not only him, but the owner and staff of the pub where he had intoxicated himself for letting him walk out and drive, even though they knew he should not be doing so, instead of calling a taxi for him. I was attacking myself for forgetting to buy our groceries on my way home from work, which necessitated her leaving just in time to be struck by his vehicle. I was attacking God for allowing any of it to happen. I was attacking my own feelings of helplessness and pain at the thought of a future without her.” He turned just as deliberately to retrieve his notepad and pen from the table. “I was defending my wife’s right to have lived, as well as my right to live the long and happy life we had planned to live together. I was defending my desire to see her killer pay for that life with his own. I was defending my desperate desire to have her back. I was defending my hatred of the system that was supposed to deliver justice for her and had failed us both.” He sighed. “And I was defending my willingness to do anything, even harm another person, perhaps fatally, in a desperate attempt to banish the pain that had consumed me.” His voice wavered sighed again. Jon stared at him. He wondered whether he should ask the older man if he was all right, or even offer to leave. However, Dr. Targaryen shook his head, as if he had anticipated Jon’s desire, and spoke again.

“All of that to say,” he went on, “that what the man had said about anger being used for attack and defense was woefully true in my own case and also applied to many other clients with whom I have worked.” He turned his gaze straight to Jon.

“So,” he said, “when you got angry when you thought about your grandmother, the vase, and Sansa, do you believe you were attacking or defending anything?”

His voice had resumed its usual steady cadence, and his pen was once again poised over the notepad. Jon badly wanted to ask him to finish his tale about the criminal’s sentencing. That, and an account of how he could speak about such a thing and stay so assured, even peaceful. Yes, peaceful was a better word than any he’d thought of so far to describe the older man’s nature. A bitter laugh escaped his lips as he thought about the irony of just now putting a name to the very thing he needed most at this point, but had the least clue about how to get.

He blinked at Dr. Targaryen, who had not moved an inch, and shook his head, trying to come up with some answer or another that would not agitate his own mind even more than it clearly was. It took several moments for him to find his voice again.
“I didn’t want to attack people,” he said. “I just want to be able to remember my Gram in peace. I want to go for a few bloody minutes during when I’m not working where my fucking brain doesn’t fly off to think about the vase breaking, or anything breaking.” Great. His voice was getting loud again, although Dr. Targaryen, who was jotting down another note, did not seem to mind. For reasons Jon could not grasp, his voice rose louder. “There you go. Maybe it’s a parallel between the vase breaking and my life breaking apart, right? One of those parallels therapists like?” He winced at his own words, but his mouth kept moving. “Or a metaphor, like my bloody marriage and my life are like the vase, right? There’s something to attack properly, right?”

“What ‘something’ are you attacking?” Dr. Targaryen asked quietly. When Jon did not answer, he said, “Sansa?”

Jon froze with his mouth hanging open.

“No!” he replied as soon as he could form a word again. “No, no, no, I’d never even – no.”

“I did not mean a physical attack, of course,” Dr. Targaryen interjected. “A non-physical attack can take on many forms, such as, for example, wishing upon another person the same suffering he or she has caused you.”

Jon stopped in his tracks once more.

“It’s still not – I don’t – all right, I used to,” he admitted. “But that was before everything happened at my flat last month. Now I’d just rather –” His shoulders sagged, and he leaned forward to scrub his hands over his face.

“I’d just rather – if I’m attacking anything, it’s stupid, because it’s not even there,” he said finally.

“What is not even there?” Dr. Targaryen inquired, looking up from his pad.

“I – just – maybe – attacking the idea that none of this bloody clusterfucking stuff ever happened at all,” Jon said slowly. “I mean, everything that started the night she came to see me when I was on set and she saw me going into – into –” he could not say her name – “into my ex’s trailer.” Suddenly, his stomach felt heavy and his throat tightened. “I – God knows, maybe even further, back to the day I bloody laid eyes on that – woman, and –” That only made the pressure in the pit of his stomach multiply. “Fuck, not really – I – then I might not have met back up with Sansa, and I –” He leaned his head forward onto his hands again, not trusting his voice to hold up further.
“Would it be fairer to say,” asked Dr. Targaryen, his tone gentler than Jon had ever heard it, “that you tried to attack, not Sansa, but rather the pain her actions caused you?”

Jon’s head snapped up. He had a sudden urge to scream at the older man for trying to condense three years’ worth of agony and frustration and sleepless nights and driving himself crazy over whether he should text Sansa no matter what her stupid attorney had said and cutting his hand open while installing the router for the wireless spot he was creating in his flat so that his phone would have service no matter where he was there, just in case she called – all of it, and every night he had beaten the walls and destroyed boxes and pillows and begged whatever higher powers might be found in the universe to let it all just stop, into a stupid fucking four-letter word like pain.

Dr. Targaryen’s eyebrow rose, and Jon realized he’d spoken the last word out loud. That, for whatever reason, only made him angrier. He stood up abruptly, strode off in the direction of the office door, and barely restrained his urge to smack it with both hands. Instead, he turned on his heels and stalked back toward his chair, then toward the door again.

“Pain?” he shouted again. “You – of all – you bloody well know pain is the fucking dumbest word to describe what happens when – everything, with the hole that gets ripped in your heart and all of what’s left getting ripped to fucking pieces and everyone walking around asking if you’re OK and all you want to do is scream at them for it but you have to bloody stuff it all down because God forbid they think you’re mad or fragile and ought to be in a fucking mental hospital or some place where everyone can hold your hand so you don’t need to go to one! You should know all that shit only makes it worse when the only thing that can make it better is to go back before it happened, and that never happens and – bloody hell, you even had somebody to hate for it! You can’t – I can’t – it’s bloody well a thousand times worse when you can’t hate the person, you never could, and all you want is her, and fucking Christ almighty – ”

He rasped out the last few words before the tears overwhelmed him and he collapsed to his knees in front of his chair. The sobs hit his body like a wall of ice, and they forced themselves out so loudly that even after they had gone on for several minutes, Jon did not hear Dr. Targaryen rise out of his chair, nor did he hear the floor creak as the older man made his way across the room. He only realized the other man was sitting next to him when he felt the rustle of the tissues in the box Dr. Targaryen was holding out to him. Eventually, Jon’s tears slowed, and he used the chair to pull himself up before sitting and grabbing a few of the proffered tissues out of the box. When he had dried his eyes and face as best he could, he faced the older man, who had once again settled in his usual seat, and grimaced.

“Look,” he said, “I didn’t mean to – sorry, I shouldn’t have been such a dick saying all that about what you went through. I’ve never had it happen, and I shouldn’t talk as if I knew all about it. And – I’m really sorry it happened to you.”
Dr. Targaryen only shook his head.

“There are over seven billion human beings on this earth,” he replied, “which means over seven billion unique ways in which grief can manifest itself.”

Jon blinked at him. “I thought – you were asking me to talk about anger,” he said. The older man’s lips turned up at the corners.

“And you did,” he answered. “Anger and grief often intertwine themselves with each other.” He paused, and for the first time since Jon had met him, his brow furrowed as if he were struggling to summon the right words.

“It sounds to me,” he continued, his voice gentle again, “that, as angry as you feel about your divorce and the fallout from it, you also feel, perhaps, just as much grief over the loss of the life you had before it happened, and Sansa’s reappearance in your life made those emotions recur in full force. Is that a fair statement of what you feel?”

Jon nodded.

“Can – did you – I don’t want it to – um – recur again,” he said, and blinked back more tears. “Anything you know that helps it so I don’t get like this – I can’t – I can’t take it again, not like this.” He shrugged. “If that makes me a weakling, it does.”

“On the contrary,” Dr. Targaryen replied. “It was strength that brought you here in the first place, and even greater strength that makes you willing to try to break a vicious cycle that you see causing pain to you and others around you.”

Jon flushed. “I wouldn’t put it like that,” he murmured. “I’d just rather – since I do such a bang-up job at handling all this myself – whatever you did to get through your – I mean, none of my business, but if you’ve found a way where you and the other people you knew could get over it.”

“I have not known a single person who ever ‘got over’ a traumatic event in the sense that he or she never thought or felt anything about it again,” replied Dr. Targaryen, “but in my own case, the pain became less and less sharp over time once I addressed its roots.” He sighed and gazed into the fireplace for a few moments before continuing. “I still feel it now, nearly seventy years later, but it no longer controls me as it did when I was drowning in the grief and anger of it all.”
“I’ll take that,” Jon said quietly, and Dr. Targaryen nodded.

“Very well,” he replied, and inclined his head toward the end table next to Jon’s chair. “You will need your book again.”


It took a few weeks, four or five sessions with Dr. Targaryen, several hours spent hammering away on the Nightwatch interface in his work room, and nearly two full composition books before Jon decided to read the remainder of the Word document Sansa had left on his computer. He had wanted to read it all in one sitting and get it over with on the same day he had first read to Dr. Targaryen from his notebook, but the older man had advised him against it.

“The more energy you devote to reopening a wound on any given day, the less energy you will have to address it,” he had told Jon. “Each person’s boundaries differ, of course, and you know yourself best. However, given what you have told me about your prior reactions to reading only small portions of it, perhaps reading it would be best preceded by consideration about how much time and effort you feel you can devote before becoming upset to the point of becoming too overwhelmed or taking physical action.”

The man had a point, of course, and Jon encountered more than enough other material over the weeks to fill his journals to an extent he had not thought possible. One day, however, Alys Karstark e-mailed him to say that she had finished the vase and it would be ready the following day. He turned to his journal, which he had grabbed as soon as he had seen Alys’s e-mail pop up in his inbox, and turned it to the next open page. The pang he had expected shot across his chest, but it did not burn as sharply or as long as he had anticipated.

Strange, was the first word he wrote, after a few minutes of pondering. Not unhappy. At least done it’s finished: relief? Hope: Gram might have liked thought properly done/thought I chose the right person and plan to fix it.

He jotted down several more sentences. The pang had long gone by the time he finished, and he felt much less exhausted than he often had when writing entries in his notebook. His hand moved the mouse until the arrow on his computer screen hovered over the Word icon in his taskbar.

Consider, Dr. Targaryen had told him. Well, he’d considered Alys’s e-mail and kept his head cool. Besides, he hadn’t written down a whole hell of a lot in his journal over the past couple of days, and reading the rest of Sansa’s document would give him plenty more fuel for his writing.
He clicked the icon, and the document popped up onto the screen immediately, the cursor blinking in the middle of the nineteenth page. Jon took a deep breath and began scrolling down. After a couple of pages, Sansa’s thoughts bundled themselves into longer and longer paragraphs. He found himself re-reading a sentence more and more often as the pages wore on.

*I can’t get away from thinking over and over and over,* she had written on page 27, *that I could go back 3 years ago and listen to you, really listen to you and myself and the part of me that knew you wouldn’t do that, and consider and think, and stop and not hire Jeyne bloody Poole and ask you if you were sure those were the right jewelers I was calling so you’d call yourself and ask them and figure out what really happened. Then I would have known. Or at the very least, after all of those doubts I had, I should have let you show me the drawings of the brooch the day you found me in Sylvester Park.*

*I started keeping a list, first in my head and then writing it down because I had a pad in my purse, of all the different times I could think of when I hung up on your calls or let Mum go on about how I couldn’t be too careful about believing you or started looking for a divorce lawyer or almost, ALMOST, pushed the button to call you. You have no idea how many times I just sat there bawling and wanting to call you so you could come over and hold me and make things better just like you always did before. But I always decided not to, because you were the one who was supposed to make me feel better but instead you ripped my life apart in the first place, right?*

*But then, I did the same thing to you, so that’s filthy rich of me. I was the one you were supposed to come to when things got bad for you, not just the other way round. I did to you what I only imagined you had done to me. I was supposed to count on you, and it turned out that I could, but instead I believed that you hadn’t, and so I hurt you, and you were supposed to count on me, but you couldn’t because I thought you’d hurt me first.*

*You promised to love me and protect me, and you kept your promise. I promised to love you and protect you, and I didn’t just fail.*

*I was the one who attacked you. I was the one you needed protection from. How fucking messed up in this world is that?*

Jon’s hand froze on the track pad. Then it began shaking. He pushed his chair back, knocking his notebook to the floor as he did so. He snatched it back up, strode to his room, collapsed onto his bed, and buried his head into his hands.

