



EPILOGUE

The road up to Oldstones went twice around the hill before reaching the summit. Overgrown and stony, it would have been slow going even in the best of times, and last night's snow had left it muddy as well. *Snow in autumn in the riverlands, it's unnatural*, Merrett thought gloomily. It had not been much of a snow, true; just enough to blanket the ground for a night. Most of it had started melting away as soon as the sun came up. Still, Merrett took it for a bad omen. Between rains, floods, fire, and war, they had lost two harvests and a good part of a third. An early winter would mean famine all across the riverlands. A great many people would go hungry, and some of them would starve. Merrett only hoped he wouldn't be one of them. *I may, though. With my luck, I just may. I never did have any luck.*

Beneath the castle ruins, the lower slopes of the hill were so thickly forested that half a hundred outlaws could well have been lurking there. *They could be watching me even now.* Merrett glanced about, and saw nothing but gorse, bracken, thistle, sedge, and blackberry bushes between the pines and grey-green sentinels. Elsewhere skeletal elm and ash and scrub oaks choked the ground like weeds. He saw no outlaws, but that meant little. Outlaws were better at hiding than honest men.

Merrett hated the woods, if truth be told, and he hated outlaws even more. "Outlaws stole my life," he had been known to complain when in his

cups. He was too often in his cups, his father said, often and loudly. *Too true*, he thought ruefully. You needed some sort of distinction in the Twins, else they were liable to forget you were alive, but a reputation as the biggest drinker in the castle had done little to enhance his prospects, he'd found. *I once hoped to be the greatest knight who ever couched a lance. The gods took that away from me. Why shouldn't I have a cup of wine from time to time? It helps my headaches. Besides, my wife is a shrew, my father despises me, my children are worthless. What do I have to stay sober for?*

He was sober now, though. Well, he'd had two horns of ale when he broke his fast, and a small cup of red when he set out, but that was just to keep his head from pounding. Merrett could feel the headache building behind his eyes, and he knew that if he gave it half a chance he would soon feel as if he had a thunderstorm raging between his ears. Sometimes his headaches got so bad that it even hurt too much to weep. Then all he could do was rest on his bed in a dark room with a damp cloth over his eyes, and curse his luck and the nameless outlaw who had done this to him.

Just thinking about it made him anxious. He could no wise afford a headache now. *If I bring Petyr back home safely, all my luck will change.* He had the gold, all he needed to do was climb to the top of Oldstones, meet the bloody outlaws in the ruined castle, and make the exchange. A simple ransom. Even he could not muck it up . . . unless he got a headache, one so bad that it left him unable to ride. He was supposed to be at the ruins by sunset, not weeping in a huddle at the side of the road. Merrett rubbed two fingers against his temple. *Once more around the hill, and there I am.* When the message had come in and he had stepped forward to offer to carry the ransom, his father had squinted down and said, "You, Merrett?" and started laughing through his nose, that hideous *heh heh heh* laugh of his. Merrett practically had to beg before they'd give him the bloody bag of gold.

Something moved in the underbrush along the side of the road. Merrett reined up hard and reached for his sword, but it was only a squirrel. "Stupid," he told himself, shoving the sword back in its scabbard without ever having gotten it out. "Outlaws don't have tails. Bloody hell, Merrett, get hold of yourself." His heart was thumping in his chest as if he were some green boy on his first campaign. *As if this were the kingswood and it*

was the old Brotherhood I was going to face, not the lightning lord's sorry lot of brigands. For a moment he was tempted to trot right back down the hill and find the nearest alehouse. That bag of gold would buy a lot of ale, enough for him to forget all about Petyr Pimple. *Let them hang him, he brought this on himself. It's no more than he deserves, wandering off with some bloody camp follower like a stag in rut.*

