Remember Me

by IndigoRaysofLight

Summary

Ned Stark wakes up in a hospital, in a remote town with no recollection of his past. There he meets a familiar face, who gives him a new identity and a new life. Yet his mind is racked by ghosts that still bind him to his past and compel him to rediscover the memories he left behind.

This is the story of Ned Stark finding his way back to his true self, his home, his family. . .and his Catelyn.

Notes

I want to take a moment and thank pattarain, from tumblr, who nudged me in the right direction and provided the persuasion I needed to write my first fic. And I want to dedicate this work to our lovely DKNC and thank her for writing brilliant fics that inspired me to write this in the first place.

I do not own anything. All the characters come from the fantastic imagination of George R R Martin in his series A Song of Ice and Fire. I will possibly add direct quotes or paraphrases.
from the show or the books, as I know them. I admit that I have not read the books, what knowledge I have about these characters is acquired by reading the well written fics here, from the series Game of Thrones and by doing research of my own. I personally wanted to explore the idea of Ned losing his memories especially after meeting Catelyn, because I knew the love they shared would guide him back, in any case. And I approached it in a Modernized Westeros setting because I've always been fascinated by the idea of Westeros flourishing over time just like Earth did.

I'll change the rating to mature eventually as the story will get graphic after the first few chapters. This is the first time I'm writing a fanfic or any story, for that matter, so in case you find any errors (especially grammatical) feel free to let me know. I use British English so unexpected 'U's will pop up in words every now and then, if you are used to US English. Comments and Critiques are Welcome. Enjoy!
Five months. It had been five months since he woke up at the hospital after incident that had erased all his memories and turned his mind into a blank canvas, made him the person he was now. Physically he healed over a couple of months ago, emotionally he felt wounded still. A few weeks into his recovery he felt a desperate need to regain his memories, the doctor said it was only normal to feel that way, that it would ease in time and perhaps also help him remember. The doctor had written down a prescription of some pills to soothe his nerves, recommended that he give himself some time to heal and to feel content with what he already had before he ran after the memories he had lost. The drugs did soothe him but, he did not truly remember much for a while. Over time, he had started feeling certain familiarities, started getting flashes of images and some crooked broken pieces of memories lost in the past. If he focused too much he ended up getting terrible head aches or just lost the fragments he had gathered all together. Some of those pieces that he still remembered had turned into repetitive nightmares that haunted him most of the time and this night was no different.

He dreamt of her again. Or at least he thought it was a “her”. For months now his mind was racked by troubling dreams. Sometimes he dreamt of an older man with graying hair wearing a crisp grey suit with his arm around a younger charming man who looked just like him, he saw an ancient castle in the woods and in a clearing stood a giant white tree with bright red leaves, these images just made him feel a sad longing. Ironically, the memories that troubled him the most were the ones that held joyful giggles of children with chubby little feet running around in the grass, and a flicker of beautiful long auburn hair glowing in firelight and unbelievably blue eyes that he wished to get lost into. Just as he would get comfortable, his vision would blur and slip away leaving him grasping in the dark. He would reach to hold that auburn haired stranger and the children close to his heart lest they fade away from him. He would desperately claw for some solace only to find himself sinking further and further away from it. In that darkness he felt a loneliness so deep it would drain his energy and leave him hollow, turning those images into a mirage in mere moments.

That was the moment he woke up crying out, as he always did, feeling frantic, breathing heavily with his clothes soaked in sweat. He reached over to grasp something as a reflex to his left and his hand almost knocked over the glass of water on the end table, why do I always do this when I dream badly? He knew it was a something his past self must have done because every time he looked over to the left and discovered only the edge of his bed, he felt a longing strike him like a sharp knife in the heart. Longing for someone long forgotten, someone he had loved deeply, for sure, as he had never felt anything so strong before.

Five months. Five months have passed and I still don’t remember a damn thing. This couldn’t go on, he had to remember something. He was grateful for everything Ash had done for him, but her stories from past ten years didn’t comprise of all of his life, even if it was the only link he had to his past since he woke up. Ash had found him at the hospital just a few days after the incident. She walked in with dark blue eyes, violet in some lights with an expectant smile on her face. She was slender, yet made of soft curves and had mid-long black hair pulled over her shoulders that curled along her collarbone. She was beautiful. The doctor explained to him that she was his girlfriend, sadly he didn’t remember her at all.

Ashara, Ash, she had said her name was. It sounded vaguely familiar, her face seemed familiar too. According to her, his name was Richard Williams, he was orphaned at a young age and lived with his grandparents until the age of twenty, when they died in a car crash. Since then, he lived on his own, working at a local store to pay his dues and they both had an on and off relationship. She
procured a picture from nearly ten years ago and told him how they'd met. She told him how he had been very shy to ask her to dance at a party and how his face had transformed into a wide smile after she had said 'yes'. As he recalls now that story had seemed quite familiar to him, that's the point he started to believe her. She had told him a few more memories of some of their dates and was so deep in thought she looked like she wanted to go back in those moments and relive them. And looking at her face he wanted to tell her he remembered but he drew a blank, yet he couldn’t deny that she seemed very familiar. And the picture spoke for itself, she further explained, looking anywhere but his eyes how a year ago they had gotten into a huge fight and he had moved away for a while. And also how a few months after that they had gotten back in touch, talked back and forth and decided to get back together again. He was coming down to see her when she lost contact with him, a couple of days later he was found a little outside of town by her brothers when they were driving back after visiting her place for thanksgiving. He was bruised, had a head wound with no wallet on him. Her brothers had recognized him immediately, informed her, and brought him straight to the hospital. She seemed honestly distraught when she was telling him the events and he realized he actually believed her.

If she hadn't found him, he'd just be another John Doe with a clean slate who needed to start over his life because of his condition anyway. It was a good fresh start as any. Or as I thought at the time, he thought grimly.

A few days later, the sheriff came to visit him at the hospital- he seemed quite familiar as well -Ash said he was a distant relative, when he noticed they shared similar features. The sheriff was slightly taller than Ash, with greying hair and a serious face, he was polite yet spoke tersely, he explained that they didn’t find his belongings or his car and likely the thieves used the car to escape and it was highly unlikely they stayed in town so, it was too late to look for them. Ash mentioned it was a rental car, it would take a while for the search, in dead winter and it was naïve to hope to get his money back after all this time. The sheriff honestly didn’t seem enthusiastic about the search so, he didn't fret over it. She had one of his old Ids, birth certificate, adoption papers that he had left, in anger, when he moved out. “You trusted me with it, and I kept them safe for you. We'd gone through rough patches before, this wasn’t really new for us”, she'd said slightly sheepishly. The documents were authentic enough and that solidified his identity and strengthened his belief in her explanation. If only that were enough.

After spending a little over a week at the hospital, he had moved in with her. At the time, his left forearm was still fractured and in a cast, his torso still aching from bruises, the large stitched gash on his left eyebrow still healing and a throbbing bandaged wound on the back of his head- which the doctor had told him would take the longest to heal. It took him a while to get used to his identity and his surroundings, but he adapted pretty fast. He and Ash got along well enough and over time they had built a good rapport. He thought maybe in time he would start remembering their past together. The doctor wanted him to avoid the strain and take some rest for a few of weeks and reluctantly he had agreed to it. However, he still helped around the house as Ash didn’t allow him to go out without her, much to his chagrin. You don’t know the place quite well and I don’t want you to get lost, she’d say. After what happened to him the last time he went away, he couldn’t blame her for feeling that way.

Ash's place was quite small so soon they had to move to a different, slightly bigger place. This house was not particularly large and was pretty secluded, but he realized he preferred solitude. After they moved in there, it took a couple of weeks to settle in. Just as they were getting to a comfortable stance was when they hit their first bump. They were sitting on the couch chatting when Ash mentioned her aspirations and how she still hadn’t achieved much of anything she wanted to before her thirtieth birthday, which was not that far and he'd said “Don’t lose hope. You're smart, you'll figure it out, I know it” with a crooked smile. Ash’s eyes had gone from hope to something quite different as she leaned in for a kiss and to his surprise reflexively he actually got up and backed off.
Something in his mind told him a clear NO! Adrenaline rushed into his system and he panicked. He stood a few paces away from her feeling quite alarmed and breathing heavily. He just looked at her to say something and in her eyes saw a mixture of hurt and something else like....caution? Fear? He didn’t know, he just mumbled an apology and all but ran into his room.

The next day, he brought up the incident and told her it would take time to feel comfortable taking the relationship.... further, as he still struggled emotionally. So you did, but you doubt it. She was a beautiful woman but, honestly he felt guilty and wrong to even contemplate being physically intimate with her. She was desirable to men, he knew, he could see eyes following them whenever they walked in town, but he never felt attracted to her like that. But shouldn't I? Since we have a past together?, it always bothered him. He cared for her. He did. Not the way she wants you to though.

Sighing he got out of bed. In spite of her constant reminder that they’d been a couple for almost ten years, he didn’t love her. He knew that, it just didn’t feel right. Has his past self loved her? He didn’t know. Wouldn’t it be plain enough or even strong enough to seep through his subconscious? Or maybe his past self didn’t love her enough. Or maybe he didn’t love her enough. Or maybe he didn’t love her at all, whispered a tiny part of his mind . There was a repressed instinct within him that was clear that he hadn’t loved her, and after that night he stopped resisting it.

The stories she told him sounded like he did love her though. But sometimes the man in the stories seemed very charming and buoyant, that it didn’t sound like him at all. He just assumed the emotional state he was in now had changed him as a person. He spent months after his full recovery, trying to convince himself to love her. It didn't work, no matter how rational he was about it. It all came down to one simple fact, if his past self had feelings for her, then he would've kissed her back that night. He almost felt like something had pulled him away, a force stronger than rationality. And that’s when he started wondering why, in spite of staying so long with her he didn’t remember a single memory of them together. Since the doctor had told him he would slowly recover memories in a few weeks, those should have been the first memories he tapped into. He could surely remember something if he did love her- an impulse, a feeling, anything! He sighed audibly again and closed his eyes lest he became overwhelmed by the growing suspicion about Ash coupled with the frustration with himself for not remembering his past.

Unbidden, the image of auburn hair and blue eyes flashed in his mind again. Irritated, he inhaled sharply, started pacing and walked into a mirror on the wall. He leaned on his arms braced on each side of the mirror and glared at his own reflection. Who are you? He thought wistfully studying it. He had a distinct rugged look and his pale skin combined with the sharp features like his prominent nose, the straight line of his thin lips and his pronounced chin made his face seem like it was carved out of marble. He noticed idly the premature lines forming over his furrowed eyebrows and dark circles around his icy grey eyes. His mind went back to the face he saw in his dreams. He could be my brother, we look similar, only he is much better looking than me. The man he saw in his dream also had brown hair with the same hair cut he had and was clean shaven like himself, but his face had been quite expressive and bright. He looked like he would draw people in like a moth to a flame. Compared to that face, the reflection that stared back at him right now seemed quite plain and solemn. His face was impassive, but to a casual observer he would still appear quite intimidating, cold even.

You're the warmest person I know, darling, he heard an amused feminine voice and he jumped back scanning the empty room. He was hearing voices now, God, this has to stop.

He wanted to pace, but his room was quite small as they had moved to a remote little place in town. This area was almost off the grid, apartment buildings were none existent here and this was the only affordable house they could find since neither him nor Ash had a very well paying job. They had enough to cover the usual expenses including his medications. Thankfully, the pharmacist was a cousin of Ash's and gave them a sizable discount, so did the therapist who was a friend of hers.
Everyone in this town knows each other by name. We are practically a huge family, Ash had said. She has friends in high places indeed, he thought grimly as he walked out in the backyard to get some fresh air.

He walked barefoot in the grass and let the chill in the air wash over him. It was early spring but, winter was still slow in ebbing away. He quite liked that, he knew he would miss the winter. There was something about it that made him feel tranquil and peaceful, like home. He had long since discovered cold air didn’t bother him very much, in fact it comforted him. He still had a few hours to relish this peace before he had to leave for work. Couple of months ago he had started working at a local library, in spite of Ash’s insistence that he wasn’t well enough and his assurance that sitting at a desk for twenty hours a week wouldn’t kill him. He wanted to help out and how long was Ash gonna support them by working as a manager at a local store?

If he was truly honest with himself that wasn’t the only reason he took this job. He desperately wanted to distract himself from the nightmares that tormented him. At the same time what better place than a library to read up on recovering from the condition he suffered? Ash wasn’t quite happy with that either, said reading was too much exertion for him. She was right, it did cause him headaches sometimes, but damn him if he ever complained to her about them. One day she all but closed the book he was reading and exasperatedly proclaimed the memories would come slowly and when the time was right, that he shouldn’t force them. He had almost committed murder that day, but stopped by reminding himself she saved his life.

She treated him like he was made of fragile glass sometimes and he hated that, especially after he had started feeling suspicious about their relationship dynamic as she had explained, even if he told himself she was probably just worried for him. It started striking him odd that she was irritated with him trying to remember even after he had healed physically. It felt as though she didn’t want him to remember, usually he would brush it off thinking, maybe she wants a fresh start too, I can’t deny her that when that’s all I can offer her myself, but not now. Not after what happened with the therapist.

The calm he felt in the silent backyard with the exception of occasional rustling of trees disappeared at that thought, as it brought a trail of troubling thoughts with it. To ease his emotional distress the doctor had recommended therapy. And it helped him for a while, even if he pursued it to appease Ash’s concerns. He didn’t feel comfortable sharing private thoughts and he didn’t share everything since, the questions started to seem less consequential and more nosy. He soon felt like he needed to see a better therapist but he had no other choice, this was the only therapist in town and being Ash’s friend, he gave them a “friends and family” discount, he sighed. So after eight to ten increasingly uncomfortable sessions he lied to Ash that he was feeling quite well and stopped going altogether. That excuse was true enough. The other part of the reason was because his suspicion had grown when Ash had casually brought up hearing his cries at night and asked him if he was having nightmares. That was a few days after he had mentioned it to his therapist, what struck him odd was that the night she mentioned he had cried out had been one of the rare nights he had slept quite soundly. And that conversation made him realize the therapist sessions may not be as confidential as he thought. He didn’t think Ash would go as far as interrogating her therapist friend to discover that which he wouldn’t talk to her about, but something in his heart told him to be careful.

Suspicion had started growing rapidly in his mind after that. He had started observing her changes since he stopped visiting the therapist; she seemed odd, she watched him closely and panicked way too much whenever he mentioned doing something new. The panic in her eyes would leave seconds after it appeared, yet it still worried him.

Ash’s odd behaviour made him question her version of the past, as he knew and believed. I don’t think I do anymore. At least he didn’t blindly, he wanted more proof more answers to questions which Ash would brush off, ignore or just get frustrated with. We both need a fresh start, she would
say and change the subject. He needed to know about the things she may have kept from him. The people he may have left behind. Were they still looking for him? Why had they not found him yet? Did they stop after a while thinking he was dead? His thoughts started spiraling and he had to concentrate on breathing deeply again.

He knew he should probably trust Ash's story, yet the stranger in his dreams with the auburn hair and blue eyes made him feel something stronger than anything he had felt for Ash all these months. Every time he saw that image, something strong grasped his heart. A deep longing, something that made him want to hold that image and keep it safe and hidden in his soul. The image was so brief yet so convincing that he couldn’t deny the fact that Ash may have lied about some things when she found him at the hospital all those months ago. He had to find out who that stranger in his dreams was, he was sure it was someone his past self knew and if he could just meet them he could get some answers. Maybe they were a friend? Another...girlfriend? or... Family...? his mind whispered. He gazed eastward and looked at the faintly glowing horizon, the morning was almost here. He had to look into this today. He could talk to one of his colleagues, Dave, another newbie in town who had helped him out when he first started working at the library, he felt comfortable enough with Dave to ask for help.

He needed to do this quietly, if she truly wanted him to never remember his past, it wouldn’t solve anything by alarming her, especially with all her friends in this town. But he wouldn't stop until he got some answers and rediscovered his past. With that thought the image of auburn hair flashed in front of eyes again, followed by a pair of expectant, hopeful blue eyes gazing into his grey ones.

I will find you, he thought, I promise you, I will find you.
Thank God she's finally asleep, she glanced in the rear view mirror to see Arya grasping 'woof'- her stuffed wolf toy - tightly in her left hand, sleeping peacefully in her booster seat. Waiting for the light to turn green, Catelyn sighed and leaned her head back on the head rest. *Why did this have to happen today??* Old Nan had called last night saying she was feeling sick and she couldn't babysit the kids for a couple of days. So Catelyn decided to take Arya to work with her, since she napped that time of the day anyway. And now, taking an early lunch break, she drove to pick Robb from school and Sansa from kindergarten so she could drop all the kids at Lyanna's for the afternoon. She'd called Lyanna early in the morning- who had sounded disgruntled and edgy, as she always sounded that time of the day -who had agreed to look after the children until Catelyn could pick them up after work.

The thought of Lyanna made her smile proudly. She had recently pieced her life back together after Jon was old enough to go to kindergarten. She had taken her old job back as a horse riding coach, part-time, and soon gained some good clients who were willing to hire her as a personal trainer. Over a year ago, she quit her job at the Equestrian centre and started freelancing full time. They'd all been thrilled and very supportive of her. So now she had enough free time to take care of wee Jon while managing her work to support themselves financially. *And sleep late,* she thought shaking her head. Lyanna and Jon still lived with Benjen in his condo but she was still fiercely independent.

Catelyn and Lyanna had their differences, in spite of that, a few months ago they'd become good friends after... - a honking sound from the car behind hers rattled her back to the present, she saw the light had turned green and started driving again- throwing a nervous glance back at Arya to make sure she still slept. She almost felt grateful for the impatient honking that stopped the negativity that was creeping into her thoughts. She barely had an hour left to pick the kids up, drop them all at Lya's, eat lunch and go back to work for the rest of her day. *Go back to work to attend that meeting, you mean.* Her palms started sweating. She was nervous, she couldn't stop wondering about the outcome this time. . . disappointment, yet again? Maybe hope? Or . . . finally the worst she could imagine. . . *No. . .don't think about that right now.* She tried to focus elsewhere as the storm of emotions tried to overwhelm her.

It had been a particularly rough day so far. And Catelyn's hopes that Arya would nap or be docile the whole time had inevitably been hollow, she should have known better than to expect predictability from 'Lyanna-reborn'. Knowing she was not at home, Arya had started screaming from the moment they entered Catelyn's office, then after getting quite impatient Catelyn and admonished her rather harshly which had brought the girl to tears. At the sight she could never resist but hold her close and kiss her sweet brow, - a sigh and an amused wolfish chuckle resonated in her mind again, *Oh god!* she caught her breath- knowing her mother was charmed Arya had gotten enthusiastic from that point on and had started calling out to her every five minutes babbling about “woof” and “horsie” to which Catelyn would reply to and then try to focus on the pile of reports, spreadsheets and proposals on her desk. Then Arya had found another 'fun' task of squealing at anyone who walked through her office. Thankfully, Catelyn didn’t have as many appointments this morning. It was usually just Ben to discuss the progress reports of on-going development projects or the recent status report, or her assistant Mya to confirm the weekly agenda and move around meetings or appointments. Benjen offered to hold the fort when she left work with Arya, insisting he would take her appointment with
Karstark and speak with the man himself. Karstark no doubt had his strong opinions about the latest decisions she’s made in the recent board meeting and wanted to discuss their catastrophic repercussions lest she heeded his advice. *God, the man is exhausting.*

Other than that, she had her usual meeting with their advisor, Luwin to discuss current performance and also to speak of new marketing strategies. Honestly, Luwin and Ben were the reason she could handle being the CEO of Stark Corporation, Ben had taken her old job as COO, putting his aspirations aside for a while to focus on the betterment of his family’s business, *just as his brother did before him.* Luwin guided her through most of the duties required of her ever since her husband. *Deep breaths.* She shook the inevitable turn that thought took as she pulled into the kindergarten parking lot to pick Sansa, her eldest daughter kept her busy with her own hushed chattering- ever so careful not to wake her baby sister, *sweet girl* -as she drove down to school to pick Robb, who she knew for sure would chatter loudly enough to wake every napping child in the ten kilometer radius up, she sighed and smiled.

Finally, after dropping the children at Lya’s, Catelyn headed back to work. With no kids to keep her mind busy, her nerves started to kick in again. *Good God! stay calm, its only a meeting. It may not mean anything.* *negative. Rodrik sounded calm enough on the phone, just a meeting. Just a meeting.*

A meeting she had every time Rodrik had a new lead or wanted to discuss progress or something, *anything! What if it was a new lead?* She wanted to be hopeful, she really did. But hope was waning even if she refused to let it go completely. She clutched on to it because it was the only thing that gave her strength to go on.

Five months, it had been five months after all. *Oh God, Ned, where are you, my love?* That thought sent a sharp jolt in her heart and she felt tears sting her eyes. No matter how much she tried, she could never keep away from that thought. She had to be stronger than this, for the children. She swallowed the lump in her throat and quickly wiped her eyes. *No, I mustn’t give up hope.* He had to be okay, he just had to be. Ned was a survivor, he was smart. He wouldn’t go down without a fight. And they hadn’t found any...bodies of his description. She felt a shudder go through her. “Stop it Cat! No, he's fine. I refuse to believe otherwise”, she admonished herself loudly, focusing back on driving, it was mid-day and there was no traffic which made it easy for her thoughts to wander.

Rodrik Cassel, the head of security at Stark Corporation and his nephew Jory Cassel- next in command and also one of his best officers -had both volunteered to help her find Ned even after the detective working his case had told her over three months ago that the last lead had gone cold and since it had been over a month, in a winter that was colder than any, the odds of finding her husband were next to nothing. That they needed to close the case after having no leads for a while and that likely Ned was gone and that she and her family should mourn him. At her insistence that he was alive, they had given another possibility. With the wealth and resources Starks had perhaps, Ned had simply decided to walk away from his life and didn’t want to be found. *No, Brandon maybe,* but not her Ned. She knew him as well as she knew herself, he wouldn’t walk away from their family, from their life, he was too honourable for that. Something must be keeping him away. If Ned hadn’t been found yet, something must have kept him from contacting her. *But WHAT? God!* she thought. How long could she carry on like this?

She pulled in the parking garage of their office building and looked at her phone. She had a few minutes to spare so she allowed herself a moment of weakness and let the tears fall freely down her face. *Please Ned...come back safe to me, please, my love. I cant do this Ned, I really can't do this without you. Please.*

The memory of the last time she saw him was seared in her heart. He was dressed for a long flight he
was taking to Sunspear to discuss their diversification strategy with the Martells and the Tyrells, who were flying down there from Highgarden. He had hurried right into the kitchen, pulled her in a tight embrace and pressed a deep ardent kiss to her lips. He had pulled back, his loving grey eyes smiling, *I will miss you, my love, but I promise I shall be back as soon as this business is taken care of. I love you Cat.* She had replied with *I love you too,* with a longing, as she always did especially when he went off on long business trips. His face had transformed into his truest smiles, he'd kissed her soundly again and rushed out of the door, leaving her breathless and staring after him. Silent tears ran down her face and she heard her phone beep startle her out of nostalgia. It was a text from Benjen, *He's here. Where r u?* She replied, *In the building. Be there soon,* squared her shoulders, walked out of her car to the elevator and pressed the button to her floor.

As she waited to reach her floor, she quickly looked at herself in the mirror beside her, fixed her mascara that had smudged a little, erasing the track of her tears from earlier. She glanced away from the worry lines and dark circles that had formed around her eyes and took a deep breath. *Today, perhaps today is the day I will get some answers,* she told herself as she did everyday. *And if you dont?* whispered a tiny fearful part of her mind. She pushed it away and thought firmly, *then...*

*On my honour as a Tully, on my honour as a Stark, I will NOT stop until I find my husband.*

Chapter End Notes

C&C Welcome! :)

---

Chapter End Notes

C&C Welcome! :)
God damn it! He thought as he walked to work. For a week now he tried to find clues and he had found nothing. He had tried to look for missing people with his name to see if anyone else was looking for him, but nothing yet. No one named “Richard Williams” had gone missing in the last six months. He also tried to see if he could track down anyone his grandparents may have known, but no luck there either. There was only so many things he could search for using the computer at work. This had been tougher than he thought. There was... one other way, that he ended up taking in spite of the skepticism he felt the whole time. That had been his best shot. He had wondered if anyone tried to find him, if anyone came to the hospital looking for him after he moved in with Ashara. He thought the doctor would inform him in that case. He still felt shocked by what he found when he visited the doctor's office. He remembered the conversation with Dr. Groff quite well...

Groff seemed genuinely pleased to see him, “Richard, nice to see you again. Please take a sit and how may I help you?”, he asked jovially.

Richard mumbled his greetings and sat down in front of the large wooden desk across from the doctor. He almost didn't ask, it was a long shot, he knew. He was quite nervous about it but he needed to know. “I was... just wondering if anybody else came looking for me, when I was first brought to the hospital. Or perhaps after I.. left.”

He looked at Richard curiously “Not that I recall, no. Why do you ask after more than five months?” Groff didn’t raise his voice, nor did he change his tone but Richard could see that he was somewhat alarmed by the question. Why is he alarmed?

Richard continued, carefully piecing his words “Ash mentioned that I was away for a year after we split up. I was only wondering if anyone I met in that year tried to find me, since I haven’t contacted anyone after being here for five months.” That was true enough, he didn’t want to give too much information.

Groff leaned back on his chair, took a moment and said, “If you are recalling anyone specific, perhaps you should speak with your therapist about this.”

“Yes, I did speak with him about receiving an image in my dreams. I was merely curious if a person with that description showed up looking for me here, is all.” he did his best to keep his face expressionless and his voice casual.

“If I may ask, what is in the image?” Groff asked softly.

“The only discernible feature was long auburn hair.”
At that he saw a fleeting moment of panic in Groff's eyes, but lasted less than a second. After a few moments standing up he said hurriedly, “No, I haven’t seen anyone with auburn hair look for you. Perhaps your girlfriend, Ashara can help, maybe it was someone you both knew. I suggest you ask her, now if you'll excuse me I have patients to attend to.” He heard the emphasis he put on 'girlfriend' when he mentioned Ashara, *he's hiding something, he knows something.*

Richard didn’t answer him, he just gave a slight smile, nodded and thanked him for his time. As he was walking out Dr. Groff called out and said “Oh and by the way, Richard, I also suggest you keep taking the antidepressants. It will help you relax especially if you've started recalling memories now. It can be quite stressful at times, I imagine.”

If Richard didn’t know any better, he would’ve taken that for a genuine recommendation. However, since he started working at the library he had read up on his condition and apparently the particular antidepressants that were prescribed to him hindered recollecting or storing memories. He had obviously stopped taking them after he found out, but now the doctor ‘suggesting' him to keep taking them, especially after he mentioned he’d started recalling memories unnerved him to the core. *Ash sure has friends here,* he’d thought acidly but managed to keep his face blank. He merely gave a tight nod and exited the office. He had gone straight to work that day, wondering how he had been so stupid to actually expect anything from Groff, of all people. After his little 'suggestion' things were suddenly clear in Richard’s mind. *He is in on it.* Because, of course he was, he had recommended that nosy Tanner in the first place, said he was an 'excellent therapist' who just happened to be Ash's friend. 'What a co-incidence' she'd said when he showed her the card. *Fucking liars!!* He barely managed to get through the day without screaming in rage. When he got home he went straight into the backyard and leaned back on the big maple tree and sat there for hours in an attempt to calm his anger.

That was three days ago. As if that wasn’t proof enough, the events from last night confirmed it. He was almost prepared for the conversation, after dinner last night Ash had said brusquely, “So I bumped into Dr. Groff today, he asked me if I spoke to you about some auburn haired woman you've been dreaming of. Which is funny because I don’t recall you mentioning anything like that to me. Do I want to know why you spoke to him about it and not me?”

*God, I knew it! I knew he would tell her. Damn the man.* He was doing the dishes when she asked him that, without stopping he replied nonchalantly “You told me I was away for more than a year. I was wondering how anyone from that year hadn’t tried to contact me.” he realized his voice sounded oddly cold, like it was made of ice.

She must have noticed it too because he heard her draw in a sharp breath at the tone, “Yes, but why didn’t you ask me?”, she asked impatiently after a moment.

He shrugged, “I was just curious really. And I didn't want to worry you. I know you don’t like talking about the past. And as you mentioned to me before...we could both use a fresh start.” He knew he had her then. He had used the line she always used on him every time he had asked her questions she didn’t want to answer.

After a few moments she said “I wish you had spoken to me, I would have told you about how I dyed my hair auburn a couple of years ago-” he heard her walk up behind him and embrace him “- it could just be me you dreamed of.” her tone turning husky when she said the latter.

“Could be.” he said quietly- still hearing the chill in the frosty voice - but feeling a bit unsure himself. *Could it? No. I don't think its her.* That woman...he only remembered a brief glimpse and Ash...no it's definitely not her. She didn't make him feel what that woman made him feel....
“So, don't think on it too much, okay? You don't need memories to remember me.... I'm right here.” she said and kissed his cheek “Good night, Richard.” No, Ashara is not her, he thought firmly.

He heard her walk away and close the door of her bedroom, he glanced back at the empty kitchen for a moment then washed the remaining dishes. As he went to bed last night, what Ash had said hit him, some auburn haired woman.... woman, he inhaled sharply. If Ash said it, that means she knows her. Why did she keep it from him? Why would she insist the woman was herself? Perhaps she is an ex and Ash is worried I'll go back to her. What if she was an ex? Maybe she had some answers. If he could trust those answers or not, he didn't know. But she was the only thing that felt real to him, in spite of her being just a flicker of an image, he felt something strong grab his heart whenever he saw her.

He realized he had never felt anything like that about Ashara, even if she remained vaguely familiar to him. But this auburn haired woman..... he let that thought trail off as he felt sleep reach him slowly. He dreamt of her again, this time she was standing in the middle of a cathedral of sorts, she looked stunning with the stained glass throwing myriads of hues on her auburn hair making it glint in different lights. He walked closer to see her face clearly, but just as he was close enough to finally make out the high curve of her cheek or the pink of her lips, she appeared distressed and started to move farther away, still trying to reach out to him. He could feel himself running and trying to find her, he wanted to call out to her but...he didn't know her name, he just screamed "Noooo!!" as he saw the last glimpse of bright auburn fade away, then he was falling... He startled awake, soaked in sweat, grasping something to his left and the longing hit him sharply, yet again. God, when will this stop?

He felt exhausted and slightly drowsy- I feel like that most nights though, perhaps I am overexerting myself- he needed some fresh air, he needed to distract himself. He got up and started to walk into the backyard, but he saw Ash's silhouette facing away from him and he moved back out of the sight.

Ash never stays up this late, he thought. He could see tiny whiffs of smoke coming from the cigarette in her left hand and the other one was holding the phone to her ear.

He heard her say, "Its me. Yes, he's asleep....he's always deeply askep this time of the night-” He didn't need to question who “he” was, “-No, I tried to ask him about it, but he wouldn’t tell me.. I tried to tell him it was me when I dyed my hair auburn, I think he believed me, but I don’t know.....He can't remember her, its too dangerous...yes I know, but we must be careful, we cant risk him finding out...No..he only goes to work most of the days or spends his time under this giant bloody maple in our backyard when he is home.....no, he wasn’t spotted anywhere else according to my sources in town....Apparently he has been conversing a lot with the new guy, Dave, at the library. Yes, I’ve asked Merianne to keep an eye on him... No, Kenneth pushed him too much too fast, that idiot spooked him! he stopped going to therapy weeks ago-” I knew the therapist was in on it! And Merianne, Annie? the head librarian? She is in on it too? He thought angrily as she stopped to smoke for a moment before continuing, “.I don't think he remembers who he really is, as far as I know he's just getting glimpses, at least that’s what he told Ken..he doesn’t really share much with me... And now that he's seeing her of all people, we need to do something... Is there a way to stop that?...No, I'm not sure if he is taking the medication, but I'm adding the drugs you gave me in the food, as you asked. Perhaps I should increase the dosage?...okay-” her voice trailed off, and he shuddered. Ash had always cooked the food, even if she always ate raw fruits or steamed vegetables, she was on a ‘strict diet plan' she'd told him, so he had long since claimed that washing the dishes would be his task if she insisted on cooking all his food. There’s no damn diet. They've been drugging me since day one. Perhaps that’s why its so difficult to remember anything vital or why he felt so drowsy at nights. The thought made him sick, but he forced himself to walk back quietly to his room as he heard her conclude the call.
Sleep hadn’t found him again last night, he thought yawning as he walked to work. Now, he looked around and indeed saw a few people watching him closely. Foolishly, he’d thought they were just curious about the new man in town who didn’t remember his past. But now, he knew they were making sure he stayed on the leash. *Ashara's leash.*

He all but ran out of the house this morning, without any breakfast, fearing he might start shouting at her on sight. Damn her and damn every one of her allies to hell! A person walking in his direction actually stared at him briefly before hastily walking away and he realized he had actually growled at that thought.

He walked the remaining distance to the library, now feeling quite weary of the fact that he was being watched. He needed to find who he was, who he *really* was, and he needed to find it soon. Especially after overhearing Ash's conversation, he knew he needed to act fast and perhaps find excuses to eat elsewhere until he sorted this out. *Dave,* he thought, *I can easily persuade him to eat out in the evenings with me. Perhaps strike a conversation about his travels,* Dave adored talking about his travelling. And that way he wouldn’t have to eat the......drugged food. He felt sick at the thought again, damn these people!

Stop scowling, my love, he heard that sweet feminine voice again. He breathed in sharply, he indeed was scowling and immediately relaxed his forehead. *I'm hearing her admonish me now,* he felt something between amusement and resignation...... and she called me 'my love', he felt a thrill run through him and his lips slightly quirked up, in spite of the stress he was under. *This woman is an enigma,* he sighed, as he went in the library, absentmindedly signed on the weekly time sheet and went straight to his desk, still wondering about this intangible bond that seemed to pull him towards this woman, more and more, every single moment he thought of her.

He shook his head and started working. He never slacked off at work, although there wasn’t much work really, he was just an assistant. He mostly kept records and operated the front desk. Some guy came in briefly to return a book but there were no other readers in the library, he finished updating the records fairly quickly. His co-worker, Dave did most of the work, his shift started later though, so he took the book to put it back on the shelf himself. He read the title to place it correctly and inhaled sharply, he felt a jolt go through him as he beheld the cover. “The Lone Wolf” was written in bold icy blue letters on the left hand with a picture of a wolf in profile facing it on the right. Snow fell all around him, his grey wet fur sticking out sharply. Staring intently, he bared his teeth as if to give a menacing growl. Unbidden an image of a grey silhouette of a wolf on a black background flashed in front of eyes. Then he saw a striking silver artifact made of the same design on a wall, in front of it was a huge desk with a high-back chair. There sat the older man from his dream studying some papers intently. He looked up and said “There you are.... my boy, always on time... Come in, son.” with a deep hoarse voice sounding sad, with a slight smile. *My smile, he looked so like me when he smiled,* he felt a tear in his eye, he quickly wiped it. Holding this book made something stir in his heart, he felt an odd attachment to it and didn't want to let it go. Quietly he took it back to the front desk, *Son, he called me son. I have a father, I'm may not be an orphan,* he thought sadly. *God, I want to go home.....wherever that is,* he sighed. Just then, Dave walked in the door smiling at him briefly.

He had moved here a few weeks before Richard was found. He wanted to take a year off and live somewhere remote, focus on his photography, he took the job at the library to pay his dues. He was a nice guy, quick-witted and always kept the work environment jovial much to Merianne's chagrin. She was strict and kept a close eye on them both to make sure they were working. *So we thought, But now I know the truth,* he thought darkly. Dave was a tech savvy and had helped him a lot when he first started searching for clues online. He had guessed what Richard was trying to do and quietly mentioned where to start looking. He also explained how private windows didn’t record any online activity and giving him a knowing look he simply walked away. It had confused him at the time, but
now he knew why Dave gave him that particular advice. *I'm being watched.* Dave had also suggested a few informative books about his condition. *He may be the only guy in this town who I can trust.*

After signing the time sheet himself he looked curiously at Richard and with a slight smile he asked “how sleepy were you this morning, man? Your signature is all wrong”. Richard took the sheet and looking at it, frowning. Dave just laughed, “Nothing a little wite-out wont fix. Its probably in the pen stand next to your computer.” Saying that he dropped his stuff on his desk and walked away.

Richard looked at the signature curiously. After seeing his signature on the old ID Ash gave him months ago, he had tried to recreate it his best, he had felt ashamed and sad that he couldn’t even remember his own signature but mastered it fast enough, even if he had to concentrate a bit whenever he signed, which wasn’t often and it was usually for trivial matters.

The signature on the sheet looked nothing like the one he had practiced these few months. In fact, it didn’t even say “Richard Williams”. *God, I think this is my true signature which means....Richard Williams is not my true name.* He remembered Ash's words from the night before, *I don’t think he remembers who he really is.* He focused on the signature, it was loose and haphazard, he was deep in his thoughts when he signed fast and quite absent. He grabbed a notepad and a pen and tried to figure out the letters in the signature, he glanced up briefly and saw Dave at other end of the library organizing books and chatting with Annie who had been somewhere in the back of the library herself. *Coast is clear,* he thought and studied the signature. He started jotting down the letters he could barely make out, “E”, “D”, an “A” then another “D” then there was a large “S” followed by a “T”, “A”...maybe and ended with what he thought was an “L”.

He made a list of a few names with those letters and started searching online, he didn’t know how much time had passed, he was still looking for clues and finding no answers. Finally, he decided to study the letters again looking at the last name. *Stal? Stahl? I think that's a last name.* Then he looked at the first name which he was still struggling to piece together, *Edmund.....? no....that is definitely an 'r' before the last 'd'... Edward, perhaps? it doesn't look like a “w” though.*

“I think that’s a “D” Richard.” Dave's amused voice startled him. And before he could get angry Dave said apologetically “I'm sorry, I wasn’t trying to intrude, I just walked by and saw you breaking down the signature from the morning and clearly you needed help-” he pointed at the 'd' and said “-in what universe is that a 'w'?"

Richard looked around, thankfully Annie wasn’t anywhere near, he just corrected the letter and frowned at Dave, who grinned back and said “Never mind that, I need your help with this crossword. Its killing me.” Before Richard could say no Dave continued “five letter word for grim appearance. Any idea?” putting his feet up on the desk.

He sighed, “I can't help right now, I'm busy.” Dave just huffed and said “uh, yeah. Deconstructing your own sloppy signature from this morning. Why are you deconstructing it anyway? you were sleepy man, believe me I've done much worse before, and I wasn’t even sleepy most of those times. A tiny bit drunk though! Ha!” and he laughed at his own joke loudly.

Richard just glared at him and he stopped right away saying “Gee you look like you should be the answer to five down-- OH! Got it!!! Thanks man."

Feeling irritated and confused, Richard frowned and bit sarcastically asked “umm...you're welcome?” He was being too harsh, he knew, sighing he continued, “Look man, I'm sorry. I don’t mean to be harsh this is just...important to me. Thats all I can tell you okay?”

Dave looked up at Richard's apology, his face softened and became serious. “I know Richard, I'm
just trying to lighten the mood. Look, whatever this is, you'll figure it out. And if you need my help” before Richard could protest again, he added, “on a 'need to know' basis, I can help you out. Just ask alright?”

Richard gave him barest of smiles and thanked him. Dave smiled and walking away he said, “Right. I have to get back to work now that my crossword is done, thanks to you.” Richard chuckled and asked him before he went too far, “Hey...so what is the answer to five down, anyway?”

Dave looked back without stopping and said “STARK. The answer is STARK”, smiled and walked away.

He felt like his whole world had stopped, he felt numb. He looked down at the scribbles on his notepad and made changes to the words “Edward” and “Stahl” thanks to Dave's help. He let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding, somehow it made perfect sense. Immediately, he opened a new private tab and entered the name, his hands were trembling. This is it. I can feel it. He took a deep breath and hit enter and the page before him flooded with results: articles, interviews, websites and pictures. He let out a shaky breath, then the grey wolf silhouette flashed in front of his eyes and the last ounce of doubt in his mind disappeared.

“STARK......” he breathed, “The answer is.....STARK.” And for the first time in over five months, Eddard Stark smiled his truest smiles.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading. Comments and Critiques welcome! :)
He felt like he was buzzing as he scrolled past article after article, his hands were still trembling. His heart stopped every time he saw pictures with people who seemed familiar or looked similar to him. In the myriad of articles, one in particular caught his eye, the headline read “Eddard Stark ties the knot with his college sweetheart at Castle Winterfell” *Castle Winterfell, I think its the Castle I saw in my dreams,* he thought as he scrolled past the headline to view the big picture beneath it. He caught his breath, *the auburn haired woman,* he was in the picture too only with a stubble and shaggier hair with his arms around this beautiful auburn haired woman with sparkling blue eyes. They both looked happy and made a very handsome couple. He couldn’t stop looking at her, she was smiling widely and wore a simple blue dress that set off her eyes and stood in contrast with her beautifully layered auburn tresses. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and most definitely was the woman he’d been dreaming of all this time. He scrolled down to the description “Eddard Stark (23) with his new bride Catelyn Stark née Tully (22)”. *Catelyn. She....is my wife.* That thought surprisingly exhilarated him, this woman had been in his dreams since he started remembering fragments of memories. In fact her beautiful hair and blue eyes had been the very first memory he ever recalled, even if it took him a while to realize it wasn’t just any dream, but a glimpse of his past, *his wife.* As he reeled himself back to the present, his exhilaration was soon replaced by anger that started boiling in every fiber of his being. *Ashara lied to me. She fucking lied to me about everything.*

He had already gone down this path, and he needed to see it through without any interruptions. He looked up and scanned the room, Annie was still at her desk on the other end and Dave was arranging some books on the shelves; the library was otherwise deserted and quiet, now with the exception of the wild beating of his heart. He quickly searched “Eddard Stark missing” and found more articles. He opened one of the top ones as the title spoke for itself, “‘Search for Eddard Stark continues’ says Rodrik Cassel, Head of Security at Stark Corporation”. The article informed the measures they were taking to find him and it also explained that there was a sizable reward to anyone who had information about him, followed by a link. He clicked on the link and caught his breath. The grey wolf image that had flashed in his mind before, now flashed on the screen - *logo, its a logo* - before it transported him on the page with the contact details to the security office. *Its a start...*

He wanted to call right away yet he couldn’t help but wonder why exactly Ashara had kept all of this from him. He knew she had known the auburn haired woman, *Catelyn, her name is Catelyn and she is my wife.* Then why had she gone to such lengths to hide his true identity from him? Not for the reward, no, that didn’t explain the fake stories, Ids, pictures and everything else that made quite clear that he was “Richard Williams” and not “Eddard Stark”. *Then what? damn it! The woman lied to me about everything for five months.* He forced himself to calm down, anger would not solve this, he needed to think clearly. There had to be more to this, he knew for sure she wasn’t alone in wanting to keep his memories from him. He knew for a fact now that the doctor, therapist and the librarian were helping her. Maybe the sheriff is in on it too? No wonder he seemed unwilling to investigate the robbery and the stolen car. *God! What if that was part of the plan as well?* Suddenly a thought struck him, *If I'm married ...... swiftly,* he reached for his left hand... *No wedding band, I never wore one. I must have one.* *Damn, they stole that too?? Of course, they did.* He stared at his left ring finger and indeed saw very subtle tan lines around the base. *They took everything...Fucking bastards!* He shuddered, remembering how they had drugged him constantly since the beginning, compared to that destroying his wallet and car wouldn’t be a big deal.
The realization hit him all at once. *I'm a hostage.* That was the only explanation. His condition now only made it easier for them to keep him here. *Or perhaps, they had done this to him for precisely that. God, this is much bigger than I thought. I don't know for what purpose these wretched people are doing this to me, but I don't want to stay to find out.* He needed to get out of here. He needed to find his family, his true family and he only saw one possible way to get to them.

*But first, I must be sure I'm alone.* An idea hit him, he looked up at Dave and waved him to come over. Dave slowly walked to him and asked “Whatsup?”

He whispered, “Were you serious about your 'need-to-know' favour?”

At Dave's nod he continued, “I need you to distract Annie, keep her as far away from this desk as you can. And I'll need your phone.” Dave looked a little uncomfortable but after a moment of thinking said “Ohhh-kay, I'll do that, her break starts in a while, I'll take her out to lunch, tell her I know a nice place with-- I'll...I'll figure it out. I'll make sure to be loud when we come back. You better be done by then.”

He thanked Dave, took his cellphone and asked “Oh, Dave, does your phone have a video phone-call feature?”

“Yes, just click on the camera button once your call starts. And look if you are gonna do what I think you're gonna do...please...wipe the phone with sanitizer afterwards.” Dave replied grinning.

Feeling confused, he nodded dumbly and gave his thanks again, Dave just gave him an exasperated look and walked away. Bemused, he waited for the cue when he heard Dave loudly proclaiming he was taking Annie out for lunch. How the man managed to charm her, he would never know, but there was no time to lose.

He knew he would not completely trust anyone for a while, in spite of finding some strong proof about the legitimacy of the the information he just discovered. But he knew he couldn’t stay here either, and something in his heart reeled him towards this. *Catelyn,* his mind whispered. So taking a deep breath, he picked up Dave's phone, hit the number in the article and he thought, *Here we go...*

-------------------

It was late afternoon and Rodrik Cassel felt exhausted. They were working hard all day yesterday and all through last night. Finally Hal Mollen had offered to hold the fort asking both Rodrik and Jory to go home and get some sleep. Things had been tough since Ned had gone missing. Although the number of people trying to sneak in the building to get information about Ned’s disappearance or business in general had lowered over time, they still had to deal with usual security protocols. And there were still many hackers trying to get into their database, but thankfully they had a fairly competent firewall installed on the server. Catelyn Stark had invested in security enhancements, knowing fully well that their rivals would try to take the advantage of their vulnerability. Especially after the stocks took a hit and they’d lost some clients in the midst, but Mrs. Stark managed to convince a few of them to stay. She took over Ned’s job five months ago and already had a good reputation. They were all very supportive and proud of what she had accomplished so far. If it wasn’t for her, the corporation would have gone down by the end of the year. The ones that had known her for a long time knew how it was tearing at her heart every minute she had to make a decision on Ned’s behest. This woman was single-handedly taking care of three young children and running one of the biggest corporations in the country while still searching for her husband who disappeared over...
five months ago. *She lives up to the Tully motto,* he thought.

In spite of the newest security upgrades, he could feel there was still a mole working on the inside. Who they were or for whom they worked he didn’t know, but he had a team trying to find that employee. Whoever it was they were clever enough not to leak too much information. However, a couple of months ago he realized the pattern, issues always popped up a few days before an important meeting. Issues that were challenging, that tried to cripple Mrs. Stark’s leadership sometimes in a very subtle way, especially since Karstark didn’t exactly need huge problems to yap about in meetings, or outside, he thought angrily. They found a few articles leaking information about possible southern acquisitions, or the northern investors feeling hesitant about Mrs. Stark taking over. There had also been delays in minuscule orders regarding some of their small projects in the north, even information of the Skagos acquisition proposal which hadn’t even been final yet. They always covered their tracks quite well. The Corporation was still on shaky ground and took a hit every time these things went public. He knew that if they didn’t find this mole soon their rivals would and pay them good money for the same information, perhaps they already were. He had spoken to Mrs. Stark about that in the meeting several days ago, and they had both discussed possible measures to eliminate this issue. Hal had informed him yesterday that they might be onto something. Rodrik hoped he was right.

The meeting with Mrs. Stark was for a different reason, of course. He wanted to discuss the idea Jory had about conducting an online image search of Ned Stark in the five hundred mile radius around the area he was last seen to see if he appeared in any images. It was a long-shot and a lengthy process, right from gathering the resources to conducting the search and waiting for results. They had set it up last night and so far found nothing. He still wanted to give the woman something to hope for, God knew she needed it. A month after he volunteered, he’d started losing hope himself, yet nothing could shake Catelyn Stark’s faith that her husband was alive. He had long since heard about the legendary stubbornness of the Tullys, but never before had he witnessed it firsthand.

In the beginning they had found a few leads that brought them close to a town south of Seagard, close to where Ned’s rental car was found. However, after Jory investigated the place the lead had gone cold right there since nobody seemed to remember a man of Ned’s description and in a remote town they didn’t have any security cameras. Jory sought out every possible lead by retracing every scenario they could imagine, it all lead back to the town near the Twins, where he was last seen. Jory also circulated Ned’s picture all over that town and nobody had apparently seen him, so reluctantly he let it go.

That was over two weeks ago. Since then they had no new leads, or ideas and Rodrik had started fearing the worst himself. Ned had gone missing at the start of the coldest winter of the century and stayed missing for more than five months now, the chances of his survival were little to nothing. He never mentioned that to Jory or Catelyn Stark, even though he was certain that deep down they both knew it too. He would still take every measure he could to find Ned, he owed the Starks as much.

He missed the lad, they all did, but only Jon Arryn and himself had known Ned since he was a boy after all. And after Rickard’s death a few years ago, Ned had relied on him, Luwin and Jon Arryn for guidance and support.

Rodrik had always been fond of the Stark children, Ned in particular because he treated his nephew, Jory like he were his true brother. The Starks had always treated them kindly. After Jory's parents had died, Rickard Stark had helped him get the lad's custody and build a new life. He also found a nurse to take care of Jory when he was just a baby. Jory had spent most of his childhood with the Starklings and even after he grew up, he stayed best friends with Ned. Rodrik knew how much Ned’s disappearance had devastated Jory and hoped that his idea would work and the image recognition software would find Ned somewhere. He didn’t care where Ned was, as long as he was
alive they would find him and by god he would go bring the lad home himself.

His thoughts were interrupted by the ringing of his phone. He looked down at the screen, the number was unknown and long-distance too. He had circulated the security office phone number around the country by contacting various newspapers and by speaking to their sources who worked online. There was a sizable reward for anyone who gave valuable information about Ned Stark's whereabouts. Then he had assigned the task to a volunteer - Brienne, from the Security Office - after attending to countless bogus leads by people who just wanted the reward. He had given Brienne clear instructions not to forward the calls to him unless it was a really solid lead or it was bloody Ned Stark himself. Since the solid leads had died out more than a month ago, he was now very curious to see just who it was on the other end.

He quickly pressed the answer button and said “Rodrik Cassel, Who's this?”

On the other end there was a momentary silence followed by a deep and familiar, but hesitant voice, “Hello, I Am Eddard Stark and I need your help.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Comments and Critiques Welcome! :)

And I know its another cliffhanger but I promise I'll update soon!
Rodrik knew that voice well, he'd heard it enough. The grave tone always made him sound so much like Rickard, they'd always teased Ned by calling him “Young Rickard” whenever he used his grave tone in front of his father. After Rickard's death, that jest had turned into a sad reality as Ned turned into an even more solemn man. And after hearing that familiar grave tone, Rodrik couldn’t hold back a gasp.

His voice was oddly thick as he asked, “God, lad is it truly you?”

He heard the same grave voice reply “Yes. Look sir, before you get your hopes up, I need to tell you something. Now, this may sound odd but I don’t remember anything. I suffered a head injury and lost all my memories. And I’ve been lied to ever since and told I was someone else. I only figured out who I truly am a few minutes ago.”

Rodrik gave a sigh at that, he knew it was Ned, he knew that voice and the accent. And the Starks had a distinct Northern accent that was very difficult to mirror, but what he was saying was too much to comprehend. An after attending so many bogus calls, Rodrik couldn’t risk not being sure.

He said firmly, “Look, I know your voice quite well, but what you're saying is...” he trailed off and after a moment said “...after all this time I have to be certain it is truly Eddard Stark. I'm going to need some proof from you.”

“I can do that, I'll start the video call” Rodrik agreed, and used the video feature on his own phone, the screen buffered before turning into what at the first glimpse he thought was Brandon, then he saw the serious eyes, Rickard’s eyes. Brandon's eyes had been grey but he inherited Lyarra's eye shape and expressiveness just like Lyanna, while Ned and Benjen got Rickard's icy thin eyes. He couldn't help but stare intently at the young man's face before him. He looked quite like Brandon, with an identical haircut with the sides trimmed down and disheveled on the top and he was clean shaven as well. He looked thin, not sickly thin, but thinner than usual and had a large cross shaped gash on his left eyebrow, but it was definitely their Ned Stark. The face, solemn as ever as he looked back expectantly.

“Dear God, It is you. You are alive!” he breathed and Ned just pursed his lips and gave a tight nod at his exclamation.

“Is it true what you said about your memories being gone?” he asked sadly.

“Yes, I'm afraid it is. I don’t remember anything from before. I only know the facts I was told after I first regained consciousness after the accident. Or at least I thought they were facts at the time.” Ned replied with a frown on his face.

“You were in an accident?” they'd feared as much. They'd found some of Ned'd blood at the scene and on some shards of glass. Front half of his rental car had be somewhat bludgeoned by the impact on hitting the tree, airbag had gone off. Otherwise, car seemed in good shape with no damage to the interior. Now Rodrik was curious to know just what happened.

"Yes, at least I think that's true. I don't know anymore. I don't know what these people told me is true and what is not.” Ned said, almost to himself and Rodrik couldn't help but ask.
"How did you find me? If you didn't remember, I mean." he asked.

Ned sighed, "It's a long story, but I came across your articles online with the link to Stark security office's contact details. A woman, she gave me your number surprisingly quickly."

Rodrik smiled briefly, *in Brienne's defense, it is bloody Ned Stark himself*, but if it took him so long to find his identity then.... "Is it safe to talk where you are?"

"It is, but not for a long time. I'm being watched. I was told I was a different person and given a different identity and drugged constantly to keep me from remembering my past. And by the amount of information I got in the last hour or so, I think its safe to say that I'm being held hostage." His shock must have shown on his face, because Ned hastily added, "I'm well. Physically I mean. But, I'm not sure I will be if the people in this town realize that I've found my true identity. I need to get out of here, and go back to my family. Can you help me?"

At that Rodrik said, "Yes I will, I'm going to track your exact location, hang on." and quickly opened the laptop which was well-equipped with top of the line security softwares. He surrounded himself with a team of well-trained professionals, but after the previous scandals at Stark, Jory insisted he be prepared for rare cases in which he may have to solve an issue alone. *Like this one*.

He quickly used the tracking software to pinpoint Ned's exact location while contemplating the best way to get him home safe.

"You're somewhere in north east of Strong Song in Mountains of the moon, Ned. Creekwood, Hmm I didn't know it had been repopulated. You're at least six hundred kilometers away from where we found your rental car near Seagard. The good thing is you are close to the Vale, we have friends there. Now, it is essential that we get you out of there fast. Calling the authorities and initiating a proper rescue will take a lot of time and call attention to the matter, which we cannot risk. And anyway we would need more than just your word to convict these people and I can't let you stay there with them until all that is done. Especially if they are drugging you, we don’t know how far they will go. I'm going to call one of my best officers-- and your best friend, but you don't remember, he thought sadly--and he is going to come pick you up as soon as tomorrow. Is there a location you can meet him at? Preferably secluded?"

"The only place I trust is the library, its not secluded, but there is rarely anyone here. Its on the west edge of town, past the Cathedral. Ask your man to meet me there around 7 am" before he could nod, Ned added quietly, almost guiltily, "And, I may not recognize him. I recognized and trusted you because I remember your face. I don't know if I'll remember the man you send so tell him to look for me at the front desk and to ask me about a book called 'The Lone Wolf' and I'll know who he is." God, it will kill Jory to see him like this, he thought just before Ned mentioned the book name. He sounded so firm when he said that, Rodrik couldn't help but give a sad smile. *The Lone Wolf? Even with the memories gone he's a Stark through and through.*

He merely nodded, "I'll tell him that. When he gets there he will explain what we've planned. That way we'll have enough time to strategize and help you get a safe passage home. In the meanwhile, you stay put. Just act normal, these people need to think you're in town even after you leave, if possible, that will buy us time to get a team of officers down there. I'd like to catch them when they are oblivious." Ned gave a tight nod, clenching his jaw and Rodrik couldn't help but remember what his brother's rash angry decision had cost their entire family, "Ned, I know you are probably quite angry at these people, but don't try to talk to them about anything you've found today. If we alarm them, your life will be at risk and it will be very difficult to track you down again. And your safety is our primary concern. I'll need the address you're currently living at." he wrote down the address, "Ned, I will also need the names of everyone who you think is in on this" He could hear a loud voice in the background and Ned's face was frozen and transfixed in the direction of the voice, "Ned?"
“Damn it! I have to go, someone's coming. Tell your man not to be late.” and he was gone. *Damn! If only I got the names, I could put out an APB on those bastards.*

Rodrik immediately called Jory, ignoring the buzzing in his ears from the adrenaline now pumping through his veins. *Ned is alive and I intend to keep him that way.*

“Jory, We found him.”

He stared up at the ceiling, laying in his bed for the last time. *Just a few more hours.* In a few hours he was going to go back home. *To Catelyn.* He still reveled at the fact that he had a wife. The thought of her made him smile, he grasped sadly at his ring finger, *I wish I had my wedding ring, I'll speak with Rodrik once I get back, see if he can locate it.* In spite of the thrill he got when he thought of her, he also felt very anxious, his mind would flood with unanswered concerns. He hadn’t had time to ask Rodrik about them. It had been five months since he had disappeared after all. What if she had found someone else? How would she react when she realized he doesn’t remember her? Doesn’t remember *loving* her? *I can't lose her,* he felt panic strike at that thought. He hadn’t even met her yet- well, after he lost his memories at least- still he felt his heart twist at the idea of losing her. The depth of longing he felt for this woman still surprised him, he didn’t clearly remember a single aspect about her yet he knew he yearned for her like a drowning man yearned for air. He knew for sure that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and the idea of her being his wife had surprised and thrilled him deeply. He'd wanted to spend hours reading about their story, their life together, but finding his identity was more important...

For what it seemed like the hundredth time today, he had to reel his thoughts back on track. He huffed a laugh, his mind kept drifting away at the mention of his wife. He had been surprised at how easy it was to contact the man investigating his disappearance. He had found the contact details on the Stark Corporation's website, *and that logo,* that logo cemented his belief in this plan. He also felt like he'd known Rodrik for years, he certainly remembered his face. After the call ended he got a flash of images with Rodrik and a younger man, both wearing suits in a posh room laughing and talking to him. *I know him all right.* He was surprised that in spite of being far away Rodrik had arranged a safe passage for Ned within a day. He knew he was not completely trusting of any of this, but this was his only hope. And he had more evidence of its truth than he did in five months here with Ashara. *Catelyn.* Her thought alone was enough for him to want to go back. He felt something strong enough about her to convince him to see this through.

He had already created an alibi for tomorrow, made sure Ashara knew he was going early and working late. Annie had been complaining about the library looking dingy and he had generously offered to come in early the next day to spruce the place up, feeling terrible about having to lie about it. Cassel wanted it to be discreet because he wanted to have enough information about these people before marching into town and accusing them. It would be easier if they remained oblivious and with Ned gone, they would have no leverage. He had to tell them to be easy on Dave though, if he was a part of it or not, he had helped Ned get this far.

He had cleaned up behind him after the phone call. He deleted the numbers he’d called from Dave's phone, erased the signature from the time-sheet and tucked away his scribbles. It was difficult, but he spent the rest of the day as he usually would. He felt grateful that his face was hard to read because most of the time he could hear his heart beating in his ears and feel the frenzy every second of the day. He asked Dave if he wanted to get dinner at the local diner after his shift as a 'thank you' for his
favour. That was true enough, he couldn’t imagine eating Ashara's food again. Dave had agreed, squealing “oh our first date! And I ain’t putting out after one meal. You'll need to try harder,” Ned had just rolled his eyes. They walked down to a diner nearby, they'd spoken of trivial things and occasionally Dave came up with suggestive remarks or cheesy flirting in a high-pitch voice, which he brushed off chuckling and ever so often coming up with his own sassy comebacks - he was happy about the prospect of going back and it brought that side out in him- much to Dave's surprise. There had still been an underlying sense of recognition that this was the last time they would hang out. He knew Dave sensed what was happening, even if he didn’t ask questions about it. It's easier if he isn’t a part of this, I don’t want him getting in trouble because of me. He had come straight home and did his best to act normal in front of Ashara. It must have worked because she didn’t seem a least bit suspicious.

God bless my stony face. His thoughts trailed off and eventually he found himself dreaming.

He was standing in a cathedral again. But there was something odd about it, it was seven-sided and there was a statue on each side in here. His vision trailed past the statues to a figure on the far end, standing still, facing him. It was Catelyn, standing beneath the huge stained glass window in the front, wearing the same blue dress he saw from their picture online. She looked straight at him with a soft loving smile. He walked right up to her, transfixed at the sight of the colours through the stain glass cascading down on her beautiful auburn hair, making it glint like starlight. This time, she didn’t fade away. She just looked up at him as he came to stand right in front of her, amazed at just how close he was to her this time. He couldn’t stop staring at her beautiful face, he looked down into her impossibly blue eyes feeling mesmerized. She gently placed her hand on his jaw and whispered softly, “Come home safe to me. I’m waiting, my love.” She parted her lips, and raised her face to his. He could feel the heat of her breath and almost feel the brush of her lips against his own--

The alarm clock on his end table went off loudly. Fuckin' hell!?! One dream....one good dream in months and this bloody... he stopped mid-curse as he saw the time: 5 am. He just had to meet the guy at 7 am. Hurriedly, he turned it off and got up to take a shower and get dressed, he looked down awkwardly to see he was stiffening rapidly. He had been emotionally distressed for months and hadn’t spent time doing... 'that' since he recovered. But, sometimes he would wake up and find his boxers, pushed down to his ankles, his hand on his softening cock, and his seed spilled on his stomach or thighs with still an unquenched longing in his heart. He would try to recall the dreams that caused him to take those measures, in his sleep, but always drew a blank. Now he figured out the subject of those dreams, and he smiled sheepishly. As he walked in the shower, he desperately tried to think about anything else but how that blue dress hugged Catelyn's slender figure, and how soft her lips looked while he was touching his naked body in order to cleanse himself, lest he ended up spending more time in here than he should. Soon it worked as he realized that he recalled this sweet dream because he hadn’t touched the food last night, so he didn’t get the drugs in his system, that made him angry and then he had to calm himself before he put his fist through a wall. He quickly got dressed and walked out of the house, it took every bit of his self-control not to barge back in and demand Ashara to tell him the truth. It would serve nothing. She won't tell me and I'll sabotage this plan before it starts. I must play my part in this. He sighed and walked out, pausing just for a moment to scan the house one last time.

He was at the library desk waiting when he heard a familiar voice “I know its early, but is the library open?”

He looked up and said “Yes, it is,” looking at the man walking in. He was just as tall as Ned and wore a leather jacket, he had short dark hair and greyish brown eyes. He looked tired as he scanned around finally fixing his serious gaze on Ned at his reply. His eyes widened and he gasped imperceptibly, but Ned caught it. This is the guy. He's the younger man from the image that flashed in my mind after calling Rodrik, he thought. He was only sorry that he couldn’t return the affection, but thrilled that he was meeting someone he knew from his past.
The man slowly walked over to the desk and asked, his gaze quietly scanning the area, "Good, can you help me find a book called 'the Lone Wolf'?"

Ned got up at that, before he could reply, Dave walked in. He was dumbstruck, *what the hell is he doing here so early???

"Morning..." he drawled, and looked at both of them rather oddly.

"Dave, why....um...why are you here so early?" Ned stuttered.

"Well, I'm here to help, you offered Annie to come in early to organize, I thought I'd come and help you," he said slightly confused by the other man's presence since the library hadn't opened yet. The man looked nonchalant but with a pretense of putting his hands in the jeans pockets Ned saw him put his left hand just below the hem of his jacket. He glimpsed a holster with pale grey object protruding out. *He's armed, I need to stop this before it gets out of hand.*

Dave gave him a knowing smile, and then looked back at Ned.

He quickly replied "Dave, this gentleman... wanted a bo--"

"Go." he said softly.

"What?" Ned asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Well, I'm craving an onion bagel. And look the bagel shop across the street opened early today" Dave said with an exaggeratedly bright voice, giving Ned an odd look and then looking over the window to the shop. He followed Dave's gaze. He was right, the shop was open early, too early. The bagels were nice but the shop owner always gave Ned odd stares whenever he went in to grab a snack every now and then--Oh. The realization struck him and he understood what Dave was trying to do.

Recognizing the change in his expression, Dave continued, "So, you can help this gentleman... once I'm at the shop." He nodded at the man. When he was at the door he turned around, "Take care... Richard." he said softly and he walked away. The small pause before he used his fake name made Ned wonder if Dave knew more than he let on.

"Did you understand what just happened?" He heard the man ask. Ned nodded at him then looked at his hand still lightly touching the gun he carried and shook his head.

"I did. It means we have some time. Wait until he started conversing with the bagel shop owner and then we'll make a run for it."

They saw Dave go in and start talking to the owner at the shop rather enthusiastically. *Charmer,* he thought if it wasn't for Dave's excellent people skills - *and his habit of sneaking up on people,* he added - Ned wouldn't even have discovered his name. The man looked at shop owner turn around. Dave gave them a brief look and a nod, the man said without a hitch, "We're good. We have to go. NOW." Ned followed him, scanning the deserted street and got into his white Lexus. Next thing he knew they were driving out of the town. He knew Dave would make an excuse if Annie wondered where he had gone. Just then he saw her walking to work, he quickly ducked, in a bit he looked into the rear view mirror and realized he had ducked too late. He could see Annie's image getting smaller as she frantically picked up the phone to call someone. *Damn it!*

He looked at the man and said, "I think they just found out. We just passed the librarian. She saw me and called someone."
The man cursed under his breath, “I promise I won’t kill you, but you’ll need to put your seat belt on for this.” saying that, he floored the car.

Jory focused on the road, but he couldn’t help the quick glances at Ned to make sure he truly was alright. He looked fine, yet he seemed like a stranger. He was looking out the window quietly without a greeting, a friendly hug, not even the signature “Ned” grin- Catelyn’s term for his crooked wolfish grin. Jory couldn't help but voice what was gnawing at his heart since Rodrik had called him, “So....you don't remember me do ya?”

Ned looked straight at him, his face guilty, “I'm sorry...no I don't really. You seem really familiar though. I saw you briefly in an image; a memory flash of sorts. I've known you for a while, I guess.”

He felt a sharp pain hit his heart. *God he really doesn’t remember me. My best mate.....doesn't remember me.* He just nodded sadly, “Thirty years. We've known each other for thirty years, mate--” his eyes widened, mouth agape, “--I'm Jory. Jory Cassel. Rodrik, the man you spoke to is my uncle. We are in charge of the security at Stark Corporation, your family business. We grew up together, went to the same school, same college. We're best mates actually.” he added sadly, feeling tears prickle his eyes as he fought not to lose focus.

“I'm so sorry. I wish I remembered, I really do. For what its worth, its nice to...meet you Jory and thanks for helping me. I wish you could drive slower, but I still appreciate you helping me escape.” Ned said smiling nervously, he couldn’t help but laugh a bit sadly at ‘drive slower’. Ofcourse, he doesn't remember....

When they were both sixteen and just got their licenses, he had convinced Ned to take Rodrik's car for a 'test drive'. It all started well, but it had been raining and after a while he had kind of lost control of the car and nervously told Ned “I promise not to kill you, but I think you need to put the seat belt on”, Ned had just stared at him, eyes wide with fear for their lives, nodded dumbly frantically reaching to secure his seat belt. Thankfully, Jory soon regained control of the car and slowed way down before driving back home slowly and quietly pulling in the drive way. They had stayed in the car breathing heavily in relief, thanking God for their lives when Ned had muttered, scowling, “I told you to drive slowly”, they'd just stared at each other and burst into laughter. Since then Ned insisted on driving every time they were in a car together. It was just a joke now, he realized for a brief moment he had forgotten about Ned's condition. *God, I hope he remembers soon.*

He heard Ned's voice interrupt his thoughts, “So, what's the plan?”

Rodrik had called him again a few hours after he left to find Ned. Apparently, he had called Jon Arryn who sent his private jet with a trusted pilot - *Yohn Royce, of course* - down to Vale airport to pick Ned and himself.

“The Vale airport is about three hundred kilometers away, with this speed it will take us a few hours to get there. If someone did see you then we need to get you to safety as fast as we can. There is a private jet waiting for us there, its a five hour flight, with the time difference, you'll be home before midnight. Oh that reminds me--” he waved at the bag in the back seat “--I've got a jacket, shades and a cap for you to wear. You need to put those on as soon as we approach the city. We can't risk anyone seeing you, we don't want a bigger mess on our hands.”
He saw Ned lean over and grab the leather jacket, shades and the cap with NW written on it. He looked at it curiously, Jory answered “NW, stands for Northern Wolves. Its a College football league. We used to play for them.”

He wore the lame ‘disguise’, Jory had picked up whatever he found in his closet in a hurry, he didn't even realize he had picked up that NW cap, he and Ned were the same height so his jacket fit him well enough. He looked surprising different, of course he doesn’t have his beard and the shades cover his ‘Stark’ eyes.

In a little while, Ned asked, “So, what about the people who...kept me there?”

He had known Ned well long enough to know he was barely holding his anger together. “We don’t have network here yet. The moment we get it, I'll call Rodrik and we'll let him know the situation. He'll get in touch with his... contact-” Blackfish, he'll surely call the blackfish. But you won't remember him “- they can get a team of officers to the town as early as this afternoon, if things go as planned. If those people did see you, then we will have to act fast. Once we call Rodrik, you can give him names and descriptions of everyone you think may be involved. The least he can do is do background checks, if he hasn’t already and put them on the no-fly list. Rodrik can decide what to do next. He'll handle it, don’t worry,” he said calmly knowing fully well he didn’t sound very calm at all. Its too late, he thought desolately. If they had been spotted, they had given themselves away. Chances were the team of officers and investigators would find an empty town, but in a hurry these culprits would leave evidence behind. They always do.

They drove in silence for a long while before Ned spoke again, “So, when you say home....” he saw Ned swallow twice before trailing off.

“I mean the Stark mansion. Its in the heart of Winter town.” he said softly.

Ned nodded, “Will...my family be there?...My wife?”

Oh God! Catelyn. He had completely forgotten about her in all the haste. Rodrik mentioned calling her once they were on the plane, even after Jory insisted that they call right away, Rodrik had been firm on calling only after they were absolutely certain Ned was in safe hands. I trust you to bring him home safely Jory, but we don't know his situation yet and we cant give her false hope before we know for sure that he is okay, he'd said . He's right, its going to be hard enough with Ned's condition.. he knew that. They had a few times, told Catelyn early on, when they thought they almost found Ned, and eventually, every single time, they had to break it to her that it was a false lead and it broke their hearts to do so. She never cried in front of them, always held her head high and no matter how she tried her voice broke a little when she thanked them excusing herself whenever they assured her they would find him soon. God, I can't imagine what it will do to her to see him like this.

“Jory--” he heard Ned's voice startle him again, “--You were telling me about...my family.”

“Right. Yes. Rodrik had mentioned he will contact your wife, Catelyn, once we get you on the plane. I'm not sure about the rest, but your wife and kids will definitely be there.” He was sure he didn't imagine the hitch in Ned's breath when he mentioned Catelyn's name. Perhaps he'll remember her. God, let him remember her!

“Kids? I have kids??” he said, his face transformed into obvious delight.

Jory chuckled, “Yes, Ned you have kids. Robb is eight, Sansa is four and Arya is about two and a half.”
“Three kids.” he breathed with a soft smile.

After a while, when they were in the city Jory called Rodrik and put him on speaker. “Hello, Rodrik I just got into the city. Ned is safe, but we have a problem. Ned says the librarian spotted us when we drove away.”

“Fuckin' hell!” they heard his curse through the speakers. “Alright. I'll talk to the blackfish, if they leave town in haste they'll leave stuff behind.” Rodrik answered, mirroring his own thoughts. "However, Ned I do need their names this time. They might be using false names, but I'll still do a background check and put them on the no fly list right away.” he continued.

Ned said, “If you find a man named Dave, be easy on him. He helped me, he may not be a part of it.”

“Dave? The weird onion bagel guy?” Jory asked. The man's presence had startled him this morning. He seemed calm, eerily calm and Jory couldn't help but be ready to draw his gun. After what these people were doing to Ned, both Rodrik and Jory knew they probably had professional help and he couldn’t risk anyone attacking Ned before they could escape. He wasn’t going to kill him, but he did plan on knocking the guy out. And from the moment the guy opened his mouth, he had confused Jory to no end, but Ned seemed to trust him, so he let it go. And he did end up helping them escape, so he assumed Ned knew him well.

“Yeah, I know he knows whats going on. Still he helped me as he could. In fact I could call Rodrik because of him.” Ned answered, “and for the names that I know of: I think the Sheriff's name was Sand, though I don’t remember, I only met him once over four months ago. The Doctor who treated me is Armond Groff; The therapist is Kenneth Tanner; The librarian, Merianne Mcdormund and the woman who lied to me... Ashara Dayne.”

He glanced sharply at Ned. *Did he say Ashara Dayne?* Before he could voice his thoughts Rodrik asked, “Wait, Ashara Dayne? Are you sure that’s what she said her name was? Can you describe her?”

Ned said, “Yes. Average height, long black hair, blue eyes- violet in some lights- and tanned skin tone.” *Thats Ashara alright...*

Rodrik echoed his own thoughts again, “That does sound like Ashara...but Ned-”

“But, what?” Ned asked angrily.

He felt bemused and unsure of how to say it. Thankfully, that’s when he heard Rodrik's grim voice,

“...Ashara has been dead for nine years.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. Comments and Critiques welcome! :)
She turned around on her other side groaning, ignoring the sunlight streaming through her bedroom window and trying to fall back asleep. She'd had yet another exhausting week, *its been like this since we 'found' Richard, why can’t he just forget?* she sighed. She spent last night conversing with Groff about their plan, yet again. He had gotten anxious since Richard went to see him a few days ago. She'd been furious that he was blaming her for not keeping Richard's curiosity in check and he was furious with her when she insinuated that the drugs weren't doing what they should. They'd ended up having a heated argument in the park where they met up after Richard's visit, when they both calmed down, he'd given her more drugs assuring her that these would definitely do the job. She was getting tired of this charade, it was going nowhere, but they had no other choice. After speaking with Groff about the drug effects, she felt a bit relaxed and started dosing Richard more through the food. Ever since, according to her sources, he had gone back to normal but she was still cautious. Groff said these drugs would effectively block memories and stop his brain cells from reconnecting with them, or something along those lines, she didn't care about the detailed scientific specifications as long as Richard didn't remember. And she was glad it was working since he had gone back to normal but she was still cautious. Groff said these drugs would effectively block memories and stop his brain cells from reconnecting with them, or something along those lines, she didn't care about the detailed scientific specifications as long as Richard didn't remember. And she was glad it was working since he had gone back to normal but she was still cautious. Groff did say it would take at least a year for him to get to a place where his past memories would be way out of reach and then he could settle into his new life. They were halfway there and they could not afford anymore screw ups. It would be easier if he started feeling attracted to her, either way she had to charm him fast. _But how do you charm a man who doesn't even want to touch you._

She knew she would have to convince him that she was the one he loved. Dressing provocatively had not helped as she thought it would. He did seem relaxed two nights ago when she kissed his cheek though, _the increased dosage must be working._ Although she had expected him to follow her in her bedroom, naively- she should've opened that bottle of wine, maybe once he got drunk he'd be pliant enough to follow her. She could still tell he was tense, probably from that one time she tried to kiss him months ago when he all but ran to his room. He had looked so much like his brother that night, _I shouldn’t have lost my focus_ , that mistake started it all. What little comfort they had built together- as much as she hated the dull lifestyle he seemed to prefer- had slowly drifted away from that day onwards. _I showed him pictures of us, but he more concerned about one brief image with Catelyn Tully_. Damn that woman. She tried to steal Brandon away from me and then Ned too... _No. Not Ned. Richard. He must always be Richard._ She had to be careful with her thoughts too. One slip up and everything they had worked for all this time would go to waste. He didn't remember, but he was smart enough to figure it out. Which is why it was essential that he was watched at all times.

It had been so difficult in the beginning. Especially with his haircut and shaved face – that she'd insisted him to maintain saying 'its how he used to look like', to make things easier for her, of course- that made him look so much like Brandon. She had almost thought life with him would be possible, that dream had shattered fairly quickly, _they may have similar faces but they couldn’t be more different._ She sighed, Brandon had been lively, charming and so easy to get into her bed. Sometimes, she just had to look at him wearing something slutty, her dark hair in disarray, leaning over a wall, mouth slightly agape, breathing heavily staring at him with open lust. She tried that on his brother, idiot actually thought she was feeling dizzy or unsteady and offered her a chair when Brandon would’ve had her naked and had his way with her on that same chair in that time. She rolled her eyes, his brother was probably the most dull, sullen and frigid man on the planet. She knew he
thought her beautiful and attractive, that was obvious enough. Then why was it so difficult to convince him? Their entire plan was based on him falling for her, and with his memories gone, it should have been easier than this. And she had to compromise a lot to do this, what choice did she have though? This was her only chance to get back what rightfully belonged to her, what the damn Tullys had taken from her and--

Her thoughts were cut off by the ringing of her phone. *Merianne? At this hour?* Reluctantly, she'd had the nosy old woman keep at eye on...Richard whenever he worked at the library. Her only job was to make sure he didn’t do anything out of the ordinary and after the conversation they had last night, she'd mentioned he seemed more focused that ever. *He didn’t take his eye off the computer for a second*, she'd said. That was good news, they couldn’t afford more problems. It was easy enough to lure her with money and without having to include her in the plan. Good thing about Creekwood was, they made sure the town was repopulated completely by the kind of people that would enable them to carry out their business in peace. The kind that didn't ask questions and weren't opposed to doing questionable things for a good amount of cash. Annie was one of these people, she had an innocent face, clean record and no idea what she was doing this for. *She's an outsider, we dont need more liabilities*. Irritated she picked up the phone, “What?”

“He...He's left town...he's gone.... I didn't know... I swear”


“Richard. I saw him in a car with another guy. They are driving away out of town right now.” Merianne said hurriedly.

Her heart was pounding, *What!?!? Left town?!? How??, “Who did he leave with? Did you seen his face? Was it Dave??”*

“No...Not Dave. His shift starts much later....I didn't see the man, they went too fast.”

“Which way did they go?”

“South. They went southwards towards Strongsong. I didn't know..I sw-” She'd already hung up. *How the hell did he get out?? Where did he go and who helped him??*

“The old hag! She had one job!!” she cursed loudly as she paced to her closet, knocking things off the dressing table in the haste to get to his room to find a clue or a message or anything that could tell her where he went. She checked his drawers, closet, finally she saw his shirt and jeans that he wore to work the day before. She scoured them, nearly ripping the fabric to find something, and soon she felt a scrap of paper folded in his jeans pocket. Hurriedly she pulled it out and unfolded it to see a series of names written on it, and her eyes darted down to the largest letters, written crisp and clear: **EDDARD STARK**. Shit. She didn't need to second guess, she knew he figured it out and he had likely found a way to contact someone back home. But who could help him so fast?? Who did he conta-- *Cassel. Ofcourse!!!* No one else could have gotten him out this fast, and the man had been getting the Starks - *especially Brandon* - out of trouble for decades. She cursed loudly scampering in her own room, she picked up a suitcase and started throwing things in and hastily called Groff. She knew if he did contact Cassel, he would send officers over as soon as today, they didn't have much time, *evidence, I also have to take care of the evidence. How the hell did this happen?* She was drugging him!! It was all going fine. And he was focused at work, she'd asked Carl to open his bagel shop early today just in case, since he was going early to the library and staying late...Oh. *He tricked me! The son of a bitch tricked me!! He wasn't going in early to help out. He was creating an alibi so he could escape....Motherfu-

Groff picked up before she finished her thought, “Groff, he got out and he figured out who he is.
Merianne just called me. He's headed south.” Groff replied tersely, “Damn! I was afraid this would happen, I've prepared for it and I'll speak to my contact working inside. I'll inform anyone and everyone who needs to know, and I'll be there in an hour. Take care of the evidence, ALL of the evidence. And...even if the actual plan is scrap now, there is still something we can do. Something you can do, some damage control.”

She listened to his plan carefully and smirked. She knew exactly what to do. Ned had been with her for five months, they had that to their advantage. Catelyn Tully may love Ned Stark, but she was still a proud woman. And Catelyn had been betrayed by a Stark before, countless times. And she knew very well how the little trout had taken it. The Tully-Stark alliance had been close to being ripped apart after Brandon's constant cheating had been exposed - with undeniable proof provided by herself, of course. The bonds were still severed in spite of Brandon waiving all his rights to Stark Corporation, old Rickard renaming Ned as the successor to his empire, not even Brandon calling a press conference to apologize to Catelyn and the Tullys to assuage them. In fact the public display had only riled the Tully patriarch more because they were constantly in the tabloids and were hounded by the media as if to pressurize them to accept the apology, classic Brandon. Catelyn's precious marriage to the honourable, less attractive, frozen faced Ned Stark that did some damage control, however Hoster Tully hadn't stepped into the Stark Mansion as long as Brandon was alive. was alive. He's truly gone. The sting had lessened in time, only giving a way to the ever increasing vengeance that was building up in her heart for every damn Tully and Stark alive. But it still popped up, much more in the last five months of living with a man who reminded her of his brother. She thought he would be exactly like Brandon, she really had. But the more she spent time with him, the different they both seemed and it made it more difficult for her, but it had to be done. Because, she was craving her vengeance now, she wanted the Starks and the Tullys to suffer what she had the last decade. They did this, they took my Brandon away from me, and I will do my damnedest to ruin everything that Ned and his little trout got because of it. And after Brandon's scandal, nobody would believe Ned even if he did try to speak out. Groff also had sources that would do their job in exploiting this news and reopening old wounds, she knew. They were doing well enough now with shadowing every wrong move Catelyn made in the business. Ned was away for so long with a woman - the very woman who Brandon cheated on her with – for five months, accepting that she was his girlfriend; Catelyn was too indignant to just let it go. And if he had contacted Cassel, she had a hunch he would send over Brynden Tully to investigate and she knew the man had a temper. He'd nearly killed Brandon for hurting his niece, he definitely would not let this go easily. A flicker of doubt is all it would take to break whatever was left of Ned's marriage after his absence for half a year, and the Tully-Stark alliance would collapse for good. Oh, that would serve us very well now, wouldn't it?

They may have lost their first plan, but new opportunities had just opened up. She picked up most of the stuff she could find, wiped all her fingerprints, destroyed all the evidence, Groff had arrived just in time to help her. She found last night's food dumped in the bin, sneaky bastard! Which meant he hadn't been dosed last night. Groff reassured her that even if he did find his true name and perhaps people who would aid him, he would still have a lot of drugs in his system to remember anything important soon anyway. Finally after taking care of everything, she picked up various 'important' items and smirking walked into Ned's room. Catelyn Tully, lets see how you deal with being betrayed yet again, this time by the Stark you actually trusted.

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

“What? How..how can she be dead?!” Ned yelled at the speaker, trying to calm himself.

Jory said softly, “Ned, we think, Ashara died about nine years ago. She had a complicated pregnancy, she went into labour early after finding out her brother had been killed and gave birth to a still-born girl. She committed suicide in a couple of months out of severe depression. However...”
“However, what?” his tone was terse, he knew he should be calm, but he couldn’t. Who the hell was this woman? And why had she done this to him?

“However, we never found her body, we found a suicide note that we were kind of skeptical about....Could it be her, Rodrik? If she never recovered from that trauma... I'm thinking.....”