Once he had stopped trembling, he grabbed the nearest pen and scribbled so hard that he almost tore the page.
You’re damn right. You didn’t defend me. You attacked me. He stopped at the end of the “e,” before he had written the period, and let out a loud, bitter laugh.

Dr. Targaryen would probably have said Sansa was angry too, if she’d been the one to see him. He might even have asked Sansa the same questions as he’d asked Jon.

“What ‘something’ are you attacking? Jon?”

Jon dropped the pen into the folds of the comforter. He had practically screamed no in Dr. Targaryen’s face when asked the same question about Sansa.

“No! No, no, no, I’d never even – no.”

Whatever fuckery he’d let play with his brain before, he knew Sansa would have said the same thing. She would have meant it, too.

The fuck if he hadn’t felt like she was attacking him, but she’d say the same thing about him, wouldn’t she?

He frantically felt around the wrinkled comforter for the pen, but when he finally managed to grab it, it left a long swipe of ink across part of a white stripe. He cursed, flung it onto the floor, and emitted a long, rasping cry through his teeth. It was perhaps the ugliest sound he’d ever heard, not that he cared.

I wasn’t supposed to attack you, he could not bring himself to write. You weren’t supposed to attack me. But you weren’t attacking me. I didn’t want to attack you. If I was really attacking my pain, then you were attacking pain too, weren’t you?

You could have come to me. I would have attacked it for you, and you would have understood, and we would have fought it away together.

What if I had gotten over myself and gotten a lawyer and had him look into things instead of holding out so I could do everything myself? I’d have found the truth, and we wouldn’t be attacking or defending anything any more. Or at least we’d be attacking and defending different things together.
Instead of all this cocked-up misery.

Fucking hell, I'm sorry too.

Jon did not remember falling facedown onto the bed or feel the first rivers of tears trickling their way down his face and through his beard and into an expanding portion of the stained comforter. He only noticed the wet bed some time after his throat had gone dry from sobbing.


“Sit anywhere you like, Jon. I’ll be right back.”

Alys Karstark gave Jon a reassuring smile before she left the private room at the back of her studio to retrieve the vase from its place in one of her workrooms. Jon, however, continued pacing back and forth across the room. His nerves were far too jangled for him to sit, and even if he somehow forced himself into a chair, he’d just jump right back out of it at this point.

After perhaps Jon’s thirtieth lap, Alys returned holding a bundle draped in a thick white cloth. She set it down carefully on the oak table in the center of the room.

“I’ve got the full padded box for it as well,” she said just as one of her assistants swept into the room and set a wooden box on the table. “I’ll pack it in for you if you like.”

Jon nodded. Alys smiled at him again, and Jon could see the sympathy in her expression. She probably thought he was a bit touched, not that he cared as long as the vase had turned out well.

“You can take off the cloth if you like,” she offered, but Jon shook his head.

“No, it’s all right. Go ahead,” he replied, hoping his acting skills had been sufficient to keep the tremor out of his voice.

Alys nodded and gently swept the cloth aside, revealing a clear, sparkling structure shaped like an hourglass opened at one end. Undulations in the crystal created a lovely swirl design, which was punctuated with fine circles made of champagne-colored glass and rosebuds in pink and green.
Jon froze, his eyes wide. It had a few more roses than before, and a few of the circles had been reshaped to become textured spheres, but the vase was unmistakably Gram’s.

“Give it to your wife some day,” she’d said the day when she’d given it to him, when he’d stared at her like he was staring at Alys now. She’d given him the same indulgent smile Alys was offering back, and his mind’s eye could see her just as clearly as his actual eyes could see Alys.

“What do you think?” Alys’s voice sounded like it was coming from the other end of a very long tunnel. Her smile had changed to speculation, almost to worry.

“Of course,” she said, sounding a bit clearer now, “if you don’t believe it’s close enough to the original, I can rework it. There’s –”

“No.” Jon shook his head. “I mean – sorry to interrupt. It looks like – I like it. It looks very good.”

The smile returned to Alys’s face. “Glad to hear it,” she said. “Do you have any more questions before I wrap it up for you?”

Jon shook his head, still staring at Gram’s vase, although calling it Gram’s vase sounded strange to him because of Alys’s alterations. But it was beautiful, and the more he looked at it, the more he thought Gram, if she could see it, would have said so too.

“It’s your vase now,” she had said when she’d given it to him, and calling it both of theirs sounded like a better way to describe the new vase. And, if he had to be perfectly honest, partly Sansa’s. At one time it had been hers, and she had paid Alys for its restoration.

Jon turned to stare out the window at the late winter sunset through his tears.

Chapter End Notes

Full disclosure: The concept of people using anger to attack certain things, such as pain or panic, and defend other things, such as one's self-confidence or control over one's life circumstances, is not original to me. I heard it in a speech given by Timothy Keller, a Christian pastor and author. I don't always agree with what he has to say, but I found a
great deal of truth and wisdom in this particular idea, and it kept on popping up in my head whenever I thought about this part of the story.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

I am thrilled to death at the warm reception this story has gotten upon its return from my hiatus! Thank you so much to all of the wonderful readers who have expressed such kindness and understanding to me. I’m blessed beyond measure to have such a terrific and supportive audience.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You want me to do what?”

Mya Stone held up a hand. “You don’t have to do this, Sansa. It’s not even that that’s what I want you to do; it’s just something that has worked in the past for quite a few people. If you try it and it doesn’t work for you, you can stop before you finish it.”

Sansa Stark sighed. She had not expected her therapist to suggest that she write a letter to a group of strangers she’d never even met, especially since they were the family members of a woman Sansa had only seen after her death.

However, the face of that dead woman had plagued Sansa’s dreams most nights over the past several weeks, and Sansa always found herself a little more tired and irritable on the days following those dreams. If there was a chance, however small, that writing a letter to Sarah Mordane’s family, one that would once and for all detail her memories of the accident and its aftermath and attempt to say just how sorry she was that she had been unable to do anything to stop any of it, would cut down on the nightmares, Sansa supposed she was willing to take it.

“And remember,” Mya told her for the second time since she’d made the suggestion, “you won’t be sending this. It’s only for you.”

Sansa nodded. “All right,” she conceded. After all, she’d done much the same thing with Jon when she’d stayed in his flat. She’d said as much to Mya. Right. No wonder the other woman was suggesting she write another letter. Perhaps it would work again. It had, after all, helped take the edge off of the screaming storm of thoughts and frustrations and anger raging inside Sansa’s head the first time.

Mya nodded. “Remember, you don’t have to write pages per day,” she said. “If you can only get out a couple of sentences at a time, that’s OK. And don’t overthink or over-edit. This is about
getting your feelings off of your chest and onto the page, not writing a perfect essay, although I don’t doubt you could.” She smiled knowingly, and Sansa resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Ever since she’d told Mya how she’d formerly written stories and sketches in her spare time, the other woman had been encouraging her to do more writing, whether it involved returning to her sketches or jotting down the ideas she sometime had for the novel she’d never begun, or simply journaling. Writing could be good therapy, she’d said.

“Sansa?”

Mya was staring at her, eyebrows raised. Sansa shook herself out of her reverie.

“Sorry,” she said. “What was that?”

Mya smiled again. “What positive distractions did you find last week?” she asked. Sansa got even closer to rolling her eyes. Last week, Mya had asked her to do at least one or two things per day that made her happy.

“It can be anything,” she’d told Sansa. “Running, yoga, knitting, cooking, swimming, reading – anything that engages your attention in a positive way. Whenever you focus on something positive, you’re helping to pull your mind out of that swamp of guilt it’s stuck in.”

She was continuing the analogy she had just drawn to Sansa as a soldier carrying too much gear who had stumbled into a pit of mud or quicksand and was being sucked under – the mud and sand, of course, representing guilt in this case. Sansa, who had spent much of her past couple of sessions crying, had not been able to argue with that parallel, even if she had thought it a bit simplistic, so she had agreed to do what Mya had suggested.

“I tried some things,” she said. That was true enough, although judging from the rise of Mya’s eyebrow, the other woman could sense the but and much of what Sansa would have said after that before any of it had formed on her tongue.

She’d bought a new book to read on her Kindle, but no sooner had she’d downloaded it than she’d noticed it was written by the author of fantasy series on which her first movies with Jon had been based. That, of course, had thrown her straight back into thinking of Jon and wondering if he’d bring her brooch to the Bridge Theatre next month during the run of “An Ideal Husband” as they’d agreed and wondering what the hell she would say if he did. The following day she’d pulled her old crocheting tools out of one of her hall closets, only to discover the half-made black scarf stuck onto the hook. She’d been making it for Jon at while he’d been filming his ill-fated film with Ygritte North, then forgotten about it in the ensuing three years. She’d shoved the bag back into the closet
and gone out shopping, hoping that retail therapy at least would not fail her. However, none of the
clothes she’d tried on had fit quite right, and after the fifth boutique or so even the shoes lost their
appeal, which was a bad sign. However, on her way home she’d stopped at the finest nursery in
Leeds on an impulse and gone home with half a dozen potted plants. She’d never owned plants
before, so none of them made her think of Jon, and she’d spent a couple of hours reading up on soil
types and watering frequencies. It had proven very relaxing – so relaxing it almost bored her, except
for when she’d had to haul three large bags of potting soil into her apartment. Of course, she could
have gotten help from one of the building staff, but she preferred not to bother them, and even after
three years, she still sometimes turned out of instinct to check for Jon, who had always been the one
to haul around any heavy items they’d picked up on shopping trips. Well, perhaps haul was the
wrong word, Sansa mused as she bent to drag a bag of soil through the doorway. He could have
lifted two bags at once as easily as Sansa would lift her purse. Of course, then she would have
giggled and pretended to swoon at the sight of his muscles, or teased him for being a showoff, and he
would have chased her inside the house, pinned her to the bed, kissed her senseless, and proceeded
to show off in a much more enjoyable way.

Sansa had flushed beet red then, half from exertion and half from the memories. She felt her
heartbeat increase just a little and sighed.

Right now, she could be watching Jon carry the bags through her door. She could be grinning at
him and squealing as he chased her into the bedroom. But no, she’d chased him out of her life
instead, and now here she sat exhausted and beginning to hoard plants like a cat lady hoarded cats.

Sansa snorted. She’d had her chance at that outcome, a far better one than her mother had ever
gotten, and she had no one but herself to blame for tumbling into an existence whose highlights were
watering flowers and daydreaming about the life she’d shattered with her own two hands.

I should have believed him.


Sansa sat straight up against the wall. She had done at least one other positive thing lately – no,
make that two other positive things – even though they exactly hadn’t been the type of distractions
from guilt that Mya had envisioned for her.

She stood up, walked over to her computer, and pulled up her e-mail inbox. She hadn’t talked to her
friend Meera Reed in ages. Margaery had mentioned that she’d invited Meera out to brunch with
Sansa, Beth Cassel, and Shae Lorath a few days after Sansa had returned from York, the same day
she’d first told Shae and Beth what had happened at Jon’s flat, but Meera had been sick and hadn’t
come with them.
Sansa’s finger raced across the trackpad to click on the Compose button. *Idiot. I should have thought of that before. Nice job, Sansa.*

She clicked into the body portion of the e-mail screen. *How about dinner,* she typed, then hit the backspace key until she had a blank screen in front of her again. *Shit.* Her mind went blank. *Double idiot.*

Her right hand tapped listlessly against the keys, and her left hand joined it. Before Sansa knew it, she found herself staring at the words *Jon never cheated. Jon never lied.*

She sighed and leaned her forehead against the keyboard.

Really *nice job, Sansa.*

“So we’re meeting up for lunch tomorrow,” Sansa told Mya to finish her account of the past week’s events. As she had predicted, Mya’s eyes had narrowed into the look that meant some observation or another, often uncomfortable, was sure to follow.

