Last Christmas

by **DKNC**

Summary

So . . . this was supposed to be a silly little ficlet because a friend once asked me to write about Ned, Cat, and Brandon using Wham!'s Last Christmas video for inspiration. And I started it, but life got in the way. Then George Michael died on Christmas Day, and I decided I had to finish it. But somehow it turned into a four chapter fic.

A tale of the Christmas at Winterfell AFTER the Christmas during which an engagement was made and then broken the very next day. A lot can change in a year.
Lyanna

*Last Christmas I gave you my heart, but the very next day you gave it away . . .*

The song blaring from behind the closed door of her brother’s bedroom was enough to stop Lyanna Stark dead in her tracks and send her back in the opposite direction. He wasn’t so much singing along to it anymore as he was shouting it accusingly. He must have tried texting the damn girl again.

“He’s got fucking Wham blaring again!” she exclaimed as she flopped down in one of the big armchairs in the great room, tossing a leg over one of the arms. “I know he was a dick last year, but couldn’t she just throw him a bone? I mean, would it kill her just to answer her damn phone? It’s Christmas, for Christ’s sake!”

Her brother Ned looked up from the impossibly large puzzle with a gazillion tiny pieces spread over the big wooden table. “She doesn’t owe him anything, Lyanna.” His voice was cool as usual, but Lyanna heard that edge of angry defensiveness which so often seemed present whenever Catelyn Tully was mentioned.

It pissed her off. She knew Brandon had done the girl wrong and that poor Ned had been the one who got stuck driving her all the way to wherever the hell it is she lives after the blow-up last year. He’d returned to Winterfell more furious than Lyanna had ever seen him—didn’t so much as speak to Brandon for weeks. But whatever Brandon had done, he was still their brother. And he really seemed to be hurting now. She could handle goofy Bran, arrogant Bran, wisecracking Bran, egotistical Bran, life-of-the-party Bran, and even angry Bran (who terrified a lot of people—with good cause); but she found herself completely unprepared to deal with a heartbroken, emo Bran. She’d not have believed such a thing existed if she hadn’t heard that stupid song seven million times from behind his closed door since his unexpected arrival at Winterfell.

“Ned should be as worried about Brandon as she was. Not concerned about the injustice done to Brandon’s ex-girlfriend a year ago.”

“What’s the matter with you?” she asked him, putting both her feet on the floor to sit up straight and stare at him. “Don’t you even care how upset he is? I’ve never seen him like this, Ned!”

Ned sighed. “Then you haven’t been looking closely.” He dropped his eyes back to the table and picked up one of the tiny pieces, attempting to fit it into a bunch of others.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked, rising from the chair and walking right up next to him so that he couldn’t ignore her.

Ned didn’t look up, though. He found the right spot for the puzzle piece in his hand and calmly reached for another one as he said, “He’s got everyone’s attention, doesn’t he? Dad’s cooked up a plan to invite everyone he can think of for a ski weekend to cheer him up, Ben’s practically waiting on him hand and foot in an effort to make him smile, and you’re worried that he’s practically suicidal.” He did look up at her then. “Everyone in the house is entirely focused on him. You can’t say you’ve never seen that before, Lya.”

It took her a moment to process his words before the fury struck her. “Are you saying this is an act? Because if you are, Ned Stark, then you are the worst! The absolute worst! He’s really sad! It’s Christmas, and he’s miserable, and I can’t stand that! Brandon’s always loved Christmas! He’s always right in the middle of . . .”
“Everything,” Ned interrupted. “Always right in the middle of everything. Always wanting every eye on him.” He held up both hands in a conciliatory gesture as she started to protest once more. “He is upset,” he conceded. “And probably as unhappy as I’ve ever seen him. But Lyanna, whatever Brandon does, he does over the top—including being unhappy. Things didn’t work out the way he wanted this Christmas, so he shows up here—and suddenly whatever any of us may have had planned is forgotten. I do feel badly for him, Lya. But I’d like the holiday to be about all of us.”

Lyanna frowned. Arguing with Ned was never a satisfying experience. He was always so infuriatingly rational. She and Brandon could have much better arguments, even if Brandon did tend to baby her more than Ned did—a product of his being six years older than she was where Ned was just under four years older. And as much as she loved Brandon, she had to admit there was some truth in Ned’s words.

“I guess I understand what you’re saying. But it’s a little more than ‘things not working out the way you planned’ when you lose the love of your life,” she insisted.

He didn’t change expression, but she caught a glimpse of something flash through the grey eyes that looked exactly like hers. She and Ned looked more alike than any of the four Stark children, especially through the eyes. “I wasn’t talking about his breakup with Catelyn,” he said coolly. “I was referring to Ashara backing out of their planned beach holiday. This desperate desire to reach out to Cat didn’t start until after Ashara cancelled.”

_Cat?_ Ned almost never used people’s nicknames other than for family members. “That’s not true! I mean, yeah, it’s true he hadn’t called her in awhile until that happened, but you know he called her for months after it first happened. He only stopped because she told him to back in July! That she’d moved on and he should do the same.”

“And yet he’s called and texted her for the past two days. Ever since he got here,” Ned said, shaking his head. “In spite of her having asked him more than once not to do so.”

“Well maybe that’s because he’s here now. And it’s Christmas! And this was where he gave her the ring and they got engaged and everything was so perfect!” Lyanna’s words came out in a rush, compelled to defend her oldest brother.

“Yes,” Ned said darkly. “Everything was ‘so perfect’ for less than 24 hours, considering that Barbrey Ryswell showed up the very next day waving around that pregnancy test with the plus sign on it.”

Lyanna just looked down at that. It had been pretty awful. Brandon had shouted at Barbrey and she’d shouted back. Their father had gotten in on the shouting as well at some point, and none of them had even looked at Catelyn. Lyanna had, though. The pretty redhead who’d seemed over the moon at the prospect of marrying her brother just the night before had stood there silently watching the spectacle, her usually expressive face as unreadable as Ned could make his. Then she’d quietly taken the ring off her finger, laid it on the very table that held Benjen’s ridiculous puzzle now and walked out of the house without even getting her coat. Lyanna had started to yell for Brandon to go after her, but Ned had grabbed a thick blanket off one of the sofas and followed her. By the time he brought her back, wrapped up in that blanket, but still shivering, Barbrey had gone. Brandon had tried to talk to her, but she hadn’t wanted to listen. Finally, their father had insisted Brandon leave her alone, and Catelyn had packed up her things for Ned to put in the back of his SUV, and they’d driven away. Ned had returned nearly a full day later and went straight up to his bed, apparently having driven eight hours straight to Catelyn’s home and then the eight hours back with almost no rest stops.
“That was a really awful thing to do, Ned,” Lyanna whispered now. “But he’s said over and over that what he did with Barbrey at Halloween was a mistake. And Catelyn never even tried to forgive him.”

At that, Ned walked quickly away from her toward the big fireplace. He rested his hand on the mantel and laid his forehead against it for a moment before saying quietly, almost to himself, “She forgave him more times than he deserved.”

“What? What are you talking about, Ned?”

He raised his head and turned to look at her and the mixture of anger and sadness in her brother’s face seemed as foreign as the angry pop tune singing her other older brother had been doing for two days. “You were just a kid, Lya. Most of the time Brandon and Cat were dating, you were just a kid. Hell, you’re still pretty much a kid.” She started to protest that she was eighteen, but Ned kept speaking. “Barbrey wasn’t the first. She wasn’t even the second or third. And she wouldn’t have been the last. That’s what Cat realized that day. An engagement ring didn’t make a difference. A marriage wouldn’t make a difference.” He shook his head. “It wasn’t a matter of forgiveness, little sister. It was a matter of deciding what she did and didn’t want for her future.”

Lyanna felt kind of like she’d been punched. She’d never known Ned to lie—well, except to occasionally take the blame for something she, Brandon, or Benjen had done. And as much as she hated to admit it, believing that Brandon had cheated on Catelyn more than once over the years wasn’t really that hard to do. “But . . . they weren’t engaged when he . . . when he was with Barbrey,” she said weakly.

“No. But he had the ring almost paid for by then.” Ned shook his head sadly and walked back over to her. “I don’t want you to be angry at Brandon, Lyanna. I truly don’t. He’s . . . He is who he is. And I suppose that in his own way, he did love Catelyn. But it wasn’t the way she needed to be loved. I just want you to not blame Catelyn for Brandon’s unhappiness now. Okay?”

“Okay,” she muttered. Ned still looked somehow distressed for some reason. In a feeble attempt to get him to smile, she added, “But would it kill her to send him a text that just says ‘Merry Christmas’ or something?”

“No!” he said miserably. “She can’t. She hasn’t even gotten any of his messages!” Before Lyanna could even begin to make sense of that, Ned threw back his head and grabbed his hair with both hands exclaiming “Oh God!” with the demeanor of a man can see no reprieve from an impending calamity before going to sit in one of the big arm chairs with his head still in his hands.

“Ned?” she said in alarm. “What’s wrong with you?”

He looked at her and took a deep breath. “Catelyn doesn’t have her phone,” he said flatly. “Her sister threw it in the river three days ago in a snit.” At Lyanna’s stunned look, Ned rolled his eyes. “Lysa’s always been a little bit . . . oh, it doesn’t matter. But Cat’s far more protective of the girl than she deserves, and she told her father she dropped it. He says he’ll buy her a new one, but not until after the holidays when she’s back at school and work, and that she has to send him half her paycheck every two weeks until it’s paid off.”

“Harsh,” Lyanna said. “But how do you know about . . .”

“Hoster Tully believes in responsibility,” Ned interrupted. “Very big on never shirking your duties or obligations—especially to family.”

“No wonder Dad always said he liked Mr. Tully,” Lya laughed. “But I still don’t understand how
“He let her use his phone one time to let me know she’d convinced him to go along with our plans and to tell me what time her train would get in. That’s the last time I spoke with her.” He hit the arm of the chair with his fist. “And Brandon showed up here two fucking hours later! And the Tullys got rid of their land line and I never got Hoster’s number. I couldn’t think of any conceivable reason to disappear from here for a day as soon as Brandon arrived, and even if I had, I probably couldn’t have gotten to Riverrun before she left. She’s not taking the express because she wanted to ‘take her time and actually see some of the countryside’ so she left early yesterday. I thought she might call me from one of the stops, but there are hardly any pay phones anywhere anymore and I guess . . .” He shook his head again. He’d looked away from Lyanna at the very beginning of this inexplicable torrent of words, but he looked up at her again as he said in a voice of desperation, “I can’t even warn her!”

“Warn her?” Lyanna’s head swam as she tried to piece together all of Ned’s words, but they didn’t fit together in any pattern that made sense. The picture was harder to see than the one in Ben’s puzzle. Or maybe she just didn’t want to see it. “Wait . . . Catelyn Tully is coming HERE?”

Ned nodded.

“To Winterfell?”

He nodded again.

“To see . . . you. Not Brandon.”

“Lyanna, she doesn’t even know Brandon’s here!” he snapped. “She wouldn’t have even considered this trip if she did!”


“Lya, you don’t understand. I . . .”

“Don’t you dare tell me you love her! You aren’t allowed to do that, Ned. She’s your brother’s girl. You just don’t . . . You just . . . It isn’t right!”

“She doesn’t belong to Brandon,” he said in voice that sounded rather liked steel. “She belongs to herself. And the two of us . . .” His expression softened just a bit. “We didn’t mean for this to happen, Lyanna. It wasn’t planned. And it certainly didn’t happen until well after she and Brandon split. You know she never even looked at another man while they were together.”

Unbidden, the memory of Ned chasing after Catelyn with that blanket when she ran out into the snow came again to Lyanna’s mind. “But you did, didn’t you?” she accused him.

He didn’t flinch. “I liked her, Lya. I’ve always liked her. She’s an amazing person. And I’d have to have been a blind man not to know she was beautiful. But I never looked at her as anything other than my brother’s girlfriend. Not once. Not until she wasn’t.”

“So that’s why you took her home then. Last Christmas.”

“What? Are you insane?” He looked at her as if she had three heads. “Cat was in shock, Lya. The man she loved asked her to marry him, and she’d put all her doubts away and believed in that promise, and she’d been walking on air. And then she finds out he not only cheated on her—again—but that someone else is carrying his child. And when Brandon finally got his head out of his ass enough to actually talk to her, he tried to reassure her that Barbrey would ‘get rid of it’ before he
even said he was sorry.” He shook his head. “Cat didn’t even know I was in that car, Lya. I don’t
know if she knew much of anything for days, if not weeks. She dropped all her classes that next
semester because she couldn’t concentrate. Only stayed in her apartment because of her job. And
because she didn’t tell her dad she’d dropped out until she’d already made certain she could re-
enroll for summer term.”

Lyanna looked at him. “Sounds like you know a lot about it. Spent a lot of time together, did you?”
It sounded more accusatory than she intended at this point. She knew Ned would never hurt
Brandon intentionally, and her initial shock and anger were wearing off.