Rodrik cut in, “You're thinking, she's trying to take back what belongs to her. It would make sense, nobody would suspect it was her, since she was declared dead after a few years - when they couldn't find her dead or alive. And wouldn't be the first time a Dayne took the dark route to get what they wanted. And Arthur Dayne had agreed that he'd helped people 'simply disappear' before, maybe he gave a few pointers to his little sister. It would also explain why Ned looks so much like Brandon right now.”

“What...has my appearance got to do with it? And who's Brandon?” he was getting quite impatient now. *Calm down, my love,* he heard Catelyn's voice in his mind. But, he was too irritated to pay any mind to it, in spite of the slight jump his heart gave at the sudden feminine voice.

Jory looked up at him, “Brandon is...well...was your older brother, Ned. Your haircut and shaved face makes you look quite like him. Ashara and Brandon were together. It was his baby she lost.”

His felt a jolt in his heart at 'was'. “What do you mean 'was'?” he said, his voice oddly thick now.

“I'm sorry Ned, Your brother died in a car-crash, seven years ago.”

*Oh God!* The man he dreamed of. His brother...was dead, he felt a pain strike his heart. He sat silently, not knowing how to react. The image flashed through his mind, a charming young man with a crooked grin smiling at him, he felt the pain strike again as he tried to hold his brother that he would never know, in his heart. Jory looked at him sympathetically, continued speaking with Rodrik, to give him a moment. He heard them carefully strategizing their next move according to the new.....developments. He said a lot of things; getting a sketch artist, no-fly list, investigators and kept mentioning some blackfish. *What the hell is a blackfish?* But he wasn't paying much attention. He was still trying to cope with the staggering amount of information he got in the last ten minutes. And also felt grief, grief for losing a member of his family without even meeting him coupled with a deep sense of guilt that he couldn’t even remember his own brother.

“....Ned...?.... Ned??” He snapped out of his thoughts, “hmm?”

He heard Rodrik's voice, “I'm sorry lad, but we need to know every fact this woman told you in the last five months. If she tried to keep you away with her for so long, in spite of knowing who you are then you might not be the only intended victim here.”

Jory interjected sharply, “This could be intended for all the Starks!... Damn it! It makes sense....the stocks took a hit, we almost lost half of the northern clientele in two months. Rodrik, these people need to be found. They had to have help. To forge so many documents and make sure the whole damn town stayed quiet about it. They are not scavenging, they are professionals. If she is Ashara, and she has her brother's contact list, it would be even easier for her to disappear.”

He heard Rodrik sigh, “Yes, this is much bigger than we thought, we must hurry. Ned, tell us your tale.”

They conversed for a while in the car after that, Ned explained all the stories and 'facts' she'd told him about his life over the last few months. Rodrik said her appearance had become very important now, if she was Ashara, she definitely had motive and she was not stupid enough to not have a back-up plan. One thing was clear, this woman had lied to him about everything. She ripped him away
from the people he loved. Could it really be Ashara Dayne after all this time? She did seem very familiar. And there were a few stories she told him that felt very familiar too. It was possible, if he had been alive all this time, she could be too. His head was still pounding, he leaned back, closing his eyes for a bit in an attempt to block out the rush of overwhelming emotions,

.....Catelyn...he saw her silhouette walking towards him, he was in the woods this time, with that unusual white tree with red leaves, it was calm here. She walked up beside him and held his hand, turning him to face her. She looked so beautiful her red hair in contrast with the snow falling softly on them. He just stared at her, she looked sympathetic and touched her forehead to his as he bent forward to return the gesture. Breathing her in, he clasped both her hands in his. “I'm so sorry, my love......you're so close Ned.......so close.....”

He startled up at the tapping on his shoulder, he opened his eyes to see Jory say,

“Sorry Ned, we're almost here. You can take off that cap and shades, but bring them together. We'll need them when we land.”

He realized he had actually fallen asleep. As he shook off the cobwebs of sleep, still thinking about Catelyn, he realized Rodrik had already hung up, and saw they were driving towards what looked like an airplane hanger. He was slightly perturbed by the prospect of flying, and as Jory drove right in the hanger where the private jet waited for them, those nervous jitters started to resurface. He got out of the car, taking out the shades and cap, stared at the sleek black jet with creamy silver engraving that said “The Falcon”. He couldn't help but wonder exactly how Rodrik had managed to get a private jet for him in less than a day. “Go on, go inside.” Jory said, getting out himself. He slowly walked in the plane and paced all the way to the back scanning the posh interior with comfortable cream coloured seating and mahogany panels along the sides of the plane. This plane was quite luxurious, and probably designed uniquely for the owner, and he couldn't shake of the strange feeling that he'd been here before many times when a raucous voice behind him startled him out of his reverie,

“Jory Rodrik Cassel!! This better be a bloody important person, because if I cut my fishing trip with my boys short for some crack-addict rock star, I swear to god, I will stab your damn uncle with a steak knife.” He whirred back to see a tall, big, familiar looking middle-aged man in front of the door to the cockpit with slightly graying short hair. He had a scowl on his face which was now transforming into shock as he walked further to see Ned clearly.

“Is Eddard Stark important enough for you, Royce?” he heard Jory's quiet amused voice as he walked in the plane himself carrying a backpack.

The man didn't answer him. He just walked right up to Ned and crushed him into a tight bear hug whispering thickly, “Son of a bitch! She was right. God bless the stubbornness of your Tully wife, it finally paid off!” He pulled back and looked at Ned with affection. Yet another person, I can't truly remember. “Where in the damn hell were you, Stark?” he said.

Jory cut in before he could answer. “Yohn, I'll explain everything once we land, we can't talk about this right now,” quietly he added, ”-I saw the other pilot from the window...”

Understanding dawned on the man's eyes, “No neither of us knew who the passengers were. However, I instructed him to stay put when I saw your car, shoved that damn headset on his face telling him to start prepping for take off before walking out here to ask what the hell was going on. And if it was some idiot with money who needed a ride back home after a hangover, I would've landed this plane on your uncle's head.”

"I guess Jon didn't tell you then?” Jory asked.
"Jon told me to call Rodrik if I needed more information, and when I did all he told me was that it was important, very urgent and that I couldn't ask anymore questions." Royce rolled his eyes, “I swear sometimes, he forgets he’s no longer the captain of the WIA Wintertown division.”

Jory laughed, “Ha! You’re telling me, I live with it everyday!! Anyway, right now, its important that we get Ned home.”

Royce nodded back, turning back to Ned once more he said, “Its good to have you back. We'll catch up later over pints of ale and the best steak in town. Well, that depends on which one of us is in the mood to cook, eh? Also, tell your Tully wife, I owe her dinner for not believing her. Its a date!” he laughed expectantly. Ned just nodded not catching his drift, and Royce's expression turned grim. As he turned to walk back to the cockpit, he looked at Jory, “An explanation, once we land. Your word, Cassel,”

Jory nodded back, “You got it,” as Royce went to the cockpit.

Flying didn’t affect him badly as he'd thought. He actually felt comfortable about it. Maybe its something I did often..before, he contemplated looking out of the window, watching the sunlight dance on the clouds beside him. In a while, he got out of his seat to stretch his legs when Jory walked over from the pantry with a couple of trays, laying them down on the table between their seats.

“Yohn said we're in for a smooth ride, the climate is favourable for flying. How are you holding up?” he asked softly looking rather emotional and relaxed, his face wasn’t as alert as it had been the whole drive here. No wonder, if only he drove a bit carefully.....

Ned sighed, “I'm fine... Still coping. But, I'll be fine. Thanks for everything.”

At that Jory nodded slowly “Bloody hell, Ned!” he said thickly and all but tackled him, wrapping him in a tight hug. Ned just patted his back, We've known each other for thirty years, mate , Jory had said, I wish I remembered him, he thought miserably. He did a little, but nowhere near the way Jory obviously felt about him. Jory pulled back with his hands still on Ned's arms, he had tears in his eyes. “I'm sorry....I'm just..We were looking for you for five months, I was starting to fear that you......I'm so glad you're safe Ned. I didn't think....I would ever see you again. I swear, we will have a security detail on all of you once we get home. We'll find this bastards, I swear to you. And I will personally be in charge of your safety wherever you go.”

“Its okay...And thanks. I would be honoured...as long..as you let me drive” he said attempting to lighten the mood, which worked because Jory laughed out loud and said wistfully “Oh...Classic Ned....” before he could ask the meaning of that Jory continued wiping his tears, “Anyway, you must be hungry so, eat up. Looks like Jon made sure the pantry was well stocked,” he waved at the food on the table.

He was hungry, the food humble for a jet this expensive, but pretty good. They ate in silence, occasionally talking about what they discussed in the car. He picked up another chicken sandwich, “So...what time do we get back you said?”

Jory took a swig of his coffee “with this speed, a you'll be home around nine at night, maybe earlier. We have a car waiting for us in the hanger at Wintertown, I'll drive you home myself, carefully this time,” he grinned.

“How did your uncle manage all this in one day?” He couldn’t help but voice his thoughts.

Jory merely chuckled, “Contacts. We've done things like this several times before. Only the stakes
weren't this high then. Rodrik used to work for the Westeros Investigation Agency, he retired ten years ago, but he still consults sometimes. After he joined your father at Stark, he still had many contacts at the WIA to help out whenever your family dealt with any legal obstacles. Anyway, considering we didn’t want many people involved in this, it was different this time. Rodrik called Jon Arryn, a family friend of yours. He owns Falcon Air, this is his private jet and he was instructed to send his most trusted pilot to bring you home. And that's Yohn Royce.” he pointed at the cockpit. “He is a remarkable pilot and like you an extremely talented cook, but you interrupt his family time and he'll cut you with his bloody expensive cleaver. Those are two things you have in common.”

Ned chuckled, Jory's cellphone pinged and immediately the laughter went out of his eyes as he scurried over to his backpack in the next seat and pulled out a sleek black laptop.

“What’s going on?” Ned asked.

“Rodrik alerted the team of officers who were waiting at Strongsong, they're there now, half of the town is deserted already. There is no one in the house you stayed in, the doctor's office and even the sheriff's station. So Rodrik said he spoke to one of his old buddies who is a sketch artist. The man is willing to video chat with us where you can describe what these people look like, it will certainly make things a lot easier for us.” Jory said, mostly focusing on the laptop screen.

“How did they all leave this fast?” he wondered.

“Like we suspected. It looks like this is much bigger than just keeping you away from your family. We'll know more once they scour the town for clues, you ready Ned? I'm hitting the call button.”

*Half of the town is deserted. God, this is more dire than I imagined.* Ned said feeling slightly unnerved by how fast events were unfolding around him. When he nervously looked up, Jory said soothingly but firmly, “Look Ned, I know this is difficult for you. You've been through a lot in the last few hours, but we don't know what these people want from your family - and god knows the Starks have suffered enough - if we lose this chance, we don't know how much information they have or when they will strike again. We cannot do this without your help, Ned.”

Jory looked at him genuinely and there was a plea in his eyes. He felt more at home in this damn plane than he ever did in Creekwood. And he knew he needed to find Catelyn, she felt like she was the key to finding all he'd lost. Since they escaped, he had started feeling a desperate need to get back to her. He didn’t understand or even remember anything about her but in all this chaos and lies she was the only one that felt real, *god but she feels real*. And if this was intended to hurt his family, he would do everything in his power to find them.

“Yes. I'm ready.”

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Still rubbing her temple, Catelyn sat down on the plush comfortable leather couch in their living room. Leaning her head back, she simply tried to let the tension from the day melt away. Old Nan had come back to babysit the kids couple of days ago. And Arya, thankfully, was sleeping quite soundly this night. She'd been quite excited to see Old Nan again and spent all day playing and running around. After the older two got home, already excited for the summer vacation, had decided to join in- Sansa too, much to her surprise- and the poor old woman was tired to no end. By the time Catelyn got home the children were cranky from exhaustion and hunger, she had scurried to prepare their meals, inviting Old Nan to join them as a 'thank you' for dealing with her wild offspring. She'd then asked Robb to go take a shower, given Sansa and Arya a bath herself and put the older two to bed with a story while Arya surprisingly had dozed off on her shoulder when usually she was the last one to go down. She'd put the girl down in her crib, that had started to look small for her youngest.
She's growing so fast, Catelyn had let her sleep in the crib a little while longer as the child moved around so much she would be in a completely different position when she woke up then when she fell asleep. And Catelyn didn't wish to risk getting a bed for her lest she fell off trying to fight off a particularly nifty foe in her sleep. She grabbed the baby monitor and came downstairs to sit down for a bit, she hadn’t even changed from her work clothes yet, but she was wearing a comfortable cashmere dress anyway so she didn't make a move to change.

It had been a tough day. Karstark had demanded to see her again today - in spite of speaking with Ben a week ago - having felt 'quite humiliated by being dismissed by adolescent boy' in his words. He had requested – rather demanded- that Ben be present too, like he was a school kid creating menace in Karstark boring class, and she was the Principal apparently. She had spent about an hour assuaging his 'hurt feelings'. However, before he turned to leave, after deciding he was satisfied enough with her answers, she made sure he knew she trusted Benjen's counsel very much, and reminded him that Benjen was a very qualified twenty five year old man who took time out of his busy schedule to meet with Karstark a week ago. Karstark had only gritted his teeth and reluctantly thanked Ben who had been standing quietly beside him, trying very hard to keep the smile off his face. Well, if I am going to be the Principal, she'd thought, looking at Ben pointedly.

She also had a few other meetings in order to ensure their newest project was on track and working fine. She had some of their best people working on this, it was the very first big initiative she had taken after she became the CEO of Stark. She was quite anxious as all of their investors were watching this project like a hawk. If this failed, it would mean a huge loss for the Corporation. She sighed, if that wasn't enough she keep hearing Ned's voice ever so often during the day. When Karstark and Ben left the office, she had tried to calm down the anger that still flared by the man's careless words, just because she couldn't make it to one damn appointment. That temper of yours is a dangerous thing, love, said a deep teasing voice in her mind, she'd jumped back feeling tears sting her eyes. During lunch break she heard, you're working too hard, Cat, sit down, she realized she had been pacing in the office, trying to organize her thoughts. She only huffed and sat down muttering “damn you, Eddard Stark!..” and wept bitterly. Hearing him was not uncommon, it always caught her off-guard, she heard his voice or remembered his memories every now and then. But today, she knew exactly why he presence was more evident in her mind.

She remembered her dream from the night before. She still struggled to understand it. She had started dreaming of Ned ever since he had...gone missing. But it was always a glimpse of him and her running around to find him, in the woods behind Winterfell, sometimes at Riverrun, or in their backyard. She would look and look, calling out alone and in cold, only to startle awake to a wet pillow and aching eyes. Soon, work had gotten so busy and with the kids, she started getting too exhausted to even dream. She thought it was merciful, but at the same time she missed seeing Ned even if it was for just one moment. But, she had another one last night. This one had been quite different than the rest. She wasn’t sure what it meant or if she was reading too much into it.

She was standing in the woods, she could feel the soft snow in her hair, she could see the godswood from Winterfell in front of her. There she saw Ned standing in front of the weirwood, facing her. He was wearing a grey Tshirt with the Stark wolf logo and olive green cargo pants, the clothes he was wearing when he left for the trip. She gasped at the sight and slowing walked towards him, hoping he would stay. And he stood rooted where he was, unlike her other dreams. She walked closer to see him, he gave her a tender smile, he looked at her as if he was awed by her presence. He reached out to touch her hair and coming closer whispered, “I'm coming home, Cat.” and pressed a soft kiss to her lips, she had sighed at the feeling, as she was about to wind her arms around him, to feel him solid and next to her she’d woken up to Arya wailing in the nursery, she'd wiped the tears and went to tend to the girl lest she woke the other two.

I'm coming home, Cat. She'd heard him say that enough before. Every time he was on particularly
long trip or if he was on a trip with Robert Baratheon - who would try to lure Ned into spending extra days “having fun” at local casinos, strip clubs or sleazy bars - Ned would always argue with the man, leave immediately after taking care of business and text her *I'm coming home, Cat.* It was his way of saying, “Robert tried to talk me into staying, so he can have a wild affair with some young blonde he met at the bar and make fun of me for moping about wanting to go back home to my family. So I left early. Because I'm done with him. I didn’t want to punch him. And I love you. I cant wait to see you”. In spite of feeling troubled she huffed a laugh at that. Sometimes Ned just sent that message on any regular day, just to remind her that he was thinking about her. And now she dreamt about him saying that to her and she didn’t know what to make of it. Perhaps it was a dream conceived by bitter longings or a sign that her husband truly was alive. She desperately wished it was the latter. God, knew she could use some hope. Rodrik had mentioned the image recognition software in the meeting a few days ago. She knew he was trying to give her hope, she also knew this was their last resort, Rodrik was scraping the barrel for some ideas and this was the last one he found. She had one more idea. She was going to speak with Lya and ask her if she could bring Jon over for a few days and ask Old Nan if she could stay when Lya was at work to babysit the children and then request Ben to take care of any work related issues for those days. She intended to go down to the town where Ned was last seen and spend a couple of days finding him, along Jory if he agreed to it. She knew Ned more than anyone, perhaps she could offer a different perspective. Perhaps if they approached this a different way, they'd get some results. She would keep trying, as she could, she looked down at her wedding ring and started tracing around it. She would go down to that town herself to look for Ned. And if she didn’t find him alive or...dead, she shuddered, she would still hope. She would hope and find another way - tears ran down her face silently, she clutched at her wedding ring tightly - and she would live. She had to, reluctantly she would go on and hope that her love, her sweet Ned, would find his way to her one day.

She could hear a buzzing in the midst of the wild beating of her heart and she realized it was the intercom. She looked at her phone to check the time and saw five missed calls- she always put her phone on silent after work, wanting to focus only on her family- and saw it was quarter to nine. Feeling slightly nervous she walked over to the front door to see who it was. The media had stopped bothering them within a few weeks of the investigation, “still missing” didn't make a good enough story to lure the viewers. She walked down to the front door and turned on the video from the camera at the Front Gate. She saw Rodrik Cassel in his white sedan, *what is he doing here so late?? Oh god! Please, don’t let it be bad news. I cant...I cant.*

“Pardon me, Mrs. Stark. I tried to call you several times to tell you I meant to come down here. We need to talk.”

*Oh god...no please,* she nodded and buzzed him in and waited. *Oh please no. Anything but that. ANYTHING.* She was breathing fast, she started pacing in the foyer, she heard approaching footsteps when she open the front door to let the man in. He walked into the living room and she followed him. He turned around to face her and gave a smile, “I'm sorry to come here this late, but I couldn’t share this news on the phone.”

“Why...is everything alright? Have you found anything? Do you have any news?” she braced herself for his answer.

“Your husband is coming home.”
C&C welcome! Thanks for reading! :)

Chapter End Notes
Chapter Notes

When you are reading Ned's POV, after Jory says "There it is", if you wish to, play Lilac Wine by The Cinematic Orchestra in the background (heres the link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_w-xms9h0Dc). I think its quite fitting for the end of this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Your husband is coming home.

“What?” Her heart stopped. Had she heard him correctly?

“Eddard Stark is coming home. We found him, Catelyn.” Rodrik said with a genuine smile on his face.

“Oh!” She exhaled in relief, her legs were going weak. She couldn't think clearly. After over five months? how? “How...Where? When did yo-”

“Easy lass, I'll tell you everything, perhaps you should sit down.” Rodrik said, gripping her arms before she fell down. Giving her a hand to steady herself, he led her to the couch, after she settled, he grabbed her a glass of water from the kitchen. She stayed rooted where she was not even moving to stop him, somewhere in her mind she felt embarrassed, because she should be the hostess and offer him refreshments, but given her state she appreciated the gesture. Rodrik had been a father figure, especially the past six months - since her uncle and father both were far away. She appreciated it very much, even more now because she was too preoccupied in steadying herself, she had lost all thought at his last statement and his words kept looping in her mind. Shakily she accepted the glass of water, gulping it down as he sat across from her in one of the high back chairs. Ned is coming home! The thought made her heart soar with joy. Soon she would see him, touch him. Oh god, Ned how I've missed you. She had questions, she wanted to breathe, cry, scream with joy, but she was just trembling and trying to process every emotion and thought that was swirling in her mind.

His voice startled her out of her thoughts, “Before, I tell you how we found him, there is something else you must know....”

Ice crept into her veins at his tone, “What? Oh no, has something happened to him? Is he hurt? Is he safe?” she asked, her calmness long forgotten.

He hesitated for a bit, “He is well physically as far as I know, but he is still emotionally unwell... Catelyn, Ned has lost his memories.”

She felt cold, “What do you mean, 'lost is memories'?" she heard the quiver in her own voice.

“He doesn’t remember anything Catelyn. Nothing at all. I believe the term is retrograde amnesia, I called Dr. Walys immediately to ask. We'll know more once Ned is home and the doctor takes a look at him. But, now you must prepare yourself for that.” Rodrik paused and swallowed. “He...he might
not recognize you, any of you.”

Her whole world collapsed at that, she felt hollow. It felt like she fell off a cliff and hit rock bottom, she'd never even imagined anything like this would happen. Her worst fear was losing her husband or kids and now she would have him back, but he would still be lost to her. How could she bear that? Why was this happening to her? She was getting her husband back after five months, but not truly. All the happy sweet memories...they played in her mind, piercing her every moment, a reminder that her husband wouldn't remember any of them. Would he even remember me? No. Ned...wouldn't remember me. How do I stand that? The thought felt like someone plunged an icy dagger into her heart and twisted it-

Rodrik continued sadly, “That's not all. As far as we know he was held hostage for all these months. He couldn’t contact us because they gave him a different identity. Once he figured out his true identity, he found my number and called me. We arranged for his safe passage right away. Jory picked him up this afternoon, they are on their way home. They'll be here in a couple of hours.”

She forced herself to listen to what he was saying and frowned when she understood it completely. “This afternoon? How long have you known this?” she demanded.

He swallowed, “since yesterday,” her eyes widened in anger, before she could react he continued hurriedly, “I wasn't sure what his situation was, Mrs. Stark. And by the sound of it the people who kept him there knew you and perhaps your entire family. I thought about bringing you with us, but if they recognized you, and had more help than we expected, both of your lives would be at risk. We couldn't just initiate a full-frontal assault without any hardcore evidence, and that wouldn't happen without—”

“-bringing attention. And that would risk everything;” she finished softly.

He nodded, “...and I needed to know he was truly safe before I could tell you. We didn't want to give you... false hope. I'm sorry.”

False hope. Her face softened a bit at that, she remembered several conversations such as this one over the last few months. They would let her know early on in the previous cases and it always ended in disappointment, the men tried their best of course, they always did everything they could and she never knew how to repay them for working relentlessly to find her lost husband with not many options. Nevertheless it broke her heart every time it led nowhere and as much as she tried, she could never completely conceal it from Jory or Rodrik. And she knew he made sense, if she had gone with them knowing Ned was so close, it would cloud her judgement. Rodrik didn’t mention that, but she heard it all the same. She was still slightly unhappy about them keeping it from her, but she told herself he was doing his job by implementing the safest decision if Ned was..... Oh god he said hostage! “Ned was held as a hostage? By whom?”

He looked distinctly uncomfortable at that. “People who know your family. And after Ned explained it to us, the mastermind might just be....Ashara Dayne. I know it sounds crazy, which is why Ned is describing looks of every person he thinks is involved to a sketch artist through video calling from the plane as we speak. Our speculation is, we never found Ashara's body, and the investigators weren't certain whether the suicide note found was truly written out of depression or as a diversion. We think she may in fact have had some of her brother's expertise that helped her get out and start anew.”

Ashara Dayne?? But she is dead, she is gone. “That's not possible....Is it?” she asked not sounding sure of herself, she knew it sounded vaguely possible, but how could it be Ashara?

Rodrik answered, “Arthur Dayne was involved in more notorious crimes than he ever got convicted
for. We knew it, of course, we just didn't have proof. The man was always one step ahead of us, when he got caught however he knew he was almost done. The Targareyans had made it damn well known that he was responsible for everything they were being convicted for, to get the spotlight off them. The man was intelligent and gave away only enough to benefit him, he did eventually confess to some trivial things including the fact that he'd given people a new identity for their safety before. We thought he was trying to suggest something, give us clues or hinting at more evidence, but we never figured out what he meant. And soon he met his impending doom, taking his secrets with him,” he sighed. “Its far-fetched, crazy, but not impossible. And its the best theory we have right now. I've spoken to Brynden who spoke to his sources in Starfall and Dorne, to get more information. And have a couple of sources myself in the Free Cities, who are trying to find some proof for this theory, if she is alive she wouldn't stay in the country and we knew Arthur Dayne had a safe-house somewhere in Myr and allies all over Braavos. We'll know more once we restart an investigation.”

Catelyn nodded slowly, she hadn't followed the Targareyan case very much, but she knew Arthur Dayne had been into far worse things than they'd imagined. Every theory Rodrik mentioned was entirely possible, but she couldn't truly care about that just yet. All she wanted was that Ned was safe, god please be safe and whole and come back to me. Remember me, a tiny fearful part of her heart added. She looked up at Rodrik still watching her concerned, “If what you say is true than we have a lot to discuss and think about, but right now its important that Ned gets home safe.”

Rodrik hummed his assent, “And Mrs. Stark, we need to keep this quiet for as long as possible. Ned's condition might make things a bit tricky, which is why no one outside your immediate family can know. If this gets out your business will suffer and that will just make it easier for these people to strike again or take advantage of your vulnerability, especially because we don't think Ned was the only target here. Brienne, from the security office who attended his call is one of our trusted employees, she shall not speak of it and we need to keep it that way. At least for a week or so, it will buy us more time to track down the villains who held him there.”

“Track them down? You mean they escaped?”

“Ned said someone saw him as they drove away and informed the woman. She and her allies evacuated immediately. I called Brynden, he was stationed at a town nearby with his team. When they got there however, half of the town was deserted. They've been canvassing the area for a while now.” He added apologetically, “And I'm sorry, but I must stay here until Jory arrives with Ned. I must speak with him about the sketches and about these people in town. And if it truly is Ashara....then this is much bigger than we thought, and we'll need to plan our next move fast.”

She nodded, her heart gave a slight jump every time he said Ned's name. She reconsidered his explanation and his theories, they sounded plausible and crazy at the same time. But he was right, they wouldn't know for sure until they could see for themselves what this woman looked like. Ashara Dayne, a tiny voice whispered in her mind. The woman cannot leave us in peace!....Ned was with her for five months.....he had no memory of me. Oh god, what if they....?? No, no. Don't think about that. Ned is safe. He's coming home. Even if something had happened between it wouldn't be his fault. Even as she thought it she could feel white hot jealousy burning her heart, hasn't the woman caused me enough pain already? She no longer cared about what happened with Brandon, all those years ago. But, Ned... she couldn't bear the thought of Ned being with this woman like he would with herself, holding her in his arms and giving her that tender look full of love that only Catelyn had ever seen, Ned pulling her in his embrace after they....- Stop it, Cat! She forced her eyes shut and desperately tried to push away the images that came rushing in. Whatever happened, he was coming back to her. They would get through any challenges this situation brought. She would help him, they would move forward. He is alive, he is well...that's what matters. She repeated it over and over in her mind as an attempt to purge all the images, all the fears that tried to
cripple her.

“I’m sorry, Catelyn. I wish the lad remembers in time, we’ll figure it out.”

She looked up to see Rodrik's sympathetic face and realized she was crying. She wiped her tears quickly, sat up straighter holding her head high and nodded, “We will. Now, tell me exactly what happened from the moment he contacted you.” *Ned is coming home*, she thought again as Rodrik began his tale.

*That explains the dream.. Ned is alive and he's coming back to me. He lost his memories, our memories, our children.....our love. Ned doesn't remember loving me*, she felt the icy dagger in her heart twist again. *We will get through this*, she thought firmly. *He is alive, he is well...that's what matters*, she repeated in her mind again. *Ned will remember, he must*, she hoped. They talked back and forth for an hour, Rodrik explained every move he made to get Ned back. Her heart clenched whenever he mentioned Ned having to be discreet, the drugs, the trauma and the fear he was dealing with, she desperately wanted to hold her Ned in her arms and keep him safe.

He explained how they got him out and apparently the people who knew about this before her were, Jon Arryn, Jory Cassel, Yohn Royce, her uncle Brynden - he'd called her the night before just to check in, but hadn't said a word. *I'll have a talk with him, he has some explaining to do*, although her uncle could be infuriatingly right sometimes and she knew he'd tell her the same thing Rodrik did. Brienne from the security office had taken Ned's phone call and had been instructed about the situation, as well. She knew Brienne, the girl had done extra shifts the first few weeks when calls were coming in relentlessly. Catelyn made a point of thanking her personally for that and made sure she got overtime for all the extra work. She'd been at Stark for about three years starting as an intern and working her way up. She was hardworking and already one of their trusted employees. She was barely twenty three years old, but sharp as a tack. Catelyn knew she was one of their best employees, and made sure she was treated thusly, especially after she realized the amount of criticism and workplace abuse many excelling female employees had to deal with. She'd invested in security upgrades to ensure safety for these women and approached Brienne to help implement a strict anti-abuse policy she created. So far the girl was proving her talent and excelling at it, Catelyn knew they could trust her.

And Rodrik was right, they didn't need media attention leeching onto their troubles, especially because of Ned's condition. She felt a pang in her heart as she realized something, she would have to explain the children. *Oh gods! Arya and Sansa wouldn't even remember him! Robb and Jon! oh my sweet boys!* Robb had asked her where his daddy was for the first few weeks and Jon had been just as heartbroken as his cousin. She had explained as much as she could to both of them since Lyanna was suffering from depression herself and wasn't in the state of explaining anything to her son. Catelyn made sure Jon was always with her children and didn't feel all alone, with his mother crying most of the time and his godfather - the only father figure in his life - missing. But he sensed something was wrong even before Robb did, and the poor boy had become quieter than he already was, she'd never seen him smile after that. They'd probably be the only two who would remember Ned, even if he didn't remember... *Oh gods*, she felt tears again and she started pacing, slightly shaking. *No, they are too young to understand it. We can't tell them*, she thought still pacing impatiently.

Rodrik declined any refreshments she offered after calming down a little and carried on corresponding with his sources, giving her the space she truly needed at present, as she tried to cope with all the information she got in the last hour. Her husband was coming back, but she had no idea what to expect. She couldn't simply walk into his arms, kiss him breathless, laugh and cry in his embrace as she wished. *Oh god, he wouldn't even remember me... Would he even want to be near me?... Stop it!* She couldn't give up hope, not now. She would figure it out, they would get through
this. In a bit, Rodrik went to attend a phone call, and she walked around readying everything for Ned's arrival, he would need his space for a while, as much as it hurt to contemplate it. So she walked into his old room to place some of his clothes in the closet, stocking up the bathroom, in case he wished to stay there until he settled in his life, her hands were trembling the whole time. She refused to look at any of the happy family pictures out in the living room, now they were just a cruel reminder of a past unknown to her husband. She willed herself to keep her tears at bay, she needed to be strong now. God, how long can I keep doing this? how long can I stay strong? Rodrik walked in the living room from the foyer ending the call and told her the sketch artist had finished all the sketches and was about to send them to her uncle and himself. When she asked, Rodrik assured her Brynden's trusted associate was instructed to provide a viable story without taking any names when they put an APB out. He asked to use the printer and she led him to Ned's study.

The study was largely untouched after Ned had gone missing. She couldn't bear to walk in there to face countless sweet memories and watch them turn into bitter longings, Sansa had taken her first steps here. After fussing to see her father she had finally freed herself from Catelyn's arms at the entrance and walked unsteadily on her chubby little feet to her father, who was kneeling down with his arms outstretched and a wide grin on his face. She couldn't even count the times she had to pry Ned away from this desk, lest he ended up pulling an all nighter on a weekend after a stressful week. The first few years at the Corporation after Rickard's death were challenging and they both spent enough time in this home office as they did at work, while taking care of three children under the age of six. That's when they'd bought the extra chair, she remembered. The desk was big enough to fit two chairs beside each other and they would both sit down working, also watching to make sure Arya stayed asleep and neither Robb nor Sansa got out of the baby play yard her father had gifted them, after Sansa started walking. She actually had an office upstairs, attached to their bedroom, which used to be a crafting room for Lyarra. Rickard didn't refurbish it for the longest time after his wife's death, finally letting go when he left for Winterfell, proclaiming they make good use of it. She'd been quite uneasy when Ned suggested she utilize it as she saw fit, she didn't feel like intruding if he wished to keep it as it was. Looking at her expression he'd put on a decidedly grim face and said, 'But the chamber is meant for the Lady of the Castle,' and she'd rolled her eyes. After persuading with endless dramatic phrases such as that, he'd convinced her. When she agreed he said solemnly, 'a wise choice, my Lady Stark' when she'd just stared blankly, clearly not amused, he added 'Last one. Promise.' And keeping his promise he didn't try to persuade her with anymore dramatic statements, for a year. So, she planned to make it her home office/library, It works for me because then I can easily lure you to drop all the work and join me in bed, he'd said then quirking his eyebrows with a cheeky grin. She smiled at the memory slightly, in spite of the building anxiety.

After becoming the CEO, she'd kept work at work and focused completely on the children at home. She made sure she stayed busy all the time, every moment spent alone would bring back memories that threatened to cripple her resolve. Now she stood in the doorway, teetering on the edge of a completely different breakdown as she realized those very memories were lost to her husband. She jumped slightly when she heard Rodrik's cellphone beep. He read the message and looked up smiling, "They're here, Catelyn."

She ran out before he finished the sentence, bolting to the front door. Her heart jumped and she buzzed them in as soon as she got a glimpse of Jory's white Lexus near the Gate. She hesitated for a moment, glancing at the baby monitor on the couch wondering if she should wake the kids who were all in deep sleep, but she couldn't, not until she knew how much he remembered. She rushed out and down the porch and saw Jory was out of his car scanning the area, making sure there's no one around. A figure with a dark grey jacket got out of the car, and her hand fled to her mouth. Ned closed the car door, fixing his gaze directly on her. Oh god, Ned! Oh please god, let this be real. She felt tears in her eyes, as she looked at her Ned, she could not take tear her gaze away from his beautiful grey eyes that stared back intently at her blue ones.
I'm coming home, Cat, she heard his voice from the dream. She lowered her hand slowly, he is home, my Ned is home. He stood there staring at her intently, and after a moment he took a tentative step towards her. At that she dropped all her resolve and ran towards him. After all this time, Catelyn Stark desperately wanted to feel she was truly home.

His heart was beating wildly in his chest. He spent a couple of hours on the plane on the video call with the sketch artist describing every detail of every person he thought was involved - with the exception of Annie and Dave, apparently they'd found them both as soon as the officers got in Creekwood. He finished describing, reviewing and approving all the sketches a little before they prepared for landing. Jory had seemed serious when he saw one of the sketches, but didn't say a word.

Once they landed and started to get out, before leaving the plane Ned bid Royce a goodbye who in return clapped a hand on his back and said, “You take care of yourself, now. No wandering about for a while. And for god sake grow your stubble back, you look like a baby,” in spite of his anxiety he chuckled at that and walked towards the car, donning his ‘disguise’ again at Jory's insistence. He felt silly wearing shades at night, but it was necessary. He saw Jory speak to the pilot himself and he could tell what they spoke of when he saw Royce’s shocked face staring at the car where he sat. Jory got in the car after the conversation looking grim, but drove without saying a word.

They were silent for a long time as they drove smoothly through the night, with the city lights glazing across the hood. The city was fairly crowded, so Jory asked to look casual and inconspicuous whenever they stopped at a signal. He was glad he wore the cap and shades then as he indeed got a few stares. Thankfully, they were all just amused stares wondering why he was wearing shades late at night, and no one seemed to recognize him or try to take a picture. As they were passing downtown, at another signal Jory broke the silence, “You see that sleek grey building up there? The one that looks like a sword?” He said pointing to his right. Ned turned to see the posh looking office building, he remembered it. It was made of dark stones, steel and glass, however it had a distinct metallic look, like a sword. He remembered how dark steel and glass would glint certain times of the day. He would be so mesmerized by that view, the sun would throw rays on the structure, making the corners glint like a sharp steel sword. “That's your office building. Do you remember it?” he heard Jory ask. “A little,” he answered truthfully. They drove past downtown and they passed various apartment complexes and houses, getting into the classier area of the town. He saw there was a beautiful river to his right, as they passed the bridge. “White Knife”, he thought out loud.

“You recognize it?” Jory asked. “I do, but I wasn't aware that I recognized it,” he added slowly. He was awestruck by the amount of land that was here, if you took away all the buildings they would be driving in the middle of nowhere. Soon, they were passing by beautiful scenery, he saw tall trees and then plains gliding past them when Jory said, “We'll be there soon. Nervous?”

He looked up, “Honestly? Extremely. I've waited for this for five months. I don't know how my family will react y' know. It cant be easy for them.” He thought of his wife, desperately hoping she hadn’t moved on.

“Don't worry. Rodrik is over there explaining your...condition to your wife.” Jory said, like he could read Ned's mind.

“Yes, but... How will she cope with this? Its so much to ask of a person...” Ned hesitated.
Jory just looked at him curiously, after a moment he said softly, “Every one had given up on looking for you, y’ know. The investigators bluntly told your family that it was unlikely they could find you, the only hope was you contacting us, that is if you made it alive. They said after over three months, in a terribly cold winter, there was no way you would have survived, and your family should mourn you and give up the search. But Catelyn didn’t. Everybody thought she was deluded, struck by grief, PTSD, depression, living in denial...- Hell they gave her enough labels that she popped in the tabloids constantly for weeks. But the woman never stopped believing you were alive. That gave us strength to keep on looking. She's been waiting for you for five months too. She needs you just as much as you need her. Trust me, that’s one thing you don’t have to worry about.”

He huffed a nervous laugh. The woman never stopped believing you were alive, Catelyn, the auburn haired stranger that nudged him to remember his past, he thought with a smile. She had remained tethered to him as a constant silent companion beckoning him home in spite of everything that kept him from remembering who he truly was. And all this time, she had been his wife. That bond he felt with her since that first image was intensifying rapidly now, it was almost palpable.

“There it is.” Jory said pointing to the large secluded property surrounded by trees and stone walls around it to the right. It was up on a hill overlooking the steady stream of White Knife cutting through the moors and the city now dressed up in night lights. It was still in a rather posh neighbourhood, but secluded enough to look solitary, giving it exclusive privacy.

A huge rustic stone mansion stood in the middle of the property, with lights glowing its greyish-brown stones in the front and a white sedan parked past the front door and he saw several trees on the right side, as if to cloak the backyard from view. They drove towards the majestic metallic front gate and he saw a flash of red move through the tall windows, he started trembling. He feared his heart would beat out of his chest, I hope she has it in her heart to forgive me, to be patient with me. She must expect her husband yet she is getting a solemn stranger. I hope I remember and remember soon, for the sake of my family. The gate opened before they even reached it, we've been spotted. They drove in and Jory stopped the car a good distance away from the front door and got out before he could. As Ned was getting out, he saw auburn in his periphery, he immediately turned to face it. He stood there feeling dazed, absently slamming the car door shut, never taking his eyes off the woman in front of him.

When he focused on the face his heart stopped, his world stopped. Unbidden, all glimpses from the past five months flashed in front of him- the auburn hair, the blue eyes, her standing in the cathedral looking at him lovingly, her voices in his mind, her hands clasped in his in the woods beneath the white tree- he gasped and blinked once as a reminder that this time she was truly standing a few paces away from him, still as stone with tears running down her cheeks and her hand clasped on her mouth. She was barefoot and wore a beautiful navy blue dress, her hair was down, and slowly she lowered her hand and stared at him like she wanted to hold him there by her loving blue gaze. The sight of her face made his heart skip several beats, God, she is so beautiful. Involuntarily, he felt himself take a few steps forward, she seemed to startle out of her reverie and ran towards him. His heart was beating fast as his arms opened, on their own accord, and held her tightly in his embrace, feeling the solid warmth of her. "Oh god," he let out a breath of relief, much to his surprise. She made a sobbing sound and felt into him and cried in his neck. He just held her tight and buried his face in her beautiful soft auburn locks and pulled her closer, she breathed a soft cry at that. This feels like home, he sighed, breathing her in.

After a few blissful moments, she pulled back and looked up at him like she still couldn’t believe he was in front of her. His vision was blurred as he realized he had tears forming in his eyes and he blinked them away. She reached out and touched his jaw, much like his dream and frowned slightly looking at the gash on his eyebrow and then again at his jaw. He smoothed the furrow on her forehead with a crooked smile remembering her admonishment from yesterday to stop scowling.
And her eyes widened briefly and she huffed a laugh. He wanted to say something, anything. But he was so transfixed by the sight of her and the feel of her that he couldn’t think straight. He was reacting strongly to her presence, he hadn’t expected it to affect him so deeply but on some level he recognized her, he knew. There was a part of him that wished to drown in those impossibly blue eyes, that wanted to stay like this reveling in the comfort of her arms that he’d missed so much. His dreams truly didn’t compare to seeing her in the flesh. The warm lights on the front porch were making her hair glow, creating a bright halo around her face - so much like his first memory of her. He looked into her blue eyes and reached out to touch those fiery locks and saw fresh tears in those eyes, “Catelyn...” he whispered, just when she whispered “Ned..” in her sweet voice. They both laughed softly, touching their foreheads briefly. He had been called Ned since yesterday and he’d thought at first it would take him a long time to get used to it. But hearing it in her voice, it sounded right, he knew he would get used to everything far sooner now. He could feel she was holding herself back, like she wanted to say so much more but she wasn’t... She knows.

Catelyn composed herself, pulled back slightly and said “Welcome home, Ned.” not being able to keep the tremor out of it. He nodded, “Home. I’m so happy to be home.” He meant herself more than the rustic mansion that he hadn’t even looked at yet, he wanted to say something more, but he didn’t know how to express exactly how he felt at the moment. they stayed in that moment for a bit when he saw movement behind her and realized there was a man standing right outside the front door. Ned recognized him as Rodrik Cassel, who let them have a moment just as Jory who was waiting next to his car a few yards away quietly.

She led him towards the mansion, and as he walked close to Rodrik, “you're a sight for sore eyes, lad,” the man hugged him briefly and moved away to let Catelyn and him pass and both men followed them in the house after.

As he crossed the threshold his arms still around his beautiful wife, in spite of undiscovered memories and still some burning questions, Eddard Stark truly felt ...he was home.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay, I was busy making artwork for this. If you want to view you can check it on my tumblr - https://www.tumblr.com/blog/indigoraysoflight
(one of the tags will be "homecoming", in case you cant find it right away)

I will upload the post soon enough. Hope the chapter was worth the wait, and I'll upload the next one as soon as possible. I have songs as background scores for most of them, so I will also post the song name with the chapters in case you wish to listen to it while reading yourself, its upto you though.

Thanks for continuing to read this, I appreciate it very much. C&C welcome.
In the Eye of the Storm

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Catelyn walked in the front door, her arm around her husband's waist. She couldn’t stop the tears falling from her eyes. How long had she waited for this moment? Her heart still broke to see him look around like he was seeing everything for the first time. *Gods, what did they do to you, my love?* When she ran into his arms outside, all she could feel at first was the joy that he was alive and with her. She'd sobbed when he pressed his face in her hair, some things certainly hadn’t changed about him. But then she had looked up at him. He was thinner than usual, he had lines around his eyes and dark circles beneath them, much like herself. His hair was much shorter, trimmed to the scalp on the sides mostly and he was clean-shaven. She had seen him clean shaved barely a handful of times in all the years they were together, and only due to unbearable heat waves whenever he took trips to the south. Otherwise he always kept a stubble. Seeing him without it seemed odd, to feel his smooth jaw, when she was used to feeling the rough beard. And she couldn’t bare to look at the cross-shaped gash on his left eyebrow. And she'd huffed a laugh when he smoothed her frown, a gesture she used on him often when he frowned. He was looking at her like he wanted to do so forever, that gave her hope. But there was still a novelty in the look, a sense of fear and longing. It hurt her to see that, to realize he was seeing her for the first time even if in her eyes he was returning after months.

Rodrik had told her everything before he arrived. *Ashara Dayne,* Catelyn almost hoped it wasn’t her, feeling guilty for wishing she stayed dead. Catelyn never wished the woman dead, she'd made mistakes but she didn't deserve to die - not so young and not after living through terrible times that Catelyn wouldn't wish on anyone, even on her enemies. But if she truly faked her own death just to get revenge on something neither Catelyn nor Ned were responsible for, making their entire family face the consequences, it could not go unpunished. God knew the woman had caused enough grief for the Starks from the moment she walked into their lives - directly and indirectly. And it had taken them about a decade to regain their balance after what happened before.

There was the other thing that worried her. She had pushed the thought away, every time it came up, but she knew it would be one of the first questions Rodrik would ask. Ned had lived with this woman for five months. If he remembered who he was, Catelyn would trust him implicitly, even if she struggled with jealousy. But in his current condition, with no recollection of their life together, she couldn't help but worry. Ashara was beautiful, *much more beautiful than I am, especially in my current state.* Not knowing he was married to Catelyn, living with a strikingly beautiful woman who convinced him he belonged to her.... Catelyn knew it wouldn’t be his fault, even if he and Ashara had..... But, it still hurt just contemplating it. She couldn’t imagine hearing Ned confirm her suspicions. She couldn't, she wasn't strong enough. He came back to her, but did he love Ashara? Had he fallen in love with her in this time and only returned because it wasn't fair to the family he doesn't remember? Her thoughts started spiraling and her grip on his waist tightened.

“Are you alright... Catelyn?” She looked up at those beautiful grey eyes, so full of concern. Yet she felt her heart ache a little at the slight hesitance before he said her name. She was always “Cat” to him, but...he didn't remember. She only nodded and gave a slight smile, he didn't seem convinced so she said, “Really, Ned. I'm fine. Really.” He gave a slight nod, just then, Rodrik walked in the living room himself. She saw a few sheets of paper in his hand. *He must've printed out the sketches.*

She just walked over to Jory who gave her a triumphant smile, clasped his hands in her own. She felt tears in her eyes again and she said softly, “Jory, thank you, for bringing him home safe.” She looked over to Rodrik, who gave her a smile, “Both of you. I don’t know how I'll ever repay you for this...”
Jory just shook his head and wrapped her in a hug. “Aww..Catelyn, come here. You don’t owe us anything, alright? It was my honour. We couldn’t do this without you, you know? You believed he was okay and he is. You were right, we were right. We did it, Catelyn!” She smiled.

Jory was one of their closest friends. She'd known him since college, even though Ned had known him much longer than that. They'd been good friends ever since, of all Ned's friends she had a good rapport with Jory and Howland. She had learned how to be around Robert over time, she even started liking him, even if she neither agreed with his philandering nor with his constant insistence that Ned join him in it. She knew Ned loved Robert, so she learned to live with it. She had no wish to tear their friendship apart and Robert wasn’t a bad person, he did have some admirable traits - like his loyalty to Ned.

Robert had been destroyed when he first found out, he tried his best to find Ned's whereabouts for a while. But after the detective's closed the case, just like the rest he eventually gave up and even mourned the loss of his friend. Howland had gone quiet, he seemed sad and even more withdrawn ever since and they barely saw him anymore, he kept himself busy managing their projects in his hometown, Greywater Watch. Rodrik was devastated too, she could sense that just like the rest, he had started losing hope a long time ago. He would never stop looking though, she was grateful for that. Her family had been quite concerned for her, Brynden and her father stayed in touch to make sure she was alright. Even Edmure called a few times from Riverrun University, where he was studying for his final year. Lysa called once, but just to pity Catelyn and to remind her there were plenty of 'better-looking rich' fish in the sea. That conversation ended up in a huge argument, she didn't call after that and knowing her sister, Catelyn tried not to let it get to her. The children weren’t old enough to remember Ned, even if she saw Robb and Jon both go eerily quiet every once in a while. Ben had lost his buoyancy, turning quite solemn. He had regained some of it back over the months, but it wasn’t the same. Lya struggled with depression herself, Ned and Lya had been very close. She'd taken Brandon's death pretty badly, Catelyn knew she blamed herself for it, but she took Ned's disappearance even harder. Catelyn had asked Ben and Lya to live with them for a while so they both lived in the Stark mansion for the first month in an attempt to cope, that had been quite comforting. That’s when Catelyn and Lya came closer as friends, finding common ground. For Ned's sake, they decided to put their differences aside.

If there was one person, apart from Catelyn herself, who never stopped believing Ned was alive, it was Jory. She drew strength from that, it helped her stay sane. And she knew Jory wouldn't stop until he found Ned. Five years ago after leaving WIA, he had joined Stark Security - the security firm Rickard acquiesced a decade ago putting Rodrik in-charge. It was situated in their office building and also took care of the security of all the Stark businesses. And he was also travelling non-stop looking for Ned for the last two months when she could not. They couldn’t have done this without him.

She just looked up at him and gave him and Rodrik a watery smile, tears falling again when Ned thanked them himself. When Rodrik excused himself to take a phone call, she asked the two men if they wanted something to eat or drink, and both declined so she sat down next to Ned and held his hand in hers. Still reveling in the feel of him solid and beside her. We will get through this, I have Ned with me now. He is safe and here with me, and that is all that matters.

---

He walked in the foyer, staring at the beautiful interior. The stone walls gave it a rustic feel, yet the
modern decor stood in contrast. He felt at home, instantly. He could tell he lived here, even if he didn’t remember much. He looked up the large staircase, remembered two dark haired teenagers running downstairs arguing. The boy had his look but a sweet face, big puppy eyes and a wide grin on his face, the girl had a Gothic look, dark hair, black clothes, she wore black lipstick and she looked irritated as she ran down. He blinked it away, breathed in and walked in the living room, he saw another memory of people sitting around the room talking and laughing, a huge well-decorated Christmas tree stood beside the lit fireplace with crackling fire dancing over the glowing embers. He saw the teenage kids looking much older this time sitting on the couch. The girl with her head on his brother's shoulder... Brandon, who sat in the middle; on his other side was the younger boy his arm draped on the back of the couch. they were all looking at one of the high back chairs where his father was sitting and talking with a glass of scotch in his hand. And then he saw himself, straight ahead sitting on the other high back chair, with Catelyn sitting sideways on his lap, wearing a Rudolf sweater and he was lightly stroking the big bump on belly. She looked at him and smiled, and he grinned back, placing a kiss in her hair. They looked so happy.

He felt Catelyn's hand tighten at his waist, he jolted back into the present and looked down at her, the memory still there.“Are you alright... Catelyn?”

She looked up at him, her blue eyes sad and full of fear. Oh god! I hope she can forgive me for not remembering her. This must be so difficult for her. She nodded at him, but he wasn’t convinced, something bothered her. He wanted to see her smile like she did in that memory, he wanted to make her laugh, hold her close and never let her go.

“Really, Ned. I'm fine. Really.” He nodded and walked further in the living room scanning around, just as Rodrik walked in with a few sheets of paper from somewhere behind them. Catelyn walked up to Jory and thanked him and Rodrik. He just stood there, listening to their exchange, feeling grateful himself. He didn't know how to repay them, they had given him his life back. He just looked at the two men in front of him and said, “Rodrik.....Jory, I thank you for giving me my life back.” Jory walked over and clapped his shoulder, just as Rodrik smiled and looked at the papers in his hand almost apologetically.

“Are those the sketches?” the sketch artist had told them he would send them over to Rodrik after he finished uploading them. That must be it, if he looked so grim. “Do you recognize them?” Ned asked expectantly.

Before Rodrik could respond, his phone rang and he excused himself for a bit. They sat down as they waited for him to come back, Catelyn sat next to him, her hand clasped in his. Jory looked at the papers, handed one to Catelyn, “It is her...she looks different however.”

“Ashara Dayne? This is Ashara Dayne... So she's not dead.” He enquired.

“Apparently not. Explains why we never found the body. I don’t know how she pulled it off, but if she had Arthur Dayne's contacts...it would be a piece of cake.” Jory said firmly, now Ned realized why he looked grim on the plane. He knew this would not be an easy conversation.

Catelyn studied it, “If she is, she sure looks different, like she had some work done. And her face was her asset, I don’t think she would change it.”

Jory added, “Yes, but if the whole world thought her dead, she would make some changes to hide her true identity, of course. And Arthur Dayne had many enemies, after his death, she wouldn’t want to deal any vendettas. And she was a wreck towards the end, she could be doing all this in resentment, she has motive. You and Ned were in the tabloids constantly the last few years, your family was growing, the corporation was flourishing again. She could’ve heard what happened to Brandon....”
Catelyn added, “...And realized all this was supposed to be hers and Brandon's. That makes sense. We knew she got pregnant in the first place because she knew I would never marry Brandon after that, and he would have to marry her. In which case she would have claim over Stark Corporation and all his assets. Arthur Dayne admitted to directing her to do it as much when he was being questioned about all those murders he committed for the Targareyans. When Brandon gave up his claim on the Corporation, she wasn't happy about it. She doesn't care about mine or Ned's feelings, we know that. But, this...” she shook her head, “I can't imagine she would go this far.”

Ned was puzzled by their interaction, “But, if she was with Brandon, why did she want me to believe I was her partner?”

Jory looked down, Catelyn replied, “Because you were, for some time. A long time ago; She was your first girlfriend. And I was with Brandon at the time, but they were both cheating on us with each other. My family wasn’t happy about the cheating, so to maintain the alliance our fathers had, eventually, after a huge scandal Brandon decided to waive his claim to the business, Ashara tried to fight about it at first but it was a losing battle. After a few months, they broke the engagement. We never knew why really, we thought they're attraction for each other had probably fizzled out since Brandon had started seeing other people. And that announcement of their break up created more problems, then...many things happened after that and their lives just turned upside down in the matter of a few years. The point is, they both ended up losing everything and we ended up gaining everything, because Brandon decided to step down. Perhaps, she thinks making you love her would make things right, since you now own everything Brandon was supposed to. If you never remembered our...life together, that she would finally get what she wanted. She was hurt, angry and even self-centered, but this... It still shocks me that she would got this far just for vengeance...” she sounded sad and a bit frightened. Why is she afraid? he thought.

Jory said “She almost lost her mind in the end, Catelyn. We were skeptical about the suicide note, and if she faked her own death for this then maybe she is emotionally unstable and it just got worse over time. And after seeing this sketch and Ned's description of her, it sounds a lot like Ashara. Its the best explanation we have.”

Rodrik walked in, looking grimmer than before, “It indeed is.”

He took his seat and took the papers from Catelyn, “The therapist and librarian I don’t recognize. By their names, they might be local, the town was repopulated by the New Folk, a couple of decades ago.”

“What do you mean repopulated?” Ned asked.

“Well, Westeros had a large expanse of land. So when the New Folk migrated here, after the revolution and rapid development in all areas, new towns were created to accommodate the new immigrants and growing population. Creekwood was one of those towns. It's a small town that was created north-east of Strongsong, just past the northern mountain ranges of the Eyrie for the people who were coming into the country from the Eastern Docks. So the town is almost completely populated by the New Folk aka the immigrants, I understand now why they took you there. The town is out of the way, not very advanced in technological development and the people there don’t really care about the outside world. Easier to stay hidden among the oblivious.”

He looked down at the sketches and continued, “The doctor...he looks vaguely familiar, I sent it over to WIA office, so the blackfish's associate can look it up. I just got a call from him, after his team got there half of the town was deserted, as I mentioned, with an exception of very few people, most of them had no clue about what was going on. We caught the librarian and your friend Dave, they're being easy on him as you asked. They're questioning them both as we speak and searching for
evidence in the house and the Doctor's office. We also may have a bigger problem on our hands...” he looked pointedly at Ned.

“What do you mean?” he asked, feeling Catelyn freeze beside him.

“He....he found some things...in your room,” he said and looked hesitantly at Catelyn.

“What things?” Ned asked suspiciously.

Rodrik looked at Catelyn and hesitated, “Catelyn...are you sure you want to hea-”

“Say it, Rodrik. Whatever it is, just say it.” She said in a cold flat voice, taking her hand out of Ned's and gripping her own.

Ned swallowed, “What did they find?”

“Lingerie, a pack of condoms.....and a used pregnancy test in the trash.”
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Catelyn Stark felt her whole world crash around her. She felt cold, *this must be my worst nightmare*, she thought, *for if its true, I don't know how I'm still breathing*. Moments passed, yet she stayed as still as stone, helpless, as the past reeled in front of her eyes. She remembered that day when she'd met with the news that Brandon had gotten Ashara pregnant while they were still together – just when she had started to forgive him for his cheating and was about to put it all to rest - even if she hadn’t loved him, the betrayal hurt. And as much as they tried to keep it quiet, it didn't take long before the rest of the world did the math and made her and her family's life miserable. And now history was repeating itself in the worst possible way, and she wasn't sure if this wound would ever heal, if what Rodrik speculated truly came to be. She loved Ned with every fibre of her being, and every fear she'd held at bay until now flooded in her mind, and made her head spin. She could see them! *God, but I see him with her*, and she just couldn't stop the thoughts anymore. She forced herself to ask one simple question, bracing herself for the worst possible answer that would destroy whatever was left of her heart at this point. She whispered, “Was it...” *positive?* No. She couldn’t say it, she barely choked the first two words out, but Rodrik heard it the same.

“No. They were negative,” he said firmly, not taking his eyes off Ned. She felt some relief, but it didn’t mean Ned and Ashara never.... She closed her eyes and sagged back, letting out a shaky breath against the images that were attacking her heart, yet again.

“No....” Ned breathed and she looked up at the tone, she could tell he was furious. “Gods, damn that despicable woman!!!” he said loudly, getting up and walking a few paces away from them. “She's lying!! She planted that stuff.” He looked back straight in Catelyn's eyes, and she didn't know what he saw in them but his expression changed. The anger in his grey eyes was instantly replaced by burning desperation and he rushed to her, and knelt down in front of her, roughly grabbing her hands, “Catelyn, listen to me its not true. I swear, its not true. I never slept with the woman. You must believe me, Cat, please.” he said desperately, forgetting there were other people present. Her breath hitched at the end, *Cat*, he called me *Cat*. Ned was a terrible liar, she looked deeply into his eyes, *God he is telling the truth*. She felt a huge burden lift off her heart, *He never touched her*. Catelyn felt hope again when a dark part of her mind added *doesn't mean he didn't love her*, and she pushed it away. She closed her eyes briefly exhaling in relief, and just looked down at him, her heart aching at the fear she could see in his eyes. All her uncertainties vanished at that sight. He was genuinely terrified of losing all he had again, in less than two days. *I am the only family he knows he has, the only family he's met*. It took her all of her self-control not to take him in her arms right there. She held his face gently in her hands, “I believe you, Ned.” She saw relief sweep over his features, his eyes no longer stormy grey, but they held a calmer hue like a cloudy winter sky. She smiled at him, looking deeply into the eyes she loved so much, and silently she thanked the Cassels in her mind for bringing him back safe.

He exhaled shakily looking into her eyes, and covered her hands with his again and whispered, “Thank you.” He composed himself, sat beside her again. “Rodrik, I don’t know why, but she planted those things there. She must have after Annie called her. And I'm pretty sure wherever she is, she is with Groff.”

Jory spoke before Rodrik could answer Ned's speculation, “You said she wanted you to sleep with her. After what we were talking about, I think I know why. She lost a child before...maybe....”
She wanted me to, but I never touched her, Ned had said. And it clicked then, “Oh god, do you think that’s why she tried to convince Ned he was her partner? So he would sleep with her? So she could get back what she lost? I don’t know it that is sad or twisted,” Catelyn grimaced.

Rodrik still looked at Ned pointedly, “And you are sure you had no relations with this woman, whatsoever. Because we cannot approach this without knowing anything or everything they may try and use against us.”

She knew Rodrik would be blunt about this, and she respected that about him, but it was still ripping her apart to speak about her husband being intimate with anyone else whether he remembered or not. Catelyn held her breath for Ned's answer, he replied shortly, “No, I told you. I had no relations with the woman whatsoever.... She insisted we were together. However, I was still coping and uncomfortable with the idea of having a physical relationship with someone I couldn't remember. It wouldn't be fair to either one of us, I told her that....” he stopped briefly giving an odd look to Catelyn before continuing, “We were friends.... I trusted her. I thought I could, but I was wrong.” at the wistful tone Catelyn pushed away the surge of jealousy in her mind. To hear him speak of that woman like he lamented whatever they had was killing her. She nursed him back to health, gained his trust and tried to charm her way into his bed. And even if they weren't involved physically, it seems she had some effect on him. Ned had fallen for her charm, a long time ago. What if he did again? No, don't think about that now. Its not the time, Catelyn admonished herself and tried to focus on the conversation.

Rodrik nodded, “I believe you. I just needed to be sure, is all.” He left the subject entirely, she knew he wouldn't question Ned's feelings regarding Ashara, it wasn't his place. But, he did give Catelyn a significant look that said it was her choice whether to talk about it or not. And she was grateful that he didn't intrude in this particular matter. Ashara Dayne was a delicate subject in the family. Not only did she cheat on Ned with Brandon, but when she'd broken her engagement with Brandon, she'd gotten quite 'nostalgic' over losing Ned and tried to woo him, even when she knew fully well that he was engaged to Catelyn. Ned made it quite clear to her that he was not interested and she seemed to get the point. But Catelyn found it hard to forgive that particular attempt of hers. And now it wasn't difficult to imagine the woman doing the same thing -and more if she was fueled with the idea of vengeance- in carefully created circumstances in which Ned would find it hard to say no. However, Catelyn felt a great satisfaction that he'd turned her down, even then. She looked down at the sketch yet again in disbelief at the fact that she was speaking of a woman they all thought dead less that a day ago. She was most definitely alive, and they were getting surer and surer about it each passing moment at the discernible patterns of behaviours that she was repeating, even after over a decade.

Jory broke the silence, “What did they find in her room? Any of the fake Ids, pictures?” he asked Rodrik.

“They are searching it now, the blackfish said they found some of the Ids for 'Richard Williams' in Ned's room. They forged it well, so I'm guessing these people have more help than we thought. He said he'll send me the list of everything he finds, in case we find something out of place. It will help us track them down. We tried to get phone records using the numbers we found and the ones Ned gave us....”

Rodrik was still talking, but Catelyn turned her attention to her mind. She was getting a strong sense of déjà vu, and she couldn't place it. Something about all this felt far too familiar. They'd all been here before, getting Ned to sleep with her, planting those things in Ned's room to accomplish what? Did she think we would believe her instead of Ned. What was the purpose of creating doubt about Ned's fidelity--Oh god!

“Catelyn...Catelyn, are you okay?” Ned's concerned voice brought her back to present. Catelyn
nodded absentmindedly and continued her trail of thoughts out loud, “She is trying to sink the corporation by ripping our family apart. She knows what happened when Brandon's cheating was exposed. She knows how that nearly broke the Tully-Stark alliance, almost losing all southern clients Rickard had. when I broke up with Brandon, she was there because it was immediately after we caught them.” Catelyn shared a look with Jory and Ned, briefly forgetting Ned's condition, but he held a shocking expression on his face and it was an uncanny replica of his expression from that day they had caught Brandon and Ashara red-handed. He'd been furious with Brandon and cold towards Ashara. And much to her surprise, indignant on Catelyn's behalf, that had comforted her at the time very much. Catelyn shook off the thought and continued, “She must also know we would send Brynden to recover evidence, not trusting anyone else. And Brynden would jump to the worst conclusions, having dealt with this once before. Oh god, I have to call him before he does.” Catelyn got up hastily. Pulling her hand from Ned's grasp almost physically painful, but she had to speak with her uncle, so walked towards the study to call.

It all made sense, Ashara would expect Rodrik to send Brynden, just like last time. And knowing her uncle's temper, she probably expected him to react badly after seeing those things. Even if Catelyn believed Ned, it would take more than the word of her husband in convincing the rest of the Tullys. She called her uncle's mobile and glanced over through the foyer in the living room where Ned sat now looking even more puzzled.

You must believe me, Cat, please.

She couldn't bear to look at the pain in his eyes, it wouldn't be any easier if that news got out.

We will get through this, my love. I promise, she vowed to herself waiting for her uncle to answer her call.

---

Ned Stark sat on the couch, feeling dizzy by the amount of information that he had received in the last twenty four hours. How could that woman be so selfish? Thank god, Catelyn had believed him. What would he do if she hadn’t? He was glad that she did, because she was the only person that he felt comfortable with in all this, in spite of not truly knowing her for more than an hour. And she was the only family he knew right now, the idea of losing her again terrified him to his core and the depth of his fear confused him even more. He didn't quite understand why this woman had such a profound effect on him, he could only assume his past self loved her truly and deeply. He couldn't understand why Ash would do such a thing, it seemed like the speculations got darker and grimmer every passing minute. She showed him pictures, constructed a story, made him trust her, and he did care for her as a friend, as a woman who nursed him back to health. But all that she did was for revenge....“So, this is not just about just ripping me apart from my family. Not just an act of resentment or built-up anger. This is a premeditated plan to destroy everything my family created. Why?” he said, almost to himself.

Jory said softly, “Like Catelyn said, you two ended up getting everything that was meant for her and Brandon. I was there when Catelyn broke up with Brandon and stormed off crying, you broke up with Ashara the same time, and went to see if Catelyn was okay. Ashara had been devastated. She actually expected you to be okay because 'it was just sex’, she assumed you would stay with her in spite of catching her in the act. She actually tried to ask me to convince you a couple of times in the next few weeks. But I wouldn’t, so eventually she let it go. She even tried to coax you after she'd broken her engagement to Brandon, she seemed to realize how much she had lost when saw how
happy you and Catelyn were together.” Jory finished, shaking his head grimly.

Ned just stared at him disbelievingly, it made sense, she all but forced him to believe he was her boyfriend all these months. She honestly didn’t care if he wanted to be or not. She just took advantage of the fact that he was under obligation to her for nursing him back to health. And stupidly, he’d believed her, following like a puppy until it was too late. He looked over to the study where Catelyn was speaking with her uncle, she caught his eye and smiled at him briefly. He returned her smile and realized something. All this time his wife was alone, handling all the troubles he created in his absence. And now he came back with no memories of their past, bringing with him yet another pain she must endure for him. Could she ever forgive him? He desperately wished she would. He thought she might, she’d been nothing but warm from the moment he got out of the car. A familiar warm, he felt comfort in her arms, like it anchored him to the present. He wished she could give him a chance to make things better. He would do his best to make this up to her for the rest of his life, if need be. Ashara had taken everything from him because of an old resentment, he wouldn’t let her take Catelyn away.

Unbidden, he remembered blurry visions back from Creekwood. He remembered being on his back, dizzily opening his eyes after feeling a slow burning on his neck or his forearm a few times just to find Ash and sometimes Groff standing there. Ash was whispering soothing words to him..... were they soothing? what had she said? He couldn't remember. He picked up her sketch that lay on the coffee table and coaxed himself to recall her words.

He heard Rodrik speak again, “We'll find her Ned. Until then, we need to keep your rescue quiet. Especially because of your condition. And I'll speak with the blackfish, make sure nobody talks about the evidence found in Ned's room and hope that it works. Catelyn has been doing her best to maintain balance after your disappearance, but it wont last if people found you couldn’t remember anything. That would be the end of your business, everything your family worked for.”

“No... we can't let that happen” he replied firmly.

Catelyn walked in, “We won't. Brynden is aware of the situation now. He said he's flying in after they are done thoroughly canvassing the area and talking to those people. We can meet up here when he does, we'll have more solid information then. I don’t think they'll be stupid enough to try and fly out of the country.”

“Or sail out. We've put an APB out on them.” Rodrik reassured.

“Right. I asked Brynden to speak with some of his friends up in Dorne. Just in case.” Catelyn added, “And I'll call Dr. Walys first thing in the morning. Rodrik, I'll need your help bringing him here without anyone's knowledge.” He saw Catelyn, she had a fierce determination in her eyes. She was still struggling to understand all this, she had to be. Yet she was sitting besides him now, carefully planning what they must do next. For his sake, for his family’s sake, she was leaving her pain aside. He felt a deep sense of respect and pride when he looked at her now.

Rodrik's voice snapped him out of his reverie, “The team will get everything done in a few days. With some luck we'll get their finger prints somewhere and we can run it through the system, as far as I know Ashara's record is clean, but I have a feeling the doctor may have dabbled with narcotics before. And I'll take care of bringing Walys here unnoticed. I've already debriefed him about our situation- without mentioning Ned of course. He'll expect your phone call tomorrow, however, I've told him you'll explain the rest. Jory and I will make sure every step is taken under discretion from now on. With luck Ned will remember soon and it'll all be much easier that way.”

Ned reached for Catelyn's hand just as she reached for his, they shared a look before holding on tightly, and she smiled at him. A smile that made his heart skip a beat and he returned it, yet again,
just for a moment forgetting there were others present. It comforted him, having her this close again, and her comfort level around him also gave him hope.

Rodrik looked pointedly at Ned again, “And Ned, you cannot get out of the house, at least until we figure this out. You could go in the backyard, but only when its dark. One picture of you and--”

Jory cut in, “The media will leech onto it. We cant have that. We’ll know more about your condition once Walys takes a look at you. I’ll also have a couple of trusted guards nearby, just in case these people are stupid enough to send anyone up here. Because, I think its safe to assume your accident may not have been an accident at all.” he finished, looking at Rodrik expectantly, who nodded sadly in return.

Ned felt Catelyn shudder beside him. He’d expected that, he’d known it, but to hear it made it too real for him, as well.

Jory continued sadly, "You said you were severely wounded. And there is a sharp gash on the back of your head..." he stopped talking and looked at Rodrik pleadingly. And Rodrik took over, "Ned, there is no way you could have gotten that blow in the car. Your headrest isn't hard enough to make that blow. After Jory sent me the pictures of your wounds, I sent them to a forensic specialist." Ned nodded, he remembered Jory taking pictures of the back of his head, his forehead and the scars on his chest to send over to Rodrik, just when Royce had announced they would be landing soon. He'd felt quite awkward then, but Jory had reassured him it would help them uncover quite a lot, and apparently he was right. Jory had been quieter after he spied the sketches before ending the call with the sketch artist and then in the car, perhaps this was one of the reasons why, and Ned felt bad for him. Rodrik continued, "The specialist took a good look at the wound on the back of your head and said it was probably caused something long and somewhat sharp. And we didn't find anything in the car around your seat that could've made that impact. Our speculation is that someone dragged you out of the car.... before hitting you...."

"Stop. Please. I think, we understand, I'm sorry to cut you off Rodrik, but I just can't hear it again." Catelyn whispered, her eyes squeezed shut. Rodrik apologized, sheepishly. He must have told her before they arrived, Ned pulled her closer and reassured, "I'm alright Catelyn." Then he looked at Rodrik, "And I expected that much, figured it out when I first heard Ashara and Groff's conversation. But, I think that's enough for now. Maybe we could talk about this another time." He looked at Cassels significantly, with a tone that meant the end of the conversation. That news didn't affect him as badly, because he'd guessed it already, but Catelyn was hearing it just now, right after finding out he was held captive. He felt touched that the thought of him in distress would cause her to react in such a way. He looked at her again, she was sitting straighter and composed, yet with a distant painful look in her eyes. He felt a pang in his heart, God, I would take away your pain if I could.

He heard Jory continue, yet he didn't take his eyes off her. "You are right. We should speak again when we have more information. If you remember anything that you think might help us catch them, give me a call. And we'll figure this out, so hang in there."

His head snapped up at that, but he just nodded. Catelyn was speaking to the Cassels now, “No one out of our immediate family can know. I'll ask Ben and Lya to drop by tomorrow.......” she continued speaking, yet her voice trailed off in his mind as he focused only on what Jory had said... Hang in there....

Suddenly he was assaulted by a memory of being flat on his back, his body aching and bandaged. Everything was blurry, he could barely keep his eyes open, but he wanted to get up ..........Hang in there it will be over soon, that is what Ash would say every time he felt a sting, on his neck or his
forearm. It would burn and he would grumble at the dizzy nauseating sensation that would make his head pound and his limbs jelly. *I don't like it Ash...make it stop,* he used to beg. He hated that sensation, he felt powerless, and he hated that. He would thrash about, try to move but fail miserably, then mercifully things would go black.....

“Ned...Ned!” he heard an anxious yet a very sweet feminine voice.

.....”HUH?” he panicked, back into the present and saw Catelyn staring at him terrified, he saw Rodrik and Jory behind her concerned. “Are you alright?” she asked, her voice quivering just as he realized where he truly was.

“Yes...yes I'm fine. I just...I was just recalling some bad memories from Creekwood,” he answered trying to slow his breathing.

“Should I call Walys?” Rodrik asked.

“No! Not now. I just need some rest now,” he said hoping he didn't sound too panicky. I truth, he wasn't quite trusting of this doctor and he was going to speak to Catelyn about it. But he knew, he would need help if he wanted to get out of this so he complied when Rodrik first mentioned him.

Jory nodded, “Yes, we should leave you to rest. You take care of yourself, mate. We'll stay in touch.”

Rodrik and Jory moved to leave then. Jory gave him and Catelyn another quick hug. Rodrik gave him a hug after Jory, “We'll catch these buggers lad. Don't you worry. Now get some rest. It has been an eventful day for the both of ya.” Catelyn walked up to the front door to operate the front gate.

He took a deep breath, trying to shake off that memory. He didn't quite know what to make of it, but he didn't wish to think about it any longer. As they drove away, Catelyn looked up at Ned walking right up to him and asked, “Are you alright, Ned? What was that before? You looked pale. Whatever it was it scared you, didn't it?” Catelyn continued and that shocked him. How did she know it had scared him? It was the first time he had ever had visions of after he woke up and the uncertainty he felt while he had them left him thoroughly apprehensive about what may have been going on all the time he was there, that he didn't know of.

Or didn't recall.

“It did.” He answered truthfully, “but its nothing we need to worry about right now. It can wait.” He thought he didn't imagine the shadow of hurt that crossed her eyes, but he didn't wish to delve into these memories just yet. He'd had enough for one day and he just wanted to leave Creekwood behind.

Catelyn continued, “I understand this must be difficult. To be here, to take it all in.”

“Yes... it is challenging. But we'll figure it out.” he answered, he was feeling the fatigue set in after an overwhelming day.

“Do you...recognize me? You seem to know my name... I'm guessing Jory filled you in about us, in the car.” Catelyn said in a small but firm voice. And he was proud of her, he didn't think he could have the courage to live through what she was living through right now.

“I do recognize you. When I found my identity, I saw your picture with me. You feel very familiar, but.. I can’t...” His voice trailed off, but his thoughts were rampant...*I don't really remember you, except for the fact that you are the only one that seems true. That seems real. The only one I wish to*
be near in the midst of this storm. I feel like you were always there with me, but still you were so far away. I don’t know why, but I can’t imagine my life without you anymore and I’ve only been near you for less than a couple of hours.

He wished to say it all, but he just stood there looking at her eyes, speechless. He didn’t know if his words would be welcome. He didn’t want her to feel compelled to return them. He didn’t want to force them on her, but at the same time he wished he could tell her all of it. That they could go back to living as they would. But he knew it wouldn’t be the same - it would never be the same - so he stilled the emotions that tried to overwhelm him.

She looked down, whispering... “I know...I know. I understand, you don’t have to say it. I know it will take some time for you to...go back to where we left off.” she said, not even skirting around the term ‘remember’. And he realized then how long these five months must have been for her. He had no clue of this life, yet she was living it alone.

She closed the distance between them, “How are you, truly? Are you well.....? You're so thin...” she said with a quivering voice moving her hands over his chest and his face and looking at him like she was afraid he'd fade away.

“I'm well enough, Catelyn. Really.” he reassured, he didn't want to tell her about the drugs just now, in case Rodrik hadn't. That reminded him.. “Um... Catelyn...this Dr. Walys...”

She cut in, “I know you're scared Ned. After the way they drugged you, I understand. But I promise, nobody will give you any drugs here. Walys, he's a therapist and he helped your family members cope with trauma before. He is trustworthy, he's known your family for decades.” how did she know that’s what I was worried about? He wondered yet again. She continued, looking down, “I know...you can't trust me right now--”

“I trust you.” he answered with a hitch. Her head snapped up in disbelief, he continued, “I can't explain why, but I trust you.” He did. He didn’t know how but he knew he was home. He grasped her hands in his again. He knew he would probably second-guess everything for a while. But he saw raw honesty in Catelyn's eyes and she had been the only person that felt real to him since he started remembering. The woman who guided him back home. So yes, he trusted her and this one time, he decided to take a leap of faith. They would track down Ashara and everyone who helped her. They knew her history so it would surely aid them in finding her. He would remember, he owed Catelyn as much. He remembered the pain he saw in her eyes, and marveled at how this woman was strong enough to stand here in front of the man who didn’t remember her, remember loving her and still look at him like she never wanted to let him go. He didn’t deserve her. He really didn’t. “And I'm sorry, I'm sorry for causing you so much pain. For being away for five months only to return with no memories of my past. Our past.” he looked up to see tears swimming in her beautiful blue eyes. He wiped them with his thumbs, pulling her in for a hug. She fell into him, again just like she did before and cried.

After some time, she whispered, “You're home. That’s what matters. We'll figure this out Ned, together.”

“Together...” he whispered as she pulled away.

“You should sleep Ned, you must be tired and jet-lagged. I'll tell the children in the morning” she said, he could see how it pained her to say it by the look in her eyes. His heart jumped at the mention of their children, he looked up the stairs longingly. He felt guilty, he’d forgotten about them after they started talking about his condition. He wished he could see them all right away, but he was afraid.

“If we wake them now, they'll be fussy and will refuse to go back to sleep again. And in any case, it
will not be easy or fun to get Arya back to sleep.” Catelyn said laughing. And I don’t remember them, he added in his mind. She continued that thought, “And Ned, when we do. You must act like you remember them....they're too young to…”

He nodded, “I know.. I know. I wont hurt them, I promise.” He hated lying, but he couldn't imagine hurting his children. "Could you tell me about them before I see them tomorrow, so I wont disappoint them?” he asked sadly.

She replied lovingly, “You'll be fine. I will help you Ned.” He knew she didn’t just mean with the children, she meant she would be there for him, he just smiled at that. She continued hurriedly, “Your old room is past that hallway to the left. If you’d prefer....sleeping there for a while.” her voice still broke at “sleeping there”.

He knew he should go sleep in their bed, he should refuse this offer. But he also knew as much as he liked to, it would still take a while to get accustomed to all this. He knew it was a coward's way out to take that offer, but he remembered how he cried out when he got nightmares. He didn’t wish her to see him like that. He didn't want to walk in that room where they probably shared many memories and have her see just how oblivious he was to every single one of them, she’d been hurt far too much already and he'd only just arrived. He didn't wish to hurt her anymore, he was proud of his wife's bravery, he knew it must be killing her to contemplate sleeping alone when her husband was right there. He hated to see that, he didn’t know what to say when she reached out to touch his jaw again, and said softly,

“Ned, I know you're overwhelmed by all this. You are hiding it well, but you found out your true identity less than 48 hours ago. Within a day you had to trust two people who were just strangers for you to bring you back home safely. Everything you knew for five months broke apart in one day. It may have been a fake identity, but it was true for you for five months. Even if you know, you are not Richard Williams but Eddard Stark, it will take time to adjust, I understand that. And you know it too, I can see it my lo-...Ned.” she was going to call me my love, he wondered why she stopped. He was glad she understood him though, he sighed, “Yes, I'm sorry Catelyn. But yes, I'll need some time to cope. Please don’t give up on me.”

“Never” she whispered fervently. “Now, get some rest. I've prepared the room for you. And still if you need anything, I'll be upstairs in our...in the master bedroom, its the one with the huge mahogany door.” She looked at him for a long moment, and he felt like she was looking in his soul. Then she gave a tremulous smile and walked away from him towards the staircase.

And suddenly he was back in the dream. He felt hollow, loneliness engulfed him. He remembered watching her fade away, leaving him empty, grasping in the dark to find her, to feel her near him where she belonged. He felt the loneliness, remembered how he ached for some solace, how he woke up feeling a deep longing, grasping for someone to hold him. Then he remembered how in spite of no memory, this woman had been the beacon that guided him back home to her. He felt that intangible bond between them pull strongly at him.

“Catelyn.”

She stopped in her tracks and turned to look at him, concerned.

He walked up to her briskly, gathered her in his arms and pressed his lips to hers firmly. He felt a spark go through his whole body like a bolt of lightening, at the contact. She gasped, returning his kiss with fervour, he could tell she felt it too. She just linked her arms around his neck clutching him tightly lest he faded away from her. He locked his own arms around her fearing the same and opened his lips to deepen the kiss. Her lips were slightly chapped, but so soft, just like he'd imagined. He trailed his hands up in her hair, feeling the soft locks fall through his fingers. He felt as though he
was drunk on her, he felt dizzy, he wanted to stay in this moment forever. He remembered this feeling- the taste sweeter than anything he'd tasted before, his heart beating just as loudly as hers, he'd lost all track of time, all he could think or feel was Catelyn. Too soon after they were both completely out of breath, he pulled back slightly. Their foreheads were still touching and his hands still caressing her face, as they both fought to catch their breath.

“I will remember, Catelyn. I promise,” he whispered fervently before walking briskly to the room down the hall, feeling her eyes on him. And as he went to sleep, he hoped that she would be patient with him, coming days and months. He hoped she wouldn’t give up on him. And above all, he made a vow to himself to do whatever it took to be the man he should be.

He had promised Catelyn he would remember, and it was a promise he intended to keep no matter what.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

I'm coming home, Cat. She heard his voice from her dream the night before. Little did she know then, just how precise that dream would turn out to be. Catelyn just stood there, breathless and staring after her husband, much like five months ago. I will miss you, my love, but I promise I shall be back..... Thats what he’d said then and she'd questioned that in her darkest moments when he hadn't. She'd been wrong. He did, he did come back to her. Even when he didn’t remember her, he stayed true to that promise. She trembled, as she felt tears in her eyes fall silently.

This day had turned out so much better than she had imagined. Especially after Rodrik told her about Ned’s condition, she was afraid he would maintain his distance, it would take him some time to come back to her - if he would even want to, what if he didn’t want to come back to her? She'd dreaded that thought. Catelyn had been so terrified that Ned would fall for Ashara's lies, especially after Rodrik told her how well she had convinced him and how he had been drugged, to stop from remembering. That part still made her blood boil, if she could, she would strangle these people with her bare hands. But still what surprised her was that her husband found his way home, to her and their children, in spite of that. From the moment he walked past the threshold most of her fears and anxieties had slowly melted away. In fact, she was taken back by just how familiar he was, in spite of that distinct distant look he had in his eyes.

It broke her heart to see him look around with big puppy eyes, trying to cope with everything that was being hurled at him. He did a good job hiding it in front of the Cassels, although she suspected Jory was somehow concerned about Ned being overwhelmed. Ned couldn’t hide his feelings from her though. She could see precisely how he felt more and more burdened by everything- his grip on her hand would tighten imperceptibly, he would swallow ever so often, she saw his eyes go stormy grey more than once. She saw them widen slightly, heard his breathing change, and his face was set in a scowl almost the whole time.

The only time she had seen Ned so distressed was when he had been forced to carry on the family business, in spite of the emotional crisis they all had been going through. Mere months after they had gotten married and announced Catelyn was pregnant, Lya had announced her pregnancy to Ned. She refused to name the father but soon they found out Rhaegar had been pressuring her to get an abortion, willing to throw money at her for that, he had been worried she would use it as a leverage somehow to break his already collapsing marriage to Elia. When that didn't work he sent Arthur Dayne to 'take care of it', thankfully Lya and her baby were well-protected and safe. But Brandon
had been enraged and he'd driven down to King's Landing, and beaten the hell out of Rhaegar. It all went viral soon, Rickard had just reinstated the company balance after the Ashara scandal, when this had created an even bigger problem. Brandon was driving back- he'd steadfastly refused to fly back proclaiming he needed some time off- and soon, they got a phone call about Brandon's accident and Ned rushed down there to see his brother in the hospital right away. Just a couple of hours after he reached there Ned called to tell them Brandon was gone. That had been the final straw for Rickard Stark, and they rushed him to the ER after a major heart attack. Ned was completely ripped apart, he didn’t know whether to mourn his brother, worry for his father, comfort the family or take care of the business all the while preparing for the lawsuit against the Targaryans for their attempt to murder his sister and her unborn child. He had been so desperate and lost then with a constant cloud of worry over his head. She had seen that same expression on his face tonight, and it had broken her heart.