“I *know* it involved Jon and the – divorce.” Her tongue still stuck on that word. “I know it wasn’t really a distraction. But it was positive.” Her heartbeat picked up again. “Making up – well, I’m an idiot, that’s stupid, I can’t ever make up for the half of it – but doing a little bit to set things straight for what I did, that’s positive, more positive than watering flowers.” She saw Mya frown and squared her shoulders. “And you said to do something that makes me feel happy, and this makes me feel happy.” Not quite as happy, she could have said, as her fleeting memories of Jon carrying luggage into their house and then carrying a giggling Sansa to their bed, but she had of course not told Mya about those thoughts in the first place.

“All right,” said Mya slowly. “How long did you stay happy after you arranged to have lunch with Meera? Or rather,” she continued, seeing Sansa’s nonplussed look, “how long did it take for you to feel your guilt and anxiety returning?”

Sansa shook her head. “Not long,” she admitted. In fact, only a couple of minutes after sending her message to Meera, she’d navigated back to her inbox and refreshed her browser window, hoping to see an update from Alys Karstark about the progress of Alys’s repair job on Jon’s grandmother’s shattered vase. She’d done that more times than she cared to admit to Mya at the moment.
“So, which distracted your mind off of those thoughts,” Mya asked, “setting up and caring for the flowers, or making your lunch plans?”

Sansa sighed. “The flowers,” she said, twisting her finger through her braid.

“In other words,” Mya continued, “your brain clicked out of its rumination and anxiety mode for a longer period of time when you focused on something completely outside of the week you spent in York.” She held up a hand when Sansa opened her mouth to reply. “Hear me out for a moment. You’re taking concrete steps toward both making amends for what are responsible for with Jon and recognizing your lack of complicity in the car accident you weren’t responsible for, and those are very positive things. However, from what I see, you’re still spending an awful lot of time and energy on your guilt over what happened with Jon, and if that’s all you think about, it’s going to consume your life entirely. You do need to process your emotions from it, but you don’t need to process them all at once. It’s too overwhelming for one person’s mind to handle one hundred percent of the day, every day.”

You try having to do rehearsals day in and day out trying to remember all of your lines in the middle of wondering if your ex-husband will show up on opening night or any other night after that with the gift your divorce revolved around, Sansa wanted to snap, not to mention wondering at the same time how upset he’ll be and how good he’ll smell and how many times he’ll let you say you’re sorry and whether he’ll laugh like he did when you accused his building manager and insurance agent of being paparazzi. Instead, she held her tongue. She understood Mya’s point even if her mind insisted on throwing one hundred percent of itself into the equation anyway – well, the hundred percent that was left after she was done trying to fight away the flashes in her mind’s eye of Sarah Mordane sprawled out dead in front of her – and so she nodded.

“All right,” she said. “I’ll try doing better this week.”

Mya shook her head. “This isn’t a black-and-white, success-or-failure endeavor, Sansa,” she replied. “I’m not going to grade you or berate you. Retraining your brain out of a thought pattern it’s been stuck in for years happens gradually, not overnight. My hope is that you keep finding more positive things to take up your time and energy so that you eventually strike a healthy balance between doing those activities and bringing your perspective on what happened with Jon out of that mirror house we talked about before.”

Just then, the clock on Mya’s desk chimed to end their session. On her way out the door, Sansa pulled out her phone and navigated to her e-mail app. Her inbox had no messages from Alys.

Sansa swore under her breath and navigated to her Kindle app to open one of the books she’d downloaded on how to care for her new flowers.
She still thought about Jon’s grandmother’s vase the whole way home.


“Well, look what the cat dragged in.”

Sansa whirled around so fast, she could almost feel her neck snap. She definitely felt her knee slam into the leg of the solid bronze table at which she was seated.

“Jesus Christ, Marg,” she yelped at the voice’s owner just as the latter pushed her Fendi sunglasses atop her artfully tousled curls. “You’re getting a medical bill for that – ow!”

“Sorry!” exclaimed Margaery Tyrell as she plopped her purse onto the table and reached out to steady Sansa, who had risen from her chair to stretch her aching leg. “I thought you’d caught sight of me from the side already.”

Sansa shook her head. “No,” she groaned and waved her friend’s hand away. “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. Just give me couple – oh, cup, right.”

Without further ado, she plucked several ice cubes out of her water glass, dropped them into the blue brocade napkin in front of her, and held the makeshift bandage to her knee. At least she was wearing a long skirt, she thought dolefully. That meant no paparazzi shots of the injury would haunt the Internet for all time.

“Well,” remarked Margaery a few minutes later, after they had both seated themselves and Margaery had ordered them a round of the Reach Café’s famous mimosas, “I’m happy to inform you that I can at least partially make up for that – ” she gestured toward Sansa’s knee – “although I meant to give it to you without making you suffer for it first.”

“Suffer for what?” Sansa asked, just as the server arrived at their table bearing two carved mugs full of steaming coffee. When she ordered a plate of French toast to go with her eggs Benedict, one of Margaery’s impeccably groomed eyebrows rose almost halfway up her forehead.

“Not that I don’t applaud you for eating like an actual human in this world of Toothpick Barbie
Sansa could sense the additional questions bubbling beneath the now even higher arch of Margaery’s right eyebrow and quickly decided she had neither the energy nor the stomach to fend them off. She sighed.

“It’s a therapy thing,” she said. Margaery’s eyebrow did not move. Sansa sighed again.

“Right.” She lowered her voice. The café’s owners did an exceptional job of trying to keep out the paparazzi and undercover reporters, but one could never be too careful.

“My therapist told me that whenever my brain starts spinning out of control, I need to think of something or do something or – or focus on something that makes me happy,” she explained. “And French toast makes me happy.”

“What? I don’t make you happy? Your upcoming Tony Award doesn’t make you happy?”

Sansa rolled her eyes. “Tony Award, my left foot,” she said dryly, eliciting a snort from her friend. “Besides, you know plays. They take up every drop of your lifeblood, even when they’re as much fun as this one is. The idea is to do something that gives me energy rather than draining it.”

“Um, you forget I don’t know plays, dear.” Margaery took a long sip of her coffee. “There’s a reason I’ve done a grand total of two since sixth form. My brother’s the Patrick Stewart of our family.”

“If you say so,” Sansa replied, even more dryly, and Margaery grinned at her.

“Really, though,” she said after a moment, her smile fading, “this therapy exercise. Is it helping?”

Sansa silently berated herself for expecting any less than her friend’s trademark proclivity to cut straight to the heart of a thing like a sword through so much butter, even if it was one of the things that made Marg her best friend. She shrugged and tried to keep her expression as composed as possible.
“At times,” she answered. A few times per week did count as *times* in the plural sense, after all. Tending to her new flowers had managed to drive away the images of Jon crying and Sarah Mordane slumped over in the driver’s seat of her car out of her head for brief periods of time at least that often, even if nothing else had.

Well, that wasn’t entirely true. Writing her letter to Sarah Mordane’s family, which she’d done in fits and starts at first and then for longer stretches over the past couple of weeks, had proven its own form of torture, but it had at least distracted her from stalking her own e-mail inbox and wondering if she’d exonerated Jon thoroughly enough to Meera Reed. She’d lain down on her sitting room couch, clutched a pillow, and sobbed after she’d written the last bit of it and been quite depressed for the rest of the day. However, that night she’d gotten her best night’s sleep in months, perhaps years. She’d thought of the accident the next day, as she usually did, but this time it had seemed to happen farther away than it actually had, and Sansa, who had documented the occurrence and basic details of her nightmares about the accident at Mya’s suggestion, had noticed that she had begun to have fewer of them afterward. Granted, she’d had as many dreams as usual about Jon screaming at her in front of the whole theater on opening night, or running around his flat in the snow just out of her reach, or letting go of her grasping hand to fall off the cliff next to the Italian villa where they’d spent their honeymoon, but she still felt a bit less exhausted, a bit less crushed, after writing the letter. Maybe that was the best she could hope for, but at this point she would take it.

“She said it would take a while because I witnessed a death I couldn’t stop, and then one of the core truths of my life got turned on its head and smashed,” Sansa continued, “and I’m still entrenched in guilt over all of it.”

Margaery’s eyebrow rose again. “Hmmm,” she said. “I’m almost impressed with this woman, actually. I haven’t had one conversation with you since you got back from Jon’s flat where you haven’t lit into yourself like white on bloody rice.”

Sansa did not bother correcting her friend’s metaphor, or indeed giving her any response other than a shrug.

“Hey.” Margaery reached across the table to lay a gentle hand on Sansa’s arm. “Listen, I’m not saying you didn’t royally fuck up – ”

A brilliant smile lit her face all of a sudden. Sansa looked up to see the server setting down Margaery’s mimosa in front of her and mimicked her friend’s expression. Neither of them said a word until he was well on his way.

“Anyway, as I was saying,” continued Margaery, “yeah, you did one hell of a job fucking Jon over, and now you’re realizing you did a bang-up job on yourself to boot. You’re doing the right thing admitting it. But if you can’t stop – oh, what’s that thing they did in the Middle Ages during the
“Flagellating,” supplied Sansa before she realized her mouth had opened.

Margaery snapped her fingers. “Yes. That. Exactly. If you try to recover from fucking Jon and yourself over by just fucking yourself all over again, then you’re fucked over twice and it takes you twice as long – oh, no, not to get over it, you don’t just get over it, but to come back to some kind of – what’s the word? – equilibrium. Stability. Tranquility. Recovery, if that’s what the therapists call it.” She tilted her head. “You understand, babe?”

You have no idea, Sansa wanted to tell Margaery, but she bit the inside of her lip and nodded. It was not Margaery’s fault, after all, that she sounded uncomfortably like Mya, or that neither of them had ever divorced the best man she’d ever known for something he hadn’t done and spent the past several weeks walking around feeling like someone was scratching a chalkboard in the back of her brain.

“So,” she said as lightly as she could, “what was that you were saying about making up for scaring the life out of me?”

“Ah, yes!” Both of Margaery’s eyebrows wiggled. “I am, and you’ll thank me for it.” She leaned closer to Sansa and lowered her voice. “Ellaria Sand’s casting for her new project. My agent is one of the writer’s best friends, and I got a look at the script the other day.” Her voice lowered almost to a whisper. “Alayne – the lead – has got your name written all over her, Sansa. Well, not literally.” She waved a hand off in the direction of the exit. “You know what I mean.”

Sansa gave her a dirty look. “I’m not even going to ask how you found that script, Marg,” she said.

Margaery grinned. “Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies, right?” she replied. “And they’re going to start looking for people soon – like, a week soon – and the agents always know before the talent. So if I ask my agent to have coffee with yours, say, tomorrow or the next day, what’s the harm?”

Sansa gaped at her. Any actress in her right mind would kill for the chance to star in Ellaria Sand’s next film. The “Argentine Auteur,” as she had been dubbed at the beginning of her meteoric rise to the top of the international film industry, was as legendary for her on-set theatrics as for her preternatural talent. She was also fresh off the success of Desert Roses, a dark thriller about a mother who meticulously planned and executed the gruesome deaths of the men who murdered her daughters. Sansa vaguely remembered reading about an interview in which Ellaria had been quoted as stating that her latest film would represent a complete about-face in both style and story from her
recent Oscar winner, but as far as Sansa could recall, she had mentioned no further details, although that would not stop the *Who’s Who* of the film industry from leaping at the chance to be involved.

“All right, all right,” she said, turning her palms upward in mock surrender. “You win. And thank you.”

“I told you you’d thank me,” replied Margaery, grinning. “And for what it’s worth, I didn’t think you’d make it that easy, although I do appreciate it.” She sighed. “My next scouting task’ll be at least fifty times harder.”

“You know,” remarked Sansa after the server had brought them their food, “you should just go into business as an agent and be done with it. It’d make a killer second career for you.”

