

CATELYN

Ned and the girls were eight days gone when Maester Luwin came to her one night in Bran's sickroom, carrying a reading lamp and the books of account. "It is past time that we reviewed the figures, my lady," he said. "You'll want to know how much this royal visit cost us."

Catelyn looked at Bran in his sickbed and brushed his hair back off his forehead. It had grown very long, she realized. She would have to cut it soon. "I have no need to look at figures, Maester Luwin," she told him, never taking her eyes from Bran. "I know what the visit cost us. Take the books away."

"My lady, the king's party had healthy appetites. We must replenish our stores before—"

She cut him off. "I said, take the books away. The steward will attend to our needs."

"We have no steward," Maester Luwin reminded her. Like a little grey rat, she thought, he would not let go. "Poole went south to establish Lord Eddard's household at King's Landing."

Catelyn nodded absently. "Oh, yes. I remember." Bran looked so pale. She wondered whether they might move his bed under the window, so he could get the morning sun.

Maester Luwin set the lamp in a niche by the door and fiddled with its wick. "There are several appointments that require your immediate attention, my lady. Besides the steward, we need a captain of the guards to fill Jory's place, a new master of horse—"

Her eyes snapped around and found him. "A master of *horse*?" Her voice was a whip.

The maester was shaken. "Yes, my lady. Hullen rode south with Lord Eddard, so—"

"My son lies here broken and dying, Luwin, and you wish to discuss a new master of *horse*? Do you think I care what happens in the stables? Do

you think it matters to me one whit? I would gladly butcher every horse in Winterfell with my own hands if it would open Bran's eyes, do you understand that? *Do you?*”

He bowed his head. “Yes, my lady, but the appointments—”

“I'll make the appointments,” Robb said.

Catelyn had not heard him enter, but there he stood in the doorway, looking at her. She had been shouting, she realized with a sudden flush of shame. What was happening to her? She was so tired, and her head hurt all the time.

Maester Luwin looked from Catelyn to her son. “I have prepared a list of those we might wish to consider for the vacant offices,” he said, offering Robb a paper plucked from his sleeve.

Her son glanced at the names. He had come from outside, Catelyn saw; his cheeks were red from the cold, his hair shaggy and windblown. “Good men,” he said. “We'll talk about them tomorrow.” He handed back the list of names.

“Very good, my lord.” The paper vanished into his sleeve.

“Leave us now,” Robb said. Maester Luwin bowed and departed. Robb closed the door behind him and turned to her. He was wearing a sword, she saw. “Mother, what are you doing?”

Catelyn had always thought Robb looked like her; like Bran and Rickon and Sansa, he had the Tully coloring, the auburn hair, the blue eyes. Yet now for the first time she saw something of Eddard Stark in his face, something as stern and hard as the north. “What am I doing?” she echoed, puzzled. “How can you ask that? What do you imagine I'm doing? I am taking care of your brother. I am taking care of Bran.”

“Is that what you call it? You haven't left this room since Bran was hurt. You didn't even come to the gate when Father and the girls went south.”

“I said my farewells to them here, and watched them ride out from that window.” She had begged Ned not to go, not now, not after what had happened; everything had changed now, couldn't he see that? It was no use.

He had no choice, he had told her, and then he left, choosing. "I can't leave him, even for a moment, not when any moment could be his last. I have to be with him, if... if..." She took her son's limp hand, sliding his fingers through her own. He was so frail and thin, with no strength left in his hand, but she could still feel the warmth of life through his skin.

Robb's voice softened. "He's not going to die, Mother. Maester Luwin says the time of greatest danger has passed."

"And what if Maester Luwin is wrong? What if Bran needs me and I'm not here?"

"*Rickon* needs you," Robb said sharply. "He's only three, he doesn't understand what's happening. He thinks everyone has deserted him, so he follows me around all day, clutching my leg and crying. I don't know what to do with him." He paused a moment, chewing on his lower lip the way he'd done when he was little. "Mother, *I* need you too. I'm trying but I can't... I can't do it all by myself." His voice broke with sudden emotion, and Catelyn remembered that he was only fourteen. She wanted to get up and go to him, but Bran was still holding her hand and she could not move.

Outside the tower, a wolf began to howl. Catelyn trembled, just for a second.

"Bran's." Robb opened the window and let the night air into the stuffy tower room. The howling grew louder. It was a cold and lonely sound, full of melancholy and despair.

"Don't," she told him. "Bran needs to stay warm."

"He needs to hear them sing," Robb said. Somewhere out in Winterfell, a second wolf began to howl in chorus with the first. Then a third, closer. "Shaggydog and Grey Wind," Robb said as their voices rose and fell together. "You can tell them apart if you listen close."