His head had begun to pound; soft now, but he knew it would get worse. Merrett rubbed the bridge of his nose. He really had no right to think so ill of Petyr. *I did the same myself when I was his age.* In his case all it got him was a pox, but still, he shouldn't condemn. Whores did have charms, especially if you had a face like Petyr's. The poor lad had a wife, to be sure, but she was half the problem. Not only was she twice his age, but she was bedding his brother Walder too, if the talk was true. There was always lots of talk around the Twins, and only a little was ever true, but in this case Merrett believed it. Black Walder was a man who took what he wanted, even his brother's wife. He'd had Edwyn's wife too, that was common knowledge, Fair Walda had been known to slip into his bed from time to time, and some even said he'd known the seventh Lady Frey a deal better than he should have. Small wonder he refused to marry. Why buy a cow when there were udders all around begging to be milked?

Cursing under his breath, Merrett jammed his heels into his horse's flanks and rode on up the hill. As tempting as it was to drink the gold away, he knew that if he didn't come back with Petyr Pimple, he had as well not come back at all.

Lord Walder would soon turn two-and-ninety. His ears had started to go, his eyes were almost gone, and his gout was so bad that he had to be carried everywhere. He could not possibly last much longer, all his sons agreed. *And when he goes, everything will change, and not for the better.* His father was querulous and stubborn, with an iron will and a wasp's tongue, but he did believe in taking care of his own. *All of his own, even the ones who had displeased and disappointed him. Even the ones whose names he can't remember.* Once he was gone, though . . .

When Ser Stevron had been heir, that was one thing. The old man had been grooming Stevron for sixty years, and had pounded it into his head that blood was blood. But Stevron had died whilst campaigning with the

Young Wolf in the west—“of waiting, no doubt,” Lame Lothar had quipped when the raven brought them the news—and his sons and grandsons were a different sort of Frey. Stevron’s son Ser Ryman stood to inherit now; a thick-witted, stubborn, greedy man. And after Ryman came his own sons, Edwyn and Black Walder, who were even worse. “Fortunately,” Lame Lothar once said, “they hate each other even more than they hate us.”

Merrett wasn’t certain that was fortunate at all, and for that matter Lothar himself might be more dangerous than either of them. Lord Walder had ordered the slaughter of the Starks at Roslin’s wedding, but it had been Lame Lothar who had plotted it out with Roose Bolton, all the way down to which songs would be played. Lothar was a very amusing fellow to get drunk with, but Merrett would never be so foolish as to turn his back on him. In the Twins, you learned early that only full blood siblings could be trusted, and them not very far.

It was like to be every son for himself when the old man died, and every daughter as well. The new Lord of the Crossing would doubtless keep on *some* of his uncles, nephews, and cousins at the Twins, the ones he happened to like or trust, or more likely the ones he thought would prove useful to him. *The rest of us he’ll shove out to fend for ourselves.*

The prospect worried Merrett more than words could say. He would be forty in less than three years, too old to take up the life of a hedge knight . . . even if he’d *been* a knight, which as it happened he wasn’t. He had no land, no wealth of his own. He owned the clothes on his back but not much else, not even the horse he was riding. He wasn’t clever enough to be a maester, pious enough to be a septon, or savage enough to be a sellsword. *The gods gave me no gift but birth, and they stinted me there.* What good was it to be the son of a rich and powerful House if you were the *ninth* son? When you took grandsons and great-grandsons into account, Merrett stood a better chance of being chosen High Septon than he did of inheriting the Twins.

I have no luck, he thought bitterly. *I have never had any bloody luck.* He was a big man, broad around the chest and shoulders if only of middling height. In the last ten years he had grown soft and fleshy, he knew, but when he’d been younger Merrett had been almost as robust as Ser Hosteen, his eldest full brother, who was commonly regarded as the strongest of Lord

Walder Frey's brood. As a boy he'd been packed off to Crakehall to serve his mother's family as a page. When old Lord Sumner had made him a squire, everyone had assumed he would be Ser Merrett in no more than a few years, but the outlaws of the Kingswood Brotherhood had pissed on those plans. While his fellow squire Jaime Lannister was covering himself in glory, Merrett had first caught the pox from a camp follower, then managed to get captured by a *woman*, the one called the White Fawn. Lord Sumner had ransomed him back from the outlaws, but in the very next fight he'd been felled by a blow from a mace that had broken his helm and left him insensible for a fortnight. Everyone gave him up for dead, they told him later.