“Not a lot,” he said simply. “But we lived in the same town, went to the same school . . . well, I
was still going to school anyway. And I was the only one who knew what happened. She didn’t tell
anyone the whole story about their break-up, Lya. Not even her family. Her friends thought she
was insane for letting him go. Especially when the flowers and gifts started arriving, and he started
texting some of them asking if they’d help him get her to see him again. I became her escape. She
could be honest with me. And I never told her what to do.” He laughed. “I think that’s the first
thing about me that she fell in love with. She says I’m the first person in her entire life who
absolutely refused to tell her what to do.”

Her brother’s face transformed completely when he spoke about Catelyn Tully falling in love with
him. The stress of the impending disaster was gone—replaced by a deeply joyful expression that
Lyanna hadn’t thought Ned’s features could make.

“You think she loves you then?” she asked. “Really loves YOU? You said you were her escape.”
She didn’t want to hurt him, but she wasn’t as much of a kid as Ned thought she was. She’d seen
the way Catelyn Tully had looked at Brandon. And Ned deserved better than being some kind of
more benign Brandon stand-in.

“She does,” he said quietly. “I didn’t believe it myself for a long time. I mean . . . how could she?
But Cat is almost terrifyingly straightforward, Lya. She tells the truth without softening it even if
it’s painful—for her or for me. Or for anyone else. And as soon as we realized that something was
happening between us . . . we promised each other not to lie to each other.”

Lyanna almost smiled. Ned was probably the most brutally honest person she knew. If his
assessment of Catelyn was accurate, the two of them were probably far more compatible than she
and Brandon had ever been. But the thought of what would undoubtedly happen upon Catelyn’s
arrival at Winterfell kept her from truly feeling good about any of this. “Okay. I get it, Ned. I do.
But what on earth possessed you to bring her here of all places?”

“This is my home, Lyanna! I can’t share a life with Cat and this place not be part of it. And you’re
my family. I don’t want to hide from you.” Lyanna’s head was spinning from the phrase ‘share a
life.’ Ned was moving way too fast here, as far as she was concerned. And if he had any bone-
headed ideas about proposing to the girl here at Christmas, he had lost his damn mind. “We told
her father together at Thanksgiving that we’re seeing each other. He was . . . concerned. But he’s
gradually come around. We wanted to speak with you and Dad and Ben without Brandon present.
Because he’ll be . . . because we wanted you to listen to us, to see just us, rather than it all be about
Brandon from the outset.”

His words at the beginning of their conversation took on a whole new meaning now. “Well.
Brandon showing up for Christmas after all kind of fucked that up, didn’t it?”

“Yep. Remind me to thank ‘Shara for that the next time I see her. She’s always done as she
pleased, but damn I was counting on a few days here with you three and Cat and for Brandon to
arrive much later all tanned and happy after a few days of warm surf and great sex before I had to
Lyanna grinned evilly. “Great sex, huh? You’d know all about that from what I remember about that weekend at . . .”

“That was a long time ago!” Ned said, narrowing his eyes at her. “And don’t believe everything you hear, little sister.” Then he actually laughed. “When the hell did you get old enough to tease me about my sex life, anyway?”

“When you weren’t looking.” The playful moment between them felt good, but it couldn’t last. “You have to tell him, Ned. When does her train get in?”

“Four o’clock.”

“Four o’clock?! That’s only . . . Ned! What the hell are you thinking just standing around in here with Ben’s stupid puzzle? You’re almost out of time here!”

He swallowed. “I don’t know, Lya. I honestly don’t know what I can do. So I’m just . . . not doing anything.”

“That’s the worst plan I’ve ever heard. I swear, Ned. For a smart guy, you can be awfully thick sometimes. You really need . . .”

“Great news, children!” Rickard Stark’s deep voice came booming from the hallway as he entered the room. On a normal day, Ned and Lyanna would have rolled their eyes at each other over their father’s insistence on addressing them as ‘children’ at the ages of eighteen and almost twenty-two, but this was not a normal day. Lyanna almost dreaded hearing what Father might consider ‘great news’ at the moment.

“People are very excited to hear that Brandon has come to Winterfell this Christmas after all!” Rickard continued as he walked toward them. “Almost everyone I called is thrilled about spending a couple days here. Rhaegar Targaryen and his fiancée are coming. Robert Baratheon’s coming, Lyanna!” He said Robert’s name with a smile in her direction that made Lyanna roll her eyes. “It’s fortunate that their families decided to spend the holidays in the North so they’re already nearby. And of course, I invited your local friends—Jory Cassel, the Glover brothers, Jorah Mormont and his sister Maege, Willam Dustin . . .”

“Dad!” Lyanna exclaimed. “Willam Dustin is dating Barbrey Ryswell!”

“Oh,” Rickard said. “I suppose that’s why he declined the invitation. The only other refusals were the Mormonts. Apparently, Jorah is somewhere down south with a girl he’s wooing, and Maege is restricted to home for some reason or other. Jeor wasn’t very informative.”

“Oh god. This isn’t happening,” Ned muttered.

“Oh, but it is!” their father assured him with a big smile on his face. “The main roads have been cleared relatively well after the last snowfall, but it’s still bad coming up here. I’ve told everyone to simply park at the grocery down at the foot of the mountain at five this evening, and you and Brandon can take the two SUVs down and pick them up.


Lyanna marveled at how oblivious her father was.

“Yes, today! You can have everyone up here by six. I’ve already put the staff on alert. They’ll have
dinner at eight. You all can celebrate all you like this evening, and tomorrow you can all ski.”

Rickard finally seemed to notice Ned’s expression. “Oh, don’t worry, Eddard. I know Brandon has
been glum, but there’s nothing he loves better than a good party unless it’s skiing. This will be
precisely the thing to bring him out of his funk. We all understand why this Christmas is difficult
for him, so let’s make it as different from last Christmas as possible. He won’t have time to mope
about the unfortunate end of his engagement to Miss Tully. He won’t even think of her!”

“Oh god,” Ned repeated. “Please tell me this isn’t happening.”

“Why the devil do you keep saying that, Eddard?” Rickard Stark asked, beginning to look annoyed
with his second son.

Ned looked at Lyanna, looked at the ceiling, and then rose from his chair to face their father,
pulling himself up to his full height which was still about an inch shorter than Rickard. Brandon
was the only one who’d passed him up—he had him by a good two inches. Yet Lyanna thought
Ned looked as tall as he ever had as he looked his father in the eye.

“I can’t pick anyone up at the parking lot at the foot of our road at five o’clock, Dad, because I’m
picking Catelyn Tully up at the train station at four o’clock.”

Ned’s jaw was set precisely the way their father’s was when he would not be moved, and Lyanna
watched the realization dawn on Rickard’s face. Before he could respond, however, their youngest
brother’s voice called out excitedly from the doorway.

“Cat’s coming to Brandon’s party? He’ll be so excited! I’m going to go tell him!”

“Stay where you are!” their father barked, freezing Benjen in his tracks.

“Is . . . is it a surprise?” the fourteen year old boy asked hesitantly, sounding much younger than
his age. No one liked being barked at by Rickard Stark, and Benjen had fewer years of practice
than any of his siblings.

“It certainly is,” Rickard said, looking at Ned.

Ned hadn’t flinched or taken his eyes off their father, and Lyanna was rather impressed.

“Benjen,” Dad asked now, still looking at Ned. “Where is your brother Brandon at the moment?”

Ben rolled his eyes, not that Dad could see it as he never once looked away from poor Ned. “He’s
in his room. Listening to that dumb song over and over again.” Ben sang the first line. “Last
Christmas I gave you my heart . . .” and rolled his eyes again. “It’s so dumb. You’d think he’d be
bored of it by now.”

“Yes. Why don’t you go tell him several of his friends are coming over for a dinner party this
evening? That should get him to stop. Tell him I said to take a shower now. And say nothing at all
about Catelyn Tully.”

“Yes, Father,” Benjen said. He looked from their father to Ned and then looked questioningly at
Lyanna. The kid wasn’t stupid. He knew something was up. She mouthed ‘go’ at him and then
nodded slightly and winked to let him know she’d fill him in later. Might as well. It’s not like any
of this would be a secret much longer.

Once he scampered off back down the hall, their father spoke again. “In my office, Eddard. Now.”
Then he turned to Lyanna. “Did you know of this?”
For about the past fifteen minutes. But she thought of all the times Ned had stood beside her accepting part of the blame for crimes of which he was entirely innocent. She wouldn’t let him do this alone. “Yes,” she said simply.

“In my office,” he said, turning on his heel and leaving her to follow him.

Ned had walked away as soon as their father had directed him to go, and he looked at her in some surprise when he saw her enter the office behind Dad.

“So,” their father directed them as he himself sat in the big chair behind his desk. Both of them dropped into chairs facing him, and Lyanna wondered if she was the only one who felt ten years old.

This is ridiculous! We are both legal adults now. Ned’s only got one semester left of college! It was ridiculous for their father to treat them the same way he had when they truly were children. When she looked at her brother, though, he did not look remotely like a child.

Before Rickard could speak again, Ned said, “I apologize for not telling you that Catelyn was coming today, Father. We wished to tell all of you about the two of us without Brandon present, and when he announced he wouldn’t be home for Christmas, it seemed a good opportunity. I never intended to hurt Brandon or put Catelyn in an uncomfortable position.”

Rickard looked between the two of them. “All of us? Lyanna informs me she knew about this.”

Lyanna knew she didn’t imagine the slight smile that tugged at Ned’s lips. “Well, she found out a few moments before you did. But she wasn’t a part of it. This was entirely my idea.”

Rickard snorted and looked back to Lyanna. “You never said anything like that when he sat here taking your punishments.”

“I . . . I . . .”

Rickard snorted once more, and Lyanna realized to her great shock that he was trying to keep from laughing.

“So tell me, son. When did this become a thing? You and Catelyn Tully? I know you too well to think it started when she was engaged to your brother.”

Ned apparently hadn’t realized that their father wasn’t as angry as he wanted them to believe as he replied, “Well, she was only engaged to Brandon for about eighteen hours so there wasn’t really a large window of opportunity there, but if you mean were we involved at all while the two of them dated, the answer is of course not.”

Lyanna had to fight back a laugh then. Ned never sassed their father. Never. He must have it really bad for Catelyn Tully.

“So when?” Dad asked again.

“We’ve been dating since the first of September,” Ned answered without hesitation. “As to the exact moment when our feelings for each other changed . . . I couldn’t really say. It sort of happened over time. I don’t know how else to explain it.” He shrugged. “We were friends, Dad. And then we were more. I don’t know exactly what the in-between was or how long it lasted, but I do know what we are now. We love each other.”

Rickard nodded. “Well, she’s a lovely girl, Ned. I’m happy for you.”
The stunned expression on Ned’s face then caused Lyanna to collapse into laughter. “You’re not gonna die, Ned,” she grinned, bumping him with her shoulder. “At least not until Brandon finds out.”

That erased the smile which had just begun to appear on Ned’s face and earned her a frown from her father. “Yes,” Rickard said. “Brandon will not react well to this at all. Why the devil did you not call the girl and tell her not to come? And hasn’t Brandon been calling her since his arrival? How can she not know he’s here?”

As Ned explained the whole cell phone situation, Lyanna thought about her oldest brother. She honestly didn’t know how he would react. Before the past couple days, she’d have predicted he’d blow up, attempt to beat the crap out of Ned, call Catelyn names, and then go hit on the best looking girl he could find in a thirty mile radius. But whatever Ned thought about Bran’s behavior, it WAS different. Maybe he wasn’t cut out for marriage. Maybe he had been completely prepared to bang his blues away with Ashara Dayne on a beach somewhere, but he’d never been with any girl as long as he had Catelyn Tully. He’d never asked anybody else to marry him, and he’d never mooned over any ex-girlfriend a week after parting ways—much less for a year—except for Catelyn Tully. She honestly had no idea what he’d do when Ned told him.

“All right,” she heard her father say. “Dad! I’m not gonna just show up with her and say, ‘Surprise, Brandon! Look who I’m dating now’! I won’t do that to Bran, and I sure as hell won’t do it to Cat.”

Rickard twisted his mouth. “Well, considering you’ve known about this for two days and haven’t told him yet, I’d say your resolve is somewhat lacking.”

Ned bristled, but their father held up his hands. “And I don’t blame you, son. Your brother is not going to take this well. I don’t know how he’ll be with either of you these next several days, but I do know that when he first hears of it, he’ll strike out. He’ll say things he’ll regret, things he doesn’t truly mean. But you won’t be able to forget them, Eddard.”

Nobody called her brother Eddard except their father. And even he usually called him Ned except when he was being very serious. He’d used Eddard several times since interrupting them in the great room. “I realize that, Father,” Ned replied. They only called him that when being reprimanded, commanded to do something, or when being very serious. Lyanna watched her brother carefully. “I think that’s why I’ve been dragging my feet. I don’t want to hurt Bran. I don’t! But even more, I don’t want to resent him. I don’t want to cross a line we can’t cross back. I . . . I’m afraid of that happening.”

“That’s why you won’t tell him.”