As much as it hurt her to see him walk to his old room instead of walking with her to their room, she knew it was for the best, she wouldn’t force him. He had gone through enough already, if she could make this transition easier for him she would. And she knew how her husband craved solitude sometimes, that was the way the Starks healed their wounds. If she could do this thing for him, she would. So, she had mustered up what courage she had left to walk away from him tonight. When she heard him say her name, the tone of his voice stopped her in her tracks. The raw vulnerability in those eyes almost made her look away. Before she could walk up to reassure him, he all but ran up to her and crushed her to him, pressing a firm kiss to her lips. She had forgotten everything the moment she felt the familiar spark go through her. Oh how she had missed him! How she had waited for him. She all but melted into his kiss, that spoke of hope and it gave her strength to face these coming challenging days and months. She wanted to stay in that moment, too soon he had pulled away...

She was startled out of her thoughts when she heard a sound coming from somewhere in the living room, it sounded like Arya fussing. The baby monitor! She grabbed it and went upstairs to tend to her daughter, Arya hadn't slept properly since Ned disappeared. The first few nights she had cried for him, making Catelyn lose his composure as well. Eventually she forgot, but she never slept through the night without fussing a few times. Catelyn wanted to bring the kids down, even if they fussed to sleep for one night. She just wanted them to see their father, but after he got the memory flash, he'd seemed so scared, she was terrified he was having a fit. And that's when she's decided to wait a night, she realized how much he was dealing with today and how exhausted he truly was. It hurt her to see that he wouldn't share the specifics of that incident with her, but perhaps in time he would. She hoped, she had so many reasons to hope now.

After putting Arya back to sleep, she went to her room changed in her night clothes and she lay down in her empty bed. She tried to push away the longing that struck to realize her husband was safe under their roof, but he was not in their bed. For a brief while after Rodrik told her they’d found Ned, she'd imagined various versions of this night. The family together, laughing and happy that he'd returned. They would both be desperate for each other as the night wore on, sneaking glances and touches in the crowded room. And she would end this night in his arms, blissfully satisfied and exhausted feeling his fingers in her hair. Warm and sleepy for the first time in months, she would fall asleep listening to his husband's heartbeat. She wiped off the tears that were forming recalling how those dreams were shattered just moments after, when Rodrik informed the circumstances. She refused to give up though. She reassured herself, there was a much to hope for. Much more than she had expected.

As she felt exhaustion pull her into slumber, she felt a smile tug at her lips. When she had looked into Ned's eyes before he walked away, she had seen the nineteen year old boy from over a decade ago who had promised Catelyn he would love her more and more everyday and would do everything in his power to make her happy for the rest of their lives, and he had proved it to her everyday since.

As she closed her eyes, his words resonated in her heart again. I will remember, Catelyn. I
promise....

And Catelyn Stark believed them completely, because her husband always kept his promises.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!! C & C Welcome! :)

And stay tuned! More is on its way! :D
He heard a loud crash pierce the silence. He looked for the source of it, but found none. He felt dizzy, everything was bloodshot red and his vision was blurry. Before he could make sense of it all he felt something grab the back of his collar and drag him, he could hear it pant loudly. It was surely a wild animal, he thought. He tried to fight back, to pry himself free, but it only resisted, groaned and pulled him further in the darkness. Panicking, he tried harder, and finally succeeded in pulling himself out of its claws and tried to regain his balance. His vision was still blurry, he could hear its footsteps scamper away, but all he could see was white.... His head was pounding....Where am I? He wondered, and looked around frantically to find someone.

“Ned” he heard a soft throaty whisper. He breathed in sharply. Catelyn. It sounded like her. “Ned. Come home to me, my love. Please...come back..”

“Catelyn” his voice was hoarse, “I'm coming to you, Catelyn....” he ran towards the sound of her voice, he needed to find her. She kept calling out to him. He saw red in his periphery and he ran towards it until he couldn't feel the ground anymore. And suddenly he was falling.....then he heard a loud crash...

Ned Stark woke up with a start, scanning the room around him. He panicked for a split second when he looked around to realize he wasn’t in his room in Creekwood. But soon the reality rushed back to him, he realized he was truly home. *I'm home*, it felt weird to even think about how his life had changed in the last forty eight hours. He touched the back of his head, relief flooded when he couldn't feel a sting or a sharp pain hit him. It had felt so real in the dream, like his head was split open, it was like that when the morphine wore off in the hospital, over four months ago. He got up and breathed in the cool air seeping in through the open window, even if the curtains blocked the view. *I can't be seen*. He remembered the conversation with the Cassels last night. *God! I'm truly home.*

He had felt at home the moment he walked in, this room in particular felt very familiar. He had gotten several memory flashes that made him dizzy before exhaustion finally pulled him into slumber, however he couldn’t truly recall any of them anymore. He looked around to see it was still dark, Jory had mentioned on the plane that his body would take a while to adjust with the time difference. He smiled at the thought of his friend, Jory and Rodrik brought him home in less than forty eight hours with a single-minded determination. He still couldn't fathom how they managed to do that, nonetheless he felt immense gratitude towards these two men for what they'd done for him.

He had slept quite well out of pure emotional and physical exhaustion. His throat felt inexplicably dry however, so he wandered out in the kitchen to get some water. He looked around to see how well maintained and clean this kitchen was. He felt calm just being in there he realized. He walked into the living room looking at pictures frames on the walls, remembering bits and pieces of memories from his past. His eyes caught a picture of him and Catelyn, it looked like an engagement photo. Catelyn was smiling brightly at the camera and he was looking at her. He held her close with his arms around her waist, she was wearing a maroon dress, her hair was loose - and longer than it was now - and it cascaded down her shoulders. She was breathtaking, he spied a silver vintage diamond ring with two sapphires on each side on her left hand that rested on his chest. *Good choice, young Ned*, he mused looking at the ring. The sapphires immediately reminded him of much more
beautiful blue eyes of the woman who wore the ring. It fit her perfectly, he hadn’t seen it last night, however he recalled the feeling of cool metal on her left hand and what he thought was three diamonds on the right. His lips quirked up in amusement, it was good to know he could recollect anything with precision. But he knew why exactly he remembered that particular fact. They were holding hands almost the whole time they sat together, it felt right. And ever so often the grip would tighten and he would feel the gemstones press into the skin of his palm.

Unbidden the image of the seven sided cathedral flashed in his mind. He saw bits, he saw Catelyn standing at the far end looking at the stain glass window, only she wore different clothes this time, she was wearing a dark pair of jeans with a sweater and a long winter coat. He walked closer and the image flashed out. He tried to control his breathing, his heart was beating loudly as he leaned on the couch to regain balance. Once he looked around the living room another memory flashed in his mind, he saw himself sitting in one of the high back chairs. He sat with a baby in his arms, cooing to the swaddled tot. He could see the auburn fuzz and big blue eyes staring up with a wide toothless grin as he reached out to hold Ned's finger. He could feel immense happiness engulf him. Robb, he thought. The image flashed out again. This time he felt a slight pounding in his head, he walked over and sat on the couch, leaning his head back. He could see faint sunlight now streaming through the windows. He remembered a day much like this one, over a week ago when looking at the horizon he had vowed to himself that he would find that auburn haired woman who was haunting his dreams and waking moments.

Just then, he heard footsteps walking down the stairs, he stood up straight at the sound and turned around to see the subject of his thoughts standing right in front of him and his heart jumped. It took him a moment to retrace everything that had occurred in the last two days. She wore a loose faded t-shirt and a baggy dark green flannel bottoms. Her hair was down and disheveled, curling around her shoulders and face. She looked stunning and adorable all at the same time making his heart pound leaving him unable to think. She gasped when she first saw him, then nervously looked down at her clothes before meeting his eyes again. He didn’t know what she saw in his eyes, but whatever it was it brought a delightful faint pink colour to her cheeks. And he felt his heart beat a little faster, he loved that blush bright on her face that slowly travelled down her neck......

“Good Morning” she said - her voice throatier than usual - interrupting the turn his thoughts took, and walked up to where he stood. He loved the sound of her voice, it was relaxed rather than anxious like in his dream. He shook off the memory of his nightmare before it overwhelmed him, turning his focus on Catelyn.

“Morning to you too, did you sleep well?” he asked softly.

She nodded, “You?” he smiled and nodded back. “Do you want some tea or coffee?” she asked as they walked towards the kitchen.

“Tea please. The jet lag feels like I have ten cups of coffee in my system.” he answered, following her.

“This is a very well maintained kitchen.” He commented absentmindedly as he looked around.

She followed his gaze, “Yep. Our housekeeper is very thorough. She won’t be around again until we can announce your return, I'll call her soon to give her an excuse.”

He hummed his assent. “Who cooks all the meals?” he asked curiously. He didn't understand why exactly he wished to know that, but he was curious about it for some reason.

She smiled, “It was only a matter of time before you asked that. The last five months I've been cooking, but you are the official cook of the house.”
“Jory said something about it on the plane. Am I any good?” he asked with a grin.

“You're the best.” She grinned back.

He laughed, “Well, we'll have to see won't we?” Catelyn handed him his tea, absentmindedly he thanked her and as he sipped it he felt surprised. She had made it exactly the way he liked it. It couldn't just be a co-incidence. He was very picky about how he liked his beverages, it had taken three painful weeks of explaining -occasionally returning- his beverages back at the local diner at Creekwood before they got it right. Somewhat. Ridiculously he felt relief that he would no longer need to do any of that followed by confusion and surprise. And he struggled to find the best way to frame his exact thoughts.

“We've been together over twelve years, Ned. That’s wife 101.” Catelyn answered.

He looked up at her surprised, once he was sure that he hadn't said anything out loud. And he knew his face was quite expressionless, so it startled him to see her answer his unspoken questions. *Gods, how does this woman read my mind?* He wondered. And yet again he was met with an answer.

“She's 101,” she whispered and smirked rather smugly. He tamped down the strange urge he had to kiss that smugness off her face and settled for smiling sheepishly instead. They drank the beverages in silence after that, it felt comfortable. He was a taciturn man, he knew. He’d always felt uncomfortable about it back in Creekwood, Ashara insisted on filling the silences or there was always an awkward air around the room whenever they were quiet together. But he felt serene here, like it was okay to be himself and he quite liked that feeling.

“I'll call Ben and Lya, they'll come around before work. Do you..remember them?” she asked after a while.

He shook his head, “I saw them in a couple of memory flashes last night. But, not more than that, no.” he finished sadly.

“Is it quite common? The memory flashes, I mean. Do they hurt?” she asked with a frown.

“They don't exactly hurt. But they can be uncomfortable sometimes.” He said thinking about the most recent overwhelming one, he’d never had such an intense reaction to one before. Perhaps his return would help him remember sooner. He did have several memory flashes since he left. He shared his thoughts, “I was surprised by the frequency myself yesterday, but I think figuring out who I am is speeding the process. And I get head aches sometimes…” her eyes widened slightly, “but its not serious. I promise. I think they just overwhelm me a little, I just have to sit down for a bit and then I feel better. Honestly, I'd rather have memory flashes and suffer a mild head ache every now and then, than not remember at all.” He replied. He didn't know why he was telling her all this, he was usually very private about his feelings about this particular subject. But he felt he could trust Catelyn.

“The thought of you in pain is very unsettling. You've gone through so much already. But I'm sure Dr. Walys can help you guide through it, and I will help you too.” He smiled at her words. “And about your siblings..Would you like me to tell you a bit about them?” she asked sympathetically.

“Yes, please.” he whispered.

She nodded, “Well, Lya - Lyanna – is your younger sister, she is 30, she is freelancing as a horse riding instructor. She has a son, Jon, he's 8. He looks quite like you. They both adore you very much. Ben- Benjen, your youngest brother - is 26. He joined Stark as a COO, after you....disappeared. And Brandon--”
“Yeah... Jory told me about him.” he said. He got glimpses of the other two now, just barely. Ben at a spelling bee when he was a kid, Lya's first horse riding competition. They flashed in and out, he felt a soft warmth press against him, when he opened his eyes he saw Catelyn hugging him and whispering soothing words. Then he realized he was breathing quite heavily and started sweating profusely.

“Ned?? Oh god! Are you alright, Ned? Do you want to sit down?” she asked frantically.

“No.. no. I just- Like I said, the memory flashes can be overwhelming sometimes.” he said massaging his forehead to soothe the pangs that he felt.

“You said, they only ever gave head aches.” She asked concerned.

“Yes, but this one was one of the more intense ones. The intense ones can be slightly more taxing.” She didn't seem convinced. “I'm fine. Catelyn” he said, sharply. But he felt guilty immediately when he saw her pulling away slightly at the tone. “Really. I'm fine.” he added softly, involuntarily pulling her closer.

She seemed to relax then, so he felt better. She was close enough that he could feel her breath on his skin. “I'll call Walys too. I'll arrange to bring him here as soon as possible.” she whispered, still looking up at him with her big blue eyes. He looked down at her, his heart was beating a bit faster. He hummed his assent, “Tell me about our children.” he asked as an attempt to change the subject before his thoughts reeled towards what her proximity was doing to him emotionally....and physically.

She smiled sadly, “Well, Robb is-”

“Our firstborn.” She looked at him in disbelief. He admitted, “I saw him in a memory flash too. When he was a wee bundle, I was holding him, sitting in that chair. He looks like you, hes beautiful.”

She smiled, “Yes he is that. Sansa, is our little princess. She looks like me too. And Arya is our wild wolf. She looks like you, she's perfect.” She said, almost to herself.

“Wild wolf?” he asked.

Catelyn just laughed, “When I was pregnant with her, she used to kick very hard. Your father named her that then, presenting us with a stuffed wolf toy for her. ‘Such a wild wolf deserves a toy worthy of her nickname’, he'd say.”

The book about the 'lone wolf' had triggered something in him back at the library. Now he was intrigued, “Why 'wolf'?” he asked.

She laughed again then, “Well, its an old story really. Rickard, your father, was very enthused by Westeros history. And your family is very old, and apparently during the monarchy – thousands of years ago – the Starks had a direwolf on their sigil, there is more to the story, but I'll save that for another time. Rickard took that interesting fact to make the direwolf the corporation logo, as a way to preserve the legacy of his ancestors. And over the years every Stark involved got a nickname, including our daughter. Well that one was your father's courtesy.” She reminisced.

He smiled at that. His family seemed to have an interesting history, it felt very very familiar. And Catelyn's explanation acted as a reminder. He was glad she brought them up, he had been wondering about his parents, “Speaking of him. Where is he? And my mother? They don’t live here, I guess. I assumed they'd be here last night, but—what happened?” he asked her, at the change in her
expression, her face was now guilt-stricken with tears in her eyes.

“Ned..I'm sorry, I forgot you--..” Catelyn came closer again, “Ned, your father died 3 years ago. And your mother...she's been dead since you were 10.” she added sadly.

He was caught up listening to her reminisce that he never realized she was speaking in past tense until now. He leaned back on the counter to steady himself. He...he had only just got his family back. And he already lost half of them, his older brother and his parents. Well, Ashara was right about me being an orphan, he thought bitterly. “What..happened to them?” he choked out.

“Your mother was diagnosed with rare ovarian cancer when you were 8, she held on for 2 years but eventually lost the battle. And Rickard, he took Brandon's death hard, his health deteriorated after that. Soon he handed over the business to us and moved to Winterfell. That is-

“Yes, its the Castle we have up north. I read about it when I first found out about my identity” he said dully, he kept seeing the brief glimpse of his father back from the library.

Catelyn nodded and continued, “We would go visit him sometimes, he asked us all to go when I was pregnant with Arya. Thats when he gave us all the presents, I think he knew he didn’t have much time left. He was so happy, we stayed over for a week and had a lovely time. The day we were supposed to leave you went to check on him, he had died in his sleep.” He closed his eyes.

Unbidden the memory flash he had in the library played out in front of him. Come in son..... he saw his father beckon him again, the memory didn’t stop there this time, he could feel himself sit in front of the desk, across from his father. Stark Corporation is yours now, my lad. You've done well, Ned. Your mother would be so proud, his father said hoarsely, and the image flashed out.

Catelyn was still looking at him, concerned. “He died peacefully and surrounded by the people he loved, Ned.” she said, involuntarily he pulled her closer and buried his face in her hair seeking comfort. They stayed like that for a while, he was still surprised by how peaceful he felt in this woman's mere presence. “I'm so sorry you have to go through this again, Ned.” He heard her whisper and he kissed the top of her head as a way of thanking her, unable to respond at the moment.

She seemed to understand and burrowed her face in his neck. After some time, she looked up at him lovingly, “I'm afraid I have to call Walys now. Then I'll bring the kids down too. Its too early for them to wake, but I can't wait any longer.”

“Me neither. I'll try not to disappoint them. Correct me if I get anything wrong,” he said warily and she nodded.

After looking at him for a long moment like the night she did the night before, she tip-toed and kissed his cheek. With her hand still on his jaw she said, “I cannot explain in words, how glad I am to have you back.”

His heart skipped a beat, her words touched him deeply. He kissed her forehead in an attempt to convey what he couldn’t find words for. And covered her hand with his feeling the gemstones press against his skin again and he smiled turning her hand to see the ring he’d spied in the picture frame earlier. He could feel her eyes on him, “I was thinking before, when I saw that picture” he motioned towards the frame. “Younger Ned Stark certainly made an excellent choice,” he said tracing the engagement ring lightly.

She laughed looking down at the ring wistfully, “You said the sapphires reminded you of my eyes.”

“Your eyes are much more beautiful though.” he replied and she looked up at that. Oh god, did I say that out loud? he wondered and looked at her intently to see her reaction. He saw her cheeks flush once more, and he smiled sheepishly.
“Thank you, I better go and make the calls now.” she whispered scurrying away, he was sure he heard her mutter “before I forget myself” while she walked away. And he tried to comprehend what had just occurred, and hoped he hadn't crossed a line blurring out his thoughts like that. In truth this woman was doing something to him and he had no idea what it meant. He just felt flustered, his heart would beat loudly and he couldn't take his eyes off her whenever she was around. He walked in the living room and sat on the couch feeling quite wary and excited about meeting his children that he didn't know he had until yesterday. That's when he heard tiny voices and footsteps scurrying down the stairs. He got up, his heart filled with joy instantly as he saw two adorable miniatures of Catelyn standing a few paces away from him with identical expressions of shock on their faces.

Then after he was sure his father was truly home Robb's face broke out into a wide grin and he ran towards Ned yelling “Dad! You're home! You're home!” he caught the boy in a hug and picked him up.

“Oh! Yes, I'm home. How you've grown in five months, my boy!” he said thickly and put him down, kneeled down to come face to face. “Have you behaved while I was gone?” He asked, the boy nodded vigorously his auburn curls bouncing on his little head. And Ned ruffled them, smiling brightly when Robb's expression suddenly changed.

“Daddy, what happened to your eye? Are you hurt?” he asked fearfully.

“I was, but I'm fine now.” Ned assured.

“Why were you gone so long? Promise you wont leave again. I missed you. Mommy missed you too.” he pleaded, his blue eyes glistening with tears.

Ned's heart broke for his little boy, he wiped them with his thumbs, “I promise”, he vowed. He looked up to find Sansa, instead he saw Catelyn standing a few paces away tears running down her face as well, and he saw another girl on Catelyn's hip considering him with big grey eyes, his eyes. Gods she does look like me! Sansa was standing behind Catelyn peaking at him suspiciously, his heart broke all over again to see that. Sansa moved to see him clearly, nervously glancing at his scar with a tiny frown on her face. And he looked down at her, she drew in the courage to walked up to him. She is so like Catelyn! “Hello, Sansa. How are you princess?” She smiled shyly when he called her 'princess' suddenly remembering who he was, and he smiled back at her, still holding Robb with his other hand.

“C'mon Sansa! Say hi, its our daddy! See? He's back!” Robb said excitedly. Sansa regarded her brother with wide eyes, and looked back at him, her hesitance waning.

“Daddy?” she asked tentatively in her tiny sweet voice.

“Yes, sweetheart. I'm so sorry I was gone for so long. I wont do it again. Forgive me?” he opened his arms. Hesitantly, she walked in and he hugged her tightly remembering the first time he held her. Pink faced with the auburn fuzz on her head scrunching her perfect blue eyes open to look at him. She's perfect, she's you Cat! He remembered his words from the day she was born, he felt another surge of inexplicable joy. He pulled away, kissed her nose, she just giggled and walked back to Catelyn proclaiming enthusiastically, “Mommy! Daddy home, see!! he pwomised.” Her voice melted his heart.

“Yes, darling I heard.” Catelyn smiled at from where she was kneeling down in front of him. She spoke to Arya who still stood there staring at him confused. “Go on, Arya. Its your daddy, go say hi.” Catelyn whispered hoarsely, trying to speak in the midst of tears that were flowing down her face. She nudged Arya softly towards Ned. Sansa, now feeling quite confident, stepped into 'big sister mode' nudging Arya herself, “Yes, Ayya its daddy. Dont be afwaid.” and he dearly hoped she
wouldn’t learn how to pronounce “r”s soon.


“Yes...Hello, baby girl.” He said his voice was thick with emotion as Arya walked up and started patting on his face.

He chuckled when she grabbed his chin, she squealed loudly, he held her close and kissed her forehead. He remembered getting Arya to sleep, one night. Pacing around in the nursery, with her in his arms. It had been a stormy night, she wouldn’t sleep because of the loud thunder. He remember when she dozed off on his shoulder, he had placed her in the crib, brushing a stray lock of dark hair off her cheek, tucking her in and placing her stuffed wolf toy next to her. He had wondered then just as he did now how this child looked so pretty in spite of getting his look. He felt moisture on his cheeks, realized he was crying. Catelyn, came over with Sansa and held him and Arya. He pulled in Sansa and Robb with his other arm, having a moment with the family that he and Catelyn had created. He felt sad that it took home five months to come back to them. As if she sensed his distress, Catelyn cradled his head, gently stroking his hair. “Oh, Ned!” she whispered hoarsely, and he pressed a tender kiss to her lips holding her closer. He was overwhelmed with joy. He couldn't quite explain how he felt, but in spite of having only a few memories, his heart overflowed with happiness and he gave into that feeling completely.

He didn't remember feeling quite like this anytime in the last five months. Somewhere within him, the true Ned Stark had recognized them completely. And this was his moment, and for one moment he wished to completely give into that tiny part that felt like his true self, and not worry about the future. He felt complete as he held his family, the family he and Catelyn made, kneeling down in a huddle in the living room. They stayed like that for awhile before a buzzing interrupted them and slowly Catelyn got up, and walked to the front door wiping the her tears.

Sansa, still a little shy followed Catelyn. He saw two cars pull in the front, three people got out. His heart was beating faster already. My siblings. Robb, saw his cousin get out of the car and ran to the door just as they entered, “JON!!! Look my dad is home!! He's back, look!” just as Arya ran towards the door on her chubby feet, surprisingly fast and steady for a girl who wasn't quite three yet, “Jon!!!” she called out loudly.

“What on earth is he talking about, Cat? And why the fudge are we--” said the dark haired woman, frowning. My frown, he thought, she looked a lot like him. Arya will grow up to look so much like her. Lya, the name came in his mind. He got to his feet, looked at her remembering his memories from yesterday. He walked up in the foyer, she stopped mid-sentence and stared at him with wide eyes now filling with tears.

He heard another deep but sweet voice, “Cat, is everything okay? You told us to hurry up. I don't-” the man who looked much like himself, only younger, thinner looked up at him and stared at Ned, shocked, with wide puppy eyes. Ben.

They both stood there like deer caught in a headlight, after a few moments Lyanna ran up to him and tackled him in a hug. She pulled back in a few moments and punched his shoulder and he cried out in pain. “Where the heck have you been!??!?!” Lyanna demanded.

Before Ned could answer, Benjen walked up and wrapped him in a hug, “God! Ned, you're alive. And yeah where the fu-”

“Ben!” admonished Catelyn and Lyanna, simultaneously.

“Where....were you?” Benjen asked timidly looking like a puppy, suddenly realizing there were
many tiny ears in this room.

Ned was short of words, he looked up at Catelyn who was holding a miniature of himself and he was taken aback, “Is that....”

“Yep, that's Jon. I know, he looks more like you now. He's a Stark through and through.” Lyanna answered, the last part quite proudly. He wondered why, but only walked up to the boy and kneeled in front of him, much like he did with his own children. He remembered holding him as a baby, big grey eyes looking into his own, hello Jon, he remembered whispering to the bundle.

“Hey, Jon.” he said solemnly to the boy who looked up at Ned, mirroring his expression. His lip quivered as he looked at the gash “you're hurt..” he whispered much like Robb, and he hugged Ned tightly. “I missed you, uncle Ned.” he said softly.

“Oh my boy. I missed you all too. Very much. I'm fine, I swear.” Ned just held him for a moment ruffling his dark curls, then pulled back wiping the boy's tears.

“Why don't you kids play for a while in the nursery. And don't leave Sansa and Arya alone.” Catelyn suggested. He understood what she was trying to do, looked at her and said, “I'll take them upstairs.”

“The door next to the mahogany door, they can play in the nursery.” Catelyn whispered softly, and he nodded grimly. “Jon can you make sure Arya doesn't run around, please? And call me if she fusses too much, okay?” she asked his nephew.

“Yes, aunt Cat.” Jon nodded, “Thanks for coming back, uncle Ned.”

Ned smiled at the boy and moved to pick up Arya and take the rest upstairs.

“Seriously, is anyone going to explain what is going on?! Ned you have a big gash on your face! And where were you all this time?” Lyanna asked impatiently, and he devoutly wished his gash would just disappear before traumatizing more people.

“You both need to sit down for this.” Catelyn said. He took the children upstairs in the nursery, everything was heavily baby proofed, apparently Arya lived up to her nickname. Sansa asked to be put in the play yard and Arya wanted the same. He sat with the children for a bit, and as much as he wanted to spend time with his kids, he wanted to see his siblings too. With a promise to spend time playing with them soon, he asked Jon and Robb to keep an eye on the girls and went downstairs.

When he sat next to Catelyn, “So.. you can't remember us?” Benjen asked quietly.

“No, I mean I do a bit. But, not very much. I'm sorry.” Ned said. He saw their faces fall at his confirmation and he felt guilt strike him.

“And its Ashara! She's doing this? She's back?” Lyanna asked angrily.

Catelyn nodded, “It seems that way for now, as impossible as it sounds. We'll know more once we hear from Brynden. Until then...”

“Yeah we know. Nobody will know Ned's here. Or that he doesn’t remember. I guess that’s why you sent the kids upstairs?” Benjen asked Catelyn.

She nodded gravely, “I hate lying to them but they're too young to understand. They should be fine for a little while alone, especially if Jon is up there with them. And Ned will remember. We'll tell them once they are older.” she said firmly.
Ned felt a moment of panic, hoped desperately that it would not take him long to remember. He couldn’t imagine going on for years with no memories. He squeezed Catelyn's hand. Catelyn smiled reassuringly, turning back to Ben, “I've called Walys, he said he'll be here this evening. I wanted to be here with Ned, for a while, since the housekeeper can't come here until we announce Ned's return, which needs to wait at least until Brynden gives us more information. And I wish to stay until he recovers a little. I was thinking of working from home, if its not too much to ask...”

Benjen laughed, “Of course its not! I'll take care of work, don't worry. We don't have much coming up anyway.”

She nodded gratefully, “Thanks Ben. I'll call Mya and rearrange my schedule.”

“Sounds like a plan. I'll come down here in the evenings and bring whatever needs your attention until you can return to work. That way I'll get to spend some time with Ned too.” Ben said looking at Ned.

“Well, I was hoping both of you could live here for a little while. That way you can spend more time with him, its been a long time after all.” Catelyn asked.

Lyanna smiled, “No, Cat. Thats a great offer but that will be a bitch of a commute.”

“Whoa! Swear jar, Lya!!” Ben said,

“Oh shove it Ben! The kids aren't around and its hard enough not to swear in front of them.” Lyanna said exasperatedly, leaning back on the couch, she looked exhausted.

Thats when it hit him, “Is that why you said 'why the fudge' when you first walked in?”

Lyanna laughed, “Yeah, in my defence, it was a swear-worthy moment.”

Catelyn huffed, “She did commit to change some of her vocabulary, and I think she is doing well with not swearing around the children.”

Lyanna rolled her eyes, “Why, thank you! Mom-of-the-Year approves.”, she said with a show of hands, Catelyn just shook her head. Ned didn't know why bit it felt odd to see Catelyn and Lyanna speaking with each other so casually. They seemed like two completely different women with nothing in common, but he had to admit the thought of harmony in his family brought him a sense of ease and relief. They all spoke back and forth for a little while, when they both got up to go to work, declining Catelyn's offer to stay for breakfast.

“Ben, are you sure, this is okay? If its too much to ask, you can tell me--” Catelyn asked, when Ben cut her off, “No, Cat! Its fine, I swear. You just take care of him, all right? I'll come back in the evening.” He gave Catelyn a quick hug and turned to hug Ned.

Lyanna moved to leave herself when Catelyn said, “Hang on, Lya. I was wondering if Jon should stay here until all this is settled. It is vacation, he'll have fun with the kids and you were planning to drop him here for next week anyway. And as obedient as he is, he is still a little boy. Even if he is not as chatty as Robb, its too much to ask him to keep this secret.”

Lyanna nodded, “Yeah, its a good idea. Especially if everything you said is true, one slip up is all it will take. We know how the media will all pounce on it. They won't care if it costs lives....they just want the fucking ratings.”

Catelyn looked at her sympathetically, “Lya--”.
Lyanna closed her eyes, “I know.. I know..swear jar. I'm sorry.”

“No” Catelyn added fervently, “What they did with the news of your pregnancy was horrible. You have every right to be angry about it. But Lyanna, everything is fine now. Rhaegar - god knows where he is - cannot touch you. You got full custody of Jon, and he's happy.”

Ned looked at them curiously, “Tell him, Cat.” Lyanna said looking sad.

Catelyn turned to him, “When Lya was pregnant with Jon, she wanted to keep it quiet but the media hyped it. That's when Brandon went to confront Rhaegar- Jon's father - and when he was driving back in drunk fury, he...got into that accident.” Ned nodded in understanding, he didn’t know the details of his brother's death, it chilled him to hear it.

No wonder Rodrik was taking extra precautions with his rescue. Lyanna said, “Yeah well like I said, Jon is Stark through and through. He's walking in his godfather's steps already, he's got a shitload of honour for an eight year old. And I'm not worried about Rhaegar anymore, he couldn’t get in the country again, even if he tried!” Lyanna continued, “.... Anyway, I have work this afternoon. When I come back later in the evening, I'll drop Jon's clothes.”

“Oh and don’t make any plans for dinner. I'll text Ben, you both should stay for dinner. I'll cook something nice for us all tonight. It's been so long since all of us had a meal together,” Catelyn added.

He agreed, “That's a good idea. I would love to talk to the both of you more. And spend time with all of my family,” he said looking at both of them.

“That sounds good to me, you know well enough how much I loathe cooking. And both me and Jon would love anything that isn't mac and cheese, for once.” Lyanna said laughing.

She turned towards him and he saw her fight back her tears. She pulled him on his feet and hugged him “And you! You better remember how to cook soon, because I'm dying to eat your chicken stew.” When she pulled back, her expression had become quite frightened and sad.

“Promise me, Ned. Promise me, you'll remember.” Lyanna whispered.

At her tone, he knew, she didn’t just mean the cooking. She meant everything. His life, his memories of her and the rest of his family. He could feel he was close to his sister, he felt a lump in his throat as he heard memory from a long time ago, Promise me, Ned. Promise me you'll keep him safe if Rhaegar does anything to me. “I promise, Lya” he replied, much like all those years ago, meaning every word. He would remember and he would remember everything for the sake of his remaining family who seemed to love him so much.

Catelyn stood in the living room after Dr Walys left. She saw Ned standing in front of the large window in the kitchen, staring out in the backyard with a desolate expression on his face. This all must be so overwhelming for him, he always went out in the backyard whenever he was troubled. But he didn’t have that luxury, at least for a while in spite of being home. She cursed the wretched people, who made it necessary to take extra precautions.

The day had turned quite grim as it progressed. The morning had been blissful, Ned seemed so familiar. Your eyes are much more beautiful though. Her heart skipped a beat when he'd said that.
He always said that, but his tone this time around had reminded her of the day he put that ring on her finger and whispered, *the sapphires remind me of your eyes, even if your eyes are much more beautiful.* She had been so confused and thrilled at the same time when he said it this morning looking at her intently. She had walked away before she forgot her everything that needed to be done and stood there feeling warm under that grey gaze of the man she loved so deeply. The man she'd missed so deeply.

There was much to be done, she'd called the housekeeper, Nan, Dr. Walys and Rodrik to confirm Walys’ appointment. Then she's woken up the kids, telling them there was a surprise waiting downstairs when they fuss ed about getting up. At 'surprise' the older two all but ran downstairs, she'd picked up Arya and carried her down. Ned had been so wonderful with their babies, she had started hoping again. Yet now, it all seemed so far away.

After Ben and Lyanna left, she had made breakfast for all of them and the children had been overjoyed to have Ned home, much like herself. Ever so often she looked over in the living room to see Ned playing with the children. She teared up thinking about his face when he met them. It was the face she'd seen the day he'd held them first in his arms, as she weakly looked over from the hospital bed exhausted, content and happy to see her husband and their baby meeting each other for the first time. He held the same expression of awe and happiness as he met them today, and even if it pained her to know his condition, she was glad she got to see that expression on him again.

She was glad they didn’t know about his condition, he was acting naturally with them even if he looked at her a few times when he didn’t understand a reference either Robb or Jon were making. She was glad neither of them seemed to notice he was quieter than usual. She could tell he felt guilty for not remembering much about his own children. All day she fought to stifle the urge to hold him safe in her arms, with the exception of those times when she found him staring into space breathing heavily; she couldn’t stop herself when she saw him like that. The presence of all the children had eased him, she knew. The day had gone by fast with them around, each one wanting to claim Ned's attention to show their newest accomplishments and play their favourite games. Then after getting quite exhausted and fussy, they had all gone down for a nap and both Ned and Catelyn stood in the nursery and watched over their two little girls sleeping peacefully when Ned had broken the silence.

“Thank you for our children Catelyn. They're perfect.” he'd whispered hoarsely, wary of waking up their babies. “And I'm sorry. I'm so sorry that I can't remember much.” he looked down and her heart went out for him.

“Oh Ned, look at me. Its not your fault. Do you hear me? You didn't cause this.” Catelyn assured him.

He looked at her with incredible pain in his eyes, “It truly doesn't bother you, Catelyn?”

“It bothers me, just as it bothers you, Ned. But, there are more important things than that, trust me.” She bit her lip and he'd just waited for her to continue. “You were there, you know. You were there when I gave birth to each one of them. And you were in the waiting room when Lyanna was in labour too. You looked at our children with the same amount of love and inexplicable joy today as you did the day they were born. And that means so much more to me than the fact that you cannot recall all the memories just yet.” She finished, feeling fresh tears in her eyes.

“I do love them Catelyn. And I swear I will do my best not to disappoint them again or any of you.” He answered looking deeply in her eyes, “I know” she'd whispered back.

And as promised, Walys had shown up late afternoon, and was quite thrilled to see Ned himself. Ned had been quite nervous. When she moved to give them both some privacy, “stay” he'd whispered holding on to her hand tightly with a distant fear in his eyes. She only squeezed his hand and sat
down with him, feeling quite moved that he wished her to stay even if he didn’t truly remember her yet. They had spoken back and forth for a while discussing his condition as she sat quietly carefully making a note of any important factors Walys mentioned about Ned’s current condition. Then Ned had explained how it still hurt him to get memory flashes, how often he thought he was being drugged and how it felt- she had shuddered to hear it, they were drugging him through food so at least three times a day – then he showed them his head wound. Something she had been quite wary to look at when Rodrik mentioned how he got it, twice in their conversation last night. His current haircut made it clearly visible and she had peeked at him in the morning, but now - after they pushed away some of the short hairs - she could see it quite clearly. The faint pink gash was larger than one on his forehead and thicker, she heard him explain how it throbbed for weeks in spite of being heavily bandaged, her heart clenched in her chest.

She couldn’t hold back the tears at the thought of her Ned spending months alone and in pain. It angered her to contemplate that Ashara was nursing him back to health like she was raising a pig for slaughter, just to use him later on. She heard him explain his situation in Creekwood, Catelyn felt temper boiling and she had half a mind to find these people and murder them herself. She’d heard the story from Rodrik before, but to hear it from Ned she could feel the depth of anger and insecurity he had felt being anywhere near that conniving bitch and her minions! No wonder he couldn’t trust Walys at first sight. *He trusts me, he trusts me so much*, that thought soothed her as the feeling of his thumb tracing her knuckles lazily as they sat holding hands.

After about an hour, Walys had concluded the session, Ned had slowly relaxed in his presence. Walys confirmed their suspicions that the drugs were indeed hindering Ned from trying to remember, he mentioned how something in those drugs must have been designed to hinder Ned’s memory. They would know more once Brynden found the drugs, Walys said he was consulting them in this case. She was truly thankful for him. He mentioned it would take some time for Ned to fully regain his abilities after being drugged for so long. He may also experience some restlessness, since he stopped taking them suddenly instead of slowly transitioning out. Ned mentioned waking up this morning feeling extremely thirsty, and Walys had confirmed it as a side-effect. Any exertions would probably pain him, he recommended against Ned forcing himself to remember, at least the drugs worked out of his system. He had refused to take anymore drugs, outright and she had supported him. So Walys suggested he drink plenty of water and avoid caffeine and alcohol to help drain out the toxins.

He mentioned coming over for sessions every other day to pursue some cognitive exercises that would help Ned ease back into his life. And he had asked Ned some other questions to test his general knowledge. She was surprised to see just how much Ned knew, and Walys mentioned, sounding relieved, that the retrograde amnesia hadn’t affected his academic skills, or anything he may have learned physically. He was recommending they revisit some old projects, test Ned’s academic skills. He was talking about various other measures they could take to help him remember enough to resume his job in the midst of all this when Ned had gone still next to her. She held on to him, as Walys turned to her, telling her everything she could do to aid him.

“So, I basically remember everything, but my memories of the people I love.” Ned asked dully, but she could hear the pain and anger beneath his controlled voice.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Stark. But yes, at least for a while, you won’t remember. But once these drugs get out of your system and you fall back into your routine, it will get easier. I am optimistic about your recovery, however it will take some time.” Walys comforted him.

Ned had just nodded. She was concerned about him, but only thanked Walys for taking time to visit them at home. Ned had thanked him himself, but she knew his thoughts were elsewhere. As she walked to bid Walys goodbye, Ned had stayed back walking over to the window.
She wished to console him, to hold him close and tell him it was all going to be okay, but after
twelve years, she knew when Ned needed solitude. So, Catelyn gave him his space and walked in
the kitchen to prepare dinner. She cooked well enough, although she wasn’t as brilliant as Ned or
Yohn. The thought of Yohn brought a smile to her face, she got a text this morning saying, 'I was
stupid not to believe you, Tully. I owe you dinner.' They hadn't spoken much after the
disappearance, but he'd offered her condolences about a month ago to which she had replied, 'my
husband is not dead' curtly and he’d only smiled sadly in return. That was their last conversation, she
truly didn't wish to go down a path that would bring her nothing but pain. She was touched to read
his apology now, quickly she had expressed her gratitude before returning to make the calls this
morning. She started readying all the ingredients, it would take a while since she hadn’t cooked for
so many people in a long time and she could already see the sun setting from the kitchen window,
glowing brightly on her face. After Ned had disappeared, and Ben and Lya stayed over, that’s when
she had cooked the most in her life since neither Ben nor Lya cooked well or even liked to. She took
care of the house after her mother passed away, but her father had hired a cook and a housekeeper
urging her to focus on her studies. And when she got older and just started to learn how to cook,
she'd met Ned who was already a pretty good cook himself and claimed that the kitchen was his
territory and that she shouldn't worry about it much. She gave it up gladly as she was never very
keen about the craft, Ned was very good at it so he used to make the meals and she did the dishes.
Over the years, she'd learned some from him, so she knew her way around the kitchen well enough
now. Still, she was preparing simple yet Ned's favourite dishes. She wanted to do something for him,
in a way to soothe him, and she had no idea what else to do.

After more than ten years of marriage, it seemed like they were back at the start, but even then they'd
been closer. Now, she didn’t know where exactly 'now' was. She wondered idly if they could ever
go back to that intuitive bond that they’d had before. Hoping desperately that they would, she just
wanted her Ned back. He was right there few paces from her, yet he seemed so far away that it broke
her heart. They had never gone through moments where they felt distant, even in the rare fights they
found their way back to each other. Over the years, their love had only grown stronger. They'd both
rebuilt the Corporation together, stone by stone, and all through the tough times, they always loved
each other. This had been the longest separation they'd gone through, that seemed to change
everything. She knew it would be a while before they could go back to the comfort that was natural
to them, although she thought some part of Ned was already very comfortable around her. She
couldn’t feel more grateful for the fact that he chose to return to her, in spite of not remembering her
at all. She knew it was partially due to his loyalty streak that he didn’t wish to desert his family, no
matter what he felt. But she knew he felt more than just a sense of repentance and duty. He actually
wanted to be here and that fact had relieved her in itself.

Walys had said it would take a while for him to remember further. And she would not force him,
especially if it hurt him every time he tried to. Although she was glad that he wasn’t completely
blank, that in spite of the drugs, Ned was remembering bits and pieces of everyone. I wonder if he
remembers anything with me. She knew it was a petty thing to feel bad that he hadn’t mentioned
seeing her yet, but she couldn’t stop it. She was glad he was remembering, but some part of her
desperately wished he had remembered her as he did others. Or remember something, anything, but
she was too afraid to ask. She didn't want to push him, he was already being hard on himself for not
recalling enough. She tried to tell herself the comfort he felt around her was enough for now, but
worries would creep up on her every once in a while. She knew he didn't remember loving her yet. It
hurt her even to consider it, in her mind, but she wished he did. She hoped.

Catelyn looked up to where he stood and gasped at the sight. Ned was leaned on the window just
gazing at her with reverence, she didn’t know for how long, but he looked awestruck. At her gasp,
he straightened up looking slightly abashed but his eyes never left her face, his gaze felt palpable on
her skin. It were now trained on somewhere on the left of her face. Before she could ask, he walked
over and tucked the stray lock of her hair curling around her cheek behind her left ear. Realization struck her, and she felt heat in her cheeks.

He gave her a tender smile. “Your hair is so beautiful, Catelyn,” he breathed.

“Thanks.” she managed to reply, her cheeks burning now as she tried to control her breathing. It was the second time today he'd surprised her. After a few moments, Ned offered to help with dinner and she was happy to oblige. She turned away from him with the pretense to grab things from the fridge and smiled to herself. She knew fully well what the setting sun did to her hair colour just as she could tell he was staring at her hair now bathed in the melting sun light, because she heard his familiar sigh and she smiled again.

*It is enough. Its enough for now. Whatever else he remembers or doesn't....*

*Ned still loves my hair.*

Chapter End Notes

C & C welcome! Thanks for reading, and yes there is more to the story! :)
Catelyn woke up to the chirping of birds and delicious aromas coming from the kitchen. She smiled, Ned had realized quickly that his brilliant cooking skills didn’t elude him after all. Almost immediately he had started making all the meals – and more – in an attempt to help her out and familiarize himself with this new found ability. The night Ned cooked dinner for the first time for the whole family, Lyanna had been absolutely thrilled by the fact, proclaiming they should have family dinners every night and it started a tradition. She knew the prospect of seeing everyone he loved everyday delighted Ned to the core. She could see it in his eyes, and it made her happy to see how that constant cloud of guilt of his inability to remember lifted off in moments like that. He was so ecstatic to find out he was doing well that he started experimenting with cooking. Immediately he started making three or four different types of appetizers, entrées and desserts everyday. He spent a lot of his time in the kitchen then. They had an inordinate amount of leftovers, in spite of having Ned, Benjen, Robb and Jon, – and occasionally Jory- all of whom had big appetites. Lyanna had been overjoyed to take most of the leftovers off their hands. And Catelyn ended up having to go shopping the day before to restock the kitchen, but it was well worth it. Ned was feeling a sense of accomplishment and he was feeling better and that was more important to her.

She walked out to peer in the nursery, Arya was sleeping soundly. *Ned’s presence had brought peace to us all*, she thought. Then she went back to her bathroom to brush her teeth. It has been over a week since Ned returned. A week he spent reacquainting himself with his family. Lyanna and Benjen came over on their days off, and for dinner every night. Benjen would show up for lunch a few times and he brought any work related issues Catelyn needed to deal with personally. Catelyn had decided to work from home the moment Rodrik told her about Ned. But, after spending more than a week working from home and taking care of the household chores, she had realized quickly how dependent they truly were on their housekeeper, Mrs. Burley. The woman was returning in a few weeks, until then they were on their own. Catelyn had explained they had a family crisis and they wished some privacy for a while, the woman hadn't asked a question. Catelyn had offered her half pay leave for the inconvenience, which she courteously refused. She seemed to understand the situation was difficult, and offered whatever help she could. Catelyn was aware of the weekly chores she needed to take care of, nevertheless the woman offered to speak with her whenever Catelyn needed assistance. They had the cleaning closet full with supplies, something she thanked for soon enough. With four children under the age of ten, Catelyn had to make use of it an alarming number of times. *God bless Mrs. Burley. I will never take her granted again.* Catelyn heard herself silently thanking the woman countless times.

Ned reluctantly spend the first few days resting, then insisted on helping around in the house to make things easier for her. She was grateful even if she wished he could take it easy, she knew her husband wouldn't waver once his mind was set on something. She at least hoped distracting himself from his condition might help him, even if it didn't stop her from worrying for him. Ned had seen Catelyn spend most of her time doing household chores, he spent most of his time playing or watching movies with the children the first couple of days. She loved to watch him spend time with them, and they were delighted to have him back. The day he met them, Catelyn spent some time talking to him about their babies. He was anxious to know them well, and he listened to her speak of their likes, dislikes, accomplishments intently. She steadfastly refused to speak to him about his time in Creekwood, or stay away from anything that would trigger negative emotions for him.

After finishing her morning routine, she walked downstairs and felt a tinge of disappointment at the
thought that he wouldn't be in the living room this morning. However, before she finished that thought, as she was descending down the stairs she heard someone scurrying out of the kitchen. After walking down the last step, she indeed saw expectant grey eyes peering at her from the archway to the living room. Her heart skipped a beat, like it did every morning. But today more so, because his stubble was back. He stopped shaving after he came back, and couple of days ago he asked her for his trimmer to maintain the close-cropped beard. Catelyn had been ecstatic and tried very hard to keep her emotions off her face when he did. She had to admit, she had been so glad that he grew back his stubble, he'd even admitted he felt more like himself like that. Now he stood in the living room, his shorter than usual hair unkempt, stubble on his face and grey eyes gazing at her intently, and she felt her cheeks burn.

The first morning it had been a co-incidence. She had been dazed when she walked down to get her coffee. Ned was on the couch and he stood straight up in the living room as she approached, and stared at her. Her heart had jumped, it took her a moment to realize he was truly real and back in their home. Then, he'd just smiled softly and scanned her from top to toe, shyly. She realized she was wearing one of his old t-shirts and loose flannel bottoms, she knew her hair was a riot and she probably looked deranged without her morning coffee, and she knew fully well that her dark circles and premature wrinkles couldn't disappear overnight. She had looked down at herself desolately thinking, for the love of god, Tully! The man returned to you after five months, he just found out you are his wife and you're going to scare him now by looking like a hungover zombie, she took a deep breath and looked up, her cheeks burning, he was looking at her like she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. Her heart jumped once more. After that, every morning she found him waiting for her in the living room, and every time he gave her that look. At first the novelty in it had saddened her, but now all she felt was that blush that crept in her cheeks, which made him get a hazy look in his eyes.

She shook off her thoughts, to see him staring at her with the same look, she walked up to him standing quite close, “Hi.” She whispered, knowing fully well how he adored her morning – extra throaty – voice.

“Hi. Slept well?” he asked in his own deep groggy one. Oh she always loved the sound of that voice, she nodded. “You?”

He nodded back looking intently in her eyes. They just stared at each other for a bit then his eyes widened suddenly, “Bacon!!” and he ran in the kitchen to fix the bacon that almost burnt while they were busy making doe eyes at each other like a couple of teenagers. She bit her lip and joined him in the kitchen, pouring herself a cup of coffee after making his tea.

Walys had come over for Ned's fourth cognitive rehabilitation session yesterday. She no longer sat in the sessions with Ned after the second one, he seemed to relax in Walys' presence. After the first session, she bought some informative books the doctor recommended so she could help Ned herself. She spent the last few days scouring them, so she would know everything about his condition. And they both spent some time every day working on his memory. Ned said he was keeping a journal now, he thought it best to record everything he could remember in case it ever got hazy and Walys was on-board with the idea, he confirmed that it would help Ned solidify what he did remember.

In truth, she thought he was doing very well in terms of coping considering it had just been a little over a week since he returned. He had settled in quite well. His relationship with the children was unchanged, his relationship with his siblings was normalizing as well. Every night Benjen and Lyanna spent time after dinner talking about old shenanigans, some nights Jory would join them and they would talk about college days. They all hoped to see a flicker of recognition in Ned's eyes. And sometimes she saw something akin to familiarity in them, when he would sit and listen intently to the tales and she would have to make a conscious effort to curb the eagerness it would spark in her and
she knew the others did the same. She also knew it would take a while for Ned to fully reintegrate with his life, and she didn't want to make him feel guilty for not recalling anything.

The only worry she had now was their relationship. He was ever so warm to her, comfortable around her. But still he was distant compared to his usual self. And she knew him well enough to know he was holding back. For what? She didn't know. Some part of her still feared that he had feelings for Ashara, even if he knew Catelyn was his wife, and even if he cared for her. She feared, he couldn't yet let go of the memory of the woman he fell in love with in the last few months, the woman who betrayed him in the end. But just contemplating it broke her heart into a million pieces. She couldn't muster up the courage to ask him yet, with the fear that it might be true.

“So, how are you feeling today? I know the session yesterday was exhausting.” she asked in an attempt to distract herself from the thought that would potentially make her break down in tears.

“Fine, considering...” Ned sighed, “I haven’t really remembered anything more,” he added dully. Walys informed her that they had tried to revisit some of the older memories -on Ned's insistence- and failed, leaving her husband emotionally and mentally exhausted by the time the session ended. When she saw him after the session he looked like he’d run a marathon, Walys was opposed to exerting him again, at least for a few more sessions until they could tell for sure where they stood. Ned was definitely disappointed by it, she could see it clearly in his eyes right now.

“Ned, you know it will take time.” she replied softly. He nodded sadly, she knew it bothered him more than he let on. He would always be grim after his sessions with Walys. The doctor insisted on an easy pace the first few weeks until the drugs wore off completely, and she knew Ned hated that. He wanted to get it over with, but he also didn't wish to lose what he did remember completely, so he didn't push the matter. But he would talk to her after the sessions, seeking comfort, sometimes he just wished to speak his mind or be near someone who understood and she was glad he felt that sense of comfort around her. *He cares for me, I know he does.*

He sipped his tea, smiling a little. “I don't think I will ever get over how perfectly you make this, every time.” He said raising his cup slightly.

Catelyn laughed, before she could say anything he cut her short, “I know. Wife 101,” he said and smirked, making her heart skip a beat.

She laughed a little more. “You've always been picky about drinks. Especially your tea. I admit it took a lot of practice to get it perfect.”

He looked at her gravely for a moment, she knew he wanted to say something but he was just trying to find words for it. She watched him silently. “You know, when I was back in Creekwood; After I returned from the hospital, I was so stressed out with nothing to do. It got worse over time, so, I got a job - this part-time job in a library... to get away from things.” He said, his eyes darkening. After a brief pause he continued with a distant look in his eyes,“ I'd read that caffeine was bad in my condition, so I started drinking tea in the morning before I went to work. But, Ash only drank black coffee or some soy milk, non-fat, skimmed----I don't know something that tasted quite disgusting, honestly. So the kitchen didn't have anything I liked to even sniff.” He smiled and she tried not to be hurt by how naturally he spoke of Ashara, yet he was still disbelieving of Catelyn's – the woman he'd married, the mother of his children - ability to make his tea perfectly. She looked up as he continued,“Anyway, so I used to go to a local diner for tea every morning. And they always got it wrong, at first I just ignored it. On one particularly bad day, I took my tea, sipped it in the diner and frowned, sighing loudly. The woman asked me it was okay and when I hesitated she said, 'its alright to say no, hon' in a thick accent. So I returned it and she got it right the next time, well kind of. After that, every time I got my tea she would wait until I checked it and fix it when it wasn’t perfect.”
Catelyn smiled. She could picture it, Ned was usually easy-going if ever a barista at the office cafe got his order wrong. But, whenever he was tense or stressed out, sometime the smallest things would make it worse or bother him very much. He could never help but show his dismay. Usually people assumed he was cold and never approached him. Catelyn was glad this woman caught it in time and gave the poor man what he wanted but felt shy to ask for. Ned paused to sip his tea, but Catelyn knew he was trying to frame what he wanted to say next in his mind. “It sounds silly, but that was the only thing that seemed right, when everything felt so alien. It kept me sane to have one good cup of tea everyday. Everything seemed so wrong then....” Her heart broke for him when she saw the look on his face. He was so alone there. He caught her staring and straightened up, “I'm sorry, I'm rambling...I don't know why I'm telling you all this...”

“No, no, don't apologize. I understand completely. You can tell me anything, Ned. Anything.” she answered, still aching to hold him and tell him he was not alone, that she would always be there for him. She was warmed by the idea of him sharing anything with her, even the fact that he told her about this. But it also brought a fear of what he would share, and if she was strong enough to hear it. 'Ash', he called Ashara 'Ash'. Yet he still calls me Catelyn. She thought sadly. She felt a shiver run through her body just then. She had changed the thermostat settings a few nights ago, so he could sleep easy and be comfortable in their home. That is the least she could do, even if it could never replace his warmth.

He seemed to notice it, “Are you cold? I notice its cooler in here now.”

“Yes, I know how you get uncomfortable in heat, so I lowered the temperature a few days ago,” she said, sipping her coffee to get some warmth in her body.

“I don't want you to freeze,” Ned replied, concerned.

“I don't want you to melt.” she countered. “Besides, I just have to wear an extra layer, I just forgot to pick up my cardigan before coming down, that’s all,” she shrugged, simultaneously feeling goosebumps rising up on her skin. There was only one person, who warmed her more than anything. In the past, whenever she shivered and she would sneak up on him and press her face in his neck, he would jump acting like he didn't notice her approach, and let out a sigh in mock-frustration to her aversion to the slightest dip in temperatures. He would grin and then pull her in his arms to warm her, shaking his head whenever she burrowed a triumphant smile against his neck. You and your thin southron blood, he'd say.

“Come here,” he ordered. His voice startled her out of her thoughts.

“What?” she asked.

“Come here, you're shivering,” he added softly, opening his arms. Her eyes teared up, Eagerly, she placed her cup on the counter and walked into his arms, nose pressing against his neck. God! How she'd missed his warmth. He jumped when he felt the icy nose on his skin, as he always did and she burrowed a sad smile in his neck. Oh god, how I've missed you. Ned, how cold I've been without you. How did she ever survive the coldest winter without her Ned? She couldn't even explain how she had lived through it, in the constant worry that she would never feel warm ever again, if her husband never returned- she stopped the trail of her thoughts and hugged him closer feeling warmer now, reminding herself that he was safe and home with her.

“How are you so cold?” he breathed, holding her tighter.

She was so distracted by the feel of him, after so long that it took her a moment to process what he said. “Thin southron blood,” she replied softly with a laugh. She was so glad that they were feeling
this level of comfort around each other, that her husband still cared for her well-being. Her heart soared to see how much he cared, in spite of his condition.

The week had flown by quickly, she didn't have the time to dwell on worries while she was working from home, taking care of the household chores and their children while reading up on how to help Ned recuperate. But, now she had settled into the routine, she wasn’t needed much at work and the chores were divided since Ned started helping out. Now she truly felt all those unspoken concerns surface, especially when she was in such an intimate proximity to her husband. She hoped, that this would be easier than she imagined, that their relationship wouldn't be all cold and distant at first. This gesture spoke of starting anew with comfort and warmth. After moments, feeling overwhelmed by amount of emotions that flooded in her heart at this new found hope, she pulled back slightly to look at him.

“Are you warm now?” he asked softly.

“Warm enough,” she whispered.

“Good. If you feel cold again, I'll be happy to warm you.” he said shyly, looking deeply in her eyes.

“okay...” she heard herself answer. She felt rather dazed by the warmth radiating through his body and through her own coupled by the longing she saw in that gaze that was now turning into her favourite smoky grey. Oh she knew that look!

He looked at her lips, she saw him swallow and look back up into her eyes. He's holding back, she thought biting her lip. She could tell he was waiting for her consent, she felt like she was nineteen again when she saw this expression on his face most of time, in the first few weeks they were together. He had been so cautious, not wanting to push her or force her. And she knew he also compared himself to Brandon, but he was ever so careful with maintaining boundaries that she actually had to drag him out of them.

Just like her nineteen year old self, she decided to take the first step. She raised her face and pressed a soft kiss on his lips. She felt him sigh and kiss her back just as tenderly. She pulled on the front of his shirt and kissed him more firmly, feeling so very glad that he chose not to shave the last few days. She'd missed the feel of his rough beard against her skin, he returned her kiss eagerly this time, caressing her face. They stood there kissing, again and again relishing the new found comfort. Neither wanted to stop, she felt like she was melting. She had missed this so much, she wanted to stay here forever. Suddenly Ned pulled back, his head turned sharply to the left. She was so engrossed in that kiss that she hadn't heard the gasp. Still dazed from the kiss, she actually followed his lips for a split second as they moved away and then followed his gaze to see Jon standing in the archway to the kitchen looking at them embarrassed, blushing furiously. She looked up at Ned, who was staring at Jon with the exact same expression minus the blush, and she hid a smile.

“Jon, what are you doing here? Are you hungry, love?” she asked, trying very hard to keep a neutral tone in the midst of her heavy breathing and pounding heart.

Jon jolted back into present, “No..I woke early because you asked us to, but Robb and Sansa were sleeping, so I went to see Arya, she was up too, then she was asking for Uncle Ned, and you two weren’t in your room, so I came down here to find him, I'm sorry.” Jon answered hurriedly, without a hitch. She had never heard him speak so much all at once in all his life, she bit her lip to stop her from smiling. He must be truly embarrassed to see his aunt and uncle in a heated embrace, and she pulled away completely before he got more uncomfortable.

“Don't be sorry, Jon. You are not in trouble. You've done nothing wrong,” Catelyn reassured.
“I'll go bring Arya and the rest downstairs for breakfast.” Ned said looking in her eyes deeply, then her lips; licking his lips he walked away stopping briefly to ruffle Jon's hair.

She felt herself shiver and she licked her own lips, and shook off the thought, “Jon, do you want to help me plate up?” The boy nodded solemnly seeming relaxed now as he realized he wasn’t in trouble and helped her by placing plates on the dining table.

“Did Robb and Sansa get up yet?” she asked him.

“Sansa came to play with me and Arya before I came to find you. I tried to wake Robb, but he hid under the blanket saying five minutes.” Jon said silently, “But, he promised he will be up on time.” he added quickly.

Catelyn smiled, “your uncle Ned will wake him, don't worry.” she knew Jon would excuse himself to wake his cousin before Catelyn had a chance to go wake him herself. Jon was a good boy, Lyanna was right, the more he grew the more he seemed like Ned in his demeanor. It made her smile ever so often to see how different Robb and Jon were. She loved Robb fiercely, even if he was a handful at times, the boy brought them far more joy especially in the darkest of times. He was born to bring happiness to the Starks and she knew he would grow up to be a buoyant young man, just as she knew Jon would grow up to be probably the responsible one, just like Ned. It used to bother her sometimes, but the more she got to know him and the more he spent time with her children, the more she loved him like they were their own.

Ned had been the boy's only father figure since he was born, – Ben (and Jory) was more like an uncle that liked to spoil the children- she knew his disappearance had affected Jon deeply. She hoped, he would feel more like himself now that Ned was back. She ruffled his dark curls, he looked up giving her a slight smile, “You missed him a lot, didn't you aunt Cat?”

Her eyes teared up, “I did, very much,” she answered truthfully. Jon had seen the changes in her the last few months, she knew. One time he caught her sobbing silently and asked, Aunt Cat is uncle Ned gone forever? Is that why you are crying? Looking scared, because he had never seen her cry before. She had no answer for the boy, it had been the day the detective informed her that they'd closed the case asking them that Ned was likely dead and that they should mourn him. She'd been strong when they told her his car was found battered, even when they found his blood on the scene because they assured her it wasn't enough to lose his life even if he probably would if he didn't get proper medical care. She'd still been hopeful, because she knew Ned, she knew he wouldn't give up easily, even after they didn't find anyone with his description in hospitals or clinics. But when they closed the case, all the hidden fears came crawling back in her mind. And when Jon asked her that question, she had no answer for him. She had just stood there silently looking desolate, Jon had guessed the worse and started crying himself. She'd never seen him cry so bitterly, she had wiped her tears holding him while the sobs slowly stopped wracking his body. He will, he will do his very best to come back, that was the best she could offer him. He believed her for a time being, but she knew deep down he feared the worst. She could only imagine just how relieved the boy must be to have Ned back.

“I did too. He won't go away again, will he?” he asked now fearfully, her heart broke for him. “Oh, Jon” she hugged him, “Oh, my sweet boy. Your uncle never wished to stay away so long. He will never leave us again. Don't you worry about that.” That she knew, whatever else she feared about her husband, she knew he would never desert his family.

“I'm glad he's back,” he said, as she wiped his tears.

“I'm glad too. Now, how about some chocolate milk, with breakfast?” she asked, he nodded smiling. Chocolate milk cheers up the most solemn of Starks, Ned used to say, especially if one of the boys
were sad. She knew for a fact anything chocolate was Ned's weakness, something he'd passed on to all their children except Sansa. Who much like herself couldn't for the world resist lemon poppy seed cakes. She came back with the carton and found all her children sitting down at the dining table, all three in different stages of sleepiness, and Ned looked over at her and smiled sweetly. She smiled back, her mind reeling back to their kiss earlier, and joined them. Breakfast was a quiet affair, the children were too sleepy still, but they needed to be up early if they wanted to go out with Lyanna for the day. Ned and Catelyn stole brief glances in the midst, she knew he was thinking of their kiss just like herself. She felt a flutter in her heart every time she felt his eyes on her. God, how does he still have this effect on me?

The children had gotten quite fussy staying at home for the past few days, and at dinner last night, Lyanna offered to take them out today. They couldn't take children out in a fairly crowded place, so Lyanna was taking them out on her friend's ranch, Jon and Robb adored horse riding. Nan was going along with them to take care of Sansa and Arya. Catelyn had called Nan, asking her to come over. She wanted to tell her about Ned today, the woman was like family to them and she used to babysit Ned and his siblings when they were younger, so she'd been around for a long time. She would want to know about him, Catelyn trusted her not to talk about it to anyone for a while.

Ned was making sandwiches for them all so they could prepare a picnic basket for them to take along, while Catelyn made sure the kids are ready to go. When she got Lyanna's text and brought all the kids downstairs, she was out in the living room talking to Ned and already hauling the children out in the car. At the same time Nan buzzed in, she opened the gate for her turning to Lyanna,

"Lya, I need to tell Nan about Ned. Can you all wait in the car?"

"Alright, don't take too long, its a long drive and we're already late."

Catelyn bit back a reproach. In truth they'd been ready for a while, waiting for Lyanna to show up. She always proclaimed she was fighting punctuality for ages and losing every battle. Catelyn hated being late, but when Ned had been away Lyanna helped her quite a lot by taking the kids out when she couldn't and she was more thankful that than bothered by her issues with being on time. So Catelyn swallowed her strong sense of punctuality for the sake of maintaining peace. She knew their friendship was more stable now, but it was still based on acceptance on both parts. And they were all happier this way, the boys were inseparable even if their families lived relatively far. In truth, Catelyn used to wish they could have another boy for Robb to play with, but as Robb and Jon grew, in spite of having opposite personalities they'd become best of friends and she was glad for that.

She went to Ned. “Ned, I asked Nan to come over here, so she could meet you. You've known her for a long time and she's been worried about you, so I want her to know that you're okay.” she whispered.

Ned nodded, “Can we tell her?”

“What the fudge are you two talking about??” Robb piped up, Jon elbowed him slightly.

Catelyn raised her eyebrows and stared at Lyanna, who looked like a deer caught in headlights. Quickly she pulled Robb and Jon towards the front door, “C'mon, boys. If we don't leave now, we will get in big trouble. Lets go.” She mouthed 'sorry' to Catelyn and left. Catelyn looked over to Ned, who wasn't even trying to hide his amusement. And she couldn't help but smile.

She looked up at Ned and shook her head slightly, “We can't tell her just yet.”

She had spoken to Sansa and the boys upstairs and told them not to mention Ned to anyone today.
They had been confused as to why they had to keep it a secret, but she managed to reassure them that they planned to surprise everyone else. *Shocked more like,* but it was true enough. She hated lying to the kids, but there was no other way. Sansa and Arya squealed when they saw Nan get out of the car insisting on riding along with her, Lyanna helped them settle into Nan's car and the boys got into hers, proclaiming they were too old to ride along with little girls. Well, Robb proclaiming and Jon nodding. Catelyn shook her head, watched the old woman walk in the foyer.

“Mrs Stark you wished to speak with- Oh god! Ned, my boy you are alive!” she exclaimed forgetting the formalities and walking over briskly to grab Ned in a hug. Catelyn stayed back, letting them have a moment.

“Nan?” he whispered hesitantly, hugging her back.

“Oh dear boy, we've been worried sick. Where were you so long? Are you alright? Dear God, what happened to your forehead?” she asked away rapidly.

“I'm fine, Nan, I'm fine. Its a....long story really. We'll talk about it later. How are you?” Ned asked, thickly, the woman's presence affected him, Catelyn could see. He'd told her when they were first dating that Nan stayed over at the mansion for a few years after Lyarra's death to take care of the children. Rickard was busy with work and she didn’t have the heart to leave four young children alone, Ben had been just three then. She was like a mother to Ned and his siblings, even Jory, as Rodrik used to drop him at the mansion before going to work. After Ned disappeared, Nan had helped Catelyn cope. Helping her with the kids, she came over anytime Catelyn needed her to. She was relaxed and at work knowing the children were safe at home with Nan. Catelyn wasn’t sure what she would have done with the woman's help. She wanted her to have the moment of joy, at a later time, she would explain everything.

“Oh I'm fine! I'm a tough old bird and I'm not the one with a gash on my forehead. Does it hurt?” She asked touching the gash gingerly.

Ned chuckled, “No, it doesn't hurt anymore. I'm fine, Nan. Its good to see you again.”

“There is something we need to ask of you. We were hoping you wouldn't mention Ned was home. We mean to announce it soon. We don't want any attention to this just yet.” Catelyn added. Nan nodded in understanding, the woman had seen what untimely media attention had caused the family before, she knew it all too well, “I won't. I won't breathe a word about it. You can trust me.”

“I know, Nan. Thanks,” Catelyn said and the woman smiled at her looking back at Ned.

They heard a loud honk, Nan sighed exasperatedly “Lya was always the impatient one! Ned walk me to the door.” Ned walked with her and Catelyn sat down for a little bit, closing her eyes. She was looking forward to this, especially after the way they started this day. This was the first time they were to be alone after Ned came back about a week ago. She remembered the feel of his beard on her skin from earlier and shivered. She felt something soft cover her and she saw to see Ned draping the couch throw over her shoulders and sitting besides her, *he saw me shiver,* she thought.

She smiled, “You remembered Nan?” she asked.

“Yes, vaguely. I can't remember any memories with her, but I remember her face. I just felt like I'd known her for a long time. And I felt quite happy to see her, actually.” Ned replied.

“She's known you for a long time. After your mother passed away, she took care of you and your siblings. And now she is taking care of our children. She's like family, and she helped me a lot through the last five months.” She said, almost to herself and smiled at him.
She was happy for him, she knew he was glad he was remembering something. There was still a tiny part in her mind, nagging her to ask him if he had any memories of them but she pushed it down. She wasn't going to force him to remember, he was with her, comfortable around her more than she'd expected and that was enough for now. She wouldn't have him feel guilty or feel pain for her sake. He would remember, when the time was right, she told herself. She still tamped down the urge to ask him, but not the part that wished desperately that he would remember something about her and the part that was fearful he never would.

They spoke about the house for a while. The mansion was very rustic, compared to the other houses in the area. She knew he'd be curious about it. They'd redesigned the house after Rickard moved out. Then Ned asked why the study was the only thing that looked older than every other room. She answered, “After your father moved to Winterfell, he sold all the old furniture. You were furious, but he insisted we start a life afresh, untainted by old pains. He didn't want you to dwell on the past, he wished us to only look forward. Something that he struggled with a lot, he didn't wish you to get trapped in that grief as well.” she said, Ned looked pained. “So...you insisted on keeping old pictures and didn't make much changes to the study itself except for sprucing up the place and changing the flooring.”

“You redesigned the house?” Ned asked.

“We hired someone for it. You put me in charge, so I had the final word in the project. You didn't have the patience for it. After being rather befuddled by our first meeting with the interior designer, ‘That's it! The man spoke for more an hour pointing at squares on that paper and the only words I understood was fabric, floors and weird paint names. I don't think I'm cut out for this,’ you said, holding your hand up and then asking me sweetly to take care of it.” Catelyn answered laughing at that memory. Ned had been so confused and infuriated with the patience of the interior designer they'd hired. The man had loved to get his hands on a rustic mansion and he had various ideas. She had been fascinated by his recommendations and Ned had stopped listening after he started throwing architectural terms and colour schemes. And she'd spend the rest of the meeting glaring at him at various points in time when he zoned out- usually grabbing at her hair curling around her shoulder or playing with her engagement ring instead of looking at the designer. She knew, he didn’t have any interest in redesigning the house he grow up in, she also knew it was partially because he didn’t want to actively discredit his old memories so she took the initiative after he asked her to take care of it.

He chuckled. “Yeah, that sounds like me. You did a brilliant job, if it were up to me every room would look the same as my old bedroom. Blue walls and grey curtains.”

“Don't you mean Cerulean blue and graphite grey?” she asked raising her eyebrows and he made a face at her and she threw her head back laughing. Remembering the exact conversation they'd had from a decade ago when he'd walked in the newly refurbished house. He'd said the same thing then and she'd replied with the same line eliciting that exact expression on his face. Only back then he had pulled her to him and kissed her laughter away.

They spent some more time talking about the house, she realized he kept asking more questions. She knew he hated that he didn’t just tap into those memories. The more he asked, the more she answered and the more he scowled for not knowing the answers himself. It did concern her that he wasn’t remembering anything, but Walys had told them it would take some time for the drugs to work out of his system and for him to regain the ability to tap into his old memories. He’d told them bluntly it would be a long process, perhaps months depending on how much the drugs had affected him.

Much later after a quiet lunch, Rodrik called her and urged her to put the phone on speaker. She sat next to Ned on couch with the phone in her hand, “You're on, Rodrik.”
“Ned, how are you doing now?”

She saw Ned clench his jaw, “I'm fine, thanks. Have you found anything?”

“Yes, it's about your test, we needed to know something.” Rodrik had sent a trusted doctor a couple of days ago for a check-up and to take some samples for drug testing. He'd informed them that they wanted to be thorough, because the amount and quality of drugs they'd found in the doctor's office had been staggering. She was glad then, that he was ahead of the game by wanting to do a drug test, even if it scared her to the core to imagine what they were dosing him with and how powerful it was.

“And?” Ned and Catelyn asked in unison, smiling briefly at each other.

“Ned, when you were at Creekwood, do you remember being drugged directly through a syringe? Apart from orally, I mean.”

She saw Ned shift in his seat uncomfortably, and she braced herself for his answer, “No, not after I left the hospital, not that I recall anyway. Why?”

Rodrik ignored his question and sighed, “Did you ever feel a sting when you were asleep? Or discover a red itchy patch on your body? Like your forearm or your neck?”

Ned looked paler, he was quiet almost like he had phased out. “Ned?” she whispered softly when he didn’t answer for a few moments and her voice jolted him back to the present.

“Yes, several times.” he answered, barely controlling his anger.

There was a momentary silence on the other end, when impatiently she demanded “What does that mean, Rodrik?”

“I don’t know, not yet. We needed to confirm if Ned was drugged in any other way, is all. I'll inform the doctor now, we'll get the results soon. I'll stay in touch.” Rodrik answered, sounding considerably less hopeful and Catelyn shuddered. Ned sat silently breathing heavily and he pulled her close. He did that a lot, she noticed, it was an old habit of his to involuntarily pull her closer when he felt most troubled. It thrilled and relieved her that she could at least provide some comfort to him. She truly hoped that they hadn’t dosed him with anything irreversible, as they waited for the results to come back. “Catelyn..”

“Yes, my lov- Ned.” She bit her tongue, the endearment came naturally to her but she didn’t wish to make him feel uncomfortable.

“The night I came home. When I phased out for a while and you were all worried for me, I was having a memory flash.” She looked up at him at the tone and he continued. “I was having a memory flash from after I woke up at the hospital. I remembered feeling a sting, feeling extremely nauseous and powerless. I remembered begging to make it stop, I saw Groff and Ashara there. I didn’t tell you then because I wasn’t sure what it meant...until now.” he finished desolately and her heart went out for him. She remembered that night, she'd been terrified for him. He looked like he was far away with a tortured expression on his face.

“They were drugging you when you were asleep.” Catelyn whispered, feeling disgusted. He didn't answer her, he looked like he was far away.

“I trusted them. Groff. Ash.” Ned said distantly. She looked up at him. She felt her heart break, for him and for the expression of complete betrayal on his face. “I trusted her, Catelyn. I believed Ashara.” he added softly. She felt tears in her eyes, she ignored the pang in her heart and held his hand in an attempt to comfort him.
“I wish...” he whispered.

“What? What do you wish, Ned?” Catelyn asked, hoping her voice didn't tremble.

He straightened up, “Never mind. Doesn't matter now.” he said, pulling his hand out of hers and massaged the bridge of his nose. Catelyn felt her heart rip out of her chest, she turned away trying to stop the tears that were falling uncontrollably.

“Besides, I'm more concerned about what these drugs are doing to me.” he said after a while.

“We don't know what it means yet, Ned.” Catelyn whispered.

“But Catelyn you heard him. They drugged me more than we expected, they found copious amounts of lethal drugs and that bloody doctor's office, what if he gave me something strong?--”

“--Then we will find an antidote.” Catelyn cut in. “Whatever happens, we will find a way. And we will move forward, together. I am not giving up, Eddard Stark and neither are you.” She answered firmly.

He looked at her, grabbed her hand and squeezed it smiling at her. “I will never give up. No matter what happens.” He said looking deeply in her eyes.

“I know. You promised me remember?” she said. He does care for me, perhaps in time... he will forget her, Catelyn thought.

Whether his concerns were valid or not, they wouldn't know for sure until Rodrik brought them the results. As she embraced Ned tightly, pushing away the fear that came back to haunt them both as they realized how he struggled to remember even the slightest memories in his home since he returned. She tried not to worry about how wistfully he spoke of Ashara, even if it ripped her heart to even contemplate it. She felt him hold her tightly his knuckles trembling. She may not have all the answers yet, but she knew she wouldn't let him carry his burdens alone.

I love you, Ned, she thought feeling tears return to her eyes, and I will always love you, no matter what.

Rodrik Cassel, sat in Brynden Tully's office at the WIA Trident headquarters in front of a huge desk, looking warily at the pile of reports that sat on top of it. He had flown down here yesterday to discuss the progress. Today they were flying down to the scene in Creekwood to understand the status of this case and then returning Winter Town. He spent the last couple of hours with Brynden and his associates discussing the progress so far. They had a few leads, they located the therapist who was a few towns over attempting to escape and brought to the precinct at Vale PD.

They didn't have much on him, they knew he would realize that soon enough, so they questioned him as gently as possible. And thankfully, he cooperated and gave them a few leads on Groff, he seemed to only know that Ashara was in charge of Ned and that he was to inform her about whatever he told in the sessions. They charged him for breaching confidentiality agreement, but thats all they could do. They had to let the librarian go, but they kept a close eye on her to see if she tried to contact Ashara again, but she seemed to know nothing of it and was only relieved that they didn't arrest her on the spot. Ned's friend Dave was clean as well, and since he had helped in Ned's rescue, they were bound to stay easy on him. However, he had a distinct feeling the lad was hiding something, not necessarily related to Ned though which is why they decided to let that go for now. After the discussion, Brynden had gotten a phone call and excused himself asking Cassel to wait in
his office. They expected to get the results from the drug tests today and he was anxious for it, especially after what he found out after calling Catelyn and Ned a couple of hours ago, when they were reviewing the case as they knew so far.

He knew how secretive WIA was and he also knew if it wasn’t for him they would never divulge case specifics like this. Technically he was still an employee as he consulted with them exclusively. He was an active part of this investigation - as active as he could - since it was taking place hundreds of kilometres away from where he was sitting. Brynden had spoken to some of his most trusted officers, deeming this investigation 'top secret' at least until they got more information. Rodrik had spoken to quite a few of his friends to make that happen, they couldn't afford making this case public. Brynden had volunteered for the task pulling some strings himself to maintain secrecy amongst his colleagues as well, except for Mallister from Trident PD who officially took over the investigation - rather demanded to - he had cued into Brynden's behaviour and immediately recognized who it was that they were trying to protect. Brynden decided to include him, since Mallister was a fine officer and a trusted ally and he was doing it all for the sake of Catelyn, and the Tullys. That lass has won over so many loyalties, Old Hoster should be proud of her. Especially because Rodrik knew it was a huge risk, especially if the culprits weren’t as professional as they expected, urging the high level secrecy Brynden could lose his job. Family, Duty, Honour; Rodrik hadn't even bothered to ask why he was taking such a risk.

He'd worked with Brynden for quite a long time in his earlier days at WIA, they worked cases together. They’d both eventually taken different routes as Brynden was training to become a special agent, whereas Rodrik had asked to get transferred to the Winter Town division after his brother Martin and his wife had died in an accident leaving Jory in his care. Brynden and Rodrik led two different lives until they collided again a decade ago, when The Targaryan empire finally burst into flames. A common cause brought them together, working as partners, just like old times.

Brynden had been his confidante all through his career, especially after that. And he stayed that whenever Rodrik needed him, even if he didn't agree with Rodrik helping Brandon get out of trouble they he always got himself into due to his excessive philandering. Catelyn had been with Ned by that time, thank god for that. He cared for the lad, but he didn't approve of his behaviour one bit. As much as he hated to encourage it by getting him out of trouble, he would save Brandon's arse for Rickard’s sake. After all he'd done for Rickard's family, he couldn't imagine not helping him. Soon he had retired from WIA, and after years of persuading, Rickard got him to start working at the recently acquired security firm, full-time. He was thankful, after being a workaholic, staying at home all day was killing him, especially after Jory went to college. He'd been thrilled to start working there. And now, as much as he missed his old friend, he still wished to stay and guide young Ned and Ben to make sure their business thrived. That is all Rickard ever wanted, peace in the family and peace at work. And he was proud that the business Rickard Stark had spent all his life building was well taken care of by three of the Starks who were in charge of it now - Catelyn had proven to them all in the last five months that she may have been a Tully by birth, but she is a Stark at heart.

“Good God, Rodrik. Dozing off on duty! What have those frosty northerners done to your work ethics?” Brynden walked past the desk, looking at him amused. He realized he was contemplating with his eyes closed, he looked up at his old friend and smirked.

“Its called contemplating, arsehole. And if I fell asleep, I assure you the entire building would hear me snore.” He replied back.

“Ahhh still got the dodgy sinus problem, eh?” he said, sifting through some files.

“Hmmm.... In fact, I'm convinced Jory decided to come all the way to Trident for college to escape it.” Brynden laughed.
“So, what is it that you want to talk about?” Rodrik asked leaning back on his chair.

“First, I need to ask a question. Something I couldn't ask in front of the rest. Cat won't tell me, she only said I shouldn't worry or breathe a word of any of this to Hoster, for now, and that we could speak of it in person. But I need to know.” Brynden asked firmly, he'd known him a while to know that was his 'wont take no for an answer tone.'

“Well why don't you just ask her when we fly down there? I'm sure she'll give you-”

“-Yes she will. But, I want to hear your thoughts first.” he insisted. “Did Eddard Stark have a relationship with that woman?”

He knew even after he gave the man the answers, he would still talk to his niece about it. He couldn’t really blame him, what Brandon had done to her by cheating with the same woman all those years ago had been inexcusable and shameful to all the Starks, he was surprised Brynden hadn't killed Brandon on spot when he found out. And he wanted to get it out of the way and focus on discussing how to find these people when he went to see the Starks tomorrow. Rodrik sighed, “ You haven't changed. And no, Ned didn't have any relationship with that woman.”

“And we're sure of it because....”

“Because he's not Brandon. He betrayed your niece Brynden, not Ned. And the lad had no memories, even if he had, he wouldn't know why it was wrong. You saw the evidence, you know they were holding him hostage and how well planned it was. Even if it was well planned and inconspicuous, he still confirmed he didn't touch her. And I trust his word, so does Catelyn.” he said tersely.

Brynden nodded, “I know. I just wanted to be sure, I can't see her hurt again. And Ned's a good lad. And you're right the evidence was planted, the box of condoms was open, but untouched; there was no traces of... 'bodily fluids' anywhere on the clothes or in the house, well we found a lot on his bed. But, its inconclusive that that was.....two people.” He raised his eyebrows. “Cat and him were always way too 'sappy' to be around, not to mention the alarming speed with which their family grew. It had been five months after all, the boy's no saint, it doesn't surprise me that he had to.. take measures.” When Rodrik didn't react, he continued, “ ya know...have some 'private time'. Go solo, polish the sword--”

“-oh for god sake, Tully! I'm not slow. I get it!! Get to the fucking point.” Rodrik cut him off cringing at the picture.

“Prude,” Brynden snarked. Before continuing seriously,“--And the pregnancy test was a definitive negative. Its almost as if they planted this to created rumours, not for us. Especially by the arrangement of clothes, it was arranged differently and possibly just a few hours before we got there. We know now they used gloves so we couldn't get their prints. The place was spotless, which is why we can safely conclude that--”

“-that it isn't their first rodeo. Yes, I thought as much.” Rodrik nodded, “what else?”

“Well, I brought Ashara and Arthur's files from a decade ago. To see if we find any similarities. Especially since she is the main suspect now.” Brynden added.

“What do you mean?”

“I contacted my sources at the Dorne and Starfall Police Department to check the authenticity of our speculations.” he sighed.
“And?” Rodrik added leaning his body forward.

“And they said they indeed received tips a few years ago about a woman with her description, they were sent some low resolution pictures. But they paid no mind because she'd been declared dead and there wasn't enough proof.”

“Who gave those tips, do they know?” Rodrik enquired.

“It was just some lowly crook. When they interrogated him, the guy claimed to have had the pictures for over a couple of years and that he was being paid to keep it quiet. The money stopped coming, so he reported it.”

“Is there a money trail?”