Merrett hadn't died, but his fighting days were done. Even the lightest blow to his head brought on blinding pain and reduced him to tears. Under these circumstances knighthood was out of the question, Lord Sumner told him, not unkindly. He was sent back to the Twins to face Lord Walder's poisonous disdain.

After that, Merrett's luck had only grown worse. His father had managed to make a good marriage for him, somehow; he wed one of Lord Darry's daughters, back when the Darrys stood high in King Aerys's favor. But it seemed as if he no sooner had deflowered his bride than Aerys lost his throne. Unlike the Freys, the Darrys had been prominent Targaryen loyalists, which cost them half their lands, most of their wealth, and almost all their power. As for his lady wife, she found him a great disappointment from the first, and insisted on popping out nothing but girls for years; three live ones, a stillbirth, and one that died in infancy before she finally produced a son. His eldest daughter had turned out to be a slut, his second a glutton. When Ami was caught in the stables with no fewer than *three* grooms, he'd been forced to marry her off to a bloody *hedge knight*. That situation could not possibly get any worse, he'd thought . . . until Ser Pate decided he could win renown by defeating Ser Gregor Clegane. Ami had come running back a widow, to Merrett's dismay and the undoubted delight of every stablehand in the Twins.

Merrett had dared to hope that his luck was finally changing when Roose Bolton chose to wed *his* Walda instead of one of her slimmer, comelier cousins. The Bolton alliance was important for House Frey and his daughter

had helped secure it; he thought that must surely count for something. The old man had soon disabused him. “He picked her because she’s *fat*,” Lord Walder said. “You think Bolton gave a mummer’s fart that she was your whelp? Think he sat about thinking, ‘*Heh*, Merrett Muttonhead, that’s the very man I need for a good-father’? Your Walda’s a sow in silk, that’s why he picked her, and I’m not like to thank you for it. We’d have had the same alliance at half the price if your little porkling put down her spoon from time to time.”

The final humiliation had been delivered with a smile, when Lame Lothar had summoned him to discuss his role in Roslin’s wedding. “We must each play our part, according to our gifts,” his half-brother told him. “You shall have one task and one task only, Merrett, but I believe you are well suited to it. I want you to see to it that Greatjon Umber is so bloody drunk that he can hardly stand, let alone fight.”

And even that I failed at. He’d cozened the huge northman into drinking enough wine to kill any three normal men, yet after Roslin had been bedded the Greatjon still managed to snatch the sword of the first man to accost him and break his arm in the snatching. It had taken eight of them to get him into chains, and the effort had left two men wounded, one dead, and poor old Ser Leslyn Haigh short half an ear. When he couldn’t fight with his hands any longer, Umber had fought with his teeth.

Merrett paused a moment and closed his eyes. His head was throbbing like that bloody drum they’d played at the wedding, and for a moment it was all he could do to stay in the saddle. *I have to go on*, he told himself. If he could bring back Petyr Pimple, surely it would put him in Ser Ryman’s good graces. Petyr might be a whisker on the hapless side, but he wasn’t as cold as Edwyn, nor as hot as Black Walder. *The boy will be grateful for my part, and his father will see that I’m loyal, a man worth having about.*

But only if he was there by sunset with the gold. Merrett glanced at the sky. *Right on time.* He needed something to steady his hands. He pulled up the waterskin hung from his saddle, uncorked it, and took a long swallow. The wine was thick and sweet, so dark it was almost black, but gods it tasted good.