Catelyn was shaking. It was the grief, the cold, the howling of the direwolves. Night after night, the howling and the cold wind and the grey empty castle, on and on they went, never changing, and her boy lying there broken, the sweetest of her children, the gentlest, Bran who loved to laugh and climb and dreamt of knighthood, all gone now, she would never hear

him laugh again. Sobbing, she pulled her hand free of his and covered her ears against those terrible howls. “Make them stop!” she cried. “I can’t stand it, make them stop, make them stop, kill them all if you must, just make them *stop!*”

She didn’t remember falling to the floor, but there she was, and Robb was lifting her, holding her in strong arms. “Don’t be afraid, Mother. They would never hurt him.” He helped her to her narrow bed in the corner of the sickroom. “Close your eyes,” he said gently. “Rest. Maester Luwin tells me you’ve hardly slept since Bran’s fall.”

“I *can’t*,” she wept. “Gods forgive me, Robb, I can’t, what if he dies while I’m asleep, what if he dies, what if he dies...” The wolves were still howling. She screamed and held her ears again. “Oh, gods, close the window!”

“If you swear to me you’ll sleep.” Robb went to the window, but as he reached for the shutters another sound was added to the mournful howling of the direwolves. “Dogs,” he said, listening. “All the dogs are barking. They’ve never done that before...” Catelyn heard his breath catch in his throat. When she looked up, his face was pale in the lamplight. “*Fire*,” he whispered.

Fire, she thought, and then, *Bran!* “Help me,” she said urgently, sitting up. “Help me with Bran.”

Robb did not seem to hear her. “The library tower’s on fire,” he said.

Catelyn could see the flickering reddish light through the open window now. She sagged with relief. Bran was safe. The library was across the bailey, there was no way the fire would reach them here. “Thank the gods,” she whispered.

Robb looked at her as if she’d gone mad. “Mother, stay here. I’ll come back as soon as the fire’s out.” He ran then. She heard him shout to the guards outside the room, heard them descending together in a wild rush, taking the stairs two and three at a time.

Outside, there were shouts of “Fire!” in the yard, screams, running footsteps, the whinny of frightened horses, and the frantic barking of the

castle dogs. The howling was gone, she realized as she listened to the cacophony. The direwolves had fallen silent.

Catelyn said a silent prayer of thanks to the seven faces of god as she went to the window. Across the bailey, long tongues of flame shot from the windows of the library. She watched the smoke rise into the sky and thought sadly of all the books the Starks had gathered over the centuries. Then she closed the shutters.

When she turned away from the window, the man was in the room with her.

“You weren’t s’posed to be here,” he muttered sourly. “No one was s’posed to be here.”

He was a small, dirty man in filthy brown clothing, and he stank of horses. Catelyn knew all the men who worked in their stables, and he was none of them. He was gaunt, with limp blond hair and pale eyes deep-sunk in a bony face, and there was a dagger in his hand.

Catelyn looked at the knife, then at Bran. “No,” she said. The word stuck in her throat, the merest whisper.

He must have heard her. “It’s a mercy,” he said. “He’s dead already.”

“No,” Catelyn said, louder now as she found her voice again. “No, you *can’t*.” She spun back toward the window to scream for help, but the man moved faster than she would have believed. One hand clamped down over her mouth and yanked back her head, the other brought the dagger up to her windpipe. The stench of him was overwhelming.

She reached up with both hands and grabbed the blade with all her strength, pulling it away from her throat. She heard him cursing into her ear. Her fingers were slippery with blood, but she would not let go of the dagger. The hand over her mouth clenched more tightly, shutting off her air. Catelyn twisted her head to the side and managed to get a piece of his flesh between her teeth. She bit down hard into his palm. The man grunted in pain. She ground her teeth together and tore at him, and all of a sudden he let go. The taste of his blood filled her mouth. She sucked in air and screamed, and he grabbed her hair and pulled her away from him, and she

stumbled and went down, and then he was standing over her, breathing hard, shaking. The dagger was still clutched tightly in his right hand, slick with blood. "You weren't s'posed to be here," he repeated stupidly.

Catelyn saw the shadow slip through the open door behind him. There was a low rumble, less than a snarl, the merest whisper of a threat, but he must have heard something, because he started to turn just as the wolf made its leap. They went down together, half sprawled over Catelyn where she'd fallen. The wolf had him under the jaw. The man's shriek lasted less than a second before the beast wrenched back its head, taking out half his throat.

His blood felt like warm rain as it sprayed across her face.

The wolf was looking at her. Its jaws were red and wet and its eyes glowed golden in the dark room. It was Bran's wolf, she realized. Of course it was. "Thank you," Catelyn whispered, her voice faint and tiny. She lifted her hand, trembling. The wolf padded closer, sniffed at her fingers, then licked at the blood with a wet rough tongue. When it had cleaned all the blood off her hand, it turned away silently and jumped up on Bran's bed and lay down beside him. Catelyn began to laugh hysterically.

