

CATELYN

Of all the rooms in Winterfell's Great Keep, Catelyn's bedchambers were the hottest. She seldom had to light a fire. The castle had been built over natural hot springs, and the scalding waters rushed through its walls and chambers like blood through a man's body, driving the chill from the stone halls, filling the glass gardens with a moist warmth, keeping the earth from freezing. Open pools smoked day and night in a dozen small courtyards. That was a little thing, in summer; in winter, it was the difference between life and death.

Catelyn's bath was always hot and steaming, and her walls warm to the touch. The warmth reminded her of Riverrun, of days in the sun with Lysa and Edmure, but Ned could never abide the heat. The Starks were made for the cold, he would tell her, and she would laugh and tell him in that case they had certainly built their castle in the wrong place.

So when they had finished, Ned rolled off and climbed from her bed, as he had a thousand times before. He crossed the room, pulled back the heavy tapestries, and threw open the high narrow windows one by one, letting the night air into the chamber.

The wind swirled around him as he stood facing the dark, naked and empty-handed. Catelyn pulled the furs to her chin and watched him. He looked somehow smaller and more vulnerable, like the youth she had wed in the sept at Riverrun, fifteen long years gone. Her loins still ached from the urgency of his lovemaking. It was a good ache. She could feel his seed within her. She prayed that it might quicken there. It had been three years since Rickon. She was not too old. She could give him another son.

"I will refuse him," Ned said as he turned back to her. His eyes were haunted, his voice thick with doubt.

Catelyn sat up in the bed. "You cannot. You must not."

"My duties are here in the north. I have no wish to be Robert's Hand."

"He will not understand that. He is a king now, and kings are not like other men. If you refuse to serve him, he will wonder why, and sooner or later he will begin to suspect that you oppose him. Can't you see the danger that would put us in?"

Ned shook his head, refusing to believe. "Robert would never harm me or any of mine. We were closer than brothers. He loves me. If I refuse him, he will roar and curse and bluster, and in a week we will laugh about it together. I know the man!"

"You knew the man," she said. "The king is a stranger to you." Catelyn remembered the direwolf dead in the snow, the broken antler lodged deep in her throat. She had to make him see. "Pride is everything to a king, my lord. Robert came all this way to see you, to bring you these great honors, you cannot throw them back in his face."

"Honors?" Ned laughed bitterly.

"In his eyes, yes," she said.

"And in yours?"