

her my seed.” He dismissed the red-faced youth with a flick of his fingers and gestured to two of his other sons. “Danwell, Whalen, help me to my chair.”

They shifted Lord Walder from his litter and carried him to the high seat of the Freys, a tall chair of black oak whose back was carved in the shape of two towers linked by a bridge. His young wife crept up timidly and covered his legs with a blanket. When he was settled, the old man beckoned Catelyn forward and planted a papery dry kiss on her hand. “There,” he announced. “Now that I have observed the courtesies, my lady, perhaps my sons will do me the honor of shutting their mouths. Why are you here?”

“To ask you to open your gates, my lord,” Catelyn replied politely. “My son and his lords bannermen are most anxious to cross the river and be on their way.”

“To Riverrun?” He sniggered. “Oh, no need to tell me, no need. I’m not blind yet. The old man can still read a map.”

“To Riverrun,” Catelyn confirmed. She saw no reason to deny it. “Where I might have expected to find you, my lord. You are still my father’s bannerman, are you not?”

“Heh, “ said Lord Walder, a noise halfway between a laugh and a grunt. “I called my swords, yes I did, here they are, you saw them on the walls. It was my intent to march as soon as all my strength was assembled. Well, to send my sons. I am well past marching myself, Lady Catelyn.” He looked around for likely confirmation and pointed to a tall, stooped man of fifty years. “Tell her, Jared. Tell her that was my intent.”

“It was, my lady,” said Ser Jared Frey, one of his sons by his second wife. “On my honor.”

“Is it my fault that your fool brother lost his battle before we could march?” He leaned back against his cushions and scowled at her, as if challenging her to dispute his version of events. “I am told the Kingslayer went through him like an axe through ripe cheese. Why should my boys hurry south to die? All those who did go south are running north again.”

Catelyn would gladly have spitted the querulous old man and roasted him over a fire, but she had only till evenfall to open the bridge. Calmly, she said, “All the more reason that we must reach Riverrun, and soon. Where can we go to talk, my lord?”

“We’re talking now,” Lord Frey complained. The spotted pink head snapped around. “What are you all looking at?” he shouted at his kin. “Get out of here. Lady Stark wants to speak to me in private. Might be she has designs on my fidelity, heh. Go, all of you, find something useful to do. Yes, you too, woman. Out, out, out.” As his sons and grandsons and daughters and bastards and nieces and nephews streamed from the hall, he leaned close to Catelyn and confessed, “They’re all waiting for me to die. Stevron’s been waiting for forty years, but I keep disappointing him. Heh. Why should I die just so he can be a lord? I ask you. I won’t do it.”

“I have every hope that you will live to be a hundred.”

“That would boil them, to be sure. Oh, to be sure. Now, what do you want to say?”

“We want to cross,” Catelyn told him.

“Oh, do you? That’s blunt. Why should I let you?”

For a moment her anger flared. “If you were strong enough to climb your own battlements, Lord Frey, you would see that my son has twenty thousand men outside your walls.”