“He has to be told! Regardless of what happens. He deserves to hear it from me.”

“He does have to be told. But whatever he deserves, he’s going to hear it from me.”

“What?” Ned and Lyanna said at the same time.

“Lyanna, this doesn’t truly concern you,” Rickard said. “I’ll thank you to keep quiet.”

“Dad, this is my responsibility, and I’ll . . .” Ned started.

“Son, you and Brandon are both my responsibility. And I happen to care more about your relationship than any sense of responsibility you have right now. I’ll tell him, and I’ll stand there while he says whatever he needs to say. And with luck, he’ll have gotten the worst of it out by the
time you arrive here with Miss Tully. I can make no promises he’ll be on his best behavior, but I am your father. I’ll not allow him to be on his worst.”

Lyanna could plainly see guilt and relief warring in Ned’s eyes.

“Get out of here, Ned,” his father said. I’ll call you when it’s safe to return.”

“And go where? It’s not even noon, and I don’t have to be at the train station until four.”

“Go eat some terrible fast food lunch. Go window shopping. I don’t care. Just get out of here. And once you do pick up your young lady, take your time coming home. All right?”

“Yes, Father,” Ned said, and he pushed back his chair and rose quickly to walk toward the door. Then he stopped, turning back to look at Rickard. “Thanks, Dad.” Lyanna was watching her father acknowledge that with a smile when her brother said, “You, too, Lya.” She turned back to face him, and he grinned at her. “Thanks, little sister.”

“You wouldn’t even let me take any of the heat! But you’re welcome. Now go on.”

As soon as he was gone, she turned toward her father. “What about this party of yours, Dad? If I counted correctly, six people will be showing up for a ride at five o’clock tonight. Ned won’t be here and Brandon probably won’t be in any state to play chauffeur. You going to cancel?”

“Hell no! The Expedition seats eight and there will only be seven including you. It’ll be tight with bags, but it’s got the ski rack on top. You can fit everybody in that one.”

“Me?”

“Yes, Lyanna. You are now on guest pick-up duty. A house full of people may be the one thing that keeps your oldest brother from showing his ass about this situation.”

“Or make it a thousand times worse if he does.”

“That’s a risk we shall have to take, I’m afraid. Now, go collect Benjen and go snowmobiling or something. I’m going to have a chat with Brandon.”

Lyanna nodded. She hadn’t really planned on snowmobiling today, but they were fast and loud. With luck, she and Ben could get far enough away to keep from hearing the explosion that was about to go off. And hopefully, the rest of the holiday would be no worse than awkward. She exhaled as she rose from her seat to search for her younger brother. One thing she knew for certain. It sure as hell wouldn’t be boring.
Ned Stark stood on the train platform and watched the horizon as if he could will Cat’s train to appear. Most people were standing inside as the temperature was several degrees below freezing, but he didn’t mind the cold. It wasn’t nearly as cold as it often was in December, and the cold helped clear his mind. God knew his mind needed clearing after the past two days. He’d nearly had a heart attack when Brandon had waltzed through the door unannounced with a big grin and a shouted, “Greetings, Family! I’m here so the holidays can begin!”

The grin had lasted through approximately two hours and three bourbons on the rocks. Rickard had frowned when Brandon grabbed Ned and headed straight for the well-stocked bar, but as both Brandon and Ned were of legal age, he didn’t say anything to them although he did remind Lyanna that she was eighteen when she reached for a beer. She’d stuck to Coke as long as their father remained with them, but grabbed a beer as soon as he left them to their own devices as he had a conference call he had to take.

Brandon had been on his phone almost from the moment of his arrival, either texting someone or checking for messages, and Ned had initially thought he was communicating with Ashara who had backed out on their plans to spend the holidays drowning in booze and sunshine when her brother Arthur threw a fit about her skipping out on family responsibilities. “He kept texting her pictures of Allyria crying!” Brandon had complained. “Who the fuck does something that shitty?”

Ned hadn’t responded, and Brandon hadn’t really expected him to. Both of them knew Ashara well enough to know that whatever anyone said about her undoubtedly cavalier attitude toward most things in life—including relationships with men—she adored her family. Arthur had always been willing to use that (even if it meant playing dirty) to get her away from situations he didn’t approve of, and he most definitely didn’t approve of Brandon. Privately, Ned thought Brandon and Ashara suited each other rather well as neither asked the other for any more than they were willing to offer at any given time.

That’s how he’d figured out Brandon wasn’t texting Ashara. He’d gotten progressively more despondent and pissed off. And while he was bummed about his holiday plans being trashed, he wasn’t the least bit pissed off at ‘Shara, only Arthur.

When he’d finally tossed his phone down on the bar, exclaiming. “I thought she’d at least fucking answer me,” Ned had gotten the first uncomfortable inkling about whom his brother had been messaging.

Not long after that, Rickard had returned from his conference call and frowned at the sight of his obviously drunk first born, not-quite-sober second born, under-age daughter with a beer in her hand, and his eighth grade son obviously enjoying just sitting in the same room with his older siblings as they had conversations generally not held in his presence. Still, he’d joined them, pouring himself a scotch and allowing Lya to finish her beer although stopping her from getting another. And when he’d asked Brandon to slow down on the bourbon, he’d responded, “Why? When she won’t even answer me. I loved her, Dad. I really did. And she just threw it in my face. I messed up. I know I did. But she never even gave me a chance to make it up to her. How is that fair? How is that fair when I loved her so much?” Then he’d dug into his pocket and pulled out that damn ring. “I’ve still got this. I should throw it off a cliff. Or in a lake. But I just . . . can’t. I can’t throw it away. And she won’t even tell me Merry Christmas.”

It had been torture. He’d know exactly why Catelyn hadn’t responded, of course, but he could hardly tell Brandon without explaining how he knew, and that definitely hadn’t been the moment.
for that conversation. It had pissed him off a bit, too, that Brandon felt entitled to a response when Cat had asked him not to call or text her anymore. He’d been pretty good about, too, for the most part. Since summer, he hadn’t texted her any more often than once or twice a month. Depending upon the tone, she’d ignored him or responded with brief, polite messages which didn’t encourage further communication.

But this had been a barrage of messages. Ned didn’t even want to think about what Catelyn would have felt had she actually received them. Apparently he was leaving voice mails, too. Lyanna had heard him. She even caught him singing that ridiculous song into his phone and had wondered aloud to Ned if he’d left that as a voicemail for Catelyn. Was it being back in Winterfell which had prompted this sudden desperation to connect with Cat? Was Brandon more sentimental than anyone suspected? Or had the unfulfilled promise of a sexy beach romp with ‘Shara simply left him alone and horny?

Ugh. He did NOT want the words Brandon, horny, and Catelyn to come together in any of his thoughts so he stared intently at the horizon again, hoping to will the train into arriving. He missed Cat even more than he thought he would. It had been a week since he’d seen her, and that was the longest he’d gone without seeing her since at least midsummer. And they hadn’t even been officially dating then. He’d loved her, though. God, how he’d loved her even then. Hell, who was he kidding? He’d probably loved her for a lot longer than that, although he certainly hadn’t acted on it. He hadn’t even let himself recognize it—refusing to allow himself to believe in any kind of future with her. Well, he was done with that. He’d had nothing to do with Catelyn finally leaving Brandon. And it had been her choice, not his, to reach out to him when she was so broken and lost and convinced she wasn’t strong enough to pull herself back together. He’d always known she was, though. And she did it. He’d been there for her as her friend. But he hadn’t rescued her. She didn’t need rescuing. She built herself back up, and only then, when she felt whole and ready to move on with her life, did they begin to build something between them.

“Brrrr. Aren’t you freezing?” A young woman about Lya’s age had stepped up to stand beside him. Ned shrugged. “The cold doesn’t bother me. It’s warm inside, though, if it bothers you.” He motioned back to the little station house.

“I know. I was just in there. Couldn’t take the Christmas music anymore. My mom plays it 24/7 starting in November and it’s starting to drive me batty.”

Ned laughed. “Well, I like it all right in small doses, but for a limited time only.”

She laughed with him. Then she groaned. “Oh hell! Listen! You can still hear it out here! I mean it’s not nearly as loud, but . . . Ugh. I guess I’ve just gotten way over-sensitive to Christmas songs!”

He hadn’t noticed the music at all, but actually listened after she spoke and then groaned.

*Once bitten and twice shy. I keep my distance but you still catch my eye. Tell me, baby, Do you recognize me? It’s been a year. It doesn’t surprise me,* came floating out from the station house.

The girl beside him laughed at his expression. “Not a fan of this one, huh?”

“Let’s just say I consider it overplayed,” he said.

It had started while they all sat there at the bar on the evening of Brandon’s arrival. Lyanna had turned the radio on to some station playing Christmas songs and proceeded to sing at least a few lines of all of them. When “Last Christmas” started playing, she’d pretended she had a microphone
and pouted dramatically as she belted out the first few lines. Brandon, in spite of being a pretty sad, miserable drunk by that point had actually laughed at her and teased that George Michael had much better hair. She’d thrown an empty beer can at him, and their father had decreed that it was time for everyone to call it a night. Benjen followed him without protest, Lya with a bit more protest, and he and Brandon hadn’t moved. Once they were gone, Brandon had looked at him and said, “It’s a fucking stupid song, but I swear it could be about me right now. I wish it was last Christmas, Ned. I really do. I wish I could have it back.”

Ned had felt colder then than he did now on this railway platform. “You can’t go back, Brandon,” he’d said. “Only forward.” Then he’d stood up and gone to his own room, unable to sit there with his brother anymore. Since then, Brandon had been a veritable hermit—spending most of his time in his room and playing that stupid song over and over. At least that had prevented Ned from having to make much conversation with him—although he’d known he’d have to talk with him eventually. He’d honestly avoided dealing with it as much as he could, opting instead to concentrate on the 5000 piece jigsaw puzzle that Benjen had of a snowy mountain scene. It was almost entirely various shades of whites and greys and nearly impossible. Ben had been thrilled to have someone else interested in tackling it, and Ned had been grateful for the distraction.

“Oh! Here it comes!” the young woman said, bouncing a little on her toes.

After boring a hole into the horizon with his eyes, he’d gotten so lost in his own thoughts, the train was almost at the station before he actually realized it. More people than he’d expected got off at this stop, and his fellow Christmas music non-fan shrieked, “Dad!” and ran to embrace a rather large gentleman in a ridiculously thick fur coat. Apparently, a dislike of cold ran in the family, and Ned absently wondered if the man disliked Christmas music as much as his daughter did, too.

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“Ned!” The sweetest voice in the world caused him to turn around, he saw her, two cars away, waving and running, lugging a bag with a ridiculous floral pattern. She was perfect. He rushed toward her, and then she was in his arms, her beautiful auburn hair almost completely hidden beneath her hood, but her blue eyes bright and her lips warm against his.

“I’ve missed you,” she murmured. “I swear I could murder Lysa! I’ve reached for my phone a hundred times a day just to text ‘I love you’ and of course it isn’t here. If my father was hoping to prove a point about how dependent we’ve become on cell phones, he’s succeeded. Being away from you is hard enough. Being completely out of contact is unbearable!” She kissed him again and he found himself thanking Hoster Tully for his hard line on being responsible for one’s property. If she’d had her phone, she’d have gotten all those messages from Brandon. If she’d had her phone, he himself would have been telling her not to come. And at this moment, he’d rather deal with whatever reaction Brandon might have than let her out of his arms for another week.

Even with his arms around her, he felt her shiver as a blast of cold wind hit the platform. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s get you out of the cold.”

She kept up a fairly steady stream of conversation as they walked to his SUV. He didn’t mind. She was perfectly capable of being quiet and listening, but she knew it took him awhile to begin talking. Even with her. And he talked to her more easily than he did anyone. He was particularly grateful for her willingness to carry the conversation at the moment because he had no idea how to tell her what he had to tell her.

She seemed surprised when he suggested they stop for hot chocolate, but she didn’t object. So he pulled into a little diner that had very good cocoa and little booths that afforded a bit of privacy. He couldn’t tell her about Brandon while he was driving. He needed to look at her.

“So,” she said after the waitress brought them their cups. “Have you given them any hints about
“Dad and Lyanna know,” he said. “I told them today.”

“Ned! I thought we were going to tell them together.”

“Yeah. That’s how I wanted to do it. But . . . that wasn’t going to work. Too big a surprise.”

She frowned. “Do they object to me? To the two of us, I mean? I know it’s . . . awkward for everyone. But if we could get past it, surely they can, too, can’t they?”

“Dad and Lya are fine with it, Cat.” She looked at him in some disbelief. “Honest. They’re happy for us.” That might be overstating it, but at least Dad didn’t think they were committing a crime. And while Lyanna had certainly objected initially, Ned thought she was pretty much okay with it by the time he’d left Dad’s office. She didn’t seem mad at him anymore at least.

“Then what’s wrong? Don’t tell me Benjen has a problem with it. He’s always liked me, and surely he’s too young to be over-invested in his brothers’ love lives.”

“Ben doesn’t even know.” Well, shit. He almost certainly knows now. Since Dad told Brandon . . .