“No, they had a pick up location where they dropped a bag with cash. He never saw who did, he only knew when and where to find it. They found cash in his apartment, so he wasn't lying about being paid.”

He nodded slowly, “And you have these pictures?”

Brynden hummed, “I had to pull some strings, to get them here unnoticed and fast.” dropping a couple of pictures, “I also had our tech guy run it through the system along with the sketch Ned described. Its a match. Its her Rodrik, there is no doubt now that its her.”

Rodrik had prepared for this, but it still came as a surprise to actually realize this woman had been alive and planning revenge for years. Well apparently things like this didn't just make corny daytime television.

“Oh, and the storage unit under Groff's name in Starfall... we found a few medical reports with her name on it. Cat was right, Ashara has had work done, its subtle, but it changes her face enough to give anyone pause, I wanted to discuss all this alone, since it would involve-- ”

“Ned's description of the woman, I get it.” Rodrik contemplated, they'd discussed the storage unit of course. There was so much more, Brynden interrupted his thoughts again, “Thats not all... they handed me Ned's drug test results after I finished the phone call. You'll need to read it, the doctor sent us notes on the drugs they found in his system after we matched them to some of the drugs we found in the Groff's office, his house, and in the discarded food at the house where Ned lived. By the looks of it this Groff has definitely dabbled with narcotics. Lethal narcotics.” He pointed at the pile of folders on the desk. He looked grimmer than usual.

Rodrik nodded and read the report, his heart started pounding. He looked up slowly, eyes wide with fear and stared at Brynden, “So...”

Brynden nodded grimly. “So, there is a strong chance if Ned doesn't remember soon, that he may not remember at all.”

Chapter End Notes
Sorry for the delay. and thanks for continuing to read this, really appreciate it. Also, C & C welcome!
Ned Stark sat in the room, unable to fall asleep. He tried, he did try, but it didn't work. Every time he heard even the tiniest noise, he would sit straight up, breathing hard and scanning wildly. It didn't matter that he was far away from Groff or Ashara, when the memory of being drugged was crystal clear in his mind, the anxiety set in, and then all he could do was hope that it passes. He hadn't relaxed all night last night, and he kept thinking about what else they may have done to him that he wasn't aware of.

He had a terrible night, and he'd woken up with barely an hour of sleep, tired. He had gotten through the half of the day, the best as he could. But after lunch, Catelyn had all but ordered him to go take a nap when his head kept drooping on her shoulder when they were watching a movie with the children. He'd obeyed her trying to hide the amusement when she said, “Ned, go to your room!” trying her best not to sound like she did whenever she admonished Robb. Things were still a bit strained between them. After the phone call with Rodrik the day before, things had gotten quite grim. He found himself retracing everyday he'd lived in Creekwood, now realizing everything he'd overlooked. He was naive to give them the benefit or the doubt, especially Ashara. He was living with her, he trusted her and she had used him. He felt anger boil up within him at the thought, and he kept thinking of the mess he would have gotten into if he gave into her 'charm' like she'd wanted him to. He had felt guilty then that he couldn't and didn't love her. Now he felt relief that he didn't, he had a beautiful, brave wife and perfect children. And if he had fallen for Ashara, it would have made living this life, his true life impossible.

He found himself watching Catelyn and the children all day yesterday, he hadn't been able to speak to her clearly again. What would have happened if he'd believed Ashara's lies? He didn't think he could love her, nevertheless, after all she'd done for him, he would feel obligated to stay with her. And he would miss out on living with his true family, he'd thought standing silently in the corner as he watched them play together. _They've become everything to me_, he'd thought watching them in turn and his eyes had lingered on Catelyn the longest. Yet, he'd looked away when she met his gaze. He felt like he just couldn't face her, she was brave, she wasn't giving up, yet she kept getting hurt in all this. And he never would give up for her sake and for the sake of their children, but it seemed like every time he took a step forward, he was faced with obstacles that threatened to take him back to the start. And every time he tried not to, he ended up hurting Catelyn. He wished he could've found them sooner, that he'd looked for clues sooner. He'd been at home resting, believing Ashara and Groff, while Catelyn suffered, burdened everything he'd left behind. And now the one hope of recovering his memories was slipping away slowly, he knew the test results weren't in yet. Nonetheless, dread was seeping within him, threatening to overwhelm him. The odds were already against him, and he was anxious for things to come. All he wished to do is keep his family safe and happy. He wanted to keep Catelyn happy, he wanted to take care of her. But, he didn't know how anymore, he wanted to be the man he was, the man she loved. And he tried not to think of what would happen to what they'd built these few weeks, if he couldn't be just that. When he looked at Catelyn's face yesterday, her beautiful face that held a mixture of fear, pain and determination, he realized how much he could lose if he never recovered from this. She had promised to stay, to help him, and he believed every word, but it broke his heart to see she would willingly give her life taking care of the man who was no longer who he used to be.

So, not knowing how to explain the turmoil, he'd gone quiet yesterday. He didn't speak much to the kids, he couldn't get his mind off Creekwood, of the fears, anxieties and guilt that swirled within
him, burning him from inside out like slow poison. Catelyn had given him his space, he'd appreciated that. She'd taken care of the children, made excuses for him, so they wouldn't think less of him. And before going to sleep, she looked at him with fear and longing and he'd felt guilt and shame for being so aloof and leaving her to take care of everything, yet again. I don't deserve her, he'd thought. He'd forced himself to give her a smile, before he all but fled to his room, alone with his thoughts. And now, he tried not to barge into her room and apologize for his behaviour, he wished he could take her in his arms and promise her everything. But, what good would a promise do, if he never recovered?

He was angry and terrified about what had been done to him, and ever more afraid of what his drug test results would bring. He would have therapy sessions with Walys everyday to remember, but if they'd drugged him to hinder his brain from remembering anything, he wasn't sure if he could do anything about that. I will still try, though. I won't stop trying. He thought firmly. I know. You promised me remember? He heard Catelyn's sweet voice from yesterday. She'd looked up at him with her big blue eyes, full of fear, yet her expression remained determined and brave. And he hadn't been able to resist pulling her in his arms then, she'd trembled, but she hadn't cried.

He recalled what Nan told him when he had walked her to the front door yesterday. She had looked over at Catelyn and said, “She's brave, but she's stubborn. She won't ever tell you how much she went through all these months. We were all worried, Ned. But she was devastated, yet she stayed strong for the sake of your children. Take care of her.” The words had gone through his heart like an icy dagger, he felt guilty for bringing all this with him. He had followed her gaze, looking at Catelyn, “I will.” He'd whispered. Yet when she needed him yesterday, he'd taken the coward's way out. So he sat silently, sulking in his thoughts. Giving up on the idea of sleep, he walked out in the kitchen. Catelyn was there making coffee, she looked up at him and smiled, his heart gave a familiar jump at her sight. God I wish...I wish so many things, he thought desolately.

He knit his brows together in confusion when he took in her outfit, she was dressed for work in the evening, she looked stunning. Before he could voice his confusion though, she'd read his thoughts.

"I went to work for a couple of hours. Nan's upstairs with the kids watching the sequel to that movie. We did it, we finally found a movie all three children enjoy.” She said laughing and he joined in. Their kids had completely different tastes, and it was tough to pick a movie they all liked. But, finally they'd found one today that each one was excited to watch. Including Arya, surprisingly; the little one couldn't sit still for a minute, but she'd watched the movie without a word with big doe eyes, at least she had until he left. He looked up at Catelyn, everything he wished to say stuck in his throat.

"Did you sleep, Ned? You look tired." She said concerned.

"A little. How was work?" He changed the subject, he truly didn't wish to think of the anxiety now after Catelyn's sight had subsided it finally.

“Jon Arryn called me a while ago. He said he'd drop by, he wants to see you.” Catelyn said looking up from her mug.

Ned felt a surge of anticipation, followed by guilt that he only knew this man by his name. Yet he'd made sure he got Ned home safe. Catelyn told him one day about him. Jon was like a father to him, he was also his mentor, and a good family friend. He'd helped him tremendously when his own father died. He felt afraid that he'd come off as a disappointment to yet another person in his life.

“He knows, Ned. He'll understand.” He looked up to see Catelyn regarding him closely. He found himself smiling at how she easily read him like a book, and she returned it. Yet, he'd been a close book in Creekwood, Ashara was thoroughly disappointed by his nature. Now he knew why, she wanted bloody information so she knew how to trap me.... He looked up to see Catelyn's smile had
faded, he could only imagine what his face looked like. Before he could say anything, they heard the intercom. Catelyn walked up to get the door, and he waited in the living room. He heard a familiar deep solemn voice greet Catelyn, in his mind he heard a snippet of a memory, *You have to be strong, Ned. Lya and Ben are too young, they need you. You are all they have now.*

*How do I do this, Jon? How do I take care of all this? It wasn't meant to be mine.* He heard his own insecure tone, feeling the headache set in. *No, but it is your responsibility now. It will take some time, but you will get through this. And I'm here, whenever you need me.* The voice echoed out, leaving him with a pounding head ache.

He looked up and saw a tall thin man walk in the living room, he was dressed in a work suit, and he looked at Ned like he'd found his long lost son. He felt his chest constrict at the sight, he realized he was truly glad to see this man. Before Ned opened his mouth Jon walked over and hugged him.

“How are you, Ned?” He asked pulling back, his voice trembling slightly.

Ned smiled, “Good, thanks. And thank you for sending the plane for me.”

He nodded at that, giving him a small smile. “You're doing well?” Ned asked.

“I'm well enough,” He answered solemnly.

“How is Lysa doing?” Catelyn asked.

“She's well too. She's still in Riverrun... And I haven't spoken to her about this, its not my place.” Jon told her carefully.

Catelyn looked at him steadily, “You're her husband. You would have every right. But, I'm glad you didn't. I haven’t either. Its not news I can give by calling her.” Ned could see she was holding back something, but Jon asked no further, and Ned felt as though they both silently knew what it is Catelyn was hiding about her sister. She gave him a look that said, "I'll explain later" and he nodded in assent. Catelyn offered him refreshments, but he declined politely.

"I presume Rodrik has informed you about what is going on?" She asked Jon, now as they all sat down in the living room.

"He told me what I needed to know. In fact, since people know I'm in Winter Town, he asked that I don't spent too much time here to avoid suspicion." Jon looked at Ned, "The only times I've visited your home is when you were here, or your father was. It would strike suspicious if anybody saw me come down here now."

Catelyn sighed, "Yes, he told us to be careful as well. Apparently, since I've been working from home a lot, rumours are going around. And we want minimum attention until we announce Ned's return, which will be soon." Ned felt trepidation remembering that conversation from a week ago. They knew, they would have to announce it some time, but it still terrified him. Benjen and Catelyn assured him they would prepare him for the day they held the press conference and he was truly glad, because he didn't think he could survive it by himself.

"If there is anything you need my help with, don't hesitate to ask." Jon's voice startled him, he looked up to see he was speaking to them both.

"Thank you, we appreciate it." Ned answered formally.

They talked very less, their conversation was filled with long periods of comfortable silence. He quite liked that, he only felt that way while speaking with Catelyn. He knew the man was affected by
him being alive and safe, Catelyn had told him he'd lost both of his sons, Ned could imagine what he was feeling right now. After a couple of hours, he moved to leave, saying he needed to be in Vale tonight, and yet again politely declining their offer to stay for dinner.

"I'm here for you, Ned. And I will help in any way I can. I want you to know that" He'd said sincerely, and Ned was touched by the fatherly affection he spoke with. After a while when they were having dinner, they discussed about it with Lyanna and Benjen there.

“He’s been like a father to all of us, but you more so. You were an intern at his firm, before the whole thing happened with Brandon and Ashara. In fact, I remember you didn't want to leave. He was a brilliant mentor to you.” Benjen answered him.

He realized Catelyn had been quiet all through dinner. After his siblings left and the children were all abed, she came downstairs and sat on the couch with a glass of wine in her hand. She looked so vulnerable, he walked over behind her. And almost involuntarily his hands found her shoulders, loosening the knots formed there, she was so tense. She looked up gasping for a second, when she saw him she sighed and smiled lazily at him. His heart jumped again at the sight.

“Rodrik just called, he's coming over tomorrow with Brynden and Jory.” she said lazily, he nodded. He was anxious about that, but he didn't care about any of that in the moment. He knew what he wanted to say, “Catelyn.....I'm sorry.” She looked up surprised. He continued, “I was.....after the phone call with Rodrik, I went back to that dark time in Creekwood. I just, I needed some time.”

“I know, Ned. I understand.” She said, and he saw nothing but truth in her eyes.

“And we.....you...I mean.....” he sputtered, chiding himself in his mind for not speaking clearly when she got up, stood beside him and kissed his cheek. “We're good, Ned.” she whispered.

He nodded again, taking the empty glass from her hand “I'll take care of it, you go get some sleep”. He knew she was holding back, she'd given him his space, now it was his turn. He moved away, “Good night, Catelyn.” She gave him a slight smile, “Good night, Ned,” and walked away.

He sighed loudly, he knew he should walk up to her, pull her in his arms, kiss her breathless, tell her he would fix everything. But, he didn't want to promise something he couldn't give. He would try his best to remember, and he would try his best to keep her happy. And she understood when he needed his space, the least he could do was reciprocate that. But, he hoped desperately that they would work towards each other and not move away from each other. He wished she would give him a chance, even when he knew he'd caused nothing but pain to her. Yet he knew if she wished to leave, to make a different life, he wouldn't stop her. She deserved happiness, she deserved to be held, cherished, to be loved by the man she wanted. But, he wished so much that he could be that man again....... He wished.....

*I want to take care of you Catelyn, please let me take care of you,* he thought desperately, *I....* his thoughts trailed off not daring to name that which he knew he couldn't ignore anymore. He also knew he would let her go, if that is what she wished. But he wouldn't have the strength to go on if he truly admitted to himself just how much he'd come to care for her. Standing alone in the darkness in the kitchen, Ned Stark slowly made his way towards his lonely room and wished desperately that he could fix this.

----------------------------------------------------------------------

Rodrik walked into his office, “Thank you, Hal. I'll take it from here.”
There were piles of folders on his desk already. His job had been sidetracked after this whole mess. Jory and Hal were helping as much as they could, but he knew he needed to resume as soon as possible. Brynden sat down on the chair across from him. Jory came over soon, they hadn't updated him about the progress yet. He'd called Catelyn the night before and informed her they would come over tonight. He knew they couldn't delay announcing Ned's return anymore, rumours were already flying around and he knew there was a chance Ashara and Groff would take advantage of that. They needed to act quickly and prepare an official cover story for this. Suddenly he felt very tired, they'd been in Creekwood, hurled by information for a whole day, before flying down to Trident where they tried to organize it all. And then they flew down here, where he was greeted by a mountain of documents. *I'm too old for this*, he thought sighing and sitting down in his chair.

“Coffee?” Rodrik asked, Jory nodded.

“After that flight? Yes, please.” Brynden answered.

After Rodrik's secretary got their coffees, he explained the drug test reports to Jory. “The two of them can't catch a break. can they.” Jory said still staring at the report.

Brynden shook his head. “I just hope he doesn't break her heart. If it ever comes to pass.” Before Rodrik could protest he added, “Not on purpose. He's not that kind of a man, but inadvertently. If there comes a day when he still doesn’t remember his past, and cannot go back to his old life as he thought.”

Rodrik nodded, he understood what Brynden was trying to say. He didn't wish it for either of them, they'd made a good life. He hoped they could find that happiness again.

“You know, I don't think we need to worry about that” They both turned to look at Jory. He added, “I've been to dinner at their place several times in the last few weeks. I saw them together and although there was a distance there, it was like not much had changed between them. To be precise, the way he looked at her hadn't truly changed. And the few times I was there, whenever they spoke to each other, they were completely oblivious to the fact that the rest of us were still there, it was like they were in their own little world. Just like old times!”

Rodrik smiled. Ned and Catelyn had a reputation of being positively sappy, even around people. They weren't for public displays of affection, yet every time they were together in public just talking or smiling at each other it felt like witnessing something intimate.

Jory continued, “And I saw the way Ned looked at Catelyn, he probably doesn't realize it yet, he can be slow sometimes, but give it time. So, Brynden, I don't think you have to worry about him not wanting to stay around. He couldn't stop being charmed by her even when she was with his brother, and I don't think this is going to stop him....Brynden?”

Brynden's eyes were trained on Groff's picture on the desk. “I'm sorry. I...” he trailed off, “Get me a red marker,” he said absently. Jory brought him one and he started drawing on it with the red marker.

"Is this really the right time, for that?” Rodrik asked.

When he didn't answer, Jory leaned towards him, "Rodrik, how exhausted is he?” Rodrik shook his head.

"Will you too shut up, for one second.” Brynden grumbled, never taking his eyes off the picture.

“Brynden, what is going on?” Rodrik demanded.

Brynden picked up the picture, “How did we not see this before? I knew the name 'Groff' seemed
familiar.” he said, almost to himself.

“What is it?” Rodrik asked again.

“When the Targaryan empire fell, they put the blame on Arthur Dayne and Jon Connington in order to save their bacon. That didn't work of course, they were buried too deep, but it made them the primary suspects nonetheless, and bought the Targaryens some time to build a story. We found Arthur Dayne - who died on the way to prison. Eventually they met their downfall and the case was closed.”

Brynden said to him and Jory, who was just staring at him, his mouth agape in confusion. Rodrik voiced his thoughts, “Yes, I know that. We were on that case together remember? We never bothered to look for Connington after we realized he was framed. What is your point?”

Brynden sighed and turned the picture for both of them to see, now with red marker around his face as a beard. Rodrik gasped, “Fuckin' hell. That sneaky son-of-a-bitch.”

Brynden replied, “After over a decade seems like we found Jon Connington, after all.”

Catelyn watched Nan drive the kids for another day out with both Robb and Jon bouncing in their seat. Rodrik had called her the night before informing her that Jory, him and her uncle were coming over today to discuss where everything stood. His tone made her realize it would be better if the children didn’t remain for whatever it was he wished to talk to them about. She hated the secrecy, and she hated not being able to take the children out even more. Nan had offered to, knowing Catelyn wouldn't concentrate on their discussion with the children around, and she was grateful for that. She wished they could join them, it had been so long since they had a family outing. This facade would lift off in a week or so when they would announce Ned was back. Benjen, Luwin and Vayon were planning to come down in a few days, and she planned on speaking with them about the press conference in person.

She and Ned were anxious and distracted all day. They had been a bit distantly the last couple of days, he was quieter after he spoke of how he trusted Ashara. And Catelyn had tried not to let it get to her, it didn’t work though. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night he spoke to her and the sincerity in his eyes made her feel better. She knew he cared, she just couldn’t help her worries. She gave him his space, last night she saw Rodrik's sedan and buzzed them in, opening the door slightly. She heard Ned sigh, he was in the living room looking at her with big puppy eyes, he still looked like biding time until his impending doom, and it broke her heart. She could see various emotions in his eyes, fear, anxiety, hope and she walked up to him. Before she could ask him anything, he kissed her. She gasped at first, but relaxed into it soon enough. She could never get enough of this, even if there was a novelty, a longing and uncertainty that lingered on his lips as he deepened it in an attempt to seek solace in her arms and she kissed him back firmly, trying to say what she couldn't with words.

“erhm.” She pulled back at the sound, looking at the door to see her uncle looking at them in amusement. She smiled widely and ran into his arms, “Uncle!” and he laughed and hugged her tightly drawing her off her feet for a few moments “Little Cat!”. Her uncle was a good bit taller than her, his hair was mostly grey now and he always kept a light stubble.

When she pulled back, he asked, “Have you given him time to recover at all? Or did you drag him to
bed the moment he stepped in the door?"

She rolled her eyes, trying to mask that tiny pang of longing that statement gave her. “Oh god, are you going to make lewd comments all evening? Tell me now so I can get a drink,” she groaned.

He looked at her with mock-severity, “Almost exclusively.” She laughed genuinely at that. Her uncle had tortured Ned and herself with increasingly lewd jokes over the years, especially after they had three children before their eighth anniversary. It had gotten to a point where she threatened to set up an innuendo jar whenever he came over, so they'd have enough money to send their kids to a good college. Inevitably he'd answered, well, at the rate you two are going at it, you'll have three more until I visit next time.

That was a couple of months before Ned..... she stopped her trail of thought and turned around to see Ned chatting with Jory and Rodrik who had walked in while she was greeting her uncle. “Ned, this is my uncle Brynden Tully.” She gave her uncle a stare that clearly said 'behave'. And he crossed his heart with a decidedly serious expression, making her smile. Ned walked up and shook his hand, “Hi, so you're the Blackfish?”

“More like BIG fish now, eh?” Rodrik quipped from the living room. She grinned at her uncle, he wasn’t as thin as he used to be even if he remained quite athletic and handsome. He just rolled is eyes, “Don't mind him. He's just jealous, because I still get all the girls.” Rodrik rolled his eyes and muttered, "Show off."

They all had dinner, and the conversation stayed light and witty. She was glad that they'd lightened the mood, but she could feel something grimmer was lurking behind the corner. And she wasn't looking forward to it. Then they slowly moved to the living room and a heaviness settled in as they realized what they needed to do. Rodrik and Jory pulled out all the documents and her uncle pulled her aside in the study to talk.

“How is he doing, really?” he asked.

She sighed, she knew this was coming. From the moment Ned came back, her uncle had started checking in more than he did, when Ned had been missing. She had to order him to stop being concerned, but she knew why. “He's doing better. He...he's a bit frustrated of not recalling much, but he's more relaxed. And Dr. Walys is optimistic that he'll remember.” She added the last part as a reassurance to herself as well. He was too hard on himself, and it hurt her to see him tearing himself apart to recall something. And she'd started fearing the worse herself. He was ever so thoughtful with her and the children, but she was afraid if he didn't remember her, he would never love....-

“Cat.” she was startled out by her uncle's voice and his hands steadying her. “Are you happy? Rodrik said Ned didn’t have any...relationship with that woman-”

“-and he was right. I trust Ned, uncle.” She looked at him steadily.

Brynden scoffed, “That’s what Rodrik said.”

“And you didn’t believe him?” Catelyn raised her eyebrows.

“Do you blame me, little Cat? After what Ned's arsehole brother did to you with the same little tramp?” Brynden's eyes darkened. She wished he would let it go. Brandon was gone, and he didn't deserve to die so soon. And he had gone through his share of pain and terrible times before he died. He had hurt her once, shamed her, but it was way in the past now and it didn't bother her anymore. She had let it go for she never really loved him. And even though they could all do without the scandal that story brought with it, it got her close to Ned. And that she would never regret.
“...Ned is not Brandon.” she replied firmly.

Brynden snorted, “Rodrik said that too. I worry for you, Cat. I just want you to be happy.”

She smiled and looked down. She understood where he was coming from, but she trusted Ned when he said he didn’t have any relationship with Ashara. *But what if he loved her and never acted on it?* She shook that thought off.

“We should talk to Hoster.” She looked up at that. She didn't want to worry her father, he could get really over protective of her. And she knew he was ignoring his health and working too hard. She asked Edmure to keep a close eye on him and to call her if he tried too hard.

“No.” She held her hand up when her uncle started to protest. “Not yet, not while Petyr is still in Riverrun.” They’d realized soon enough that Petyr, the man she’d considered like her brother only truly cared about himself. First he’d taken advantage of Lysa's loneliness, pretending to be a friend and confidante, then he used her to get information about Catelyn's life, their father and Jon Arryn's business to boost the ratings of his trashy magazine. And she had to agree with Ned, the man had an obsession with her for whatever reason. He'd blatantly tried to make passes at her over the years, if they ever bumped into each other or in business parties whenever Ned was far away speaking to a client or a executive, and posted them in his magazine highlighting with lewd titles. She knew her husband had come close to strangling the man several times, she knew she wanted to. And when Ned went missing, he had the nerve to send her a few bouquets over the last few months expressing condolences and offering a "shoulder to cry on". She'd thrown them in the trash, knowing she couldn't just light them on fire or she'd attract attention. And he was not naive, he was cunning and had a way of finding out news when he wanted to. If she told her father on the phone, or spoke to Lysa, or anyone in Riverrun for that matter, she knew Petyr would find out. And the last thing they needed was to show up on the cover page of 'The Mockingbird.'

“So it isn’t just about his health.” Brynden said, she knew he was thinking along the same lines.

“No, although I confess it is a major part of it. If we tell him now, and even Petyr doesn't manage to find out, he will worry for me and will want to see me. And after his ulcer surgery, the doctor asked us to minimize anything that may cause him stress.” Catelyn said sadly, thinking about it. About a year ago, Edmure had called her sounding frantic and worried after they had to rush her father in the emergency room when he was found passed out in his office. She had rushed down to Riverrun to see him, the doctors had to do an emergency surgery to stop his ulcer from bleeding. He’d recovered eventually, but was on a strict diet for the longest time and excessive worrying still caused him pain. The last thing she wished to do is make him feel like he needed to worry about her well being, it had been tough enough on him already when Ned had gone missing. Brynden had been so close to locking the man in his own home when he didn’t cease his insistence to fly down to Winter Town to see Catelyn. But, she didn't want to keep it from him for long, either.

“I have a plan of how to tell him. I'll speak with Benjen, he can surely bring up a business related issue that will need the Tullys and Starks to discuss in the same room. And nobody will suspect anything, if we discuss it here. We haven't seen each other in a while, and the children miss him too. I'll tell him when he gets here.”

Brynden nodded, “Spoken like true business woman.” Catelyn looked at him sadly, he added, “Oh I say it proudly, little Cat. We're all proud of how you handled everything in Ned’s absence.”

Catelyn smiled, “Thank you.”

Brynden looked over to the living room to see Jory, Rodrik and Ned talking about something. “Is he treating you well, little Cat?” he asked softly.
“Did you not see us when you walked in?” Catelyn laughed. But, it died down as she beheld his face. He looked sad, and remarkably he reminded her of her father when he couldn't fix Catelyn's troubles for her. Brynden looked down at her helpless, as if he wished to fix this, but didn't know how to.

“He does, uncle. Even when he doesn't remember, he's the epitome of chivalry, trust me.” she answered, in an attempt to lighten his mood.

“That’s...not what I mean. Does he remember...” loving you yet? He didn't say the last part, yet she heard it all the same.

Catelyn swallowed, trying to keep tears at bay. “Not yet. But, he wants to. He's trying to. And that is good enough.”

Brynden changed the subject, sensing her distress. "I wish the kids were around, haven't seen them in a while. But, I'm glad you sent them away for the day. I know you'd would tear yourself apart by trying to be there for Ned and take care of them." She frowned, but she knew it to be true. He continued, “We do have many leads, we should join the rest and discuss.” She nodded and they went back to the living room. She settled next to Ned who smiled at her and pulled her close. I think he loves me, I don't know if he fell in love with Ashara, but I think...some part of him still loves me . Then why couldn't he remember anything about her? Maybe he was just relieved and relaxed around her because she was supposed to be his wife, the mother of his children...Maybe he was just trying feel comfortable for her sake, no..

“Catelyn, are you alright?” he asked, jolting her back to present. She nodded and smiled, focus Tully! Its not the time to mope about your friggin’ love life, she admonished herself.

“So..what have you found so far?” she asked.

Her uncle gave Cassel a look and he took the cue to speak. “We had sources confirm it is truly Ashara Dayne. And you were right, she had some work done, we found some medical reports.” He handed her the reports and low resolution pictures.

“That’s her.” Ned clenched his jaw looking at the pictures.

“Oh god. I cant believe this. She truly is doing this, I never thought she could be this wicked.” Catelyn sighed.

“And intelligent.” Brynden said, “She planted all the evidence in the room for us to find, she must've known Rodrik would send me. I was on my way here to beat the shit out of him before calling Hoster to get out of that damn alliance. But thank god, you called and clarified everything or she would get what she wanted. Chaos and disruption in both our families.” He shook his head.

“This is all premeditated.” Catelyn accused, feeling anger boiling within her now.

Brynden nodded and continued, “There was very little evidence to work with in the town, they were very thorough. That made us conclude they’ve had more help than we expected. We saw them head south first, their trajectory all pointed to a couple of eastern harbours. I've send officers over to investigate.”

“We can't let her get away, not after what she did to Ned,” Catelyn said fervently, her voice breaking in the end.

“We won't, little Cat. Trust me, we'll find them from the deepest pit of hell, if need be,” her uncle soothed her.
Ned was still beside her still looking at Ashara's picture. His eyes were unfocused and that worried her, “Ned, are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” He whispered weakly placing the picture on the table. “I’m just a bit dizzy.”

“I’ll get you some water.” Jory said all but running into the kitchen and coming back with a glass of water. She saw he watched Ned closely, after he sat down. She looked over at Rodrik who had the oddest expression on his face, he looked desolate almost apologetic and steadfastly refused to meet her eyes. There is something they are not telling us.

Before she could voice her thoughts, Brynden came back placed a picture on the table, “My buddy from narcotics found someone with Groff’s description.” He said handing the picture over to Ned who confirmed it was him, the man had a stern face, he was completely bald with icy blue eyes and clean shaven. Something about the man made Catelyn uneasy, like he had a dark history.

“He didn’t look that scary when I met him, you know. He was very good at putting on a gentle, caring facade.” Ned whispered, and in spite of the severity of the moment, Catelyn felt her heart jump a bit at the realization that her husband was still quite an expert at reading her face. And he smiled one of his natural smiles at her, and her heart skipped a beat. He added, “Husband 101,” and flashed a crooked grin. “I’m impressed.” Catelyn couldn’t help but laugh.

“Do you want us to leave you two alone for a while? We can come back later.” Brynden retorted.

Ned moved away embarrassed and Catelyn cursed her Tully trait as she felt her cheeks burn.

“Where were we? Yes, I said at least we know who Groff truly is now. Even if he changed his identity.” Jory said and Catelyn gave him a grateful smile.

“What do you mean, who he truly is?” Ned asked.

“That my lad, is Jon Connington.” Brynden sighed.

Catelyn gasped. “The Jon Connington. The man behind the Targaryan murders? Didn’t he disappear when you found Arthur Dayne?” She knew about it. Arthur Dayne had sent a man to threaten Lyanna to abort Jon and was ready to murder her if she refused. With the help of Brynden and Rodrik they’d caught the man and found out who was behind it. It was also about the time the Targaryan industries’ scandals were out, the murders they’d committed to shut up everyone who dared to speak against how hazardous their practices were. And Jon Connington, their CEO, was claimed to be the master mind behind it all, including the contract to kill Lyanna. And the Starks had taken a fight against them, filing a lawsuit. And everyone who was affected by the Targaryans and hiding in the shadows had come forth to join the them in the fight. Eventually the Industries met their downfall and it was clear they’d framed Connington, he was off the hook. But, he was in the wind by then and they couldn’t find him until now.

“It is. And it seems he has a new hobby. No one except the five of us knows about this. And it must remain that way. We need them to think we don’t have a clue who they are. Too late for Ashara though, he probably must have figured out we’d get to the storage box. But nevertheless, he’s the major suspect.” Brynden answered.

"But, what did he have against Ned?" she gasped realizing the answer just as she asked the question. "We filed a lawsuit against them. We were the first to stand up against the Targaryans. We're the reason, he lost everything." She said.

"We thought that was the motive, ourselves. And the man has unparalleled resources, it won't be
easy to track him down. But, we intend to this time around.” Rodrik reassured her.

"I checked for the place for voice bugs when I first came in. We're not being monitored or heard. And I suggest you don't allow anyone in, for a while. Well, except for Nan, Lya and Ben. And be careful what you speak even around them, in case they are ever bugged unknowingly. Now that we knew its Connington, we know he'll do everything he can to get eyes and ears in here and in the office. I've spoken to Brienne about security, she's on it as we speak. I've already secured the phone lines. And I'll come over to check the place every once in a while, to make sure we're secure. And there is a security detail a couple of miles away at all times, just in case." Jory informed them. How did we get here? she thought desolately. She wished it was over soon. It was just one more added worry for them.

“And we intend to keep his identity as Groff, who is a drug dealer from Braavos. And we intend to speak of him as such, to avoid slip ups. We had a tip from a guy who told us about him and we're using it as a viable lead. And we'll keep going as if we believed him, so they won't catch on.” Rodrik added. And they all agreed to to plan.

“Did you get the drug test results yet?” Ned spoke up in a bit, his voice was still weak and he'd been quiet all this time. It worried her, she knew he hadn't slept well in the last couple of days. I wish I could help him fix this, she thought, before focusing on Rodrik to hear his answer.

Rodrik and Brynden exchanged odd looks, “We did, and I'm afraid its not good news.” Rodrik answered. Catelyn went cold at the tone and grasped Ned's hand.

“Tell us.” Ned demanded silently, but his voice was cold as ice.

“Groff was dabbling with lethal narcotics. Drugs that are illegal in most states, we think he was a professional dealer. Some of these cannot be given orally. They need to be administered directly into your body, through a syringe.” Rodrik stopped briefly and Catelyn was already feeling numb, but her focus was on Ned, she didn't take her eyes off him for a minute and the shadow that came over his face was killing her. He was dosed directly several times. “And the drugs found in Ned's body were in fact extremely strong and illegal. It wasn’t clear before because, the only side effects are anxiety, mood swings, nausea or drowsiness in extreme cases.”

She gasped then, and saw the realization register on Ned's face. He was dizzy just a while ago, it was still affecting him. Even after being away from the drugs for so long.

Jory continued, “These drugs are untraceable yet lethal and that’s why they are illegal. However, the traces in Ned's blood were lower than we expected. It is possible their effect will...fade over time.”

Ned asked dully, “But, you don't know for sure?”

Jory looked at him sadly, “I'm afraid not. But, they are conducting more tests to figure that out...”

She was staring at Ned, now his hands trembling in her own and his jaw clenched tightly. She was terrified of what they were saying but she was more afraid of Ned's reaction. He was too quiet to ask anything, without taking her eyes off him, she asked, “Ned was dosed several times. What does it mean?” grateful that her voice didn't shake in her current condition.

Rodrik took a moment and sighed, “It...it means if Ned doesn't remember in the next few weeks, there is a strong chance he won't remember at all.”

Catelyn closed her eyes, that statement went through her heart like a knife. Few weeks, they only had few weeks. If he didn't remember in those weeks...he....she looked down at their hands. She had
no words for anyone, her whole world collapsed again. She forced herself to look at Rodrik, “Is there an antidote? Or a cure for these drugs? Anything?” Rodrik shook his head, “I'm afraid not. But we informed Walys, he has a treatment to accelerate the chances of Ned's recovery, he's still optimistic. So there is still hope.”

Ned laughed bitterly, “Hope....” He said dully and her heart broke for him. She looked at him and he returned her gaze, his eyes full of remorse and despair.

“We should go. We can talk about this some other time, can't we?” Jory asked Rodrik and Brynden who nodded and moved to leave. Catelyn was still rooted where she was unable to take her gaze of Ned. She forced herself to walk up to the front door to thank them for coming over. Her uncle assured her he would come back soon to talk after. She went back to sit with Ned, who still was still looking desolate.

“I'm so sorry, Catelyn. I never thought-”

“Its not your fault, Ned. You didn't do this. I don't blame you.” Catelyn couldn't stand to look at the pain in his eyes.

“God, Cat.” Ned whispered before embracing her tightly, he pressed his face in her neck as he used to when he sought comfort. And the idea of him never remembering their life together brought tears to her eyes. We will get through this, she thought trying to find a tiny shred of hope.

“I'm afraid, Catelyn...” Ned whispered into her neck grabbing on tightly to her, as if his life depended on it.

And she understood it all too well. She knew he cared for her, but she knew what it felt to be loved by him to know he didn't now, as much as it hurt her to think it. The future suddenly seemed daunting and uncertain. And the fears she'd hidden away, crawled up to the surface, and overwhelmed her. It was a possibility that her husband could never remember. And perhaps he would never love her as he once did. She would love him all the same, but would that be enough for Ned? She knew he couldn't live a lie, and neither would she want him to. What if one day he woke up and realized he couldn't spend anymore time with the woman he was supposed to love, but didn't. Whatever remained of her heart crumbled at that thought, and she felt her sense of foreboding grow stronger. They would find a way forward, if he never remembered their life together. But, Catelyn didn't think she could cope if he never loved her again.

“So am I.” she whispered back.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! C & C Welcome! :)
An Unexpected Turn

Chapter Summary

So sorry for the loooong delay. Life distracted me! But, I promise I'll do my best to post sooner next time! :) Thanks for being patient, folks!

And just a warning, it gets a bit emotionally and mentally intense towards the end. Its not so bad, but if you get overwhelmed very very easily (like I do :P) you may want to stop reading after "he opened the door" and restart reading from the third last paragraph. You won't miss very much, it will be explained briefly in the next chapter.

“Daddy!” Catelyn gasped, wrapping her father in a tight hug. Tears filled her eyes, she hadn’t seen him in months. The last time was during their visit to Riverrun in the fall, before Ned had gone missing and while her father was still recovering from the surgery.

“Little Cat,” he whispered, pulling back. “How are you, my girl?”

“I'm fine, daddy. You look good.” She said, wiping her tears, scanning him for any signs of exhaustion or distress. He'd gained most of his weight back; he had been sickly thin for months after his surgery. His hair was mostly gray now, and he looked much older that fifty eight, but he looked healthier and she was relieved to see that.

He rolled his eyes at her inspection, “I keep telling you, I'm fine. You, Edmure and Brynden need to stop treating me like a child-” she noted he didn't say Lysa. She knew it bothered him, but Lysa's relationship with her family had loosened over the years and they'd all accepted it as a part of her nature. Before she could say anything he continued, his expression changing “-speaking of....where are my grandchildren? I've brought presents.” He finished pointing at the two giant bags sitting on the threshold.

Catelyn sighed, “You have to stop bringing them so many toys, daddy. They have enough. They're upstairs, I'm afraid I forgot to tell them about your message this morning. So it will be a great surprise for them. I'm glad you you could make it, there is something important you need to know.”

He frowned at the change of tone, “Why did Ben ask me to come over so hastily? I thought we had a meeting at Stark, but he only said to come see you as soon as possible. Is everything-” he stopped mid-sentence, his eyes fixing on something behind her. She followed his gaze to see Ned standing a few paces away awkwardly. “-okay?” her father finished slowly, his face going paler than the grays streaking his hair.

“That is why. I couldn't tell you over the phone.” She said, and beckoned Ned forward with her gaze. Her husband, now an expert in reading her expressions promptly took the cue, formally walking towards her father with a hand outstretched, “Mr. Tully?” She hid a smile at the deja vu, the gesture was so similar to the first time he'd met her father. She couldn't help the grin when her father stared at her in confusion, while shaking Ned's hand. “Hoster.” he replied slowly, to correct him.

"Hoster, its nice to me-...see you.” She bit her lip at the hesitation in Ned's voice, she knew Ned was trying to say “meet”, and changed it last moment. Her father looked back at her with a mixture of
shock, confusion and numerous questions.

“Lets go see the children, first. I'm afraid this will take a while to explain.” He nodded dumbly and followed her upstairs to see her babies. Each one squealed at the sight of their grandfather, demanding attention and wanting to open the presents right away. She smiled at the sight, and after he promised he would play with them soon after he talked to their parents, they immediately got back to their new toys, while she walked downstairs with him.

Catelyn and Ned explained everything, she could see he was rapidly getting angry and overwhelmed, and to spare them his outburst he excused himself to get some fresh air and walked out in the backyard. She gave him a few moments for himself, she knew well enough not to play with the Tully temper. “He'll be alright.” she said to Ned, who appeared quite distressed by her father's reaction. "We're lucky, if it wasn't for the anger management classes he was forced to take after the surgery, he would probably burst into flames right here." She added lightly, yet Ned remained tense. She held his hand reassuringly, knowing he would take the blame on himself, "Its me he is mad at, Ned. Not you, and he won't stay that way for a long time.” He just looked at her, his grey eyes full of guilt and she just kissed him on top of the head. After some time when her father didn't return, she walked out to see him.

He stood at the far end of the property staring off into the distance at the view of the city past the moors. She stood beside him quietly, looking down. “Are you still mad at me?”

He turned to face her, his blue eyes blazing. “I'm furious! Why didn't you tell me? If you couldn't speak over the phone, you should have called me here sooner.”

“So you could worry about me? So you'd leave everything and get on the next plane to Winter Town? Ed told me you've been overwhelmed with work for a while, I didn't want to add to your burdens. And you've been too worried about me these last months-”

“-damn right, I have. I'm your father. Does he even know, how much you've gone through these months, Cat? You were taking care of everything he left behind, his children, his business, even his family all the while looking for him. And he was right there- a few hours away from Riverrun with no clue about any of it.” He waved his hand angrily towards the house before walking a few paces away from her.

“That is not fair, dad. How was this his fault? He didn't ask for it! And yes, he does know and he blames himself for everything. It wasn't his fault that he was held hostage and given a false identity while I took care of our children, our business and our family.” She answered firmly, emphasizing on ‘our’. And she could tell she was mirroring the same ferocity she saw in his own blue eyes. She forced herself to calm her temper, “Ned is blameless in all this, he's suffered just as much as I have. I know I should've told you sooner, I just didn't want to add to your troubles, I'm sorry, daddy.” she said trying to stay firm, yet her eyes watered anyway.

“It was because of Lysa and Petyr too, wasn't it?” He asked softly after a few moments of silence.

“Yes. I love Lysa, but she can't keep a secret, especially from Petyr. I know that from experience. She would tell Petyr and next thing you know Ned and I would be spread across every tabloid in the country. Besides, she hasn't really called me after we argued a few months ago over the same issue.” Her sister had called her once, she'd just received news of the detectives shutting the case down, and she'd tried to talk to Lysa about it, in an attempt to vent. Yet she'd been very nonchalant and had talked to Catelyn as if Ned were dead and she was wasting her time with the search. She'd rambled on about staying away from Petyr and alternated between saying resentful things to hurtful things. And she'd blatantly told Catelyn to move on and go find someone better looking, since 'she was so precious and everybody liked her better anyway'. Catelyn had lost her patience and been furious with
her, she'd never called her again after that. It hurt her to hear her sister act so indifferently to her life falling apart, but Catelyn pitied her too; Lysa was unhappy, those two miscarriages had hit her hard and made her bitter. Jon was a good man, and he cared for her, but their marriage was loveless.

“T'm afraid she doesn't know what it is to love a man in such a way, that you never stop believing in him. Even when the odds are against you, because contemplating the latter is just too unbearable.” She said, almost to herself, her eyes lingering back to where Ned was in the house.

“Cat, he was living with Ashara. Just because they weren't involved, doesn't mean he wasn't close with her.” Her father said, his face now laced with concern. And she couldn't hide her surprise at the question, she should've expected it. In truth she was dreading that very question. He didn't miss the change in her expression, “You've thought of it too, haven't you? Has he said anything to you, Cat? That woman had proved she would do whatever it takes to get her vengeance. And its not the first time she tried to woo someone you are with.”

Catelyn closed her eyes, feeling all her fears trying to cripple her, once more. She pushed them away firmly, “It doesn't matter. What matters is that he wants to be here, he wants to make this right. I trust him when he says that.”

“Does he love you?” he asked softly.

“He's trying, daddy, I promise, its enough.” She answered trying to hold her tears back as she recalled the memory from a few nights ago. Rodrik had informed them that Ned may never remember and they'd stayed on the couch for the longest time in silence. She'd walked in the room at night and the floodgates she'd tried to hold close these past weeks, had burst open. She'd wept bitterly in their lonely room for the man she loved with all her heart, dreading he would never feel the same way. She'd let herself to be weak for a few moments, to mourn the idea that he would never remember what they had before. She'd felt selfish for not thinking of how Ned must feel, he'd walked out in the backyard long before she went to her room. She knew there was nothing she could say that would help him, he needed time. Time to come to peace with the worst, just like she did. Yet she'd ached to sleep in his arms that night, to feel his presence around her, to gain strength by being wrapped in his strong embrace.

“Will it always be enough? Cat, I don't want you to be unhappy.” Her father wiped her tears with his thumbs, startled her out of her thoughts.

She bit her lip, she'd made her decision that night. “I can love him knowing he'll never love me the same again or love me at all. I won't leave him to deal with this alone, dad. I will be there for him, as long as he wants me to be. And if in the future, it isn't enough for him.....I'll have to let him go.” she shrugged, yet she bit her lip hard enough to draw blood so she wouldn't cry. But before she knew it, she was crying earnestly.

“Oh, Cat....” he pulled her into a hug.

After a few moments she heard him speak again. “He is treating you well though, right? Or should I go get my gun from the car?” he said in attempt to lighten the mood. And she remembered he'd said the same over a decade ago, when she'd convinced him that Ned would be a great husband to her. She'd known already that miraculously he'd won Hoster Tully over with whatever sorcery he possessed, she didn't quite believe it even then. If she asked how he ever managed it, Ned would smirk and say “I have my charms,” and she only assumed he meant magic, since her father immune to charms and was more stubborn about his opinions than Ned and herself put together.

She chuckled at the memory, in spite of her tears. “Yes. He's treating me well and taking care of me. And you don't have a gun. And before you can ask all the other questions, I assure you uncle
Brynden beat you to it.”

He chuckled, “I don't need to have the 'what are your intentions with my daughter' talk again with him, then.” She laughed.

When they went back, they were both in a good mood and that helped Ned relax. Her father stayed for dinner, she realized Ned was being quite courteous even with her and she wanted to laugh at that. Hoster spent time talking with Lya and Ben, he loved them dearly. She knew he'd only called them 'Ned's family' out of anger, Starks and Tullys had gotten closer over the years and after Rickard's demise, he'd treated Ben, Lya and Ned as his own family; and her heart was warmed by seeing that. After dinner, he had clapped Ned on his back and asked to talk to him alone for a bit. They seemed relaxed when they came back, so she didn't pry about it. She knew her father would worry for her well-being, but she was glad he didn't blame Ned for what he hadn't done. They'd walked out together talking before he left for Riverrun.

“Whatever happens, I will always be here for you. And whatever you decide to do, you have my full support. But I have one piece of advice. If what you fear does happen, find joy in your children, Cat. After Minisa died, you, Ed and Lysa kept me going. It may not fill the void completely, but it is quite enough and fulfilling, I promise you.” He whispered in her hair when she hugged him in farewell.

“I know. Thank you, daddy.” she whispered in his shirt. “And please don't be hard on uncle Brynden, I asked him not to tell you.” She said knowing that was the first thing her father would do once he got in the car.

He sighed, “I wish you couldn't read my mind so easily. Fine, I will try not to be mad. But I will sulk, at least for a few days.” he replied. She smiled at him “Fair enough,” she said and waited as his car drove away. She returned from the foyer afterwards, Ned had been upstairs, putting the children to bed. But, now he sat in the living room, staring into the crackling embers in the hearth. He smiled as she walked in and pulled her down to sit next to him.

“So, my father told me, he'll be there for us. And that the Tully-Stark alliance still stands.” she said, laughing softly and inadvertently laying her head on his chest, hearing the steady thrumming of his heart. Their relationship had been strained the past few days, yet they still remained physically comfortable around each other and she relished it. Her smile faded when she remembered their conversation with her father. No matter how much she told herself she was over thinking, she couldn't forget Ned's look of utter betrayal, when he learned what Ashara had done to him. She closed her eyes tightly against the memories.

She must have drifted off for a while, because when she opened her eyes, his breathing had gone harsh, his heartbeat was pounding in her ear, his temperature had gone way up. She looked up to see him grimacing in pain, eyes closed. His hand went to pinch his nose.

“Ned, what's wrong?” she asked, in alarm.

“I...I'm just very dizzy. I got some flashes....It's been happening all day.” Ned said groggily, and clenched his jaw, barely getting the words out..

“You were dizzy the other night too, Ned.” she was alarmed, especially after what Rodrik told them about the drugs. “I'm calling Walys.”

“No.” Ned pulled her back sharply, “I haven't slept properly for a while, Catelyn. I'm sure I'll feel better by tomorrow.” He stopped her again when she started to protest, “And If I don't, I'll call him myself.” She got him a glass of water, he drank it hungrily, lying back on the couch.
“Come find me, if it gets worse. Or maybe...” Catelyn started to say, but he interjected.

“Don't worry, Catelyn. I will be fine. This had happened before, in Creekwood. It usually passes.” Ned assured her, his voice hoarse, his eyes still unfocused.

Or maybe you could sleep in our room tonight. She bit her tongue to stop her from saying what she wanted to say, perhaps it was too soon. Ignoring his protests, she helped him to his room.

“Catelyn...” Ned whispered in the dark after she tucked him in. She waited for him to continue, “...Have a good night.” he said quietly, yet she knew he wasn't saying what he truly wanted to. She didn't pry, she only smiled. She knew he would speak when he was ready.

“Come find me if you need me. Good night.” She tenderly kissed his forehead, frowning at the beads of sweat she felt against her lips, he was understating how he felt. She thought she heard him whisper something like “more than you know,” when she walked out. She checked on the children who were sleeping deeply and went to sleep herself. She was worrying for Ned most of the night, but she'd fallen asleep for brief periods of time. She couldn't help go downstairs to check if Ned was okay when she was up. He seemed to be fast asleep, when she peered into his room and that made her feel better.

She woke up early morning ready for work, Benjen had told her they needed urgent actions on some issues and they had the weekly meeting rescheduled. She'd felt guilty for sidetracking work for this long, leaving Benjen to deal with it alone, and agreed to come over for a few hours. It tore her apart to leave Ned in this state, in spite of his insistence that he would be okay. And as she descended down the stairs the subject of her thoughts appeared in the archway as usual, but with an expectant look in his eyes. “Ned, what are you doing up so early? You should be resting- oh.” He'd pulled her to the dining table as she spoke, and she stopped mid sentence when she saw and smelled lemon blueberry pancakes served up on a plate along with coffee, maple syrup, honey, assorted berries laid out on the table.

Her shock must have shown clearly on her face, because he answered her unspoken question. “You told me they were you favourite,” he said to her sheepishly.

The memory hit her when he said that. She'd spoken to him about it a couple of weeks ago when he found his favourite cookbook with the recipe page dogeared. He had been so excited to see the book, just like the first time he saw it all those years ago. And unknowingly he'd asked why the page was dogeared, since he wasn't a huge fan of blueberry and lemon combination. And it left her no time to hide the flinch and the dart to her heart at the question. Ned knew everything she loved to eat, and he would surprise her ever so often, and for a moment she had forgotten about his condition. She'd assured him it was alright and told him it was her favourite. Now face to face with this, she felt so touched by the gesture, and didn't even try to stop the tears that came to her eyes.

“I know you said you would go to work today, I have a plan made for the children. Don't worry, I'll wake them, give them breakfast and entertain them until you return. And Nan is taking them to the playground close by in the evening” He informed her, rather formally.

“Thank you,” she whispered, kissing him on the cheek. “How are you now?” she asked warily gazing at his face for signs of distress.

“I'm much better. The dizziness is mostly gone.” He said, pressing his finger against her forehead, smoothing her frown. She smiled. She had to agree he did look fresh, even if the dark circles hadn't disappeared. They ate breakfast in silence, since the pancakes were so delicious. But shared glances and touched hands.
Soon, reluctantly, she rushed to work after giving him a peck on the lips, and not missing the hitch in his breath that made her spend random moments during the day smiling triumphantly. Sadly, she had most of those random moments at work. It had taken longer than she thought, they had a small issue in the Long Lake project and she needed to make sure it was back on track and speak with Luwin and Vayon about the weekly report. If anyone suspected why she was home, these days, they didn't mention anything and everything was working well so nobody had reason to talk about it. Karstark was vacationing in Crag with his family, so thankfully she didn't have to meet with him. And Benjen had everything under control. Still she knew she would have to speak with Luwin and Vayon soon and devise a plan of how to announce Ned's return. She knew it would create quite the ripple effect if they didn't handle it well, so she needed to hear Luwin's thoughts on it. Rodrik had spoken to her about some security issue, apparently they'd tracked the department the mole was from. And she had to go to a meeting to discuss that. He also informed her that they were doing all they could to find Groff, but it would take some time before they got any news.

She came back too late to have lunch, but she was starving. Ned had fed the children and Nan took them to a playground, while he waited for Catelyn. And she was touched again. They ate in a comfortable silence. *He's trying to take care of me.* That was Ned's way, he never spoke of it, he showed her how much he cared through his actions and she felt warm all over. In spite of facing terrible odds, they were finding their way towards each other and she knew she could hope.

As she sat on their couch winding down after a hard day, she felt him stand behind her and massage the knots out of her shoulders. He wouldn't stop at her protest, and she relaxed into his touch. It truly felt divine, he always knew how to make her feel relaxed. She thanked him after and rose up to go to sleep and found the most tender expression on his face. She was the one who couldn't stop a hitch in her breath this time. Before bidding her goodnight, he pressed a soft ardent kiss to her lips. And she'd gone to bed that night with the flicker of hope growing stronger. She woke up surprised to find a warm and sunny day after the rather loud thunderstorm. At breakfast, she promised the children they would go swimming, since it was rare in this season in Winter Town for the weather to be this warm.

“Excellent. Very well done, sweetling! I am so proud of you.”

Catelyn clapped loudly as Sansa paddled her tiny limbs and swam towards her. At barely five she was extremely good at swimming, and neither Robb nor Jon used a float to balance them anymore. Arya had stayed behind, still a bit wary of the depth of the pool. And Catelyn didn't force her. She would take her in the hot tub sometimes, the girl enjoyed swimming in a tinier pool of sorts, yet she didn't enjoy it quite as much as her siblings did. Horses were more Arya's forte, Lyanna had been so enthusiastic the first time she took Arya out to a ranch with her half a year ago. The girl loved patting ponies and accompanying her aunt to groom the horses. She was thoroughly fascinated by them.

“Why is daddy not swimming with us, mommy?” Sansa's sweet voice brought her back to present.

“Your daddy doesn't like it when the weather is hot, sweetling. If he came out when it's this hot, he would melt.” she joked, giving her only the half truth of why their father couldn't come out during the day just yet.

Sansa gasped, “like Pwinceess spawkle? No...I don’t want him to melt like that!” Catelyn immediately felt sad at that. Last winter, Ned and Sansa had built a snow princess in the backyard, sadly the next day the weather had gotten surprisingly warm, inevitably melting Sansa's princess. The girl had cried all day and Ned somehow managed to get her to stop crying after promising to build another one the next time it snowed. *Of course it wasn't to be.* Before Catelyn could reassure the poor child, she heard Robb's voice.
“He won't really melt Sansa. It means Dad just doesn’t like the weather.” Robb said. And Catelyn smiled at him. Her baby boy was growing up, he'd gotten quite mature the last few months. Sansa may not remember, but she would cry often for Ned in the first few weeks he was missing. She would ask for him often, and Catelyn didn't know what to do. Soon Robb had started reassuring her their father was coming back, and that had stopped her from crying many times. He would tell her stories of how his brave father was off fighting evil snow monsters to come back to them and the girls would believe them. The boy had kept everybody's spirits up with his unwavering hope. And he'd been right, she felt Robb's hopes were partially the reason Ned was safe, as cheesy as that sounded. She watched her boy beckon his baby sister to him, with a big smile on his face.

“Okay...Wobb can I swim to you and Jon now??” Sansa asked.

Catelyn slowly let the girl go and watched her swim to her brothers. Her mind kept going back to Ned. In spite of the dark conversation they'd had with Rodrik and the others a few days ago, he seemed to relax more in their home. Walys was still optimistic, so she took a tiny shred of hope in that, as well. Ned wanted to work towards her and that was good enough. And after his behaviour the last few days, she thought perhaps they were getting closer much sooner than she'd expected.

“Mommy?”

She looked up to see all three had mischievous smirks on their faces and before she could say anything, they started splashing water at her. She cried out, trying to cover her face “Come here you!” and swam to grab them. They played a little while longer, when Catelyn felt quite pruned and got out of the swimming pool leaving them to play with the new basketball hoop her father brought for them two days ago. The air was still, but kind of chilly and immediately she missed the warmth from the pool. She ran her hand through her hair, and saw Ned standing at the kitchen window staring at her with open lust in his eyes. She smirked, and she felt her skin flush, and saw the discernible effect that had on him as his eyes went hazy, he swallowed and took a few deep breaths. He caught her looking and looked away, smiling sheepishly.

“Mrs. Stark, your phone is ringing. Its Dr.Walys.” Nan's voice startled her. She nodded at her, turning to Ned again. He was looking away and she knew what he was trying to avoid and she felt the blush deepen. Well, at least he wants me. She couldn't bear it anymore, he was so close...and she truly wanted him. And watching the visceral reaction his body had to the sight of hers made her shiver in a way that had nothing to do with the chill in the air.

And as Catelyn wrapped the robe around her body, she felt another flicker of hope in her heart.

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Ned Stark gulped down a glass of water, he felt exhausted. He was sitting on the couch, after another intense attempt to revisit his memories. Walys was considering him with disapproving eyes, Ned wished to approach the subject feeling quite anxious to get on with it. After the conversation with Rodrik a couple days ago, he'd been more anxious to get his memories back before it was too late. After the flashes he had about them, he was starting to fear he was losing whatever memories he had.

Walys only focused on getting Ned emotionally and mentally prepared, asking him about his time in Creekwood. He tried to enhance his skills, abilities and steering away from remembering. He wanted Ned to consider going for rather trivial memories, instead of attacking the once that were too close to
the events that took them away in the first place. However after ten sessions, Ned had finally convinced him to try visiting a recurring dream, - one he had the last few nights as well - something that may tie into how he got to Creekwood. He'd dreamt quite a few times now of being dragged out in the white and trying to run away from it.

When he spoke to Walys about it a few days ago, they tried to revisit it and he'd realized the loud crashing sound was actually glass and the whiteness around him was soft like snow. He thought perhaps he was dreaming of the accident that took him to Creekwood, he bore scars that were embedded in his skin by shards of glass and he'd arrived in Creekwood in the middle of winter. Being dragged out by an animal still didn't add up to the story, he still wanted to investigate it more. He felt like the dream was trying to tell him something and he'd tried to dig deeper. Now as he beheld the expression on the Walys' face, he reluctantly admitted to himself that he wasn't ready after all.

This time, he had recalled several elements of his dream smoothly, but when he prodded for more, everything went out of control. He was assaulted by all kinds of memories, he kept seeing his family from different stages of life. He felt sadness, regret wash over him, he felt fearful and angry memories being hurled at him. After the storm started to calm, he saw Catelyn sitting next to the hearth humming lightly and dozing off, her hand rubbing the big bump on her belly. He held on to that thought as he felt the storm settle around him, all he could see was Catelyn and himself in the eye of the storm. He walked towards her, when she heard him she smiled sleepily and turned to look.

He gasped then, its the first time I saw her face. It was the first flicker of memory he'd recalled of her. He felt a rush of recognition as the flicker he'd recalled of his wife played out before him in length. He could see her blue eyes sparkle with love and warmth up at him, her auburn hair glowing by the light from the hearth. As if it were kissed by fire itself, he couldn't stop looking at her. Slowly the image faded out, he could hear Walys trying to rouse him. He grumbled, he didn't wish to leave. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes when reality came crashing down on him, he sat up straight. Trying to ground himself, fighting against the dizzying sensation, he was still trying to catch his breath, trembling. And he realized the aspects of his dreams that he caught were fading away too.

Walys refused to continue the session, he asked Ned to take rest for a couple of days. He asked if he recalled anything or if anything popped out of the experience, anything that came easily to him. He rather commanded Ned not to try and jog his memory, and Ned explained to him how it all slipped away right when he got to the end of his dream. Walys suggested he took it easy and avoided unnecessary exertions. He seemed very serious, so Ned bit back his reproach and thanked him for his time.

After a quick shower, he walked over to kitchen window with a view of the backyard where Catelyn was with the kids playing in the pool, except for Arya who was in her seat next to Nan. Arya was in a particularly cranky mood today, the child hadn't slept well last night due to the thunderstorm that hit. Ned had spent most of the night trying to get her to sleep. After she was down, the thunder had woken up Sansa too who clamped on to him terrified and he'd read to her until she went to sleep. When he was walking out he peeked in Robb's room where both Robb and Jon were asleep- they'd both been so tired, they passed out just after dinner and Lyanna had left him here, not wanting to wake the child up. He smiled and heard a low humming -the one he recognized from his memory flash. The sight warmed his heart, she had a chair pulled up between the two beds, a big book on her lap. And she was humming lightly and alternately patting their heads. And he looked at the boys who were sleeping peacefully. Slowly she tucked them both in, kissed them both on the forehead. He'd left before she had a chance to see him. He lay awake last night in bed, thinking about what a wonderful mother his wife was.

Catelyn's squeal jolted him back to present. The children were splashing water on her vigorously
now as she tried to cover her face. He wished so much he could join them, but he didn't want to go out in broad day light. They'd seen a few people lurking close to the property, Jory had security detail around the area, in case they found anyone suspicious. They hadn't had any more of people around, but he didn't wish to risk it or let the security see him. He sighed, Catelyn got out of the pool just then.

He felt a stab of desire to see his beautiful wife in her stunning black halter swimsuit that clung to her body like second skin. Her skin was flushed pink, and hair wet. He wasn't there when they'd all gotten in the pool, so the sight of her had made his heart skip a beat. It was too cold for her and she almost always wore thick long clothing that kept her warm and hid her skin from his eyes. It didn't stop him from wondering about what was under it though, he was ashamed of it, but she was just so beautiful he couldn't stop himself sometimes. This was the first time he saw his wife so scantily clothed, and if he was completely honest, he wished he had more opportunities to see her this way. He adored her this way, jubilant, her eyes sparkling and a bright smile on her face. And creamy soft, almost milky white skin dusted with freckles, that he wished to press kisses to it--

He stopped mid-thought and gasped. She was looking right at him in amusement with a smirk on her face, yet the flush in her cheeks extended down to her chest and disappeared under the one-piece she wore. He felt his heart beat faster, he smiled sheepishly and looked down trying to think of anything but how he wished to touch her smooth skin, to desperately try to stop his cock from stiffening at the mere sight of her.

How does this woman always do that to me? Much to his chagrin, he had to take measures to alleviate the unbearable need of his wife these past few weeks. And at the rate of which he had to do it, he was glad he was sleeping in a different room with an exclusive bathroom. In truth, he still couldn't understand just how Catelyn's presence was affecting him physically or emotionally, but he no longer resisted it. He would miss her when she went to work, and she would leave his heart pounding every time she entered the room, and he couldn't stop looking at her and marvelling at the fact that he got to call this brilliant woman his wife.

After a while, he saw her walk inside to him, wrapped in a plush robe and he smiled at her. “You had fun.”

Catelyn laughed, “I did. I confess I adore swimming, I'd missed it so much in this weather. Thank god for heated pools. That was the first thing I asked for when we renovated the place.” Ned grinned.

Catelyn bit her lip, “I wish you could join us today.”

“Yes, me too.” Before he could stop himself he added, “Maybe we could. I mean... tonight. Just you and me, after the children go to sleep.” He finished hurriedly, inadvertently pulling her closer and looked at her expectantly.

Catelyn's answering smile went right through his heart and he was glad he hadn't stopped himself from saying that. “I would love that very much.” she answered.

“Its a date then.” He smiled at her, unbidden the first memory of her sitting in the chair next to the hearth flashed in front of him. And he looked down to her belly, which was now toned. He felt a stab of longing, to see her with it again. Immediately followed by guilt, would she want him back in her bed? He wasn't the man she knew after all. He'd changed and no matter how much he tried to go back he couldn't. His rather poor attempt today had proved it.

“Walys told me.” Catelyn whispered.
He looked up at that, “He called just when I was coming inside. This session was very intense wasn’t it? Why did you exert yourself like that, Ned? He told me he was quite concerned for you.” She was truly scared for him, he could see in her eyes.

He pulled her closer, “I just wanted to test my potential, Catelyn. Its been long enough without me recalling anything. And after what Rodrik said they other day, I just couldn't wait.” Before she could protest, he put his finger on her lips, “But you are right, I shouldn't have exerted myself like that. I wasn't ready for it.”

She trembled in his arms before embracing him tightly, “Promise me, you will never do that again.”

He pressed his face in her neck, “I promise” he whispered in her skin.

She pulled back, looking serious, “I can't do this without you, Ned. Please, don't try to do more than you can manage.”

He looked into her eyes, this woman who had waited for him, perhaps fearing he would never return. And in spite of that, she never gave up. Even after she found out he may never recall their life together. And he felt like a petulant child throwing a tantrum because he didn't get his way. He felt ashamed, silently he vowed to never do anything that would put her in that dark place again. He'd come this far because of her, and he only wished that he could find a way to move forward, together.

“I need you more than you'll ever know.” He heard himself say. Her eyes widened in something akin to recognition. For a moment he thought she'd heard him say it the night before when she'd helped him to bed. He decided not to resist what he felt now, and kissed her. Thankfully she returned his kiss with fervour, and the last speck of fear that he'd crossed a line disappeared. They'd kissed quite a few times now, and they were still cautious around each other. But once their lips touched he felt a sense of belonging, and the familiar spark that ran through his body. He wanted her to know how much she had come to mean to him just in the last few weeks. He couldn't quite find the words to describe it, he hoped this wonderful woman who seemed to just know his mind would understand just how important she had become to him. He kissed her deeper, to convey how he felt.

“Eeeeeewwwww. Gross.” They pulled back sharply, he saw Robb standing a few paces away, sopping wet wrapped in a towel next to Jon who elbowed him slightly at the proclamation. He stood there, his face scrunched up in disgust while Jon struggled to look anywhere but them. Behind them was Sansa blushing furiously, and Arya unaffected, started fussing and ran up to Ned.

“Language! In the bath, all of you before you freeze.” Catelyn admonished.

“I'll take them Mrs. Stark. You should take a shower too, before you catch a cold. Or maybe, Ned is already taking care of that.” Nan said looking at Ned and took the kids upstairs. He looked over at Catelyn to see her face was bright red like Sansa's and grinned. Arya was already on the verge of falling asleep on his shoulder.

“I'll take her Cat.” he said and was on his way to put the little wolf pup to bed, since she'd slept terribly. He stopped for a moment not being able to stop the appreciative gaze that rolled over Catelyn's form. When she walked away, he thought her hips were swaying a bit more than usual, he had trouble concentrating while he followed.

Much later after having lunch and then spending some time with the rest, Nan managed to settle them in one place by pulling out a story book. He was feeling quite tired, and the dull headache which started after his session hadn't gone yet. Perhaps Walys was right, sleep would do him good. He hadn't slept properly for a week now, and it only got worse after the news Cassels and Catelyn’s uncle brought. He decided to try to take a nap after speaking with Catelyn before she could order
him to bed yet again after seeing the exhaustion etched on his face. His lips quirked up in amusement, he almost wanted to appear more exhausted so he could see her boss him around again. He wished they could spend some time together though, he felt like he hadn't seen her all day and he missed her. They spent some time everyday revisiting some general memories, or talking about the people in his life. He was excited to meet some of the people she had mentioned. Robert Baratheon and Howland Reed were two of the names that felt most familiar to him. She told him of their friendship.

He realized she was completely skirting away from discussing their own relationship and he didn't push her, every time the topic came close to it he could see a flicker of pain in her eyes. And he wished he could make it go away, every time it did. Perhaps she was worried, no matter how he tried he would never go back to being the man she loved. She was genuinely wanting to find a way forward together, and he held on to that tightly. He'd come to realize it mattered a lot to him that she did. He didn't think he could do this without her. He felt comfortable in her presence, and he was proud of how brave she was. He knew it was killing her to see him like this, for his beautiful wife could never guard her face. And he'd become quite an expert in reading it, he could see her push away her pain and put on a brave face for his sake. And he felt ashamed of his own inability to recall their life together, for her sake as much as his own and their children's. Because he wanted to make her happy, he wanted to make her smile. He wanted to kiss away the sadness that seemed to follow her everyday. He walked towards the master bedroom, realizing briefly he'd never been here before. He heard Catelyn's voice beckon him inside when he knocked, and cringed against the dizziness that had returned a while ago. Closing his eyes briefly, he opened the door.

His world turned upside down. He felt a flurry of memories rush into his mind as he walked in. He looked around, feeling overwhelmed, euphoric, sad all at the same time, the room swirled around him uncontrollably. *Its cold, but its so pretty...* he heard her voice, and saw Catelyn standing at the window, her hair loose and gazing out in the white expanse of land...... wait. *Its late spring, how could it be snowing so heavily? how do I look, my love?* He turned to the left to see her come out of the walk-in closet, she twirled around. She wore a loose red dress, he could see the big bump on her belly....What was happening?? Oh but she was beautiful. He wished to reach out and touch her...*Ned, come back to bed.....* her voice sounded different, hoarse. It echoed in his mind, his head turned to the big king sized bed to see her staring at him lustily from under the sheets, he could see her hair disarray, skin on her bare shoulder and her hand that was outstretched beckoning him closer. Just as he reached her....everything changed again. She was fully clothed and the sheets were at the foot of the bed, her expression had changed, her face was soaked in sweat.....*Whats happening, Ned??* she asked frantically looking down, he followed her gaze to see the sheets soaked with blood...*I'm losing the baby, Ned, I'm losing our baby!!!* He felt his blood run cold, he maneuvered to pick her up, to get her to the hospital...but she disappeared just as he reached for her......an old frail man replaced her on a bed, it looked different....

"Dad? Dad! Wake up!" He heard himself choke out. He saw himself reach out to check his father's pulse and he shuddered when he felt the cold skin and no pulse. *Oh God, he's gone... Cat!!....* He turned around frantically......*Dad! Dad... you have to listen to me. Take care of them. I'm sorry, Ned...I didn't mean for this to happen. I just wanted to protect her....* his father's still form was replaced by white sheets under which his brother lay, battered and bandaged everywhere. *I'm here, Brandon. I forgive you......we all do....* He reached his hand out, but Catelyn was back in the bed, eyes closed, limp and pale, sheets soaked in blood.....*Oh god, she needs to get to the hospital... My love, we need to hurry if we want to get to the party on time.* He turned at the sound of her voice, as she walked out of the door to the bathroom, her hands busy attaching an earring and she wore a long black dress, her belly flat. He was so confused.... He looked down she was still in the bed pale...losing their child.... dying.....

"God! What is happening??" He felt sharp stabbing pain in his head he held his head tightly. "God!
My head!!" he choked out, the memories spiraled out of control like a whirlwind around him again, he could see it all, they were all painful... god! He felt grief wash over him, he felt sadness, he felt alone... where is Catelyn? He couldn't find her.....she wasn't on the bed anymore....."Cat!! Cat!!!” he called out weakly as the thoughts kept assaulting him sharply...... Look at my hand, he heard Tanner's voice.......and he eyes followed the movements of his hand......sleep the voice echoed, but he jolted up.....He needed to find Catelyn..He needed to get her to the hospital, the blood...there was so much blood, he remembered her horrified eyes looking down at the bloody sheets. Yet he felt weak, he couldn't move. He collapsed, still being assaulted by voices and images. Ned, my lad, Stark Corporation is yours- ..........I'm sorry, Ned, I didn't mean to....I didn't mean to-..............Ned. Come back to me, my love...Please...come back.....-.............-Promise me, you'll take care of him, you'll keep him safe-............-we're so proud of you, Neddie, this is your first medal......-I'm content with being the cool uncle, I don't want any kids, Ned- ......sleeep- .....Ned.....Ned....Ned......

“Ned!!! Oh god!! Ned, my love, please. Can you hear me, Ned?” He heard the terrified voice of his wife as he felt her face pierce through the thick cloud of memories. He smiled, dazed by her presence, she'd saved him yet again. “Cat”...he thought, her hair tickled his face and he reached out to touch it. It was “so soft”.....She was “beautiful”, but she looked horrified. He felt moisture on his face, Snow...but it didn't feel like snow...It was snowing wasn't it? It felt..warm...like tears...but he felt cold all over.......like he was soaked......in rain? Tears?..... He could hear her call out for someone...his eyes drooped close, he was so tired, he could sleep now. When he opened his eyes again, she was on her phone, she never left his side "Stay...please” he thought...or mumbled.... Her eyes were sparkling...like "sapphires.” He realized he'd grabbed onto her tightly, lest she faded away again making him go back in that whirlwind of memories....He scowled, he didn't want to think about that.......”stop...no”.his head....it hurt

“Ned, I'm here, my love. Walys will be here soon... hold on...”

“He's burning up, Catelyn...” he heard another voice from somewhere over his head. He tried to shake away the memories, “No...please.....make it stop!!!”... But he focused on Catelyn. “Oh god! The baby,” he touched her abdomen, “Cat, our baby, Cat! You need a doctor....the blood...I can't lose you too.....not after mom, dad and Bran....”

“Nan....what is happening to him....?” he heard the tremor in her whisper....she's afraid.....the baby......Brandon's in the hospital...who is with him? He's alone....father....his father was gone.. he was dead.....she needs to know....as he struggled to move, to hold her.

“Catelyn, he'll be fine..he is just incoherent, its not uncommon. Don't worry, dear. The doctor will be here soon.” Good...he thought. He couldn't lose her.. “I'm here Ned, we're both safe.” She said firmly. He touched her hair again, it cascaded down his face...”Auburn hair......kissed by fire.” He smiled.

“Nan, please go see to my children. Don't tell them anything, just stay with them And please let doctor Walys in when he arrives. I'll be here with Ned until the doctor gets here.” Catelyn said firmly, he felt someone move past them.....yet Catelyn never took her eyes from his, he smiled at her voice......it was throaty, but sweet...just like her.....she was so sweet, his Cat.... “My Cat.” he smiled at her.....she was “everything”....everything...his eyes drooping close.

“Ned, please” she wailed her plea, tears falling from her eyes, yet her gaze held his own.........He liked that, he liked when she did that....Her eyes were so blue..they were getting hazy.....he wanted to drown in them..... He felt himself drift away.....he could now.....she was there.....there was nothing to worry about....he sighed, and closed his eyes...holding on to his Catelyn tightly.
No...No....Ned!... stay with me...please my love!!......wake up, Ned.... WAKE UP!!!
A big flash made him drift away slowly but he could sense things around him still. He felt a pair of trembling cold fingers press against his neck, then felt a weight on his chest followed by a great heaving sigh...followed by a sweet trembling voice, "You're okay...please be okay...please come back to me.......please Ned.......” then everything was quiet. He felt numb, he felt like he couldn't move. It was merciful this way, he didn’t wish to go back in the whirlwind of emotions. Catelyn had saved him again, he wished he could see her now. He was lonely once more, but at least it was quiet and still. But then it was pierced by a cold grim voice, "We need to get him proper help, call Rodrik. Make the arrangements, we cant lose anymore time.......” Then everything was quiet again.

*******

He was drifting in and out, he felt himself move, like he was being carried. “Hang in there lad, hang in there” it sounded like Rodrik. There were voices, too many to make out. It hurt his head, but then he felt a hand gripping his own or was it him who was gripping the other? He didn't know, he was too weak to think...He drifted off feeling the familiar cool metal band pressing against his palm.

*******

He felt himself fall into something soft, it was cold. Or was he cold? The hand still held him tightly. “Is he okay Cat, will he be okay?” a frantic voice followed by many voices he couldn’t keep track of. He didn’t know how long it had been but he felt a familiar hand on his forehead, felt water on his face...and fingers running through his hair speaking words of comfort and pleas. Catelyn. “Please Ned, drink it for me...you'll feel better.” he opened his mouth, he would do anything for her...a bitter fluid flowed through his throat, making him scrunch his face against the revolting taste. It was followed by pills that made him weaker, it continued again and again until he could take no more. “Don't want it Cat, I don’t want it.”

“Please my love, its for your good, trust me.” he would listen, he would grip her hand...he would swallow the bitter fluids, pills and stay still when they poked in needles that made him fear more than he let on. He didn't want to be drugged again, but he was too weak to protest. “Stay” he would think desperately, if he was being drugged he couldn’t imagine waking up and forgetting everyone he held dear.

“Always” he would hear each time. A reply, a promise that made him peacefully drift away.

*******

A big flash made him squint his eyes. “For once in your life, Eddard, give us a smile”, A booming voice called from behind it. He tried to refocus, to see through his eyes again. He looked away from the camera, as soon as his vision got better, it caught a copper glint to the right. Catelyn...dressed in blue that set of her eyes, everything around him went hazy, the voices were just echoes now, and all he could see was her.

“Give us a smile!....oh well, this will just be a candid shot...” a voice echoed in the distance.

After the flash went off again, he saw an angry pair of grey eyes next to Catelyn fixate on someone
standing next to him. Brandon, he looks furious. He tried to think, but everything was blurry. The flash kept going off...he was drifting away...

“Give us a smile........” and the flash went off one last time. He caught a glimpse of dark hair and purple eyes beside him, and everything went dark...

*******

Ned Stark opened his eyes with great effort. The dim lights in the room stung his eyes, he scanned around and realized he was in the master bedroom. He felt a dull pounding in his head, his limbs felt heavy and he felt too weak to move. He was thirsty, he looked around to find something to quench it and saw a thermos on the end table. He tried to touch reach it his hands still trembled and accidentally dropped it. *Fuckin' hell*, he muttered under his breath, his voice was hoarse. Before he could reach it, a smaller pair of hands picked it up and handed it to him. He looked up.

“Catelyn,” he whispered hoarsely.

She sat in the chair next to the bed, looking surprised, “You know..me?”

He tried to process his thoughts. “Yes..” he said slowly, “You are my wife.....and we...we..” he drew a blank. He tried to concentrate...

“Its okay...don't try to remember anything. You need to rest more.” She whispered, she had tears in her eyes.

He ignored her words...and tried to think, “Children...we have three children.....Robb, Sansa and...Arya....Jon?”

“He's as good as. He's your godson and our nephew.” She answered, sounding relieved.

“Why did you think I wouldn't know you?” he asked, bemused by her reaction.

She frowned, “After you fainted, you were incoherent for a long time. Walys thought it was possible you could suffer more damage to your memory. He asked us to be prepared in case you had trouble recalling us again.” He did have a bit of trouble to tap into the specifics, but he remembered them. And he was glad he did. He was still fuzzy about what precisely occurred after he entered Catelyn's room.

He tried to sit up, Catelyn moved some pillows behind him so he could rest against them. “Tell me,” he said, with a stronger voice.

“You came to find me here, and I heard you call out to me in anguish from my office. I thought you were hurt, so I rushed in, and you...just sort of collapsed. You were saying.... things, like you were dazed. And you fainted in my arms.” She said, holding on to his hand tightly.

“What did I say?” he asked gently.

Catelyn wiped her tears, “You were just talking about some things that happened in the past. But, it was like you were reliving them. Like you couldn't tell the difference between past and present.” She stopped talking after that. Gently he urged her to continue. “Walys says it may be that when you fell you hit your head again and started hallucinating, or you started getting a rush of memories like in the session two days ago. He thinks sleep deprivation is tiring your mind way too much, and it made you vulnerable to it. So, you need all the sleep you can get. And you kept waking up so he had to give you a pill to induce it, I allowed him, Ned. I know you don't want any medication, but its necessary for a while. And I've checked, its not harmful-”
“I trust you, Catelyn. But, I still want you here when I take any meds.” He said hesitantly, he trusted her and only her. He knew he could trust Walys, but after what occurred, he just wasn’t sure about anything anymore. She smiled, “You’ve said that too, many times in the last two days, but you were too drowsy to remember it.” Inadvertently, he held on to her hand tightly, placing it on his chest. He could feel things slipping away, yet he tried to hold on. That’s when it hit him what she’d said.

“Two days ago? How long have I been here?” he asked looking around to check the time of the day. Suddenly he remembered feeling needles, he touched his hand gingerly.

Catelyn understood where his thoughts lurked, “We had to take you to a trusted doctor the day you fainted. They ran some tests on you.”

Catelyn nodded, “You’ve been asleep since the evening before last. You had fever, it broke early this morning. But, you slept all day today. Are you hungry?”

His stomach grumbled just in time, he nodded. When she came back with food, he ate in silence for a while. It was all tasteless to him, but it was filling. He’d slept so long, he couldn’t remember anything. “...I can’t remember anything after I came to find you. The children...?” he asked, he didn’t want them to see him like this.

“They’re well, Lya is with them now. She’s staying for a few days, she refused to leave until she knew you were fine. The children don’t know. I told them you were just feeling a bit ill. I didn’t want them to worry. They were with Nan when Jory and Ben carried you to the car...” she trailed off and started crying, she looked at him like she was terrified he was going to fade away. He folded his hand through her hair, placing his hand on her cheek. She choked and hugged him, placing her head on his chest. “I was so afraid, Ned. I was so afraid...I’d lost you. When you fainted, I couldn’t wake you...I couldn’t...” wake up Ned.....WAKE UP!!! unbidden he heard her voice calling out to him frantically before he’d lost consciousness.

“-Shhh.....I’m here, Catelyn. I’m okay. I’m sorry I scared you,” he whispered, holding her there until her tears subsided. She pulled away and wiped cheeks, composing herself.

“You are going to stay in this bed until you feel better and don’t argue with me Eddard Stark. I will not risk your health. Rodrik is sending the doctor to check on you this evening, And Walys will be here soon too. I’ll bring you warm meals here and spend time with you too, but you are not to leave this bed on your own. Do you understand me?” She ordered. He nodded dutifully, she continued softly touching the scar on his forehead, “I can’t lose you again...”

“You could never lose me, Catelyn.” Ned answered without thinking. She smiled at him.

He looked at her carefully, didn’t miss the dark circles around her eyes, he traced them lightly. “Have you slept at all?” She shook her head. “You’ve been here all this time?” she nodded.

She bit her lip, “I went to see the children when your fever broke. I was with them for a while each day. I’m afraid I haven’t been the best of the mothers the last few days, but I needed to know you were alright, Ned.”

“You’re a terrific mother, Catelyn. They know that.” he assured her. It was the truth, and she needed to know she’d done an admirable job raising them with or without him. His head hurt at the thought of him not being here. His mind lingered on the dark memories from Creekwood, so he shook them away, breathing deeply.

“I couldn’t leave you alone like this.” Catelyn said to him as if she knew what just happened to him.
“You should get some sleep, I'm better now.” he reassured.

“I'm not leaving.” she said simply.

“You'll get sick, Catelyn. I don't want you to get sick.” He argued.

“I will not leave you, Eddard Stark. Don't ask it again.” She looked at him firmly, even when her voice wavered and eyes teared up.

“Very well.” he sighed. “I will comply, if you...” he trailed off, trying not to ask too much. But damn it, she would get sick if she continued like this. He looked to his left on the empty side of the bed..... “will you be comfortable to...sleep here, next to me? I... promise I won't move.” Her lips quirked up in amusement, but dutifully she got in bed, lying next to him. He moved to the far right, not wanting to make her uncomfortable. “Sleep, Catelyn. I promise I'll stay here.”

She smiled at that. “I'll hold you to that promise, Eddard Stark.” she murmured sleepily.

He was too weary to move. He slightly turned his head to see Catelyn was already asleep. She looked so peaceful, yet vulnerable. It must have been so difficult for her to face this, I don't deserve her. She must be truly tired, my brave yet stubborn Catelyn. My wife. He clung to what he did remember desperately, pushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “I would promise you everything, Cat.” he whispered looking at her sleeping face. I can't lose her, I can't forget her again. I am Eddard Stark. I am married to Catelyn... he pushed to remember her maiden name .....Tully! Catelyn Tully Stark. We have three children; Robb, Sansa, Arya. I am Eddard Stark..... he repeated to himself until he felt sleepy, and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, Catelyn was gone, he heard murmurs in the living room. His throat was awfully dry, he reached over to get water, clearing his throat. While he drank the water, feeling relieved at the cool sensation that soothed his throat, he heard a knock. He beckoned them in, his voice stronger now.

“Mr. Stark....how are you?” Walys entered the room. Catelyn was at the doorway. She looked fresh, she'd changed. Yet she didn't enter. She motioned towards Walys and gave him a smile before leaving.