That was the way they found them, when Robb and Maester Luwin and Ser Rodrik burst in with half the guards in Winterfell. When the laughter finally died in her throat, they wrapped her in warm blankets and led her back to the Great Keep, to her own chambers. Old Nan undressed her and helped her into a scalding hot bath and washed the blood off her with a soft cloth.

Afterward Maester Luwin arrived to dress her wounds. The cuts in her fingers went deep, almost to the bone, and her scalp was raw and bleeding where he'd pulled out a handful of hair. The maester told her the pain was just starting now, and gave her milk of the poppy to help her sleep.

Finally she closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, they told her that she had slept four days. Catelyn nodded and sat up in bed. It all seemed like a nightmare to her now, everything since Bran's fall, a terrible dream of blood and grief, but she had the pain in her hands to remind her that it was real. She felt weak and light-headed, yet strangely resolute, as if a great weight had lifted from her.

“Bring me some bread and honey,” she told her servants, “and take word to Maester Luwin that my bandages want changing.” They looked at her in surprise and ran to do her bidding.

Catelyn remembered the way she had been before, and she was ashamed. She had let them all down, her children, her husband, her House. It would not happen again. She would show these northerners how strong a Tully of Riverrun could be.

Robb arrived before her food. Rodrik Cassel came with him, and her husband’s ward Theon Greyjoy, and lastly Hallis Mollen, a muscular guardsman with a square brown beard. He was the new captain of the guard, Robb said. Her son was dressed in boiled leather and ringmail, she saw, and a sword hung at his waist.

“Who was he?” Catelyn asked them.

“No one knows his name,” Hallis Mollen told her. “He was no man of Winterfell, m’lady, but some says they seen him here and about the castle these past few weeks.”

“One of the king’s men, then,” she said, “or one of the Lannisters’. He could have waited behind when the others left.”

“Maybe,” Hal said. “With all these strangers filling up Winterfell of late, there’s no way of saying who he belonged to.”

“He’d been hiding in your stables,” Greyjoy said. “You could smell it on him.”

“And how could he go unnoticed?” she said sharply.

Hallis Mollen looked abashed. “Between the horses Lord Eddard took south and them we sent north to the Night’s Watch, the stalls were half-empty. It were no great trick to hide from the stableboys. Could be Hodor saw him, the talk is that boy’s been acting queer, but simple as he is...” Hal shook his head.

“We found where he’d been sleeping,” Robb put in. “He had ninety silver stags in a leather bag buried beneath the straw.”

“It’s good to know my son’s life was not sold cheaply,” Catelyn said bitterly.

Hallis Mollen looked at her, confused. “Begging your grace, m’lady, you saying he was out to kill your *boy*?”

Greyjoy was doubtful. “That’s madness.”

“He came for Bran,” Catelyn said. “He kept muttering how I wasn’t supposed to be there. He set the library fire thinking I would rush to put it out, taking any guards with me. If I hadn’t been half-mad with grief, it would have worked.”

“Why would anyone want to kill Bran?” Robb said. “Gods, he’s only a little boy, helpless, sleeping...”

Catelyn gave her firstborn a challenging look. “If you are to rule in the north, you must think these things through, Robb. Answer your own question. Why would anyone want to kill a sleeping child?”

Before he could answer, the servants returned with a plate of food fresh from the kitchen. There was much more than she’d asked for: hot bread, butter and honey and blackberry preserves, a rasher of bacon and a soft-boiled egg, a wedge of cheese, a pot of mint tea. And with it came Maester Luwin.

“How is my son, Maester?” Catelyn looked at all the food and found she had no appetite.

Maester Luwin lowered his eyes. “Unchanged, my lady.”

It was the reply she had expected, no more and no less. Her hands throbbed with pain, as if the blade were still in her, cutting deep. She sent the servants away and looked back to Robb. “Do you have the answer yet?”

“Someone is afraid Bran might wake up,” Robb said, “afraid of what he might say or do, afraid of something he knows.”

Catelyn was proud of him. “Very good.” She turned to the new captain of the guard. “We must keep Bran safe. If there was one killer, there could be others.”

“How many guards do you want, m’lady?” Hal asked.

“So long as Lord Eddard is away, my son is the master of Winterfell,” she told him.

Robb stood a little taller. "Put one man in the sickroom, night and day, one outside the door, two at the bottom of the stairs. No one sees Bran without my warrant or my mother's."

"As you say, m'lord."

"Do it now," Catelyn suggested.

"And let his wolf stay in the room with him," Robb added.

"Yes," Catelyn said. And then again: "Yes."