“Ned, what’s wrong? And don’t tell me ‘nothing.’ I know you better than that.”

“It’s . . . Brandon.”

“Brandon? What has he . . . Oh my god! Has someone told him about us? Did he call your father? He’s with that Ashara Dayne, isn’t he? I bet she told him something. She’s very good friends with Elia Martell, and she and Rhaegar have seen us together enough times to be suspicious.”

“Ashara didn’t tell him anything,” Ned said quickly. His younger sister wasn’t the only person who thought she knew all that had happened during a particularly crazy weekend in Harrenhal nearly two years ago. Catelyn hadn’t been there, but she’d heard the tales so she wasn’t exactly a great fan of ‘Shara’s. Of course, that was initially because of the tales Brandon featured in, but Cat had said enough since they started dating that she knew she’d heard the stories about him as well. She’d never come right out and asked him what happened, though. If she did, he supposed he’d tell her the whole story. He had promised never to lie to her after all. But he saw no point in dragging up embarrassing ancient history if she didn’t ask. “And as it happens, you’ll see Rhaegar and Elia very shortly.”

“What?” she asked. “Where?”

“At Winterfell. My father’s throwing a small party, apparently, and since they’re vacationing up here with Rhaegar’s family, they’ll be there.” He’d forgotten about his father’s stupid party until he’d already driven forty-five minutes, but when he’d texted Lyanna, she’d said it was still on and that she had transportation covered and not to worry about anything. That was a laugh.

“What on earth for? I thought this was supposed to be a quiet family Christmas.”

“It was.” He sighed and then reached across the table to take her hands. “Look, Cat, I don’t even know how to tell you this, but . . . Brandon’s there.”

She stared at him for a long moment. “Brandon,” she finally said. “At Winterfell?”

He nodded.
“Oh my god. I can’t . . . I can’t . . . You said he wasn’t coming!”

“He wasn’t! Ashara bailed on him at the last minute, and he showed up unannounced! About two hours after I last spoke to you! God, Cat, if I could have reached you, I would have . . .”

“I am going to murder Lysa!” she exclaimed. “I have to leave, Ned. I can’t possibly go to Winterfell with Brandon there!”

“You can, Catelyn. I love you and I want you there. Brandon doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter? He put a ring on my finger last Christmas and I took it off the very next day. Or did you forget that little fact?”

“Of course, I didn’t forget it! How can I? Cat . . . if I had my way, everyone could just forget that you’d ever met Brandon before, but that can’t happen. And he’s always going to be my brother, and Winterfell’s always going to be my family’s home. And we always knew we were going to have to face that.”

“But not all at once!” she nearly wailed. “Ned, coming here at Christmas is hard enough. I only agreed because I want new holiday memories with your family. Memories of you and me at Winterfell rather than Brandon and me. It’s not going to be easy for me, Ned! But I love you, and I want to share everything that’s important to you. But . . . I haven’t laid eyes on Brandon since that awful day. To see him again for the first time in the very same place . . . on almost the very same date . . . I don’t think I can do it, Ned. I really don’t.”

She was nearly crying, and she’d raised her voice enough that several people were looking at them now. Ned wanted to take her in his arms, but she was across the table from him. And they were in the diner with people looking at them. The waitress had left the bill on the table. He pulled out his wallet and found he had only a ten and two ones. He tossed the ten on the table and figured the waitress would be thrilled that he was a big Christmas tipper. He just wanted to get Catelyn out of there.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I can’t go to Winterfell, Ned. I can’t.”

“I know,” he said. “But let’s get out of here.”

She stood up then, and he put an arm around her as he walked her to the door, aware of eyes on them. Just as they got to the door, a very large man stood in front of them. “Are you all right, miss?” he asked Catelyn.

“I’m fine,” she said, not looking up at him. Ned knew she was embarrassed by the tears on her face.

“You’re crying,” the man said. “Do you want to leave with this man?”

_Oh great! This dude thinks I’m some kind of abuser or a kidnapper._ “Look man, she’s okay. She’s just upset. I need to take her home.”

“I don’t want . . .” She stopped suddenly, obviously realizing the same thing about this guy that Ned had. He was certain she’d been about to repeat that she didn’t want to go to Winterfell, but that wouldn’t sound good at all. She looked up at the man, no longer hiding her face. “I don’t want to cry in public,” she said. “It’s embarrassing. I just got some very bad news, and Ned’s trying to make it better, but I just need to get out of here. Excuse us, sir.”
The man looked at Catelyn and then looked at Ned with a scowl. “I’m watching you, man,” he said. “I know what you look like, and I’m gonna see what you drive and get your plate number. Don’t do anything stupid.”

Ned had rarely wanted to hit anybody so badly in his life, but the dude didn’t know him was just trying to look out for Cat. Besides, Ned didn’t want to get killed. So he just took deep breaths and didn’t respond.

Catelyn, however, had had enough. “Listen to me, sir. I realize you’re trying to be a hero here, but I don’t need one. I am not upset with Ned, nor am I in any danger from him. Right now, the only person I feel threatened by is you! So please stop threatening my boyfriend or I will have to ask someone here to call the police.”

“Okay, lady,” the guy said, backing off and holding his hands up. “But if you need anything, just yell.”

“Come on, Ned,” she said, practically pulling him out the door. When they got to the car, she immediately began crying, “Oh my god, that was awful. I’m so sorry, Ned. I’m sorry I made such a scene.”

“Hey! Don’t apologize. I shouldn’t have told you in there with all those people. I just . . . I just wanted to be able to look at you, and not the road. I hate this, Cat. I really do.”

She wiped her eyes with her hand and tried to smile at him. “I know you do.” The smile faltered almost immediately. “God, Ned. How are we supposed to do this?”

He knew that question encompassed a lot more than just going to Winterfell. Being together had been so easy at school. Everything about it had felt right. But now all the worries that had plagued them in the very beginning were back with a vengeance. “I don’t know,” he said honestly. “But we will, Catelyn. I love you.”

She leaned across the console to throw her arms tightly around his neck. “I love you, too,” she said, her words thick with tears again. He put his arms around her and just held her silently, not knowing what else to say or even where to go. After a moment, she muttered, “Shit.”

“What?” he said, pulling back enough to look at her face, confused by her sudden use of the expletive.

She was looking at something over his shoulder. Turning her eyes toward him, she nodded toward the diner. “He’s watching us,” she said, frowning.

Twisting to look behind him, Ned saw Cat’s wanna-be savior standing just outside the diner. “Jesus. That guy seriously thinks I’m an axe-murderer.”

Catelyn actually laughed at that. “You are pretty scary looking when you scowl.”

“I don’t scowl at you!”

“No, but you were scowling at him.” She sighed. “Just drive, Ned. I don’t care where.”

He started the car, and as he was backing out of the parking space heard the buzz of his phone from the glove box.

“Shall I get that?”
“I don’t care. I threw it in there in case Dad needed to reach me for . . . whatever. Since you haven’t had a phone, I haven’t really needed mine.”

She opened the glove box and pulled out the phone. “It’s from Lyanna. Shall I look?”

“Go ahead,” he said, praying his sister wasn’t reporting that something awful. Catelyn clicked on the message, and he saw her forehead wrinkle as she read. “What?”

“If you’ve got Catelyn, come to the lot. I am NOT driving all the way back home with these complainers and all of their shit packed into Dad’s old Expedition like fucking sardines. HELP!”

She looked up at Ned. “What on earth is she talking about?”

Ned sighed. “Dad’s party—the one he arranged to cheer Brandon up. Six people are coming tonight. The road up to Winterfell is kind of a mess, so he planned to have Brandon and me pick everybody up at the grocery, but I told him I was coming to get you and he decided he should tell Brandon about it and that left Lya to pick up everybody.”

“What?” Her voice shot up an octave on the word. “Your FATHER is telling Brandon about the two of us?!”

“He insisted,” Ned said somewhat defensively.

“Oh god.” She put her face in her hands. “I’ll never be able to face either of them again.”

The phone vibrated again, and Ned turned his eyes back to the road as Catelyn read. “Ned? Are you there? Answer me. I don’t want to spend half the night in a fucking parking lot.” She looked up. “Your sister swears a lot in text messages.”

“My sister swears a lot period.”

“What do I tell her?”

He sighed. “Tell her the train’s late, if you like. She’ll make them all pile in the car and leave us alone.”

“Seven people? In your father’s old Expedition?”

“With bags and skis.”

“Oh for the love of God!” She started texting.

“What did you tell her?”

“That we’re on our way.”

“Cat!”

“Brandon knows about us, Ned! They all know you’re picking me up. The only thing I can think of right now that’s worse than going to Winterfell to face Brandon, your family, and a bunch of your friends is having them all know I ran away!” She took a deep breath. “Tell me who all’s coming.” The phone vibrated again. “She says You’re the best, Ned.”

Before he could tell her that she was the best—and the bravest—person he’d ever known, the phone started the continuous buzzing of a phone call alert.

“It’s Lyanna,” she said, shoving it into his hand.
Trying to keep his eyes on the road instead of Catelyn, he grabbed it and answered. “What, Lya? I’m on my way.”

“Shut up and listen. They’re all cracking open celebratory beers that they aren’t forced to ride on top of each other so I wandered off for a minute. I told them all that you were at the station picking up Catelyn because the two of you are dating now.”

“What?!”

“It’s how Bran wants to play it, Ned. He doesn’t want to look like some victim in front of his friends.”

“Victim?” Ned asked indignantly.

“Shut up and listen!! Look, I don’t know what went down when Dad told him. I wasn’t there, but by the time Ben and I came back, the plan was that we’ve all known about the two of you for months and everybody’s happy for you. So that’s how he’ll act when we get home, and I don’t want you freaked out by it. Okay?”

Ned didn’t say anything. He didn’t know what to say.

“Ned? You there?”

“Yeah.”

“Some of this bunch seemed pretty stunned, but I got some looks that make me think that at least the southern contingent knew already. You’ll probably get questions, but at least you won’t have to make some sort of announcement or anything. Oh, shit! Robert’s throwing snowballs at other parked cars! Between that and the beer, he’s gonna get us kicked out of here before you arrive. I’ve gotta go!”

The line went dead and he lowered the phone.

“What, victim, yeah.”

“Huh?”

After you’re initial greeting, those three words comprised your entire end of that conversation. I must admit I’m a little concerned about ‘victim.’ Has someone been murdered?”

“Not yet,” Ned said grimly and proceeded to fill Catelyn in on the most recent developments.

“The victim,” she said when he had finished. He could tell she was seething. “He dares to portray himself as the victim here!”

“No. She said he doesn’t want to be seen as a victim.”

“And why would he be concerned about that if he doesn’t think he’s been wronged? God! He thinks everything is about him!”

He really couldn’t argue that point. “What do you want to do, Cat?”

“What can we do? Let’s go pick up some partiers. And smile, Ned. Whatever else you do, smile. We are happy together, after all; and if Brandon wants to put on a show, we’ll show everyone just how happy we are!”
He glanced at her quickly before turning back to the road. She was beautiful when she was furious. But she was a little bit scary, too, and he had a very bad feeling about what might happen over the next few days.

Their group wasn’t difficult to spot when Ned pulled into the parking lot at the grocery store. They were all standing behind Dad’s Expedition. The back was open and a large cooler occupied most of the space behind the third row of seats. He recognized it as Robert Baratheon’s. No wonder there wasn’t enough room for the people and their bags with that thing loaded in there.

They were all laughing and didn’t even notice him pulling in. “Ready?” he asked Catelyn.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” she said, flashing him a nervous but genuine smile and giving him a quick kiss before she opened the passenger door and got out. When he got out and walked around to take her hand, she was looking at the impromptu parking lot party with an expression of near terror, but as soon his fingers closed around hers, she’d plastered a bright fake smile across her face and called out, “Hey, everybody! We finally made it here!”

“About time!” Lya exclaimed, rolling her eyes. She was leaning against the side of the Expedition, and Ned was glad to see she wasn’t partaking in the bounty of Robert’s cooler since she was driving.

Before he could even respond to his sister, however, the entire group began shouting out greetings and rushing up to them. Robert, of course, was the loudest.

“Ned, you dog! You’ve been hooking up with your brother’s girl all this time, and you never said a word? No wonder it’s been impossible to get you to hang out anymore!” He had a ridiculous grin on his face, completely unaware of how awful his words were, and Ned struggled with how to respond to his long time best friend.

Catelyn didn’t hesitate. “I have not been Brandon’s girl for a long time now, Robert,” she said firmly but with just enough of a smile in her voice to keep from sounding as insulted and furious as Ned knew she was. “And if you don’t know the difference between hooking up and true love, then I don’t think I want Ned hanging out with you.” She said that with a definite teasing note, and Robert guffawed, but she’d made her point. Everyone present had just been informed that she considered Ned her true love.

Jory Cassel and Robett Glover exchanged a sort of awkward look and wouldn’t meet Ned’s eyes. Elia was smirking at Rhaegar as if she’d won some sort of bet. Galbart Glover, who was older than any of them and normally a bit more reserved, was actually the first to speak after that, saying, “Merry Christmas, Ned . . . Catelyn.”