The curtain wall of Oldstones had once encircled the brow of the hill like the crown on a king's head. Only the foundation remained, and a few waist-high piles of crumbling stone spotted with lichen. Merrett rode along the line of the wall until he came to the place where the gatehouse would have stood. The ruins were more extensive here, and he had to dismount to lead his palfrey through them. In the west, the sun had vanished behind a bank of low clouds. Gorse and bracken covered the slopes, and once inside the vanished walls the weeds were chest high. Merrett loosened his sword in its scabbard and looked about warily, but saw no outlaws. *Could I have come on the wrong day?* He stopped and rubbed his temples with his thumbs, but that did nothing to ease the pressure behind his eyes. *Seven bloody hells . . .*

From somewhere deep within the castle, faint music came drifting through the trees.

Merrett found himself shivering, despite his cloak. He pulled open his waterskin and had another drink of wine. *I could just get back on my horse, ride to Oldtown, and drink the gold away. No good ever came from dealing with outlaws.* That vile little bitch Wenda had burned a fawn into the cheek of his arse while she had him captive. No wonder his wife despised him. *I have to go through with this. Petyr Pimple might be Lord of the Crossing one day, Edwyn has no sons and Black Walder's only got bastards. Petyr will remember who came to get him.* He took another swallow, corked the skin up, and led his palfrey through broken stones, gorse, and thin wind-whipped trees, following the sounds to what had been the castle ward.

Fallen leaves lay thick upon the ground, like soldiers after some great slaughter. A man in patched, faded greens was sitting crosslegged atop a weathered stone sepulcher, fingering the strings of a woodharp. The music was soft and sad. Merrett knew the song. *High in the halls of the kings who are gone, Jenny would dance with her ghosts . . .*

"Get off there," Merrett said. "You're sitting on a king."

"Old Tristifer don't mind my bony arse. The Hammer of Justice, they called him. Been a long while since he heard any new songs." The outlaw hopped down. Trim and slim, he had a narrow face and foxy features, but his mouth was so wide that his smile seemed to touch his ears. A few

strands of thin brown hair were blowing across his brow. He pushed them back with his free hand and said, "Do you remember me, my lord?"

"No." Merrett frowned. "Why would I?"

"I sang at your daughter's wedding. And passing well, I thought. That Pate she married was a cousin. We're all cousins in Sevenstreams. Didn't stop him from turning niggard when it was time to pay me." He shrugged. "Why is it your lord father never has me play at the Twins? Don't I make enough noise for his lordship? He likes it loud, I have been hearing."

"You bring the gold?" asked a harsher voice, behind him.

Merrett's throat was dry. *Bloody outlaws, always hiding in the bushes.* It had been the same in the kingswood. you'd think you'd caught five of them, and ten more would spring from nowhere.

When he turned, they were all around him; an ill-favored gaggle of leathery old men and smooth-cheeked lads younger than Petyr Pimple, the lot of them clad in roughspun rags, boiled leather, and bits of dead men's armor. There was one woman with them, bundled up in a hooded cloak three times too big for her. Merrett was too flustered to count them, but there seemed to be a dozen at the least, maybe a score.

"I asked a question." The speaker was a big bearded man with crooked green teeth and a broken nose; taller than Merrett, though not so heavy in the belly. A halfhelm covered his head, a patched yellow cloak his broad shoulders. "Where's our gold?"

"In my saddlebag. A hundred golden dragons." Merrett cleared his throat. "You'll get it when I see that Petyr—"

A squat one-eyed outlaw strode forward before he could finish, reached into the saddlebag bold as you please, and found the sack. Merrett started to grab him, then thought better of it. The outlaw opened the drawstring, removed a coin, and bit it. "Tastes right." He hefted the sack. "Feels right too."

They're going to take the gold and keep Petyr too, Merrett thought in sudden panic. "That's the whole ransom. All you asked for." His palms were sweating. He wiped them on his breeches. "Which one of you is Beric

Dondarrion?” Dondarrion had been a lord before he turned outlaw, he might still be a man of honor.