“Ha, ha,” Margaery replied, rolling her eyes. “Although I actually might charge a commission for the next couple if I didn’t like the people involved.” She sighed. “Finding the right person for Ellaria Sand’s next film: piece of cake.” She lifted a forkful of eggs and gestured toward Sansa with it. “Finding the right narrator and a bit of funding for the not-likely-to-see-the-light-of-day documentary about Jon Snow’s charity youth theater program, lovely as it is: slab of concrete.”

Sansa dropped her fork, which hit her plate with a clatter, and Margaery clapped her hand over her mouth.

“Shit,” she murmured when she had recovered herself. “Shit, I – that just flew out of my mouth, Sansa. I’m sorry. Please forget you heard that; I didn’t mean to mention it to you – sorry.”

Sansa merely stared at her. Jon had to have started whatever this project was after the divorce; he’d never even mentioned it as an idea during their marriage. She briefly wondered where he’d found the time, since he’d always had at least a dozen projects on the go at any given time when they’d been together. Then she berated herself for wondering about it at all, like a complete jackass would, in light of the three dozen or so things she’d tried to distract herself with over the past month alone. Why the hell should she have expected him to do any less? And of course he would find a charity project; he always had been the most generous person she could think of.

“Really, I’m sorry, Sansa,” Margaery said again.

Sansa shook her head. “Don’t worry about it, Marg,” she replied, spearing a piece of her eggs Benedict with her fork. “It’s fine. I’m eating things to make me happy, remember?”
When Sansa awoke the next morning, she opened her e-mail inbox to discover a message from Alys Karstark accompanied by several photographs of Jon’s grandmother’s vase. As soon as she saw Alys’s name and the images, her heart leaped into her throat, and she had to close her eyes and take a few of the deep breaths she and Mya had practiced before she could make herself squint nervously at the neat row of thumbnail images. She could distinguish none of them from her memory of what the vase had looked like before she had smashed it on Jon’s living room floor. She reminded herself that photos of that size would tell her nothing about the details, and forced herself to click on the first image. It sprang up to fill her computer screen in a swirl of pale pink and gold gleaming in the sunlight. Sansa had to narrow her eyes to tell where she thought the cracks were, and even then it was just a guess. Heartened, she proceeded to view the entire block of photos. By the time she reached the last one, tears of relief were streaming out of her eyes. Alys had always outshone even the best in her field, but this time she had outdone even herself, and before she could stop herself, Sansa had dialed the other woman’s number and told her just that.

“Sansa, really, I should be thanking you,” Alys said when Sansa finally took a breath. “You know I always love a challenge. Not that I’m glad such a beautiful heirloom broke in the first place, of course, but seeing as it did…”

“Oh, no.” Sansa would hear none of it. “Alys, you’ve saved my life.” *And my sanity. And any chance in hell I had of doing something right by Jon for once.* “You’ll send me the invoice, right?”

“Yes,” agreed Alys at once. “So I have your approval to give Jon the finished product?”

“Oh – yes, definitely,” replied Sansa. “Just – well, thanks, Alys, and I don’t care what he says, don’t let him pay you a shilling, all right?”

“Not a half,” Alys assured her, but Sansa still found herself trembling when she ended the call. Over the next several hours, she still found herself refreshing her e-mail inbox out of habit. Even after Alys called her the next day to report that Jon had picked up the vase and seemed satisfied, Sansa worried that Jon had simply said he liked it in order to be polite. She worried throughout a whole hourlong workout, and she worried as she mixed the marinade for the new chicken recipe she was trying, and she worried as she rearranged and watered her roses.

She stopped with the watering can poised in midair over the last flowerpot. *Rose. Of course.*
Rose Cerwyn was the name she’d desperately been trying to conjure up in her memory since the previous day, when Margaery had told her about Jon’s charity project. Myranda Royce, Sansa’s agent, had mentioned Rose’s name a few times. Rose worked for House Umber, a distribution company known for its focus on educational and charity film projects. Sansa had asked Myranda about her a few years ago, when she and Beth Cassel had tried to help a friend make a documentary about the evolution of Britain’s domestic violence laws. The project’s funding had fallen through, and their planned interview with Rose had been cancelled.

Sansa pulled up the contacts screen on her phone and clicked the “call” button next to Myranda’s name. She could, of course, contact House Umber outright, but the proposal she was about to present to Rose would sound better if she arranged the meeting through a friend.

In the moment it took for Sansa to click the speaker button on her phone screen, Mya’s piercing gaze flashed through her mind’s eye, and she felt her heart race again.

No, offering to finance Jon’s documentary was hardly the type of distraction toward which Mya had been pushing her, but there was no way Sansa would do anything other than leap at the chance. Besides, none of her other distractions had worked that day, and certainly none of them could compete with the exhilaration she felt as she waited for Myranda to answer her call. And getting Jon’s project made was worth more than a little disapproval from Mya, or a few nights of nightmares, or weeks full of shattered nerves during the entire run of “An Ideal Husband.”


She’d given Jon three years of broken friendships and broken trust and a broken marriage. It was high time she gave him something a hell of a lot better than a few sobbing apologies.

“Myranda Royce.” The brisk, familiar voice resonated off the high ceiling of Sansa’s living room. Sansa clicked off the speaker button, took a deep breath, and lifted the phone to her ear.

“Myranda, it’s Sansa Stark,” she said as evenly as she could manage. “Do you still have Rose Cerwyn’s contact information?”

Chapter End Notes
Sometimes chapters flow seamlessly out of an author's brain onto the screen. Others require hours of grinding and refining and re-wording and still come out kicking and screaming like two-year-old children. This chapter was definitely one of the latter. Maybe that's partly because Sansa herself is undergoing a brutal process in her own mind the end of which is still uncertain. Either way, though, this chapter is still a labor of love, and I hope it did not disappoint my readers! And it produced one ray of light: while writing it, I constructed the framework of the next chapter, which I hope to post shortly.

As always, thank you for reading, especially through the rockier parts of the story. If you've made it this far, props to you, and I dearly hope the rest of the story does not disappoint you.
Loras Tyrell swept Sansa Stark into his arms and kissed her tenderly. She wound her fingers through his curls and fused her mouth to his. The audience applauded wildly, and Sansa’s well-honed theater senses told her they were beginning to stand. She sighed into Loras’s mouth out of pure relief.

She’d just done her fortieth performance of Oscar Wilde’s “An Ideal Husband” without missing a line, and as far as she could tell, she had done it with only about half of her mind focused on the show. The other half, of course, had been anxiously – and futilely – watching out for the presence of one Jon Snow in the audience.

But tonight was the last night, and Jon still had not come.

“Sorry about that,” she murmured to Loras as the curtain fell and he set her back down. “I hope my toothpaste held.”

Loras winked at her. “A gentleman never tells a lady otherwise, love,” he replied. Sansa rolled her eyes at him.

“Congratulations.”

Sansa’s yawn reflex picked just that moment to kick in so effectively that it took her open hand to cover her gaping mouth.

“Sorry about that,” she said to Mya Stone when she could speak again. “It’s been an exhausting few weeks.”

Mya nodded, but her eyes were giving Sansa that pierce-right-through-the-patient look again.
“You had mentioned during our last session that you were looking forward to the end of the run,” she commented. “It seems like you’re disappointed more than happy at this point.”

Sansa bit her lip. “No, I am glad it’s over,” she said slowly. “Even if you get the best show and castmates ever, everyone’s over it by the end, especially if you do two shows a night on the weekends.”

That was true enough, and Sansa had a fleeting hope it would get Mya onto another subject. “An Ideal Husband” had been a smashing success on the West End. Loras Tyrell’s golden-curled charm had dazzled audiences and critics alike, and most of the latter had noted in their reviews that Sansa Stark’s steely-eyed grace shone like perhaps no other working actress of her age could boast in historically-themed productions. Two or three of the reviewers had spent practically half of their articles gushing over Loras and had barely mentioned Sansa if at all, and one or two had found some flaw to pick, but Sansa had received much worse. In fact, this was probably the most positive set of reviews she’d ever gotten for a theater production.

Besides, the rehearsals and the costume fittings and the late nights out with her castmates had drowned out some of the constant screeching at the back of Sansa’s head. Sometimes, especially on the days when she’d added extra plant care to the routine, she’d even forgotten about it for a while. Then, as soon as the flat and the accident and the divorce would rush back to the forefront of her consciousness, she’d felt guilty about forgetting them in the first place.

“Are you tired,” Mya continued, “or is it more than that?”

No dice, then. Sansa worried her lip between her teeth.

“No dice, then. Sansa worried her lip between her teeth.

“Just me being a bloody idiot again,” she said, and tried to ignore Mya’s narrowed eyes. Over the course of their past several sessions, Mya had become even more insistent than Margaery Tyrell about trying to get Sansa to back off of what both women argued was Sansa’s bad habit of calling herself far too many names.

“The goal is that as you become more aware of it and examine why you’re using this language for yourself, you’ll deal with the underlying reasons, which will wean you off of the negativity,” Mya had explained a couple of weeks ago. Sansa had struggled not to roll her eyes, but Mya’s ideas had a history of working out better than Sansa had thought they would, so she had kept her eyeballs – and her mouth – still and listened patiently.

“Sorry,” she said now, “but I do feel like an idiot this time. I know you don’t think I’m one, but this time I was – all right, I did something idiotic. Well, more like thought something idiotic, but you
understand.”

Mya tilted her head. “What was it that you thought?”

Sansa twisted the bracelet on her left wrist. “Oh, I thought Jon would come to one of the shows – or not even come to one, just maybe meet afterwards for a few minutes, or have someone do it for him – because I forgot to bring the brooch with me when I left his flat. Afterwards, he texted me and asked me to send him my schedule so he could bring it to me some night, and I sent it to him – well, a couple of days later; that was my fault, really – but he never came. Not that I blame him; I shouldn’t have expected that, that’s what was idiotic of me. I just thought maybe he would send it with someone else, since he – well, I would have thought he’d want it out of his sight as soon as possible.” She twisted her bracelet again. “Well, I suppose he might have changed his mind. After all, he had it made for me and I basically threw it back in his face. I suppose I’d hate me and want to keep it if I were him, too.”

Seeing the look on the other woman’s face, she bit her lip and went silent. She could practically feel the restrained disappointment radiating off of Mya’s body.

However, Mya sounded far less disappointed than concerned when she asked, “Did he respond after you sent him your schedule?”

Sansa shook her head.

“Did he mention the brooch except to talk about returning it to you?”

Once again, Sansa shook her head.

“No,” she murmured.

“He did not tell you he’d changed his mind about it?” Mya reiterated. Sansa, who could guess what was coming next, dully shook her head. A few months ago, she might have raised her voice to argue, but now she knew that it would get her nowhere, and that listening generally worked better anyway. She felt less tense after her sessions with Mya when she did, almost as good as she did after doing half a session of yoga.

“How come you think he doesn’t want to give it back?” Mya asked, her chin resting on her hands.
Sansa’s shoulders slumped. “I suppose because he didn’t give it back when he’d said he would,” she offered, then straightened her back. “And Jon’s always on time. He always does what he says he’ll do. He’s not the type to just leave a person out in the dark – well, I mean, I deserve it from him, but even when we were in his flat together…” She shrugged. “It just isn’t like him.”

“All right.” Mya paused for a moment. “I remember your telling me that when you lived together, he would get caught up in a project until late at night, or until the two of you had to leave the house or go to bed.” Another pause. “Is it possible that the week in his flat overwhelmed him just as it overwhelmed you and that he got caught up in his own form of dealing with it?”

Sansa’s lips turned up at the memory of calling down the stairs to Jon’s basement work room in the house they had shared during their marriage to tell him it was two o’clock in the morning, or ask if he wanted food for the first time in seven or eight hours, or inquire whether the Nightwatch interface had swallowed him whole and he needed someone to rescue him. She shook her head, reminding herself for the fifteen millionth time that thinking of those things did her no good now, and tried to focus on what Mya had just said, which, after all, had some merit.

“Yes, I suppose so,” she finally answered.