“Thank you, Galbart,” Catelyn said brightly. “Merry Christmas to you, too!” She smiled as if the awkwardness didn’t exist, and added, “Merry Christmas to everybody!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Lyanna said. “Merry Christmas to everybody. Now can we all get in these cars so we can get to Winterfell and I can have a drink?”

“Your wish is my command, my lady!” Robert said with a flourish, immediately grabbing another beer from the cooler and moving to claim the passenger seat of the Expedition.

Lyanna rolled her eyes and mouthed “You owe me,” at Ned. Robert’s infatuation with his younger sister was something he wasn’t certain how to handle. His father thought the two of them getting together was a splendid idea. Ned, who loved Robert like a brother, but knew him considerably better than his father did, wasn’t so sure. Ordinarily, he’d have encouraged Robert to come ride in
his vehicle to spare Lyanna his outrageous attempts at flirting, but tonight he was just going to accept the gift she offered. The prospect of listening to Robert make lewd remarks about Catelyn and him all the way to Winterfell did not appeal to him at all.

In the end, Galbart, Robett, and Jory climbed into the back seat of Ned’s vehicle, and Rhaegar and Elia rode with Lyanna and Robert, leaving the back row of the Expedition for the bags. No one said very much in Ned’s car for the first half of the drive. Catelyn, who’d put on a hell of a performance in the parking lot now looked strained, and Ned finally couldn’t take it anymore. He’d grown up with Jory and Robett. They knew him as well as anybody did. They’d never been this silent around him.

“If you have questions, guys, just ask them,” he said.

Nobody said anything for a few moments, and then Jory said, “Brandon’s really all right with this?”

Ned’s jaw tightened. “He says he is.” Brandon would say that to their friends. What he might say to Ned was another matter entirely.

“But do you think he really is?” asked Robett Glover.

“I don’t really care.”

Ned heard someone draw in a sharp breath, and he knew that Catelyn’s words had shocked them.

She turned in her seat to look back at the three men seated behind her. “I’m sorry if you think that sounds cold, and I certainly don’t mean that I wish Brandon any unhappiness. I honestly don’t. But he made his choices, and I made mine, and we went our separate ways a year ago. Since then, my life is really none of his concern. And his is none of mine.”

“Ned... he’s your brother,” Robett said.

Ned, annoyed that Robett had chosen to speak to him instead of responding to Catelyn remained silent.

“Robett, enough,” Galbart said. “You’re correct, Catelyn,” he said then. “You are under no obligation to answer to Brandon. Forgive us if we’re a little shocked. It’s just... well... Ned IS his brother. And it’s a bit... surprising, that’s all.”

Ned turned to glance at Cat and was surprised to see her looking back at him with an expression of adoration that wasn’t put on for anyone else’s benefit. He reached out for her hand, and she turned back to look at Galbart as he touched her. “It surprised us, too,” she said softly. “But it was a good surprise.”

“Well, all right then. I guess that’s all there is to say about that,” Jory said after a long moment.

“No, Jory,” Ned said. “I’ll say one thing more. I love my brother, and I know you do, too. But this... Catelyn and I... it isn’t about him. This is just about us. And it’s good. You’re my friends, and I hope you can be happy for us, whatever your concerns for Brandon.”

No one spoke after that, and thankfully they pulled up in front of the house at Winterfell behind Lyanna only a few minutes later. The group in the Expedition was already climbing out when Ned put his car in park and turned off the engine, and Brandon came running out of the house to greet them, grinning widely, slapping Robert and Rhaegar on the back, and hugging Lyanna.
The guys in the back seat climbed out quickly and ran forward to be greeted by Brandon with equal enthusiasm before going to help unload bags and skis and Robert’s ridiculously large cooler.

“Cat?”

She was staring at Brandon with an odd expression on her face. She turned to him when he said her name. “I didn’t think it would still hurt,” she said softly.

He swallowed hard, feeling his heart drop at her words. “You still care for him, then?”

“Oh! No, Ned. That isn’t it at all. She leaned over and kissed him. “I love you. Only you. But he hurt me. And even though I don’t want him at all, it hurts to remember what he did to me.” She looked carefully at his face. “And now I’ve hurt you. I’m so sorry, Ned. I never want to hurt you. Not ever.”

She threw her arms around him and kissed him again, more deeply this time. And then Ned felt a sudden rush of cold as the driver’s side door was opened.

“Jesus! Get a room!” Robert Baratheon bellowed. “But first help us carry some of this damn stuff.”

Ned let go of Catelyn, shook his head, and started to respond to Robert when the passenger door opened, and his brother’s hand reached in for hers. “It’s good to see you, Cat,” he said. “I’m so glad you could make it this Christmas.”

The expression on Brandon’s face was a pleasant mask with a charming smile, but Ned saw conflicted emotions in his eyes. Catelyn smiled, as charming and as forced as Brandon’s and let him help her out of the car as she said, “Brandon! Ned and I planned to spend Christmas together here months ago. But what a lovely surprise to find you here as well!”

Ned watched Brandon’s mask falter just a bit as he realized he couldn’t rattle Catelyn as easily as he’d hoped. But he recovered quickly. “Surprise?” he asked. “I thought I made it clear I’d be here in my messages.”

Catelyn looked quickly back at him, and he realized he hadn’t told her that Brandon had been messaging her nearly continuously for the past two days. He hadn’t told her about the stupid song on constant replay or the fact that her engagement ring was still in Brandon’s pocket, either. He hadn’t had time, really, and he hadn’t wanted to upset her any more than she already was to discover Brandon was at Winterfell. That’s why he hadn’t told her. Yet a tiny part of his mind recalled her face when she’d first laid eyes on Brandon a few moments ago—I didn’t think it would still hurt—and he admitted that maybe he’d also been afraid that she did still care more for his brother than she realized. Maybe he was still afraid of that.

He quickly got out of the car himself, walked past Robert without a word and around the front of the car to stand by her side. He tried to smile the way she had in the parking lot, but he wasn’t as good at this as she was. “Oh! Were you messaging Cat, Bran? She hasn’t had her phone for days! It’s kind of a funny story, actually.”

Catelyn hit his arm. “It’s a dreadful story!” she admonished him in the same teasing tone she’d used on Robert earlier. “And you’re an awful man for bringing it up.” Then she tiptoed and kissed him on the cheek before turning a thousand watt smile on Brandon. “But if you really want to hear it, I’ll tell it over dinner. I am sorry I didn’t get your messages.”

Brandon smiled back at her. “I’m sorry, too, Cat.”

Then he turned abruptly and walked over to where Robert was standing by the big cooler. “What
the hell did you bring this behemoth for Baratheon? You do realize we have booze here, right? How’d you even lift it into Dad’s old monster?"

“It took all of us!” Robert laughed.

Ned didn’t listen any longer. His father and Benjen had come outside and several people were carrying bags toward the front door. He put an arm around Catelyn and walked toward the house to greet his father and little brother, feeling Brandon’s eyes on them the entire time. He felt a rush of gratitude toward Ben as he gave Cat a genuinely welcoming hug. His father’s welcome was more reserved but friendly enough. Then he ushered her into the house and up to his room so he could actually speak with her.

“My bag . . .” she started to say as he steered her up the stairs.

“I’ll get it. We need to talk.”

“Yes, we do,” she said as he pulled her into his room and closed the door behind them. “Brandon’s been texting me again?”

He sighed. “And calling. And possibly even singing.”

“Singing?” she asked incredulously.

“Wham,” he said, and she stared blankly at him. He sighed. “I don’t know what’s going on with him, Cat, but since he got here, he’s been focused on you to the point of obsession. Leaving you text messages and voice mails and getting upset that you don’t answer.”

“Well I couldn’t very well . . .”

“I know that. He doesn’t. And he talks about how badly he messed up. But then about you were unfair not to give him another chance.”

She huffed at that.

“And he’s been locked up in his room playing Wham’s ‘Last Christmas’ over and over.”

“You’re making that up. Brandon would never . . .”

“And he’s . . . he’s got your engagement ring in his pocket.”

That silenced her. She looked stricken.

“Cat?” he said softly.

“Why?” she whispered. “Why would he keep it?”

“He said he loved you,” Ned said, his own voice little more than a whisper.

Tears sprang to her eyes. “God damn you, Brandon,” she breathed, turning her back on him and walking to the window. Ned’s bedroom faced the front of the house, and Ned wondered if Brandon and the others were still out there. If she was looking at him. He didn’t know what to do so he simply stood there silently.

Finally, she turned back around and looked at him. “He didn’t love me,” she said.

“He says he did. And he’s been more . . . despondent . . . than I’ve ever seen him these past two
days. You’re all he’s thought about.”

She shook her head. “That isn’t love.” She walked toward him. “I’ve no doubt he thinks he loved me. But he confuses it with possession. He . . . took care of me. He wanted me safe and well. Happy even. As long as he was the reason for my happiness. And that my happiness didn’t come at the expense of his own. But . . . he would never give up anything of his. Not his time. Not his plans. Not his women. And he never understood why he should give any of that up—as long as I was well cared for—like a pet or house plant.”

“That isn’t fair, Cat,” Ned said, wondering why he felt compelled to defend his brother even while all he wanted was for her to declare that she didn’t give a damn about him. “Brandon would die for me or Lyanna or Benjen or Dad. I know that. And he would have died for you.”

“Yes,” Catelyn said. “He would have. Had someone shot a gun at me, he would have stepped in front it without a second thought. And I loved him for that.” She spoke that sentence with a depth of feeling that stabbed at Ned’s heart. “But I didn’t need him to die for me, Ned. I needed him to live for me. To live with me. I needed him to come to the ballet with me just because I love it and he said he loved me. But he bought me two tickets and then told me to take my sister when he was invited to that casino opening. He never once did anything just to make me happy unless it was something he would have enjoyed with or without me.”

“You wanted him to do things that made him miserable?”

“No! I wanted him to love me enough that sharing my life didn’t make him miserable. I don’t mean learning to love the ballet or even suffering in silence through season after season of performances—just wanting to share the experience with me at least once because it’s been such a big part of my life . . . caring enough about me to want to see how it excited me and moved me. Just the once, Ned. I would have liked him to fit himself into my life just once. In some small way. But he never did. I always fit myself into his.” She shook her head. “I loved him, Ned. I truly did. But he killed that love a little at a time without my even realizing it until it was dead beyond all hope of resurrection.”

“Barbrey . . .”

“I didn’t leave Brandon over Barbrey Ryswell.” He must have had a look of frank disbelief on his face. “I didn’t,” she insisted. “Even if I thought I did for a long time. She . . . and all the other women . . . they were just the most blatant expression of how Brandon continued to live his life precisely as he wished, believing that I could fit it in exactly the places he needed me to fit and not caring enough to fit himself into the places I needed him in my life. He felt that his fucking around had no impact on his relationship with me and so he couldn’t . . . or wouldn’t . . . stop doing it just because I felt that it did. He would have died for me, Ned. I believe that. But as long as he lived, he would never give up even the tiniest bit of himself for me even though he expected me to do that for him. And whatever Brandon may believe, that isn’t love.”

“You still care about him,” Ned said, his voice sounding hoarse.

“Of course, I do. We have a history, Brandon and I. But history is all we share now. Well . . . you. We also share you. Which is why we’ll have to figure out how to deal with our history because I’m not giving you up.”

“Why?” he asked her, voicing in that one word all the doubts and insecurities he’d never wanted to admit much less speak out loud. “Why me?”

Her eyes filled with tears. “You truly don’t see it, do you?” She reached out and took his hands.
“Everything I just told you about what love is—what I need, what I want—I only know that because I know you. I want to fit myself into your life in every way you need me, and I don’t worry that I’ll pour myself out until I’m empty because you’re doing the same for me! You fit yourself into my life without even thinking about it. You wrap yourself around all the parts of me—those you understand and those you don’t. You never tell me what to do or expect me to tell you what to do, but I’d gladly do most anything you ask of me and I know you’d do the same.” She let go of one of his hands and reached up to touch his face. “And you’re neither shouting accusations at me or running away even though I know that you’re standing there right now half afraid that I’m still in love with your brother.”

“Cat . . .” Ned felt he should say something, but the only word he could find was her name.

She smiled. “You’d die for me, Ned. I know that as certainly as I know my own name. But I think it takes a hell of lot more courage to stand there loving me as much as you do when you fear I may never love you the same way. You’re willing to live for me, Ned. And knowing that means everything to me.” She caressed his cheek and then reached for his hand again, holding both of his hands in hers once more. “Listen to me, Eddard Stark. I am not in love with Brandon. I was once. But I haven’t realized it yet. But however much I loved him, I have never, ever loved anyone the way I love you. And I intend to love you even when I’m frightened and to live for you every bit as much as you live for me. Do you hear me?”

He could only nod.

“Do you believe me?”