Hallis Mollen bowed and left the room.

"Lady Stark," Ser Rodrik said when the guardsman had gone, "did you chance to notice the dagger the killer used?"

"The circumstances did not allow me to examine it closely, but I can vouch for its edge," Catelyn replied with a dry smile. "Why do you ask?"

"We found the knife still in the villain's grasp. It seemed to me that it was altogether too fine a weapon for such a man, so I looked at it long and hard. The blade is Valyrian steel, the hilt dragonbone. A weapon like that has no business being in the hands of such as him. Someone gave it to him."

Catelyn nodded, thoughtful. "Robb, close the door."

He looked at her strangely, but did as she told him.

"What I am about to tell you must not leave this room," she told them. "I want your oaths on that. If even part of what I suspect is true, Ned and my girls have ridden into deadly danger, and a word in the wrong ears could mean their lives."

"Lord Eddard is a second father to me," said Theon Greyjoy. "I do so swear."

"You have my oath," Maester Luwin said.

"And mine, my lady," echoed Ser Rodrik.

She looked at her son. "And you, Robb?"

He nodded his consent.

"My sister Lysa believes the Lannisters murdered her husband, Lord Arryn, the Hand of the King," Catelyn told them. "It comes to me that Jaime Lannister did not join the hunt the day Bran fell. He remained here in

the castle.” The room was deathly quiet. “I do not think Bran fell from that tower,” she said into the stillness. “I think he was thrown.”

The shock was plain on their faces. “My lady, that is a monstrous suggestion,” said Rodrik Cassel. “Even the Kingslayer would flinch at the murder of an innocent child.”

“Oh, would he?” Theon Greyjoy asked. “I wonder.”

“There is no limit to Lannister pride or Lannister ambition,” Catelyn said.

“The boy had always been surehanded in the past,” Maester Luwin said thoughtfully. “He knew every stone in Winterfell.”

“*Gods*,” Robb swore, his young face dark with anger. “If this is true, he will pay for it.” He drew his sword and waved it in the air. “I’ll kill him myself!”

Ser Rodrik bristled at him. “Put that away! The Lannisters are a hundred leagues away. *Never* draw your sword unless you mean to use it. How many times must I tell you, foolish boy?”

Abashed, Robb sheathed his sword, suddenly a child again. Catelyn said to Ser Rodrik, “I see my son is wearing steel now.”

The old master-at-arms said, “I thought it was time.”

Robb was looking at her anxiously. “Past time,” she said. “Winterfell may have need of all its swords soon, and they had best not be made of wood.”

Theon Greyjoy put a hand on the hilt of his blade and said, “My lady, if it comes to that, my House owes yours a great debt.”

Maester Luwin pulled at his chain collar where it chafed against his neck. “All we have is conjecture. This is the queen’s beloved brother we mean to accuse. She will not take it kindly. We must have proof, or forever keep silent.”

“Your proof is in the dagger,” Ser Rodrik said. “A fine blade like that will not have gone unnoticed.”

There was only one place to find the truth of it, Catelyn realized.
“Someone must go to King’s Landing.”

“I’ll go,” Robb said.

“No,” she told him. “Your place is here. There must always be a Stark in Winterfell.” She looked at Ser Rodrik with his great white whiskers, at Maester Luwin in his grey robes, at young Greyjoy, lean and dark and impetuous. Who to send? Who would be believed? Then she knew. Catelyn struggled to push back the blankets, her bandaged fingers as stiff and unyielding as stone. She climbed out of bed. “I must go myself.”

“My lady,” said Maester Luwin, “is that wise? Surely the Lannisters would greet your arrival with suspicion.”

“What about Bran?” Robb asked. The poor boy looked utterly confused now. “You can’t mean to leave him.”

“I have done everything I can for Bran,” she said, laying a wounded hand on his arm. “His life is in the hands of the gods and Maester Luwin. As you reminded me yourself, Robb, I have other children to think of now.”

“You will need a strong escort, my lady,” Theon said.

“I’ll send Hal with a squad of guardsmen,” Robb said.

“No,” Catelyn said. “A large party attracts unwelcome attention. I would not have the Lannisters know I am coming.”

Ser Rodrik protested. “My lady, let me accompany you at least. The kingsroad can be perilous for a woman alone.”

“I will not be taking the kingsroad,” Catelyn replied. She thought for a moment, then nodded her consent. “Two riders can move as fast as one, and a good deal faster than a long column burdened by wagons and wheelhouses. I will welcome your company, Ser Rodrik. We will follow the White Knife down to the sea, and hire a ship at White Harbor. Strong horses and brisk winds should bring us to King’s Landing well ahead of Ned and the Lannisters.” *And then, she thought, we shall see what we shall see.*