“Then is it idiotic to believe that Jon forgot to return the brooch, rather than that he withheld it out of spite or because he hates you?”

Sansa’s shoulders slumped. Mya hadn’t surprised her one bit, although that did not lessen her exhaustion. “No,” she admitted.

“Then is it fair to say you weren’t an idiot?” Mya’s voice had gone soft. Sansa sighed.

“Technically, it is,” she answered.

“Technically?” Mya raised her eyebrows.

Sansa sighed again. “All right, by that definition I wasn’t an idiot. But I felt like one. You want me to say what I feel, and that’s how I do feel.”
Mya leaned to the side and rested her head on her hand, which was propped up by her elbow resting on the arm of her chair.

“I noticed that you said something similar when you described what happened when Jon first gave you the brooch,” she observed, “and when you told me about the accident with the vase. In fact – ” she paged back through the spiral-bound notebook she used to take notes at all of their sessions – “it’s come up many times when you’ve talked about the time you spent at Jon’s flat and about the end of your marriage. Also – ” Her lips pursed as she perused the pages further – “I see that words like pathetic, daft, stupid, brainless, oaf, and – right – dumb cunt pop up from you at the same times.” She fixed her gaze on Sansa, who was now squirming in her chair.

“Rarely have I heard you use a positive word about yourself, Sansa,” she said, and her voice softened again. “What do you believe might be some of the reasons for that?”

Sansa stilled at once and stared right back at Mya.

“You’re seriously asking that right now?” she asked.

“Yes.” Mya did not blink. “When you first began seeing me, before you stayed with Jon during the snowstorm, you described in detail your anger at him and your disbelief of his explanations about what happened – or, rather, didn’t happen – with the woman he used to date, and we’ve spoken since then about how so much of it was precipitated by what your father did to your mother when you were a child. However, I’ve noticed during the last couple of sessions that we didn’t stay on that subject for long before you pointed out how wrong you were to judge Jon so quickly purely out of fear that you would end up like your mother. Then, though, you rushed to blame yourself for everything that happened, to the point of calling yourself all manner of names.” She propped her elbow on her chair again and rested her chin on her hand. “What are you thinking when you’re using that language?”

Sansa turned her palms upward in exasperation. “Well, if you want me to put it extremely clearly, let’s see. I falsely accused my husband of cheating on me the way my dad did to my mother.” She held out the forefinger of her right hand. “I then divorced him way too quickly and after not investigating the circumstances enough.” Down went her middle finger. “I hired a lawyer who fucking threatened to have Jon arrested without me knowing a bloody thing about it and who deserves to have her license taken at the bloody least.” Her ring finger stretched out to stand alongside the other two. “And I refused every opportunity I had to just listen to Jon, just once, for Christ’s sake, and when he wanted to show me illustrations of the brooch to prove everything I told him to fuck off.” She stuck out her thumb and pinky finger. “And then when he took me in during the blizzard, I screamed at him, threw the muffins he’d baked for me at him, broke his Gram’s vase, and ate him out of house and home without paying for it. Even when he tried to talk about it all like a reasonable adult, I kept on throwing it in his face. Good God in fucking heaven above, even when we were younger and we first met on set, I blew him off the first couple of times he wanted to hang
out with me because I thought he was weird, even though he was so, so nice to me.” She glared at Mya through the tears that had gathered as she’d spoken. “So you tell me what it is that I haven’t done to deserve being called every fucking word you wrote down there.” She flung out her arm in the direction of Mya’s notebook, trying furiously to control her ragged breathing.

Mya, however, did not flinch. When she spoke, her voice had switched to that soft, almost soothing tone of hers that sounded like nails on a chalkboard to Sansa at the moment.

“Do those names belong to who you are,” she replied, “or to the things that you did?”

Sansa, who had opened her mouth to snap back at Mya, shut it at once. Two of the tears she’d been trying to hold back escaped her eyes to trickle down her cheeks.

“I – ” Oh, shit. Her voice was not nearly steady enough to form coherent language. She passed a few lungfuls of air past the aching center of her chest and tried again.

“I – both?” Her voice wobbled as badly as her whole body had that day in Jon’s flat, when he’d shown her the brooch and the world had shrunk to gray carpet and white walls and flashes of gold, green, and red all around her. Another pang shot across her chest.

“Is that what you think?” Mya asked, her gaze as steady as her voice. Even now, Sansa had to give credit to the woman – she never gave you a clue about the response she was expecting, although at this point she was rather beyond caring.

“Yeah, maybe I do,” she shot back. “Maybe I wasn’t like that a long time ago – like, a really long time ago – but the kind of person who did everything I’ve done can’t – ” Her voice started to shake again, and she had to breathe more deeply to force it past her chest and her aching throat. “Can’t help but be a stupid fucking idiotic – everything that I said before.”

Mya did not hesitate. “Did Jon call you those names when you were staying with him?” she inquired.

Sansa, who was too exhausted to roll her eyes, settled for shaking her head.

“And when you told your friends about it, did they call you those names?” she continued. “Not to describe what you did, but to describe you in a way that meant they seriously thought of you that
Once again, Sansa shook her head.

“And among the people I mentioned, I remember your saying that you trusted at least a few of them to be completely honest with you about their opinions, even if those opinions were not what you wanted to hear?”

Sansa’s shoulders slumped as she remembered Margaery’s lecture in the café. She nodded.

“So is it fair to say,” Mya continued, “that most or all of this self-deprecating feedback is coming from you and not from other people?”

Sansa barely had the energy to raise her shoulders enough to shrug. “Right.”

Mya nodded as if Sansa had just answered a question she had been asking for a very long time. “So this is about shame more than just guilt,” she replied. Seeing Sansa’s questioning look, she added, “When people express a lot of negativity about themselves, those negative feelings usually fall into one of two categories. Sometimes they’re feeling remorse and regret over something they did that violated either their own or society’s moral code. Those are expressions of guilt. Other times, they feel that they themselves, rather than their actions, are worthless, disgusting, inadequate, abhorrent, and so on. That’s shame. Guilt is about the things you do; shame is about the person you are. They’re often very closely intertwined, though, which is why we’ve spent much of our time together discussing concrete remedies you’ve taken to make amends with Jon. Those are things you can do to deal with guilt.” She paused for the moment it took her expression to transform fully from expository to empathetic. “However, in your case, I’ve noticed that even though you’ve done those concrete things, you report not feeling that you’ve done enough, so you constantly look for more ways to remedy what you can, which now includes large financial decisions. That makes me wonder if you’re attempting to remedy not just perceived defects in your actions, but also perceived defects in *yourself.*”

Sansa’s cheeks reddened. When she’d told Mya about meeting with Rose Cerwyn and then subsequently with her accountants and a business attorney to set up a shell company through which to finance Jon’s documentary, Mya had given her that piercing expression and asked her why. Her face had not changed its expression all throughout Sansa’s explanation about how it was the least she could do considering all of the terrible things she’d done to Jon over the past three years, but Mya had seemed unconvinced. Now she looked downright sad, which made Sansa’s eyes hurt. She could feel the heat rush to them just as it had to her cheeks.
“Sure enough,” Mya continued, “every time we meet, you express how inadequate you feel about what you’ve done to make amends with Jon, as well as how much you doubt that anything you do can make up for your prior actions against Jon. And each time, you’ve directed quite a few serious insults at yourself, far more insults than only at what you’ve done.” She began to open her mouth, but paused and thought a moment before continuing. “And that all points to the shame being the root of this issue. Until you resolve it, I don’t think you’ll ever believe that you’ve done enough to atone for the divorce. And that may mean you spend the rest of your life walking around under a burden of anxiety and shame and never feeling quite good enough.”

So what if I fucking do? Sansa wanted to yell at her, but the accuracy of Mya’s words had struck her silent. Her chest had begun to hurt again, and her throat ached, and bile poured into the back of it. She coughed loudly to stave off the sobs.

“I –” It took a few moments for her to gather herself, but Mya said not a word. “I – both, the, you don’t – but I – it doesn’t matter now; I still can’t believe – I hate – I still feel all of it anyway; I still have to do something to try and start to make up for it to Jon; I have to – to – to do something.” Something. Anything. The bile welled up again to scald her throat. Anything at all.

“And it’s natural and normal and not at all wrong to feel that way,” said Mya softly. “I’m not condemning you for your feelings, Sansa. I’m only trying to process with you whether your current way of dealing with them is healthy for you, and, if not, to find an alternative that won’t involve you beating yourself into the ground for the rest of your life. By now, I think we both can see that you’re constantly doing more and bigger things to convince yourself you’ve done enough for Jon, but each thing you do only makes you happy for a short amount of time until your guilt and your shame both hit you full force again, so it only results in more and more of the life being sucked out of you.” She leaned forward and lowered her voice even further as the tears streamed down Sansa’s cheeks. “I could tell you that, to quote some of your previous words, idiots and dumb cunts don’t care about figuring out what they did wrong in the first place, and worthless fucking dicks certainly don’t try to make things right with the people they’ve wronged. But until you believe that, those are just words coming out of my mouth and nothing more.” She rested her chin on one hand, and for a moment she looked as though she would beat Sansa to outright sobbing. “Are you afraid that Jon won’t forgive you, or that you won’t forgive yourself?”

Sansa, who had opened her mouth, wheezed her reply back into her lungs with the air she had swallowed, and coughed again.

Jon, was the only word her mind could form for several moments. Jon, Jon, Jon, gentle Jon, kind Jon, patient Jon, would forgive her for some of it, wouldn’t he, maybe even just a little bit, maybe, if he understood how sorry, how horrified, how ashamed she was, how she would give up anything from her past, present, future, or hell, all three, to undo it all? If he could see a little of that, he could forgive her for just a bit of it – no, not all, not ever all, not even half, not even close – but just a tiny bit? If he could not – for she could not possibly do that much for herself, but then how could she expect him to? That would mean –
“Jon – ” Two more tears rolled down her cheeks. “Jon – I – if he’ll – I mean, I have to speak to him, after all of – of course, I don’t expect him to – no, I, of course – I have to talk to him again and tell him again how horrid and snarly and terrible I feel for the horrid and snarly and terrible things I did – I have to; I never said it properly even before, at the flat – but if he doesn’t – ” She turned herself toward the gaping hole of what Mya had said that could not now be taken back, the roiling chasm of the terrible possibility, and shuddered and sucked in a breath that sent spasms of pain through her chest. “I know he doesn’t have to. Nobody should have to, not with something like this – but I – and I – no, Jon, no – ”

For one glorious moment, she shut her eyes and imagined Mya disagreeing with her again, telling her that of course Jon, gentle Jon, kind Jon, patient Jon, would almost certainly forgive her once he saw all she’d been through. She imagined Jon sitting opening the door to Mya’s office, making some pun or other on something the other woman had said, and then smiling at her as though it were three and a half years ago and they were lying in their sunlit bed on a lazy afternoon, naked and sated and loved and unable to do anything except sweat and grin and whisper and giggle.

“No,” Mya agreed, and the illusions vanished, and Sansa felt the last bit of ground give way underneath her. “You can ask for his forgiveness, but whether or not he grants it is completely up to him. It’s the same with anyone else you approach about this. Sometimes people are still hurting too much to forgive, where other people might start hugging you as soon as you get the words out of your mouth. People are people, which means they’re not really controllable. All you can control is who you ask for forgiveness, how you ask it, and whether or not you choose to forgive yourself. Living with your uncertainty about what other people do is part of the healing process. It’s one of the toughest parts, but in my experience it’s an absolutely necessary part.”

The pang in Sansa’s chest twisted itself into a knot when Mya said up to him, and by the time she reached absolutely necessary, it had radiated a surge of bile that burned Sansa’s throat and ribs and stomach and felt as if it would turn her insides into molten lava at any moment. Still, she managed to give Mya a weak nod. Fortunately, the wall clock chose just that moment to chime and signal the end of their appointment.

Sansa only wondered afterwards how she had managed to get all the way back home before the retching began.