“Much better” he said to the man, vaguely disappointed to see her go. He sat up and looked around, the daylight was streaming through the drapes, he figured he'd slept through the night, he felt fresh. His memories were still muddled, and he tried not to chase them, lest they ran farther.

“Do you mind if I ask you a few questions, Mr Stark?” Walys asked from where he stood. Ned beckoned him to sit, “Not at all.”

“How far can you remember, and I urge you to stop when it hurts. And tell me.”

“I was going in the bedroom to find Catelyn. And I walked in, and....and I just felt a rush of memories, like they were happening right then and.. don't know it was all fuzzy afterwards.” Ned pinched his forehead at the sharp pain shooting in his head.

“That’s okay, I want you to focus on your breathing now, it will help you relax.”

“Why did that happen to me?” he asked.

“You're in a complicated state, Mr. Stark. You have retrograde amnesia and PTSD. And as I recall, you told me you barely had any sleep all last week. When you fell, you hit your head and the impact was around the area of your old wound. We think that the minor concussion caused you to
hallucinate and feel that rush of memories. The discomfort you experienced in our session that day may have made it easier for you to recall them in that state. We’ll know more of how it affected you, after examine the incident further, that is after you feel better.”

He nodded, after he relaxed, Walys handed him a cognitive assessment test - the one he'd given him during their very first session. He spent the next hour or so asking him general questions about his life and told him to stop answering when he felt a head ache or any discomfort. Walys mentioned he needed to distract from remembering for a week or so, that his condition was delicate now after the incident.

“Well, just like before, your semantic and muscle memory is intact, better actually. Episodic seems a bit more vulnerable than before. Whatever triggered that rush of events in your mind seemed to have wounded it. Your mind has built higher walls this time, it will take some time to reach through them. I would suggest that you divert your attention completely now and don't go down that path for a while. I will come back next week for the next session.”

Ned sighed. “When can we start trying to tap into my memories?” he urged, fearing his chances were lower now after whatever happened to him two days ago.

“Not very soon, I'm afraid. Mr. Stark, it will exert you very much and possibly hinder what cognitive ability you have gained. We cannot risk it just yet--”

“But, you said you had a way. You said, you could fix this!” he knew he sounded petulant, but damn it he was tired. It had been over three weeks now. They would go public with his return soon, he needed to remember his life, damn it!

“Eddard.” he said softly, yet the weight in his voice stopped Ned's protest.

“You can't push yourself too much, I understand it is difficult, but patience will help you in the long run. I know you are eager to regain what is lost, to remember the people you love-” Walys said softly and his tone struck Ned silent. He gazed to where Catelyn had disappeared a while ago giving them privacy for the session, and leaned forward on his chair. “She understands, lad. You're anxious, I know. But if you push yourself to hard, chances are we will lose all the progress we've made so far. We will get there eventually, take one tiny step at a time.”

Something in his tone made him feel like a child. He was speaking as a man who knew him and not as his therapist. Ned knew this man, but he couldn't remember damn it. “Do I have any chances after that Walys?” he asked softly, not being able to stop himself.

The doctor smiled, “ofcourse you do. There is always a chance, Ned. You may remember tomorrow or in two weeks, or two months. You never know, the human brain is a tricky thing. But you mustn't lose what you do have in order to chase after what you can't find right now.” he held Ned's gaze steadily before looking in the direction of the door again. He sighed, understanding the unspoken advice he'd given.

“What is there anything I can do? Anything at all?”

He nodded, “I will give you one suggestion. Take a break from this for a while, after that, if you feel like it, whenever you are in a relatively good mood, sit down and try to calm yourself, breathe deeply and find a comforting place in your mind. And if there is a particular memory that you wish to explore, approach it through that calmness. However, if you feel distressed open your eyes immediately and try to ground yourself in your surrounding. Make sure there is someone near you when you do this, and call me if you wish to talk.”
Walys left after that. He was moving about by the end of the day, yet he'd fallen asleep on the couch after lunch again only to wake up to Sansa staring at him with a toothless grin. “Mommy, Daddy's up.” she said, still grinning at him.

“Daddy, you okay?” Arya who was on the floor with some toys walked up to him.

“Of course, how could I not be? When both of my princesses were guarding me so diligently.” He said pulling them close pressing kisses on their tiny heads when he sat up - ignoring the slight pang in his head. He saw Arya's wolf toy fall off the couch, he realized the toy was next to him while he was asleep and he picked it up.

“Woof guard you too.” Arya exclaimed.

“Why thank you Ser Woof.” He said to the toy making the girls laugh.

“True. He was right next to you as you slept.” he saw Catelyn come to stand by the couch. “Why don't you give him the card you made?’ she said to the girls sitting beside him. He saw them pull out a folded piece of paper with and adorable drawing of himself in front, a red line on his forehead. Next to him was Catelyn holding his hand, the kids next to her and Woof on his left with a small sword in his hand. He grinned at it and looked as surprised and delighted as he could possibly look, appreciating every ounce of it and making the girls beam with pride. He could see the boys run inside when they saw him get up. Sansa and Arya clung to him the whole time, not letting go, while Robb was alternating between wanting to tell him all he’d done that day and wanting to know if he was alright. Jon just sat quietly beside him, not wishing to leave his side.

Lyanna had been awfully quiet at dinner as well, staring at him few times to make sure he was okay, so was Benjen. After dinner, he'd spent time with both of them making sure they knew he was doing alright. Lyanna clung to him, and cried in his neck. “I can't lose you too, Ned....” He just sat there silently, beckoning Benjen to join in. Who hugged him sitting on the other side. They sat there like that for a long time. And rather than staying, they both left for the night. I am Eddard Stark, I have two living siblings and three beautiful children. He felt dizzy again as he struggled to hold on to what he knew. He had tried to appear normal, not wanting to scare his siblings; but Catelyn had seen through it. She walked with him in his room and he knew she was gearing up for another all-nighter sitting by his bedside.

“Catelyn, you don't have to stay, I'm fine.” He said, losing his balance a bit and cursing the bad timing.

She rolled her eyes, “Sure you are. I'm not leaving.” she said firmly.

“Well then, how about a compromise. Like last night? I know this bed is not as comfortable, but I would still have you rest.” he said, hopefully. If he were honest with himself, he'd slept peacefully with her next to him the night before. And he wanted it again, he just didn't know how to ask. But, her answering smile told him she'd read his mind. Wordlessly, she got in the bed next to him. He bid Catelyn good night lying beside her in the darkness. When she was asleep and he was about to, giving into his urge he pulled her close to him, she complied easily locking into his embrace, her head on his chest and he sighed in relief, pressed a kiss in his wife's auburn hair. And he felt a renewed hope and vowed to spend more time with the people in his life. Whether he remembered or not he knew for sure that he would do his best to be worthy of Catelyn. He couldn't for the world, imagine his life without her anymore. He knew just how important she had become to him. He sighed and felt her snuggle up closer to him.

I am Eddard Stark, I have two living siblings and three beautiful children. He felt dizzy again as he struggled to hold on to what he knew. He had tried to appear normal, not wanting to scare his siblings; but Catelyn had seen through it. She walked with him in his room and he knew she was gearing up for another all-nighter sitting by his bedside.

“Catelyn, you don't have to stay, I'm fine.” He said, losing his balance a bit and cursing the bad timing.

She rolled her eyes, “Sure you are. I'm not leaving.” she said firmly.

“Well then, how about a compromise. Like last night? I know this bed is not as comfortable, but I would still have you rest.” he said, hopefully. If he were honest with himself, he'd slept peacefully with her next to him the night before. And he wanted it again, he just didn't know how to ask. But, her answering smile told him she'd read his mind. Wordlessly, she got in the bed next to him. He bid Catelyn good night lying beside her in the darkness. When she was asleep and he was about to, giving into his urge he pulled her close to him, she complied easily locking into his embrace, her head on his chest and he sighed in relief, pressed a kiss in his wife's auburn hair. And he felt a renewed hope and vowed to spend more time with the people in his life. Whether he remembered or not he knew for sure that he would do his best to be worthy of Catelyn. He couldn't for the world, imagine his life without her anymore. He knew just how important she had become to him. He sighed and felt her snuggle up closer to him.

I am Eddard Stark, and I'm falling hopelessly and irrevocably in love with my wife. Or perhaps, I already have. With those thoughts in his mind, Ned Stark smiled. For he knew which one was true.
“Jory is bringing our advisor and CFO to speak about the announcement.” Catelyn said handing her husband his pills and a glass of water. He frowned but took them from her anyway. She continued apologetically, “I wish it could wait. Especially after everything that happened. But-

“Catelyn, its okay. I'm not fragile, you know? I can handle talking. And we'll have to do it at some point. We really should start preparing for it. Could you introduce me to whatever it is I need to know about Stark Corporation?”

Catelyn nodded, “I promise you won't be alone in this, Ned. We'll have everything under control and you will have a final say in everything, of course. But, you can take whatever time you need to prepare yourself.” He smiled gratefully, she wished it wouldn't be difficult. She hoped people would buy their cover story and everything would go smoothly, the last thing she wanted was Ned being cornered for answers everywhere he went.

She moved to bring the last of the food to the table. Edmure had texted this morning, to say he was coming to lunch. She knew the real reason, her father must have ordered him to come see her. She was excited to see her brother, but she wasn't looking forward to giving another report of how she was perfectly happy with Ned coming back, no matter what his condition.

“You should've let me help.” her husband murmured from behind her, she sighed.

“I told you, once you feel alright and have no head aches-” she looked at him pointedly stopping his protest, as if to tell him she'd seen him wince many times all day when he thought nobody was watching. She continued, “- once you feel alright, you can do whatever you want. I will not object to anything.”

He looked deeply into her eyes until she felt her breathing accelerate, then he broke the silence. “I'll hold you to that promise, Catelyn Stark” he said softly and his voice reverberated through her. They turned to the door when she heard the intercom and reluctantly she went to open it.

“Eddie! Its so good to see you.” She exclaimed and walked to her baby brother with her hands outstretched, completely aware of the pout on his face. The one that softened when she called him by his childhood nickname.

“Don't 'Eddie' me, Cat. I'm still mad at you.” He said but hugged her tightly nonetheless. She looked at Benjen wordlessly.

“I told him everything on the way.” Ben answered knowingly. She smiled gratefully for that and pulled back. When Edmure walked towards Ned, Benjen added softly, "We know its difficult for you to keep talking about it, Cat. I hope it was okay?"

She smiled him again, "Ofcourse, thank you, Ben. That was kind of you." And walked with him in the house.

“I am, however, very thrilled to see you are alright, Ned.” Edmure said and wrapped Ned in a hug. He was frozen for a moment and then hugged him back, Walys had mentioned he could be wary around strangers for a while and it broke her heart to realize her brother was just a stranger to him right now, no matter how friendly they were before it all happened. Edmure pulled back and grinned, “Edmure Tully, the best brother-in-law you can ask for.”

“Um. I beg to differ.” Benjen added moving closer to her and they all laughed.

When they sat to have lunch and the children were talking to Ben and Ned was feeding Arya.
Edmure leaned in to talk to her.

“So, only uncle Brynden knew then.” Edmure asked.

“He did. He knew before I did.” She admitted.

“Ben told me why you have to keep it a secret for a while. I'm assuming if I didn't know then Lysa
doesn't either?” Catelyn shook her head. “Have you heard from Lysa lately?” she asked instead.

“No. She calls once a month or so, just to check in. From what I know she spends most of her time
with Petyr. I don't even know if she's still in Riverrun or if she'd back at Jon's mansion in Vale.
Either way, if you want to keep this a secret she should be last one to know. She'd tell Petyr and we
don't want another family issue splattered across his damn magazine. And I don't think she would
care. She cannot see past designer clothes anymore, anyway.” She couldn't blame his bitterness
towards their sister, but she hurt to see it anyway. Edmure and Hoster's relationship had strained
briefly a few years ago impacting the business and Lysa had blurted out about it to Petyr . The
issues later got published in his magazine followed by various others and the stocks at Tully
Enterprise had taken a hit, impacting the business even further. Edmure and their father had spent
almost two years trying to bring the business back to stability.

“Ed, its not true. She does care, she's just unhappy.” Catelyn argued weakly.

“And resentful” he muttered. She worried for her sister, but there was nothing she could really do
and she dropped the subject. There was an awkward silence before Ben rescued them from diving
into even darker family matters by bringing up the fishing trip two years ago.

She kept a close eye on Ned to make sure all the voices and noises weren't bothering him, she saw
him wince a couple of times Robb piped up to make himself heard over all the voices but otherwise
he seemed fine. He was definitely overstating how fine he was, he wouldn’t completely know how
close he'd come to being admitted into a hospital.

She shuddered at the thought. That fall hadn't been severe due to the carpeting in their room, but he
definitely hit his head hard when he fell – possibly agitating the old wound he had there. And since
that one took away his memories, the prospect of another had scared Catelyn to the core. She tried to
push away the memory of her finding her husband on the floor talking about dark events long
forgotten, but failed. It had seared itself in her mind. She'd almost stopped breathing when he'd
closed his eyes, she realized she had been quite hysterical and steadfastly refused to leave his side
until he opened his eyes. When they’d reached the clinic the doctors asked her thousands of questions
and just when they'd finished, Ned had stirred and immediately retched in the bin next to the bed,
scares her further. The doctor assured her in a few hours that her husband would be alright. The
scans and test results had come soon, and it was clear then that it was a minor injury. Nonetheless,
Wylys asked to be prepared for the worst, and she'd been equally hoping and fearing the moment her
husband would open his eyes.

“I'm fine, Catelyn.” She was startled out of thought by Ned's voice and realized she'd been quiet for
a long while. She looked over to her side where Benjen and Edmure seemed to be deep in discussion
telling the children about the fishing trip, regaling the tale enthusiastically of how they’d struggled to
catch the biggest trout ever. Ned held on to her hand tightly and looked at her knowingly, she
gritted it. They were more hopeful now, since Ned was responding well to the medications and had
recovered in a couple of days as the doctor had predicted.

“Ed, you are staying the night, aren't you?” Catelyn asked after the others finished talking.

“No, Cat. My flight leaves in a few hours. I still have work tomorrow. And you know how dad will
stress himself if he doesn't see me there.” Edmure answered, his expression turning grim. She wished her brother hadn't been forced to grow up in the last two years. But after father's health took a hit, he'd risen to the task and focused completely on helping him however he could. He reminded her of their father so much now in the way he spoke. She wished he could stay, but she knew her father would definitely work twice as hard if Edmure didn't go.

Some time after he left, Jory arrived with Luwin and Vayon. Catelyn led the men to the study and watched them exclaim in joy at the sight of her husband. She shared a look with Ben, their joy of seeing him was so authentic and clear that it warmed her heart to see that, and she was glad they decided to bring them in on this. Jory brought them over for a meeting to discuss the strategies to announce Ned's return. After Catelyn explained the situation, they were both shocked, but were on board almost immediately to help out however they could. They'd asked Jory to sit in on the meeting to get his views on their plan and discuss any security requirements that they might need.

Luwin was concerned about the repercussions of the announcement at work. Especially, if Ned needed to stay at home even after they officially announced he was fine. But they'd assured that he was going to work from home for a while, Walys was more than happy to be there at the conference to explain that he was going through PTSD. Jory joined in and informed them about the cover story they were planning to give in order to mask their moves and to stop anyone from questioning too much about what Ned had been through. He wisely didn't give any details or information about the suspects and only answered the questions that would affect Ned or their family personally. And the men didn't pry for more information either way. It all sounded like a good plan, when Ned broke his silence.

“Catelyn, I can't stay at home like a coward. I can handle whatever is hurled at me.” Ned argued, just as she'd expected.

“Ned you will be working, but from home, like I was all these days. And you can resume once the news settles down.” she replied.

“He will have to make an appearance though, ma'am. At least a few times, I'll give him all the details and debrief him before any appointments or meetings he will have those days. If Mr. Stark doesn't show at all, it will create tension in the workplace.” Vayon Poole explained.

“And Mr. Stark, you will have to meet up with the most important clients, it will strengthen our position for them to see that you are indeed back and doing well.” Luwin added.

“We may have a solution for that.” Benjen who'd been quiet the whole time chimed in, they all turned in their seat to look at him leaning on the window. “We can hold a formal house party for very distinguished guests. That way we won't have to deal with excessive attention, and the shareholders and board members will be happy.”

“We'll take care of getting a security detail around the house. And I can be in the house with maybe Hal and Brienne to watch over,” Jory added.

“That's actually a very good idea. I can create a list of the people who should be invited, who need to know that Mr. Stark is capable to come back on board and resume working. And you can invite any friends or family you want.” Luwin affirmed.

It seemed like a very good plan, Ned agreed to it as well. They'd discussed the details for a while longer and Catelyn was on board with it as well. They decided to have it next weekend. Luwin also offered to help Ned get ready for the business in a practical way. He promised to stay by his side and consult him whenever he needed on any matters he needed help with and they were both quite moved.
When she returned after bidding them goodbye, she found Ned pacing in the study. She knew it wouldn't be easy to convince him to stay back and let them do the work.

“What is it?” she asked, although she already knew what it was.

“I don't like it, Catelyn. I don't like relaxing at home while you two carry all the burdens.”

“Ned, we have a very supportive staff. But, we also have some snide, suspicious people at work. If they sense something is off, they will not hesitate to try and bring you down.” Catelyn interjected.

He frowned. “More the reason for me to resume work. Catelyn, I've seen how hard you work, I know you are capable to handle the job, but its unfair to ask you and Ben to carry my responsibilities, because of a hypothetical threat to my health. Why should I hide away and let you two deal with them? I'm sure if I try harder, I can learn about all of these people faster—”

“-How many people are you going to learn about in a less than a week, Ned? You're doing admirably, but we don't know what you may have to face. What if it overwhelms you? Everybody will be watching you like a hawk. Even if we clear every possible hitch, nobody will believe our story blindly.”

“I assure you I won't cause any harm to the business.” He retorted. And she realized what he must have thought she had said, and that angered her further.

“You think--? It is not about the business!” She shouted, and they both glanced at the stairs warily, hoping it hadn't woken the children who were napping. She forced herself to calm her voice, “Ned, we built Stark together once before when it was falling apart. And we can do it again if it comes to it, I'm not worried about the business. I'm worried about you! Everybody will question you why you were gone for so long and pray you for answers. You won't have a moment of peace. And what if you have that incident again....” She knew her voice was getting louder and shriller, but she didn't care. She needed him to understand. She took a few heaving breaths. “I won't risk you, Ned. I have seen how vicious these people can be to get the information they want. Walys' report that you are dealing with PTSD won't stop them from harassing you for answers. I know you are capable of sticking to the cover story, but it will be very stressful, and Walys said you mental health is still unsteady—”

“Its been unsteady for weeks, Catelyn! We don't even know if my memory will ever come back. No one knows how long it will take for my full recovery, I can't just hide away until it does.” He argued louder.

“I never asked you to stay for a long time. Just for a couple of months.” She answered, trying to control her flaring temper. Why was he so adamant at risking himself? Why couldn't the stubborn man just listen to her once?

“What good would a couple of months do, when a month didn't? I'm so tired of being stuck here, instead of moving forward.” He finished, sounding exhausted and tired. The last line had gone through her like a dagger. They stood there in the study staring at each other wordlessly.

“I'm sorry that you have to be stuck here. But, I will not risk you, Ned. Don't ask it of me.” Catelyn whispered, glad that her voice didn't waver as she said it. She walked away not being able to look at him anymore. She couldn't.

“Catelyn, wait.” his voice stopped her in her tracks, yet she didn't turn around. He came to stand in front of her.
“I know why you are so worried. But, I can't hide away forever.” He said softly.

“I'm not asking it of you, Ned. Just for a few weeks, until all the attention deviates from us.” Catelyn urged. “Please Ned, I know you're frustrated. But, I can't bear the thought of people slandering your name or stressing you until you collapse of exhaustion. Not again.”

“But wouldn't it create more attention if I stayed home for a few weeks and then resumed work like nothing went wrong again.” he argued softly.

“You will overtire yourself, Ned. I know you will. Just doing regular things sometimes exhausts you. It tires you, yet you push yourself to do more. And don't deny it!” she snapped when he tried to protest. “If you overtire yourself again at work and have that incident like you did a few days ago, I will never forgive myself. I can't watch you go through it, Ned, please. I can't watch you get hurt again.” Her rant became increasingly emotional and she ended up in tears, hating herself for her weakness. Ned pulled her in his arms and she cried endlessly.

The memory was still fresh in her mind. Ned's frantic eyes staring at her unfocused. When he'd closed his eyes she'd genuinely feared she lost him. She'd tried to rouse him for a while, for a few wild moments she'd thought he was dead. But she felt a pulse and could hear his heartbeat and she'd held on to that until Nan escorted Walys in the room. He'd woken up in two days, yet for her it seemed like an eternity.

“You can't protect me from everything, Catelyn. We must move forward.” He gently pulled back, cradling her face so she'd look up at him.

“When you said 'stuck here'...what did you mean?” she asked hesitantly. In her dark moments, she worried that he only stayed for the sake of duty and to do the right thing - she knew he loved the children and cared for all of them, but sometimes she wanted to know he truly wanted to be near them. She could usually brush it off by admonishing herself, but when he'd mentioned being stuck, the fear rushed back in her mind in full force.

“I meant I'm tired of just being at home and not doing anything. I love the children and I love the time we all spend together, but you and Ben are out there taking care of it all by yourselves and I can't help but feel guilty. I want to help, Catelyn.” she looked deeply in his eyes to search for a lie. But her husband was a terrible liar and there was nothing but truth in those grey eyes. She exhaled in relief and bit her lip. “Fine. Lets meet halfway here. I won't ask you to stay at home for a long time. Just a week or two. You can still come over for a day in those weeks, but you won't start completely until the planned date. And I will be watching your every movement, Eddard Stark, if I see you overtire yourself I'm sending you straight home. I can't lose you...I won't.”

“You won't lose me, Catelyn. You could never lose me.” She looked up at him she felt goosebumps rise up on her skin. He looked at her with so much tenderness that gave her a glimpse of her husband prior to his accident. Before she could say anything he reached forward and softly pressed kisses to the tear tracks formed on each of her cheeks, then kissed both her eyes and pulled back to look at her with the same expression. She started crying earnestly once more, and he kissed them again. Ned always did that when she was troubled, to soothe her and to tell her he would always be there with her. She leaned forward and pressed her face in his neck feeling emotions overwhelm her again. And the last of her fears that he would want a different life lifted off her heart. They didn't speak of it again, but she could feel they'd come closer to each other.

Later that night after dinner, the children were watching TV in the living room and Lyanna volunteered to help her clean up after dinner, while Ben, Jory and Ned went out in the back yard. It still surprised her sometimes to see how Lyanna had matured over the years. If it was Lya from a decade ago, she would have jumped at the chance to skip cleaning after dinner.
“So, I was going to have the children over for the weekend.” Lyanna said matter of factly.

Lyanna did that sometimes, but she was curious about why this time. “What’s the occasion?” Catelyn asked.

“Well, you and Ned have a lot on your plate right now. And I can tell the children hate being home all the time. I’ll pick them up tomorrow, we’ll plan some outing. You take care of Ned.” Lyanna answered.

“You’re right. They’re good kids and they don’t fuss much, but they’re bored of staying home. Are you sure it’s okay, Lya? Arya can be a handful sometimes.”

“Umm.. I know how to handle Arya, I’ve taken care of her countless times you went to work early and stayed late, remember?” Lyanna answered. Catelyn bit her lip, she’d forgotten about that momentarily. Lyanna indeed helped her out a lot when she needed to focus on the business.

“I’ll talk to Nan, she can come along to help. We’ll take them to the zoo, have movie nights, I’ll even take Arya to the ranch. Please Cat, you’ve taken care of Jon countless times, let me do this for you. I can see you two could use some alone time.”

She nodded at her sister-in-law gratefully. “Thank you.” she whispered.

“Speaking of, the girls are yawning already.” Catelyn followed her gaze to the living room. They decided to finish cleaning up after putting the children to bed. When they told them about Lyanna’s plan, they all cheered excitedly. Catelyn smiled at them, yet she felt sad that they couldn’t do more fun activities as they used to. Jon showed his usual puppy eyes to convince his mom to let him stay over another night and Robb did the same. Since Lyanna was picking them up the next morning anyway, they both agreed if the boys behaved and went to bed without protesting. They still sat down and told them stories before bed. She knew the boys were just pretending to be asleep and would probably spend another hour playing after Catelyn and Lyanna went downstairs, but she didn’t have the heart to tell them no and pretended to be oblivious.

She was glad Lyanna was doing this for them, even if she wished she and Ned could join them. Just one more week, she told herself, knowing fully well it wouldn’t be the end of it all. She was worried for Ned, even after they announced he had returned, all eyes would be on them after that and she wished Ned didn’t have to face everyone suspiciously poking at everything he’d been through like it was just a story they could exploit. Not again. He’d been through it already after Rickard and Brandon’s death. She knew the real challenge would ensue once everyone knew he’d come back after six months of radio silence. Catelyn knew Ned was capable to act like he was fine, but she knew there were people around them who wouldn’t stop being suspicious of the long absence and not much information to go on. And the last thing she wanted was for him to have more worries on his plate when he would have to deal with more than his fair share in the coming weeks anyway.

They both walked down again to put away leftovers in silence when Lyanna asked, “How are you doing, Catelyn?”

“I’m doing fine, thanks.” Catelyn replied as a reflex. She’d been asked the question for months everywhere, and she had to bite her lip at the quick lie that came so easily to her now.

“Stop bullshitting Catelyn. You really think I’m going to believe that?” Lyanna challenged.

Catelyn sighed, “What do you want me to tell you, Lya?”

“The truth. I’m your friend, Cat. Tell me the truth.” She said softly.
“I just don't know where to start.” Catelyn said.

“I do.” Lyanna answered, walked over to the small cellar next to the dining room and brought out a bottle of wine, pouring them each a glass.

Catelyn laughed, “you're a true friend indeed.”

Lyanna joined in the laughter, “Now, tell me. It'll get easier with each glass.”

“I'm just worried about Ned. He's just focusing on recovering right now, and thankfully not pushing himself anymore. That incident proved he's not in the clear yet. He feels guilty for not being able to remember, and now afraid that he never will.”

“He will.” Lya interjected quickly. “And even if....he doesn't. He'll still be our Ned.” She continued gazing at Catelyn with cautious eyes.

“Of course he will. He will always be Ned, Lya. And its enough for me, its a good place to start. God knows we found our way to each other against all odds the last time. If we have enough time, I think we could do it again.” Catelyn shook her head remembering the drama that came along when they first started dating over decade ago. They’d tried to keep it a secret, but once it got out, they were in a different kind of hell for a while. Brandon said he approved, but he sulked every time they were near, or took cheap shots and jabs at them until one time Ned actually broke his jaw and refused to speak to him again. Everyone - including her sweet Ned - thought Catelyn was doing it to get back at Brandon, when it had never even occurred to her. Brandon believed it too, and as a retaliation went on to announce his engagement to Ashara just a few nights after they’d told Rickard about their relationship. Soon however, everyone realized how much they loved each other and Brandon seemed to understand as well, even if he remained somewhat wistful towards her. Especially after what happened to Ashara. or what we were made to believe had happened to her.

Still with all the drama going on around them, it was like she and Ned had created their own little world where nothing truly bothered them. Their love had only grown stronger over time. The world just seemed to fade away when they were together and the problems only brought them closer to each other.

“You're thinking about him. Aren't ya?” Lyanna smirked, startling her out of her thoughts.

“Am I really that predictable?” Catelyn laughed sheepishly.

“Oh, We've seen you two together and apart for over a decade now. And as nauseatingly sweet as you can be together, you're not exactly different apart when you're thinking of each other. Well, it got less obvious over time, but what I saw now was the twenty one year old Catelyn Tully talking about her future husband.”

Catelyn tried to fight of the heat she felt in her cheeks, cursing her Tully trait. “The point is, I will love Ned no matter what. And I can still live with him never remembering what we had.” Catelyn whispered softly.

“You can't see it Catelyn... you can't see the way he still looks at you.” Lyanna replied.

Catelyn shivered, she had caught him staring at her many times with a mixture of reverence and desire, like he used to. And she saw Lyanna smirk at her again, so she shook her thoughts pouring more wine in her glass.

Lyanna continued, “Just give him some time. I'm sure it will be fine... And...Jon said you two are back to....'normal'.” she said hiding a smile.
Catelyn looked puzzled for a moment before realization struck her and her eyes widened remembering the time Jon had caught them in a heated embrace, kissing each other for all they're worth in the kitchen. “Oh crikey god,” she muttered under her breath, knowing well Lyanna would never let her live this one down.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh don't flatter yourself. It doesn't top the last time the boys caught you at it.”

Catelyn groaned louder, hiding her face this time listening to Lyanna's laughter. She would never let it go, few years ago they were at Winterfell when the boys had walked into the godswood to play only to find her and Ned sprawled on the ground. Thankfully they had their clothes somewhat on, as they were about to leave, but Ned was in the mood for round two and pushed her back on the ground with his mouth pressed to hers and hands sliding back under her pants, stroking all coherence from her. The boys were running in the godswood to play and stumbled upon them in the clearing and gasped loudly. They had scampered to cover themselves and then spend most of the next few days making excuses for why they were there. The boys believed it, but neither Lyanna nor Benjen were fooled by “Catelyn fell and Ned was just helping her up” story after Jon innocently recollected the specifics. Lyanna had exclaimed, “Is that so? Ned gave you a....'hand up', did he now?” Benjen had burst out laughing, boys had been thoroughly confused. “Where exactly was his hand...? -” her question was stopped halfway by the admonishment from Rickard - who surprisingly was trying to hide a smile and glare at his youngest. Catelyn had been bright red beside Ned who, in spite of the disapproving face, had a faint pink colour on his cheeks. She bit her lip now, thinking about those times long gone.

Lyanna was watching her closely, “Catelyn, tell me you two.......have...... you know.”

Catelyn blushed, “Oh, I don't want to talk about that.” she groaned again walking a few paces away from her. This was impossible. Talking to this woman was impossible.

“You haven’t have you?” She countered incredulously. “Why? I mean its soooo obvious that he wants you.”

She turned to her sharply, forgetting all her embarrassment of speaking of her sex life to her husband's sister. “And you think I don’t?! This is the longest dry spell we've had!” Catelyn replied, almost spilling her wine after dramatically waving her hands. Then it hit her what Lyanna had said. “Hang on. What do you mean, 'its so obvious he wants you’?”

“Well, have you ever seen him look at you? Apart from longing, you can see him virtual undress you with his eyes. Thats usually what Brandon would do, I haven't seen Ned like that...since....-well, since he first met you. I assumed you two were at least doing it regularly. But I'm guessing, I'm wrong.” Lyanna took another sip from her glass.

“Ugh, don't even get me started on that. Some days its so difficult, especially when he walks upstairs after his workout, with gym clothes that just....cling to his perspired body...tightly” Catelyn said almost to her self, trailing off as the image filled her mind. God, but it frustrated her. She both loved and hated that they had a gym in the basement, these last two weeks. She'd even changed the time of her work out after the first few times she found him in there. Running on the treadmill, she could endure. But when she walked in on him carrying weights, his body slick with sweat as he grunted with effort, she'd all but walked out the same way, eyes closed and muttering curses under her breath. She just couldn't do it anymore. Yet, her mind was filled with the thoughts of him....in the gym.... working out....--

“OH MY GOD. JUST DO IT!” Lyanna exclaimed, cringing and dramatically nodding her head, startling Catelyn out of her thoughts. Catelyn realized what she'd just said and stared dumbly, sipping her wine. It acted as an excuse to hide her face, since she had momentarily forgotten Lyanna was
Ned’s sister and spilled what was in her mind, embarrassing them both.

“I cannot believe you two. You’re the best couple I know, you both obviously are horny as fuck for each other and you’re still not bridging the gap. What is the matter with you?” She asked irritated. After a few moments she continued. “You know I’m glad now that I’m taking the children tomorrow. You two really need this.” God knew that was true. Catelyn hoped she was right. She hoped they could find a way to each other. They were closer now than they were before and hopefully this alone time would bring them even closer.

She sighed at looked out through the glass window in the backyard where the men was standing and talking. She caught her breath to see Ned look at her almost the same time she looked at him. She smiled softly looking for a long time. We’ll get through this, my love. I promise. I won’t let you face any of it alone.

“Ned?...Ned?” he was startled out of his reverie as he gazed softly at his beautiful wife who was in the kitchen putting left overs away for the night. She'd broken her gaze and resumed work a while ago, but he'd been unable to stop looking at her move gracefully in the kitchen. Her auburn hair pulled up in the ponytail was a vibrant fiery orange in the lights. He stopped his thoughts before he got distracted to look at his brother, “What did you say, Ben?”

“How are things with Cat?” Benjen inquired hiding a smirk.

Ned sighed, “We're good. She's amazing the way she is handling this. In fact, I wanted to do something for her.”

“Like what?” Ben asked sipping his beer.

“I was thinking about maybe having a date night. Just to wind down after everything that happened the last few days. Before we get busy with work this coming week.” He didn't mention what he wanted to include in a date to them, but his eyes lingered on the pool behind him as he thought of making this date special for her.

“That's actually a good idea. Woo her!” Ben said and quirked his eyebrows.


“What? I can woo.” He argued, sounding rather like petulant.

Jory raised his eyebrows. “Prove it. Woo me.” he said flatly.

“Buy me a drink first.” Ned said cheekily, raising his chin up. It faintly reminded him of his dinner with Dave and he wondered where his friend was right now and if he was safe.

Jory looked triumphantly at Benjen, “See? He can't woo AND he's high-maintenance.” Ned shook his head.

“Well, maybe you don't have to do anything grand. Just go with your gut. Do what you think will make her happy.” Ben advised. He nodded, he had something in mind. He decided to act on it.

Then he started feeling soft snow falling past the trees, It had gotten quite cold the last few days. It was spring, yet they still got some snowfall. “Right, lets go back in before Catelyn starts worrying that we've frozen to death.” Jory said leading the way.
When they walked in Catelyn and Lyanna were in the kitchen drinking wine. Apparently the children were already asleep. “So, Ben, we are planning on geeky movie marathons so we can turn Sansa and Arya into nerds like we did Robb.” Lyanna told Benjen.

“A Geekathon! Am I invited???” Jory asked with wide eyes, looking as young as Jon and Robb.

“You're on the VIP list, sir.” Lyanna answered. Jory beamed, going to the fridge to get another beer.

Ned walked towards Catelyn who looked up from her glass. His heart skipped a beat.

“Hi.” he whispered when he was close enough.

“Hi.” she whispered back, dusting off the snowflakes on his shirt and brushing them off his hair, the familiarity of the gesture left him breathless for a while.

“You owe me a date, Mrs. Stark.” He said gently holding her hand.

“And what did you have in mind?” She asked, smirking.

“Is that a yes then?” he asked expectantly. “Always.” she whispered looking into his eyes intently, and he smiled widely. He saw her catch her breath, “Well, since we have the weekend to ourselves....” he leaned in to whisper, “you'll have to wait and see tomorrow.” And she laughed softly and they kept looking at each other for a while. He was liking this idea of a weekend alone, he needed to draw up the courage to tell her how much she meant to him.

They all spoke for a while longer, he was ignoring the dull pounding in his head. It had been an exhausting day, especially after the talk about business in the afternoon. He willed himself to appear normal, but soon, he started to get unsteady and Catelyn looked at him and said, “Thats it. Mr. Stark, off to bed with you now.” He'd promised to take his medication and walked to his room fast, not wanting to be helped by anyone to his bed. He'd reluctantly taken the pain meds and collapsed on the bed. He felt the fatigue set in and hated that his strength hadn’t returned, that he had to leave a room full of people to just go sleep. He sighed, ignoring the dull ache in his head, turned on his other side and tried to fall asleep.

He dreamt of Catelyn and the children. Jon, Lyra and Ben were there too, looking for him in the woods. He was there, within sight, he tried to call out to them, they just moved farther away and seemed not to even note his presence. He called out again and scrambled to run towards them only being pulled away himself. Soon he was the only one in the woods running around to find them, he saw Catelyn far away strolling, and he called out to her, but no voice would come out of his throat anymore. She started fading away and he called out again running towards her, hands outstretched desperately wanting to pull her to him. But she kept fading away and soon she was gone. He was all alone in the woods with nowhere to go. He heard strange voices, telling him to stay there, convincing him he was Richard Williams, forcing him to believe. His head hurt, he wanted to scream but he just ran until the voices stopped. He looked around and it all looked the same, he was lost, then he was falling in the dark, as though the light was being sucked out, he scrambled for purchase. Then everything went cold.... his children were gone, his family was gone. Catelyn was gone. He was completely alone...

“NO!!” he yelled, sitting straight up, his left hand stretching to his left. He looked over to the left feeling the familiar longing deep in his heart, he recalled the countless nights he'd felt it in...
Creekwood. “Cat,” he whispered to himself. He needed to see them, know they were here. It was in
the middle of the night, but he got up and walked upstairs, peaking in both rooms to see the children
sleeping soundly. He kissed each child on the forehead tucking them in and carefully walked out.
Before he knew it, he found himself standing before the mahogany door to the master bedroom. She
was still up, he saw light from under the door. He remembered his nightmare, along with every other
he had in the last five months and it strengthened his resolve. He knocked. She opened the door, and
furrowed her brow in concern. He sighed at her sight, his mind still hazy from his nightmare.

“Ned, are you alright?” she asked alarmed, after opening the door.

“I....can I sleep here tonight, Catelyn?...Please?” he asked, words falling through his lips desperately.

“Yes.” she answered immediately. He felt relief, he didn’t have the strength anymore, he needed to
feel her near him, feel her arms around him, to know that she was real. He walked in the room,
thankful for not having another reaction to it. It was warmer than the rest of the house. He didn’t care
if he had to sleep on the sun, if it meant she would be there when he woke up.

“You can sleep in your boxers if you want. I know this room is the warmest in the house.” she said
shyly reading his thoughts. He looked up at her, hesitating.

“I've seen you in much less before.” His shocked must have appeared plainly on his face, because
she laughed. “We have three children, Ned. And I guarantee you a stork did not drop them here.
And I assure you I have seen you in much less, much more than just three times.”

He huffed a laugh at that. Taking off his shirt and sweat pants he'd donned hastily before he'd ran
upstairs, and he heard her gasp. She walked over to see the faint scars on his chest made by the
shards of glass. She touched them gingerly and he tried to control his breathing and resisting the urge
to pull her closer. “From the car, I was thrown over the windshield, they told me. Thats when the
glass shards penetrated here..” he said holding her fingers on his chest “and here....”and then up to
his left eyebrow. “It wasn’t serious though. It didn't bruise my eye, thankfully.”

“And you don't know what happened to the back of your head?” she asked, softly tracing the ridges
of his scars.

“No. All I recall is waking up at the hospital with a pounding headache and itching bandages. And
terrible daytime television.” he laughed nervously. He focused on thinking of anything else as he
could feel what her proximity was doing to him physically. In truth he was holding back, he didn’t
wish to push her too soon even if all he wished was to pull her on the bed with him and get lost in
her embrace. But he had to agree he needed some time after the what happened a couple of days ago.
He had to push away every thing he wished he could do with her right now. Sensing his distress she
walked over to turn off the lights, and they both got in the bed.

“Thank you, Catelyn,” he whispered.

“Whatever for? This is your bed too, Ned.” she said.

All was silent for a while, soon he turned over to his left to see she slept. He looked at her beautiful
face, free of the worries and burdens of the day and tamped down the urge to trace it with his finger.
Slowly, he felt himself drifting to sleep as well. Next thing he felt was excruciating distress, he must
have dreamt badly yet again as he woke again crying out and braced himself for the inevitable sharp
jolt of longing to strike his heart.

And for the first time, someone from his left side reached over and grabbed him, pulling him to them.
Cat, he felt his head press against her warm chest. “Yes, I'm here, Ned. You're safe, you're
home.” Her fingers stroking his hair as she whispered soothing words. He felt a whimper escape his lips and she kissed the top of his head. He was scared, more than he admitted to himself after what he knew about the drugs and what happened a couple of days ago. He didn't want to be alone, to be back in that dark place.

*Please stay,* he thought desperately not wanting to wake up alone, to discover it was all a dream, not if he would never remember their life together. He wasn’t strong enough to wake up back in Creekwood with no memories; to see her and their children, their family gone, he just couldn’t. He was terrified of losing all he had if he truly couldn’t remember ever again. He wished to hold on to what he did have. He was slowly drifting beneath consciousness, listening to her steady heartbeat when he heard her soft whisper.

“Always,” she promised.

The last vestiges of his fears slipped away and he knew his wife would still be there when he woke up.

And for the first time in over five months, wrapped in his Catelyn's warm embrace, Ned Stark fell into a deep, contented sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year, everyone! Thanks for continuing to read this, it means a lot! :)
"Can you bring us some wine, Ned?"

He turned in the direction of Catelyn's voice and saw a glimmer of copper far away, he followed until a familiar scene unraveled in front of him and he found himself standing in a cozy living room. He was familiar with this place. Catelyn looked up from where she sat on the leather couch and smiled. He realized he was standing with two glasses of wine in his hands. He went to sit beside her, almost as a reflex, almost like he couldn't control what he was doing. And he went with it. He felt aware of every surrounding detail as if it were seared in his mind. He could see the kitchen from where he sat. He saw the flickering of candle lights. He was in an apartment, a very familiar apartment. He instinctively knew it was late in the evening and he was aware of the faint sounds of rain falling outside.

“To new beginnings!” Catelyn toasted, smiling brightly at him. They clinked their wine glasses, as he sipped the wine, it left a strong tart on his tongue.

“I always know you'd make it into Winter Town University, Ned. I'm so happy for you!”

“Thanks Cat. I'll miss you, you know.” He heard himself say. His heart was beating wildly in his chest as he looked deeply in her impossibly blue eyes.

“And I'll miss you too, Ned. But don't worry, its just one year. I'll be applying to WinterU myself next year.” She said, holding his gaze.

He felt his heart skip a beat. “Cat, I thought you wanted to go to Trident. I don't want you to give up on it, I want you to be happy, Cat.”

“I want to stay here, Ned. With you. Unless you don't want me here.” Catelyn looked down.

Ned gently nudged her to look at him, his thumb brushing at her jawline. “Of course I want you here, Cat. I just don’t want you to give up anything, not for me.”

“This is what I want, Ned. To be here, with you.” She answered looking deeply in his eyes, he knew she meant it.

“Thats what I want too, Cat.” He heard himself whisper. “I want you more than you'll ever know.” She just looked at him, she was so beautiful and so close he couldn't stop the words falling from his mouth. “I love you, Cat.” She gasped, and stared at him, her mouth agape. “I know you're still not over Brandon, and thats okay. I just wanted to say it before you returned to Cerwyn College for your final year.”

“What?...Ned do you think I'm in love with Brandon?” Catelyn placed the glass on the table and sat up straight to talk.

“Of course, Cat. You were with him for almost a year before we caught him cheating on you with Ashara.” He'd seen Catelyn through the break up, she'd been heartbroken. And he wanted to punch his brother in the face again for making her go through it.

“Oh god! Ned, I don’t love Brandon. I love you!” Ned's eyes widened, and his heart stopped beating
altogether.

“But, you were so heartbroken, Cat. You were so sad. I saw you.” He said, not caring that he sounded like a child. He'd gotten close to Catelyn in one of the darkest times of their lives. He'd just broken up with Ashara- and that hadn't hurt much at all since they'd only been going out for a few weeks, most of which he couldn't stop thinking of Catelyn. Partially the reason he knew it would never work out, and he had to break it off. But he'd already agreed to be her date at the party, so he'd decided to talk to her about it after. He ended up breaking up at the party, of course. The moment he'd realized she was spending time with him to make his brother jealous, he'd forgotten the rest and broken up with her as civilly as he could, considering the circumstance him and Catelyn had caught them in. Eventually they'd made peace when it was clear that she felt apologetic and her relationship with his brother was official. He didn't blame her completely though, after all, he had gone out with her even when he couldn't stop thinking about Catelyn. Partially the reason he knew it would never work out, and he had to break it off. But he'd already agreed to be her date at the party, so he'd decided to talk to her about it after. He ended up breaking up at the party, of course. The moment he'd realized she was spending time with him to make his brother jealous, he'd forgotten the rest and broken up with her as civilly as he could, considering the circumstance him and Catelyn had caught them in. Eventually they'd made peace when it was clear that she felt apologetic and her relationship with his brother was official. He didn't blame her completely though, after all, he had gone out with her even when he couldn't stop thinking about Catelyn. He'd fallen hard for Catelyn when Brandon had introduced them two years ago. He knew it was wrong, he'd tried not to love her. But, if he were truly honest with himself he'd loved her from the moment he'd met her. How could he not? She was nice, kind, caring, funny and intelligent and the most beautiful girl he'd ever met.

“Yes, I didn't like his philandering because it was disrespectful, but I never loved him. I was going to break up with him after that party anyway, even if we hadn't found them screwing in Robert's bedroom. I was sad because I knew with the amount of pictures taken by everyone there, the press would be all over us. And I didn't want daddy to have to deal with all that. And I wasn't the only one who was sad, Ned. You were too.” He tried to protest, but she held up her hand, “I know you said you never loved Ashara. But you love Brandon, and he betrayed you too. I promise you, Ned, I am not longing for your brother. You are the only person I've loved for a long time. I tried not to, I knew it was wrong, but every time you took care of me because Brandon stood me up, or spent time with me when I had no friends, or showed me around the city when I was new in town, I got to know you more and more. And the more I knew you, the more I fell for you. I told myself I wasn't in love with you, but I knew I couldn't live a lie for long. The first time you walked me to my dorm, and when I complained about the cold, you teased me for having 'thin southron blood' while wrapping me in your jacket, I already knew I'd fallen deeply in love with you. And that night, I decided to stop lying to myself.”

He stared at her dumbstruck, her blue eyes glistening with tears. It was too good to be true, but he saw nothing but truth and love in her beautiful eyes. He pulled her to him and kissed her, feeling an overwhelming sense of joy. Catelyn loved him and he loved her. When they pulled back, sitting silently with their foreheads touched, she broke the silence.

“I want this, Ned. I truly want to make this work. We will get through this year, it will be difficult, I will miss you terribly, but well get through.”

“Me too. I want this to work, Cat. I don't care what anyone says, we've dealt with it all so far. We can do it again. No matter what happens, I will be here with you for as long as you want me to be.”

“That'll be forever.” she smiled, making his heart skip a beat another time. “Forever it is then.” he grinned back, before becoming very serious. He wanted her to know he meant it. He held her face gently in his hands, and looked deeply in those blue eyes he wanted to get lost into.

“I promise you that, Catelyn Tully. Because I love you. I loved you even when I barely knew you, and I always will. I promise, I will love you more and more everyday and I will do everything in my power to make you happy for the rest of our lives.”

Speechless, she stared at him before grabbing him in her arms. He buried his face in the soft auburn
tresses, and felt her warmth surround him. “I'm so happy, Ned.” she whispered in his shoulder.

“I'm happy too.” Forgetting the rest of the world, he looked forward to this new beginning with the woman he loved, listening to the synced up beating of their hearts. . . together.

****

A soft rhythmic heartbeat slowly roused him from his sleep. Ned Stark opened his eyes lazily, conscious of the steady thrumming sound in his left ear, he’d never slept so soundly for as long as he could remember. He felt good. It must have been a good dream, whatever it was. He'd never woken up this blissfully before. Suddenly, he became aware of the warm form he pressed beneath him, sleepily he moved to change his position to relish this new found warmth and comfort a little more and his nose nuzzled a neck, he could sense a steady pulse and something cool and soft tickling the other side of his face. He had missed this feeling, the comfort was so familiar he didn't want to get up.

It took him a few moments to realize he was in bed with his wife, as if to confirm that recognition he heard a soft sigh from somewhere above his head. Slowly he raised up, balancing on his elbows to look at Catelyn's sleeping form. Last night's events started coming back to him. I thought it was all a dream, he thought. Always, unbidden the word came in his mind. Had he truly heard it? Had she said it? Or did his fearful mind conjure it up to make him feel better? He didn't know, but he couldn't be more thrilled to find her truly here after he woke up because thought of waking up alone again and not seeing Catelyn was as painful as a bed of nettles. But there she was, in deep sleep, her auburn hair spread across the pillow, mouth slightly agape, peaceful as he had ever seen her. She looked breathtaking. He had to push the urge to capture her lower lip in between his own and run his fingers through her hair. He watched her sleep for a while, but he soon ended up carefully pulling himself away from her completely, as his body started reacting to his increasingly lascivious trail of thoughts.

It was dark outside still, but he was glad he was up. He continued through his morning with the thought of waking up next to his wife. Lyanna had decided to take the children for a much needed outing. She was picking them up soon for a whole weekend of fun, and she had invited Nan to go with them. He wished Catelyn could go, and he felt selfish to not mention it. In truth he couldn't imagine being alone in the house without the rest of them, for three days. He knew he would miss them terribly, and decided to sulk in the guilt of keeping his wife from having fun and vowed to himself that he'd try to make this weekend as special as he could.

There was only so much he could do staying at home, so he went to the kitchen and opened his cookbook for ideas. There was one particular recipe handwritten on a page, tucked in the book, and he felt drawn to it by the note his past self had written on it, and he went with the feeling. But, he wanted to do something more so she'd know just how much she meant to him. He was never good with words, and he wished his actions to do what his words couldn't. When he spent the next half and hour trying to think of something clever and still couldn't come up with anything he concluded his wife was definitely 'the brains' in their marriage.

Soon, something from the dining area made a noise. He walked up to the table curiously and realized it was the phone Benjen had drop for him the night before. It was all set with the information and numbers he needed when he’d start corresponding with everyone after the announcement. He'd forgotten about it completely after he’d gone to his room early to sleep. Well, sent to his room early by his wife for mild disorientation. He felt perfectly fine now, he was glad for that. He was tired of
lying in bed all the time. He picked up the phone and checked the message, it was from Lyanna.

*Change of plans, I'll pick up the children three hours early.*

He frowned at the screen. He tried to respond, awkwardly and slowly – still getting used to the new phone.

*Dmmn it Lya how am i going to get them ready in time they r still sleeping*

He had no clue where the punctuation were or how to access them and hated that his fingers were too big for the tiny buttons on the screen.

*Cat? Is that you? Why are you typing like that?*

He replied again.

*No its ned its my phone.right*

*Hi Ned. Still suck at texting, I see. I texted you both, just in case. I'm glad its you, Cat would have skinned me alive for the last minute changes. Anyway, I realized the zoo closes early today and we need to get there early if they want to see all the exhibits.*

He narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

*And*

he typed and waited.

*And.... I forgot I had a meeting in the evening. So... yeah we have to go early so I can get back on time.*
Ned sighed.

*Fine I'll get them ready, but they'll be cranberry.*

??

*I mean cranberry*

*What?*

*CrAnkY why is it doing this to me*

*Ned, please stop. You're embarrassing yourself. I'll pick them up at 6:30. They can sleep in the car, it takes 2 hours to get there.*

He frowned, but stopped texting. *6:30 means 7 am.* He'd learned Lyanna-lingo in the last few weeks. He just resumed making breakfast and hoped his children would wake up without making a fuss. When he went upstairs, Catelyn was still sleeping peacefully, so he woke the tiny sleepy heads, gave them breakfast and got them all ready and groomed to go. He felt a bit proud at how he managed the wild bunch this early in the morning and half wished his wife could see him like this. Meanwhile Catelyn was still in dreamland – in her defence, it was too early in the morning and she usually woke up later anyway. The children were fairly well behaved because they wanted to go out and were too excited to go back to sleep again. His amazing wife had already packed everything they needed for the weekend, making his job much easier.

Lyanna picked the children up, shockingly she arrived at 6:30 sharp and rolled her eyes when he looked at the time and back at her in surprise. When she left, he went back to clean the table after the mess they'd made in a hurry and make breakfast for him and his wife. When he was in the pantry to get some ingredients, he spied a small tray which he thought was for having breakfast in bed and he jumped at the idea. He knew Catelyn would be up soon, he prepared everything, quickly ran out in the back garden to pick flowers to put in the makeshift vase on the tray and all but ran upstairs. He knocked before entering and greeted Catelyn with a smile. She was sitting up, but looked around confused, yawning. The sunlight was streaming faintly through the windows making her hair glow. She was adorable and stunning at the same time. Unbidden he remembered how he'd woken up and he felt overwhelmed by emotions again.

“Hey, mornin’.” he said when he could speak again, sitting beside her and placing the tray on the bed.

“Aww, Ned. This is so sweet. You didn't have to...” Catelyn smiled at him before looking down at the tray. Suddenly, he realized they were all alone, together. And he had two more days of it to look
forward to, and he felt happy and nervous at the same time.

“I absolutely did. You deserve to be cherished, Catelyn.” He answered seriously, she looked up smiling but stopped and looked deeply in his eyes before whispering “thanks.”

“The children...?” she asked peaking in the corridor.

“Lya picked them up earlier. Apparently, the zoo closes early today. She wanted to get there soon so they could see all the exhibits.”

“You should've woken me.” She frowned, before handing him a fork, and pouring maple syrup over her lemon blueberry pancakes then pouring honey over his, just as he liked. He watched her for a moment and smiled at her, before sitting back to enjoy his breakfast.

“You looked so peaceful, I didn't have the heart to. I promised them we would do a video call tonight once they all get home. Anyway, if it helps, all of them kissed you on the cheek before leaving, even Jon.” He grinned.

“Did you?” she asked, he could tell she was trying to hide the delightful blush in her cheeks. He remembered how much he wanted to spend the whole damn morning kissing her beautiful face. He looked down sheepishly, “No...But I wanted to. Very much.” He said the last part looking up straight in her eyes deeply.

She blushed, as he'd expected. “So what is the plan-?” Ned stopped her words by kissing her firmly, but carefully not to knock over the tray between them. He pulled back slightly, “Lets start with breakfast, then we can... improvise,” he kissed her chastely again on her nose and sat back to eat, smirking in his mind when he heard her sigh. They talked about everything and nothing and he told her to sit back when they'd finished breakfast, taking the tray back to the kitchen.

“Did you sleep well, Ned?” she asked after he returned. And he froze for a moment, the nightmare rushing back into his mind. Before he realized she was standing next to him and she'd pulled him in her arms, whispering soothing words in his ear. His breathing was harsh, but he pressed his face in her hair smelling the sweet floral smell of shampoo. Soon he felt grounded, and he pulled back to see her blue eyes searching his face for any distress and he pressed his forehead to her own.

“Thank you” he whispered.

"Always." she replied. His eyes widened as he realized everything he'd thought he'd conjured up in fear to find solace had been true. The events of last night rushed in his mind and he felt a strong surge of love for this amazing woman.

“I did. I sleep well when you're near me.” He confessed.

“Me too. I don't think I've ever slept so well to tune out all the clamouring of our offspring that early in the morning.” She whispered, he pulled back to see she was biting her lip. They both laughed sheepishly.

“Not much clamouring, lucky me, they were very well-behaved today." he sighed, "Catelyn....can I..” sleep here from now on? He wanted to say, but the words stuck in his throat.

“Yes.” she answered his unspoken question. And he smiled at her widely. They settled in comfortable silence before starting to talk about the children, he was telling her how Sansa helped him this morning by brushing Arya's hair and how Arya was running around the room trying to dodge her sister and would protectively hold a hand on her curls and the other one on Woof's fur when Sansa drew near. Catelyn had laughed out loud and was equally exasperated by their wild
wolf pup resisting getting her hair brushed.

“Oh, I hope Arya doesn't come home Sunday night with head full of tangles. She always convinced Lyanna and Nan not to brush her hair with big puppy eyes and I would come home from work just to spend hours trying to get the tangles out. I was forced to cut her hair short, yet she still manages to mess it somehow.”

He laughed at the description, Catelyn just looked at him and he stopped, realizing she was serious. “I'm sorry, Cat. It's just you looked exactly like Sansa when she was admonishing Arya to sit still so she could brush her hair.” She stared at him wordlessly. He knew he'd called her 'Cat', out loud, he thought it would be okay. He called her 'Cat' in his mind, but didn't dare to say it openly thinking it would be unwelcome. But it felt like the most natural thing, and after what they'd been through the last few days, he thought...he hoped...

“'You called me Cat.' Her voice was thick and tears were falling freely.

“Yes, is that okay?” he asked suddenly afraid of her answer.

Catelyn laughed, caressing his beard, “Of course it is. I've always been Cat to you. I was waiting for this moment since you arrived, Ned.”

He gave a sigh of relief, suddenly feeling warm all over. “Cat...” whispered. It felt right. They smiled at each other as they both felt something strengthen between them.

“So, they were excited?” She asked after a few moments.

Ned smiled again, “Yes. The boys was planning which water slide to go on first. Sansa just wanted to see all baby animals. And our wild wolf pup, Arya wanted to see a real wolf.” Catelyn looked at him so he'd continue and he grinned at the memory, “She decided to take Woof with her so he could be friends with the wolves at the zoo. You should've seen her, she just walked on her pudgy little feet balancing woof in one hand and holding Jon's hand in the other.”

Catelyn looked as though her heart melted. But quickly she seemed sad and he knew exactly what she was thinking, he picked up his phone and followed the directions his sister gave him this morning.

“What is this?” She asked as he was searching for the damn file and clicked on the video button. She gasped, he stood close to her and looked at her reaction to it. He could hear the children's babbling from the speaker.

“Mommy, we're going to the zoo!!! Take care of daddy okay?” Robb said jumping excitedly.

“Oh! Theres my sweet boy.” She said hugging Ned closely, he put his arm around her and kissed her head.

“Lyanna joked she always have to strap him tightly to his seat so he doesn't bounce out of the car.” He grinned, Catelyn shook her head.

“Oh look there's baby Ned!” she exclaimed, making him look back at the screen to see Jon. She'd told him she called Jon that when she first held him as a baby, having compared him to Ned's baby pictures. Unbidden, he heard Catelyn's voice in his mind. Oh Ned, he looks like the baby you! He focused on the screen again to hear his nephew speak.

“...Bye Aunt Cat, I'm so excited for this! I wish you and uncle Ned could come, but I'll bring you both a present!” Jon said excitedly grinning at the camera. Ned had been surprised by that himself,
since he had only seen the boy smile a handful of times, Jon had inherited his solemnity just as his face. Catelyn smiled in delight, “Oh, its so good to see the boy smile.” He hummed his agreement, remembering Lyanna wiping her tears quickly while filming it.

Then Sansa smiled prettily at the camera holding Arya's hand firmly. “Mommy, I will miss you. I promise I'll say hi to baby pandas for you.”

“Oh they look perfect!” Catelyn said.

“Like their mother,” he murmured and felt Catelyn gaze at him briefly.

Sansa walked closer to the camera. “It's warm today...Don't let daddy melt okay?”

Catelyn laughed out loud, “Yeah what does she mean by that?” He asked.

“I'll tell you later. Oh look! there is my wild wolf pup!” Catelyn exclaimed, looking back at the screen.

“Maammy....Maammy!!” Arya exclaimed, trying to pull the camera closer to her.

“Say hi to your mother Arya. Tell her what you're going to see today.” Ned heard his own voice in the background.

“WOOF!" She yelled trying to say wolves and they both laughed at that. “Woof can meet them too. And make fwiends.” She said tried to hold Woof up. “Say bye to mommy, Woof.” and waved at the camera.

The all waved goodbye loudly and got in the car, and Lyanna turned the camera to view herself.

“Hey Cat. Make sure you don't 'fall' too much this weekend okay? Ned is still recovering.” She said and winked.

He heard a soft chuckle and he put the phone back on a side table. “Yeah, what was she talking about-” When he turned to look at his wife with a smile, he was struck speechless. Tears clung to her lashes, soft flush in her cheeks and she looked at him like he'd done something amazing for her.

“Thank you, Ned. That made me so happy.” She whispered.

Suddenly he felt guilt. “I want to make you happy, Cat. I just wish I could make you happy everyday. I wish I did more. After what happened I realized I've taken you for granted. I never told you what you and the children mean to me. How much I want to remember our life together!”

Catelyn's hand on his jaw forced him to look at her. “None of it was your fault. You are doing so much for us, Ned. It means so much to me that you are safe and here in my arms. I spent weeks and months worried you would never come back, no matter how I refused to give up on looking for you. And I was glad I didn't. You returned to me. And that is itself makes me happy everyday." She bit her lip briefly, before whispering, "..I just hope you are happy here.”

“Of course, Catelyn! You and the children, you are everything to me.” He kissed her again, holding her face gently.

“I would do anything in my power to make you happy, Cat.” His voice sounded thick with emotion to himself.

“Really, Ned?” Catelyn whispered, looking deeply in his eyes. And he felt as if she was looking in
his soul. It was clear what he read in those beautiful blue eyes, “Yes.” He whispered.

He nodded dumbly, transfixed by her sight. He softly kissed her tears, pulling back he said, “So, we have a few hours. I wish I had a more of a solid plan, but I'm afraid we can't do anything outside in daylight. I am willing to do whatever it is you want to do today. So what do you want, Cat?”

She looked at him for a long while again. They were standing very close and he knew both of their thoughts lingered in a similar place, they’d skirted around this place countless times, always moving away. But he knew this time was different, before he could say anything she kissed him full on the lips. When they were out of breath she pulled away for a few moments and whispered, “Let's improvise...”

“Gladly...” he whispered back before kissing her again. He felt her wind her arms around him simultaneously as their lips met and she pulled him to her. He felt was goosebumps raising up on his skin while he kissed her deeply, breathing her in. He gasped when she pushed closer and she put her tongue in his mouth making him shudder. He could taste the sweetness of maple syrup still lingering on her tongue, her lips remained ever so soft. His hands roamed all over her body, they broke their kiss to catch their breath, but she kept kissing his jaw. It felt so good, before he knew, he was backing her up to the bed. “Are you sure you want this, Cat?” he whispered in between breaths.

“Yes” she whispered in his ear, her breath making him shiver. She nipped his ear and it felt so good, his cock twitched and instinctively he pulled her closer.

He'd imagined this countless times. The more comfortable they got, the more he wanted to kiss her and do so much more. There were times she helped him in the kitchen, making a joke or being smug about knowing a fact about him after she beheld the surprise on his face, he would tamp down the urge to push her up against the next surface and kiss her breathless, like he was now. It wasn't just lust though, he knew that now, he knew he couldn't live without her anymore. He couldn't imagine his life without her. If she were around he couldn't take his eyes off her, and when she was away she was always in his thoughts. He wanted to make her happy, smile he wished to give her everything she wanted and more. He knew the unspoken walls they'd built between them were now crumbling, and he couldn't be happier. His hands were roaming over her body in their own accord, just as his thoughts spiraled out of control, voicing things he hadn't until now as he pressed himself closer to the delicious warmth of his wife, feeling the curves. She pulled him to her, both falling back into the soft bedding.

He settled in between her thighs and buried his right hand in her hair, ran his fingers through the soft locks before his lips pressing against her again. She pulled him closer, her hand in his hair tracing his gash ever so longingly. She drew his lower lip in her mouth tracing it with her tongue and he pressed his forehead against her own, groaning at the pleasure of it. His mind was spinning, he felt a dizzying sense of relief and high in the moment as he continued to drink her in. His caught her own lower lip in his mouth sucking on it as he wished to do just a while ago when she slept there looking so damn gorgeous. He was stiffening rapidly losing control, he needed her, he pushed himself against her warmth instinctively with a gasp. He pulled back to look at her, apology on his lips and the sight made him catch his breath. She moaned throatily, her eyes shut tightly. Then she was staring at him, pupils dilated, breathing heavily, her lips reddened by his kiss and a gorgeous blush on her cheeks trailing down beneath her shirt as she regarded him with heavy lidded eyes.

“Beautiful” he whispered, feeling slightly embarrassed before she gasped and pulled him to her again. He kissed her jaw up to her ears and then ran his mouth down to her collar bone, pressing kisses to the freckles dusting her flushed skin. She was pulling at his shirt and he shirked it quickly, before returning to kiss her at her pulse, making her jump slightly and claw at his back.

“My sweats...quickly” she panted. He groaned and pulled down her sweats running his hands over the long legs. He looked up and as he tried to pull up her top, her hand caught his own. The
hesitance stopped his movements.

“Lets just leave it on...” she said breathlessly, biting her lip. He fought against the arousal that shot through him at the sight. “Are you sure you are comfortable...” he said his voice deep and hoarse, desperately hoping she was.

“Yes.” she answered quickly. “After three children, my body doesn’t look the same, Ned.”

“You're beautiful, Cat. Everything about you is beautiful.” he looked at her, so she knew he meant every word. Nodding, she pulled at her top, just as he pulled down her underwear. He gasped at the sight of her naked with her hair spreading on the pillow. He looked over every inch of her body, appreciating her creamy skin now flushing under his gaze. She was breathing hard, the sight of her beautiful breasts and the dark auburn curls dusting the top of her sex made his cock go rock hard.

“Oh god, Cat. You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.” He gasped. He saw faint grey and pink scars on her belly, and assumed that is what she was talking about. He bent down and kissed each one, then moving up her belly, he kissed her beautiful breasts and took one of the delicious nipples in his mouth while teasing the other with his fingers. “Oh Ned...” he heard her moan throatily her hand pushing his head closer to her body and he pushed against her warmth again for some relief, drawing another moan from both of them. He kissed her again before kissing down her body. He followed his instincts and somehow knew exactly what he needed to do. It was so familiar to touch her like this. It didn't feel like he wanted it, it felt like he'd missed it more than anything. He wanted her very much, but he wanted to please her even more. He looked down at her face and felt as if he’d seen it countless times just like this. Like it was seared in his memory, regardless of his condition. He didn't feel like he was remembering, he felt as if he was recognizing. He wanted so badly to be inside her, but he knew he wouldn't last long and he wanted to pleasure her, he wanted to taste her. As he moved down, he moaned when he saw she was already wet. He breathed softly on her sex and saw her bite her lip and stare at him with lust. He heard himself growl as he pulled her legs to place on his shoulders, still staring at her.

“Please, Ned...” she pleaded, he took a long lick of her sex and she squeaked. Instinctively, he kissed, licked and explored the soft wet flesh, tasting her and her screams and moans told him his instincts were right. Somehow, he just knew how to please her, to touch her in a way to make her moan his name in pleasure. He growled when she buried her fingers in his hair, illiciting another moan from that beautiful mouth of hers. He brought his fingers to thrust in, and she was thrashing and screaming his name and he felt a rush in his head to see her face as she shuddered uncontrollably. He moved up to see her face clearly, flushed red and panting and looking at him like she'd missed him more than anything. And he knew he felt the same way.

“Ned please..” she panted. He quickly took off his pants and his underwear as fast as he could and pressed against her sex now, nothing between them. They both moaned at the sensation. “Oh god...yes...Ned..now” and he was happy to oblige.

Catelyn looked up at her husband's beautiful face as he thrust into her slowly, making them both moan loudly. The absolute bliss in his face made her moan again and she reached up to kiss him deeply pulling at him, her right hand clawing at his back at the pleasure of it all as her left hand was clawing at his arse in an attempt to pull him deeper inside her. She wanted him to fuck her hard and fast, she wanted to forget the loneliness that engulfed her mind these past months. She'd missed him, god she'd missed him. He was still so gentle with her, like their first time. She had to bite her lip and hold his face to her neck as he suckled a particularly sensitive spot. Giving into her impulse, she whispered, “harder...Ned...faster....please...” to urge him on.
His eyes were so dark with lust as he looked at her, he pulled one of her legs up to her chest and thrust into her deeply making her shout his name in the pleasure of it. Again and again. She wanted to throw her head back and let the pleasure take over, but she forced herself to look at his face and the sight made her catch her breath. He looked like a man lost in pleasure, his jaw coming unhinged as he thrust deeply into her. Oh she remembered that face, she’d missed that face terribly. Soon, she was chanting his name with every exhale, urging him on as she felt pleasure building up in her again and she shuddered another time, every fibre of her being sparking with pleasure. He followed her over the edge soon after, his face pressed against her chest, crying out her name, before falling on top off her.

She loved the weight of him on her, she kissed the sweat on his shoulders softly before he turned and kissed her tenderly, running his fingers through her hair. He flopped on his back and they both struggled to catch their breath. Moments passed and when she finally saw him turn to her she pushed at him back and straddled him.

She wanted more. She softly kissed the scars on his chest slowly and lazily, listening to him chant her name now. This time was more tender, with lingering touches like they had all the time in the world. They kissed until they couldn't catch their breath, touching each other everywhere, he just knew how to touch her still. He touched her and kissed her on every spot that made her burst with pleasure, taking his time. Finally, he pushed up to brush his lips against her hardened nipples. It felt delicious, how she loved it when he did that. But it was teasing her and she pushed against his lips harder. He pulled her hips closer, pressing firmly against his hardening cock and she gasped at the feeling. He buried his face in her neck, pressing opened mouthed kisses. She took him inside her again and they slowly settled into the familiar rhythm.

Once they were both exhausted and blissfully sated, he pulled her to him, so her head would rest on his chest, like he'd done countless time before. When his fingers settled in her hair she felt tears in her eyes and she kissed his chest.

“Whats wrong, Cat? God! Did I hurt you?!” he asked moving to look at her, but she pushed him back to stay as he was.

“Nothing, Ned. No, you didn't hurt me,” she whispered, burying her face in his chest.

“Then why are you crying?”

“I'm just happy. I'm very happy.” she said looking up at him.

For a moment he looked as if he wanted to say something, but he only looked at her for a long while before saying, “I'm glad for that. I'm happy too, Cat.” and kissed her on the forehead before settling back down.

Something had strengthened between them, and the unspoken barriers had collapsed. *Our bodies always remained instinctively comfortable with each other, completely oblivious to the barriers created by our minds,* she thought with a smile. Catelyn felt peace, and she felt more hope for their future than she ever had before.

She believed that they were much closer than she’d feared they would be, and allowed herself to think her husband cared for her more than she believed. He'd proven it to her countless time. She decided to push away all her fears for good, and let herself be happy. She knew more deeply now that the missing memories didn’t change him very much at all. He was still her Ned, ever so gentle and caring. Catelyn slowly drifted off to sleep listening to her husband's steady heartbeat idly remembering countless times they’d slept in each other's embrace like this. She recalled whispering how much she loved him and remembered the rumble in his chest when he chuckled and whispered...
it back with a sigh and a kiss in her hair. *I love you*, she thought to herself, instead of saying it out loud, still not wanting to burden him with something he could not return.

When Catelyn Stark was almost asleep, about to drift off completely she thought she felt her husband sigh and press a kiss in her hair. And sleepily she smiled, snuggling closer. *You're still my Ned. You will always be my Ned.*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading guys! I welcome constructive criticism, so don't be shy! :)

And The title of the chapter was from "Rise" by The Frames. Its a lovely song, and it fits the chapter. Give it a listen if you want :)
“Now it feels like summer,” Catelyn mused, looking out of their tall window. The afternoon sunlight was dancing on the freshly fallen dew on the grass; the breeze was pleasant and the weather warm. The climate had changed swiftly many times in the past month, but it gladdened her heart to see the consistently warmer temperatures this week, marking the true arrival of summer. They had some snowfall all through Spring, as per usual. This was the first time it truly rained, and didn't snow. She couldn't quite tell when it had rained, since they had been otherwise occupied. Catelyn blushed, feeling blissfully sated and her body sore. *It's a good ache though, the one I missed for so long,* she mused, remembering the time she spent with her husband this morning.

After she'd all but pounced on him the second time, they'd fallen asleep in each other's arms. The next time she woke up, it was to his steady heartbeat and the soothing movements of his fingers tangled in her hair. She'd looked at him to find him deep in thought. He smiled at her briefly before rolling over to his side, so they both lay facing each other. She could tell he wished to say something, and she’d tried to tamp down sense of panic that he was regretting the time they spent together.

“Cat, do you regret this?” he'd asked solemnly and she'd blinked several times to believe he’d said out loud what she'd been thinking.

“No, do you?”

He had frowned at her question.

“No, I've wanted to do it for a long time, I just didn't want to push you before you were ready. I thought you knew. I haven't exactly been guarded in the way I leered at you sometimes,” he said.

Her mind went to what Lyanna had told her the night before.

“I knew you desired me, but you didn't make a move and I wanted you to take your time. I thought you weren't ready, Ned,” Catelyn confessed. “I've wanted you ever since you walked through the front door.”

He shook his head sheepishly before touching his forehead to hers. His fingers gently caressed her face and through her hair, distracting her from his words. “I don't blame you for thinking that. I'm afraid its my fault, Catelyn. I've held back a lot of my thoughts ever since I came back. I promise not to do that from now on. Its just . . . sometimes I fear all this is just a dream and I will wake up alone in Creekwood,” he had stopped speaking for a moment and looked at her desperately, holding her there with his gaze. “It used to happen to me in Creekwood all the time. I would wake up crying out - I couldn’t remember my dreams - I felt only longing and pain. I was so alone, Cat. . .” his voice trailed off.

“Ned!” she'd called out to him urgently, her hands on his face forcing him to return her gaze, anchoring him to the present. “You’re not alone. I'm real, Ned. This life is real. You're home and
you're safe.”

He'd sighed, kissing her forehead, “I know. You and the children bring me back to reality every time I feel lost. Yet, I leave you alone to deal with everything sometimes. I run to solitude in times of fear. I'm sorry. I want you to know - you and the children mean a lot to me and I will be honest with you about my thoughts. No matter how dark or difficult they may be to talk about or to hear. And I want... I wish you would do the same with me. I don't want any secrets between us, Cat. I don't think I can bear any more secrets.”

Ashara had kept secrets from him, she'd kept him from knowing he had a whole life that had no connection to her. He must have been so lost there, not knowing anything, having no confidante or a way to escape. He had been trapped. They both held back certain things in fear of hurting or getting hurt. She was trying to keep him safe by not speaking of the horrible times they had faced together. And it made her cringe to think her desperate attempt to shield him from more pain actually reminded him of the dark times he'd faced in Creekwood. No, that will not be us. That will never be us. Catelyn nodded. “You have my word. I will speak my mind, no matter how difficult it may be.”

He'd smiled at her then, his grey eyes lightening as he kissed her softly before pulling her to lay her head on his chest. The sun was already out by then, but they didn't care. They both found comfort in each other's arms and they wished to relish it a little longer. They had no chores that needed immediate attention, and no hungry kids to feed; her husband had taken care of everything for her.

“The children might be at the zoo by now.” She'd murmured in his chest sleepily.

He hummed his agreement. “They needed this. They're good kids, they didn't fuss much about leaving the house much, but I could tell they were getting bored staying home with their old man all the time,” he huffed a laugh.

“They're kids Ned, they get bored quite easily. Don't take it personally,” Catelyn reassured him.

“I know, I still feel guilty for keeping them here because I can't get out.”

It surprised her to hear that. She knew he felt guilty, the Ned she knew was too taciturn to say anything. She was glad for his openness though, this way she could reassure him about the things he sometimes unnecessarily worried about.

“They love spending time with you, Ned. Last year we sent Robb off to summer camp with Jon. They adored that camp, you know? Robb enjoyed making new friends, whereas Jon was just happy to be where his cousin was, instead of being home alone with Nan. After everything that happened, Lya and I were hesitant to send the boys away from home this year. But I was afraid they would miss it terribly.” She raised her head up to accentuate the next part, “They were planning for it for a whole year, before you disappeared, you see. But I haven't heard them say a word about it after you returned. All they talk about is you and how glad they are that you are here. They are much happier with you here, Ned. They wouldn't have it otherwise.” He smiled at her words and she laid her head back on his chest.

“I'm glad they got to go and have fun. Lya will drag them in any number of places to romp around, and then they will want to be home for a week at least after they get back!” she'd laughed, making him chuckle.

“I'm glad we got to have fun too...” she'd heard him say hesitantly.

She'd smiled, raising her head up. “I am too,” she brushed her lips to his teasingly, “And I wouldn't call you an old man after that performance, Mr. Stark.”
“Cat, you will kill me like this,” he'd breathed before kissing her deeply. They’d spoken about trivial things back and forth, occasionally flirting and teasing, the seriousness of the previous moments disappearing completely as they revelled in this new found closeness. And before she knew it she'd fallen asleep again.

Catelyn smiled at her musings and sleepily donned a shirt that was laying neatly on the chair beside the window, along with all the other clothes. She looked in confusion for a moment - they’d discarded their clothes rather haphazardly, then realization struck her. Ned. He must have arranged them neatly on the chair before going downstairs. He always did that.

She thought it would take longer for Ned to get comfortable, but this morning proved her wrong. Her husband indeed needed her as much as she needed him. And it surprised her to see the ease with which they'd fallen back into the familiar rhythm and innate knowing of each other's bodies. He still knew how to touch her, but she thought it was more his body that knew the feeling than him. She'd been surprised at first, but soon relaxed into it. And for the time they were together, she had completely forgotten about the past lonely months and had given into the feeling of belonging to him. She descended down the stairs, and the off-key humming coming from the kitchen made her blush and grin like a fool. She slowly walked up, and Ned turned briefly to flash his wolfish grin at her.

The sight of him made her shiver. He was clad in his boxers, wearing an apron and his back was red by the marks she'd clawed on it just a while ago. She bit her lip, knowing if she looked in the mirror she would indeed find a few hickey's on her body. *And beard burn on my thighs*....

Ned cleared his throat, bringing her back to present, “Coffee?” he said, holding a mug in his hand with a grin tugging his face. She tried to hide her blush and failed and walked up to get her coffee. She felt his gaze sweep over her and his eyes lingered on her shirt. She looked down, and suddenly felt self-conscious realizing she'd donned his shirt, *just* his shirt instead of her own clothes. It was a reflex to pick up it up, like countless times before when they were alone together. Long before it all happened. Momentarily she'd forgotten all about the circumstances. And that thought made her realize she hadn't really looked in the mirror at all. She knew her hair was a riot – this time for a good reason. And she was still shaking the cobwebs of sleep, she hadn't even washed her face yet. She only wondered what she looked like...

“You're beautiful.” She gasped and looked up sharply at the compliment and wondered if she'd thought out loud. He smiled a knowing smile. “You're always beautiful, Cat. I should say it as often as I think it.” She gawked at him, speechless, her heart skipping a beat when he used her nickname. Leaning closer he added, “And if I might be so bold, that is an excellent wardrobe choice.”

“So is yours,” she moved even closer, running her finger over his chest and scanning his scantily clothed form. His smile turned into a frown as he brushed his fingers against her collarbone, the skin throbbed ever so slightly at his touch. She assumed he'd found a hickey, remembering the time he'd spent kissing her neck. She shivered at the thought and shook her head at the current expression of guilt on his face. Of course he was worried he'd hurt her.

“It doesn't hurt, Ned.” She pulled his fingers to her lips, pressing a soft kiss on them. “If anything it makes me think of *things* that I shouldn't, if I want to get any work done.”

His frown softened and turned into a lopsided grin. He closed the remaining distance between them and bent down to kiss her ardently. She pulled at him to deepen the kiss, loving the new place in their relationship they found themselves in.

“God, Cat. Do you have any idea how long I've waited to do that?” he said again, after pulling back.

“Me too, like I said before,” she confessed. “I just didn't know if you wanted to.”
“Oh I wanted to from the moment I laid eyes on you.” he said. “We've spend a lot of time wondering, Cat. Lets never do that again,” he kissed her after she nodded in assent.

When he pulled back, he just looked at her for a long while. “I meant it before, Catelyn. From now on, I will speak my mind. I won't go quiet when I feel lost, or you feel lost. I want us to do this together. And I will be honest with you, about everything.”

Catelyn felt relief at that and she nodded wordlessly embracing him tightly. “I meant what I said, too. I will be honest, Ned. I would spare you any hurts, but I would much rather be open with you. Even if its difficult or sometimes harsh. And no matter what happens...” she sighed, “…we're in this together” she finished.

“We'll be together,” he said simultaneously. They smiled at each other. “I would spare you any hurts, Cat. I hope you know that.”

“I know, Ned. I know.” She said, her fingers caressing the scar on the back of his head. In spite of the relief, there was a lingering fear. A sense of foreboding. Ashara and Groff were in the wind, and she had a feeling they weren't going to let this go. She just hoped they would find them soon. She didn't wish her Ned to have to go through any more troubles. She pulled him in for a kiss, as a reassurance. They were together, and they would get through this. Ned was with her, he wanted her and he wanted to be with her and their family. That was good enough.

When they broke apart, he got back to cooking lunch. The seriousness in the atmosphere lifted as he flashed a crooked grin before speaking. “So, since we already skipped to the last part of our date. What do you want to do now?”

“Well, it's a wonderful day for gardening. We could do some work in the greenhouse. Do you want to see if your gardening skills are good?” Catelyn sat on the counter before him and asked eagerly.

“Sounds good. I haven't lost touch with gardening, I took care of what little work that needed to be done back in-” He stopped midway, swallowing uncomfortably. His voice trailed off and soon he was staring into space.

“Ned..” she asked softly. He startled back into present, she hated to see that dark place in his mind still had a strong grip on him and there was nothing she could do to help him. At the mention of Creekwood, unspoken fears tried to nudge back in her mind and firmly she pushed them away. She looked at him desolately, not knowing what to do.

He looked at her firmly then.”Back in Creekwood. I used to take care of the garden back in Creekwood.” Her eyes widened, but she felt relief. They'd just promised to be open, she held his hand in her as a reassurance and watched him as he spoke again. “Ashara...had a big yard. She wasn't really into taking care of it. It was full of weeds when we first got the place. I spent days trying to get it to look more like a yard and less like a post apocalyptic house used as a base.” He stopped briefly to chuckle. She knew how he hated to see unkempt gardens. She could imagine his face when he first saw it and she laughed softly at the image. He continued, “I started spending time there a lot in the weeks prior to finding you all. There was a large maple tree there, it was quite tranquil. But I couldn't spend a lot of time there in the beginning, there wasn't much snow during the winter, but it did fall for a while gathering sleet.”

“I'm glad it snowed a little.” She said after a long moment of silence, he cocked his head curiously. “I know how you like the cold. I wished wherever you were, that you were safe and comfortable.”

“You really believed I was alive, after weeks and months?” he asked with a weight to his words, like he'd been waiting for a long time to ask it.
“It was difficult at times. But I knew in my heart you were safe. And even when the detective working your case told me it was unlikely, I held on. I wasn't going to give up until... there was proof otherwise.” She said, eyes watering. He looked at her with an expression akin to tenderness, then pulled her in close.

“I'm safe, Cat. I'm home with you,” he whispered in her hair, and she nodded before pulling back to look at him. Then shaking her head, she bit her lip.

“Well, that took quite a turn. Didn't it?” she said, laughing sheepishly and looking at the bowl he was tossing the salad in. They were quiet for sometime when Ned broke the silence.

“Lets get back to our topic of your enticing wardrobe and how you're wearing it to tease me then.” He looked up, flirting but still with some hesitance in his grey eyes.

She looked at him with wide eyes, “You're the one to talk about teasing,” she emphasized with a broad scan of his bare chest, then the apron that covered his boxers and....other parts from her eyes.

“If you keep looking like that, Cat, we won't have lunch,” he growled.

“Would it be such a bad thing?” she blurted out, then stared at him in surprise at the words, blushing furiously.

He sighed and then stared at her cheeks for a few moments before snapping back to attention, “Never. But I'm afraid we'll starve if we go down that path, because if we go back up to our bedroom, Mrs. Stark, we won't be leaving it for a very long time, I assure you.”

She shivered at the images conjuring in her mind, *he called it our bedroom*. This day was full of wonderful moments. Just then, Ned's cellphone pinged several times from the counter. They both broke their gaze, frowning at it together for its bad timing.

“It must be Lya, she was saying she would send pictures.” Ned looked back at the bowl, unable to stop smiling.