He didn’t understand it. He simply couldn’t make sense of the fact that this woman—this beautiful, strong, amazing woman—loved him with such abandon, loved him the way he loved her. But he believed her. He couldn’t look into those incredible blue eyes and not see the love and the truth of her words shining in them. Surely she was meant for someone greater than him, but she had chosen him regardless of that fact. She stood there in front of him choosing him now, and he knew he’d choose her every day of his life.

“Ned?” she asked, suddenly sounding a little unsure of herself. “Do you believe I love you?”

He’d been silent too long. “I believe you, Cat.” He smiled at her. “I admit I sometimes have a hard time understanding what you see in me, but I know you love me. And my God, I love you.”

Those were all the words he could speak before words weren’t enough, and he kissed her the way he’d wanted to kiss her since she’d stepped off the train. He kissed her as if nothing in the world existed except the two of them because at that moment, for him, nothing else did. Nothing else existed for her either, judging by the way she returned his kiss, and Ned decided that his father could take care of situating all these people he’d invited. When Catelyn tugged at his shirt to put her hands beneath it, he decided they’d be late for dinner and anyone who didn’t like that could go hang. When her hands moved to unbuckle his belt, it occurred to him that he should lock his bedroom door, and that was his last rational thought for quite a long time.
Brandon

She hadn’t changed a bit. That was the first thing that had gone through Brandon’s mind when he’d seen her through the windshield of Ned’s car. And when he’d opened the door and she’d looked at him—God, those eyes! A man could drown in Catelyn Tully’s eyes. He’d actually forgotten how beautiful she was.

Beautiful and false, he thought bitterly. She certainly knew how to hurt a man. He’d believed in her. Out of all the women in his life, she’d been the one he’d believed in—even after she’d left him. She was angry. She was hurt. She just needed time. That’s what he’d told himself. And he’d been patient. He’d given her space. He’d gone his own way and let her go hers, but he’d never forgotten her. Had she really forgotten him? And with Ned, of all people?

That smile she’d flashed him after she’d kissed Ned by the car had been fake as hell. He knew Cat too well to fall for that shit. I am sorry you didn’t get your message. Bullshit. She wasn’t sorry for a damn thing. But if that smile was fake, maybe that kiss was fake, too. After all, what better way to make him suffer than by hooking up with his own brother? And Cat and Ned? Those two didn’t go together at all. She was gorgeous and outgoing and fun. And he was . . . Ned. This had to be some sick way of getting back at him.

“Brandon?” A feminine voice interrupted his thoughts.

He felt a soft touch on his arm and turned to look at the lovely face of Elia Martell beside him. She was holding up a bottle of wine.

“You’re glass is empty,” she said. “I asked if you wanted some more.”

He smiled at her. “Absolutely.” Elia was a nice girl. Better than Targaryen deserved, actually.

“Are you all right, Brandon? You’re quiet. And I’ve never known you to be quiet!” She said with a small laugh.

“I’m fine. Just hungry.”

She laughed again. “So is your father, apparently. He just told the man who brought the wine to go ahead and serve—latecomers be damned.”

Brandon looked at the two empty chairs near his father’s at the head of the table and frowned. His father was frowning as well. Dinner had been planned for eight and it was now eight fifteen. He’d intentionally taken the seat at the far end of the table in order to be as far from his father as he could. Rickard Stark could judge his alcohol intake from afar if he chose, but he couldn’t comment upon it without shouting across the entire table, and that is something he wouldn’t do.

To his right sat Elia Martell with Rhaegar beside her. He was currently engaged in conversation with Galbart Glover on his other side although Brandon didn’t miss the way he kept looking at Lyanna who had seated herself directly across from him, much to Brandon’s dismay. Robert Baratheon had then naturally claimed the last seat on that side of the table putting him across from Elia and on Brandon’s left. On the other side of Lyanna were Robett Glover across from his brother, then Jory Cassel and Benjen across from the two empty chairs between Galbart and Rickard Stark. Ben had looked less than thrilled at having to sit beside Dad, but he should have gotten to the table sooner. At least Jory was talking to him and making him smile.

“Latecomers have to sit by my father,” he whispered, leaning over toward Elia conspiratorially.
“And if you wonder how much fun that is, recall that I got to dinner first, and you see where I’m sitting.”

She laughed once more. She had a musical laugh, and Brandon was reminded of Catelyn. Not that the women looked anything alike. They didn’t. And their laughs weren’t really similar. They were just both . . . ladies . . . for lack of a better word. Very feminine and never loud or vulgar or obnoxious. And although he didn’t know Elia that well, he suspected she also had that unexpected fire and quiet steel that Cat possessed. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Rhaegar look across the table and nearly lick his damn lips when Lyanna laughed at something Robett or Jory had said. Fucker definitely didn’t deserve Elia. And as far as Lyanna was concerned, well if the man so much as touched her hand, Brandon would remind him in no uncertain terms that Winterfell was not Harrenhal.

“Ashara was really disappointed about canceling on you,” Elia was saying now.

Brandon shrugged. “Things happen. Especially with family.”

“Yes, but she was really looking forward to it. She likes you a great deal, Brandon.”

*I know she likes the way I use my tongue a great deal,* he thought irreverently. He was a pretty big fan of her tongue as well—and those long, strong flexible legs he could push up as far as he liked or let her wrap around his waist like a vice grip. He smiled at the thought of it and felt his cock harden just a bit at his memories. *Damn Arthur Dayne!* If it hadn’t been for his interference Brandon could be balls deep in Ashara right now instead of making small talk with her friend and staring at two fucking empty chairs that made him wonder if his own brother was balls deep in Cat just upstairs.

He pushed that thought forcefully away. “She’s a fun girl. I like her, too,” he said. “We always have a good time.”

“Mmm,” Elia hummed, looking away after giving him a small close-lipped smile that gave him the impression she’d found his answer lacking.

“It’s about bloody time, you two!” Robert bellowed from on his left, and Brandon looked up to see Ned and Cat entering the dining room just behind the staff who were carrying in entrees. “Have you worked up an appetite?”

Ned glowered at his friend, and Ned watched Catelyn lay a hand on his arm to prevent him from saying something dreadful to his friend. *She used to do that with me,* he recalled as Ned looked toward her, seemed to take a deep breath and then turned to face Rickard’s frowning countenance. *Neddy Boy seems to mind her better, though.*

“I apologize for our tardiness, Father,” Ned said formally, giving no explanations. Then he pulled out the chair directly beside their father for Cat. Brandon would have liked to consider that cowardice on Ned’s part, putting a girl in between Dad and himself, but he knew it was more likely Ned’s attempt to put Catelyn as far as possible from Robert . . . and from himself.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Stark,” Catelyn said contritely. “Please don’t blame Ned, though. It’s entirely my fault we’re late. I’ve been without my phone for the entire journey here and I’d promised my father I’d call him as soon as I arrived, but with one thing and another, I entirely forgot until we were about to come down to dinner, and then I’m afraid I got quite the lecture when I borrowed Ned’s phone to call him. And since I probably deserved it, I didn’t dare interrupt.”

Several people around the table laughed. Brandon, who could read Ned’s face better than anyone
saw both the amusement and the hint of satisfaction in his brother’s eyes and knew damn well Cat was lying through her teeth. The two of them had probably been completely naked up there in Ned’s room until after eight o’clock!

Rickard Stark’s expression softened though. He’d always liked Cat. It bothered Brandon more than a little that he still seemed to like her so much in spite of what she’d done to his sons. She’d thrown Brandon’s marriage proposal back in his face and now was using Ned to hurt Brandon even more. When his father had told him about Ned and Catelyn, he wanted to believe it was some sort of very bad joke except that his father wasn’t a joking man. When Brandon had lost his temper and begun shouting, his father had had the nerve to tell him to grow up. He wasn’t quite twenty-four years old and was already a rising star in the business world. He’d brokered deals that made more money in a single handshake than most people made in a year. No one could call him a child. When he’d shouted that at his father, the infuriating old man had actually laughed out loud. Then he’d told him he had about two hours to decide how he intended to react to this situation before Cat and a bunch of other people showed up at Winterfell. His first reaction had been to search for Ned to punch him in the damn face, but their father had sent him out before dropping this bombshell. It had pissed him off at the time, but in retrospect it would be hard to convince anyone here that he didn’t give a damn what Ned and Catelyn did if Ned had been sporting a black eye and a broken nose when everyone showed up so old Rickard probably did him a favor.

The food was good and the conversation was fairly lively through dinner, and Brandon smiled and chatted, although he couldn’t truly say he was enjoying himself. Robert didn’t make any more grossly inappropriate comments, and Brandon couldn’t help wondering if Lya had stomped on his foot under the table over his greeting to Ned and Cat. The little smiles and glances between her and Rhaegar were going both ways now, and he wondered if the two of them were playing footsie under the table with Elia sitting right there. He was going to lock his sister in her fucking room until Targaryen left if she kept this up. Worst of all were his ex-fiancée and his brother. They joined in the conversation, mostly speaking to people at their end of the table although Catelyn was coaxed into telling the story of her sister tossing her phone into the Trident to the group at large. Lysa always had been a piece of work.

It was what the two of them did when they weren’t in conversation with others that annoyed Brandon the most. They didn’t seem to speak much with each other, but they’d share a look and then laugh or touch—a hand on an arm, a light bumping together of their shoulders, even an occasional quick kiss to the cheek. The latter was primarily Cat kissing Ned. His brother was not really a man to kiss girls in public even in the most chaste manner possible, regardless of his surprising act of PDA in the car upon their arrival here. And while Brandon was certain this little performance of Cat’s was largely for his benefit, he had to admit she made it look genuine. As she leaned into his brother to whisper something which made Ned smile, Brandon felt a strange sinking sensation, as if his heart had dropped from his chest. He could remember how that felt—to have her lean in and share something meant for no one but him, the blue of her eyes sparkling with mischief or merriment, the warmth of her breath against his cheek and the laughter in her voice even more musical with her lips nearly pressed against his ear. It was extraordinary. How had he never noticed that before? He’d never paid attention to those little moments because when she moved that close to him, he’d pull her in and kiss those soft lips, allowing his body a little taste of the delights to come when he had her alone, whetting his appetite and increasing his eventual pleasure. Ned didn’t do that. His brother would simply smile, laugh, sometimes whisper something back. Brandon watched Cat giggle and pull away as he whispered once and realized Ned’s beard had tickled her neck. Ned reached out and ran his fingers over her cheek then as if to smooth over any imaginary damage, but he never once pulled her to him. Never once definitively claimed her as his own as Brandon would have. And yet, the two of them appeared to belong entirely to each other—interacting with everyone present but still somehow in their own little world.
He hated watching them. But he couldn’t look away. Elia and even the terminally unaware Robert had both noticed his lapses in conversation. He could only hope they hadn’t discerned the reason. He twirled his wine glass slowly by the stem. Catelyn raised her own wine glass and clinked it against Ned’s. When they leaned together after that, their lips actually did meet even if only for a moment and a line from that damned song—the one playing on repeat in his head even if he hadn’t actually played it since the arrival of his one-time lover and a half a dozen of his friends—drifted through his thoughts. *Now I know what a fool I’ve been. But if you kissed me now I know you’d fool me again.* Just then, as Catelyn pulled her face back from Ned’s, she caught sight of him watching them, and her expression changed to something that looked remarkably like sadness. Was that regret in those blue eyes? *Did you fool me, Cat? Or are you fooling Ned now?* He raised his glass just slightly in her direction and gave her just the hint of smile as he tipped his head toward her. He could swear he saw her nostrils flare before she very deliberately turned her face toward Ned’s again and pressed her lips to his.

Brandon chuckled softly. *You’re welcome, little brother. That kiss was on me.* Catelyn might play at being Ned’s girl, but she was obviously still affected by him. Last Christmas was clearly on her mind as well as his. *You still feel it, Cat,* he told her in his mind. *The connection between us. You might be fooling everyone, but you can’t fool yourself.*

Brandon made it through dinner with the aid of an undetermined number of refills on the wine, and when his father stood and walked to his end of the table and laid a hand on his shoulder, he managed to smile up at him reassuringly.

“I think I’m going to call it a night,” Rickard Stark said softly. “I’ll leave you young folks to your revelry.”

“Good night, Dad. And thanks for inviting everyone. This is great.” Brandon considered absolutely nothing about this situation to be ‘great’ but in spite of his many clashes with his father over his lifetime, he knew the man genuinely tried to do what he felt was best for all of them so the lie came easily to him.

His father looked at him uncertainly a moment, but then nodded. “Benjen, Lyanna,” he said, looking up at the table. “It’s time for us to head upstairs.”

Ben sighed, but didn’t balk. He knew he was much too young for this crowd and likely already had plans to kill enemies on Xbox Live with his friends once he got to his room. Lya protested, of course, but only half-heartedly and only because she knew her father expected it. Brandon, and likely everyone else in the room, knew she’d be back downstairs within the hour.