“Why, that would be me,” said the one-eyed man.

“You’re a bloody liar, Jack,” said the big bearded man in the yellow cloak. “It’s my turn to be Lord Beric.”

“Does that mean I have to be Thoros?” The singer laughed. “My lord, sad to say, Lord Beric was needed elsewhere. The times are troubled, and there are many battles to fight. But we’ll sort you out just as he would, have no fear.”

Merrett had plenty of fear. His head was pounding too. Much more of this and he’d be sobbing. “You have your gold,” he said. “Give me my nephew, and I’ll be gone.” Petyr was actually more a great half-nephew, but there was no need to go into that.

“He’s in the godswood,” said the man in the yellow cloak. “We’ll take you to him. Notch, you hold his horse.”

Merrett handed over the bridle reluctantly. He did not see what other choice he had. “My water skin,” he heard himself say. “A swallow of wine, to settle my—”

“We don’t drink with your sort,” yellow cloak said curtly. “It’s this way. Follow me.”

Leaves crunched beneath their heels, and every step sent a spike of pain through Merrett’s temple. They walked in silence, the wind gusting around them. The last light of the setting sun was in his eyes as he clambered over the mossy hummocks that were all that remained of the keep. Behind was the godswood.

Petyr Pimple was hanging from the limb of an oak, a noose tight around his long thin neck. His eyes bulged from a black face, staring down at Merrett accusingly. *You came too late*, they seemed to say. But he hadn’t. He *hadn’t*! He had come when they told him. “You killed him,” he croaked.

“Sharp as a blade, this one,” said the one-eyed man.

An aurochs was thundering through Merrett’s head. *Mother have mercy*, he thought. “I brought the gold.”

“That was good of you,” said the singer amiably. “We’ll see that it’s put to good use.”

Merrett turned away from Petyr. He could taste the bile in the back of his throat. “You . . . you had no right.”

“We had a rope,” said yellow cloak. “That’s right enough.”

Two of the outlaws seized Merrett’s arms and bound them tight behind his back. He was too deep in shock to struggle. “No,” was all he could manage. “I only came to ransom Petyr. You said if you had the gold by sunset he wouldn’t be harmed . . .”

“Well,” said the singer, “you’ve got us there, my lord. That was a lie of sorts, as it happens.”

The one-eyed outlaw came forward with a long coil of hempen rope. He looped one end around Merrett’s neck, pulled it tight, and tied a hard knot under his ear. The other end he threw over the limb of the oak. The big man in the yellow cloak caught it.

“What are you doing?” Merrett knew how stupid that sounded, but he could not believe what was happening, even then. “You’d never dare hang a Frey.”

Yellow cloak laughed. “That other one, the pimply boy, he said the same thing.”

He doesn’t mean it. He cannot mean it. “My father will pay you. I’m worth a good ransom, more than Petyr, twice as much.”

The singer sighed. “Lord Walder might be half-blind and gouty, but he’s not so stupid as to snap at the same bait twice. Next time he’ll send a hundred swords instead of a hundred dragons, I fear.”

“He will!” Merrett tried to sound stern, but his voice betrayed him. “He’ll send a thousand swords, and kill you all.”

“He has to catch us first.” The singer glanced up at poor Petyr. “And he can’t hang us twice, now can he?” He drew a melancholy air from the strings of his woodharp. “Here now, don’t soil yourself. All you need to do is answer me a question, and I’ll tell them to let you go.”

Merrett would tell them anything if it meant his life. “What do you want to know? I’ll tell you true, I swear it.”

The outlaw gave him an encouraging smile. "Well, as it happens, we're looking for a dog that ran away."

"A dog?" Merrett was lost. "What kind of dog?"

"He answers to the name Sandor Clegane. Thoros says he was making for the Twins. We found the ferrymen who took him across the Trident, and the poor sod he robbed on the kingsroad. Did you see him at the wedding, perchance?"