Catelyn leaped to see the picture of her babies. She opened the pictures and squealed. The one she loved the most so far was where they were all together, grinning at the camera. “Oh, look at my babies... how cute!”

Ned chuckled his wolfish chuckle, “We did make some really adorable children. They get it from you, no doubt,” he said with a crooked grin as he brought their chicken quinoa salads to the table. *My favourite*, she thought to herself idly.

She smiled, “Oh please, I've seen your pictures from your childhood. You used to look like a puppy!”

He looked at her curiously for a moment. “Can I see? All the pictures, I mean,” he asked. She nodded, “Of course! I didn't even think about it with everything going on. I'll show them to you.”

They scrolled through pictures Lya sent them and stopped briefly to talk about them as they ate. After lunch and a lazy afternoon, she went to take a shower and indeed found some red marks on her body. The hot water felt blissful on her skin. Ned had taken a shower himself and was in the kitchen again when she came back. She sighed. They couldn't pry him away from the kitchen these days. She felt bad, too, as the poor man was stuck at home until next week. She wished she would make all these easier for him. She'd only just spied the slow cooker when Ned all but ran to her.

“So. Garden. Lets go...” he pulled her away to the backyard rather fast, and amused by his
enthusiasm, she took him to the greenhouse. Their gardener usually took care of the rest of the foliage on the estate and they'd taken responsibility of the small greenhouse garden they'd built in the back. But since he was on leave, they would have to water the plants every so often; Ned obviously had taken the initiative.

There wasn't much that needed to be done in the garden, since they had it heated for winter growth and was well maintained. But recently, she'd wanted to make new additions to it. She'd bought some new seeds a while ago, and this would be the perfect time for Ned to reacquaint himself. Especially since she knew how much he loved it, she hated that she didn't think of it earlier.

They spent a few hours there, getting their new additions settled in. It was always comforting to do. Ned had gotten her interested in gardening when they first moved in. She saw as he moved around with the ease he'd always had, delicately regarding all the plants, settling the soil with his hands. If he actually had a choice in career she wondered whether he would pick cooking or gardening, she even teased him about it. He'd come to love the job his father had handed to him, but she always adored to see this earthy, tenderhearted side of her husband, just as she loved his firm leadership qualities and abilities to make decisions at their workplace. And there were times she wished he had the freedom to follow his heart - she knew she'd be just as happy living somewhere in a small cottage, growing their own food and living a simple life.

She looked up to feel his wet hand on her face, he pulled back looking at her blankly, but she knew him well enough to know he was trying not to smile. She looked in confusion for a minute, then noticing his muddy hands, she gasped. “You didn't...”

He kept his face blank, “I don't know what you're talking about.” She touched her face and indeed gathered mud smears on her fingers. He walked – well, ran – out and she followed. “You will pay for this, Stark.” He laughed, walking to the hose so she could wipe her face. She washed her hands trying to look mad, but his grinning face told her she was failing at it and broke out a smile.

When he turned to find his shoes, unable to resist, she turned the hose to him as he stood with his back to her. She looked away before he turned appearing nonchalant. “You didn't,” he growled.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” she said blankly, never sparing a glance. She saw him move towards her in her periphery and she ran laughing, threatening to turn the hose on him again. She evaded as much as she could, but soon he caught up to her, brushing another muddy finger on her nose and spinning her around, making her squeal.

After he placed her back on the ground and they washed up and laughed at their silliness. She walked up the stairs to the house just as the last rays of the sun caught her eyes, they had a great view of the sunset.

She turned to beckon her husband. “My lo-,” she bit her tongue at the slip. “Ned, come sit with me.” He followed her to sit behind her on the stairs as they watched the sun set. Even if she couldn't say it out loud just yet, Catelyn felt a surge of love for the man embracing her tightly, she wished they could just stay like this.

“It's beautiful, isn't it?” she whispered lazily as the sun was disappearing leaving different hues of melting purple and gold at its wake. She felt his gaze turn to her.

“Not as beautiful as you,” he said with certainty, kissing her hair. Her heart felt full. She knew he thought her beautiful - he'd proved it this morning when she'd felt a flicker of doubt at the stretch marks on her belly. But he'd kissed them as he always did and made her feel so very special. Every moment they'd spent together, he'd reminded her of that. And she felt glad they'd finally reached this new place. He may not love her yet, but he cared for her deeply, and even though the thought of
him not loving her hurt, she felt more hope than she ever had before. And that was enough for now. She turned her head, lightly kissed the rough beard on his chin, before turning back to watch the rapidly darkening sky.

The kitchen timer startled her out of her thoughts, reminding them of dinner time and they got up to go. They both changed out of the muddy clothes, and she didn't even care that she would have to take a shower again later. Perhaps, he will join me this time, she smirked. As she went to help Ned set up for dinner after changing, she gasped to see candles on the dinner table and a familiar aroma that stopped her in her tracks.

Ned pulled her to the table where dinner was laid out for her and looked curious and hopeful at the same time.

“Ned...how did you....” she whispered, blinking her tears away and disbelievingly staring at the tilapia slow cooked in lemon and a creamy garlic sauce with a side of jasmine rice on her plate.

“I found the recipe, I had marked it as 'saved for a special day'. So I made it tonight. Is that okay, Cat?”

When she didn't say anything and only let her tears fall, she realized she'd been quiet a long time when she heard him say desperately, “Please Cat, say something.”

“Oh, I'm sorry Ned. Its just, how did you find it? I couldn't find it!” she said, almost to herself.

“I wish I knew.” She looked up to see he looked guilty. She quickly took his hand in hers, “Oh Ned, its not your fault. I just, you never told me you found it. Before...I mean. This is my mom's recipe. She used to make it for us when we were children. When she was still alive, I mean.”

Suddenly the realization struck her, “Oh that must be it. When we went to see my father last fall, Edmure was showing some of our old pictures to the kids. And when they asked for more, you went with him to find our old medals, report cards, school pictures and such. I bet you found it there somewhere and brought it for me to surprise me. Oh I was looking for this for ages! I never found it. I'm glad you did. This is perfect, Ned, thank you! Thank you!” She smiled and hugged him briefly.

He looked relieved and then kissed her hand, waiting for her to taste it, watching with big puppy eyes. It tasted almost the same as her mother's and she cried again. This time around he embraced her tightly until her tears subsided.

After they finished eating and were putting leftovers away, Lya called her on the phone to video chat. They both leaned in closer after starting the call. Robb was staring right in the screen with Jon trying to peek. “Uncle Ben!! They're here,” Jon exclaimed right as Robb yelled, “Hi Mommy!!! Hi Daddy” in the microphone.

“Oh, hi guys.” Ben sat, pulling Sansa on his lap.

“Mommy, daddy wook I got a baby giwaffe!!!!!” She exclaimed, showing a stuffed giraffe. They laughed.

“Oh darling, its beautiful! Sweetling, what happened to your hands?” Catelyn frowned looking at white spots on her arms.

“Don't worry, Cat. Its just ointment, there were some mosquitoes there. Thankfully I was prepared.”

“Poor baby. Does it hurt, sweetling?” Catelyn asked, feeling relieved when Sansa shook her head. “Its scratchy...like daddy's beard when he kisses me goodnight.”
That made them laugh. Her eyes searched for her other baby girl. “Where is Arya?” Ned asked, before she could.

“Well, the wild wolf pup was tired after all the excitement of getting to see real wolves and then running around tiring both me and Nan out. After spending about an hour resisting, she fell asleep just as we left Torrhen Square. Nan is with her now, making sure she doesn't get up.”

“Mommy, we got pizza!!!!” Robb shouted again.

“Robb! You'll wake her, quietly please.” Lyanna admonished.

He nodded solemnly like they were talking about a wild animal instead of his baby sister who was just shy of three. “Mommy, we got pizza,” he whispered softly.

Catelyn laughed out loud. “Oh, did you have fun boys?”

“We did! I got you both a present, like I promised!!!” Jon smiled. He and brought back a wrapped present.

“Aww Thank you, sweetheart. I can't wait to open it!” Catelyn exclaimed, making him smile.

Robb nodded excitedly. “Yes!! We had a lot of fun, we went on water slides and saw cool animals like.. like....”

“Lions,” Jon added silently. Robb nodded, “Yes!! Like Lions!! And they were like 'Rooooooar' and we were like 'whooooaaa'.....And then we saw wolves and we...we..all howled..and they howled....it was sooo awesome!!!!” he exclaimed loudly.

Lyanna nodded, “He's right, actually. It was pretty weird. The kids howled at them and they all howled back. I thought they'd be scary, but they were surprisingly gentle. Arya was really fierce, trying to get the biggest one's attention – I think he was the alpha. I was scared for a bit, thinking he would growl at her or something - we saw him do that to some other annoying people. But his ears perked up, he just cocked his head and looked at her curiously like a dog...”

Robb waited impatiently for his aunt to finish talking so he could continue telling them all the animals they got to see as Jon nodded along and Sansa interrupted so she'd get a chance to speak too.

“Alright, time for bed.” They heard Ben's voice in the background after a while. “C'mon, say goodnight to them.”

“Bye Mommy! Bye Daddy!” Robb and Sansa waved them and Sansa blew kisses. Jon waved too, silently with a smile.

“Good night, boys! Good night, princess.” Ned said, blowing a kiss for their baby girl.

“Good night, my darlings! Robb, Sansa, be good for your aunt and uncle.” Catelyn smiled. Robb stayed back staring at her for a bit.

“Mommy, you got bit by a mosquito too!!” He said pointing at the red spot on her neck. Lyanna and Benjen frantically turned to look from the background. Benjen just looked away, not even trying to hide a smirk, while Lyanna looked curiously. Catelyn pulled her shirt quickly to cover the hickey, fighting the heat in her cheeks and willing it to go away.

“Whoa. That looks like one tenacious mosquito, Cat. Are you alright?” Lyanna asked, trying to sound grave and fighting a grin. Benjen burst out laughing.
“Daddy, you promised you would take care of her.” Robb looked at his father rather accusingly.

“I will take better care of her, I promise.” Ned assured.

“Oh, I bet you will!” Lyanna added.

“Lyanna!” Catelyn warned exasperatedly.

Then both Benjen and Lyanna broke out in laughter. Catelyn felt intense heat in her cheeks, she had no doubt she was bright red. Ned just shook his head, looking away to hide a grin.

“Give Arya a kiss from us, will ya?” Ned added when their laughter died down, pulling her closer.

“Yes, Boss! Good night you two. Ned...stay hydrated.” Lyanna winked before ending the call.

Catelyn sighed, looking at Ned who was grinning widely. “Its all your fault, you know!” she said, adjusting her shirt. He bent down briefly placing a soft kiss on the hickey, brushing his finger on it.

“I take full responsibility.” His lips quirked up a bit.

“So, speaking of the date... how about I meet you out at the swimming pool?” he asked shyly.

“Sounds promising,” she murmured, slightly pulling at his shirt to reveal the hickey hiding under his collar bone and kissing it chastely. When she walked away, she felt his gaze follow her and she smirked. She went upstairs, rummaging through her closet to find what she was looking for and picked the swimwear he loved the most.

When she came back out, she stopped briefly to see Ned was already in the pool nursing a glass of Arbor Gold. She disrobed, feeling his appreciative gaze wash over her and slowly walked in the pool, settling next to him. She took the glass from him, taking a few generous sips, looking up at the starry night. Wine hit her hard if she wasn't careful, but she didn't care. The person she trusted the most was next to her and all she wanted was to get lost in this moment.

“You look beautiful, Catelyn” he said, his gaze washing over her yet again. She smiled at him.

“Are you sure you should be drinking, Ned?” she asked accepting the glass.

“Walys already told me the other day a glass or two is fine, as long as I don't go overboard. Don't worry, Cat,” he reassured.

“I haven't felt sick at all today, you know. I'm much better. Must have been all the exercise I did this morning,” he said seriously, sipping some wine.

“Well, we should make it a routine then. For your health, of course,” Catelyn replied, just as seriously.

“That is an excellent idea.” He nodded, lightly brushing his finger over her hip underwater.

She sipped from her glass, murmuring in agreement, smiling wickedly. He looked at her for a long while before sighing. She thought about how wonderfully the day had turned out. When he'd asked her about having a date today, she hadn't expected it go this well.

“I had a wonderful day, Ned.” Catelyn sighed contentedly. “The videos, the food, gardening together and doing... other things together. It was all so wonderful. Thank you for making it so special.”
He looked at her with expression she'd seen on him many times before. But she was too caught up in the gorgeous smokiness in his grey eyes to catch the meaning of it completely. She was quite dazed and too aware at the same time. Whether it was wine or the weight in his gaze, she didn't know. His fingers brushed stray locks from her face, his eyes still fixated on her. She forgot how to breathe.

“I love you, Cat.” He whispered. She gasped, staring disbelievingly. Whatever it was she thought he would say, she hadn't expected that. “You don't have to say it back, but I just can't not say it anymore. I can't keep it to myself, I'm sorry. I just...I was so lost in Creekwood, Cat. You brought me back to life. And you've been so brave. And so beautiful...I had to say it.”

For a few moments - that felt like an eternity - everything went still and quiet, as she tried to grasp the meaning of his words.

“You....love me...” she stared at him. Suddenly the meaning of his look before hitting her like a train. Of course he loves me. That's how Ned looked at me when he was short of words to tell me how much he loved me. She felt realization wash over her slowly as she thought of every time he'd given her that look. She had been too caught up in whether or not he loved Ashara. This doesn't mean he doesn't love her. The fearful part of her mind added, but she couldn't think about it just yet. Ned loves me.

“You don't have to say it, Cat. I know... I'm not the same man you fell in love with. I don't know if I will ever fully be that man again. I don't blame you,” he added urgently when she didn't speak for a while. She blinked a few times to jolt back into present.

“What?...no..Ned--I LOVE YOU!” she exclaimed loudly. Now it was his turn to stare. “I thought you loved her...which is why I never said it. Different man? You're still my Ned. You don't realize it, but you are,” she added hurriedly and looked at him for a moment. Biting her lip, she added, “I had forgotten what it meant to be happy when you were gone. Every feeling was dull compared to what I used to feel like. I was just a poor reflection of me. When I saw you at our doorstep, my love, I remembered what it felt to be truly happy.”

“Cat...” He pulled her close and they both met with a kiss. She let herself relish in the fact that her husband truly loved her. She knew he cared about her and thought her beautiful, but now she knew that he truly loved her. My Ned loves me.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Ned Stark lost himself kissing the woman he loved. The woman who, in spite of everything that happened, loved him back. He felt something akin to a familiarity, a strong feeling of deja vu, like this had happened before. He pushed it away though, relishing the present moment. He could taste the strong tart of the Arbor gold that she was nursing. He still couldn't believe how wonderful this day had been, that he got to make love to her all morning like he'd wanted to ever since he laid eyes on her. Now knowing she loved him back had been the highlight of this day. Suddenly, he pulled back when he realized what she'd said.

“Wait, who did you think I loved?” he asked, still breathing heavily.

“Ashara. And I wouldn't blame you if you still do, Ned. You didn't know I existed. You can tell me, Ned. Do you....” she trailed off, tears filling her eyes. She didn't continue, but he heard the question all the same.

“No, Cat! If anything, I loathe her after what she did to me,” he exclaimed incredulously.

She looked at him intently for a moment. “But you looked so heartbroken, Ned. You said you trusted
her....then you were so betrayed and you looked as if you wished things had been different. I saw you, Ned,” she argued innocently, tears falling freely through those beautiful blue eyes. He sighed, cursing himself again for his lack of words and for staying quiet until now in fear of going back there and in fear of burdening her when he had put so much on her plate. He kissed her tears gently before pulling back to gather words so he could explain her everything he hadn't said until now.

“I cared for her, Cat. I thought she was my friend. She was my only friend until I met Dave. And I trusted her, so of course I felt betrayed. Yes, I did wish things had been different. I wished I’d found who I truly was sooner. I was quiet for a few days after realizing how she'd drugged me, because I kept thinking what would've happened if I had trusted her more, if I had fallen for her lies and stayed, if I had fallen for her, even though now I cannot for the world imagine falling for anyone but you. I was heartbroken because I was contemplating the thought of never knowing all of you. Most of all you.”

He looked intently, so she could read the truth in his eyes. You had no idea I existed, she'd said. She has no clue how important she was in bringing me here, he thought, feeling that intangible bond between them pulling at him to speak. He wanted her to know how much she meant. If he’d known she’d misunderstood like this, he would've said something sooner. And he hated that he hadn't spoken for so long. We've broken so many of the barriers between us today, time for the last one.

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

She waited as Ned gathered his thoughts. He loves me. Ned loves me. But she knew he wanted to say something important so she listened intently as he started to speak. “Catelyn, I was alone in Creekwood. I wasn't living, I was just barely surviving. You brought me to life. When I found you and the children, and the rest of our family, I realized what I would've missed out if it wasn't for you guiding me here,” he said, brushing her tears away.

“What do you mean?” she asked, with a furrowed brow.

“I should have told you before. But I was an idiot, and too caught up in chasing my forgotten past to say anything. I didn't recall who I was on a whim, Cat. Did you never wonder how I got to realizing my true identity? It wasn't just the suspicions, lies and then that stroke of luck when I signed my own name. I got there, because I remembered a small piece of my past. A piece I couldn't forget, couldn't even get out of my mind. It was insistent, it followed me, engulfed me, until one day I couldn't resist. That's when that memory got stronger, eventually guiding me to where I needed to be. To that picture that made me determined to see it through and to find it, because that was the only thing that made sense.”

“What was that, Ned?” Catelyn asked softly.

“It was you, Cat. It was a glimpse of you. You brought me here. You were the only one I remembered. The only one I trusted, in spite of just being a flicker of a memory. Just a beautiful auburn haired woman with sparkling blue eyes. I knew if I found you, I'd be where I needed to be. And I was right. You brought me home, Cat. And there is no place I'd rather be--”

She kissed him full on the lips, stopping him from saying anything else. It almost sounded like a lie, but she’d seen the truth in the grey eyes she loved so much. All she ever wanted was that he'd remember something about her, as he did others and all along she was the one he'd recalled before anything. She believed him, she saw the truth in his eyes.

She lost herself in his kiss, listening to the sounds of her heart pounding loudly, now mingled with the sound thunder followed by rain pouring on them. She could feel the icy cold water on her skin, contrasting to the warmth of the pool, but she didn't care, all she cared about was that she loved her
husband, and in spite of her worries, he loved her back.

And as she felt the last of the barriers between them fall away, Catelyn Stark opened her arms to pull Ned to her and kissed him with all she was worth, letting him know that she did and would always love him.

Chapter End Notes

A big shout out to cloudsinmycoffee9 for proofreading this chapter.

Thanks for reading! C & C welcome. More is on its way!
Reminiscence - Part I

Chapter Summary

First I would like to apologize was the looooooooong delay, life just gets in the way sometimes. This chapter ended up being so long that I decided to post it in two installments, I promise the next one will be up in the next couple of days. Hope you all like this one :)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The alarm on his cell phone pierced through the silence making him jolt up with a start. Squinting at the late afternoon sunlight streaming through the window, Rodrik Cassel cringed against the shrill sound and turned it off, mumbling a curse under his breath. Once they knew Ned didn't suffer any lasting injury from that fall several days ago, he'd gone to Trident, leaving Jory in charge. He'd only arrived in the wee hours of the morning. After finishing final preparations for tomorrow, he had managed to catch a few hours of sleep.

Sighing, Rodrik got up and splashed cold water on his face, then walked in the kitchen and brewed coffee. The men had debriefed him about the case while he was at Trident; most of the leads were a dead end. They wanted to get clues from Groff's financials using transaction info from his clinic, but as they expected, they were all carefully made from a shell corporation in the Iron Isles, which was untraceable. Brynden had made sure every police officer in the country was on the look out and Mallister had spoken to their informants. In spite of that, begrudgingly they had to admit he had the influence to bypass even the tightest security by pressuring or luring some of the less than honourable cops. And god knows there were enough of those down south in Kings Landing.

Rodrik suggested they take a different approach to it, Groff was obviously goading them into chasing circles by following his trail. He suggested they find any evidence on his illegal operations; clients, contacts, anything that would indicate where he might seek refuge. The men agreed to his plan and they decided to go back to Creekwood to canvas the area themselves. Rodrik and Brynden went to Ashara's house while Mallister and couple of other detectives checked out Groff's house, the library and looked into other suspects.

Rodrik had never seen the place Ned lived in. They went through the case specifics and Ashara's behavioural tendencies to aid them in looking through a new perspective. With Brynden muttering curses for not finding any clue, Rodrik had decided to take a look in the backyard. He had almost laughed looking at how well groomed it had been. He'd noticed a pair of shoes and a rake leaning against the wall, caked with dirt and grass, next to the entrance to Ned's room, confirming his assumption as to who had kept the backyard so neat. These Starks and their bloody gardens. The lad was a green thumb much like his father, who had spent his last years landscaping the land in Winterfell. Distracted by old memories, Rodrik had almost missed the oddly bright brick wall behind the shoes - more specifically odd with one particular brick.

He'd beckoned Brynden to come over and look. After inspecting it, they found it easy to pry it out. The brick was covering a hollow space that contained a box that had all of Ned's belongings they'd stolen from the car to make the crash look like a robbery gone wrong. Brynden had sent the evidence
over for testing, hoping they could find any prints on it. They’d also sent the laptop, camera and memory card Mallister’s team recovered over to the tech team.

As Rodrik downed his cup of coffee, his mind went back to the conversation that had taken place once they had returned to Trident HQ. They had gone straight to the room where the crime screen was set up with the timeline and the progress of the case laid out before them, and sat down just as they were greeted by the news that their last lead had died out. Their team had managed to get a license plate number on the car they escaped in by scouring through traffic cam footage and put an alert on it. When it was finally located, it was found ditched by the side of the remote road, burned to a crisp.

Rodrik poured himself another steaming cup of coffee, his mind going back to their meeting after the news. In truth, he had a hard time focusing on anything else after he had a chat with Brynden, but he still did his best to push the thoughts away, lest he spent all day worrying and scowling.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Brynden sagged his shoulders. Rodrik knew he was slowly losing his patience, the man had given them more trouble when they tried to find him a decade ago. After so many years he probably had many allies and resources that would make him disappear if they weren’t quick about finding him.

Rodrik’s eye settled on the image on the screen that they had pulled up recently, depicting the trajectory of the GPS from Groff’s car. With a hunch, he skimmed through the files he had in his hand. Jolting up at the realization, Rodrik had requested a copy of the schematic before pulling Brynden towards his office and closing the door behind them.

“The trajectory, did you notice anything similar about it?” Rodrik asked, rummaging through the file in his hand to pull out an image.

“No, why? What is it?” Brynden asked impatiently. Rodrik kept his cool at his tone.

“A pattern, I was looking through old case files before. Groff has done this before.” He handed him a paper from Connington’s case files from over a decade ago along with the print out he got of the recent schematic.

“What is this? Lines? Schematics? This is what you wanted to show me...?” Brynden frowned barely even glancing at the paper and threw them on the table near by running his hand through his hair. And Rodrik clearly saw guilt hidden behind his blazing blue eyes.

“Schematics. Just...look.” Rodrik rasped, barely keeping his cool.

He recalled Brynden had already been on a classified mission for the WIA in Essos when Ned had gone missing. He had been mostly off the loop about any Westerosi news and the WIA had kept him in the dark on purpose, so he wouldn’t lose focus. When he did get back from his mission, he had been livid, but it was too late, the detectives had already closed the case. And he knew Brynden felt guilty for not being there for Catelyn.

At his look of annoyance and confusion, Rodrik bit back a reproach, and took a deep breath, “Its from the case files from a decade ago, when we were trying to find him. Don’t you see the pattern?”

Brynden rolled his eyes, “I don’t see shit, can you stop with the riddles and just bloody tell me?!”

“Could you at least try to rein in that damned Tully temper of yours and just look!” Rodrik exclaimed. As Brynden reluctantly compared the images, “its like talking to a child sometimes,” he muttered under his breath.
“So they are similar, it could just be a coincidence.” Brynden looked up confused and frowning.

Rodrik pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing, “Read the landmarks, you idjit!”

“Now who’s angry?” Brynden quirked his eyebrows, his anger replaced by amusement.

Rodrik sighed, “I’m sorry, Special Agent Tully, would you kindly review the landmarks on that paper I handed you?”

“Better.” He knew Brynden had clearly heard the emphasis he put on his title and the derision in his tone, so Rodrik shook his head at him as he dutifully he looked at the paper.

“Same landmarks from last time. He can’t be that stupid, Rodrik.” Brynden looked up suspicion lingering in his eyes.

“He can if he thinks we don’t know who he is.” Rodrik said levelly.

“Or he does expect us to figure it out and change our moves, so he is tipped off as to where we stand. Maybe this is his way of figuring out how much we know about him. So what we need to do is...”

“...Keep following his trail, so he thinks we haven’t figured out yet.” Rodrik finished.

“You were right to suggest looking into his other operations, but there is a possibility he will expect that and cover his tracks. I’m afraid it may not be enough if he managed to keep his identity hidden there as well, I'll give them the orders,” Brynden said, leaving the office. He heard Brynden's booming voice giving instructions to his team.

“Jason, have the tech team make a list of areas where their car might have run out of fuel - they would have to wait to refuel somewhere. Tell them to pinpoint any particularly isolated gas stations and convenience stores around those areas and send someone over to check ’em out. Lucas and Carol, canvas the area where the car was found. If we get lucky we’ll find witnesses. I know it’s tedious and a hell of a long shot, but you never know.”

When Brynden returned, he had 'that' look on, the one he had when he would stand in front of their crime board – now screen - and his mind would be running a thousand miles, calculating a thousand possible moves. He hadn't done this in years, he’d been selected for special operations training within a decade of working alongside Rodrik in homicide. He knew the man well enough to know he wouldn't like being disturbed while he planned his next move.

Quietly, Rodrik made his way to the cafeteria, leaving his old friend with his thoughts to bring them both cups of coffee. He took a seat across from the man who was still looking at the files at hand. Rodrik waited, knowing he would speak when he was ready to.

“You haven’t called me an idjit in years.” Brynden said softly, breaking the silence in the room after a few moments and looked up at him with a wistful smile.

“We haven’t worked a case together in years. And that word is part of the reason why.” Rodrik joked quietly, both laughing as nostalgia settled in the room for a long moment.

Brynden chuckled, “I thought it was because I left Trident and went to King’s Landing for Special Agent training.”

Rodrik heard a hint of underlying guilt in his tone. “That was a part of it,” he admitted.
Brynden looked down at his clasped hands for a moment, when he looked back up at Rodrik, his expression had turned grim. “I have a plan. I will need your help to actually do it, but this needs to stay between you and me, no matter what. Clear?”

The nostalgia in his tone and his eyes disappearing -but not completely- and he saw his friend Brynden being replaced by Special Agent Tully in an instant. Rodrik nodded.

“No matter what, Rodrik.” Brynden implored him to understand, stark blue eyes standing in contrast with the grey streaking his beard and hair. Rodrik's mind went back to another day he'd heard the same words, a long time ago.

Brynden had been undercover and decided to make a deadly move that would have blown that case wide open. He kept the suspects busy while Rodrik located the evidence needed to convict them. In spite of his warning, the stubborn fool had put himself at risk, and they had tortured him, suspecting he was a mole and even then the idjit goaded them into confession before backup barged in and rescued him. It all seemed like another life, another time, but now it came crashing back with the intensity in his eyes.

“My word.” Rodrik vowed much like all that time ago, noticed the flicker of recognition in Brynden's eyes and listened carefully. He still hadn't forgiven himself for letting Brynden put himself in danger like that. But he was an agent before he was his friend. And apart from that lived by that damned Tully motto and the stubbornness and temper that came with it that almost always got him in trouble.

Begrudgingly he had to accept that if he hadn't gone to such lengths the last time then they wouldn't have caught their suspects, who happened to be ruthless rogue assassins working for an elite group of criminals from the higher echelons of Westeros. Rodrik had given a promise then in spite of knowing Brynden's idea would be dangerous, and as Rodrik had predicted the man had returned looking more dead than alive. It had taken months before he got back on his feet. But they had put some dangerous men behind bars, no matter the consequences they had to face.... This time around would be same, and they both knew Rodrik wouldn't forgive himself if he let this stubborn old bugger get himself killed in the name of 'duty'. Not after that word had already taken so much from him...

His phone rang loudly, startling him out of his thoughts. The name on the caller ID made him briskly answer the call.

“Mallister. What news?” he asked, draining the remaining coffee in his mug in one go.

“I'm afraid not good. We managed to get a hold of a witness who saw someone with Groff's description headed towards Duskendale. We're driving there now. And the tech team managed to decrypt the laptop and memory card. Blackfish asked me to debrief you, I'm afraid we can't wait until I get back.”

Rodrik sighed, pouring himself another cup of coffee. “I'm listening.”

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Ned Stark leaned his head back on one of the bookshelves and idly looked around in the study, gazing around at the rustic decor in the room, still in awe at how different this particular room felt from the rest of the house. The large wooden desk, with two lavish high back chairs behind it, and the antique paintings, collectibles on the wall - including what looked like a giant greatsword in an antique leather scabbard on display - that made the room look ancient. The walls on the right and left were lined with bookshelves, the smell of wood and paper with a hint of aged Scotch lingered in the air. He always felt as if this room had seen much in all the years; everything about it exuded authority
and demanded respect. Yet something about it made him feel at home, he felt comfortable and a deep sense of belonging.

Ned pinched the bridge of his nose in an attempt to soothe the faint throbbing in his head. He didn’t think his frustration was just due to his incapability to manage the amount of information he’d learned today. It was mostly because of how his and Catelyn’s damned sense of responsibility had poured ice cold water on the new found warmth they’d been nestling in after confessing their love for one another.

His heart still jumped at the memory of the night before in the pool, he had forgotten everything when Catelyn had pulled him to her, lips pressed firmly to his own. The rain had soaked them and he’d walked her to the edge of the pool, only pulling away long enough to get out, so they wouldn’t stumble and fall. Once they were out he’d kissed her again and picked her up and she’d wrapped her legs around his waist and clumsily walked them into the house.

Now thinking back he was grateful his unsteadiness was gone and he had maintained his balance instead of falling into the pool with Catelyn clutching to him. Their kiss had escalated from pure joy to passion to need for each other in mere moments. Next thing he knew, they were in the house and he’d pushed her against the wall across from the back door. Pulling down her sleeves, he had kissed the droplets that clung to her skin, flushing under his ministrations. She’d moaned his name and he’d growled, nipping the base of her throat in response, then kissing the spot. He'd felt so dizzy with need for her, his cock twitched remembering the taste and feel of her.

He started to pace around the room before desire consumed him, yet he was too far gone to stop his trail of thoughts.

He’d needed her so much, he’d had to grind against her warmth to relieve his need, and that had driven her wild. She’d bitten his shoulder, muffling a moan and they’d frantically and clumsily shed their swimwear. She had been ready after he’d teased her with his hard length until she’d pleaded and then ordered him to take her. He'd pushed himself inside her to the hilt and lost all thought at the feeling of her warmth surrounding him. She’d thrown her head back and screamed his name and he’d buried his face in her neck, groaning at the pleasure coursing through his body. Her nails raked his back, clutching at his hair, grasping for purchase. They'd wildly chased their pleasure, the sounds escaping her had spurred him on, making him thrust into her harder and faster. After he’d pushed both of them over the edge, they'd lingered long enough to regain their balance and then stumbled upstairs.

He ran his hand through his hair now and his thoughts lingered on their conversation after they’d collapsed on bed, breathing hard.

“What were you thinking about?” she teased after they caught their breath. In response, he brushed her hair back from her face, struggling to find his coherency and his silence made her smile smugly.

“Just that its probably safe to assume I can take you out on a second date,” he murmured sleepily after a few moments, fingers running through the tangles of her hair.

She threw her head back and laughed, “If you help me brush out the nest from my head, you can.”

“With pleasure, my love,” he growled, raining kisses on her throat.

Catelyn pulled his head up to look at him, eyes sparkling with tears. “I still can't believe it, Ned.”

“Me neither. But its true. I love you, Catelyn Tully Stark.”
“And I love you, Eddard Stark.” He smiled widely at her, evoking a catch in her breath before she pulled him in for a kiss. Exhaustion had caught up with them, so after lazily climbing under the duvet, they'd fallen asleep within moments.

Catelyn loves me, the thought still filled him with unbridled joy. If he were truly honest with himself, he had loved his wife even when she was just a flicker of a memory, he just couldn't name the feeling. It took him a long time to figure out and then he'd buried his feelings deep, thinking she could never look at him the same way after everything that had pulled them apart; after everything he had put her through.

They had spent all day yesterday just as lazily as the day before, shutting the world and their worries out even when they tried to nudge their way back in. They'd eventually given into it and spoken of days to come and what they would have to face. They had held each other, reassured each other and in lighter moments flirted and teased each other. But even then, they knew they couldn't ignore their present situation by refusing to think about it for a couple of days.

Today, they understood mutually they couldn't just hide away and hope things would take care of themselves. They had a business to run, so they had spent most of the day talking about it... among other things, he smirked to himself remembering their morning, but shook the thoughts before he lost track of it again.

He had a general understanding of Stark Corporation, and somehow instinctively knew how they ran it, but he would need more than a few days worth of knowledge to actually understand the specifics. After their conversation with Luwin and Poole, he'd started sitting with Catelyn while she worked to familiarize himself. She had frowned in concern for his health, but she hadn't refused filling him in on the details of the proposals, reports that were laid out before her.

As easily as he understood, all the information overwhelmed him. The more he familiarized with the concept the more he realized the gravity of the situation they were in and the loss they would face if the news of his condition got out. But he fought against it, he couldn't give into exhaustion now, when his wife and brother carried his burdens. Approaching footsteps made pulled him out of his reverie and he turned his head towards the sound.

“...we can discuss it in detail on Tuesday. And again, Mr. Poole, thank you for arranging everything on such short notice. We will see you tomorrow,” and she hung up.

She placed her laptop, along with a stack of papers on the coffee table. “That was Poole, confirming the time for tomorrow's conference. I have to warn Moira - we'll be flooded by RSVPs in the next couple of days for the party. She's been waiting on a head count to proceed with catering, but she sent over menus to look at. We intend to keep it casual, but we still have to pick the finger foods.” She sighed, and he wondered if she was just thinking out loud. “We have so much to do and so little time, Ned. And I'm afraid tomorrow will bring us more issues to deal with.”

“Who's Moira?”

“She's our event planner. She's done this so many times, she knows the drill. I contact her when I don't have enough time to plan it myself.”

He moved behind her, gently kneading her shoulders and pressing out the tension forming there. She leaned her head forward to give him better access and sighed as he continued his ministrations. Motioning towards the stack of papers, she spoke, “Luwin and Rodrik sent notes for us to prepare for the conference, you should take a look at them. I just hope the press behaves, and that they stay away from personal questions. But that’s wishful thinking, I don't know what we'll do if they stir trouble, and what they'll spread.”
“We will be alright, my love. We’ll just have to take it one day at a time. We can’t predict what the coming weeks will bring, but you said yourself that we have people capable enough to handle it. And we’ll get through it together,” he reassured.

Catelyn gave a breathy chuckle, “How do you always know what to say to make me feel better?”

He pressed a kiss in her hair and moved to face her, “Husband 101.” He pulled her closer, his hands moving over her waist.

“So, Ned, shall we approve the menu for our party?”

He pulled her close. “Do we have to do that right now? Can’t we do other things for a while?” His hands trailed off past her hips, suggestively.

“Unless you want some of the most influential and distinguished names in the country to eat crackers with their drinks, we need to do it now,” she challenged. He thought of what she’d said and shrugged, making a non-committal sound, and pulled her close again.

“Eddard Stark, behave!” She laughed and slapped his hands away, and put distance between them, much to his chagrin. Then she deliberately bent over to open her laptop giving him a nice view of her perfect behind.

“Tease.” He muttered under his breath.

“Hmm? Did you say something, love?” She straightened up and tried to look innocent, her eyes betraying her smugness.

He narrowed his eyes, “Nothing, my love.” He felt a small thrill at the endearment.

She sat back down on the couch and pat next to her as she reviewed something on the laptop screen. He sat next to her and pulled her back so she'd rest against his chest. She would occasionally ask for his opinion on the types of food and drink, and he mumbled his answers while trying to focus, which was difficult with the auburn cloud in his face that smelled like flowers. He twirled around a lock of her hair around his index finger while she typed out something and reviewed the lists. He liked to watch her work. It was oddly relaxing and... sexy, the way she furrowed her brow or kept playing with her hair to pull it over on one side or tousle it or tuck away the strays.

He wondered if he could ever get enough of her. Having her only seemed to make him want her more. He had to try and concentrate on her words when she had explained specifics of their business to him this morning, - just like he was now - instead of imagining ripping the shirt off her and pulling her over on his lap and kissing her soundly, maybe they could fall back on this couch that looked comfortable enough for them to....

“Hors D'oeuvres or canapés?”

“Huh?” he said, trying to shake the images and failing because she was smirking smugly. He smirked back, “Hors D'oeuvres. Sorry, Mrs. Stark, I got... distracted.” He said the last part looking at her form appreciatively. As he'd expected that remark brought the flush to her cheeks, before she turned away to resume typing.

“If you focus now, I might just reward you later.” She said over her shoulder, and he deliberately straightened himself up and looked intently at the screen, feigning concentration. She threw her head back laughing, but continued to work in silence after that, occasionally asking his opinion on something and leaned back again to rest against him.
He picked up the notes Luwin and Rodrik had sent for them and started reading. He didn't agree with many of the points, but he thought to leave it to the professionals. It made him angry that they'd covered up everything that had happened while he was in Creekwood. Once again his heart sank when he thought of what would have happened if he had believed Ashara. Hypothetical scenarios and questions started flooding his mind, making his head hurt.

With a jolt he realized not disclosing any specifics of his time in Creekwood tomorrow would leave room for wild speculation. Jory had mentioned the things that were being said about Catelyn in his absence. It saddened him to realize that along with him, she would be a target of nasty comments and speculations once more. His grip on Catelyn tightened and he pressed his face in her hair, breathing in her scent. He would be there for her this time.

“Ned, I don't want you to overtire yourself.” He looked up at her voice and saw her face was lined with concern. When he shook his head, she bit her lip and he thought of their youngest who had inherited that little trait, in spite of having his look. He marvelled at how much Arya resembled her mother when she did that. He smiled, moving his hand up and down her arm and saw her shiver.

“You left your cardigan upstairs?” he wondered out loud, frowning. He hadn't noticed it before, she only wore a short sleeved t-shirt and sweats – not enough to shield her from the low temperature set in the house.

“You promised you would warm me,” she replied nonchalantly, her face carefully blank, but her eyes sparkled with mirth.

His lips quirked up at that and pulled her close, murmuring, “Come here.” He gave a small jump deliberately when he felt her icy nose in the crook of his neck, just to feel her burrow a triumphant smile on his neck. He chuckled and rubbed his hands on her arms and back in a soothing way until she hummed in contentment.

“You're the warmest person I know, darling,” he heard her murmur.

His breath hitched, as he recalled the first time she had spoken in his mind, back in Creekwood when he’d been so troubled and he’d heard her voice say exactly the same in his mind so clearly. He realized that had been just over a month ago, but it seemed ages away.

“You know, that’s the first thing you ever said to me,” he chuckled softly.

“No it isn't. The first thing I said to you was ‘is that seat taken?’” she laughed, looking up to him. He looked in confusion for a split second, then he realized what she meant. Involuntarily he forced himself to recall the moment they’d met, but his mind drew a blank and he flinched. She looked guilty and her eyes watered. “Oh, Ned.”

His heart twisted in his chest at the sight, he kissed her softly to reassure her. “It’s alright, Cat. I do want to know about it sometime, if you would tell me.” She nodded sadly. As much as he had tried to push away the past and his fears for the future, the circumstances of past few months always found their way back into reality and shattered the lightness of the mood.

“I'll tell you all about it. Were you talking about Creekwood?” Catelyn asked, her voice wavering.

He nodded, and gathered his words. He told about his dreams and nightmares and the sleepless nights he would ache for her and not know why he was feeling longing. She held on to him while he spoke of painful memories leading up to that one morning he decided to look into his forgotten past. How he had looked up in the mirror and seen his brother and father's faces staring back at him. He remembered comparing his looks to Brandon's. “I was just thinking how compared to him I looked
solemn and cold. Then I heard your voice say 'you're the warmest person I know, darling.'"

“How did you know it was me?” Catelyn asked, her eyes watering.

“I didn't.” He blinked in surprise, as realization struck him. He never did know it was her. He looked up at her and smiled. “I just...knew. I guess I didn't forget everything then.”

She smiled at him, tears in her eyes, and pulled him into a hug. He pressed a kiss to her cheek and pulled back to continue. “Then I started hearing your voice quite frequently. Sometimes reassuring, sometimes admonishing too.” He stopped to remember that moment, and chuckled. Her admonishment had inadvertently brought him home.

“What?” Catelyn smiled at him.

He went on to tell her about the weeks leading up to the day he'd found out. “....This was maybe a week or so after I first heard you. I was scouring the internet as much as I could to find you. But I couldn't and I was so frustrated. And that day I heard your clear admonishment, 'stop scowling, my love'. I was so thrilled that you called me that, and so distracted, that I signed my name 'Eddard Stark' instead of Richard Williams on the time sheet in the library.”

Catelyn's eyes widened, “And that’s how you found out who you were?”

He nodded. “Can you tell me about the first time we met?”

She bit her lip, tears formed in her eyes. “Yes. We were taking the same elective – ‘History and Lore of the North’....”

She looked down, he gripped her hand, “Cat, if it's....difficult for you...I don't-”

“No.” she answered firmly and looked up straight in his eyes, “I want to tell you. Maybe it will help you remember.”

That’s what he had hoped and he nodded, urging her to continue.

“Brandon had told me you were taking the same class and that he'd asked you to look out for me. And dutifully, you had saved me a seat, so I walked up to you and asked 'is that seat taken?'”

“And was I tongue tied to see the most beautiful woman I had ever seen?” he asked seriously, because he had seen her first about a month ago.

She blushed and bit her lip, “You were quiet for a bit. You just shook your head then and asked if I was Catelyn Tully and introduced yourself. We became friends instantly and started studying together, you showed me around town, took me to places you thought I would like because I was new and just awestruck by how different it was from Riverrun, and...”

“...and tell me I didn't waste too much time building up the courage to ask you out.” He smiled, but it waned to see an odd expression cross her face. He knit his brows in confusion.

“I was...with Brandon then.” she said sheepishly.

“Oh right, I had forgotten you told me that.” he said awkwardly. She had been with his brother before him. His handsome, charming and expressive brother. He wondered how she'd ever fallen for him with Brandon present. He felt an unusual stab of insecurity hit him, it hadn't bothered him to know his brother was the better looking of the two of them before, but the idea of him sweeping Catelyn off her feet made him feel a twist in his guts. He looked down at their hands together,
brushing her engagement ring, he couldn't stop the next words that fell out of his mouth.

“Did you love him?” He didn't know why he was asking her that, this was years ago. Yet he felt a sense of insecurity that he couldn't quite explain. It was as if it had always been present, but dormant until now. It shouldn't matter to him if she had loved or even cared for his brother once, but it did. At that thought he felt guilty as he knew his brother was no longer in this world.

“No, I didn't love him, Ned,” she said softly, tears in her eyes. He wondered why she was crying.

“But you cared for him?” He hesitated.

“Not as much as you did.”

“How did we...I mean, you and me get together?” He remembered what she'd told him the night he came back. “I know about Brandon and Ashara. I recall you telling me about it” he said quickly, “I just....” he had been trying to bring this up, but he never could. They always had other things to worry about, but he decided it was time. “What happened all those years ago, Catelyn? I just hear bits from everyone about many things that happened ever since I arrived, but I can't really piece all the information together. I want to know.”

Catelyn took a deep breath, “I'll tell you everything.”

Chapter End Notes

A big shout out to cloudsinmycoffee9 for being an awesome beta!

And thank you all for reading! It means a lot!! :)


Catelyn Stark held on to her husband’s hand tightly as she collected her thoughts. She knew he would bring the subject up eventually, after they confessed their love to each other, they had spent a lot of time sharing their hopes and fears more openly than they ever had before.

They had been close, if a little guarded, when he first returned - even when she was not more than a stranger to him. But as the last of the barriers between them crumbled to dust, she noted the differences in his demeanour, the Ned she knew a decade ago would never have asked her if she ever loved his brother, at least not loudly. She was glad for the brutal honesty they had promised each other, but in spite of that, he was unguarded and he openly spoke of things that he would have bottled up in the past. It enabled her to soothe some of his deepest fears and worries.

Most importantly there was no sight of the constant cloud of worries and tensions that hovered over him. However, sadly, she saw a new dark cloud looming over him today when they had talked about work, she knew very well from his expressions that he understood the perils they faced if the truth of his condition ever got out. They needed to tread lightly but he was coping well, and Walys was optimistic his condition would not hinder him in any way while working. It gave her hope and added to her concern at the same time. She knew it was all quite overwhelming for him - he wouldn’t admit it to her, but she knew all the same, - and they had only just begun talking about how the business started and what his general duties were. Knowing he would reject taking some time off, she had sneaked upstairs for a little while just so he would relax himself in her absence. The correspondence waiting for her was just an excuse to let him have some time alone.

Realizing she had been lost in thought for a while, she took a deep breath and looked up at him patiently gazing at her in anticipation. Giving him a small smile, she thought of the best way to begin without choking up at the thought that he truly didn’t remember their life. He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze, his thumb brushing over her knuckles, and the gesture grounded her, filling her with strength she needed to begin the tale.

“I came to Winter Town to go to Cerwyn College. Our fathers had been friends for a while then, and knowing I was far from home and new to the city, Rickard assured my father I would always be welcome in his home and asked Brandon to look out for me. He asked me out soon after we met and we dated for about eight months.”

She felt him swallow uncomfortably, and continued hurriedly, before he started wondering if she still harboured feelings for his brother. “I don’t even know how we lasted that long, to be honest. We lived in different worlds, had different tastes, but for a while we made it work. When he graduated and went uptown to Winter Town University for his post grad, our worlds drifted apart even further. It had been a few months by then, he still came over every weekend and promised it wouldn’t change. And knowing I didn’t know many people, he introduced us so we could hang out. I’m glad he did, I really needed a friend then.”

She lightly traced his scar, before running her palm along his stubbled jaw and they looked at each other intently. “And you were my friend, my best friend. You were there for me, Ned, you understood me and we had so much fun. We had similar interests, so you and I would do gallery hops, go to museums and talk for hours about everything and nothing. You made me try different cuisines and taught me how to cook.” They both laughed, she remembered those days when she would constantly trash his kitchen in an attempt to make decent food, he never complained. “Jory
used to be furious at the mess I would make. You two were roommates then. But, we bribed him with food in exchange for co-operation.”

Ned chuckled, “Which explains why he still raids our fridge when he shows up.”

Catelyn nodded, getting back to the subject in a few moments. “We used to have a lot of fun. When the weather was good, we would go hiking and picnicking and when it snowed too heavily, we would sit in your condo and binge watch movies instead of studying.” she smiled, remembering how she'd made him watch any number of romantic movies with her and sneaked pictures of him when he would snore on the couch, bored of watching them.

“After the semester ended, we drove down to White Harbour to a southern style restaurant, and I bought you the first assorted fish platter you ever had. And you took me to a pub across the street and bought me my first glass of Northern spiced wine. Then we took a walk down Riverfront trails and laid back on the hood of your car when it got dark enough to see the stars. Then you drove me back to campus and walked me to my dorms. I was going to Riverrun in a couple of days, just for a while before the summer school started, and the thought of not seeing you for that length of time killed me, and it didn't really make me sad to know I wouldn't see Brandon either. I had been pushing the feeling away for so long, but that night was when I realized how much I loved you, Ned. And I knew I had to stop lying to myself, even if I couldn't tell you, it wasn't fair to Brandon.”

“Why couldn't you...-? I was with Ashara, wasn't I?” he asked.

She nodded, “You'd met her at one of your dad's parties. You'd been seeing her for a couple of months by then.” She shivered slightly and he pulled the plush throw from the couch to cover her with it. She bit her lip and gave a tremulous smile, “I still have that leather jacket you gave me that night. It was spring, but the temperature went down so quickly, I wasn't prepared. You just sighed exasperatedly, wrapped me in your jacket and said....”

“How do you manage to survive here with that thin southron blood?” he interrupted. She blinked a few times, making the tears in her eyes fall rapidly as she stared at him. He appeared just as shocked as her. She couldn't curb the hope and excitement that followed it.

“I don't...know why I said that.” he stammered.

“That is what you said that night, my love. Do you remember anything else?” she asked, looking deeply in his eyes for a sign of recognition, expecting he'd smile a knowing smile and pull her to him, mentioning how he could never forget that night and every moment they'd spent together. Then they would speak more of moments such as that and he would correct her or tease her over details that she couldn't even remember but he did. Yet all that stared back at her was confusion and guilt. She felt her heart sink.

“No, Cat, I'm sorry. I didn't even know why I said what I did, it was more of a reflex. There was just a blur of images in my mind and the words just fell out. But it felt like a deja vu. Like I had lived it before.”

“You did live it, Ned,” she whispered, not able to meet his gaze, she didn't think she could look at that blank expression again. She knew she was being unreasonable for wanting him to remember those moments, but she couldn't help herself. There were a few long moments of silence, before she composed herself.

“Cat, if its too much....” his voice was thick, she could feel the intensity of his gaze and it gave her some amount of relief to know he at least cared about what she was going through, - being the one who lived with the memories of the past unknown to him, - even if it made her feel guilty and selfish.
Silently, she reminded herself of the time they had spent the last few days and shaking her head, gave his hand a squeeze. She looked up with a small smile, and continued her story. “Anyway, Robert's party was the night after that; it's where everything went crazy. My flight was next morning, and I decided to break it off with Brandon after the party. I knew he wouldn't take it well, just as I knew it wouldn't change much, because you were with Ashara and I had no intention of breaking you up; I couldn't just stay with him when you were the one I loved. Little did I know, you were planning to break it off with her at the same time. But, neither of us had to.”

Ned held her gaze, “We caught them red-handed?”

She nodded. “We did. I found him in Robert's bedroom with her. Well, on her, more like. But, the worst part was, I wasn't the only one who did. I was followed by another girl – Barbrey Ryswell, who he had been sleeping with as well. She swore loudly at the sight and started shouting obscenities at them while I stood there in stunned silence. Before we knew it, everyone showed up and Barbrey was yelling at him and then at me, telling me how many times he had cheated on me with her in the past. And suddenly everything became clear, all the times he cancelled dates because of “other plans”, he was actually spending the time with other women. Then Barbrey said something about Ashara that made her angry, they started shouting at each other, arguing about who he was with first and Brandon stepped in before it got out of hand, trying to placate all three of us; I was absolutely furious with him. Sometime during that chaos, you, Jory and Robert came in and tried to calm things down. I broke up with him right there, not caring about who was shouting or taking pictures or watching us. He tried to stop me, but I was already on my way out.”

“God! I would have punched him!” he said, barely holding his anger. She could see his jaw clenching, and her mind went back to Ned's expression when he'd found her on a bench, crying after she'd broken up with Brandon.

“You did, not at the time, but you told me you punched him later.” She admitted quietly.

“Were you okay? What did you do?” he brushed an auburn lock behind her ear and she felt a delicious tingle at the brush of his fingers behind her ear. She willed herself to focus before she gave into her desire.

“What could I do? I just sat on a bench and cried thinking of what his carelessness would cost, until you found me there and walked me to the dorms. I did care for him, and to know he had been sleeping with other women the whole time we were together – it hurt me. And I was terrified of what that news would do, I recalled the amount of pictures and videos people were taking at the time. You see, Brandon and I had come public with our relationship a couple of months before that, and our fathers had been thrilled for our union, already positive we would end up together. I knew what he had done would affect both our families and neither were ready for the storm approaching in the coming months. It was all over the news next morning, I could barely get out of the building. So you drove me to the airport and told me you'd ended things with Ashara as well. We stayed in touch until I got back, as difficult as it was, given everything that was happening.”

She stopped briefly staring into space, remembering how difficult it had been for her father to deal with everything and then straightened up, at his confusion, she clarified, “Our families weren't cordial then and our friendship wasn't encouraged. My uncle told your father to keep his sons away from me and Lysa, and my father threatened to break the alliance with the Starks; both businesses were getting attacked by the media on a daily basis. The phone was ringing off the hook, more so after I returned for school, in spite of my father's insistence that I stay and finish school somewhere in the south.”

“I would too, if I were him. What made you come back?” Ned asked, concern lining his forehead.
“You. I didn't care about the hell I was going to face. I needed to see you and be there for you, like you were there for me. Even if my family dealt with a lot of trouble, we were in the south and it was more annoying than it was hindering to the Enterprise. But, your family faced the worst of it all. And in the face of that storm, you were left alone, trying to take care of your family, all the while doing your best to deal with the damages. I wanted to take care of you; we supported each other, comforted each other and got closer to each other until one day, you confessed you had liked me for a long while - even when I was with Brandon - and asked me out. I said yes, of course, - I was overjoyed, to say the least - and confessed to the same. But in light of everything that had happened, we decided to keep it a secret for a while.”

“When we were about to tell our fathers about it, Brandon decided it would be a good time to issue a public apology which created even more havoc, it pressured my father to publicly accept it, which he wasn't willing to do. To add to that, Ashara announced she was pregnant and it angered both of our fathers even more. Then suddenly, Brandon and Ashara announced they were engaged. It was mostly Rickard's doing, he wanted Brandon to take the responsibility for his actions, especially since Ashara's announcement had angered some of her kin back in Dorne and Starfall who were influential enough to damage the already staggering business. But instead of helping, it backfired when it was time for discussing some southern projects that required Tully Enterprise. My father had to stop endorsing and put a hold on his approval on those just to save face amongst his shareholders, otherwise the Enterprise would face severe repercussions.”

Catelyn's thoughts lingered on the day she heard the news, it had affected her father as much as his. Hoster Tully had a temper, he would have beaten Brandon to death if he could get to Winter Town, he would even threaten to break ties, but he wouldn't go so far as to sabotage what Rickard had built over their feud. They were friends, after all. And deep down he knew it wasn't Rickard's fault, Brandon and Ashara were the ones he was mad at. Her mind still lingered to those days as she continued almost to herself, “He never meant it in malice, it was a desperate action, he even warned Rickard before hand so he could prepare himself, nothing could prepare him for the hit Stark Corporation took and that was the last straw. Rickard's health took a toll, and in a desperate attempt to pull things together, Brandon declared he was stepping down and that you would inherit everything. You had been dealing with the damages for a while, assuaging whoever you could and trying to keep the business going. You had a good reputation among the peers, so it placated the shareholders and my father, but it made Arthur and Ashara Dayne very angry - we didn't know until later why they reacted that way. And you weren't happy that Brandon had done it without talking to you, but it had been the only way out and he knew you would have protested, which is why he kept everyone in the dark. And he was right, it seemed to solve the issue and eventually all the drama died down.”

“I never expected Brandon to be so..... rash.” Ned said almost to himself, looking away from her.

Catelyn looked at Ned’s eyes as he tried to process everything she had told him. She saw his expressions change from anger to disappointment tinged with guilt. She felt contrite, realizing all the events she spoke of didn't exactly paint Brandon in a good light. She gently stroked his jaw, so he would return her gaze. “He made his mistakes and he also did his best to rectify them. Brandon was impulsive, I agree, but he was also quite generous, lively and loyal to the ones he loved. At the time, you didn't want the business, you felt unready to handle it, but as time went on, you got comfortable and even found joy at work, and it was clear you were a better fit to take care of it. Brandon hadn't just rashly decided to give it all to you, he confessed later he wanted you by his side if he had been the one who inherited the business one day. He loved you very much, Ned.” She looked at the emotions in his eyes at those words. When she felt him relax visibly and saw his imperceptible sigh of relief, she decided against speaking of how Brandon's rashness had in the end cost him his life.

“Once your father recovered, he reconciled with my father. They both felt bad for dragging it so far, but they were both too stubborn to say so. It took a few months, but eventually the Starks and Tullys weren’t hostile towards each other, and even managed to be somewhat cordial. And that is when we announced we’d been together all that time.”

“I’m guessing that didn’t make anyone any happier.”

“No, it didn’t.” She laughed mirthlessly. “But we loved each other and wouldn’t give up on each other. It took us a while to actually confess it, but not long after that we ended up getting engaged.” Catelyn looked down at their intertwined hands remembering the day much like the one a couple of days ago, when she’d expressed wanting to go to Winter Town University so she could be with him and they'd both blurted out their feelings for each other. She told him of that day, explaining how it was similar to the events from the night before and watched him smile and let that flicker of familiarity in his eyes warm her. Then he asked how their fathers had reacted to their engagement and she laughed.

“Rickard resisted at first - he had been concerned by how my father would react, but he had already welcomed me back with no hard feelings. You came to Riverrun with me to speak to daddy and uncle Brynden, and to this day, I don't know how, but you managed to convince both of them,” she laughed.

“I have my charms,” Ned shrugged and her heart skipped a beat.

“That is what you said then, as well.” She laughed. “Charms? 'Sorcery' would be a better word, its not an easy task to convince either of them.” They chuckled, looking down at their intertwined hands; he was tracing her wedding ring.

“And then we got married?” he asked softly, she could tell he was grinning crookedly by the tone.

“And then we got married.” She smiled, clearly remembering the day in Winterfell beneath the weirwood, Ned watching her walk down the aisle to him.

“Best decision of my life.” He kissed her softly. “Thanks for telling me everything, my love. I do want to know about the things that happened after that – including our engagement and the wedding. But, some other time, I think both of us could use a breather after that talk.”

She sighed and nodded, before she could reply, they heard the intercom buzz in the foyer. When they answered it, all they could hear was various loud voices of their children trying to speak over each other. She pressed the button to open the gate and both turned to each other.

Catelyn looked at her husband intently once more. “You should ask Ben and Lya about Brandon and your parents, Ned. I didn't know them as well as they did.”

He nodded, she knew he was still absorbing everything she'd said to him. Watching a scowl slowly forming on his forehead, she shook her head.

“Stop scowling, my love,” she admonished, pressing out the crease in his forehead. He laughed, pulling her closer and kissed her soundly again. After a moment of confusion, she recalled what he'd told her about hearing her say the same when he was in Creekwood.

Pulling back, she smiled up at him, “Now, shall we greet our little hooligans?”

He hummed. “Yes, and I'm sure they brought our children with them too.”
Catelyn's laugh echoed through the foyer as they opened the door. “My babies!” she opened her arms just in time to be greeted by stampede of their children shouting in delight to see their parents and jumping to hug them. And in an instant the fog that had darkened their mood was lifted.

“Alright, come here my wild wolf pups! I've missed you all so much....” he pulled them all close to him.

In her periphery she saw Jory, Benjen and Lyanna exchange looks, then join the huddle exclaiming, “Awwww, we missed you too, Ned!!” in unison, making her husband laugh louder.

The expression of pure joy on his face made her heart soar. Catelyn's mind went to the first day Ned met most of them. The only difference was, this time around there was no trace of guilt and sadness underneath the happiness that was pouring through both of their hearts. Sitting in a huddle at the door, holding her loved ones close, all she felt was love.

Jory walked past the dining room to the kitchen, he felt stuffed after he ate like he hadn't seen food for weeks, but he still wanted something sweet. And it was the Stark residence so he was absolutely sure he would find it. Ned and Catelyn were in the kitchen putting away leftovers, huddling close to each other. He cleared his throat and grinned at them widely as he approached.

"Am I interrupting something?" he teased.

"No," Catelyn answered quickly. “Yes,” Ned nodded. Then both exchanged a look at the opposite replies they had spoken in unison. Ned grinned at her innocently when she raised an eyebrow, and shrugged, pulling her closer, “What? He was.”

“Just like old times, then,” Jory laughed. Catelyn rolled her eyes and blushed. He recalled similar conversations they used to have when she and Ned first got together - back when Ned was still his roommate. He had already been used to Catelyn spending a lot of time there, the only difference was he had started finding them huddling close together or kissing in various parts of the apartment, and Catelyn always blushed when he did, while Ned would kick him out - just like he did now. In spite of taking a lot of joy in teasing them, he had to learn how to knock before entering any room after a few times he had almost walked in on them having sex.

“Did you want something?” Ned asked, pulling him out of his thoughts.

“Oh. I wanted something sweet, don't worry I'll raid the fridge,” Jory briskly opened the fridge – in his periphery they exchanged amused glances - and picking out a fudgsicle, he walked away without a backwards glance. He heard their laughter behind him as he entered the living room, but he was too busy eating ice cream to ask them what they were laughing about. They did that a lot too, and he was used to them escaping in their own world even when they were around people, so he made his way to a living chair and sat down.

“So, the weekend alone did them good, don't you think?” Jory joked, throwing a glance in the kitchen where Catelyn and Ned were still standing close to each other, he saw Ned press a kiss to her head and his heart warmed. He'd felt a difference when he walked in the mansion today. They seemed happier and relaxed and quite likely back to the way they used to be.

“By the looks of it, they're back to being nauseatingly sweet. So, we'll have to start checking in before we walk in any rooms around here,” Lyanna answered.

“We can hear you!!” Catelyn exclaimed from the kitchen. Lyanna just shrugged. Before she could
respond, they heard Arya fussing on the baby monitor, so Catelyn and Ned went upstairs to tend to
the her. The girls had gotten quite emotional after seeing both of them, and he knew they were
exhausted but too excited to see their parents to give into it when they were having dinner. Apart
from the zoo trip, he had been there most of the weekend, after all.

After the ranch trip and the arcade, the time at Benjen's condo was spent mostly watching movies.
When they were out of movies to watch, he and Lyanna had paired up with the boys and played
video games. Arya sat on his lap and cheered him and Jon on, occasionally demanding for the
controller and finally they ended up giving her a disconnected one so she stopped fussing. In
the mean while, Sansa hauled Benjen away for her extremely sophisticated tea party with her dolls.
The kids were doing fine, with the exception of some moments when Sansa or Arya went quiet -
especially before bed time – and asked for their mother or father or both. But he would take Sansa
out in the balcony and show her the stars and tell her stories Rodrik used to tell him when he was her
age, while Lya took care of Arya and Benjen got the boys to sleep.

“Have you heard from Rodrik?” Benjen asked him softly, and it took him a moment to shake his
thoughts.

Jory nodded. “He arrived early this morning, said they canvassed Creekwood and found more
evidence for testing. He’ll update me if anything changes.”

Jory knew partly Rodrik asked him to stay in charge because he knew he would do whatever it took
to keep Ned and the rest of them safe. He had picked up on that and did the best he could to
“casually visit” the mansion with Benjen and Lyanna as much as he could, simultaneously keeping
watch. He had a feeling Catelyn and Benjen knew, but they never mentioned it. His hand
instinctively went to his left side where he felt his glock resting in the holster under his leather jacket.

“They must be quite frustrated if they still haven’t found them yet,” Benjen said, as if he’d read his
mind.

“They are. But they are all doing the best they can.”

“Sometimes I wish you charged in and caught them when they were oblivious. If you had, Groff and
his little Dornish bitch would have been rotting in prison and we wouldn’t be sitting here wondering
how he fooled some of the best detectives from Trident,” Lyanna hissed, ignoring Benjen's
admonishment.

“And put Ned into cross hairs? Seriously, Lya?” Jory challenged, and saw her flinch.

“I don’t know, couldn’t you go in there and take him to a safe space while the rest caught those
people?”

“We didn’t exactly have time to plan strategies with him - his conversation with Rodrik was too brief.
We didn't have an actual head count on suspects either. We thought there were possibly three or four,
but there were obviously much more than that, especially after Ned started acting suspicious. If they
were tightening security just based on fear of him finding out, imagine what they would do if they
knew he figured everything out. I think he got lucky.”

“I got really lucky.” They turned towards Ned’s voice, as he and Catelyn stood by the entrance to the
living room and made their way to the couch.

“If I hadn't found out about the drugs, or if I hadn’t come across Ashara and Groff conversing that
night, I wouldn't be here. I started looking into my past because of that... and other reasons.” Ned
said the last part exchanging a glance and a smile with Catelyn. “It was a sound plan to send you in,
alone. As much as I wished they were all caught, I'm glad we escaped without a scratch.”

“We almost didn't, if it wasn't for the onion bagel guy giving us some time to make headway.” Jory added, reaching for two beer bottles in the cooler next to his chair and handing one to Catelyn who smiled gratefully.

“Dave! His name is Dave.” Ned sighed.

Jory shrugged, “I can never remember it.”

“Rodrik told me about Dave. Was he your friend from the library?” Catelyn asked.

Ned nodded, “He was the only guy who kept me sane, to be honest. Many days I thought I would go crazy without answers. I spent hours just frowning at the computer when I couldn't find any clue as to who I was. I spent so much time brooding, Dave threatened to iron my face if I didn't stop frowning at things.”

“I'm gonna keep that in mind for a later date,” Lyanna quipped.

Ned laughed, “He actually kept me from pulling my hair out and brought some amount of humour in those days.”

“He helped you escape, too, didn't he?” Catelyn said. Ned nodded again telling the rest how Dave had helped them escape. Jory noticed how relaxed he was around them. They were leaning against one another holding hands tightly, he was glad they had found their way to each other.

“Jory almost shot him.” Jory had been thumbing the label on his beer bottle when he shot his head up at Ned's proclamation. He was dumbstruck at everyone pinning him down with incredulous expressions, but he felt a bit of relief when he saw amusement in their eyes.

Ned started laughing. “Don't worry. I stopped him just in time.”

“What? I didn't know who he was. I thought he was going to attack Ned. I was trying to keep him safe,” Jory argued, looking at all of them in turn.

“Geez, Jory, your jealousy is getting out of hand. He can make other friends, you know?” Benjen grinned.

Jory gave a mock gasp and narrowed his eyes at Ned, “You have other friends?”

“Should I get your gun?” Lyanna retorted.

Jory put his face in his hands, groaning exasperatedly. Now he was never going to hear the end of it.

Catelyn's voice made him look up, “Come on guys, be nice. He was just doing his job of keeping my husband safe.”

“Yes! Thank you, Catelyn.” Jory looked at her as if she was the only friend he had left in the room for taking his side, and glared at the rest of them.

Benjen agreed, “Yeah, don't worry Jory. We know we can count on you tomorrow. And if anyone does get reckless, you will do whatever it takes to keep us safe.”

Jory beamed at Benjen, who took a sip of his beer and continued, “Even if it means you, Hal and Chrys have to tackle and pin someone to the ground bare-handed before they have a chance to think.”
The rest of them burst out in laughter.

*Oh, not this again!* Jory rolled his eyes and made a face at Benjen. “Bloody hell! It happened ONCE! The guy was showing a lot of signs of aggression towards Ned and I saw a silvery object in his hand and reacted. It was a reflex!”

“He was armed?” Ned asked.

“Yeah, with a vaporizer,” Lyanna added.

Ned looked at Jory incredulously, and looking at his expression, Catelyn threw her head back and laughed loudly.

“It looked like a taser, okay? He reached for it, so I... stopped him.” Jory shrugged, ignoring the specifics of how he had “stopped” the man.

“Jory - you jumped on him.” Cat said in between giggles.

“I did not...I just.....pushed him...very lightly.” Jory answered petulantly, knowing fully well he'd basically tackled the man.

Ned seemed confused and he felt a stab of sadness until Benjen began answering Ned’s unspoken question. “Last year we were celebrating our successful project in the outskirts of Hornwood. At the party, you met with Rickard Karstark's disgruntled friend, who was angry that we opted against his company for building materials. He kept taking jabs at you and as the evening wore on, the alcohol loosened his tongue...”

Jory put his face in his hand, “Do we really have to-”

“YES!” everyone interrupted and he groaned.

“So, obviously Jory got mad. He was talking to me and glaring at him at the same time. So, after being thoroughly offended when you bluntly told him why you chose otherwise, the man advanced towards you briskly. One thing I know I'm talking to Jory about rugby playoffs and then Jory just flies out of my face to jump on the guy. Hal and Ethan were in the background, but then they joined the huddle, thinking it was serious. And we all panicked for a moment and everybody went deadly quiet. We didn't know what to expect, there was so much tension building. And as you are well known for rare displays of incredible wit, you said.....-”

“Couldn't you fellas wait until the party was over to play rugby?”

Everyone turned to Ned, shocked. Ned looked just as shocked by his own words. “I....I don't know how, the words just tumbled out like a reflex....”

Jory felt a flicker of hope, he did his best to hide the prickle behind his eyes. *Not all is lost, after all. They're both closer and he might just remember yet.* They really couldn't find words after that and after a while the conversation died down as everyone tried to curb their enthusiasm at Ned's sudden proclamation.

Soon, he got up to leave, they had an early day and it would be hard enough, he didn't wish to add sleep deprivation and a hangover to the mix. Yet, he already knew he’d had more beers than he should have. Before he could even reach for his cellphone to call a cab, Benjen pulled out his car keys and beckoned him to the door. Jory looked at his face and knew there was no point in arguing. Lyanna gave him a quick hug before going to her old room while Ned and Catelyn followed him to the front door to say goodbye. Catelyn hugged him, admonishing him to sleep the moment he got
home.

“Big day tomorrow. You two lovebirds should try to get some sleep tonight as well.” He grinned at them. Ned’s reaction to Catelyn ducking her head to hide her blush made the last of his doubts disappear. They're back to being nauseatingly sweet, indeed.

Then Ned flashed him a grin, and quirked his eyebrows, “See? I told you I could woo.”

Jory turned away towards Benjen's car, laughing and shaking his head, “You never cease to amaze me, Stark.”

“See you tomorrow, Cassel.” Ned’s words made him smile and without turning or stopping Jory gave him a quick wave and got in the car.

The ride home was mostly quiet, partly because he could feel the alcohol and the stress of all week was catching up to him. In the silence, he felt his thoughts run free, worries returning in his mind. Fear for Ned’s safety and the safety of others after the announcement.

“I can hear you thinking.” He looked over at Benjen who just smirked at the windshield and didn't spare him a glance. “You're worrying too much. Everything is going to be fine. You said so yourself, we're all set.” Benjen reassured as he pulled in the parking lot in his building.

Jory nodded wearily, “I just... I can't help it, Ben. I worry for him.”

“You just need some sleep, Jory. You're tired. Don't deny it; you can fool Catelyn, but you can't fool me. I've had Brienne report to me, she told me you've been working your arse off for this.”

“So, that’s why she keeps following me around. You sneaky bastard,” Jory shook his head as Benjen grinned smugly.

His phone rang, as Rodrik’s name flashed on the screen, his heart leapt in his throat and he turned to answer it. “Rodrik, whats up? Any news?” He listened carefully, feeling Benjen's gaze on him. Their conversation was pretty brief, for that he was glad, because he was stunned in silence.

“What is it? What news?” Benjen furrowed his brow, when Jory didn't speak for a while, he was still trying to discern what he'd just heard.

“The tech team decrypted the laptop and memory card Mallister found in Creekwood. The information they found gives us enough evidence to connect the owner to Groff. In fact, they think the person might have been his second in command - someone who looked over all his operations on his behest, to cover his identity. I thought it would be Ashara, but I was so wrong.” Jory said, his voice wavering as he struggled to rein the anger boiling within him.

“By the look on your face, I guess you know whoever it is, then?” Benjen asked grimly.

Jory just sighed loudly after putting his cellphone back in his pocket. He pinched the bridge of his nose in an attempt to calm himself.

“It’s Dave.”

“What?!” Benjen stared at him incredulously.

“You heard right. Dave is working for Groff.”
Thanks for reading! C & C welcome! :)
Reopened Wounds

Chapter Notes

Hi there! I apologize for the inexcusable delay. I will try to be more regular from now on!

Possible trigger warning: The first POV of the chapter (Ned's pov) has some graphic depictions of violence and emotional distress.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ned Stark sat in the backseat of the car as camera flashes and commotion followed them throughout the city. But all he could hear was the sound of his own harsh breathing, his heart pounding against his chest, threatening to break free, and all he felt was Catelyn's presence next to him - grounding him, giving him strength to sit upright. He felt his mind ease and he couldn't help but wonder how he had ended up in this state.

Everything had been fine when they’d left for the conference. They had walked into their sword shaped office building - his memories sparking with familiarity with every step he had taken, but anxiety had kept him from delving too deeply into it. Catelyn had held on to him the whole time, with Benjen and Jory at his side - his friend's expression had been one of utter concentration and readiness. Ned knew one misstep by anyone around them and Jory would have pinned them down.

As they had opened the door to the conference hall, he'd heard Catelyn softly whisper, “Hold on to me, my love,” before the room filled with gasps and then flashes of light all around. There had been cheers, applause and chatter as they’d settled down. He'd answered the string of questions directed his way with well practiced answers. He almost pounced on the ones that questioned Catelyn's intentions and fidelity, but she'd held him back. It was in the middle of Rodrik's official report of his disappearance when suddenly he'd started drifting away. Flashes of images flooded in his mind, the sheer force of them had taken him by surprise.

The memories had consumed every conscious thought, making it impossible for him to focus on the questions. Once Catelyn had noticed the change in his demeanour, - as much as he'd tried to keep his calm - she'd silently alerted Jory and Rodrik, and they had left the building as soon as Walys had given a brief explanation about the haste.

Just when he’d thought it was over, the memory looped back to the beginning, almost struggling to get out trapping him in an endless nightmare. Make it stop.... he sighed, helplessly. With every loop, the memory had become stronger and more vivid. He’d recalled the dreams he used to have, the bits and pieces of the accident that had always been in the back of his mind, too far for him to approach. The nightmares of someone trying to drag him as he struggled to get out of his car. He'd been told to ignore them, forced to push them down. Mind filling in the gaps, Mr. Williams, he heard the ominously calm voice of his therapist from Creekwood. It is nothing to worry about. Forget it. Forget all of it. You must move forward. And now he faced the repercussions of listening to that man as it all played over and over in his mind, mocking him in the face of an important event for their family.

“We're almost there, my love.” Catelyn's reassurance, made him break out of his thoughts. His peace lasted merely a few moments as the memory slowly started playing in his mind again. His grip on her
tightly, but he took solace in the coolness of her wedding band pressing against his palm. A part of his mind remembered another time he'd been in a similar situation, helpless when she'd grounded him; he held on to that thought. She pulled his tie out, undoing some of the buttons on his shirt to allow him to breathe. He leaned his head back and tried to focus on her soothing words, even as the images flashed in his mind. His breathing grew heavier, his heart thudded away, and he was transported back......

A loud crash pierced through the silence. He could hear his heart pounding. He looked up, but his vision was blurred - all he could see was white, and his left eye hurt like hell. Something cold and wet fell on his face, prickling his skin...

He opened his eyes, trying to focus on the car, on Catelyn, on his surroundings - anything. He was helpless. His thoughts seemed to have a mind of their own and it frightened him. A buzzing made him flinch, and he saw Catelyn turn off her phone, turning her attention toward him. His chest constricted . . .

His chest hurt. He pulled himself back, trying to reach the buzzing black object in the other seat – his phone, flashing Catelyn's face. He winced and cringed against the pain shooting through his chest and forehead by the action. His right arm felt awkward and useless, his hands were bloody. There were shards of glass everywhere, and with every movement, a thousand cuts pierced his chest. He pushed on to the steering wheel to get back in the seat, manoeuvring to grab his phone when the door opened on his right. Before he could act, something pulled him out of the car and dragged him back. He tried to stop the movement, but it was useless. Silhouettes crowded him and he felt the sharp blow to the back of his head.

A speed bump jolted him to present. “Sorry,” Jory mumbled from the front. Ned nodded at him, trying to control his breathing and pull out of the memory. Catelyn was pressing a cloth to his head, wiping away the sweat, as he felt a twinge in the scar on his eyebrow and the back of his head....

His eye hurt, blood dripping from the brow. He couldn't see clearly, as his left eye was shut and the right one hazy as he tried to focus on the blurred figures. He saw a glimpse of a tattoo on one of their forearms, glistening in the sunlight, before his eyes drooped.

“We're here.”

His eyes snapped open and he opened the door and stumbled out. Vaguely he knew people were helping him, but he was too exhausted to resist.

“Get him to his room,” he heard Walys call out. He made his way in the door to the closest washroom and retched. Someone helped him up to wash his face and pull him towards the stairs. Catelyn.

“The kids...” he whispered, desperate not to let them see him this way.

“Lyanna knows. They're with her in the tv room. They won't see us,” Benjen answered.

- He was losing consciousness, he knew, but heard the distant sound of the car starting as the shadowy figures over him began to move away. All of a sudden, he felt something grab his foot -

Catelyn helped him to bed, his eyes squinting against the light as it flooded in from the windows. He lay there breathing, feeling people huddle around him now, but one face stood out, just as the end of the memory played before his eyes....

As he closed his eyes against the sharp sunlight, he saw a glimpse of Catelyn with fiery auburn hair
glowing, and her beautiful blue eyes gazing at him, full of love. Then everything went dark.

Catelyn leaned back against the bookshelf, her eyes following the droplets of rain running slowly down the window glass. It had been a rather stressful day. Countless phone calls were directed to her and Benjen along with their answering machines at the office. They had instructed their assistants about what to say, but people were getting impatient to speak with someone whose last name was “Stark” for true information, as their calls to the office had gone unanswered since the hours had ended by the time the conference had. It was late in the evening when she'd finally turned off her cell phone and laptop for some peace and quiet. But in the solitude, the low pounding headache returned with the worries she'd held at bay for Ned's sake.

Rodrik and Walys were in the living room on a video call with the team at Trident. Lyanna was upstairs and Jory and Benjen were brewing another pot of coffee. We need it, too, if we want to get through this day. She was tired, and with nothing to do, her thoughts rushed back to Ned, who was sleeping peacefully. For now.

She sighed and slumped in one of the chairs. Just when they'd thought they were out of the storm, they had seemingly entered a bigger one. Amidst all the chaos, Walys remained as steady as a rock. And she'd never been more thankful for his presence. He'd calmly explained Ned's PTSD and stress to the conference, firmly convincing them that he would prefer no more questions. Luwin had taken his lead and brought the conference to close. By doing that, Walys had taken the spotlight off of Ned as the reporters had been clearly angry at the man for interfering with what would have been the news of the month. Walys had taken on the ire on himself so they wouldn't have the chance to focus on Ned's condition that had forced them to leave.

All throughout the day he'd remained calm and given them instructions on how to help, as if it were a normal occurrence. The thought of it made her shudder. She'd stayed beside Ned when he'd refused to sleep before speaking with Walys. He'd held on tightly to her hand while explaining his flashbacks in excruciating detail. She'd urged him to sleep, but he wouldn't budge, and he’d continued as if his life depended on it. Walys had calmly guided him through his recollection, reassuring him about the present and urging him to take deep breaths when necessary.

Her heart had constricted in her chest when she'd heard every speculation the detectives had about his accident being confirmed by him. He had been exhausted towards the end of his tale, but had reassured her he was doing better before passing out cold. She would have been amused by the irony if it weren't for the fears and questions racking her mind.

He'd woken up an hour later with a jolt, and Walys had given him a couple of pills to relax him and induce sleep, so he could rest until he gained his strength, to which he’d shaken his head adamantly, but took them anyway. The physician Rodrik brought in had checked him and assured them he was doing well, and all he needed was some rest. Ned hadn't even tried to hide his scowl – groggy and hazy as he had been by that point, from exhaustion and effects of medications.

After the doctor had left, he'd refused to go back to sleep and Catelyn had even threatened to tie him to their bed if he didn't listen to them. Much to her surprise, he'd smirked at her sleepily, “oh, you don't have to tie me to keep me in your bed, my love. Unless it's something you are interested in, then by all means.” He'd grinned at her like a fool, holding his hands up. She’d been unable to keep herself from snorting, since she was fairly certain he had no idea Dr. Walys, their family, and the Cassels had been present and had heard every word he'd said. That had slightly brightened everyone's mood, especially after Jory had sighed and murmured, “Well, Ned's up,” moments before Ned's eyes drooped, followed by soft snores in mere minutes.
Walys had agreed with the physician's assessment that her husband was merely exhausted at that point and likely would be in too deep a sleep to have any more flashbacks. She'd left to spend time with their children, who just thought their father was tired and asleep. She'd stayed with them while they had dinner and until their bedtime - settling Arya in her new bed next to Sansa - and then left to look in on Ned before spending a few hours answering phone calls. Finally Lyanna had all but pushed her out of the room, coaxing her take some rest. She tried to close her eyes for a bit but her mind buzzed with adrenaline, so she had made her way to Ned's office instead.

“Mrs. Stark?” At Walys' voice, Catelyn had looked up at doorway expectantly.

“Dr. Walys. I'm glad you're here. I wanted to speak with you about what happened,” Catelyn said, straightening up and unleashing the barrage of questions she had for him. He'd let her finish calmly and waited to respond.

His tone softened, “He is fine, Catelyn, he's just exhausted. It was a memory flash. A strong one. He has had them in our sessions, so it is common. It won't have any lasting effect on him. It was just strenuous for him, I could have tried to calm him until it passed, but he wouldn't be at peace until he got it out.”

“What does this mean? Is he remembering? Is it going to hurt him....” Catelyn asked, forcing herself to be calm and think clearly, even if the only question that plagued her was whether or not her husband could ever be rid of living through painful memories.

Walys looked at her thoughtfully, giving her the sense that he read between the lines. “I see it as a good sign, Mrs. Stark. As difficult as it may be to see it as such, considering the circumstances. Ever since I started treating him, he has spent a long time trying to recall his accident, against my advice. Yet he couldn't. He remembered it vaguely, but never in any detail and I knew it bothered him. Something in that conference must have triggered him to recall the pieces he couldn't before. We may get some answers once I discuss it with him, in detail, in our next session. And before you ask, I don't think he is suddenly starting to remember, exactly.”

He sat down in front of her and she leaned forward. He paused for a moment, “As you know, the drugs they gave him were counteracting his ability to recall events. And his PTSD made it worse, but somehow a few weeks ago something triggered and a floodgate opened in his mind unleashing all the memories all at once, which disoriented him.”

Catelyn held back a shudder at the reminder of that night. *Cat, our baby, Cat! You need a doctor....the blood...I can't lose you, too.* His words still rang in her mind, her blood had run cold at them. Her poor Ned. Of all the memories, he'd been assaulted by the worst of them. She shook her thoughts away, lest she forgot the present situation.

Walys gave her the room to think, smiling softly in understanding when she nodded so he'd continue. “After the incident a few weeks ago, I think, his mind built a wall around itself as a defence mechanism. That protects him from venturing into painful memories, but it also keeps his mind in that shell, making him shy away from recalling anything. That is why I had ask him to take his time to settle in after he fell, so it wouldn't be much of a shock to him if we approached his memories slowly. I hadn't expected what happened today, after little to no progress all these weeks, I had thought it would be a long journey. But some triggers are too strong and the flashbacks crack the resistance that his mind has built. The shock of sudden flashes is too much for him to bear. That may cause him to remember too much at once, or just have random pieces of memories with no knowledge of how he remembered it.”

Catelyn's eyes snapped up at that. “He had been finishing our stories when we tried to tell him something from the past. You think it could be....”
Walys nodded thoughtfully. “A sign that his resistance is cracking? I believe so. It is progress, because as cracked and random as it may be, he is still recalling some events from his past. But, it will still be a long way. His mental state is fragile at the moment, and it would be better if we progressed steadily. He will likely tap into random memories, and our job is to guide him through them and help him stay calm if he gets too anxious.”

Her relief was short lived. “But it hurts him. He was in pain at the conference. I thought he was going to pass out – even if it wasn't visible to anyone around him. I have never seen Ned like this,” Catelyn countered. Ned was the healthiest of them all. A rock, Brandon had named him. Nothing gets Ned down. Now even the slightest triggers would plunge him into darkness she couldn't do anything about and it unnerved her.