Almost all of the bedrooms were on the upper floors of the enormous house. Only Brandon had a suite here on the main floor. It was meant to be the master suite, but his father had moved out of it years ago after their mother’s death—unwilling to sleep there without her. It had remained empty until Brandon asked if he could take it in his late teens. His primary motivation had been a greater ease of coming and going without his father’s knowledge, but the spacious bedroom with its private sitting room and enormous master bath had become his private retreat. He retreated there now as everyone began to rise from the table after laughing at Catelyn who insisted on offering to help the staff to clear the dishes as she always did only to be politely but definitively refused as she always was.

Cat’s family had died when she was young as well. It was something the two of them shared. But where Rickard Stark had simply relied on hired staff to manage the day to day running of his household after Lyarra’s death, Hoster Tully had relied on Catelyn. So while both families were well off and had a number of domestic employees, after their mothers’ deaths, the Stark children
found themselves with less responsibility for household chores as it wasn’t something their father thought a great deal about. Instead, they had various lessons in a great variety of things and part-time jobs—always jobs—to teach them the importance of earning their way in the world. Catelyn, in contrast, had gotten a hands-on, trial by fire education in what she laughingly called domestic engineering—caring for her younger siblings, planning, meals, supervising daily life at Riverrun, and planning and hosting the perfect parties so important to Hoster Tully’s life in politics. She’d always worked with the household staff at Riverrun rather than simply telling them what needed to happen and assuming it would. Her first few visits here had left her rather stunned at how little Brandon and his siblings did at Winterfell in terms of daily household tasks, and she’d stubbornly insisted on making the bed after they’d awakened every morning—or occasionally spent time there during other parts of the day.

I suppose she made Ned’s bed before they came down to dinner, Brandon thought sullenly as he splashed water on his face from his bathroom sink. He didn’t look nearly as drunk as he felt. His face wasn’t flushed and his eyes looked clear. That was good. His hair was perfect. He had much better hair than Ned. Hell, he was better looking than Ned period. But they did resemble each other. Cat had to compare the two of them. He compared women to each other all the time—their similarities and differences, and he figured any man who said he didn’t was a liar. Women did it, too. Hell, Ashara told him flat out that she did it with him and Ned back at Harrenhal! And when Catelyn looked at Ned, there’s no way she didn’t think about him—and remember how much he turned her on.

Fuck! I don’t even know how long I’ve been standing here. That was the trouble with alcohol. Even when he could still think clearly, time got a little fuzzy and one thought led to another. He swished some mouthwash around in his mouth, spat in the sink and headed out to the gameroom.

The first thing he saw was a rather sad little pine tree that looked like something out of the Charlie Brown Christmas special. Ned was trying rather unsuccessfully to get it stand up straight, and Catelyn and Elia were pulling ornaments that looked about a hundred years old out of a box that looked damn near as old as the ornaments. Robert was mixing drinks at the bar, and Galbart, Jory, and Robett were all around the pool table with cues in their hand.

“Hurry up, Baratheon!” Jory hollered. “It’s your shot!”

“I’ll shoot for him,” Brandon said, walking over to them with a grin. “Make me a drink, too, Robert!” he called over to the bar, and Robert grinned and gave him a thumbs up.

He was good at pool. He’d sunk three balls when Robert came over and handed him a glass. “What is it?” he asked.

“Secret recipe. Just drink it.”

“Give that cue to Robert, Bran,” Robett Glover said quickly. “Jory and I were winning until you took over.”

Brandon laughed and gave Robert the cue stick. He took a sip from his glass and tasted bourbon as well as an assortment of other liquors he couldn’t identify as easily. The thing was undoubtedly potent. It was good, though. He laughed even more loudly when Robert scratched on the eight ball giving Jory and Robett the victory. “Billiards isn’t your game, my man,” he said, patting Robert on the back.

Robert frowned and then looked toward the door and frowned even more.

Brandon raised an eyebrow. “Looking for Lya? She’ll be here, man. No way is she gonna let the
old man just send her to bed with a cookie!” He wasn’t overly thrilled with Robert’s interest in his little sister, but he preferred him to the entirely too smooth, two-timing Rhaegar Targaryen. With Robert at least, you knew what he was. He wasn’t one for pretense. Brandon still hadn’t figured out exactly what Rhaegar wanted or even who the hell he was. The man’s cool, reserved image gave no clues as to what went on behind those damned purple eyes. He had no idea why his father had even invited the prick. But, of course, Rickard hadn’t been at Harrenhal.

“She’s already been here and gone,” Robert growled under his breath. “Elia Martell mentioned she was cold and that blonde shithed asked if we could put a fire in the fireplace. There’s no firewood so Lyanna volunteered to take him out to get some.”

Fuck. Brandon wondered how long they’d been gone. He’d noticed there weren’t any of the smaller logs of the size used in this fireplace in the stacks right out back so they’d likely have to walk to the big shed out back and that would take a little time. He’d give it a few minutes, but then he’d go out to that shed himself.

Brandon declined to play in the new pool game starting up and laughed as Galbart quickly insisted the guys switch partners rather than getting stuck with Robert again. Robert was the first man anyone wanted on their team for any actual athletic pursuit, but he wasn’t much good at bar game—and the fact that he was generally drunker than most everyone else in any bar didn’t help. He left the guys to sort out their game and wandered over to Charlie Brown’s tree.

“What’s all this shit?” he asked, picking up an orange lump that was roughly in the shape of a ball.

Ned made a face at him. “You should know. You made that one.”

“Huh?” He looked more closely at the contents of the old box and the ornaments already on the tree. It was an odd mixture of vintage looking fancy ornaments, various baubles touting the names of cities and parks, characters from old movies, and a variety of handmade (generally badly made) ornaments of paper, cardboard, craft sticks, clay, and some materials he couldn’t even recognize. There were photograph ornaments as well—childhood pictures of himself and Ned, some of a little Lyanna, and even fewer of a very tiny Ben. He picked up a little rectangular picture frame that held wedding photo of their parents. “This is the stuff for Mom’s tree,” he said softly.

“Yeah,” Ned answered. When Brandon looked up at him, his younger brother’s face didn’t look angry or defensive or suspicious as he looked back at him for the first time since he’d gotten out of the car with Cat. “I asked Dad about putting it up down here—just for family. We thought it was only going to be the five of us and . . . I thought it was time. Dad said okay.”

The five of us. They’d all known Brandon was skipping family Christmas so Ned was counting Cat as part of his “us.” Brandon didn’t want to dwell on that so instead he picked up hooks to place on the wedding ornament and the sun. The orange lump was the sun. He remembered it now. He couldn’t have been older than five because Lya hadn’t been born yet, and Mom bought this ornament kit and helped him and Ned (who’d really been too young to do it at all) squish the clay into whatever they wanted to make. Then they’d painted the ornaments and baked them in the oven to harden. That had been a good day.<

He’d made the sun for her because always sang that song to them. You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are grey . . . He’d made that one all by himself and remembered how proud he’d been when he told her she now had her very own sunshine for her Christmas tree. She’d hugged him tight and told him it was the most beautiful sun she’d ever seen. He reached up to hang it near the top of the scrawny tree and nearly collided with Cat who was kneeling to hang some ornaments on the lower branches.
Their eyes met and he watched her expression soften as she looked up at him. “Bran?” she said softly, and there was concern in her voice.

He almost reached down to touch her face. Or run his fingers through that hair. Her hair was always so soft. He’d once sung Mother’s song to her. He’d forgotten that. Only he’d sung sunset instead of sunshine because that’s what her hair always reminded him of.

“Ned? Is this you and Brandon?” Elia’s delighted voice interrupted the moment, and Catelyn looked quickly away, hanging up whatever was in her hand and then standing up to go get more ornaments.

“It is,” Ned laughed.

“You were so cute!” Elia exclaimed. “With your arms around each other. I hope my children are like that someday. Close to each other, I mean. I was always close to my brothers, too.”

“We were all pretty close growing up,” Ned acknowledged.

Elia talking about kids reminded Brandon of her future husband—and whom the asshole had taken out to get firewood. “Robert said you were cold, Elia. How long ago did Rhaegar and Lya head out to the shed? I can go hurry them along if you like.”

He didn’t think he imagined the very fleeting look of both embarrassment and anger that crossed her pretty face. “I’m all right, Brandon. They should return soon. Although I honestly don’t know how you can be warm in that shirt! You and Ned aren’t even wearing sweaters!”

He smiled at her. “Well, we’re Northmen. We’re very good at creating heat.” His eyes sought Catelyn as he spoke, and he saw that Ned was now standing behind her, rubbing his hands over her arms. She was always cold here, especially in winter. He’d enjoyed warming her up.

“I suppose,” Elia said. When he turned back toward her, he saw that her eyes were somewhat narrowed and less warm. She’d seen him watching Ned and Cat. “It’s funny, though. You’d think that with so much necessary experience with fire, Northerners would know better that when you play with fire, you’re likely to get burned.” She turned away to go back to the ornament box.

“I’m going to go see what the hell’s taking Lya so long,” Brandon said over his shoulder to Ned.

“They haven’t been gone that long, Bran,” Ned started to say, but Catelyn put a hand on his arm and shook her head slightly. She knew he wanted to leave even if she didn’t know why he wanted to find Lyanna. She hadn’t been at Harrenhal. Ned had been there, but he’d been too busy trying not to come in his pants every time ‘Shara smiled at him to even notice what was going on with their sister.

Brandon turned his back on both of them and left the game room. He didn’t bother to get a coat, taking the stairs two at a time back up to the main floor and then heading out the back door. It wasn’t easy to run in the deep snow, but he managed it pretty well. He needed to run. Whether his urgency was get to his sister or to run away from Catelyn’s eyes and his mother’s memory and Ned’s fucking hands on Catelyn’s arms, he couldn’t say.

The light was on in the shed, and when he pushed the door open, two people jumped apart immediately. His sister’s coat was open and her shirt was pushed up nearly to her neck. Her lips were swollen, and Targaryen’s cock was straining against the front of his expensive khaki trousers so hard, Brandon would have laughed if he’d interrupted him with any other girl.

“What the fuck, Brandon?” Lyanna shouted.
“Well this is a lot closer to ‘fuck’ than the last time I interrupted you two, but obviously you haven’t gotten quite there yet. He stared rather obviously at the bulge in Rhaegar’s pants.”

“Brandon, get the hell out of here!” Lyanna said angrily.

“No, Lyanna, it’s good that he stopped us.” The shit head’s voice sounded ragged. “This is . . . wrong. I can’t . . .”

“Rhaegar!” Lyanna said, reaching for him.

“I’ve got to go.” He shook off her hand and started to move toward the door.

“Don’t to forget to grab some firewood, Targaryen,” Brandon called after him after he’d gone around him and almost reached the door. “Might be awkward otherwise.”

The asshole stopped and turned slowly back around looking helplessly about the shed. Apparently they’d not gotten around to actually locating any firewood. Wordlessly, Lyanna walked to where the smaller logs were stacked in little bundles and handed him one. Brandon wanted to punch the dude when he saw the tears on his sister’s face, but that wouldn’t be helpful either.

Instead, he stared pointedly at his crotch again. “And you might want to . . . you know . . .” He used his right hand to give the universally understood pantomime for jerking off. “Take care of that other wood in one of the bathrooms before you go back downstairs. Otherwise your future wife might have some questions.”

Targaryen had the decency to look ashamed. As he turned to leave again, Brandon added. “Rickard caught you and Lyanna coming back with the wood and is pissed at her for sneaking down with the grown-ups. I’m trying to keep her from being grounded until after New Year’s.”

The man nodded once in understanding, and headed out into the snow.

“You had no right, Brandon!”

“I had no right? Lya, the guy’s nearly as old as Galbart and you are . . .”

“Eighteen, Brandon! I am eighteen! I’m not sixteen like I was in Harrenhal. You can’t call me a stupid kid. Rhaegar and I are both adults and . . .”

“And he’s fucking engaged to be married, Lya! Is this who you want to be?”

“You don’t get to say that to me, Brandon Stark. Not after what you . . .”

“I never cheated on Cat when we were engaged!” he shouted, knowing even as he said it what a ridiculous statement that was.

“You weren’t even engaged for twenty-four hours, Bran!” she shouted back. “You didn’t exactly have . . .” She paused as if searching for some precise wording. “Much of a window of opportunity!”

He just stared at her.

“And you would have,” she said more quietly. “If Barbrey hadn’t gotten knocked up and Cat hadn’t kicked you to the curb, you totally would have. And we both know that. So don’t you dare judge Rhaegar because you don’t know anything about . . .”

“You’re right,” Brandon said. That stopped her tirade immediately. “You’re right when you say I
would have cheated. I’d done it before and I would have done it again.” He’d never admitted that aloud even to himself, but it was true. He sank down to sit on the little bench that was built into one of the walls. “You’re wrong when I say I don’t know anything about Rhaegar Targaryen, though. I’m in a better position to judge that prick than anyone you know.’

“It isn’t like that, Bran.” She was almost pleading with him. “He’s never cheated on Elia. Not once.”

Brandon raised an eyebrow. “And if I hadn’t come in when I did?”

“He wasn’t going to fuck me in this shed, Bran!” she insisted. “We got a bit . . . carried away, I admit. But we would have stopped. This isn’t the way we want it to happen.”