Ellaria Sand swept her arm past the stained wooden pews to the right of the church’s center aisle and pointed to a gap between the stone pillars separating the nave from the side chapel. “And just over here,” she finished, her voice echoing faintly off of the stone walls and vaulted ceiling, “is the alcove where we’re shooting Sansa’s solo confessional scene.”
“As opposed to all the threesome confessional scenes,” murmured Theon Greyjoy, who had stopped right next to Sansa at the last stop of the cast’s walkthrough of the Yorkshire church at which they were slated to begin filming the following month. Ellaria Sand had not been exaggerating when she had promised that her new film would represent a complete departure from the bloody, blazing inferno of *Desert Roses.* This project centered around a young deaf-mute woman whose devotion to the Catholic faith nevertheless required her to attend confession, in which she was aided by an interpreter with a background shrouded in mystery. That was the reason for three people being in a confessional booth at once, not that that stopped Theon Greyjoy from chucking his mind into the gutter whenever he could.

Normally, Sansa would have shot Theon a sharp retort or at the very least a dirty look. As it was, the bile and sobs that had spawned at her meeting with Mya two weeks ago had just begun to fade from her body, and that had happened only with the aid of dozens of deep breathing exercises and yoga sessions. So she settled for rolling her eyes, which had followed the line of Ellaria’s pointing finger all the way across the room to an alcove centered around a statue of some saint or another and flanked by two stained-glass windows. Outside, the sun was shining directly behind the one on the right-hand side. The glass was cut just so that for a moment Sansa thought it had caught fire in the middle, until she looked more closely and realized that what she had thought was a flame was actually a long mane of red hair belonging to a woman kneeling on the left side of the window. Or had her eye caught the trail of blood streaming down the woman’s leg? And now that Sansa looked more closely, the woman’s sleeve had ripped open to reveal a bloody wound on her arm too.

Sansa blinked a couple of times to ensure she wasn’t seeing things. Wasn’t that much gore on anyone other than Jesus at his crucifixion a little scandalous for a church? However, the picture before her eyes did not change, so Sansa took a step forward, and then another, to examine it more closely. The woman was weeping as well as bleeding, her dress was ripped in a few different places – and, Sansa’s startled mind saw, resembled a vintage number she’d worn to the BAFTAs once minus the rips? *Ripped clothes on a woman? Isn’t that scandalous for a church too?* – and she was bent so far over on her knees that she was almost bowing at the feet of the man in front of her. Sansa stared, mesmerized, at one of her tears, which was forever suspended an inch above a puddle of its fellows that had gathered on the ground. For a moment the clouds moved away from the sun outside, or else someone drove by and the car’s side mirrors reflected it, because the teardrop sparkled like a prism, and for a moment it glittered so thoroughly that Sansa was convinced she saw it fall. But the illusion passed, and Sansa was left staring at the torn, crying woman.

The clouds moved again, and the sunlight gleamed off of the man in front of the red-haired woman. He was sitting on a chair or stool of some sort, and not a tear or a stain was to be found in his clothing, and his dark hair was combed neatly behind his head. He was bending down toward the woman, and one hand reached out to rest on top of her head, but he looked as though he might cry too, or perhaps throw himself down on the ground with her or throw his arms around her and hold her until she stopped crying. Not until Sansa felt the warmth on her cheeks did she realize her tears had joined those of the woman. Hastily, she wiped her eyes and glanced up toward the top of the window, where she could make out letters carved into the arch around the top.

Barely had she made out the last word, or had time to wonder whether it sounded more like the Bible or Shakespeare, when her eyes clouded over, and the warmth on her cheeks turned from trickles to puddles, just like the one emanating from the eyes of the woman in the window, whose collapse on the floor Sansa and her suddenly weary legs very much felt like emulating. Instead, she stood as still as the statues dotting the alcove for she did not know how long. Only when Theon Greyjoy, looking worried for the first time since Sansa had met him, tapped her on the shoulder did she realize they were supposed to be following Ellaria Sand out of the building. Her stomach swirled as she turned and stumbled after Theon, and then again as she turned once more to the weeping woman in the window. She felt another swooping sensation at her core, and then it stilled. She barely registered Theon taking her by the arm to lead her out of the church, and she barely even noticed the sunlight bouncing right at her eyes off the windows she had just left behind her.

All the way home, everything was still and muted and flat around her, until she unlocked the door of her apartment and stepped inside and let herself blink and look at the flowers and listen to the refrigerator hum, and the resulting avalanche of colors and noises made her collapse on the floor and let the tears pour out of her quivering body.

Then everything grew quiet again, and the feeling of stillness from back in front of the church window returned. Sansa stared at the flowerpots around her, and gradually the blooms sharpened out of the green haze in front of her face, and noises from the refrigerator and the heater sorted themselves into quiet hums instead of nails scratching a chalkboard, and a long, steady breath left Sansa’s lungs, and another, and another, and she leaned her head back against the couch next to her and closed her eyes.


A week later, the quiet hums still permeated Sansa’s apartment. She had expected herself to go racing in a thousand different directions now that she did not have “An Ideal Husband” to distract her. Instead, she had read almost four books, done yoga for hours on end, and done some serious cleaning to make up for the weeks when she’d barely been home at all, let alone had time to tidy up the place. Her tears flowed on and off no matter what she was doing, which was a bit annoying as she had to bring tissues with her the few times she left the apartment, but it was better than trying to stop them. The only thing she did strictly outside of her routine, other than the crying, was to visit what she now thought of as Ellaria’s church every day and look at the window, just to make sure she had not imagined the red-haired woman in it.

Today, however, she had no time to visit the church, for she was due at White Harbor Studio to perform her first few scenes of voice work for Wylla Manderly’s film Wolves R Us. Wylla had contacted Myranda to offer Sansa the part the day after her audition, which itself had happened just over two weeks ago. Sansa shook her head as she grabbed her jacket and her bags and headed out
the door to meet Brienne, who would drive her to the studio, ten minutes early. She should have expected no less from Wylla, who had a reputation for not letting the grass grow under her feet.

The trip to the studio gave Sansa an extra ten minutes to open her laptop and peruse the files and drawings Wylla had sent her about Sophia, her prim, fairytale-obsessed character. She had, of course, reviewed them several times before, but it never hurt to be prepared, especially with a new director on whom one wanted to make an excellent first impression. When they arrived at the studio, Sansa stowed the computer safely in one of her bags and promptly resumed scanning the same files on her phone as she followed Brienne through the hallways to Soundstage 11.

She was focused so keenly on Sophia’s lines for the day’s first scene that she did not hear Brienne’s gasp until it was too late to avoid colliding with the person emerging from the hall to her right and scattering the contents of the file he was carrying all over the carpet in front of them.

“Oh, God, I’m so sorry!” she exclaimed, reaching to grab some of the papers with one hand and steady herself with the other. Brienne pulled her up by that arm, and Sansa murmured her thanks before turning to hand the papers to the victim of her clumsiness.

Then she yelped and dropped them straight back to the floor when she saw that their owner was a very confused Jon Snow.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote several different versions of the last third or so of this chapter, some in my head and some on the screen. This is the version that felt far and away more right than any other, and I hope you’re happy with the end result.

Also, once again, the differentiation between guilt and shame definitely was not my original idea. I first encountered it while reading the book I Thought It Was Just Me (But It Isn’t) by Brené Brown, and it heavily influenced Mya’s interactions with Sansa in this chapter.

Thank you so much again to all of my wonderful readers and reviewers! It means the world to me that you continue to follow and give me feedback on this story. I wouldn't have gotten this far without you!
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

What can I say? I spent months getting so excited about the last season of "Game of Thrones" that I had little energy left among all the anticipation for writing. Then the season, well, happened, and it depressed me so much that it took a while for me to want to write anything based on a show that ended that way. But I bounced back eventually and decided "the heck with it, I am going to finish 'The Snow' and finish it well!" So, without further ado, I present to you the next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Whoa!"

Sansa stumbled over her own foot out of sheer surprise. She reached forward to break her fall, but before her hands could hit the floor, Jon grabbed them to pull her upright.

"You OK?" he asked. For a moment Sansa wondered if she had been flung back in time to the moment Jon had sprung out of his own sickbed to keep her from falling after she’d spent half the night shoveling the snow away from the door of his flat. His expression was every bit as worried, and his hands were every bit as warm, and the tingle that had shocked her fingertips then danced up the hairs of her arms now.

"Sansa!"

"Oi! Jon, what’s –"

Jon’s bodyguard burst around the corner. When he saw Sansa, he pulled up short and stared as hard at her as she was staring at Jon. Then his gaze slipped past Sansa, and he straightened at once and cleared his throat.

"Lady Brienne," he began, and Sansa would have giggled at his attempt to smooth his gravelly voice if her vocal cords had not been struck silent the moment she had laid eyes on Jon.

"Mr. Giantsbane," Brienne returned. Her voice had gone dangerously low. That very nearly did snap Sansa laughing out of her silence. Tormund Giantsbane, who clearly had no idea of the
thinness of the ice on which he skated, broke it for her.

“Thought I might see you two again,” he remarked, but his saucy grin was directed solely at Brienne. “Now, Lady Sansa—”

Brienne’s tone froze the remainder of his address in midair.

“Ms. Stark,” she corrected him, tilting her head back just enough so that she had to look down in order to meet his gaze.

For just a moment, Tormund Giantsbane’s mouth fell open. He quickly shut it and half-bowed in Sansa’s direction.

“Ms. Stark,” he repeated, his blue eyes twinkling. “You look lovely as ever.”

Jon’s cheeks reddened at once, and both he and Brienne opened their mouths.

“Um—nice to see you, Mr. Giantsbane,” Sansa blurted, eager to forestall whatever each was about to say. “And—you too, Jon, and thanks—sorry to bother you like that.”

Jon cleared his throat and looked down, cheeks still red. Sansa followed his gaze. Her cheeks went as red as his when she realized his hand was still on her arm. Not a moment later, he dropped it and took a step back, still flushed.

“You all right, though, yeah?” he murmured after a moment. The timbre of his voice plunged Sansa’s memory back into Jon’s Escalade back when they’d left his flat a few months ago, when she’d fallen out of her seat as Tormund had swerved to avoid the paparazzi, and Jon had held her gently by the arms and brushed her hair back so he could look her in the eyes and make sure she was all right, and soothed her with the same quiet rumble he was using now. He was giving her the same concerned look he’d given her during that car ride when she finally snapped out of her daydreams and nodded.

“Sorry about that again,” she repeated, gesturing toward the papers in Jon’s hands. He waved it off.
“Don’t worry about it,” he answered. “I just finished going over them with Wylla anyway.”


“ Weird, I’m off to go meet her now,” replied Sansa. “It’s my first reading.”

Jon nodded again. “Break a leg,” he said, and Sansa could not stop a wry smile from twisting her lips.

“Thanks,” she said, “and thanks for telling me about it before – your sessions with her, I mean,” she added, seeing the confusion on Jon’s face. She shrugged. “You know me. Preparation makes everything better.”

Jon’s lips twitched, as they so often had when they’d been married and she’d spent so many nights before her auditions and table reads frantically reviewing the lists she’d handwritten in her notebooks containing every tidbit she’d gleaned about a casting director’s preferences or the quirks of a character in a novel being adapted for the screen – and all from the scattered corners of her memory, since she lacked Jon’s knack for researching his parts and taking careful notes starting weeks or months in advance. He’d always teased her about it, saying that while he actually needed his research because he was such a grumpy old man sometimes, Sansa worried an awful lot for a person who could charm the spectacles off of Quentin Martell himself at the drop of a hat, but he’d always followed the teasing with hugs and whispered reassurances.

“You’ll do well,” he said now. “If she doesn’t call ‘cut’ right away, just ad lib it. She loves that.”


Brienne cleared her throat then, and Sansa, who had all but forgotten the other woman was there, shook her head.

“Speaking of which,” she said, and Jon nodded.

“Right,” he said. “You’ll do fine.”
His mouth twisted again, and he looked as though he would very much like to say something more, but after a few moments he went still again, and Sansa turned away.