“You must remember that he has been away from the outside world after he lost his memory. He was in that small town, where he only knew what his captors wanted him to know. He just needs time to get used to it and to exercise more control on his mind. He is otherwise healthy, he can still do everything he did before he lost his memories. I will help him understand it better and show him ways how to keep a hold on his mind in such a situation, so he is prepared if it happens again,” Walys answered in an infuriatingly calm voice.

“So there is no way to help him? I should just sit and watch him writhe in pain? What might be next? Reliving the deaths of his parents and his brother? Remembering all the painful things we've gone through all these years?” she countered, walking away from him. He remained silent and Catelyn felt ice creep in her veins. She advanced towards the doctor slowly. “You're not denying it. Please tell me he won't have to live through that again.”

Walys sighed, “I cannot deny the possibility, I'm afraid. I can't promise he won't suffer such a flash again, Mrs. Stark. But I can say that the intensity of the triggers and the pain and exhaustion that follow them will fade in time. And he seems to be at ease around you and your family. If it occurs again, just be there for him. Our sessions will help him cope better. He will get better in time.”

Catelyn felt defeated, but she nodded wordlessly. She had been afraid about this, and knew Ned was too, even if he hid it from everyone. She welcomed the distraction when Rodrik asked to come in, checking if she was well just as the aroma of caffeine hit her. Benjen entered with a tray full of mugs and Jory followed him with a mug in his own hand.

Walys refused the coffee and moved to leave. “My work here is done. You know where to find me, but he will likely sleep all night. He'll suffer no side effects, perhaps a headache, but if it gets to be too much you can give him pain medication. And although it is unlikely, he may have a panic attack. If so, give him the pills I referred last week and help him do the exercises. He should be back to normal as of tomorrow. If he remembers anything else, just note it down. I'll check back in a few days.”

“Thank you, we really cannot repay you for your help.” Catelyn shook his hand.

He smiled softly. “It’s my pleasure, Catelyn. I presume you're going ahead with the party on Saturday?”

That had been the very first concern on her mind, since the RSVPs had flooded in by this evening, according to Moira who had called her a while ago. Catelyn had known it was too late to cancel, but one word from Ned and she would – though she knew he wouldn't want her to. She'd forced Ned to stay in his shell causing everything he was going through now. It would be better for him to adjust with the surroundings as soon as possible, and it was in the comfort of their home. Dr. Walys would be here, so would the rest of their family. They would take precautions, and she would be by his side. She hated to put him through it all, but it had to be done.
She looked up at Walys with a firm resolve and nodded. “Yes, I think at this point, it is important that everyone knows Ned is back and capable of taking back his duties as the CEO and president of Stark Corporation.”

Walys smiled warmly, “I dare say he is. He just needs guidance, a boost of confidence, and support, which I know very well you all will provide. It is a wise decision, Catelyn. I'll see you all on Saturday.”

Catelyn smiled softly at her brother-in-law, after the doctor was gone. “Thanks, Ben. You're a darling. Someone should bring a mug for Lya.”

“Already did,” Jory answered and walked towards his uncle. “Have you spoken to the Blackfish?”

“Yes, I just got off the phone. He knows the details Ned gave us, I'll speak with him in detail once I get there,” Rodrik answered. “This may be a huge lead, if we can figure out who his attacker is.”

“You think whoever this guy is with the tattoo will lead us straight to Ashara, don't you? There aren't many crooks who would let someone like Ned go, unless they were rewarded quite handsomely, which would leave a money trail. But we got no tips and Ned never saw them again, or he would have remembered earlier. Which means whoever they are, both Groff and Ashara trust them enough not to sell them out,” Jory said.

“Yes, that is exactly what I think,” Rodrik continued. “By the sound of it, Ned didn't see their faces clearly. So they were very careful. And they knew not to hurt him too much. I don't think they were counting on amnesia, but it made it easier for them to keep him hidden.”

Catelyn felt anger burn within her. She wished she could strangle the men who'd done this to her husband. The details of his abduction were too much to hear, but she needed to keep an open mind if they were to catch the people who did this. Her husband was safe now. And she intended to keep him that way.

“Jory, when you met Dave, did you see a tattoo?” Rodrik's words snapped her out of her thoughts. She frowned. What did his friend have to do with this?

“No, he definitely didn't have one. And I doubt he'd risk being Ned's 'friend' if he'd done that. Ned isn't stupid, he would have recognized him. As Walys explained earlier, the slightest triggers are enough to spark some recognition. He is close enough to his memories to feel that much. I doubt it was Dave; Ned would know.”

“Hang on, Dave is a suspect? When did that happen? He means a lot to Ned after what he did for him, so I hope there is strong proof against him.” Catelyn hoped it wasn't true. Ned would be devastated.

Jory ran his hand through his hair. “I'm sorry, I forgot to mention after everything that happened today. I was going to tell you and Ned tonight.”

Rodrik took over, noticing Jory's hesitation, explaining to her Dave's involvement in this. Catelyn sank in the chair as she processed the information Rodrik presented about the evidence that linked him to Groff. “So, Ned was bait. Why else would he want to save Ned, effectively driving Groff out and putting him in charge? He wasn't helping Ned - he was helping himself.”

Rodrik smiled at her. “I wanted to be gentle about this news, since Ned thought he was a friend, but Brynden told me you'd figure it out with that sharp mind of yours, lass.”

Before she could react, Rodrik's phone rang, interrupting their conversation. “Jason, did you get
him? Alright, I'll leave now."

“What news?” Jory asked.

“Dave escaped, but they found things in his apartment, Jason wants me at HQ as soon as possible. In the meanwhile, have someone look through the conference footage to see if any of the reporters had the tattoo, perhaps that was what triggered Ned. Walys said he hadn’t mentioned that bit about the tattoo before when he recalled pieces of his accident. Either way, doesn’t hurt to check. It sounds like Groff to plant a spy to make sure Ned didn’t give them away.”

His eyes were still on his phone – booking the plane ticket, no doubt. She made a mental note to speak to Benjen about making sure he was covered for any and all case related expenses. That was the least they could do.

“But, don’t you think he will see the news? We must be all over it by now.” Catelyn frowned, her heart going out to the team stuck in keeping the press at bay.

“That was the plan. We are hoping he'll see this as an act of fear. By neglecting to mention his name or Ashara's, we look like we are trying to contain the damage already made by Ned's absence. They're both ego-driven, we need them to think they're getting away with this so they let their guard down,” Rodrik explained.

“I'll get someone to check the footage. It will be a while, but you're right.” Jory took out his cellphone, typing away.

Rodrik turned grim, “I'll head out, but...”

“I'll stay here, Rodrik. And Brienne and Ethan will switch with Hal and Will in the morning to watch over the estate. And yes, I'll debrief the staff about Saturday. You go do what you have to do,” Jory assured him.

Now that they’d come public with Ned’s return, it was possible Groff and Ashara would try to get an upper hand. Jory had asked them if he could stay for the night to keep an eye out for their family. At first Catelyn had thought Groff wouldn’t be so stupid as to attack them there, but then she’d seen how relieved Lyanna had been at Jory’s offer, and she’d remembered the assassination attempt on her by Arthur Dayne. Jory had been the one who had saved Lyanna, who had been pregnant with Jon at the time. Taking that into consideration, Catelyn couldn’t truly say her family was completely safe in such a condition. Especially when too many of the same people were involved. So she'd invited both Benjen and Lyanna over as well - Jon had already been here a while. Sometimes she didn't even notice there were four instead of three kids in their home.

“Catelyn?”

She looked at Jory's hesitant expression.

“Are you sure you're okay with me staying?”

Catelyn knew he still dealt with guilt over not keeping Ned safe from this abduction, so if he felt some sort of fulfillment by doing it now, she was happy to oblige. She smiled at him reassuringly, “Of course! We love having you over, Jory.” She turned to Rodrik. “Can't you stay for dinner Rodrik? I was just about to make something.”

He shook his head. “I'll eat on the plane. I need to take this one, the next flight is late tomorrow, and I can't afford to lose that much time. If I leave now, I'll make it there by midnight and see the lads at the HQ first thing in the morning. But thanks for the offer. Keep me updated about Ned.”
After he left, Jory walked over to her, looping an arm around her shoulder. “How are you holding up?”

“A bit buzzed, but I'll be alright. It's Ned we should worry about.” She gave a mirthless chuckle.

“Pfft. When aren't we worried about, Ned?” Jory asked, making them snort.

“Oh and Cat, you're not cooking. You've been through enough today. Let us take care of it.” Benjen stood on her other side, putting his arm around her and squeezing her other shoulder.

She looked at him and then and Jory, both had wide smiles on their faces. “You...two...are going to...cook?” she asked slowly, willing to keep her face straight, hoping she wouldn't be the one to explain the state of their kitchen to Ned once the guys were done 'cooking' in it. She knew they were trying take care of her and make her smile, and she appreciated the gesture.

“Haha, no. Jory and I are heading out to get pizza. What do you want?” Benjen laughed.

Catelyn giggled. “The usual.”

Jory nodded. “Yes ma'am. I'll head up to ask Lyanna and then go get the food. Maybe the smell of pepperoni will wake all the sleepy heads up there.”

As they walked away Benjen hit him on the head, “Don't let Lya hear you say that! Do you have any idea how long it took her and Cat to get the kids to sleep?”

Catelyn sat back on the chair and closed her eyes for a while, focusing on the light rustling of trees to drive away the chaos in her mind. Lyanna had helped her so much in these last few months, she had become her closest confidante. They'd both relied on each other for support and become good friends, like Ned had always hoped for.

“Cat?”

She smiled at the voice and opened her eyes.

“Lya, I was just thinking about you. How is he doing? Is he up? Maybe I should...” Catelyn started.

“No, you shouldn't. And he's doing fine, sleeping like a drunken sailor. How you can get any rest with that snoring of his, I'll never know,” Lyanna smirked.

“You tell him that when he gets up. He says I'm the one that snores.... or at least, he used to say,” Catelyn added, the smile waning from her face.

“How are you doing?” Lyanna asked, coming to stand in front of her.

“I'm fine, Lya. The adrenaline is subsiding and the headache is growing. So, I think that's a good sign. And coffee helps.” She held up the mug.

After a long silence, Lya leaned forward. “Cat...” she urged.

Catelyn looked out of the window to hide her tears, “I just, I thought it was over, you know? I thought he was doing better. I wished he didn't have to face it all alone, I don't know what to do for him. How can I help him? I felt so useless when he was going through it, Lya. I couldn't stop thinking about when he fell. But he was fine, after. He was getting better after we...” she bit her lip.

Lyanna understood, pulling her to stand. “Yeah..I.. I know.” Lyanna answered softly, hugging her. Catelyn had to fight hard against the surge of tears that threatened to flow at the comforting gesture.
She needed to be strong. "He'll be fine, Cat. I know, he will. Now come on, the lads will be back soon, let's open a bottle of wine while we wait. And after dinner, you are getting some sleep. You need it. Don't even - "

She held up her hand with a frown, stopping Catelyn's protest.

"Seriously, Lya, I'm fine. It was exhausting today. But nothing I couldn't handle." Catelyn wiped her tears.

"Oh, I don't mean today. I mean the last few days you two were obviously busy 'not sleeping'." Lyanna smirked at her, in an attempt to lighten the mood, no doubt. Catelyn groaned, but Lyanna's expression made her laugh.

The guys were back with pizza and pop soon enough – bringing extra for the rest, not wanting to face the wrath of the kids once they woke and found the adults had pizza without them.

Her concerns for her husband weren't likely to fade anytime soon. But surrounded by their family whom they loved, and loved them in return, she felt they were all safe. And Catelyn knew deep in her heart they would all get through this.

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Rodrik made his way into the Trident HQ, where his colleagues waited for him with evidence on the table. He donned his gloves, nodding at everyone. Jason was holding a newspaper in his hand, he looked up at Rodrik's arrival, "Good, you're here. We canvassed his apartment, it was wiped clean, but he left this. We also found a stash of drugs on his desk. Everything he'd explained in the emails, so he is our guy."

"Anyone see him leave?"

"We asked around, nobody has seen him for about a week – which is odd, since we only found the evidence implicating him a few days ago. So the timeline doesn't add up, but I've put an APB out. This better lead somewhere, it's starting to seem an awful lot like a goose chase to me." Mallister sighed.

Rodrik nodded, he knew everyone was getting anxious. If they didn't find them soon, they would have to close the case. Their influence only went so far. "Right, thanks, Jason. Does this mean anything to you?" Rodrik held up the newspaper crossword with the words "fish out of water" circled on it and "9/14@8" handwritten next to the words.

"Not a clue. 9/14 is today's date and I'm guessing the rest has something to do with his accomplices. He might have tried to signal someone before we got there. I'll have someone look through the cctv camera footage from the shop across the street. If someone shady showed up around the area, we'll get them," Jason shrugged.

"Where did you find it?" Rodrik asked.

Jason answered gravely, "On his desk; it's odd really. He did all his transactions and communications electronically, so it couldn't be traced. Which leaves me to think...."

"If it was meant for the police." Rodrik finished.

"Anyway, we'll look into this guy a bit more, I'll check with the docks nearby – gotta start somewhere. And well, I'll leave it to you and Brynden. Now if you'll excuse me I have some paperwork to do," Jason smiled, walking out with the rest. Rodrik knew everyone's patience was
thinning. Jason wouldn't quit, but he still had a job to do. This wasn’t the only case he was working on after all. Rodrik eyed the words again, when he heard footsteps approach.

“And here I thought, you stood me up...” Rodrik said, without looking back.

“You wound me. I would never do such a thing!” Brynden gave a mock gasp. Rodrik chuckled, handing him the newspaper. “I was busy tracing a lead...which is why I'm late. Anyway, how's Stark? And Cat?” he asked. By his tone, Rodrik knew he meant the “need to know” lead he had been after.

“Ned should be up by now. Catelyn is fine, a bit worried. But then, aren't we all?” Rodrik sighed.

“I'll call her soon. She's got a lot on her plate.” Brynden said dejectedly, looking at the evidence with keen eyes.

“They both do, I'm afraid.” He shook his thoughts, focusing on the present.

“Crossword. Huh. 4 down: 9/14@8, Fish out of water. Today is 9/14, but the rest...” Brynden read the words out loud.

“I thought it would be addressed to you, considering your nickname.” Rodrik enquired.

“But why on a crossword puzzle and then circle it and add the date? Why couldn't he just write somewhere else on the paper. There is a lot of room here. Why did he choose this?”

Rodrik contemplated that for a bit, before it struck him, “What if he wanted to get our attention? Just yours and mine. Ned told us everything in detail when he got back. He said the way he found out his name was because Dave was doing a crossword puzzle with the word 'Stark' in it and it prompted him to remember and contact me. I think it's Dave's way to getting the attention of the ones who know about that detail. We questioned him about it when we brought him in with the rest of them. He must have known we knew the significance of it.”

“Certainly fits his M.O. He helped Ned, but from behind the shadows. Maybe he knows something but is afraid he's being watched and cannot be seen with cops. But you are not a cop and I'm not exactly affiliated with these cases.” Brynden speculated, leaning against a desk and looking at the words.

“We still need to figure out what it is he is trying to tell us,” Rodrik crossed his arms, letting Brynden find the meaning. His friend stared at the paper for a long time, his frowning deepening. After a few minutes of speculating, he broke the silence.

“Maybe it's not what the words mean, maybe its literal. 4 down....” Brynden muttered to himself, turning the paper over to examine.

“Check the fourth page.” Rodrik suggested.

He opened the page, turning his gaze down, “These are just ads...” he sighed.

“Anything about a fish?” Rodrik asked.

“No, nothing—wait,” Brynden squinted. “A coupon for a meal for two: a fish platter for a diner at the crossroads. I know it, it's near the exit to King's Road Freeway.”

‘Hold on, let me check...” Rodrik looked it up on the internet, doing a word search for 'fish out of water.'
He looked at the list, and huffed a laugh, “Tully, you are a genius.”

“I have my moments. What did you find?”

“I checked to see about that fish platter on their menu, it's called 'fish out of water'. They just reopened today after renovation. @8 must mean, at 8’ o'clock. It's a hell of a long shot, but it's the best one we've had yet. What do you say?”

“So, you in mood for some fish, Cassel?” Brynden smirked.

“How did you manage to make that sound dirty?” Rodrik walked away.

Brynden sighed, “Not my fault your mind lives in the gutter.”

They got in touch with Mallister and got a couple of trusted officers to back them up. They went ahead, while the others followed. “Let's go. If we leave right away, we'll be there just in time,” Rodrik called out behind him as they walked to Brynden's car.

“You know, if we keep partnering up for tasks all the time, they're going to start thinking we're an old married couple,” Brynden smirked as they got in the car.

Rodrik curbed his grin and gave him a mock glare, “Just shut up and drive.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading and Stay tuned! Comments are always welcome. Also big shout out to my beta, cloudsinmycoffee9! She is a peach. :)


Her phone buzzed impatiently on the table. Catelyn gave an exasperated sigh and declined the call, turning back to her breakfast.

“Work?” Benjen sighed. She nodded.

“I talked to Brienne earlier this morning, she said they’re all swamped,” Jory added, helping himself to more bacon and hashbrowns.

“Oh! I’m late for work.” Lyanna checked the time and briskly got up to leave.

Catelyn frowned, “This early?”

She gulped down the rest of her coffee before answering, “Not exactly, but I have to drive to the other side of town, so I need to leave now or I won’t get there in time.”

They ate silently for a while after Lyanna left until Benjen finally brought up the subject they’d tried to avoid all morning.

“So what is the plan here, Cat?” he asked.

“We carry on like usual, focus on the Long Lake campaign. Luwin emailed me this morning - Poole has everything under control but there will no doubt be questions about why Ned didn’t come back to work right away. Both of our assistants have been instructed about the situation, we stick to the explanations we practiced. Unless something comes up, we--”

Catelyn stopped mid sentence, her eyes fixated on the disheveled figure of her husband sleepily walking in the dining room. Ned looked groggy, with mussed hair, as he shook the cobwebs of sleep. She was out of the chair and into his arms in a heartbeat. He murmured incoherently and pulled her close, his face buried in her hair. All the fears she’d pushed away since he’d collapsed on their bed yesterday came rushing back.

“Cat, I’m fine. I really am.” He kissed the side of her head.

She pulled back, and saw that he did look much better. His face was no longer pale, and he had no trouble recognizing her - that was a good sign, she told herself. But she remembered what Walys had told her yesterday; Ned would no doubt ask her about it. Catelyn bit her lip as she thought of everything they would have to tell Ned today, including the news about Dave.

He kissed the creases on her forehead. “Stop scowling, my love.”

In spite of her troubling thoughts, she huffed a laugh. They settled at the dining table after Jory and Benjen, who’d been engaged in a conversation, greeted him. He declined breakfast, saying he still felt queasy, so she fixed him his tea while he talked to the guys. He asked about the day before, as she’d expected, and Jory explained everything in detail including what they’d found out about Dave. She held on tightly to his hand, but the pain in his eyes still broke her heart.

“Do you have proof?” he asked, his voice like steel. But she saw through the facade. He had opened up to her about how he’d thought Dave was the only person who wanted to help. He’d said he’d
been suspicious that Dave knew more than he let on, but by helping Ned he’d proved he was on their side. But now she saw how much it affected him to know the man he’d trusted had used him as bait.

“Yes. But we don’t know the depth of his involvement just yet,” Jory answered.

Ned nodded and was quiet for the rest of the meal. She knew he needed time to process the information. She needed to give him his space, even if she wished she could somehow help him through this. It was fairly early in the morning, but they left for work shortly after breakfast.

As Jory had predicted, it was quite busy and before she knew it, she barely had a few minutes to spare before lunch, so she checked in with Ned and the children. He seemed to be doing fine, but he was quieter than usual. The children were unaffected by the chaos around them, she was glad for that. And before heading to get lunch, she checked with her assistant about the issue that she had forgotten about all day.

“Mya, has my sister called or left any messages by any chance?”

“No, ma’am. You told me not to send her an invite for the party, do you want me to-”

“No, I already sent her the invite personally. Thanks, Mya,” Catelyn sighed.

She had lunch with Benjen in her office as they discussed the reports Poole had sent over. She tried to call Lysa after Benjen left, but her sister wouldn’t answer. She had left a message a couple of days ago. She’d expected Lysa not to contact her after their argument, but she still deserved to know about Ned from Catelyn before the tabloids broke the news to her. She just wished they could’ve spoken on the phone or in person. And a part of her hoped she would come to the party, even if it seemed unlikely. After the phone went to voicemail - yet again - she left another message asking to call her back and reminding her about the invite for Saturday. That was all she could do.

She shook away her thoughts as her assistant announced Hallis Mollen. The tall man walked in, the stress of the last few weeks clearly visible in his eyes, yet he remained vigilant as he looked at Catelyn seriously.

“Ma’am, you need to come see this. Jory found something in the camera footage from the conference.”

She nodded and followed Hal to the security department. She’d only been here a few times since she’d taken up Ned’s role in the corporation. Everyone nodded courteously at her as they entered the room where Jory, Brienne and Benjen were waiting, huddled around a computer screen. Brienne stood up the moment she saw Catelyn.

“Ma’am,” she nodded. Catelyn smiled softly at the girl. “Sit down, it's okay.” She looked around and furrowed her brow at the look on Jory’s face, her voice firmer now as she asked him, “What have you found?”

“Ned’s trigger,” he said, motioning towards the screen where a video played on a loop. The screen showed a man walking out of the room, and she tried to focus on the shady figure and gasped when his forearm came into focus as a flash went off in the background.

“Is that….”

“A horse tattoo on his forearm? Yes, it is.” Jory finished. It looked exactly like the one Ned had described to Walys. Catelyn swallowed her temper that flared at the mere image of her husband’s attacker. She needed to stay calm and think clearly.
“He had the fucking audacity to step foot in here,” Jory fumed. She could feel tension rippling across the room.

“The bastard knew where the cameras were, he used the suit jacket in his right hand to cover his face. Unfortunately, this is the only clear view we have. We scoured through the footage in the hallway, but he changed before leaving the building. My guess is he’s been here before, as he seems to know the blind spots,” Hal added.

“Sir, what is your plan?” Brienne asked Jory quietly. His face was set in stone. She could see Ben reflecting the same concern she was sure she had on her face. Jory felt like he was responsible for everything that happened to Ned, no matter how much they told him it wasn’t his fault. This probably made him feel even worse and her heart went out for him.

“We catch that son of a bitch,” Jory said coldly. She’d never heard him speak so coldly before. “Bastard came back to hurt my fami--” he exclaimed loudly before stopping mid sentence and clearing his throat. Family, he was going to call us family. Catelyn’s eyes teared up as she saw the pain in his eyes, “I’m sorry, I...uh...I apologize for my outburst. Hal, please take charge for a bit, I need some air, excuse me...” he said and all but ran out.

Catelyn helplessly stared at the door after he was gone and took an involuntary step forward to go after him when she felt Benjen’s hand on her shoulder. “Let him go. I’ll take care of him, Cat.” He dashed out of the door.

Hallis turned to her, his lips pressed in a grim line with concern in his eyes, as well. “Don’t worry, ma’am, I’ll have our teams check the list from the conference, and we’ll scour through every second of the footage from the hallways again for any more clues. We’ll keep you updated.”

Catelyn nodded and looked at the computer screen. Every detail Ned had told them yesterday rang loudly in her mind as she stared coldly at the shadow of a man who took her husband’s memories away and wondered if they could ever be rid of that haunting shadow.

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Benjen Stark walked into the elevator and pressed the button. Jory was long gone by the time he left to look for him, not that it mattered; he knew exactly where his friend was - besides him, Ned was the only other person who would know exactly where to find Jory when he stormed off like that. But not anymore, he added sadly.

After spending months coping with Ned’s disappearance, every one of them had changed. From where he stood, Jory mirrored Cat’s composure and single minded determination when it came to finding Ned. But he’d seen the facade crumble when he’d invited Jory over for dinner one evening - after he’d moved back to his condo - and seen how tired and scared the man had truly been. Benjen had realized then just how much Ned’s disappearance had broken him.

As he reached the top floor and the elevator doors opened, Benjen made his way out through the atrium and the lounge area to where he knew Jory would be. And as expected, Jory stood on the far end of the indoor zen garden staring out of the giant glass windows. His still form cast a rather large shadow across the room as the warm late afternoon sunlight flooded through the tall window wall.

Benjen was glad Ned had used this space on the top floor to create this indoor garden as a place where their employees could eat and socialize together. He knew it was a reminder of the godswood of Winterfell, and it ended up being a place of solace for many. The ceilings were high and the place was covered on either side with tall glass window walls with abundant light and indoor plants on ever corner. There were a few cafes and food places on the other side with many couches, chairs and
vending machines, and they’d sectioned the floor with a food corner, a reading corner and a zen
garden.

“The only thing missing is beer. I wish Ned had listened to me.” Jory’s words made Benjen look
back at him.

Benjen slowly walked towards him, now with a smile on his face. “I don’t think Ned will ever agree
to that. And before you ask - I don’t think he’ll let us bring beers just because we have the power.”

“No, he won’t.” Jory gave a halfhearted smile, but he didn’t look back at Benjen, his eyes were
fixated on city view. “Do you think all this would’ve happened if I had gone to Sunspear with him as
planned?” Jory asked after a long moment.

Benjen blinked in surprise that Jory still wondered about that. “I’ve told you before, you couldn’t
have stopped him. You know how pig-headed he can be when his mind is set on something. He
would have found a way to get back, especially when his flight was re-routed to an airport as close
as Harrenhal. He probably thought he could drive the rest of the way - he’d done it before.”

Jory shrugged. “I could have urged him to wait it out.”

Benjen raised his eyebrows. “You know a snowstorm here in the north means the airport would be
closed for a few days, because they need that time to clear all the snow. He’d already been away for
two weeks, do you really think anyone could have kept him from finding a way home?”

“I suppose not,” Jory grumbled. Benjen knew he saw the truth in that but nonetheless looked
vaguely disappointed.

“I could’ve been in the car with him. You know I wouldn’t have let him drive alone, even if it was
from Harrenhal and not Sunspear. I could have stopped them,” Jory answered firmly.

“No, you couldn’t have and you’d likely be dead,” Benjen answered bluntly. “There were at least
four men who abducted Ned; it was all premeditated - you said so yourself. They were probably
following him for a while and meant to do it no matter the cost.”

“I have a gun,” Jory added, calmly.

“You would still be outnumbered. And a gun wouldn’t help if you were as badly injured as Ned
when the car crashed. They probably would’ve taken Ned anyway and then left you to bleed to
death in the cold, in the middle of nowhere, so it looked like you died in the car crash.”

“Why do you have to be so bloody on point all the time?” Jory seethed, sounding much like his
uncle and walked a few paces away from him.

Benjen consoled calmly, ignoring his outburst, “Jory, we can’t keep dwelling on ‘what if’s’. It's
done. Ned is back and he’s safe.”

“Is he now? And what about back there? That son of a bitch came back. He could’ve attacked him
again - any of you.” Jory looked away, slumped his shoulders. Benjen walked briskly to him, urging
him to look at him.

“No. Think about it Jory, if he attacked, he couldn’t have escaped. You had people everywhere. Are
you telling me you wouldn't have put a round in his brain if he even tried to attack any of us?” Jory
hesitated at that and let Benjen continue. “You said it when we caught him on tape - he was there to
gauge how much we knew, that’s all. We can use that to our advantage. Groff grew complacent
because he thought Ned wouldn’t remember a thing. But he did.”
“It still pisses me off to know that we couldn’t catch him. That he was in the same room as all of you. Ben, I fucking hate that they are always a step ahead of us.”

“Yes, and that makes the rest of us angry too. But I’m more relieved than angry that he didn’t get to Ned. They got careless and now at least we have another lead. We’ll find him.” Benjen looped his arm around Jory’s shoulder. Jory looked back and he felt his heart clench at the pain he saw in his friend’s eyes. He had only seen that once before - over a decade ago.

Jory looked at him for a long moment. “I swear, if something happened to him again - to any of you - on my watch, I’ll never forgive myself,” he whispered almost to himself.

Benjen sighed, “Look, I get it. But, we have to be there for Ned and Cat. You saw what it did to him to hear about Dave. They’re both too stubborn to say so, but they need us more than ever.”

Jory nodded, sighing loudly. He closed his eyes and ran a hand through his hair. “I know. I just need some time alone before I head back. I’ll see you and Cat later.”

Benjen nodded, “I know. I just needed to know you were okay, first.” He gave Jory’s shoulder a final squeeze before walking away.

“Hey, Ben?”

Benjen turned at his voice.

“You know I will do whatever it takes to keep Ned or any of you safe, right?”

In that moment, the look on Jory’s face reminded Benjen of the time he’d brought Lyanna safely to them after he had saved her from Arthur Dayne’s bullet. If he hadn’t been there to push her out of the way and stay with her until Rodrik sent reinforcements, they would’ve lost her and Jon both. Benjen felt confused by that look and the strange weight Jory’s tone held to it, but he wanted to reassure him nonetheless. “Of course. I’m not worried about any of our safety when you’re around. We can always count on you, Jory.”

His expression softened, that seemed to take some weight off his shoulders, and Benjen turned to leave once more. He knew Jory likely wouldn’t stop worrying about Ned, but he would be there for him to ease that burden. Just as he was about to exit the floor, Jory called out once more and he turned around.

“Ben, thanks for...everything,” Jory smiled.

Benjen returned his smile, “Always.”

He saw Jory’s eyes light up for a moment and he smiled one last time, feeling his gaze follow him as he turned and headed back to help Cat with the paperwork so they could all go home.

Ned Stark stood in the doorway to their daughter's bedroom, still in awe at how much he loved his children. From the moment he’d found out about them, his heart had filled with indescribable love for each of them – including Jon. He realized both him and his wife included Jon when they spoke of their children.

A small sound made him look back as Arya’s feet wiggled a little. He chuckled softly, their youngest was still getting used to her new bed and she’d fussed to move away from her crib for the first few nights, but now she relished the extra space. He had spent all evening playing with his girls, listening
to their stories and helping them set up the giant doll house Catelyn's father had bought for them over a week ago. Not long after setting up the house, they'd started yawning and he'd read them a story before bed and tucked them in. Now, he slowly closed the door and made his way to the boys room to say goodnight, but stopped in his tracks when he heard the conversation inside.

“.......but what if they're lying?” Robb whined.

“Robb! You know Uncle Ned and Aunt Cat never lie! Why would they?” His lips quirked up to hear Jon's serious tone.

“But....Dad sleeps so much! I've never seen him sleep a lot. Do you think that scar on his head hurts? Maybe that makes him sleepy. Grandpa Stark used to be sleepy too....” Ned's curiosity piqued and he remained silent to listen, even if he knew that he shouldn't.

“I asked Mom about it, but she won't tell me why....she just looks very sad when I ask her about Uncle Ned...I don't like it when she or Aunt Cat are sad...or scared...” Jon answered quietly.

“Me neither,” Robb replied.

“It's me, boys,” He called out, hoping his voice didn't tremor as he walked in.

“Daddy! Are you gonna play with us now? Mom says we have to sleep early even if the sun hasn't gone down yet. Saving light...or something...” Robb muttered.

“Daylight savings. And yes, we'll play for a while. We can save daylight tomorrow.” They both genuinely grinned at that.

He sat with them to set up their newest favourite race car track. It was too complicated for the boys to make by themselves. They played for a while, but he saw how subdued they were even when he tried to get them to cheer up. He decided to talk to them about it when they were finally ready to go to bed.

“Boys, come here.” He sat on Robb's bed, pulling them both to sit on either side of him. “Is something wrong?”

“It's just that.....we....” Jon fumbled, looking at his cousin for help.

Robb interjected, “Daddy, are you going to die? Like Uncle Brandon and Grandpa Stark?”

“No, my boy. Of course not. Why do you think I would?” he asked, gobsmacked by the question.

“You are always tired and you sleep all the time and no one tells us what's wrong..... and Grandpa Stark used to be tired a lot before mom said he was gone forever. I don’t want you to go forever.....” he went on, Ned saw Jon refused to look up, playing with the end of the blankets. They both looked sad. He pulled them both in for a hug.

“No, boys. I am not dying...” he tried to reassure them.

“But then why do you sleep all the time?” Jon asked earnestly.

Ned sighed, hoping he'd find the right words to explain them. He was worried he would screw up parenting somehow, but he was trying his best. He gathered his thoughts, “You know how I was away for a long time?” they nodded. “Well, while I was away, I got hurt. And sometimes, when I think about that, it makes me tired. So I sleep to feel better.”
“Why?” Jon asked again.

He thought of an example they’d understand, “You remember the other night, you ate mac and cheese and it made you feel very sick, and when your mother asked if you wanted it for dinner again, you felt you were going to be sick again?”

“Yeah, just thinking about it made me feel funny inside,” Jon groaned.

“I remember, too! Jon wouldn't even eat any other food! He just ate fruit and went to sleep!” Robb chimed in.

“Exactly. So when I think about getting hurt sometimes, it makes me feel sick. But if I sleep, I feel better. Do you understand what I mean?”

Jon nodded. “I think so,” Robb answered quietly. “So it’s like when Nan makes us sleep when we feel sick. She says sleeping makes you feel better.”

“Yes, Nan is right, it does,” Ned smiled.

“So...are you okay? Really? You are not going to die?” Robb asked with with blue eyes, so much like his mother’s, and Ned felt a knife in his heart seeing the fear there. “Really. I will feel better soon, there is nothing to worry about. Alright?” he said instead.

“Okay, Dad.” Robb nodded, seeming to accept his reassurance, as did Jon by his smile. Lya's smile, he thought.

“Alright, how about the three us go get some chocolate milk before sleep, hmm?”

“Yes!” both exclaimed with wide smiles. He took them downstairs and poured them each a glass of chocolate milk and asked about what they wanted to do the next day. He knew he didn't have a lot of days left that he could dedicate completely to his children, but he intended to spent as much time with them as he could before work and responsibilities put limitations on it.

When they all went back upstairs, their mood was considerably better, he still wondered if he’d done the right thing. Cat would know, he thought, but it was time he started taking responsibility instead of relying on his wife for everything.

“Alright, time for bed, if your mom finds out, we'll all get a scolding.” They laughed but got in bed. Lya's smile, he thought.

“Good night, boys,” he said, turning off the lights and they mumbled goodnight. He smiled softly, closed the door and made his way to the backyard. He wished to spend some time alone with his thoughts. Catelyn had called him later in the afternoon to inform they'd be late and refusing the help he’d offered with an admonishment to rest. He knew he would start working sooner than later, especially after the reactions their announcement received, but he couldn't help feeling useless in all this.

As expected, most were shocked to hear; after all, he had been gone quite a while and he had taken extra care not to be seen. The housekeeper and gardener resumed their jobs, both were genuinely happy to see him back, even if they threw wary glances at the scar on his eyebrow.

Once he was on the far end of their estate, his gaze fixated on the horizon, relishing the smell of freshly mown grass, he watched the sun set and the city light up. He had to admit, he was quite glad to be able to go out in the open again without the fear of being recognized. He knew innately the worst was yet to come, but tried to take Catelyn’s lead and not dwell on it just yet.
His wife was handling the entire situation with an admirable poise, the only thing she had been worried about was him. And even with all of his reassurances to her, he was actually daunted by the prospect of suddenly being a distinguished personality in the country. Especially when a mere flashback during the press conference had exhausted him terribly.

He recalled the events after the conference clearly now. He could still feel some images play in his mind, even if they were nowhere near as intense as before. They didn't bother him if he stayed busy, so he'd video conferenced with Poole and Luwin to make arrangements for next week when he would start going to work. Going back to work, he corrected himself. They hadn't started to catch him up with their latest projects, but they had debriefed him about anything he may need to know before he met with everyone at the party. They had someone drop a few fat files for him to study, including concise introductions and pictures of everyone attending the party. Once Nan had arrived to take care of the kids, he had gone through the files so he could discuss it with Catelyn when she came back. He wished she would come back soon, he missed her.

“There you are.”

He turned to see the subject of his thoughts briskly walk towards him. His breathing accelerated at the sight, he looked around and realized he'd been standing, lost in thought for quite a while. Her silent giggle made him look back at her.

“You never do remember the time when you're back here,” she said, her blue eyes sparkling at him.

“How did you get in?” he asked.

“The front gate has a password system in case nobody is home - oh, that reminds me, I need to give you the password, too. When we didn't get an answer I thought you must be out here,” she answered, and looked at the horizon.

He nodded, following her gaze, determined to catch the sunset and pulled her close and felt her wrap her arms around his waist, pressing closer. He kissed her forehead, relishing her warmth.

“The kids doing okay?” she asked.

He nodded, “The boys were a little concerned about me being tired all the time, but I reassured them.” She looked concerned for a bit, her expression reminding him too much of the one on his son's face, but she dropped the subject for now, burrowing closer to his warmth.

“I can never get over how beautiful the view is here,” she purred.

“I can never get over how beautiful you are,” he grinned at the blush creeping in her cheeks as she shook her head. He adored how fast her skin flushed.

“I love it when the sun sets and you can see the city lighting up the night. It's quite a sight in the fall too.” She pointed to the mountain slope covered with grove of trees running downward towards the city and the moors on the other side, “Colours of the trees along there turn into pretty oranges and yellows. Oh, it's even prettier in Winterfell! We should go there once everything settles down here.”

His eyes lit up when she mentioned Winterfell. They’d never truly had a chance to speak very much about it, or their lives. “I would like that. I saw it, you know? A few times in my dreams. I never imagined it was mine.”

“It’s beautiful. Your father spent the last of his years refurbishing it and making it self-sustained. We rebuilt the glass gardens; most of the produce is for the staff and any guests staying at the castle, but the surplus is given to the orphanages and nursing homes in the small town. It's a wonderful
initiative, really,” Catelyn mused.

“Guests?”

“Oh, there is a separate building that we refurbished first, so we'd have a place to stay while the castle was being redeveloped. Now that the castle is completely rebuilt, we don't need it. It's a manor of sorts. Some of our clients rent it during the summer and fall,” she answered.

He nodded, he wished he could see this place. Perhaps something there could spark his memories. But he knew it wouldn't be soon. Once he returned to work, he wanted to spend enough time stabilizing it. And he wondered if after his long absence, whether he would be readily accepted or not. But he decided not to think about that too much. What was going to happen would, but as long as he had this brave, beautiful woman with him, he would endure. They would endure.

_The Starks will endure._ He couldn't stop the sharp intake of breath at the thought that was clearly a piece from the past. She didn't miss it, of course.

“Ned?”

“Nothing, my love, random snippets from the past just occur to me like the other day and when they do, it's just a bit of a surprise, is all. I was just thinking, no matter what happens, as long as we're together we will endure, then something clicked in my mind and I thought: the Starks will endure.”

“The Starks will endure,” she repeated with him and he stared at her and she laughed at his expression.

“Something your father used to say.” He nodded, looking a the city lights in the distance. They remained silent for a while.

“It's not going to be as easy as it seems, is it?” he asked warily.

The smiled on her face weakened, “No, it not. But, you're here, you're safe, we'll be alright. You gave us quite a scare twice--” she placed her fingers on his lips, closing her eyes in exasperation when he started to protest. Her expression made him smile, in spite of the seriousness. Her other hand rested on his stubble. “-- I know. Walys said he'll help you navigate through it so it doesn't catch you off guard again, but that doesn't mean it makes it any less painful for you. However, worrying about the past won't make any difference. What's done is done and we must move forward. So, one thing at a time. The only thing we should worry about right now is the party in a couple of days and keeping Robert out of the cellar. If he still gets in, we're all doomed.”

Thinking of friends made his mind go back to the news Jory had given him this morning. His smiled waned, and he suddenly felt a surge of hurt and anger. He hadn't expected Dave to be one of them. He had been his only friend. Or so he'd thought. _I was too naive to believe him, to believe anyone._

“Do you want to talk about it?”

He looked at Catelyn, concern lining her face as she said those words quietly. He knew from her expression she'd read the change in his mood and knew exactly where his thoughts lingered. He hadn't spoken about it after Jory told them, he had only gone quiet and thanked him for the information. He had meant to leave it there, but he knew it would come up eventually.

Taking a deep breath, he pressed his face in her hair, murmuring, “No, not now. I’d rather have a meal with my family. Let's go back, I'm sure you're all hungry.” She looked at him for a long time and he reassured her, and tucked the feeling away in the shadowy depths of his mind as they walked in the kitchen where Jory was already pulling out beers for them.
“Where’s Lya?” Ned asked, when he didn’t see his sister.

“She’s a bit busy this evening.” Benjen said vaguely. Ned was about to question him when Jory chimed in.

“Alright, bring on the food! It’s been hours since I last ate and my stomach is straight up growling now.”

Benjen hummed his agreement. “It’s true, I spent the whole ride here listening to the dying whale noises it was making.”

Laughing, they brought the food out and settled in to eat. Benjen and Catelyn gave him a general report of how work was going, and he’d brought files for Ned to look at. He also discussed some of the project reports Poole had sent for him to look over, so he could get a better idea of how to prepare for the future. It would be difficult to squash any number of theories surrounding his reappearance after so long, so they tried to come up with a plan to shut down those rumours.

“I think Ned and I should start making appearances in public together with the kids, so they know we’re happy. Still, if they want to talk, they will. But at least people won’t readily believe any of those rumours if we’re seen together and Ned is seen being engaged and involved in the business,” Catelyn said. Ned nodded his assent.

“If our clients and peers see you two returning back to your duties and leaving the past behind, it will be good for morale. And the rumours won’t last long, they never do,” Benjen added, pouring more wine in his glass.

“And once everyone on Saturday knows we’re back to work as a team, most of the doubts will disappear. We just need to convince Maege, Jon, and Galbart, which will be easy enough. Only real problem is Karstark and some others... especially if he gets to them before we do. He is loyal to Ned, but you know he doesn’t like being kept in the dark.” She sighed. “We’ll figure out a strategy once Moira sends me the updated guest list tomorrow. And if it still proves difficult on Saturday, we’ll open more wine bottles,” Catelyn shrugged.

Ned smirked at her expression. There was a grim undertone to this evening, he assumed it was because of the news they’d given him this morning, but after dinner, all of their expressions changed and he realized that wasn’t it. “What is it?” he asked quietly.

They looked at each other and Catelyn took the lead. “We found what triggered you yesterday. Your attacker was at the conference, but he escaped and we couldn’t get a clear image of him,” Catelyn said, quietly but firmly.

He sighed, “Alright. I don’t recall his face, there were many of them, but I’ll talk to Walys the next time I see him and see if I can try to remember--”

“No!” they all chorused. Catelyn bit her lip, “No. Ned, there is no need to send you back there. They’ve sent the details to Rodrik and Uncle Brynden and they’ll take it from here. Maybe they can enhance the image and get an idea of what he looks like. The WIA can handle it from here. We have to trust them.”

Reluctantly, he nodded. This man had taken everything from him, and the idea of him in the same room as his family made his blood boil, but he forced himself to stay calm and hoped the WIA would find this man.

They didn't linger like usual, wanting to get a good night's sleep after a rather hectic month and an
even busier one ahead of them. He'd taken the dishes from Catelyn's hands, urging her to go upstairs and change. After taking care of the dishes and leftovers, Ned made his way to their bedroom. Once he entered, he could feel the steam still fresh and dewy from the open en suite, letting out the flowery scent of soap. His wife always took ridiculously hot baths, he thought idly, closing the door behind him. Catelyn sat on their bed, dressed in his shirt, watching him carefully as he entered the room.

She had been watching him closely all night, he realized. And in the bedroom, with only her as his witness, the facade fell away and his shoulders sagged. He couldn't let go of the jumble of feelings in his mind. Suddenly, he felt exhausted and if he were truly honest with himself, he had been exhausted ever since they’d left the conference hall. Catelyn put the book she was reading away and got up from her seat. She walked towards him and wordlessly undressed him until he was clad only in his boxers.

He let her pull him to their bed and he snuggled closer to sleep in her arms, her fingers settled in his hair, tracing around the wound that had taken everything from him. The tenderness in the gesture was almost too much for him to bear. After all these months in isolation, taking care of their business and their children, then having to deal with his sudden flashbacks and amnesia, she still loved him. What he did to deserve that, he didn't question, because he didn't know what he would do without her by his side. He just burrowed his face in the crook of her neck, smelling the sweet scent of her hair and letting the steady thudding of her heart quiet the turmoil in his mind.

After few moments of silence, he couldn't help but murmur, “I thought he was my friend, Cat. He betrayed me just like Ashara and the rest of them. Six months of my life, just gone. Taking everything with them, everything I lived – we lived. My whole life....”

“I'm so sorry, my love,” Catelyn kissed the top of his head. “You will get through this. I'm here.”

There was nothing more to say. He turned to kiss her collarbone and rested his head on her chest. He closed her eyes and started to drift off. We will endure.

Rodrik Cassel sat besides Brynden in a corner booth of the diner at the crossroads. It was a wee thing in the corner of the intersection. He realized why Dave picked this place - a few customers came by and left, but with the exception of them the place was empty. They'd still picked the farthest booth to ensure privacy. Mallister and the other officers were waiting around the corner, in plain clothes to blend in, but prepared to block exits if this guy was stupid enough to try anything. If he ever showed up, that is.

Brynden pulled out his cellphone when it pinged. “Lab results arrived. Traces of drugs found in his apartment match the one in Ned's system. No fingerprints. None. They were wiped clean. The lab found traces of chemicals found in car grease. Just like in Ashara's house. Funny thing is, he doesn't own a car.”

“You think they're setting him up?” Rodrik was sure this man was hiding something, but it wasn't the first time Groff tried to set someone else up as a means of escaping.

Brynden turned to him, “There is no way he knew we were coming. He was gone before we even found his laptop. And we’d looked through his place before and found nothing. Seems odd these drugs just appeared now.”

Just then the front door opened and Rodrik followed Brynden’s gaze to look at the hooded figure that entered the diner, exchanged a few words with the waitress, and walked towards them.
Dave nodded at them grimly and settled himself in the booth. “Sorry, I'm late, I needed to be sure I wasn't being followed.”

“Let's get to the point. Why did you flee and then ask to meet here? Who is following you?” Brynden's tone was grim.

“I can't say...but I can tell you what I know about Groff. I'm assuming this is about Ned,” he added quickly.

“It is. Talk,” Rodrik ordered tersely.

Dave sighed, “What I'm about to tell you stays off record, is that clear?”

“You are not exactly in a place to make demands, now start talking.” Brynden glowered at the man, his hand resting on his gun.

“Look, I'm sure you found my laptop and something must have been planted in my apartment which made you think I'm a suspect. But since I have been away from Creekwood for over a week now, before which your team went through my apartment and found nothing, it makes all the evidence circumstantial. So even if you detain me now until my alibi checks out, it won't be long before you realize it is all a setup, and eventually you will have to let me go or a sneaky-looking lawyer will show up and point out every flaw in your charges until you do. And then they will catch up to me and I will be dead. And I'm no use to you, if I'm dead,” he said firmly, but looked at them pleadingly.

The tension in the room was palpable, he knew one wrong move and this would go awry. Dave and Brynden stared silently at each other until Dave continued, “You want answers, you need to give me your word that everything stays off record and call off any and all agents you have within earshot of us - I know you brought backup.” His quick thinking was unsettling, and the man had obviously sensed their desperation. He was far from an ordinary photographer, Rodrik knew that. He shared a nod with Brynden who was eerily calm, as if he'd predicted this.

Brynden called Mallister, “Jason, call off the backup, we may have read too much into the note. We’ll stick around for a while to see if he shows, but I’m positive it’s a dead end.” Rodrik kept his eyes straight at Dave while he heard Brynden sigh. “You should go back. No need for all of us to waste our time. Cheers,” he said, ending the call. Rodrik kept his face carefully blank. 'Cheers' was the term they used when it wasn't safe to explain what was really going on. Rodrik knew Mallister would remain outside even if the rest of them were gone. After ending the call, Brynden shared a glance with him before looking back at Dave.

“Off the record. Now talk. But know that if you cross me, I will personally hunt you down. I'm sure by now you have researched me, so you know how far I will go.” He used his eerily calm tone, as his blue piercing gaze fixed on Dave. He paled slightly, even if his expression remained firm. Good, be scared. They call him 'Blackfish' for a reason.

Dave sighed. “Groff has been running a drug operation through Gulltown, as you probably know. His disappearance has created some chaos.”

“But that's what you wanted, wasn't it? Which is why you used Ned as bait to get Groff out of your hair,” Rodrik said, casually, and felt the satisfaction at the wince that remark earned, finally cracking the icy exterior the man seemed to have. “He just wanted to go home, you know. You stabbed an innocent man in his back for your selfish reasons.” Dave paled further at that. Now that he had the weak point, Rodrik continued. “What happened, Dave? The bigwigs didn't want to deal with a rat like you? Did they want to move their business away after Groff went MIA? Your plan inevitably
backfired? Is that why you ran away?"

“I had nothing to do with what happened to Ned! I didn't.....” Dave sighed, attempting to calm himself, even if his voice sounded dejected. “The clients couldn't be happier to get Groff out of the picture. He had become a thorn in their side. After Ned showed up, he had gotten more restless and secretive. They didn't like it. And that was why I interfered and gained their trust. So they'd know I was committed while he wasn't. They were planning to remove him completely, as you probably know from the emails. And I was to take his place.”

If he was trying to defend himself, he was doing a rather sloppy job of it. Before Rodrik could ask why he was telling them any of it, Brynden spoke up. “You planted that laptop and memory card on purpose. You wanted us to find those emails and track you down,” Brynden added quietly.

Dave nodded warily, “I needed to get in touch with you without them knowing and that was the easiest way to do it. The newspaper message was a long shot, but I had to make sure only the two of you showed up.” He sighed. “Getting Groff away was going to make me the shot-caller and pave my way clear so I could expose the entire operation based in Braavos.”

Brynden and Rodrik shared a bemused look. Rodrik asked, “What are you talking about?”

“I'm a narcotics agent, KL division. I've been undercover in Creekwood for eight months.”

Chapter End Notes

A big shout out to my wonderful beta reader, cloudsinmycoffee9!

And thanks for reading, stay tuned for more! C&C welcome. :)


Events Unfolding

Chapter Notes

Sorry for such a long delay. It's been quite busy, and I didn't even have the time to send this for proof reading so get ready for some cringe-worthy errors. Also I hope it's worth the wait. Thanks for all your patience. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Are you fucking shitting me right now?" Brynden exclaimed.

The rational part of his mind was conflicting with his reaction. He knew internally that the explanation fixed many missing links they were trying to understand; Dave's sudden appearance in the town, his empty apartment, and his discreet way of helping Ned. But damn it his rage was stronger.

He just stared at Dave who calmly waited for them to assimilate the information. Rodrik took over for him. "So let me get this straight... you're a narc and all of your involvement was to expose some drug operation?"

He sipped his coffee, looking vaguely amused by their reaction. "Eeyep," he answered infuriatingly calmly, and took a bite out of his bagel.

Brynden looked at Rodrik incredulously who sat pinching the bridge of his nose, just as frustrated as him. So Brynden turned back to Dave. "Why didn't you say anything when we questioned you?"

"Uh...I am undercover for a reason, you know?" Dave said with a mouthful of food. "Prove it." Brynden just glared at him.

He wrote his credentials on a napkin and slid the napkin towards Brynden. Brynden took his credentials and walked a few paces away. He intended to double check with some of his trustworthy connections in Kings Landing. He made a few calls and ran the credentials through the system when he heard Dave say, "I don't exactly have a lot of time here, if you don't hurry up I might get killed today."

"That's too bad," Brynden answered lazily while waiting for his contact to answer the phone. They sent him a picture of "Dave" attached to his redacted credentials and mission. Brynden cursed under his breath, but he'd expected that. The files deleted themselves from his phone a few seconds later. He returned a few minutes later and looked at Rodrik, "He's telling the truth."

He looked around warily to make sure the room was secure, now they it was clear he was a narc and Dave followed his gaze and smirked, "Don't worry. I wouldn't have asked you here if I didn't know it was secure."

Brynden nodded grimly, "So tell us, why did you got to such lengths to bring us here? And 'fish out of water'? Really?"

"I needed to get your attention and only yours. And that dish happens to be the best in all the Riverlands," Dave argued.
“Not by a long shot-” Brynden scoffed.

“-OKAY! Dave….get to the bloody point,” Rodrik interrupted with a frustrated tone.

“How much do you know about Groff?” Dave asked, diving right into the subject.

“We know who he is, if that’s what you mean,” Brynden replied tersely.

“We were the ones that investigated him back when,” Rodrik added.

Dave looked surprised, but continued, “Gotcha. He has a lot more contacts now so whatever you do, be very careful. The only reason he’s hiding is because he doesn’t want anyone to know who he is, he’s quite paranoid about that.”

“He always preferred to stay behind the scenes and pull the strings so he never got caught.” Brynden added darkly.

Dave nodded, “I don’t know where he is now, but he won’t leave the country for sure. If I were you, I wouldn’t go looking just now.”

“Why not?” Brynden and Rodrik asked simultaneously.

“He is very unpredictable when cornered, if he thinks he’s going to get caught he will get help from all his contacts and it will put everyone in danger - especially the Starks. And with Ashara there to fuel his paranoia, he won’t go out without a fight. Don’t underestimate her either. She knows what she is doing and she’s even more paranoid than he is.”

Brynden watched him curiously. The man talked like he had studied Connington’s behaviour thoroughly, there was an edge to the way he spoke the reminded Brynden of himself for a decade ago. He barely realized Rodrik asked him what they were to do next until Dave answered.

“Let them think they’re winning. It will give you time to close in on them carefully. And if my operation is a success, it will weaken his support.”

“Tell me about your operation.” Brynden leaned forward now really curious, and also having an inclination of where this was going.

Dave's phone beeped interrupting them, he checked and cursed under his breath, “I can’t tell you right now. I just got a tip that there maybe eyes watching this place soon. This is one of the few places in the city that is actually secure.”

Brynden leaned forward. “Listen here, Dave, I don’t care what your credentials say, I don’t trust narcs from King’s Landing. Now you start talking or I promise you, the people you’re running from will be the least of your problems,” Brynden threatened with a dangerously low voice. He could feel his temper boiling and he felt Rodrik squeeze his shoulder in support and warning. Dave just looked at him trying to act like he wasn’t scared, but Brynden could see it in his eyes.

“How do we know you won't ditch us?” Rodrik asked calmly but tersely, he was buying time so he could cool down. They had contacts that could track Dave down if he tried to cross them, but it was good to act like they were desperate to keep him off his guard. The man was too aware of his surroundings, Brynden could tell he was specials ops like himself. His contact had confirmed the man was trustworthy, but there were too many unanswered questions, and he was losing patience. He was still a narc from KL, and Brynden knew better than to trust blindly.

“Didn't you just say you'd hunt me down if I even tried to cross you? I know you weren't lying.
Your reputation precedes you. I came here because you needed to stop digging before you blew up your case and my op. And you needed to know that I am on your side. I will contact you and explain where and when to meet so we can talk in detail and--” he looked outside the window, right at the car where Mallister sat, “--in private.”

Dave smirked, then his expression turned serious. “Let’s come to an agreement. I will give you a solid lead on Groff as proof that I am telling the truth, look over it and then decide whether I can be trusted or not. But I need something in return for the information.”

“Need what?” Brynden growled.

“Help. I need your word that if I tell you what I know, you’ll help me with my operation,” Dave said in a pleading tone.

Brynden looked at him for a long moment and then nodded. “You have my word. What’s the lead?”

“You need to go back to Creekwood, go through Groff’s patient records and cross-reference those with the library records. That’ll get you some answers. It’s not much, but if you want to take this thing all the way you need solid evidence against him.”

“Clients,” Brynden breathed.

Dave nodded, “I think the reason he hasn’t sent anyone to retrieve them is because he thinks you’ll never figure it out.”

“Or he knows that will tip us off to check into his activities at the hospital and the library. He still thinks we’re only after Ashara, and I’d like to keep it that way,” Rodrik added.

“And when you check the library records, focus on the people that checked out a book called ‘the lone wolf’-”

“-Lone wolf?” Rodrik interrupted in surprise.

“Yeah, why?” Dave frowned.

“Ned used that name as a code so he would know who my nephew was.”

Dave frowned and then exclaimed, “Oh, the guy with the scowl that almost shot me. Yeah, I thought you looked familiar. The day he contacted you was a particularly risky day. I managed to keep Merianne and one of our regulars out of the library long enough so he could make the call. ‘The lone wolf’ was used to trade important information regarding him, he was Groff’s well kept secret. As far as I know, the records have details about drugs they gave him, behavioural patterns, surveillance the whole deal.” Dave looked thoughtful for a moment, “After he started asking questions he was becoming a liability and Groff had brought in more people to take care of the situation...”

“What do you mean ‘take care of the situation’?” Rodrik hissed. Brynden felt dread himself.

“You know what I mean,” Dave said darkly. His phone beeped again and he cursed under his breath. “We really need to go.”

“Hang on- was he planning on killing Ned? I need to know if he’s safe.” Brynden placed a hand on Rodrik’s shoulder when he leaned forward and his voice became louder.

“There is no imminent danger that I know of, and I don’t think Groff would do anything to him now that you’ve announced his return. But keep a security detail on the Stark estate, and don’t let anyone
you don’t trust near him or his family.”

Brynden noticed Dave mentioned the Starks a few times now, which meant this man knew Ned more than they’d expected. The panic in his eyes however was reminiscent of his past. So he squeezed Rodrik’s shoulder, “Rodrik, we really should head out now,” he said softly.

“I will contact you at eight am tomorrow with coordinates to a safe house. We can meet there tomorrow night and I’ll tell you all you need to know. Stay in the Vale tonight. It's closer from there,” Dave said, once they got out of the booth. “And sir,” Dave stopped him, speaking directly to him, “You’ll see a Braavosi name in those files. Look closely.”

Brynden nodded, Dave pulled up his hood and walked away. As they got back to the car and as started to drive away, they saw Dave's hooded figure get out of the diner and move in the other direction and they headed north on King's Highway.

As he pulled out on the highway, he heard Rodrik book the room at the Harbour Inn in Strongsong on the phone and then call Jory and give him orders about Saturday. Of course this meant he couldn't make it back in time for the party Cat had organized. After the phonecalls, his friend just seemed grim and Brynden immediately knew why.

“He'll be fine, Rodrik. You know your boy will stick to Ned like glue throughout the party. And I'm sure he has enough guards securing the place, there is no need to worry,” he said, silently reassuring himself as well. Wishing Catelyn or the little ones didn't get caught into crosshairs, but knowing fully well if her family was in danger Catelyn would shield them herself. That is exactly what worries me! The girl will put herself in danger to save her family.

“Chrys will keep an eye on Catelyn and the children,” Rodrik said quietly. And Brynden huffed a laugh when he saw the smile on his friend’s face.

“So did you track down that lead of yours? The one you said could tell us about Connington?” Rodrik asked after a long silence.

Brynden stared at him with a mixture of shock, exasperation and guilt. But it lasted mere moments, replaced by a firm resolve. He didn't wish to speak about it, he knew they would argue. And he'd rather have a peaceful time after the day they'd had.

He heard Rodrik sigh, “You're not going to tell me.”

“You know why its need to know. It's safer that way,” Brynden said, averting his eyes. “Don't worry, I was trained for this. It's dangerous, but I know what I am doing.”

“Yes, I know that, but what bothers me is your insistence on going alone. Just like you did last time, and you ended up half dead,” he said it all softly, but there was a weight in his words. “I didn't know half the details of the case and that is what stopped me from getting you the hell out of there.”

Here we go.

Rodrik tried to calm himself and added softly, “Tully, I trust you and I know you are capable. But at least give me some sort of warning if anything goes wrong. I know you’re not exactly going into a mercenary hive, but still... I just don't want to lose--” Brynden shot him a look. Rodrik sighed, “.... I don't want you to get yourself killed.”

Brynden's eyes softened, “Fine. I'll alert you if I'm in more danger that expected,” He paused before his voice turned lighter, “And I’m not stupid to get myself killed and risk facing your and Catelyn’s wrath.”
“Good.” Rodrik smirked, turning his eyes back to the road. “Because I'll haunt you.”

It had taken him a while to track down his contact, but this man could give him a lot of insight in Connington. The man himself was trustworthy, but it was getting to him that was dangerous as he mainly remained in the Free Cities.

It had been some time since Brynden left Interpol – he had worked for them for half a decade over three years ago before returning to WIA, but he retained contacts with a lot of people on the higher tiers of mostly every law enforcement agency in Westeros and Free Cities. Some were more cooperative than others. Some connections had helped him when the WIA called him in to explain they couldn't spend tax payer money for one personal case. He’d made some calls - including one to his brother and to Jon Arryn - and a couple of days later they'd called him back to tell him they’d found the necessary funding for this case but that he remember that it was a rare exception, considering the circumstances. Not that it mattered, he would’ve worked on personal time if they’d denied him again.

It was clear now that it would go on for weeks maybe months after what Dave had told him. The look on his face had filled Brynden with dread, the man looked like he'd been trying to get whatever this was done for years. And he hoped they didn't end up like that. He wanted to finish this. He had a hunch about where this would lead but he didn't wish to talk about it without more proof.

They reached Strongsong within a couple of hours. Thankfully it was an old habit to keep a go bag in hand all the time. They'd done enough cases together around the country that now they fell back into their routine. They checked in, he took both the bags and put them in the corner while Rodrik called for room service. They took turns to take a quick shower and when he came out Rodrik was on one of the twin beds staring at his laptop, and a tray of food still waiting for them. They ate in silence when the exhaustion slowly started creeping in. *I'm too old for this shit.* He then realized they'd come so far just because some guy from narcotics told them promised a lead.

*I promised Cat.* He remembered how tired she'd been, how sad she'd looked for months. He remembered seeing her first thing once he'd returned from his international operation six months ago.

He was furious and frustrated when they told him Ned’s disappearance when he landed. They’d kept him in the dark when Catelyn needed him the most. And so he’d decided to take a flight straight to Wintertown to see her. But the sight that greeted him had caused him a lot of pain. Catelyn looked desolate, older than her years - she had dark circles and lines around her eyes, yet she stood up stoically as she took care of Stark’s business and the children.

He’d stayed for dinner at her insistence and afterwards he pulled her aside and asked her how she was and she looked at him with big blue eyes and suddenly his mind had gone back to when Catelyn was just a child and she would come to him whenever she was sad or hurt - trying to be strong but eyes tearing up nonetheless - she had always believed he could fix all her hurts and it had killed him to know he couldn’t fix this. His heart had broken at the sight of her tearing up, he’d pulled her into a tight hug, and she cried in his chest like he'd never seen her cry before. His little Cat; broken, tired and scared. She was never scared of anything.

“What do I do uncle? How do I do this?” she whispered desolately.

“We'll find him, little Cat. Think of your children. They need you. You have to be strong for them,” he'd tried to reassure her. “I will do everything in my power to bring your husband home, but you have to be strong.” He didn't mentioned dead or alive. Rodrik had told him the Wintertown PD wasn’t optimistic about finding Ned alive.

“I know what the reality likely is, uncle. The police already closed the case... and I can't ignore the
The fact that Ned may be... dead. But I will not believe it until I see proof of it. Rodrik and Jory are helping me find him. And my heart tells me he is alive. I will not give up on him, uncle. I won't,” she replied adamantly.

He was so proud and sad to see the steely resolve in her eyes. He knew in that moment that she would spend her life finding Ned if she had to. Hoster never stopped talking about Minisa. He never even mentioned remarrying again. And Brynden knew very well how much Catelyn loved Ned, just as he knew then that even if they found Ned’s body she wouldn’t remarry and would make her life all about her children - just like her father. It broke his heart into pieces remembering his little Cat full of life and wondering if she would ever find happiness again.

She'd wiped her tears then and asked him, “Uncle, can you do something for me?”

“Anything, little Cat.”

“I know it wasn’t an accident, Rodrik told me. Find whoever did it. I don’t know if Ned will ever come back to me, but I want justice for him. Can you do that for me?”

“I promise.”

At the time they had thought it to be a drunk driver or even some goons who tried to kidnap Ned for money, but now as they realized how big the whole thing was, her voice rang in his mind every day. And he intended to keep that promise. They will pay for what they did to you, little Cat. I will make them pay.

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Ned went over the description cards in his hand one last time before putting them away. He opened the drapes to look at the backyard, the staff was hustling to get everything ready for the evening. Catelyn was with Moira doing final checks. The backyard was full of decorations, lights and extra seating. Ned spent most of this week memorizing everyone's faces. He knew most of what he needed to know, but he was still nervous. The rumours ran wild after their press conference since they refused to give too much information and he was sure he would be asked the same questions tonight. They'd both been quite busy. He either spent his time in the study going through files of past projects, or on the video call with Luwin or Poole while they had meetings with Benjen and Catelyn at work.

He went downstairs to help Catelyn, and just as he entered the kitchen he saw her walking in with Moira. “...okay so we are all ready, then? The staff is taking care of the lighting, the food is being set up and can we move some of those arrangements to the left, so there is enough room to move around...” Catelyn said without a hitch.

“Well, I can but there will be a lot of open space there disrupting the flow of the area and the wild succulent arrangements won't be visible,” Moira said to his wife pointing at something on her tablet. Catelyn looked up holding back a smile and simply said, “Robert Baratheon is coming.”

“I'll get them moved right away, and I will personally make sure the cellar is locked,” she turned to him with a smile, “Mr. Stark,” she greeted him briskly walked out before he could even acknowledge it.

Catelyn settled at the counter resting her head in her hands and he moved to stand behind her. He pressed the tension out of her shoulders, and pressed a kiss on her neck. She leaned back and rested her head against his chest.
“I should go help Moira...” she said halfheartedly.

“No you shouldn’t. She’s doing her job, she can handle it. You should relax, you’ve done enough,” he urged, kissing her neck again and trailing down her shoulder. He just couldn’t help himself.

“The children...” she said with a start and he held her shoulders so she wouldn’t move.

“The girls are napping and Robb is playing with his gameboy. Nan is with them she arrived not long ago. Just relax, my love. We have a couple of hours.” He rubbed her shoulders. Catelyn turned around with a sly look, her eyes roaming over him suggestively.

He chuckled, “Well, I meant to relax. But if that’s what helps you relax Mrs. Stark, I’m happy to oblige...” he kissed her softly, then deepening their kiss. Just as he was about to lead her to their room, her phone buzzed. Both of them cursed under their breath, Catelyn checked the phone and sighed.

“It’s Ben, they’re on their way,” she frowned, wrapping her arms around his waist.

He kissed her softly again, “I wish we never got out of bed this morning,”

“We can sleep in tomorrow. I’ve talked to our housekeeper and Moira about cleaning up. We won’t need to be up for any of that.”

He looked into the deep blue pools of her smiling eyes, “I will hold you to that promise, Mrs. Stark.” He kissed her again, ardently. Then sighed in frustration before pulling himself away from her, lest he forgot about the party. He looked away, when her eyes followed him lustfully.

“You are not helping, Cat...”

He felt her smug smile as she lightly brushed her lips against his and walked upstairs – the sway in her hips more exaggerated for his benefit. God, he loved her. Although it hadn’t been more than a couple of weeks since they had started making love, but it reminded them of the last six months they’d both spent away from each other. Soon it was time for the party and he went into the closet to pick out a suit for the evening. He settled for a simple grey three piece suit and a maroon tie. He brushed his hair back, idly noticing he looked fresher than usual. He also noticed the greys peeking through his brown hair.

“Cat, are you ready?” he called out as he entered the room, buttoning his suit.

“I’m ready, let’s-- Ned! You look so handsome, my love!” She exclaimed after emerging out of the en suite.

He smiled softly and looked up at her, but his words died on his lips. She wore a dark purple dress that hugged her soft curves, her hair was down and perfectly curling around her shoulders. She wore a necklace with a single diamond pendant. She looked stunning.

“How are you so perfect?” He moved towards her, thumbs tracing her hips as he took in how beautiful she looked. He just looked at her for a long moment, his hands roaming over her sides.

“Ned..” she warned.

“Yes?” he asked innocently, looking at her with his best puppy eyes – he’d learned it from Robb, he assumed that his son had learned it from him at some point.

“The party? We have to go remember.”
“No we don’t.” He kissed her. *They had to. But they didn't have to be on time.*

“Yes. Yes we do.” she whispered against his lips.

“They have Benjen and Lya they won't even realize we're not there. We could have a party up here...just you and me...without any clothes on,” he moved to kiss her again, she didn't let him deepen the kiss, but kissed him lightly on the nose and pulled him to the door.

“No, we have to go and greet guests so they know you are back home safe and sound. Today we celebrate your return, my love.” Before he could suggest a another way they could celebrate, she interrupted with a finger on his lips, “...And before you say what I know you’re going to - we will be celebrating downstairs with our guests. Then after they're all gone, maybe I'll let you help me out of this dress so you and I can have our own celebration up here. But, you need to behave first.”

“Cross my heart!” He mumbled against her finger eagerly and he led his beautiful wife downstairs.

Jory’s people were everywhere and he was giving them orders. They were all dressed in black suits and each one was wearing an earpiece. As they descended, each one of the security guards gave them an acknowledging nod and Jory turned at that. There was an air of authority around him that Ned only recalled seeing the first time after he'd seen him in Creekwood. He smiled tightly at both of them.

“All set?” Ned asked, slightly wary of the amount of guards crowding his home.

“Yes,” Jory answered, patting his side. Ned knew he would be carrying a firearm. Although he wasn't completely comfortable with that, he trusted Jory's judgement.

At that Catelyn pulled them both to the corner in the foyer. “Good, before the guests arrive I need to talk to both of you. This last year was difficult, most people were supportive but there are some that don't particularly like me and others who don't like me solely because of my gender. You two need to promise not to overreact if anybody insults me in anyway. Just ignore them and deflect it, but do not attack them in anyway. Please!” she implored.

“I will not stand by and stay quiet if someone insults you, Cat,” Ned replied firmly.

Simultaneously Jory said, “Hell no, I will not let anyone disrespect you, not after last time.”

“Stop it! Both of you. We can’t turn against our own associates when we need their support more than ever. Look if someone says or does something overtly terrible, we’ll ask them to leave-” she pointed at Jory to stop his protest and continued, “QUIETLY. No tackling.”

“But-” Ned and Jory interjected simultaneously again.

“No! If you want you two can personally show them out of the estate, but we are not alienating our associates by attacking them in our home. Both of you, promise me you will behave,” Catelyn added in the tone she used on the children when they misbehaved.

He exchanged a look with Jory of mutual frustration at grudgingly accepting defeat. “I promise.” He said. Jory made a motion of crossing his heart.

Catelyn kept her eyebrows raised at Jory. “Say it," she demanded.

Jory rolled his eyes. “I promise... Mom.”

“Good.”
“Why don't Ben and Lya ever get this lecture?” Jory pointed at his siblings petulantly.

“Because Benjen knows how to behave!” Benjen called out without even glancing at them.

“And Lya doesn’t give a shit,” Lyanna called out, without even looking up from her phone.

Jory rolled his eyes and turned to Catelyn, “Now that you're done with the usual of scolding me and your husband, let me go over the action plan. My people will be stationed at every entrance and guarding the perimeter, we'll escort the people through the side so they can walk right into the backyard. Ned, I will be at your side at all times. Chrys will be around Cat and I've asked Myna and Clara to keep an eye on the kids. If any of you feel uncomfortable, come and talk to one of us and we'll look into it.”

“What do you mean ‘uncomfortable’?” Ned frowned at the tone.

“And we have never had so much security. Is there danger here?” Catelyn asked looking around at all the people in black suits taking their places.

“Rodrik told me to be extra careful. He may have a lead, but he wouldn't have asked if it wasn't important.” He looked at his phone and continued, “Most of the guests we know, but we'll keep a lookout for anyone suspicious. So if you see anyone out of the ordinary, you let us know - discreetly, if possible. And I would suggest that the children stay away from it all until we secure the area and know there is no danger,” Jory cautioned. “Also, we have an update from the work front. We think we may have located the mole.”

Catelyn had told him about that, but he didn't clearly know the details. She asked, sounding surprised. “You have?”

“The team is looking into that as well. I'll update you two when we have more news. Meanwhile, try to enjoy yourselves, we got this.” He nodded at them and walked away oblivious to the sudden concern on their faces.

Ned turned to Catelyn, she was worrying her lip. “What is it, Cat?”

“Rodrik asked him to increase security, Ned. He wouldn't have done that if it wasn't serious. Did we make a mistake planning this here?”

“I don't know. We couldn't have known, Cat. But all we can do now is trust that Jory is prepared. But perhaps we can let the kids play around here. If there is some sort of danger, I don't want them outside with the guests.”

“Me neither. I'll go talk to Nan about it,” Catelyn suggested.

Ned clenched his jaw in anger. He felt Catelyn's hand on his face, urging him to look at her. “Ned?”

“I hate this. I hate that our children can get caught into this mess. I just want Groff and Ashara behind bars, Cat,” He whispered to her, mindful of all the ears in their home.

“They will be, my love. We will see to that.” She replied with determination. Her blue eyes firm with resolve. “Until then, we will do what we must to keep our family safe.”

Ned nodded tightly, kissing her softly and it helped calm him. They’d talked to the boys about staying together and not talking to anyone they didn't know. He didn't like the idea of their kids being unsafe in their own home, but it was too late to do anything now. He just wanted this done with. In the next hour or so he was standing with Catelyn greeting the first wave of guests. He
nodded along, shook hands, asked questions – thankfully remembering what he'd learned about everyone he'd met so far. And Catelyn came to his rescue if he ever appeared stumped.

“Ned!” A large man entered walked towards him and engulfed him in a bear hug. Ned gave a small laugh, tried to recall what he'd read about this man. He seemed quite familiar, but the name escaped him. He struggled to place why his mind kept whirring around the terms: hearth, giants and northern division.

“Hello, Jon.” Ned heard Catelyn ask rather loudly, for his benefit. The name immediately clicked.

“Doing alright, Umber?” He grinned at the man after he pulled back. Luwin had sent cards with brief descriptions of their associates for his benefit. He suddenly recalled all he'd read about the man - _Jon Umber: boisterous, a key associate, trustworthy._

“I wasn't the one that disappeared for half a year, Stark.” He countered. “Either way, we're glad you're home. We'll talk more soon, of course, but tonight we celebrate! You have more people to greet for now, let me go meet some of those grinning bastards over there before they think I forgot them.” He slapped Ned's back. Ned held straight, even when the man's slap was quite strong. The man made his way towards a few of their guests greeting them loudly and he found himself smiling at the man. They greeted a few of their clients, accepting gifts generously, Catelyn sneakily helped him along if he ever seemed stumped when someone asked him a particularly detailed question and when they had a few moments for themselves he leaned towards her.

“Thanks,” he murmured. She smiled at him, “You're doing great, my love.”

“Did your sister call, Cat?” he asked, knowing she'd been troubled the last couple of days about that. She'd told him about Lysa after Jon Arryn had left their place. Catelyn's face dropped and he cursed himself for bringing it up.

“No, she hasn't. Eddie told me early on that he couldn't make it and my father has no love for parties. Especially in the north, he tends to find northerners a bit - shall we say, roguish.” She said with a slight smile.

Ned furrowed his brow, “Has he met his brother?”

Catelyn threw her head back and laughed at that and he smiled at her. “He tries to ignore that characteristic. Brynden was a bit of a rebel, as much as Tullys can rebel, that is.”

Hoster Tully was a serious man, although Ned found him to be generally kind towards his family. He assumed it had to do with his absence all this time. He was told his father and Hoster were good friends apart from being business associates, so he wondered if that sense of kinship and the love for his daughter is what opened his heart to treat Ned's family like his own.

Soon the mirth was out of her eyes and she looked thoughtful again. “I was hoping Lysa could show up, she was the only one who didn't know about you, Ned. I think she may be angry with me.” She tried to be defiant, but he could see the hurt in her eyes.

“You couldn't tell her over the phone, Cat. You did the right thing. I know you called the day after the conference to tell her personally. And you invited her personally, its not your fault she won't answer,” he reassured her, his hand rubbing the small of her back.

“She's still my sister, Ned. I worry for her. Jon doesn't know where she is...what if something has happened? Last time with...-- she really suffered a lot last time.” Catelyn bit her lip.
She'd told him of the miscarriages her sister suffered, apparently the last one hadn't been long before his disappearance. He couldn't imagine being in that situation. Suddenly he was assaulted by images of Catelyn frantic and weeping on a bed soaked in blood, *I'm losing the baby. Ned, I'm losing our baby!* *No! Please Ned make it stop...please make it stop.* Then he saw her limp pale form resting against him as he carried her. He shirked away that thought like a reflex. *Or was it a memory.* He didn't want to believe that, he didn't want it to be a memory. He forced himself to focus on the present and pulled her a little closer.

He held her hand tightly, as a form of reassuring her and himself after what he saw in his mind’s eye. “I’m sure she is fine. You said she’d gone off grid before right? Maybe she’s just out with friends and lost track of time. She’ll call back once she gets your messages. And you don’t know, she might even show up.”

Catelyn sighed, nodding slightly. He saw her appearance change as more guests arrived. She immediately went from looking troubled to smiling brightly at people. Anyone who didn't know her wouldn't know the difference. He turned to follow her gaze to see a woman and a man that looked like brother and sister. “Cat!” the woman exclaimed and walked towards them.

“Maege!” She hugged her tightly.

Maege laughed and gave him a hug too. *Maege Mormont: Catelyn's closest friend at work, trustworthy, a key associate, valued ally.* “How are you, Maege?”

“Me?! How are you? You gave us quite a scare you know that?” The woman pulled him into a bear hug.

Seemingly relaxed that he'd remembered their names, Catelyn asked her a question so she turned to her and they started conversing.

Ned offered his hand to the man next to her, taking a wild guess “Jeor.” *Jeor Mormont: Maege's brother, lives and breathes his research at Castle Black, wrote three bestsellers and likely writing another one.*

“Eddard. Good to have you back. We were quite worried about you.”

“When did you arrive from Bear Island?” Ned asked.

“Bear Island? You don't know?” Jeor frowned. Ned's heart sank, he kept his face straight, he could see a moment of panic in Catelyn's eyes even if her face remained blank and she looked ready to jump in to rescue him when Maege spoke up.

“Jeor! He wasn't here. How could he know?” Maege intervened and shook her head.

Jeor looked abashed, “Of course, how silly of me. I relocated up north, beginning of this year.”

“So you moved to Castle Black then?” Ned piped in.

“Yes, it was getting too difficult to keep travelling back and forth. I'll stay there with the resident scientists and archaeologists, I intend to stay until we find proof that ice dragons existed. Its a harsh life, but we found some compelling fossils North of the Wall. With enough funds we'll be able to expand our research. And I wanted to thank you for all the contributions; the Starks have always been friends to us. Your aid really helped accelerate the process.”

Ned nodded along, “How is your book coming along?”
“Almost done. I’ll send you a copy.” Jeor grinned. He was called away by Jon Umber soon. Ned was glad that he hit all the points he’d read about him. Catelyn was talking to Maege so he didn’t interrupt and walked away to talk to greet some of the guests.

“Mr. Stark, we are glad to have you back.” Ned turned to see a man with dark hair, he shook his hand and expressed his gratitude. Before he could say anything the man looked at Jory behind him and asked, “Cassel, did you catch the game last night?”

“Afraid not, Robett.” Jory glanced at Ned briefly.

“So, Galbart isn’t here,” Ned asked meekly, trying to recall something else about him. He had read about Galbart Glover, but not his brother. All he knew about Robett was that he was a family friend, and that they didn’t expect him tonight.

“No, he wanted to come but he already had other plans. He wanted me to express how ecstatic we are that you have returned. Of course you’ll see him next week for the meeting.”

“I look forward to it,” Ned added, then asked about the man’s well being and making some small talk.

After he moved away, Ned closed his eyes for a few seconds. His head was starting to hurt with the cacophony of voices and all the bright lights. Just then he stopped a server to get a glass of sparkling water and some sort of a delicious crispy beef circle thing, he didn’t exactly had the time to register what the server said it was called.

Generally all of the guests accepted the story they’d given them, but he could tell a lot of them were not yet convinced. They knew something was off about him, or so he thought at least. He caught some of them staring at him oddly a few times and he wondered if in trying to mimic his own mannerisms he only managed to look awkward. If I can’t even act like myself how the hell am I supposed to lead the Stark Corporation.

Catelyn on the other hand was charming and wonderful. She handled the questions thrown towards them with poise and deftly changed the subject. He wondered why some people were still passive aggressive towards her. Although they didn’t have to escort anyone out, many had left after he’d defended Catelyn to them quite firmly. But he noticed Glover, Umber and Maege defended her as much as he did. However, he wished to somehow make it clear that if it hadn’t been for his wife, the business would’ve been in ruins right about now.

His knowledge of how to run the business was slowly returning to him as if it were like riding a bike - if riding a bike made him feel like he’d run ten marathons, that is. But Walys had assured him the exhaustion would lessen in time. He’d done all of his research and read everything about their ventures in his absence and he noticed how much Catelyn had contributed. And he’d also seen how she’d focused on what was most beneficial to all instead of preferring a few, he thought that was possibly the reason for most of the discontent. She’d done all that, along with raising three children under the age of ten. He wasn’t sure he could ever do what she’d managed to do in his absence. He watched her laugh and gracefully ignore the passive aggressive behaviour of people and sometimes politely but firmly let them know she wouldn’t tolerate outright disrespect.

Now that they knew it was safe they’d brought the children downstairs for a bit, the boys playing around and the girls ran towards him. He took them to the far end of the estate to look at the city lights. Soon Arya demanded to break free and run around with the boys. She seemed taken with Myna, who was the guard Jory had asked to spend time with the kids and started babbling to her. Sansa stayed with him quietly for some time asking him to point out Benjen's building and Jory's building. He smiled and heard her talk about how pretty all the twinkly lights were and sing a song
he'd heard Catelyn sing to her sometimes. After a while though, she wanted to go play with the others and Clara had taken her from him.

His head ache worsened as more people showed up. He tried to talk and smile but after some small talk he moved to the far end of their estate. Lyanna and Catelyn walked towards him, eyes searching for the root of his distress. He shook his head slightly to tell them he was okay.

“Oh for fuck's sake,” Lyanna’s grumbled made them turn to her. She gestured to their left.

“ITs Robert,” Catelyn said. Robert, his best friend, the one he'd spoken to on the phone a few days ago walked in greeting people along the way.

“So we can't tell him, right?” Ned looked at everyone in turn.

“No!” they chorused.

“Man can't keep a secret to save his life. Especially once he's chugged enough booze.” Lyanna muttered before drinking her champagne. Ned vaguely recalled tension between her and his friend. He tried not to remember anything as his head was still heavy.

“Just relax, be yourself and don't get upset when he says anything inappropriate.” Catelyn reassured, fixing his tie and brushing the lint of his jacket. Before he could ask why she mentioned the last part a booming voice echoed across the backyard.

“Damn, Cat, you're a sight for sore eyes,” He winked at his wife, leering at her in a way that made Ned want to punch him and he realized why she told him not to get upset.

“Hello Robert,” she greeted barely even leaning into his bear hug.

“Ned!!” Robert bellowed. “My best friend is alive and he has returned!” Robert caught him in a bear hug. He vaguely remembered him, not as much as he'd remembered the rest of them but he still felt a sense of happiness. “I thought we'd lost you forever.”

He pulled back and gave him a one over, “You're skinny.”

“And you've gained a few pounds,” He countered.

He brushed it off, “Its insulation.” His smile turned warm, almost wistful when he looked at Lyanna. “Hey, Lya.”

“Robert.” She said simply and walked away.