"The Red Wedding?" Merrett's skull felt as if it were about to split, but he did his best to recall. There had been so much confusion, but surely someone would have mentioned Joffrey's dog sniffing round the Twins. "He wasn't in the castle. Not at the main feast . . . he might have been at the bastard feast, or in the camps, but . . . no, someone would have said . . ."

"He would have had a child with him," said the singer. "A skinny girl, about ten. Or perhaps a boy the same age."

"I don't think so," said Merrett. "Not that I knew."

"No? Ah, that's a pity. Well, up you go."

"No," Merrett squealed loudly. "No, *don't*, I gave you your answer, you said you'd let me go."

"Seems to me that what I said was I'd *tell* them to let you go." The singer looked at yellow cloak. "Lem, let him go."

"Go bugger yourself," the big outlaw replied brusquely.

The singer gave Merrett a helpless shrug and began to play, "The Day They Hanged Black Robin."

"*Please*." The last of Merrett's courage was running down his leg. "I've done you no harm. I brought the gold, the way you said. I answered your question. I have *children*."

"That Young Wolf never will," said the one-eyed outlaw.

Merrett could hardly think for the pounding in his head. "He shamed us, the whole realm was laughing, we had to cleanse the stain on our honor." His father had said all that and more.

"Maybe so. What do a bunch o' bloody peasants know about a lord's honor?" Yellow cloak wrapped the end of the rope around his hand three

times. “We know some about murder, though.”

“Not murder.” His voice was shrill. “It was vengeance, we had a right to our vengeance. It was *war*. Aegon, we called him Jinglebell, a poor lackwit never hurt anyone, Lady Stark cut his throat. We lost half a hundred men in the camps. Ser Garse Goodbrook, Kyra’s husband, and Ser Tytos, Jared’s son . . . someone smashed his head in with an axe . . . Stark’s direwolf killed four of our wolfhounds and tore the kennelmaster’s arm off his shoulder, even after we’d filled him full of quarrels . . .”

“So you sewed his head on Robb Stark’s neck after both o’ them were dead,” said yellow cloak.

“My father did that. All I did was drink. You wouldn’t kill a man for drinking.” Merrett remembered something then, something that might be the saving of him. “They say Lord Beric always gives a man a trial, that he won’t kill a man unless something’s proved against him. You can’t prove anything against me. The Red Wedding was my father’s work, and Ryman’s and Lord Bolton’s. Lothar rigged the tents to collapse and put the crossbowmen in the gallery with the musicians, Bastard Walder led the attack on the camps . . . they’re the ones you want, not me, I only drank some wine . . . *you have no witness.*”

“As it happens, you’re wrong there.” The singer turned to the hooded woman. “Milady?”

The outlaws parted as she came forward, saying no word. When she lowered her hood, something tightened inside Merrett’s chest, and for a moment he could not breathe. *No. No, I saw her die. She was dead for a day and night before they stripped her naked and threw her body in the river. Raymund opened her throat from ear to ear. She was dead.*

Her cloak and collar hid the gash his brother’s blade had made, but her face was even worse than he remembered. The flesh had gone pudding soft in the water and turned the color of curdled milk. Half her hair was gone and the rest had turned as white and brittle as a crone’s. Beneath her ravaged scalp, her face was shredded skin and black blood where she had raked herself with her nails. But her eyes were the most terrible thing. Her eyes saw him, and they hated.

“She don’t speak,” said the big man in the yellow cloak. “You bloody bastards cut her throat too deep for that. But she remembers.” He turned to the dead woman and said, “What do you say, m’lady? Was he part of it?”

Lady Catelyn’s eyes never left him. She nodded.

Merrett Frey opened his mouth to plead, but the noose choked off his words. His feet left the ground, the rope cutting deep into the soft flesh beneath his chin. Up into the air he jerked, kicking and twisting, up and up and up.