No sooner had Sansa and Brienne gone out of earshot than Tormund let out a mighty whistle, earning him a pointedly raised eyebrow from Jon.

“Well, fuck me,” he said. Jon continued to stare at him, and Tormund rolled his eyes.

“Good God, boy, you really do need me around to keep you from getting dumber,” he groaned. “Or have you just started going goggle-eyed every time she comes around now?” He tilted his head toward the hallway to which Brienne and Sansa had departed.

Jon frowned at his guard, but that did not stop the heat from returning to his cheeks – or spreading down his neck.

“If I wanted to look goggle-eyed, I’d have done it,” he retorted. “Besides, what do you call your whole act around Brienne Tarth?”


Jon snorted, and Tormund glared at him.

“Bloody time to get you to your next shindig, Snow,” he growled. “Let’s go.”

The soundstage crew led Sansa into the sitting room, where four tables were crammed together at one end. Piles of notebooks and tablets obscured most of their surfaces, and a cord hanging off of one of the computers on the last table to the right was wiggling vigorously. A pair of legs clad in ripped blue jeans and capped with scuffed black trainers stuck out from under the same table. They shuffled forward to reveal the bottom of a red sweatshirt, which snagged itself on an unseen obstacle
on the table’s folding legs. A bump and an indignant huff quickly followed.

“James!” called a high, feminine voice, which presumably belonged to the red sweatshirt and ripped jeans. “Can you find any pliers? I dropped it into the power strip again.”

The young man next to Sansa stepped forward and cleared his throat.

“I’ll get them, Wylla,” he offered. “Also, Sansa Stark is here to see you.”

“Oh!” squealed the voice, and more vigorous shuffling ensued. A few seconds later, a petite young woman emerged from underneath the table. Her face was as red as her pigtailed hair was green. She quickly straightened her sweatshirt before crossing the room in three bouncing steps and holding her hand out to Sansa, who shook it at once and noted that the other woman’s grip was surprisingly firm.

“Wylla Manderly.” The young woman was beaming. “So glad to meet you, Sansa! I do apologize for the mess – we’re shooting parts of ten different scenes this week, and I’ve joined the chaos by dropping a record number of pens over the past couple of hours.” She gestured toward the other end of the room, where a third door led to what Sansa had presumed was another hallway. “If you’d like anything to drink, Sam can get it for you.”

Sansa shook her head. “Just water is fine,” she answered. Before Wylla could open her mouth again, she added, “Chilled, please.” She had been in the business long enough to anticipate being asked what temperature she wanted her drinks, although normally it was a crew member or caterer asking the question instead of the director herself. Some actors specified degree levels for their drinks, but Sansa had thought it a bit pretentious when she was still an up-and-coming young actress and had never picked up the habit. Chilled, the industry shorthand for anything stored in a refrigerator set to half its cooling capacity, suited her just fine.

Wylla nodded, and the blond crewman to Sansa’s left disappeared through the door. The director gestured toward the circle of couches gathered at the opposite end of the room from the tables, and Sansa seated herself on one of them. It somehow did not surprise her when Wylla perched on the next couch over at the end closest to Sansa.

“So,” she asked, “what would you say is Sophia’s favorite fruit?”

Sansa caught her jaw halfway to the floor and blinked. She supposed she must look more than a bit of an idiot, although she certainly would have looked a bigger one if Jon had not warned her about
the woman’s unorthodox practices. Still – what type of fruit would Sophia like? Sansa’s mind raced through the details she’d scribbled into the marbled teal notebook sitting uselessly in her bag at the foot of the couch. Sophia had been teased all her life about her red hair, so her favorite fruit probably wouldn’t be red. Her story took place in a chilly fantasy realm loosely based on northern Eurasia – in fact, Sansa had run Google searches about the plant life of Scandinavia and northern Russia because of the sizable role played by nature itself in the story.

“Right.” Sansa barely refrained from snapping her fingers. Wylla raised an eyebrow, looking genuinely curious rather than impatient, and Sansa smiled before she could help herself.

“She’d like gooseberries,” she continued. “They come in many different colors, and Sophia’s so artistic that she couldn’t help but notice. Plus, they’re useful in treating a number of illnesses, and Sophia would like that because she’s such a mother hen about her younger siblings – and Richard, even though he’s older – so she wants to be prepared to help them whenever she can, as well as the other people in the village.” A new thought occurred to her, and she added, “Really, in another world she might be a nurse – she’s got the personality and the skills – so it makes sense that she’d love something that helps people and tastes good.”

Wylla tilted her head where it rested on the arm she’d propped up at the edge of the couch. She said nothing for several moments, and Sansa had to push at her lip with her tongue to fight her tendency to bite it. Then Wylla smiled – a sudden, sunny thing – and Sansa relaxed.

“It totally does make sense that she’d be a nurse in a modern universe,” the director agreed. “I like it. Oh – one moment, I’m sorry, I forgot my notebook.” She dashed off to one of the tables at the other end of the room and returned before Sansa could count to five with a worn red spiral-bound notebook with a pen tucked into the binding. After jotting a few rapid-fire notes, she looked back up at Sansa.

“I’d love to hear your take on that healer’s identity in the scene where the children discover their wolves,” she said, looking up at Sansa and tucking the pen neatly behind her ear. “In fact, if you don’t mind reading through it briefly today, we can bump Maisie’s birthday party off to next session.”


Brienne Tarth was checking her watch and looking very nearly agitated when Sansa met her in the anteroom of the soundstage suite.

“I was about to ask after you again,” she said by way of greeting.
Sansa frowned. “Wylla said they’d let you know we’d be working overtime,” she said. “Did they not tell you?”

Brienne huffed. “They did,” she replied. “They still kept you over an hour longer than they should have.”

Sansa tamped down a smile. Brienne Tarth arrived a quarter of an hour early wherever she went, and even after years of working in the film industry with its notoriously inconsistent scheduling, she still expected the same of everyone around her. Sansa found it amusing, endearing even, but she had long ago decided not to mention that, especially not in the middle of one of Brienne’s expressions of her frustration.

“And now they’ve released me from the dungeon,” she replied. Brienne rolled her eyes.

“Right,” she said briskly, and tapped a brief message on her phone. “The car will be ready in two minutes.”

She pocketed her phone, which was always Sansa’s cue, and the two women set off for the building’s entrance. Sansa spent much of the way thanking her lucky stars once again that Jon had warned her about Wylla Manderly’s unique brand of spontaneity. Granted, Wylla had her charms and a quirky sense of humor that Sansa had liked at once, but God only knew how much longer that session would have taken if she had gone in expecting a more traditional directing style and thus been caught even more flat-footed when Wylla had asked her to read through an entire scene, performing each character’s voice separately as she went, or had her read seventeen takes on one particular line. Perhaps the only question Wylla had asked that Sansa had expected had come when Wylla had clicked through a series of files on a computer that she said she’d just used with a previous actor. “He left a bit before you got here – I’m assuming you two didn’t cross paths?” she’d asked, turning serious. Sansa had replied as diplomatically as possible that she and Jon had in fact seen each other in passing, which had elicited a wide-eyed apology from the other woman. Her face had gone back almost to the shade of red with which she’d greeted Sansa, and she’d assured Sansa that she’d gone to great lengths to ensure it wouldn’t happen, but in any case, it wouldn’t happen again. Sansa had merely shaken her head.

“We’re both adults,” she’d replied, “and we’ve both been working in this business since we were kids. It’s no problem.”

She’d had to reassure the younger woman twice, and as she did, she briefly thought about how she and Jon would have affectionately called Wylla a “baby director” back in their married years, when they’d talked shop about each other’s days over dinner or drinks or a 3:00 AM snack. Sansa reached
into her pocket and fiddled with her phone. Perhaps she should text Jon and thank him for his help – after all, he’d talked to her about Wylla without any good reason, and in fact, at the time he’d had every reason not to help her either professionally or personally. Still, she paused, imagining Mya’s concerned face watching her do it. *Are you doing this because you want to thank Jon for a professional courtesy*, she could hear the other woman asking, *or because you’re still trying to make everything up to him?*

Sansa drew her hand back and sighed. It could wait until tomorrow, she supposed, or perhaps even until the wrap party, when her head might feel a lot less muddled than it did at the moment. She sighed again and turned when she felt Brienne’s concerned eyes on her.

“I’m fine, Brienne,” she said. “Just ready for tea and bed.”

Brienne frowned at her, but said nothing the entire way back to Sansa’s flat.


“Bloody remind me why we keep going to these things, Tormund,” Jon groaned, and pushed his throbbing head farther back into the Escalade’s heated headrest.

He hated those huge corporate parties with a passion. The PR people always gave the blasted events some positive spin, calling them product launch parties or midsummer celebrations or charitable giving initiatives. No matter the name, they all boiled down to overpriced dry chicken and endless (and tipsy) after-dinner speeches and way too much alcohol and way too many cameras and paparazzi. Jon never spent more than half an hour at any such event without getting a headache from the fluorescent lighting and the omnipresent camera flashes. He endured them anyway in hopes of landing a sponsor for one or two of his documentaries, especially the Barking & Dagenham Youth Troupe project. The way he saw it, any company with the cash to throw dozens of these parties per year could spare a little extra for a film that showcased the overwhelming acting talents of a couple dozen of London’s most underprivileged students – and, of course, he and Beric Dondarrion, who always accompanied him to these sorts of things, never failed to mention the great publicity and goodwill the project would earn its sponsors. Usually it was Beric who brought that up, since he could charm the corporate CEOs and Jon could not. As Beric put it, “They’ll look at you but listen to me.”

The first time he’d said that, Tormund had howled with laughter. “Look? Look? Them corporate wives do more than look at that pretty face, Dondarrion. You mean you bring him so everybody else can drool and swoon while you sweet-talk the real high rollers.”
Jon had rolled his eyes, but Beric had shrugged it off. “As long as it works, my friend,” he’d replied smoothly, and Tormund had replied with a mighty snort.

It took another snort from Tormund to jar Jon back to the present.

“Well – ” the bigger man’s booming voice ricocheted around the vehicle’s interior, making Jon and the stomach full of the last beer he’d downed wince, “according to Sir Dondarrion over there, it’s so he can use your pretty, pouty face to charm money out of bigwigs’ pockets so somebody pays attention to all the great shit you do with those kids.” He waved one hand toward the right-hand side of the Escalade, which Beric Dondarrion had just vacated in front of his penthouse. “According to you – ” he flung his hand back toward Jon, who winced again and dodged it – “it’s so you can brood in a bloody corner and watch Dondarrion charm the money out of the bigwigs’ pockets. Still so someone pays attention to all the great shit the kids are doing. Which, by the way, I admire in spite of all the brooding and all the prattling from Dondarrion. Bloke gives me headaches.” He shrugged. “Not your bloody fault the bigwigs are such tightwads. No offense or anything.”

Jon sighed and sank his head back into the headrest. That caused a dull thudding at the back of his skull. Whether it was from the sheer stress of attending the second of those stupid parties in as many weeks or from failing to snag a single donation from either event despite his very best efforts, he did not know. He’d done everything he could to counteract his natural dislike of the pomp and circumstance so innate to the glitterati – smiled, posed for the cameras, signed autographs, tried his best to follow along with the details of the business deal being pitched by whichever CEO he was speaking with at the time, even handed out his agent’s phone number like candy with offers to meet for lunch or drinks. He’d answer every question posed to him with well-researched facts, not that too many of the attendees had been interested enough to ask about anything in-depth. Even his questions about their organizations’ own charitable initiatives, which in the past had given him some common ground with Britain’s and Hollywood’s social and financial elite, had largely produced short, unhelpful answers that segued into lengthy descriptions of plans for the speaker’s next corporate headquarters or something of the like.