He sighed, “Where is the booze? Ned come drink with me. We have a lot of catching up to do.” He looked towards the waiter holding a tray full of champagne and frowned. “Catelyn, aren't you serving some of the hard stuff? Champagne? Really?”

“No, Robert. That is all you're going to get, and don't you intimidate the staff for more alcohol,” she replied firmly but with a smile. He harrumphed loudly and pulled Ned towards the makeshift bar. He smiled at Catelyn reassuringly and walked with his friend.

“And behave!” Catelyn called out and Robert made a non committal gesture again.

Ned watched as he chugged a glass of champagne like it was water and pick up another one. Robert squinted at him briefly, “Its a good thing you are not letting go of your gorgeous wife over there. With that thing on your face, your luck with the ladies would be even more rotten.” He pointed at his
Ned scowled, partially because almost every person he'd met at either commented or stared at his scar. Although it helped make clear that they weren't making up a story about what happened he hated the attention. Robert seemed to gloss over the reason for his scowling and just muttered, “Good Ol' Ned. I didn’t believe it you know when I first heard about it. The last six months were shit…..” Robert went on explaining how he’d coped with Ned’s disappearance and he found himself feeling sorry for the man. Ned listened quietly only asked a few questions. He didn't seem to notice any difference. Robert kept talking to him for a while and chugging booze in between sentences, and more he drank the louder he became. He seemed to jump from one topic to another every few seconds and Ned was certain the man was too drunk to keep a handle on the conversation which is why he was surprised at the coherent look of concern Robert suddenly gave him.

“So you never saw your captors?” he asked.

“No. I didn't even know where I was or who was keeping me there. I was treated well, I had no injuries, but no connection to the outside world.” He answered expecting the location of his captivity to be the next question.

“How did you get out then?”

“I managed to garner their trust enough that they reduced the amount of... supervision to make sure I didn't try and escape. And they left me with alone for a while sometimes, I managed to get out for a bit, found a phone and called Rodrik;” he replied with his practiced answer.

“How did he find you if you didn't know where you were.”

That stumped him for a moment, but he was drinking water so he used that to his advantage. “He traced my call. I went back to the place I was kept in and waited. Next day Rodrik sent reinforcements to get me out.”

“I thought you were dead and gone. Hell, I thought Cat had gone completely mad when she refused to accept it. I'm glad I was wrong.” He clapped his back and laughed, he was drunk alright. “After you left I spent a few days in Sunspear. I couldn't convince them to deal with us after you stormed off. Not that they were keen on the deal to begin with. But meh, enough about that. What was I saying before? Right.. so I just invested in this new ‘club’ in King’s Landing.....”Ned flinched slightly, his head ache started getting worse as his friends started explaining his escapades after finding out about Ned's return.

Lyanna noticed him and walked towards them, “Robert, are you boring my brother?”

“Nooooo! I'm just telling him about this one time I--” Robert slurred.

She interrupted before he could finish “--Sure. Walk with me, lets get some food,” and pulled him away, squeezing Ned's shoulder.

Ned sighed in relief and watched as Benjen took Arya back after she got cranky. And Sansa immediately clung on to Catelyn who was talking to Maege. He realized just how much they looked alike then, she was still quite shy, but was very well mannered for her age in front of all the guests. Suddenly he felt irritated by everything and just wanted to leave.


He hummed his assent, cursing under his breath when he tasted the water, “Is there water that doesn't taste like cucumbers or berries?!"
“Yes. In the kitchen.” Jory suggested calmly.

They made their way back to the kitchen he drank some tasteless ice water, exhaling in relief. He splashed some on his face and stood there feeling the air cool his face. He was glad the caterers had everything prepared before the arrived and had set up a tent out back instead of crowding his kitchen.

“The party is outside, and you two are hiding in here,” Benjen walked towards them.

“Did Arya fall asleep again?” he asked. She’d been quite excited to see so many people and him and Catelyn knew she would tire herself out running around babbling at everyone. The guests were quite taken with the kids, Maege in particular had entertained Arya for quite a while before Benjen had taken the girl upstairs.

“Yes, she ran around for about an hour, demanded I carried her to say hello to everyone. She had conversations with Jon, Maege and Robett and then passed out on my shoulder.”

“Should the children be out there?” Ned asked as his concern grew bigger as he saw his other children playing outside.

“This is the best time for them to be there Ned. Everyone out there we know and trust. Once more people come in and bring guests we don’t know, they wouldn't be able to stay out.” Jory answered seriously.

“And they need to be out for a while. It would seem odd that we were hiding them away. Everyone knows something is off. Some of our associates were wondering why we kept the news for long.” Benjen explained.

“Yeah I overheard some people say something seemed odd.” Jory commented.

“I don't care what anybody bloody thinks! Its about their safety, god damn it!” He snapped and immediately felt bad. He closed his eyes taking a few deep breaths, his angry outbursts had been happening quite a lot lately and he didn’t particularly like it. “I'm sorry, I'm just...frustrated. But I don't want them out there for long.”

Benjen looked concerned, but Jory didn't phase one bit, “I agree. I've told Catelyn to signal me when she wants them to come inside. And we should go out there.”

“Is Howland planning on coming?” Benjen asked Jory.

“You know he's not much of a party person. But he wants to meet Ned. He said he'll contact Ned next week.” Jory said, but suddenly Ned saw his composure slip a bit. “Fuck.”

“What?” he asked looking in the direction he looked at, Catelyn had stopped talking and she looked at someone to the left. But she didn't seem scared or alarmed so he tried to remain calm. Then she hugged another auburn haired woman and he realized it must be her sister. He was glad for that at least. He knew that would lift Catelyn's spirits, but he was confused by Jory's reaction.

“What is it Jory?”

“Complication.” He muttered, before speaking in his mic. “Mike, signal Catelyn and get Sansa and the boys back upstairs. Where are you?......Damn it!”

“For fuck's sake Jory tell me already. Who is a complication? Lysa?” Ned snapped again, losing his patience again. If there was danger he needed to know.
“No the man she brought. Mike is not close. Sansa is sitting by the swimming pool. Ned go there and bring her inside. I'll have Clara bring the boys back. And be calm,” he said and walked out briskly.

Ned saw the man in question inching towards his daughter and his instinct took over. He quickened his pace, “Sansa, come here, princess.” He said almost as an order and regretted his tone immediately.

Sansa didn’t notice it but immediately complied, running towards him with a big smile. He picked her up, “It's time for bed, love.”

“Can't I stay for a bit longer, daddy, pwease?” she looked at him with big blue eyes.

“No love, but I promise we can play out here tomorrow. And swim, you’d like that right?” She smiled brightly and nodded at that and it warmed his heart.

“Let her have some fun, Mr. Stark. She is in no danger here.” The scrawny man said to him with a smirk that made his blood boil. Something about him made Ned quite angry. He glanced at Benjen who took the hint.

“C’mon Sansa let's take you upstairs to Nan,” Benjen said taking Sansa from him and taking her upstairs.

Ned walked towards the short man, who looked at him smugly. “I know very well that she is no danger.” He had an irrational urge to punch the man in the face, his fist clenched inadvertently.

Before he could ask the man who he was, Catelyn held his hand and interjected - her tone was laced with anger. “Petyr. What the hell are you doing here?”

“Cat!” He said warmly, moving to hug her. Ned blocked his way, defensively standing in between them. He didn't want him near his family – especially near his wife, and he didn't know why.

“I brought him Cat. Thats what I was trying to tell you.” The auburn haired woman who had just walked in said gleefully, unphased by the tension now in the air.

“Jon didn't come with you, Lysa?” Ned asked curiously, his eyes still on the man called Petyr.

Lysa shrugged, making a non committal sound, “He doesn't like parties. And I haven't spoken to him for a while. I was with my friends, vacationing in Crag when I got Cat's message. And Petyr happened to be there for a meeting! He convinced me to come here, I was quite angry when I got your messages but what happened is in the past and we shouldn't focus on that too much.”

“Lysa..” Catelyn started, but she was cut off by her sister again.

“Please, Cat. I do not wish to speak of it. Your husband is safe and back home. Let us celebrate. Right, Petyr?”

“Of course, dear Lysa. We are all overjoyed to have Eddard Stark back.” he said sounding anything but overjoyed. “Catelyn was quite lonely without you, Mr Stark.”

Before he could react, Catelyn whispered hoarsely, “How dare you? You son of a--” Ned held onto her tightly, even if a part of him wanted to let her punch the lights out of this man. But a bigger part of him didn’t want him near the man at all.

Before the situation got out of hand, Lyanna called out to him. “Ned, Cat c’mon, we haven’t had a proper toast to celebrate my brother’s return yet,” she enunciated quite loudly.
“She's right, you know?” Jon Umber exclaimed.

Catelyn smiled brightly at them, “Of course, we'll be right there.” And he heard Jory exhale in relief.

He wanted to know exactly what the man meant by what he'd said, but now was not the time. Catelyn was vibrating with anger next to him. And the man was staring at them with a smug smile, while Catelyn's sister whispered in his ear.

“C'mon, my love. We'll deal with this later,” he murmured in her ear – knowing it would appear as him kissing his wife on the cheek. He saw a flicker of anger on the man's – Petyr's eyes and a part of him felt glad for that. He was still quite confused, edgy and his head was pounding, so he urged Catelyn to look at him once more. She nodded silently and let him lead her to the table.

“Jory,” he said. And his friend thankfully understand exactly why he'd beckoned him and led Lysa and her “friend” to the other side of the estate. Jon Umber grinned at them as Ned led Catelyn to the front of the crowd.

“Speech!” Lyanna called out.

He looked at her pointed to which she just smiled innocently. Everybody started demanding one so he sighed, Taking his glass and the piece of paper with his speech. “I want to thank you all for being here tonight. As you know, the last few months have been tough for us. And I truly appreciate your support for me and my family in these tough times. I'd also like to thank my brother Benjen and sister Lyanna for standing by my wife these last six months when I couldn't be.” He paused slightly, deciding to go off script. “Six months ago if you'd told me I would find my way back home, I wouldn’t have believed you. But due to Catelyn and Jory's unwavering faith, with the help of Rodrik Cassel, Brynden Tully and their WIA team, here I am. Thank you.” He nodded at Jory, his serious exterior breaking for the first time tonight. Next to him, Benjen and Lyanna had a soft smile on their faces.

Then he turned his gaze to Catelyn who looked up at him with tears in her eyes. He felt overwhelmed with the amount of happiness he saw in them. But he also saw months of struggle, relief and inexplicable love, and slightly kissed her hand. “And lastly, I want to thank my beautiful wife for never giving up on me. After my disappearance, she took my place at Stark Corporation taking up the responsibility not only to take care of everything my father, Rickard Stark built, but also to take care of my family. She handled of all the responsibilities thrust upon her in my absence and she did so quite admirably - and better than I ever could have in her absence, if I may say so myself. I am a lucky man to have this incredible, amazing woman by my side as my partner in my life. So join me in raising a toast to my beautiful wife, to Catelyn.”

“To Catelyn,” they all chorused.

His eyes were on Catelyn, she was crying earnestly now. She raised up for a chaste kiss. Everybody had gone silent, they looked up curiously at the sudden silence. They were all looking at them intently.

He felt slightly uncomfortable by all the attention on him. Catelyn held his hand tightly when Maege raised her glass. “Now winter is over, may their lives be filled with happiness and prosperity.”

“And fun!” Jon Umber yelled out, winking at Ned.

“To the Starks.” Maege said. Everyone chorused loudly again.

“Hear Hear!” Jon Umber yelled out.
His speech definitely proclaimed clearly how he felt about his wife taking over. And he was glad for that. Everybody started conversing again. Catelyn smiled at him before she turned to speak with Maege. Jory looked troubled for a moment as he typed something on his phone and he wondered if they’d found the mole after all, he excused himself to go talk to his associates and Ned wondered what had happened, but Jory nodded at him to say he needn’t worry so he turned away.

He was still confused about the situation with her sister and the man she brought with her. Jory kept his eyes around him to make sure he was safe. And he still wasn’t sure whether or not he was capable of taking care of everything he had to. But with his wife by his side, he would try. And he knew she would help him do what he must. He pressed another kiss to her hand as they started mingling with the guests as the night wore on, and hoped for the best.

Jory moved to a quiet corner in the study to make the call. In spite of their initial plan some guests had trickled into the house and he’d assigned the guards to new positions. Myna was with Nan and the kids watching a movie in the family room upstairs. He’d asked Clara to stay upstairs as well, in case Robert stumbled up there in his current incredibly drunk state.

Mostly the party had gone well, even if he’d almost kicked out a few people he’d overheard bad mouthing Catelyn. But grudgingly he’d kept quiet. I promised her. If Ned can behave, so can I.

“Any updates?” Jory whispered in the phone when Hal answered.

“Working on it. Still going through the database, we just need some strong evidence and we'll go in. She’s been in there for a while now Brienne has a plan to catch her and the information she was trying to steal. We're trying to locate that person as well. I'll call you, Just focus on the party.” Hal explained.

“Take Brienne’s lead in this.”


Jory went back downstairs after ending the call to see the place was crowded now. Slightly taken aback he locked eyes with Lyanna across the room, she shrugged and gestured towards Robert who was standing in the middle of the living room, loudly regaling the crowd with some tale from a long time ago. Jory sighed and scanned the area out of habit, his eyes lingered on Petyr who was ignoring Lysa and openly leering at Catelyn who was conversing with Mae. His blood boiled at the sight then his eyes rested on Ned whose reaction mirrored his own. His friend got to her before he could and guided her away. He kept staring at Baelish though, countless ideas in his mind about how to kick the creep out.

“Easy, Jory.” He heard before saw Benjen standing in front of him, his puppy grey eyes urging Jory to focus on him instead. Suddenly he realized his hand had inadvertently reached for his his gun, hidden underneath the jacket.

“I can’t be easy when that son of a bitch is undressing Catelyn with his eyes. Why can’t I throw him out, Ben?” he grumbled.

“Because he's here with Lysa. You know Lysa will go with him and she won't go without creating a scene. Remember four years ago?” Benjen argued.

How could he forget that wretched party. Lysa had brought Petyr along for the first time, he hadn’t been overtly creepy but the next day they’d seen pictures in “the mockingbird” of Ned talking to
some liaison from Dorne at the party and then of him having a lunch meeting with the same woman in a restaurant to talk about diversification in Dorne. The pictures however insinuated Ned was having an affair with her. The Martells already weren't fans of the Starks after the scandal with Brandon and even a whiff of Brandon's brother possibly going down the same track had lost them the deal. Lysa had urged Catelyn not to sue for old times sake, so they'd forgotten about it. But he didn’t.

And it didn’t help that Petyr started being less than subtle after Ned's disappearance. He would send flowers and chocolates to Catelyn at work, he cornered her when she was out had someone take pictures for his magazine to fuel the rumours. Thankfully most had seen her work and didn't care, but sadly that had created enough chaos that she had many troubles to deal with some of their associates at work. Jory spent a lot of time with her back then devising plans after plans to find Ned so he’d seen how the rumours affected her. She never cried in front of him, but he knew she did after he left.

“Just give me a reason.”

He slowly walked towards Chrys who was standing not far away. “Stay close to Catelyn. Keep an eye on the worm, if he gets anywhere within a feet of her make an excuse to get him outside then throw him out, I'll handle Lysa.”

Chrys nodded and nonchalantly walked to stand close enough to Catelyn but far away not to create suspicion.

“Jory you promised you wouldn’t manhandle anyone,” Benjen sighed exasperatedly.

“Yeah, I promised I wouldn’t. I didn’t say anything about letting one of my men do it,” Jory argued. His phone pinged he looked at the message ignoring Benjen’s protests and walked away.

*We're going in now, cops on the way. Get here as soon as party is done.*

Jory put his phone away and walked out in the foyer, some people had left and the remaining guests were in the living room. He watched as Lyanna was half carrying Robert to the front door.

Before he could react, Robert pulled him by the collar. The stench made him want to gag, but he just frowned and listened. “Heeeeeeeee there you are. You...you keeep my friend safe. You do a good job... very very good. He is safe.. becasooooou...you and your gun....But he's my best friend though.....he's my best friend….you may have known first….but....don't..forget that k..I like you..but don't--...I need to lie down...” Robert slurred and pointed at his chest a few times.

“Alright, lets keep walking, I'm not strong enough to carry you, c'mon.” Lyanna muttered annoyingly.

“Mike, help Miss Stark walk Mr. Baratheon out please.” Jory looked at Lyanna empathetically as she sighed in relief almost dropping Robert on Mike. “Thank goodness the man had the sense to bring his driver. Or one of us would have to volunteer to drive him back to the hotel.”

“I swear to god, he needs to bring a babysitter next time. Anyway, I should see him off. I don't think Mike is strong enough to deal with him alone. Also you should go out in the backyard. Cat is with her sister and they both looked pissed. I’ll meet you out there after I dump him in the car.”

Jory murmured his assent and made his way through the dining room to the back door where he’d seen Ned disappear out of a while ago. As he was about to round the quiet corner he stopped as he overheard a conversation.

“What do you mean?” the man whispered. “We need those files. That is all I hired you to do. You
screwed up the last time.” Petyr. Jory thought angrily, but kept quiet. “I told you, I told you when you failed to get me Ned Stark’s personal files...-- What? Well then what are you doing calling me, you idiot?!) Get out of there and destroy the phone.” Petyr ended the call and walked outside.

Jory stood there in silence caught between wanting to call Hal and strangle Baelish. He knew he had to call Hal right away, but first he needed to get this man away from Ned and Cat.

He looked at Benjen across the room and gestured towards the living room. He got the message and went in to distract the guests. Jory looked outside, Chrys was standing a few yards away from Catelyn who was arguing with Lysa and Ned was making his way to them. He also saw Lyanna walking briskly towards Catelyn now having left Mike to handle Robert.

Jory could tell things were getting heated, his heart was pounding and his hand clenched in a fist to stop himself from reaching for his glock.

He was likely in on the whole thing from the start, Jory thought as Baelish crepted his way to Catelyn like a predator.

He mustered up the strength to make one order in his earphone, “Chrys, kick him out before I fucking shoot him.”

--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

“Lysa, why did you bring him here?” Catelyn sighed. After everyone settled in the house, she asked Lysa to walk with her so they could talk in private. When she'd first seen her sister, she'd been quite excited but the fact that she brought Petyr with her - knowing how much pain he'd caused them in Ned's absence - was something she couldn't forgive.

“What do you mean? You said I could bring someone,” Lysa frowned.

“Yes, and I thought it would be one of your new friends you met through your yoga group, not him! You know how he acted when Ned was gone.” Catelyn tried to keep her calm, but she was officially past that. But she forces herself too as she noticed one of the guards were nearby.

“He told me everything! He told me you turned to him as a friend. But how could you? Why couldn't you just leave him alone! Your husband was gone and you spent time pining after Petyr. You need to stay away from him.” Lysa spat.

Catelyn stared at her, she was struck speechless when she heard Lyanna’s voice. “Is that was the bastard told you? He was stalking Cat, kept trying to get her alone and kept sending inappropriate messages and bouquets then splashed pictures on his trashy magazine. He wouldn't take the hint. My brother was gone and the little rat thought he could sneak his way into her pants.”

“Catelyn enticed him! It wasn't his fault. He told me how you confused him about how he felt about me,” Lysa shrieked.

“What the hell is going on here?” Ned walked towards them with a frown.

“Ask your wife. Ask her what she was up to while you were gone,” Lysa countered.

“My husband clearly knows where my loyalties lie. Petyr is lying, Lysa. He was inappropriate and we had to threaten to file a restraining order against him. You can't believe him, he doesn't care for anyone but himself,” Catelyn said firmly, her anger flaring at her sister's careless words.

“No! You're lying. Why can't you leave him alone? God! You are unbelievable, you just can’t stand me being happy, can you? You know all I've been through. You've always been like this, you can never see anything past yourself! It's always about you, precious Catelyn with her precious family,”
she argued petulantly.

“Lysa--” Catelyn protested.

“No I’m done with this! Have fun at your precious party. Petryr, we're leaving. We are not wanted here,” Lysa ran to him.

“C'mon, Lysa. I'm sure there is a misunderstanding. Can't we talk about this. Your sister has been through… a lot in her husband's absence.” He turned to Catelyn then, “I am only here as a friend, for old times sake. After everything you and I have been through, you'll kick me out like this?” He moved towards her with lecherous eyes, she heard Ned growl next to her.

“Stay the hell away from my wife,” Ned moved forward, his fists clenching again.

“You were never my friend. I thought you were but you proved my wrong by spreading filthy lies about me in my husband's absence. You are not welcome here and you need to leave right now,” Catelyn said thankful that her voice didn't shake in anger, she tried to hold Ned back by grabbing his hand tightly; if Petyr didn't leave right away, she knew she couldn't stop Ned. Just as she was going to gesture at the guard Jory and asked to stay with here, she noticed him briskly walking towards them and she relaxed slightly.

Taking it as her letting her guard down, Petyr stood his ground, completely ignoring what she or her husband had said. “C'mon Cat, can't we leave the past behind?”

“Get. Out.” She enunciated. Petyr flinched but she kept her gaze pointed at him. Deadly and on the verge of slapping him, but she wouldn't give him that satisfaction. He wanted to rile her and she wouldn't give him that. “Lysa, I would like you to stay. But one way or another, he is leaving my home. And if you wish to leave with him I will not stop you,” Catelyn said to her sister in the calmest voice she could muster in the wake of the situation.

Lysa looked at her coldly, “I have no reason to be here. C'mon Petyr lets go.” Catelyn's heart saddened to hear that. Petyr didn't leave, he kept his eyes on her past Ned who was now getting angrier by the minute.

“Cat, please. We used to be inseparable, you and me. We were so close, surely we can work something out.” The emphasis he put on the word “inseparable” and “close” was enough to make Ned snap. “Cat please let me….” Petyr started and tried to moved towards her when Ned grabbed the man's collar.

“Get the hell out of my house before I strangle you, Baelish,” he said in his icy cold voice. She hadn't heard it since he'd returned. Catelyn held onto his shoulder so he wouldn't lunge at the man. She couldn't truly blame him for snapping after he'd kept his patience all night. Lysa was yelling something about getting him off Petyr, but she was too focused on holding Ned back.

“She please, my love. Let him go, it's not worth it,” she urged silently. He breathed deeply but shoved Petyr back roughly, causing him to stumble.

Just then Chrys pulled Petyr away, “Sir, you need to come with me right now.” Lysa didn't even turn to look and walked away with her hand in Petyr's as they were escorted out. It hurt her to see that, but there was nothing she could do, if her sister wished to choose his word over hers she didn't know how to change her mind and she wouldn't force her to stay. Ned's hands on her arms made her turn to him.

“Are you okay, my love?” he asked.
She nodded, “I’ll be fine. Let’s go inside.”

He pulled her closer as they walked back home. Catelyn saw Jory standing at the back door, angry but relieved to see them. Umber, Mormonts and Robett were still there - none of them had a clue of the commotion outside, she was thankful for their vast property. The party went on for a little while longer until only their closest friends remained. Then when they were about to leave, they all looked at each other briefly before turning towards her and Ned.

Maege started to speak, “I know this has been hard on both of you, and we understand.”

“Walys told us you’ve been suffering from PTSD these past few weeks,” Jon said to Ned.

Catelyn felt Ned’s grip on her tightened, she knew he hated being reminded of that, but she held him tight as Maege continued, “We just need you to know that we understand. We know you’re starting work full time in a few weeks, but if you need to take more time off—”

“No. I appreciate it, but I’m fine.” Ned interrupted.

“Okay, just letting you know. It’s been a rough year, but we know you’ll lead us out of it. Both of you.” Maege smiled at her.

“And we’re here; if you need anything just give us a holler.” Jon Umber winked at them.

“Us too. Anytime,” Robett chimed in.

“And I’ll see you next week.” Maege said and hugged her.

Catelyn was grateful for that. She knew Ned was too, but they were both too exhausted to think too much on it. After all the guests were gone, Jory’s people were on their way out too after a final sweep. Thankfully since most of the guests had been in the house, the backyard didn’t look so bad. The condition inside the house however was making her cringe, but she tried not to focus on that and they all collapsed on the couches in the living room. She’d wished to spend some time with the children, but party had gone so long Nan informed her that they’d all fallen asleep. The woman had refused to eat any party food and insisted on staying with the kids. She’d seen the kids for a while after dinner to make sure they behaved for Myna and Clara, but she was whisked away by someone or the other.

The party had gone well, all things considered. Nobody tried to reconsider any deals and Ned’s mere presence in fact had helped them finalize some decisions she and Benjen had been trying to make for months. And Jory hadn’t tackled anyone… that she knew of, a small part of her mind whispered. Catelyn just rested her head on Ned’s shoulder and closed her eyes, Ned lightly tracing her arm, raising goosebumps on her skin. He’d been so wonderful tonight. But she had to stop herself from frowning every time she caught him wincing or rubbing his forehead. She didn’t wish to ask him in front of everyone, but she could tell he was having more headaches than normal.

Lyanna went to her old room and crashed proclaiming she’d had too much to drink. Catelyn knew it was partially because of Robert’s presence, she saw them arguing during the party before he got too drunk to maintain a coherent conversation. She also had a feeling Lyanna was seeing someone, but Catelyn didn’t ask. She would tell her when she felt ready to share, but she was still troubled and Catelyn made a mental note of talking to her sister-in-law in the morning.

“I didn’t expect to see so many people tonight,” Catelyn felt more than heard Ned speak.

“I’m surprised there weren’t more people tonight,” Benjen added.
“All’s well that ends well. And we only had to threaten Robert with violence twice so he wouldn’t
get into the cellar. I say that’s progress!” she joked and felt Ned’s chest rumble as he chuckled. There
was one little hitch with Petyr, but they all silently acknowledged not to dredge it up when they all
seemed to be in a relatively good mood.

But then Jory walked in with a serious expression and Catelyn immediately knew she’d jinxed it.
She sat up now looking at him thoughtfully.

“What is it?” she asked. “Did you find the mole?”

“Yes.” Jory leaned forward, he looked weary as he looked at each of them, “We need to talk.”

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to leave comments and critiques!
She was staring off in the distance - the wind was strong, making her hold on to the scarf around her head more tightly. The last vestiges of twilight dissipated completely from the horizon. Waves crashed against the yacht, their sound unnaturally loud as it pierced the eerie stillness of the night. It made her shiver; she was still surrounded by people she didn’t trust, and she couldn’t risk anybody recognizing her.

Groff seemed very relaxed and his demeanor infuriated her. She knew it wouldn’t be long before Cassel and Tully figured out which way they were going. They probably already had. They needed to get out of here. But Groff seemed confident, he had taken measures to keep them off track. That’s because he has no idea how far they will go, she thought. She stared off at the horizon, contemplating the turn her life had taken. Because of one bloody mistake, she was going to lose everything, yet again. Her hand inadvertently fluttered to her belly but she shook off the memories and quickly moved it away before the past came back to overwhelm her.

_Not this time. I won’t let them get away with it this time._

“...Ashara!” Groff called out in a sharp, shrill voice, she was startled out of her thoughts. She looked back to see him enter the cabin. “I called you three times! Did you not hear me?”

She stifled the urge to roll her eyes, “I’m sorry, I was on the verge of an anxiety attack, since it has been more than an hour and we are still here. If it takes longer, I might as well turn myself in,” she replied sarcastically.

He sighed, “I told you not to worry. Tully and his men are grilling Dave, according to my sources.”

“Dave? What does he have to do with this?” she frowned.

“Nothing. He played his part. The rat tried to overthrow me, so I thought he’d like to be the center of this whole thing. I made sure all the evidence points to him. Given his mysterious appearance in the town, it won’t take them long to figure out his rather vivid past. Tully isn’t stupid, he’ll figure out Dave is innocent in time but we’ll be far away by then.” Groff poured himself a drink and looked out the window. “In any case, I’d like to be away from here. We can’t stay hidden under their noses for too long. Captain is preparing to set sail.”

“And where are we going?” she asked, yet again. He’d never told her particulars, he told her enough to keep her thinking she mattered, but she knew he planned with others behind her back.

“I have a safehouse close to the capital.”

“The capital?! Are you insane? If you wanted us to hand ourselves over on a platter we could’ve done it when Eddard’s dog came to pick him up in Creekwood.”

“Trust me,” he insisted quietly.

“And why exactly should I do that?” She snapped and walked towards him. “You said Ned would never remember, but he remembered enough to escape. You said I would get my revenge, yet I am sitting in this goddamn boat running for my life. And you said sending “R” at the press conference would throw Ned off, yet it didn’t. And now the North is busy celebrating the return of their precious...
Stark while we run and hide. Tell me again, why should I trust you?” she spat venomously.

He looked down at her. “Because you would be dead if it weren’t for me rescuing you from that hellhole you lived in all those years ago. I helped you become who you are. And even though you went to “R” behind my back to create this huge mess, I am still helping you clean it up. Tell me - who has ever done that for you?” His voice turned low and grim, “I am a patient man, but I warn you not to test my limits. I made you who you are and I can take it away just as easily.”

She backed down. She might be impulsive but she wasn’t going to rile up her only ally. If he turned against her, all these years she’s spent in hiding for vengeance would go to waste. She couldn’t do that, not now. But I have to do something soon. “So trust me,” he said again with a smile she knew to be fake.

“What did they call you Griff? I thought your name was Groff,” she asked suddenly.

“That’s what they call me here,” he cut her off brusquely.

She clenched her teeth at his tone. “You didn’t mention that before either.”

He walked away from her. “I have many names, Ashara, you know the one you need to know. We all have secrets we don't share with everyone.” He turned to fix her with a piercing blue gaze. She shifted uncomfortably but didn’t back down, there was no point in pretending he didn’t have an upper hand here. Besides, he’d used his knowledge of her past as an advantage to cover their tracks much better. At first she’d hated this life, but she had to admit there was a thrill. A thrill she enjoyed. The thrill I missed after Brandon died. As much as she hated to give up Arthur’s list of contacts to him as a bargain for all this, he’d only used it to get them off the grid and to supply them with whatever was needed. He’d used it for his own advantage as well - to increase his influence no doubt, as his sources were getting more and more accurate over the years. She’d played along with his plans and they’d remained undetected for years. He’d told her about his storage unit in Dorne that he “accidentally” left for WIA to find. He’d been correct in speculating every one of their moves, and thanks to him they had slipped away from Cassel's grasp. She replayed all the times he had single-handedly gotten them out of trouble and bit back her reproach, warning herself to guard her temper.

He continued after a while, “Anyway, when we get to my safehouse, we can stay until things cool off and make our next move.”

She was slightly irritated by his short answer. It still made her angry that he knew a lot about her whereas she barely knew the man. As much as she loved to “enhance” her appearance to Brandon’s liking, it had never been more than some implants and lip injections. But Groff had been the one to get her the drastic cosmetic surgery to alter her appearance. She scoffed realizing Brandon would have loved to see her now. She had finally become the kind of desirable Brandon preferred. But he is gone to never come back to see me this way.

“And the man at the docks knows what to say if Tully or Cassel comes looking for us?”

“He does.”

She nodded again. “Very well then.”

She gave a sigh of relief as they sailed towards their destination. Groff (or Griff) walked out to talk to the Captain again, and she made a decision. Her hand fluttered to her belly again as a bitter reminder of her past and she knew exactly what she needed to do, she turned and picked up her phone and made the call. It's time I play a real part in this.
R, it’s time.”

Catelyn sat as still as stone gripping her husband’s hand tightly in support. She was still trying to compose herself after hearing that Petyr had planted the mole at Stark. And to think, Petyr had been like a brother to her once. Now none of these allegations surprised her. In the last couple of years he’d proven he only cared about himself. She looked at her husband and her heart broke at the utter confusion on his face. Of course! He doesn’t remember any of it. He looked tired and curious. She would have to explain all these to him soon.

Jory gave her a moment and then continued, “We are currently looking for evidence to implicate him. She’s still quite afraid of him, but she’s afraid of us, too, and given enough leverage, she’ll spill the beans. But Baelish will know when she doesn’t report back that she’s been compromised and he’ll surely send a lawyer, so we’ll need to act quickly. We have to see this through, Cat, we can’t let him go this time,” Jory urged.

“No, we can’t. But we need Luwin to be present to draw out the papers, and I need to know what the police find before we can make any decision,” she finished. There was quite a lot to think about. This was precisely something she was trying to avoid. Petyr thrived on attention and a lawsuit meant he would publicize it to the point that the Starks would be in the perpetual limelight for the next few years.

“I agree with Catelyn,” Ned added quietly and suddenly she felt the burden lift off her chest. She didn’t have to make this decision alone. She gave her husband a soft smile. “I can’t remember who this man is exactly, but I don’t trust him. And if he is connected to Groff then we must be careful. We need all the proof we can find before we target him.”

“Our tech team is working on recovering all the files that were stolen using that computer,” Jory answered. “We’ll gather everything before we have to turn it over to Wintertown PD. Yoren’s detectives are being cooperative, he’ll keep us in the loop.”

Catelyn nodded, “Let them know we’ll provide all the support we can for this. And I’ll have to call Maege in the morning to make sure we minimize the press; if Petyr suspects we know then he’ll do his best to slander us with whatever he has. We’ll talk more about it in the morning.” Catelyn ran her hands through her hair and sighed once more.

“We should call Mr. Luwin in the morning, see what he has to say. We’ll discuss more then,” Ned finished.

“Why don’t you all stay here tonight, I don’t want you driving home this late.” Catelyn knew Jory would sleep easier here anyway, and she felt her family would be safer with him around.

“I have to go to the police station for a bit, Cat. I’ll see what they need and find out who’s leading the case. But I will come back here, I’ll go home in the morning.”

Catelyn nodded as he left.

“Well I’m knackered. I’m gonna go catch some sleep,” Lyanna yawned and walked to her room. Benjen smiled at them and wordlessly went to his room.

Finally her husband pulled her up, and they walked upstairs and went in the girls' room. Catelyn kissed her babies on the forehead, Ned did the same and they tucked the girls in before heading to the boys' room. They'd both fallen asleep quite early on – after all that running and playing all
evening, she wasn't surprised. She kissed both of them on the forehead as well, brushing their unruly curls away from their faces. Old Nan left not long after the party, but she'd made sure the boys had bathed and brushed their teeth before they went to bed. She was truly thankful for the woman’s help.

They slowly walked out, closing the door behind them.

“You were wonderful tonight, my love. I'm sorry I didn't help as much.” Ned said, his thumbs brushing her hips.

“You were great, Ned. Did the noise bother you much? I saw you flinching many times.”

“It was fine.” He answered vaguely, but she could tell he just wanted to drop the subject so she did. “By the way, what is with this Petyr guy? I don't like him, after what Jory said I think it’s a good thing.”

“You never liked him,” she answered simply. If the situation hadn't been so serious, she would have laughed at how he growled Petyr's name even when he couldn't quite recall why he hated the man. “His parents and my father were good friends, he was just a child when they died. The Baelish’s didn’t have any ties, so for their sake my father took him in as a ward. He was like a brother to me, but as we grew his feelings towards me changed.”

She sat down on the high back chair in the room to remove her stockings, Ned kneeled in front of her to help - as he always did. “He had a crush on me and he never got over it even after I told him countless times I didn’t feel the same way. He stayed away all these years, but after you disappeared he tried to come back under the guise of ‘an attempt to rekindle our friendship’. He sent flowers, he used to try and corner me when I was on my way to work. He kept posting slanderous news on his magazine but I kept ignoring him. Then I heard there were reporters outside Robb’s school because he’d mentioned the kids in one of his magazines, and I finally snapped. Stark Corp. threatened him with a lawsuit when he backed off, or at least we thought he did; now we know different.” She shook her head.

After a few moments, Catelyn walked up to her dressing table and put her jewelry in their boxes, when she returned she saw Ned’s eyes were stormy grey. She knew he was contemplating finding and murdering Petyr right now. “God, now I think I should have strangled him when I had the chance. Why did your sister bring him, anyway? And why did she take his side when you were arguing?”

“They’re...close. I don't know what he's told her, but she's been quite unhappy in her marriage and I think he’s taking advantage of that to manipulate her in some way. And she just won’t listen to me on this count,” Catelyn said, trying not to sound hurt. She honestly did not know the nature of her sister and Petyr's relationship, but she wished Lysa wouldn't throw away her marriage for it. Catelyn was sure Petyr was only using her for something, she just didn’t know what. And now that she knew the history Lysa and Petyr shared, she worried for her sister even more. If he had been the man who got her pregnant all those years ago, it was quite possible Lysa felt a connection to him especially since she’d lost their child. Catelyn’s thoughts suddenly went straight to that terrible winter when she’d miscarried, but she forced herself to shirk that thought away.

“Jon is a good man,” Ned added. And she realized she’d been quiet for a while.

“He is, but their marriage is loveless. It's almost an alliance, to be honest. She doesn't know what love is, and she doesn't know what it feels like to lose it. It makes her unsympathetic at times.”

Catelyn moved slightly closer to him. His hands were tracing the small of her back now. “I'm sad that she chose to go with Petyr tonight. But I wanted him gone at any cost.”
“I don’t like the way he was looking at you, and the things he was saying….” Ned said darkly.

She felt her cheeks grow warm. “What he said about when you were gone, it's not true…” she trailed off timidly.

“I trust you, Cat. If you say nothing happened, then I believe you. But It made me want to punch his lights out,” he growled.

*If you say nothing happened,* she felt a twinge of hurt at that. There was a time when Ned would know completely that she could never betray him. But she reminded herself of the circumstances letting that twinge of hurt dissipate.

Ned was lost in thought for a moment. “Jory didn't seem like himself after the party. In fact if I think about it, he’d been acting weird in general, lately.”

“He takes your safety quite seriously, Ned.” She loosened his tie as he took off his suit jacket. “And he feels responsible for what happened to you. We are still quite afraid of losing you again, but Jory feels he will be the reason we will lose you; that somehow he will fail in his duty to keep you safe.” They fell back into the routine of undressing each other; she helped him take off his vest, and he unzipped her dress.

“Thats ridiculous. He's the reason I am home safe. If he hadn't saved me…” Ned paused, she knew why. “Well, he shouldn't think that.”

“I know, my love. But he needs some time. Your disappearance had an effect on every one of us. Ben and Lya didn't hide it, they grieved the loss. They weren't sure you would return and after losing Brandon and Rickard, this shock was too much for both of them. Jory on the other hand refused to grieve or give up, he remained strong for our sake. And I’m selfish in being relieved he was strong because he gave me strength to go on as well.”

Then he brushed her chin so she’d look up at him. “And what about you, Cat? How did you fare when I was gone?” Ned stroked her cheek.

“I wanted to weep. I wanted to lock myself in this room and cry for days because I did not know if you would come back to me. I would never stop looking for you, but I came close to believing you were gone. I'd seen pictures of the crash and Detective Yoren told us you were bleeding and likely didn't survive without proper medical care. The rational part of me didn't know if you could’ve survived that, but I had to believe you were alive. I had to...” She stopped, closing her eyes as tears fell and Ned pulled her close. She grabbed onto him - he is alive. He is safe and alive. And nobody will take him away from us again.

“I'm here, Cat. And I am not going anywhere.”

“No, you're not,” she breathed and pulled at his shirt to kiss him deeply. Her hands went around his neck and his arms went around her waist, pulling her closer.

She undid the buttons of his shirt and threw it to the side. His hands were busy pulling down her dress as he kissed the crook of her neck, trailing down to her shoulders. Catelyn simultaneously tried to hold his head to her neck and undo his pants. He kissed her ardently and she trailed her lips across his jawline and nibbled at his ear as his hand worked to undo her bra.

They shirked the rest of their clothes. Her arms wrapped around him, he pulled her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist as they kissed. Her fingers in his hair, tracing his scar as he walked them to their bed and laid them down carefully. He moved down and kissed her slowly,
relishing every moment, making every sensitive spot burst with pleasure. She grasped his hair and he held her thighs tightly as he pleasured her, growling and biting in warning whenever she pulled at his hair too much.

Every kiss, every touch reminded her that he was all hers. She pulled him up to kiss him deeply, he thrust into her languidly like he had all the time in the world to make love to her. Soon, she threw her head back in pleasure, caught up in the feel of him and she completely lost herself in it after a few moments, and he tumbled over the edge right after. He collapsed briefly on her chest, then rolled onto his back so he wouldn't crush her. Cold hit her as soon as he moved and she turned to nuzzle him, slowly kissing his chest smattered with scars now. Internally she shuddered to think what he'd been through all those months, she raised up to kiss the scar on his brow then trailed down to his jawline and down his neck to kiss every scar on his chest again. She felt more than heard his chuckle, and his fingers tangled in her hair. She pressed a soft kiss on his lips before settling back down, snuggling closer.

She woke sometime in the middle of the night to Ned spooning her. He slept peacefully, snoring in her hair. She gently untangled herself from him and went to the bathroom, then she donned her robe and made her way to the kitchen to grab a snack. Absentmindedly she tied her hair in a knot - a tangled knot. The light was on, fridge door was open. Jory looked up with spoon in mouth curiously. She smiled but he didn’t return it. He simply licked the spoon one more time and dropped it in the sink. “PBJ?” he asked.

The thought of PBJ made her cringe for some reason. “Uh no thanks, I’ll pass.” She rummaged through the fridge for leftover carved ham from the party.

Then he gave a lopsided smile, “Ham and cheese sandwich then? Here, let me.”

She gave him the meat and cheese with a thank you. When Ned and Jory were roommates and she practically spent every night there, she would often wake up at night to snack. Jory did a late shift at his job and would show up home starving around the same time. He would always make PBJ or some other sandwich for them using leftovers, and she would make hot chocolate using her mother’s old recipe.

She looked up at him now, realizing how much their lives had changed. He looked so sad, she wanted to try and cheer him up a bit. “Hot chocolate?”

“OoOoh your hot chocolate? Yes. Just like old times,” he smiled softly.

She smiled and went to get some chocolate from the pantry. When she came back, she saw him standing there just looking out of the kitchen window solemnly - it was very unlike Jory to be so quiet. “Whats on your mind, J?”

“Nothing. Your sandwich is ready.”

She nodded. Soon the hot chocolate was ready as well and they ate in silence - which again was odd. But given whom she’d married, she was used to it. She simply let it linger and gave Jory space, she knew he’d come around. He insisted on doing the dishes, she bid him goodnight again and turned to go back to her room when he broke the silence.

“What if I can’t keep any of you safe?”

His voice was a mere whisper, like he spoke more to himself than to her. Her eyes teared up as she turned back to him. “You can’t take full responsibility for our lives, Jory. You can’t keep all of us safe at all times and if you try you’ll tear yourself apart doing it. And we need you.”
“What’s the point of me if I can’t protect you all?” he asked.

She frowned. “You are not just some bodyguard and stop talking like that about yourself, Jory Cassel.” She reminded herself to keep her voice low as everyone was asleep. Catelyn walked to stand right in front of him. “You are our friend and a part of our family. And don’t you dare put your job to protect us before that.”

He looked unconvinced so she continued. “Please, don’t ever think your life is something you must throw away for the sake of duty. Although I appreciate your loyalty to our family, I will not have you think your job comes before your life.”

She gently plucked the lint off his shirt like she did for Edmure or the boys. “You are just as important as the people you are protecting. Don’t you ever forget that.”

Jory looked quite touched, but she knew she hadn’t changed his mind.

“Thanks, Cat,” he said simply and turned away.

Catelyn knew there was nothing she could say that would help how he felt, he needed his space. She just prayed he realized that he was important to all of them and simply walked back into her room. There she smiled looking at her husband’s peaceful face as she snuggled in closer.

Come morning, she knew they would have new troubles, and she knew this ordeal with Petyr was more complicated than any of them imagined. Tomorrow she would worry about the future, right now all she wished was to sleep in Ned's arms and forget the world, just for a while.

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Rodrik finished the last of his poached egg as he checked his emails. Tully had been quiet all morning, Rodrik gave him space and quietly perused the newspaper in front of him. He finally read news about ‘Stark Corp. being saved by the long lost Stark returning home after months’ - a tiny column and no pictures. Front page was dedicated to the story of a local woman who swore she’d seen “a child of the forest” foraging in her garden with a blurry image of what looked like a rather large ferret to him. Rodrik shook his head, no wonder it took them this long to track Ned down.

Dave, as promised, had called with coordinates to a remote watering hole near Coldwater. He'd asked to meet Brynden there at 7pm sharp. It was perhaps an hour’s drive away from Creekwood, and a long hike from the town to get there. Rodrik wasn’t too eager about letting Brynden go alone, but there was no choice. The Trident folks may make an exception for him, other WIA agents didn’t. He still wasn’t happy about it. Although they’d already decided it was worth a shot to see Dave, they still didn’t know how they were supposed to get their hands on all the clinic records without tipping Connington off. He had an idea he was sure WIA would disapprove of.

Almost as a response to his thoughts, Brynden sighed. “So how are we supposed to get our hands on those records? If we go back, we tip him off. I could contact IT and see if they can track them down, but-”

“No.” Rodrik interjected. “We need those files quick. There is no way we can cross reference them in time even if we pull resources from Trident.”

“I don’t know if we have a choice here,” Brynden growled in a way that Rodrik knew that he didn’t like the idea one bit either.

“We do. You’ll have to trust me on this one,” Rodrik said half to himself as he went outside to make some calls.
“So who did you call?” Brynden asked curiously when he returned, trying to appear nonchalant and failing. Rodrik gave him a blank stare. Brynden rolled his eyes. “You’re not going to tell me.”

Rodrik smirked, “It’s need to know.”

Sometimes, it made him laugh to see how much Brynden reminded him of Catelyn when he looked disapproving. He’d seen that look on Catelyn’s face several times when the younger boys misbehaved. Brynden then turned to face the wall.

Rodrik looked and breathed in sharply. “How long was I gone?”

While Rodrik was away making the calls, Brynden had transformed the wall into the case timeline using hotel stationery and whatever documents they carried with them. They had Connington and Ashara’s sketch on one side, Ned’s picture on the other. Rodrik came to stand next to him and faced their case. “Impressive.”

“Yeah, I’m losing my touch. Took me like 20 minutes.” Brynden laughed.

They stared at it for quite some time, discussing their options, making notes and plotting their next move. Just like old times. They didn’t even realize when it was lunch time. They ordered lunch from the restaurant downstairs and ate their sandwiches.

“Do you think Rhaegar might have had something to do with this?” Brynden broke the silence after a long time.

Rodrik had contemplated it of course, especially after they’d found the true identity of Armond Groff. “I don’t know; Connington’s actions suggest something is driving him to act recklessly. And yes, I do think attacking Ned like this out of the blue is reckless.”

Brynden nodded grimly. “He took a huge risk doing that, but perhaps he thinks he can let Ashara take the blame for this. He did it to Dave, he could do it to her too.”

“Quite possibly. But what is his motive? We know Ashara’s but do you honestly think he’s getting revenge for all those years ago now? And why kidnap Ned and wipe his memories? He had nothing against Ned - Lya maybe, but not Ned. Something doesn’t make sense here,” Rodrik sighed. “This is not his style, Brynden. He is too paranoid to do this - any of this. Something else is going on here. There has to be more people involved in all of this.”

Both sat in silence, contemplating when Rodrik’s phone rang. “C’mon up.”

He went to the door and greeted their guest. He heard Brynden voice, “Who is that, Cassel?”

“Tully, meet the quickest way to get Groff’s records without tipping him off.”

Rodrik almost laughed looking at the expression in Brynden’s face. And he was so glad he hadn’t explained his plan. He turned to the tall blonde girl, standing there with two large bags and smiled warmly. He was truly thankful her sheer loyalty to the Starks meant she was one of the most trustworthy people around him, it didn’t surprise him that she’d agreed to come over on such short notice.

“C’mon in, Brienne.”
Brienne waited patiently at the airport holding her luggage. She looked for the hotel chauffeur holding a sign with her name - of course spelled wrong. She sighed and went to him, slightly irritated that he wanted to carry the bags. Now she was in the car headed towards the hotel. She wasn’t expecting to be here this morning when she woke up. She was looking forward to three days off after the whirlwind of the last few weeks. She had trained all morning and planned on spending the rest of the day playing the new RPG game she’d bought. But how could she say no to the Chief of Security personally asking for her assistance in their case. She really wanted to help Mrs. Stark find her husband’s kidnappers.

It was quite a coincidence that she’d been let into the secret of what actually happened to Mr. Stark. *Hello, I Am Eddard Stark and I need your help.* She still remembered it; the voice was unmistakable. Although she didn’t know Mr. Stark personally, she had met him several times. He liked letting every department know their hard work was appreciated. He often made rounds on their floor with Jory to make sure they were well-equipped. Jory had told her he preferred it that way; he wanted his employees to know who they worked for.

He was always quiet, some of the people on the floor thought he was cold and distant. But the few times she’d spoken to him, he seemed kind - taciturn and to-the-point, but kind. She was more used to Mrs. Stark being around. *Please child, call me Catelyn,* she’d said the first time Brienne had called her that. Any other person calling her a child would have irritated her a great deal, but Catelyn had a maternal way of saying it that made her instantly long for her own mother. Catelyn really wasn’t that much older than herself, but she was wise for her age. Or at least Brienne thought she was.

Just then a text from Rodrik broke the trail of her thoughts.

*Almost here?*

She replied with a yes.

*Alright, the concierge already booked a separate room for you. Once you’re ready come over to room 502, we’ll set up here.*

*Understood. See you soon,* she replied.

She reached her room soon enough, she’d already had breakfast on the flight so she didn’t eat anything. She’d brought both of her laptops and everything she needed in the bags. She took a quick shower, changed into comfy pants and her TarthU hoodie and headed for room 502 where Rodrik greeted her with a warm smile.

“How was the flight?” Rodrik asked.

“Not too bad, sir,” she answered formally, standing up straighter almost as a reflex.

“Who is that?” She heard a gruff voice call out from within the room. Then a tall man emerged from the corner and towered in front of her. She saw stark blue eyes look at her in shock. She was used to that and it didn’t faze her. Something about this man reminded her of Catelyn. Slick back grey hair, he wore a navy turtleneck sweater that offset the blue in his eyes. “C’mon in, Brienne,” said Rodrik leading her to walk inside the room with twin beds.

That seemed the faze the man and he reached out his hand in greeting. “Special Agent, Brynden Tully.”

Now it was her turn to be shocked. She’d heard of him of course. “You’re the Blackfish?” she asked dumbly.
“One and only,” he replied with a smirk and a wink. Rodrik rolled his eyes.

“So where do you want me to set up Rodrik?” she asked.

“Wherever is comfortable for you, lass.”

After a quick scan she headed straight for the desk next to the window. Quietly she started setting up as while watching the men in the other corner of the room talking. She could see their case timeline was up on the wall. Just like Jory had it up on the second monitor in his office. There was something else odd about this room, but she couldn’t quite place it. Once both laptops were up, she looked at Rodrik expectantly, hoping he’d shed some light on why she was there.

Always to the point, he observed her face and immediately answered her question. “We need you to hack into Groff records from the hospital. We need a way to cross reference the records to find common threads, phrases and words - anything that is common with all or at least most of his records,” Rodrik explained.

Brynden continued, “And we also need to cross reference those with the library records, specifically a book called ‘The Lone Wolf’. We need names of anyone and everyone who ever laid eyes on that book. So we’ll need to hack into any CCTV camera footage of both places.”

“Can you do that?” Rodrik asked.

“How long do I have?” she asked.

“We need some files at least by 7 pm tonight as proof that our informant isn’t trying to trick us.” She looked at the time, it was already quarter past two. She had maybe four and a half hours. She had never recovered what could be hundreds of possible files from a database she was sure was riddled with various firewalls to dissuade hackers from taking a peek. It was nothing she’d done before, but she had designed a program that would need some alterations before she started the process. She thought she could get some files by 7pm, but she would need most of the night to do most of what they asked.

“I will need some time to alter my program so it can handle this,” she said, already working on it.

“Of course, let us know if you need anything, we’ll be right there.”

Her father had straight up told Rodrik she was a hacker when he first offered her the job. Not as a warning, but he’d proclaimed it proudly like it was an achievement. Her father had always been proud of her. Rodrik, much to her surprise had only smirked at that and still given her a job. A few months ago he had asked if she would put her skills to good use. He never forced her, but simply asked and for Catelyn’s sake she had helped Jory. She had hacked into cameras and all the footage she could recover from the 10 km radius of the last place they had seen Mr. Stark to find where he’d gone.

Brienne was so occupied in flowing with the familiar rhythm of coding that she didn’t even notice the cup of coffee laid on the side table. Briefly she looked up to see Rodrik smiling warmly at her and motioning towards the coffee. “Take a break, lass. You’ve been working three hours straight.”

She returned the smile. “One moment, almost done. Surprisingly, it wasn’t as hard as I expected to get in. I’m going to get all the records that match the criteria for the last couple of years. It should take some time, but I’m sure we’ll have some records by 7pm.” She accepted the coffee. She felt slightly awkward that the chief of security was making coffee for her but he insisted they were all a team and they were all equal. Jory would always roll his eyes at that.
“Thank you for doing this, Brienne. I understand you had requested some time off. I promise you once this is done, I will make up for it.”

“Thanks, Rodrik.”

“Brynden has a meeting this evening. So once our work is done here, you can always take a couple of days. I’m sure you want to see your father. Tarth isn’t too far from here.”

She smiled genuinely at that. “Yes. I think I might do that, actually.”

The laptop gave a familiar ping. “It’s done. Now is the hard part of sorting the information we got so we can decide what to keep and what to scrape.”

Both men drew chair to sit on either side of her. “I need keywords to narrow down the list, sir. There is no way we can download all the information here.”

“I emailed you a list of medication Walys sent me. They could be possible meds that were used to alter Ned’s memories—”

“-Rodrik!” Brynden warned.

“Calm down, Tully. She knows everything about Ned. She was the one to take his phone call,” Rodrik answered nonchalantly.

She input all the values, but there were still too many hits. She adjusted time constraints and the list got smaller.

“Try these dates,” Brynden added, handing her his phone with the departure and arrival times of all neighbouring docks. “Chances are they are utilizing some cargo ships delivering groceries from the Free cities to the Vale. It’s mostly to local grocery stores and they don’t need much security.”

She nodded and surprisingly there were a lot of matches. And there were a few records for each month. She had already connected her wireless printer and started printing out all the records that were a match. They kept going this way couple of more hours - tweaking constraints, using all relevant data they thought could filter the results. Finally Rodrik looked at the stack of records they had, they had more than enough. “I think this should be enough for us for now. You should take a break and when you’re ready come back here, you and I will sort the rest of the files out.”

She nodded absentmindedly as she noticed something in the database that was peculiar. “Uh, sir.. There is something not right here. I’ve seen this drug before, its an opiod medication to manage pain after extensive cosmetic surgery.”

Rodrik raised his eyebrow. Brienne continued explaining, “A close friend of mine was in an accident and needed cosmetic surgery because it damaged her face. She took a while to get better, I used to remind her to take the meds to cope with school. She had to take them for quite some time.”

“When do you start seeing these prescriptions?” he asked donning his glasses and looking at her screen.

Brienne typed a few constraints in the program. “Two years ago. So around a year and a half before Mr. Stark was kidnapped.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Rodrik frowned.

“Yes it does.” Brynden added from across the room. “Ashara. She looks different. Quite possible her
surgery was fairly recent.”

“A year before kidnapping, Ned? That’s too late. If she truly wanted to be safe from people in her previous life wouldn’t she do this the moment she was rescued years ago? Why now? Why risk people recognizing her?”

Brynden nodded thoughtfully, “I’ll have Jason look into it. And the timeline is still off. There is something we’re missing, something right in front of us.” He turned to look at his timeline.

She had an odd feeling herself, but she wasn’t WIA so she kept quiet. However Rodrik noticed the change in her expression. “Do you have a theory, Brienne? We’re open to speculation here.”

She leaned forward. “If Ashara wanted to go into hiding, wouldn’t she have changed her face more? If she looks very similar, it wouldn’t serve a purpose. And if she did get minor surgery then these meds may be for something else? Or perhaps she was addicted.”

Brynden shook his head, “I doubt Groff would encourage that. He would want her to be on guard with Ned there. And from what I remember, he didn’t like keeping company with addicts even if he sold to them. He was all about vigilance.”

“And Ashara - from what we know was definitely arrogant and intelligent, but not reckless. No, the meds would be for something else,” Rodrik added.

Brynden narrowed his eyes at Rodrik, “She did what she wanted. We both know that.”

Rodrik sighed, “Yes. But within reason. Something else is going on here.”

Brienne had a theory but it was too far fetched so she remained quiet. Rodrik looked at her then. “Thanks Brienne, this should do for now. Take a break, start again later. And if you find anything you think might help our case, feel free.”

Brienne nodded, picked up only her laptop and made her way back. She brushed her teeth, put on her giant TarthU hoodie and picked a slice of pizza that she’d ordered. Absentmindedly she chewed on the slice and called her dad. Her father picked up immediately. His face stared up at her with a stoic smile.

“How’s my troublemaker?”

“Hey Pop. So I might come over for a few days soon. Don’t know when though.”

“That’s fine. You can come home whenever you want. Are you close? I can hear ships.”

“Closer than before. I’m in the Vale on Rodrik’s personal request. He needs help with...something.” She quickly stopped herself from mentioning Mr. Stark or the case. “I can catch a flight once I’m done here.”

“What help does he want? Is it for a case?” Her father pried.

“Daaad, its work stuff. You know I can't talk about work stuff.”

“Well, I need to know you’re safe with whatever work “stuff” this is. And why is he taking you and not Jory?” he frowned.

“Jory is back at the Stark mansion. And he is training me on the job.”

“Oh. That was nice of him,” her father answered, she could tell he didn’t believe her. But glad that
he dropped the subject.

“\textquotesingle\textquotesingle I met Brynden Tully today. We bumped into him actually,\textquotesingle\textquotesingle she corrected quickly.

“\textquotesingle\textquotesingle Oh did you? Haven't seen him in ages. See his brother sometimes at a conference or so, but never him. Anyway, how is the old chap?\textquotesingle\textquotesingle he asked, she could tell he was cooking because she could see the kitchen cabinets in the background and the stove light glowing on his face.

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle He's good, I guess. He didn't really speak much to me,\textquotesingle\textquotesingle she shrugged.

“\textquotesingle\textquotesingle Don't take it personally. He's not much of a talker when it comes to new people.\ldots\textquotesingle\textquotesingle You know, I'll have a word with him, maybe if he's around there he can see about getting you work at Trident.\textquotesingle\textquotesingle

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle Dad, I'm happy where I am.\textquotesingle\textquotesingle

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle I know, but you have a lot of potential, sweetheart. And it doesn't hurt to check? I think you'll like working at WIA. Just let me talk to him.\textquotesingle\textquotesingle

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle Whatcha cooking, Dad?\textquotesingle\textquotesingle she asked instead.

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle Chili. And don't change the subject. I'll have a word with Hoster\ldots\textquotesingle\textquotesingle he kept going.

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle Daaaad,\textquotesingle\textquotesingle she groaned.

\ldots\textquotesingle\textquotesingle just mention the idea,\textquotesingle\textquotesingle he continued.

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle Okay bye bye my pizza is getting cold\ldots\textquotesingle\textquotesingle see you soon\ldots\textquotesingle\textquotesingle love you bye,\textquotesingle\textquotesingle she ended the call while he laughed.

She didn't mind the idea, but she knew he'd hound Brynden Tully until they hired her. In the meantime, she preferred where she was. She checked her laptop to make sure her software was creating a list of all possible matches. She intended to compile everything and give it to Rodrik, but she also thought she'd print out all possible documents to make their lives easier.

There was a lot about this case she didn't know. But she didn't intend to ask. She was going to do her job and not think about why this woman was after the Starks and or why one of the two beds in Rodrik and Brynden's room was completely untouched. Or why this woman was taking medication like she'd completely redone her face when her surgery was supposedly minor. And what was with that client called “L. Merchant, M.A ” showing up here especially after the mole they'd caught at Stark mentioned the exact name to them before she was detained. It was none of her business. She didn't care about that or how odd it was. Rodrik had told her feedback was welcome and to report if she found anything odd. But if she just minded her own business she could get an extra few days off….

Who was she kidding?

\textquotesingle\textquotesingle Oh screw it.\textquotesingle\textquotesingle She sat back down to research the pain medication and this client, then she would report whatever she found. She had a theory about this, yes, she did.

---------------------------------------------

Brynden stared at the file intently. He knew the name \textit{L. Merchant, M.A}. He knew what he would have to do. And there was no way out of it.
“I think that’s everything.” Rodrik closed the files in his hand, but Brynden gave a distracted hum of agreement. “Unless you have something more...” Rodrik continued.

Brynden looked up, “Nothing at the moment. I think we're set.” He folded the paper and put it in his pocket.

Rodrik frowned. “Spit it out, Tully.”

He knew Rodrik would disapprove, he knew it would drudge up the past and Brynden needed a clear head. “Not now. I won't know until I speak with Dave,” Brynden answered and walked out.

Brynden was lost in thought as he drove to a small town north of Creekwood. He knew the route too well to refer to the coordinates Dave had given him. He drove slower than usual as he thought back on his rendezvous the week before.

Brynden walked into the underground pub at 1 am. To an outsider it would look like any other classy restaurant but this is where some very important meetings of his life had taken place. He sat at the corner of the bar and ordered a peg of aged Dornish single malt on the rocks with a twist.

“Still the same order, eh?” he heard a voice say in a familiar southern lilt. Brynden smirked as his comrade sat adjacent to him with a glass of scotch. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” his old friend asked.

“How?” Brynden asked, taking a swig of his drink.

“Yes. Lost Stark returning home,” His friend answered nonchalantly as if they were chatting about the weather.

“Good. That’s why I’m here.”

“You want to know who his captors is?”

“Oh, no. We know. I need to know where his captor is hiding and what their motives are.”

“That will take you to some dark places, my friend. Are you sure?” his friend asked grimly.

“Yes.” Brynden answered.

His friend sighed, finishing his drink. “I’ll see what I can do. But for now, I think you know the only way to stop him is with a new friend you made in the Vale. Trust him. He’ll lead you into the enemy’s lair. And I’ve heard he is a good ally to have.”

“No other way?” he asked.

“None that will get this done fast, I’m afraid,” His friend answered. “I will speak to my sources about tracking him down or at least narrowing down his whereabouts. I’ll send you a message soon with dates that will help uncover the particulars of your suspect’s dealings. But this is not an easy task as he also has friends in high places. One misstep and you may lose your footing yet again.”

“Then you must do this as discreetly as possible. We don’t want to tip him off. And...thank you.”

Brynden debated about telling his friend a bitter truth, but it was better than the lie he had been living. His friend knew the reality and Brynden believed that he would not act rashly. He had to be honest before he found it for himself, their comradery was built on strong opinions, unwavering
loyalty and most of all honesty. He had to stay true to that if he needed help.

His friend noticing his hesitation stood still. “Something else?”

Brynden sighed, “The captor has a companion, she was complicit in everything. You might want to get intel on her as well. And I advice you to remember that she is not the woman she once was. You may find some answers or you may finally find some peace.”

His friend frowned but nodded and walked out. Brynden downed his drink and walked out soon after. He had a plane to catch and decisions to make.

Brynden eased out of his thoughts as he pulled into the parking lot of the camping site. He hiked up hill for two miles and took the shortcut following the small track down the thick grove of trees that lead to an opening with a small stone building that looked like a cottage. It still looked more like a house than a watering hole, nobody would know if it weren’t for the rickety sign in the front. It was a tiny little place with a few tables, a couple of athletic guys with backpacks walked out as he entered. Various mounted animal heads still decorated the walls. He wondered how many of them were weaponized or had surveillance cameras in them. Then he saw Dave sitting at the corner table beneath the large mounted stag head, the plaque glazed with dancing firelight from the hearth across the room. He saw Dave stand up and they walked to the bar.

The waitress smiled at Dave warmly. “What can I get for you, hon?”

Dave smiled warmly, “We’ll have two shots of blackfyre.”

She nodded knowingly, “I'll have Deryk take care of that.”

The dark haired burly man called Deryk was standing by a doorway. They followed him through the back door to a small office. He pulled out a key that was in a chain around his neck and opened the closet. He moved some things around and looked at Dave and then at Brynden. “You know the drill.”

They nodded and the man stood by the door. They walked down the long staircase that led to the basement, Dave entered first and he went in after him, closing the door behind him. It had been quite some time since he’d last been here. They were in the small room with a pull out sofa, a table with an ancient computer and a bookcase with religious books. The small window was still covered with a curtain pulled over it. Dave fired up the computer and input his initials letting the computer scan him, Brynden did the same and they heard a click by the bookcase. Brynden slid the bookcase aside to open a metal door and a keypad. They input their passwords and did a retina scans and the door opened.

They entered and he immediately noticed the differences. The room was much larger - WIA had expanded the space. It was well furnished, filled with high-end equipment and sound proofed. They added a leather couch and chairs on one side. The small kitchen with counters, appliances, a pantry and a fridge on the other corner were refurbished as well. They still had five single beds in the far end of the room, desks with computers on one side and Brynden knew by the handles on the other side that the pull out wardrobe was still intact as well.

He turned around to see several big LCD screens mounted on the walls next to the door they just entered in, the surveillance covered every inch of the small town that happened to be the only way here. The last time he’d been here they only used the computers that covered a few spots close to the watering hole and the edge of the woods, giving them enough time to shut down the room and
“They’ve spruced up the place since the last time I saw it. They really spoil you lot from KL, don’t they?”

Dave gave a half-hearted smile, “They refurbished it when the location was almost compromised and they had to set the place on fire to cover tracks. And our unit’s track record exceeded expectations so we received more funding with the new government. I guess the big guys decided to make life bearable for people like us. A lot of us have gone undercover, these are dangerous times.”

Brynden nodded grimly, “How long have you been WIA Elite?”

Dave smirked, “Is it that obvious?” Brynden shrugged. Dave continued, “Fresh out of training. I had to jump in here because of my history in narcotics. They believed I would be a good fit considering the mission.”

“What did you do before narcotics?”

“I worked for the Royal Fleet briefly. Mostly search and rescue.” Dave answered, offering him a cup of coffee which he accepted with a nod.

“Why’d you leave?”

Dave shrugged, “Seasickness.”

Brynden smirked at the obvious lie, but chose not to pry. “So, two WIA agents, two different cases but one suspect. It's more complicated than it looks.”

“You have no idea!” Dave grinned. Brynden settled on the couch while Dave sat on a living chair across from them. “I'm guessing after reading the files you've realized he is not a novice. He may not be too dangerous on his own, but his contacts and clients are. He deals with mostly bigwigs in the free cities - mostly Pentos. He has connections with mostly every group of criminals - higher echelons of criminals. And thanks to Arthur Dayne’s list, he probably has more lethal resources than he did back then.”

“That explains how Ned Stark was so well hidden,” Brynden commented.

“I wasn't expecting Groff to be this involved with Ned, I had assumed it was something Ashara had cooked up. I was surprised to say the least to find Arthur Dayne’s sister had faked her own death to pick up where he left off, and after I got to know her I knew not to underestimate her, she’s intelligent and quite pragmatic when it comes to what she wants. Did I mention she faked her own death… sounds unreal,” Dave shrugged.

Something about the way Dave said it made Brynden wonder about what Brienne had said to him and Rodrik. If Ashara wanted to go into hiding, wouldn’t she have changed her face more? If she looks very similar, it wouldn’t serve a purpose. Something didn’t add up about her. They needed to recheck their evidence on Ashara and he would make some calls to her resources to dig up evidence from her suicide investigation.

“So why do you need my help?” Brynden asked.

“What do you know about a group called ‘Valyrian sphinx’?”

“I know they’re based in Pentos. Its a franchise of the elite group of criminals that will do anything for the right price. However, as per my knowledge their specialty is in narcotics,” Brynden
answered.

“Groff is a secretive man, he isn’t one to disclose his ideas even to the people he trusts. But there is someone he would got to, its the head of ‘Valyrian sphinx’ actually. And to speak to them, we’ll need to bring them down first. And that happens to be the reason I went undercover. And if we take them down, we’ll take Groff’s biggest supporter down.”

“That is where you need expertise.” Brynden had dreaded this, but he kept his face carefully blank only giving a brief nod so Dave would keep talking. He knew what he would have to do but he remained quiet.

“I’ve planned everything out, to take them down we’ll need to get their-

“-ledger. Yes, I’ve heard that one before. Look boy, its a waste of time,” Brynden answered grimly and sighed.

“It will keep the entire group tangled for a while, it will give us enough time to build a case. And in that time they won’t help Groff because they will be too busy saving their own asses,” Dave urged.

“Yes, yes, or this will put them away for a very long time. I get it. But it is next to impossible to get to that ledger. It is locked in a secure location underground with ten cameras and an alarm system guarding it. To get to it, you need to get through at least a hundred guards and even if you got your hands on it, there is no way out but through those same guards. And if you get out of there too, they’ll have snipers waiting to shoot you. You can’t call for aid and you can’t take it out of the city without aid. Believe me, I’ve tried and failed. To make another attempt at getting that ledger will take a lot of time, planning and resources - and I don’t have that much time.”

“Circumstances are different this time. We have a plan, now we have to execute it.” Dave explained. “I am already in and with Groff gone they’re depending on me to execute orders. There is a big deal coming up that we’re coordinating, I know if I get this done I’ll be ‘invited’ to go and see their leader.”

“No matter how much trust you think they put in you, they’ll never put enough of it to lead you down there. You’ll have to be undercover for years before they divulge anything worth implicating them.”

“Oh they will. Tell me, what do you know about their festival of prosperity?”

“An event where all these pricks get together to make new alliances and reforge old ones.”

“Its taking place on one of their private islands this year. They only do that once every fifty years, it has something to do with the alignment of the stars that brings them good luck. And they’re taking the ledger with them. So, that will be our best bet.”

“Oh, so you want to infiltrate a private quite possible very well guarded island instead of a port. Were you born stupid or did you get a degree?” Brynden snapped.

“I was born stupid, I got a degree in recklessness.” Dave smiled, infuriating Brynden more. “Look, I know a way in. And I can get us there. But I’ll need someone to keep them busy for a while. I already have an analyst working on keeping their defenses down for some time. We also have a mole already in there who will make a move when the time comes. I need someone with me to infiltrate and take care of the patrolling guards while I get that ledger.”

“And how exactly do you propose to get it out of the island?”
Dave smiled then, “Do you know how to sail, Agent Tully?”

“Everyone in Riverrun does. And you will never be able to sail out of there with it. This is not a goddamn movie, boy!”

“Oh, Agent Tully.” Dave gave an en expression of mock disapproval and made a clicking sound, irritating Brynden further. Dave turned and faced the surveillance monitors, changing the screens on one of them to what looked like one of the privately owned ports in Dragonstone that WIA used from time to time. “And I thought you would have figured it out by now.”

The camera zoomed in on a rather large boat with “Paramedics” on it.

“They asked me to arrange that in case someone gets too sick and has to be taken to the nearest hospital in Braavos. And...someone is going to get sick,” Dave pointed at himself.

Brynden nodded suddenly feeling a bit of hope. “This….may work. But what about the leader. He never lets the ledger out of his sight. We’ll need a distraction when you make your move. I haven’t been up to speed with the latest news of this group for a while, Who is their leader anyway?”

Honestly, he hadn’t kept any tabs on the group after the last case he worked with Rodrik. It had been a long time ago and he was transferred to a different division after his recovery.

“That’s where you come in. I’ve heard about your history with their leader and I think we could use that to our advantage,” Dave answered carefully.

At Dave’s expression, Brynden felt dread set in.

“Who is their leader?” he asked again, but he feared he already knew the answer.

------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Rodrik waited for close to three hours when Brienne told him she’d recovered everything and given him the files in a memory card. He would take the rest to Trident with Brynden to recover more clues. He already packed their bags - he knew they would leave soon. He told Brienne the room was already paid for the night, she was free to leave or stay if she wished to and that she could put the next flight on her company card as a thank you. She handed him another file and mentioned the pain meds Ashara had been taking were peculiar after all, and that one client name showed up too many times for it to be a coincidence. She’d added all copies of her research in another file and given him everything she found.

He would pay attention to that as soon as he looked through the client list. Brienne had categorized everything to make it easier for them to connect the dots. Rodrik looked at the files on “The Lone Wolf” and realized just how much thought was put into Ned’s capture. Brynden needed to arrive soon so they could discuss everything before heading out.

He called Jory, to check if the party had been a success. “Jory, how are things up there? Any updates on the mole?” he went straight to the point.

“Cat and Ned are speaking with Luwin to see what we can do. I’m heading to work to get an update right now. Is it true you called Brienne in to help?”

“Yes, she’s here. Thought we could use her hacking skills to get all of Groff’s emails.”

Rodrik explained what they’d found so far, and Jory only hummed his assent. Something was wrong, but Rodrik couldn’t quite put his finger on it. He didn’t worry too much as his nephew was
around Catelyn and Benjen, they would know how to take care of him.

Jory spoke up when Rodrik mentioned Brienne’s theory. “She’s right, you know. It doesn’t make sense. Rodrik, we are missing something very obvious and I don’t know what. And I hate not knowing.”

Rodrik frowned at the frustration in Jory’s voice. “We’ll figure it out… Jory, is something wrong?”

“No. I’m fine. I gotta go. Bye.” Jory hung up. Rodrik was left bemused by his reaction. But it was true that they were missing something. He would have to speak with Brynden and they needed to pull resources from Trident.

Brynden walked in just then, Rodrik smirked, “Well, think of the devil and—” he stopped mid way looking at the grave expression on Brynden’s face. He wordlessly started sorting through the files laid out on the table almost frantically. Then he picked up a file and stopped to look at it intently as if he was searching for something. Rodrik felt dread grow in his heart. He knew that face, he knew it too well. Brynden was visibly disturbed by whatever he was reading. And it was not easy to disturb Brynden.

“What’s wrong? Something you want to share..?..... Tully?” he urged.

He didn't move. Rodrik called him again, but he seemed grimmer and his breathing harsher. Rodrik didn't know many things that could break Brynden's cool exterior.

“Bryn?” he asked softly, placing a hand on his shoulder to ground him.

“Huh?” Brynden looked up confused.

“What is it?”

“Dave was telling us the truth about this being much bigger than we thought. He told me I would find the name of every key player in these records. Including the leader’s.” He moved to sit on one of the chairs.

“What… are you saying? I’m lost,” Rodrik asked.

Brynden sighed, handing him the file. He read the names and it reminded him of another file he'd read years ago. *Their last case.* They had failed to secure enough evidence to put those men away. Not now. Not again. Because Rodrik knew his idjit would run straight at them for that goddamn book. Now dread spread through his veins as he read the name *L. Merchant, M.A* on the file - aka who they called the magister. He looked at Brynden desolately. “This...”

“That is one of his clients - or technically his biggest supporter” he answered, his composure back. He scratched his beard, “I guess the weeds grow back again, huh?”

Rodrik cursed under his breath. Angrily, he started pacing back and forth. He could feel Brynden’s gaze on him but he didn't let himself soften. He should’ve known. Why else would they be so cordial to them. Why would Dave even show Brynden their safehouse if he didn't intend Brynden to use it during the future.

All the memories he’d buried were returning to the surface - their last case, their last fight, him rescuing Brynden and praying he wouldn’t die on his way to the hospital, Brynden taking the job at WIA Elite and leaving him behind. *He left me behind, he left me.*

“You’re not doing it,” he blurted out. He could hear it sounded more like a plea than an order.
“Rick..”

“Don’t ‘Rick’ me. You’re not doing it. This man has had a grudge since you put his boys behind bars the last time. He’s a psychopath. This is a death mission, Brynden and you know it,” Rodrik yelled.

“It's not a death mission. They have a plan.” Brynden countered.

“Can you vow that it does not involve you engaging or goading the leader in any way?” Brynden remained quiet. “Didn’t think so,” Rodrik grumbled and resumed pacing.

“We don’t have a choice. We have to do this, and I am capable of it. I know the loopholes this time. And I can buy Dave more time,” Brynden urged.

“Oh ‘Dave’? Buy ‘Dave’ more time. What - you two are best mates now that he’s WIA Elite like yourself?”

Brynden gave him a shocked look.

“Oh please, you think I’m an idjit? It’s written all over his face! ‘I’m from narcotics’, my arse,” Rodrik exclaimed.

“It’s not that and you know it. I have to do this, Rodrik and I’m doing it for Ned. According to my source this is the only way. I have checked, believe me, I have.” Brynden came to stand in front of him so he’d stop pacing.

The proximity equally comforted him and made him angrier. And suddenly he heard what Brynden had said. According to my source. Rodrik narrowed his eyes, “You met Selmy didn’t you...?” Brynden’s face hardened at that. “Didn’t you?” he asked louder, Brynden stayed silent.

Rodrik shouted, “Speak, damn it!”

“He’s an old friend and he can help.”

“His loyalty is with the Targaryens. Or do I need to remind you of that?”

“And he is loyal to me as well,” Brynden added, exasperatedly. Rodrik knew there was nothing between them, there never had been but he let his old jealousy flare up anyway. Brynden closed his eyes briefly to take a deep breath and continued, “He told me to trust Dave, he said he was going to make calls around.”

“You almost died last time, Brynden,” Rodrik said completely ignoring what he’d said.

“I have to try.”

“God damn it, it’s not your job or your responsibility! When will you listen to me about that?”

“I don’t have to listen to anyone. I know exactly what I’m doing. And you lost the authority to boss me around when you moved to Winterfell,” Brynden spat, but Rodrik could tell he regretted it immediately.

“Don’t you dare. Don’t you fucking dare! I left for the boy. I left because you gave up on us, on everything... so don’t you dare put that on me,” Rodrik growled.

“I know. And you will have to deal with this. If I have to go to hell and drag this son of bitch out, I will do it.”
“You would stupidly put your life on the line for vengeance?”

“Yes.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake!” He exclaimed in frustration. “Why Bryn?”

“I promised her. And I will see it done.” Brynden answered without flinching.

“You think Catelyn would want you to do this? She’d back me up here and you know it - oh, wipe that scowl off; I’m not going to tell her, you know me better than that. But she would back me up on this.”

“I have to do this.” Brynden stood his ground.

“Stubborn fool!” He exclaimed. “You know, I thought all this meant something. All these years apart I thought they added some sense into that damned thick skull of yours. But no.”

“I cannot believe I actually hoped for a few days, trusted that we could still make it. But none of us ever mattered to you, nothing I ever say will ever make any difference, and it is foolish for me to think we ever had a chance,” he finished desolately and walked out, slamming the door behind him. He went to take a long walk. He had a lot to think about, but there was only one obvious answer when he decided to return a while later, defeated.

“When do you leave?” he asked quietly.

“I’ll know when I meet Dave again in 72 hours. I know you need to be in Winterfell, and I want you to be there with Cat. I’ll coordinate with someone at Trident—”

“I’m staying,” he said desolately.

“Rick...”

“You’re leaving and I can’t do anything about it.”

“Rodrik.”

“I’m staying. Deal with it...” Rodrik said before picking up his bag and heading out.

“-Rick, please listen--”

“Did I stutter?” Rodrik challenged.

Brynden sighed. “We need to get back to Trident.”

“Lead the way.”

Brynden walked out quietly and Rodrik followed.

================================================================================

Ned walked inside the small cafe, feeling warmth wash over him. He heard the local radio blaring through the speakers overhead speaking of “the storm of the century”. He scoffed in his mind, these southerners would never understand the meaning of a true winter storm. He was in between Vale and the North still, the southerners may call this a north but to him the northern lands started after they passed Moat Cailin.
He walked inside and brushed the snow off his sweater. He’d decided to take a bit of rest from driving, but there hadn’t been a motel or even a restaurant for hours. He felt glad now that Jory had forced several bags of chips, apples and protein bars into his car when he insisted on driving north alone. But he forgot about those as the aroma of freshly baked croissants wafted out of the kitchen of the cafe; he need some real food now.

He walked over to the counter, ordered his usual tea with a steak sandwich and a croissant and got himself a corner table. His phone was dead, so he let it charge while he had his meal and perused the local tabloid. There was a man sitting on the table right across from him, but his face out of view and he hunched over the table. Something peculiar struck him for a moment - almost like he knew the man - but the thought left as quickly as it arrived.

After about an hour or so, he finished his meal, washed up in the restroom and decided to get a coffee for the road. He walked back to the counter to get his order, and as he turned he bumped into the man who sat in the corner table. He refused to meet Ned’s gaze, the man muttered an apology and quickly scurried away.

Slightly bemused by the encounter, Ned stepped out into the fresh sheet of snow. He’d passed the bridge at Harrenhal a few hours ago. He’d left his car parked near the gas station, he hoped to catch a few winks before he drove the rest of the way. He still had to drive for another couple of hours to get to Moat Cailan and then five hours after that to get to Wintertown. He hated owning a petrol car and wished he’d convinced the stubborn lot in King’s Landing to embrace more charging stations all over the country. But nothing would change in that wretched city, not until they brought honest people on board. He remembered Jon trying to convince him to run for Parliament. He scoffed realizing how no honest man would ever be happy in a rat’s nest like that.

Ned ran his fingers through his messy hair and then through his thick stubble. He wished he could have at least had a shower somewhere, but he couldn’t dally now that he was only a few hours away from home. He hadn’t woken up early the day before, driven all the way from Sunspear to Harrenhal with only a few hours rest at dingy rest-stops to waste more time now. He reckoned if he napped for a couple of hours he’d still be able to reach sometime later that night. The thought of surprising Cat and the kids made him feel a lot fresher.

He sat in the car, put on the international music CD Catelyn always packed for him and suddenly started feeling quite weary and sleepy. His limbs felt heavy and he could barely move. He just wanted to sleep and stay asleep for a long while. He tried to move several times, but nothing worked. Ned tried to move when he saw a man’s hand on the windshield and a muffled authoritative voice, like he was giving instructions. He saw two other men fidgeting with his car but he felt so sleepy, his eyes barely open. The man then turned to look straight at him, now his hand on the windshield in front of him gave him a clear view of the familiar horse tattoo on the forearm - the one he’d recognized in the cafe on the man was sitting across from him and then had bumped into him. In that instant Ned recognized him. But another wave of weariness crashed upon him as he stopped the struggle and fell asleep listening to a rendition of “No Regrets” playing in the background.

And the man’s name died prematurely on his lips as his eyes closed, “Ro….”

~

Ned sat straight up in his bed, panting heavily. He reached to his left, Catelyn was gone. He could hear muffled voices of his family having breakfast. The music still played in the background with a distant echo of “No, no regrets.”. His shirt was soaked in cold sweat, his breathing ragged and harsh. He needed to tell them, he needed to call Walys while it was fresh in his mind. He waited helplessly, desperately wanting to explain what he’d just seen. He couldn’t move, he was rooted in
one place. The attack flashing before his eyes, his heart thumping, he felt as though he was right there. The memories of his attack and the days that followed flooded his mind. The days at the hospital, his desperate attempts at escaping, the medication that made him increasingly groggy and finally caused him to stop trying to escape.

“Cat…Cat?” he called out firmly, but he could hear the plea in his voice “CATELYN!!” he called out again, louder, sharper - his voice oddly commandeering even for him. The music and the voices downstairs died out instantly followed by loud footsteps thumping up the stairs and towards him.

“Ned…? NED!” He felt Catelyn’s hands cupping his face, forcing him to meet her panicked gaze. Behind her he saw Jory’s face emerged - just as panicked - his hand ready to draw his gun and eyes scanning every inch of the room like a hawk. “Please say something,” Catelyn whispered.

“I remember….the….” Ned’s voice trailed off, not being able to form words to explain.

“Remember what?”

“I remember exactly what happened to me.”

Chapter End Notes

C and C Welcome! Thank you for being so patient with me! And a special thanks to the lovely cloudsinmycoffee9 for being a great proofreader and working the bugs out of this chapter.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!