He sighed again. If one, just one, of the CEOs or celebrity athletes he’d spoken to had spared a 30-minute ride in their luxury limos to the fluorescent-lit auditorium in the run-down stone school building in northeast London where the students of the Barking & Dagenham Youth Troupe met twice a week to rehearse for their next Shakespeare tragedy or Broadway-based musical – well, they might hold their noses at the musty smell or grimace at the rusty metal folding chairs or curse as they almost tripped over a rip in the carpet, which hadn’t been changed out at least since the 1960s, but they’d forget about it the moment they saw the students in action. They’d see what Jon had three years ago when Sam, who knew one of the drama teachers at Barking Abbey School, had gotten sick the night he was supposed to help out with the sound effects at one of the troupe’s shows and, in an effort to get Jon’s mind off of his falling out with Sansa, gotten Jon to fill in for him at the last minute. And Jon had seen talent – pure, brilliant talent that far outpaced both the meager resources their schools could afford and the many disadvantages to which most of them had been born. Most of their families lived well below the poverty line and in crime-ridden neighborhoods. The fifth-form boys at Riverside School had formed a buddy system with the girls after the rape and murder of a classmate walking home from school one day so that each girl had a boy to accompany her home – a
practice that had quickly spread to the other grades. Olly’s parents had been murdered by a couple of high-as-kites addicts robbing the house for more drugs when he was ten years old, and he’d bounced through a dozen foster homes since then. But he was a great kid, far more gracious and polite than Jon had been at fourteen, and he could coax sound effects out of old guitars and computers that left Jon’s mouth gaping. Most of his mates had part-time jobs to help support their families, and yet they still found the time to show up for every rehearsal and pour out their hearts and voices every time, even though some had practically been dragged there at first as a last-ditch effort by parents or teachers to raise their flagging grades or bolster their self-esteem or find any way for them to connect with other students in a constructive way.

“Take Olly,” one of the teachers had told Jon on the night of that first show. “I found him brooding in a hallway. It took weeks to get him to join up, and even then I think it was more for the prospect of fiddling with the computers than anything else.”

She’d grinned broadly then, and so had Jon, who had instantly thought of himself scowling in the corner at his first-ever film audition. After that, he couldn’t stay away, and he’d dare anyone else to do it once they’d met Olly and his mates.

But nobody would even agree to spare so much as an hour to see them declaim Shakespeare so fluently they’d make any soap opera actor blush, or hit notes in a soaring ballad damn near to Pavarotti in his prime – to see them helping each other with their lines instead of doing lines of drugs, to hear them practicing dance steps instead of practicing target shots with stolen guns, to listen to them chattering about which universities they would apply to next fall. It sure as hell would have made for a better show than the latest exploits of the bloody Kardashians.

Jon sighed again.

“None taken, Tormund,” he said. His phone buzzed, and he snatched it up, hoping against hope that it was one of the people he and Beric had spoken to at the party. Instead, it was some stupid shopping app advertising a jewelry sale. That sparked his memory enough to elicit another groan.

Shit.

When he’d run into Sansa back at Wylla Manderly’s studio, he’d remembered the brooch he’d forgotten to return to her when she’d left his flat all those months ago. He should have apologized and asked her about arranging to return it, but her unexpected appearance had flustered him so much that he could not form the words. Once Tormund and Brienne had arrived, his wits had returned, and the apology had been sitting on the tip of his tongue as Sansa had departed. He just couldn’t get the words out. After that, he kept meaning to text her – a couple of times, he’d even tapped out a sentence or two onto his phone screen before deleting them, rewriting them, and deleting them again – but he’d kept putting off actually sending the message. Something new would invariably claim his
attention, but the guilt would still gnaw away at a corner of his mind. After all, the brooch was hers, and he’d promised to get it to her somehow.

Jon unlocked the front door of his flat, dragged himself into the hallway, leaned back against the door as it closed, and pinched the bridge of his nose, which now sat on the cusp of a burgeoning headache.

Sansa had spent most of her time at his flat begging for his forgiveness, talking – and writing, according to the Word document still taking up space on the laptop in Jon’s bedroom – as though he were some kind of saint and she an inmate in the scummiest prison in London. Not that she hadn’t done her share of things to warrant an apology, but none of that excused him for not living up to his word.

Jon tapped his head back against the door and sighed again before reaching down and opening the reminders app on his phone. He’d text Sansa – or at least her agent – before the end of the week.

Faraway drums thudded to the tune of Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture blasting from the speaker on Jon’s phone, yanking him out of a deep sleep. He cursed and slapped his nightstand a few times before finding the answer button.

“Hello?” he croaked.

“Jon!” Satin Flowers, his agent, sounded far too cheerful for the unearthly hour of 6:30 AM. “Sorry to call you so early, but this one’s worth waking up for.” He paused a moment. “Promise.” Another moment. “Jon? You there?”

Jon forced a groan out of his throat. He could practically feel Satin grinning on the other end of the line, which only made him groan again.

“Super!” Oh, God. Satin was in abnormally high spirits, even for him. Jon wondered how many cups of coffee he’d already drunk.

“Soo – ” Satin drew out the word, apparently hoping Jon would enjoy the suspense. Jon was about to tell him to hurry up when he continued.
“I just confirmed that your documentary for the Barking & Dagenham Youth Troupe got a backer!” Satin practically squealed with excitement. “As in ‘back-the-whole-project’ backer. They even lined up Beric Dondarrion’s production company. All I need is your approval, if your group’s still willing to do their show and we can line something up at the Rose.” He paused, and Jon heard a sipping sound on the end of the line. “So if I can get you into the office some time this week, I’ll arrange contact with the teachers, and we’ll go from there.” More sipping. “Jon? You still on go for this one?”

Jon gulped, opened his mouth, shut it, and gulped again.

“I mean – you’re sure?” he asked when he could speak. “It’s a real business, or person, and all that?”

Satin clicked his tongue. “Jon Snow,” he tutted, “since when do I ever call you without having all of my due diligence done with delightful detail? Your donor is pure as the driven snow. The company is registered legitimately, and its financial records immaculate, or so my sources tell me.” He took another long sip of his clearly unnecessary coffee. “So? Yea or nay?”

“Um – yeah, no – yes, I mean.” Jon shook his head, still trying to clear the cobwebs out of it. “I have to contact some people, but yeah, go ahead and call yours on your end.”

“Superb!” Jon could practically see Satin fist-pumping on the other end of the line. “So, you call your people, I call mine, and you come in – what, say, 2:00 today? 3:00? Happy hour?”


So it was that Jon found himself dialing Sam Tarly’s number over his first cup of coffee, which given his meeting with Satin later that day would no doubt be the first of many. Normally he would not call Sam that early, but Sam was always up with the sun these days, and sometimes before that depending on Gilly’s working hours. Sure enough, Sam sounded as alert as ever when he answered. Jon breathed an internal sigh of relief.

“Sam,” he asked when the two had finished their greetings, including Sam’s assuring a querying Jon that Sammy and Gilly, who was due to give birth in just a couple of months, were the picture of health, “did you keep any of your records from when we worked on the Nightwatch interface a few years ago?”
“Hmmm.” Sam paused for a few moments. “Yeah, I have them in the one drawer downstairs, I think. Why do you ask?”

Jon took another sip of coffee. “If we can get it working right by the end of the year,” he said, “it would be perfect for a new project I’ve just begun. I mean—” He sighed, kicking himself over how his words might have come across to Sam. “I just need your notes; I get this is a terrible time for you to take on anything else, so I’ll maybe get Pyp and a couple of others to get it put together. I wouldn’t want you taking time you need for Gilly and Sammy.”

“No, don’t worry about it,” his friend replied. “Actually, Gilly’s taking extra shifts now to make up for her maternity leave later, so I’ll have some time. What do you need it for?”

Jon told him, eliciting a low whistle from Sam, who otherwise listened without interruption.

“But that’s amazing, Jon!” he said when the other man had finished speaking. “You’ve no—well, no, of course you’ve some idea how much the kids will love that. You’ve worked with them enough. But I remember when Dash asked me for help at the start and you filled in for me. He was desperate. Most of the teachers were. I still catch up with him every now and then, and every year they’re worrying their heads off over whether the troupe will get enough funding from the schools for the next year.”

Despite his relative lack of coffee, Jon found himself smiling, and the two men quickly made plans to meet up the following day, ending with Jon thanking Sam profusely. He could almost hear his friend waving his words off.

“I should be thanking you, as a lot of people will be,” he replied. “It’s a great thing you’re doing, Jon. And you sound good, by the way.”

Jon scoffed. “I haven’t even had a whole cup of coffee yet, Sam,” he returned lightly.

“No,” Sam continued. “You sound like you’ve lost half your stress from earlier this year. You sound happier.”

Sam’s words stuck like a lump in Jon’s stomach well after he had disconnected the call. He no longer felt like throwing pillows and boxes across his bedroom every night, so he supposed that meant that much of the stress Sam and his friends had seen in Jon had lifted since he’d begun seeing
Dr. Targaryen. If that made him happier, so be it. Still, he’d had precious few occasions lately, outside of his time spent with his friends, to laugh, to tease, to feel the warmth of a shared joke settle in his stomach – even to smile.

However, Jon surprised himself by smiling throughout nearly the entire account he gave the next day to Dr. Targaryen of his phone calls with Satin, Sam, and his friends Beric and Thoros, who had agreed to pitch in with the documentary project as well. It was not until he finished that he noticed the deep wrinkles sprouting from the corners of the older man’s eyes as he answered Jon’s smile with a broad one of his own.

“Congratulations,” he said warmly, and Jon felt as though the sun had burst through a hole in the ceiling and suffused his whole body with its glow. When he blinked away the image, his eyes stayed oddly moist.

“Am I correct in guessing that this a project you have tried to film for some time now?” he asked, and Jon nodded.

“Three years,” he replied. “It feels like a lot longer, though, because up till whoever’s behind this company that’s funding us now turned up, everybody else has passed it up – turned a deaf ear, you know.”

Dr. Targaryen nodded. “But now somebody is listening to you and giving all of you – the students and the educators included – your due.”

Jon shook his head. “It’s the kids’ due,” he answered at once. “They’ve busted their necks coming from so little, and they’re bloody smart and wise and brilliant for kids of their age. They deserve this like nobody’s business.”

The crinkles on one side of Dr. Targaryen’s mouth deepened. “You deserve it, too, Jon,” he said firmly. “You’ve done a very fine thing.”

Jon only shook his head, but he teared up again on his way out of the therapist’s office. It had never occurred to him that Dr. Targaryen would be proud of him, although he could hardly remember the last time someone had twinkled with such pride and put him in his place all at once. Not for well over three years, now that he thought about it, and not with the banter and playfulness and blue eyes
brimming with love and mischief and joy he’d taken for granted from the woman who had given the lion’s share of it all to him. If all this had happened four years ago, she would have squealed and thrown her arms around him and plied him with questions about the project and the funding until he’d talked himself blue in the face.

And his flat wouldn’t be so bare and quiet as it was now.

Jon sighed as he opened his bedroom door and trudged over to his nightstand, where the familiar wooden box nestled into the far right-hand corner. He gingerly removed it, set it next to his computer, and opened the delicately wrought hinges. Sansa’s brooch twinkled up at him as brightly has it had when he’d brought it out last week to remind himself to return it to her – before he’d put it away again and temporarily forgotten about it. Of course, he’d done the same the week before that, and again last month. He propped his elbows on his desk, buried his face in his hands, and let out another, longer sigh.

The thought of setting the box carefully into Sansa’s hands never to see it again made his stomach feel like a lead weight had just been dropped into it. Dr. Targaryen would probably have some intelligent theory or other about why, but Jon did not care to hear it.

He snorted. Six months ago, he’d practically thrown the box at Sansa. Now, his hands closed protectively around it, and it would have taken a crowbar to pry them open.

Chapter End Notes

I realize this chapter didn't provide as much of the drama or emotional baggage as have prior chapters. However, Jon and Sansa have both had months of therapy to deal with the drama, and life goes on (for now, at least). Also, this chapter provided crucial groundwork for the rest of the story, and while groundwork may not be quite as delicious to read, it's also essential. I found it therapeutic and even fun to write after the combined melodrama of this story and the show, and I hope that shone through for my readers.

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