“He’s leaving Elia, is he? Is that what he told you?”

She pursed her lips. “It’s complicated. He really does care about her, and he doesn’t want to hurt her, you know. He just . . . with me, it’s just . . .”

“You make him feel like no one else ever has. He can’t stop thinking about you however hard he tries. He can’t explain it, and he knows it’s supposed to be wrong, but when he’s with you, the only thing that feels wrong is the thought of being without you.”

She looked at him with shame and hurt in those big grey eyes so much like Ned’s. They were both innocents in so many ways—Ned and Lyanna. Always wanting to believe the best of people. At least Ned’s natural reserve and somewhat cautious nature protected him somewhat. Well . . . it had until now. Until Cat. But Lya. She was too much like himself when it came to throwing caution to the winds and leaping before she looked. She looked awfully young to him right now.

“It isn’t like that,” she mumbled. “Rhaegar means what he says to me. He doesn’t make me any promises he can’t keep.”

“Lyanna,” Brandon said softly. “Maybe you are the only girl that has ever tempted the man away from Elia Martell. He certainly doesn’t have my reputation. Or Robert’s. But what he’s doing with you is no different than what I did with Barbrey.”

“She wasn’t the only girl you cheated with!”

“No,” Brandon admitted. “But I’ve known Barbrey since we were kids. I cared about her. I still do. And I knew she was crazy about me. Do you think I just decided to say to her that weekend, ‘Hey Barb, I’m horny and you’re here, and my girlfriend’s not, so let’s fuck?’ Because that’s not what happened, Lya. We were together most of the weekend. Usually with other people too, but we had the most fun with each other. God, she can ride a horse like the wind. Always could. Cat will never ride that fast. And she’s sarcastic as hell, and we’d sit by each other and make awful comments about other people for our own amusement. I laughed my ass off with her for two straight days. And she knows so many of the stories of my past, Lya, because she was there. She remembers Mom. Cat never even met Mom. Barb and I sneaked off from the Mormont’s costume party and just sat there drinking beer and talking for hours about when we were kids. She was leaning back against me and laughing about this time she beat me in a horserace when we were about nine years old. She was the only girl entered, and she beat all of us boys, and I was so mad about it. And she cried because she was afraid I didn’t like her anymore. And Mom came up and hugged her and told her not to worry about me because I liked her way too much to stay mad and besides, as long as I knew she was as fast on a horse as me, I’d always chase after her just to prove I could catch up.”
He stopped speaking, realizing how much he honestly missed Barbrey Ryswell. It was different, of course, from the way he missed Cat, but the two of them had been friends as long as he could remember, and he’d fucked that up as completely as he had his engagement.

“Then what happened?” Lyanna asked. She was sitting beside him on the bench now, and he didn’t really remember when she’d sat down.

Irritated with himself more than her, he nearly snapped. “You know what happened. I fucked her. No condom or anything. And I knocked her up.”

Lyanna’s face sort of crumbled. “You really are an asshole, Brandon.” She started to rise, but he pulled her back down on the bench.

“Wait, Lyanna. Please.” He took a deep breath. “She told me that story, and she looked more beautiful than she ever had there in the moonlight. And I told her that only a fool would ever stop chasing her. And she said to me, ‘Careful, Stark. You’ve got a girlfriend.’ And I told her I did, and that I loved my girlfriend. But that it didn’t change what I felt right then. I told her she was one of a kind, and I meant it. And then she kissed me.” He shrugged. “Neither of us said anything much after that. And neither of us stopped.” He swallowed hard. “Barbrey isn’t an awful person, Lya. Whether I am or not seems to be an open question. I don’t love her, not like I love Cat. But I didn’t say anything I didn’t meant that night. Do you understand me? Sometimes, you can mean everything you say, but it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t make everything all right.”

“I just want to be happy,” she whispered.

Brandon sighed. “Do you think I’m happy this Christmas, Lyanna?”

“No. I think you’re still in love with Cat,” she said. “But I think Cat’s happy now. I think she really loves Ned.”

“Lya,” Brandon said as gently as he could. “You aren’t in Catelyn’s place in this situation.”

She looked down for a long moment. “I want to go in,” she said finally. “Please don’t tell Ned.”

Brandon sighed. Nearly two years had passed, but she sounded exactly the same as she made that request of him for the second time regarding Rhaegar Targaryen. “I won’t. But I don’t know if I can do this a third time and keep him out of it.”

He was half hoping for a promise that he’d never have to, but he didn’t get it. Instead, she kissed his cheek. “I’m glad you came after me Bran. I . . . I did want to stop tonight. But I don’t know if I would have.”

She all but sprinted out the door, and he rose much more slowly, picking up a bundle of wood to carry inside.

“Did you get Dad to go easy on her?”

Ned’s question as he re-entered the game room confused him for a moment until he remembered. “Oh, yeah. She is eighteen, after all. And I pointed out that he was a hell of lot less strict with you and me when it comes to booze even before we turned twenty-one.”

“Called him sexist, did you?” Ned laughed. As angry as he was at his brother over Catelyn, it did feel good to be on the same side about something again.”

“Pretty much. He told her she still had to go on to bed for disobeying him, but that she could still
come skiing tomorrow and that he’d try to remember not to treat her quite so much like a child in the future.

Ned laughed harder. “So he promised to treat her like an adult and then sent her to her room. Classic Dad!”

“Where’s Cat?” Brandon asked.

The laughter immediately left Ned’s face. “By the fire. She was every bit as cold as Elia. She just refused to complain about it.”

Brandon took a deep breath. “Do you really know what you’re doing, Ned?”

“What I’m doing? With Catelyn, you mean?”

“Look. You care about her, I get it. I fucked up and she was hurt and you take care of people. You always have. And now . . .” Ned simply stood there silently, his face as expressionless as a slab of granite so Brandon continued. “it’s just . . . we were together a long time, Ned. And while I’m sure she cares about you, that’s not something that just goes away. I don’t want you to misinterpret gratitude or confused feelings on her part for something more. I won’t lie and say I’m not pissed that you’re with her at all, little brother, but I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Ned’s expression didn’t change, but Brandon saw his jaw twitch. “You are my brother, Brandon,” he said finally, seeming to speak through clenched teeth. “But you know nothing of what is between Catelyn and myself. Nothing. So do not speak of it again. And if you think I believe your primary concern here is that I not get hurt, you are sadly mistaken. I know perfectly well that the truest thing you just said is that you are pissed off that I am with her. Well, too bad, Bran, because I am with her. By her choice. And there is nothing you can do about it.”

His brother turned his back on him then and walked to join Catelyn who Brandon now saw was indeed sitting by the fire. He carried the bundle of wood he still held in his arms over and laid it down nearly beside them, but neither spoke to him or even looked at him. Catelyn had eyes only for Ned, and her expression was troubled. It seemed she could read the distress in his brother’s granite face well enough. The pool table had been abandoned, and all the men except Raeghar sat around the bar talking and laughing a bit louder than necessary. Someone had turned on the radio, and it was still tuned to Lyanna’s Christmas station. An annoying childish voice bleated out “I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas” over the men’s laughter. He didn’t see Rheagar and Elia at first, but then spotted them sitting close together in a corner of the room, holding hands. Cat was holding Ned’s hand now, too, continuing to look at him intently.

Fuck this shit, Brandon thought tiredly. I spend one stupid night with a girl I’ve known all my life, and now the woman I love is over there having eye sex with my brother. Targaryen nearly fucks a teenager he barely knows up against the wall of a shed, and Elia’s looking at him like the sun shines out of his ass!

He walked to over to the bar. “Make me one of those magic potions, Robert!” he said, joining his friends.

He wasn’t certain how long he’d been drinking and talking and laughing with the when that song came on, but it had been long enough that he was a little afraid to stand up because he feared walking might be a challenge. He had to look at her, though. He’d been ignoring both couples, and it seemed they’d gotten together at some point as Ned, Catelyn, Rhaegar, and Elia were all sitting together near the fire now. Maybe Elia had gotten too cold in her corner. Whatever. The four of them were talking and laughing, too, although not nearly as loudly as the bar bunch. Ned’s arm was
around Cat, and she leaned into him a bit as she sat there, laughing at something the purple eyed SOB had just said. Her laughter seemed to stop rather abruptly, however, and she got quiet, lifting her head as if listening for something.

The song. Brandon’s alcohol soaked brain realized. She hears the song, too. Slowly, she turned to look at him and seemed not surprised at all to find his eyes meeting her.

Last Christmas, I gave you my heart. The very next day, you gave it away.

She looked sad. Sad and . . . something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. But she heard that song and looked at him. Ned had no idea just how connected the two of them were. But he was going to find out. For a moment, Brandon felt sorry for him, but then he remembered what he’d said to him. Well, too bad, Bran, because I am with her. By her choice. Catelyn was still looking at him. He needed to talk to her. Tomorrow. Tomorrow when they went skiing, he’d find a way to get her alone. He had to talk to her. To explain it all. To make her understand. He raised his glass toward her and smiled. She only shook her head rather sadly, but she didn’t look away.

“You want another one, Bran?” Robert asked. Brandon noticed he was slurring his words. Reluctantly, he turned away from Catelyn.

“Nah. I’m gonna call it a night. You might wanna do that, too, Baratheon. Don’t forget we’re all going skiing in the morning.”

“Oh God. Late morning, I hope.

The guys all laughed. Then Galbart stood up. “I think it’s time we all call it a night.”

His voice had obviously carried across the room because Ned stood up as well. “You’re a wise man, Galbart,” he said. Then he extended a hand to Catelyn. “Ready, Cat?”

She nodded and rose to join him. They said goodnight to Rhaegar and Elia, both gave sort of general waves in the direction of the bar, and then left without Catelyn ever looking at him again. But that was okay. He had seen her reaction to the song. Tomorrow, he would talk to her.

As it turned out, the skiing did not go as Brandon would have liked. Catelyn didn’t even go. It seemed that Elia Martell couldn’t ski. Well, she could, but she’d been ill or something recently and wasn’t supposed to be out in the cold or do anything physically strenuous. And Cat, who actually liked skiing a lot in spite of her aversion to cold, volunteered to stay behind and keep her company.

“Ned and I are planning to stay through New Year’s!” she’d exclaimed over Elia’s protests. “We’ll have plenty of chances to go.”

So, Brandon had spent most of the day hungover on the slopes with Rhaegar Targaryen, a man he couldn’t stand, because that way he could be certain wasn’t taking advantage of Elia’s absence to sneak off with Lyanna. Robert Baratheon, who unfairly did not seem terribly hungover had attached himself to Lyanna, and Ned had stuck with them—as a chaperone or buffer or referee. It could be any of those with the two of them. Jory and the Glover brothers were usually with Brandon and Rhaegar, thank God or Brandon would have been even more miserable. He barely saw Ned until it was almost time to leave. Ned was coming out of the lodge as he was going in and actually stopped him to talk.

“Do you know what’s wrong with Lyanna?” he asked without preamble.

“I didn’t know there was anything wrong with Lyanna,” he said with a shrug. “I mean aside from all the stuff that’s always been wrong with her.”
“I’m serious, Bran. She’s not acting like herself.”

“Who’s she acting like?”

“God, Brandon! I know you’re pissed off at me over Cat, but could you stop being an asshole for five minutes. I really think something has upset Lya. She’s your sister too, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” And I know what’s bothering her. And I’m the one who kept that silver-haired shit head from sticking his prick in her while you had your head up your ass—again—so who’s the asshole, brother? “Maybe she’s just unhappy about spending an entire day with Robert drooling over her?”

He thought that would rile Ned up, but he just shook his head. “No. I thought that might be it, too. But if anything, she’s being nicer to Robert than usual. And just ten minutes ago, she actually threw her arms around him and kissed his cheek in there because he bought her coffee. It’s pretty much the first time she’s smiled all day.”

Ah. Ten minutes ago would be about the time Targaryen went in there to get hot chocolate. It would seem Little Lyanna was using Big Bob in an attempt to make old Rhaegar jealous. Hopefully, that meant the asshole was ignoring her today. As much as he hated to see Lya hurt, everyone involved would be better off if Rhaegar Targaryen never spoke to her again. “Damn,” he said to Ned. “Maybe she’s possessed.”

Ned frowned. “You aren’t funny, Brandon.”

“I don’t know, Ned. Maybe she’s still upset about getting busted last night. I’ve barely seen her today so I’ve got no answers for you.”

“Yes,” Ned said in a deadly quiet voice. “You do.” He sighed heavily. “Lyanna never got busted by Dad last night. So what happened that caused you to give her a cover story?”

Oh fuck. “Ask her,” Brandon said, moving to push past him.

“I did. First thing this morning after I told Dad I was glad he was letting Lya come skiing with us after last night and he looked at me as if I’d lost my mind.”

“Oh, shit, Ned! Did you get her in trouble with Dad?”

“No. It was blatantly obvious that he had no clue what I was talking about so I played it off and said I just meant that after we stayed up half the night getting louder and more obnoxiously drunk, I half thought he wouldn’t trust her to our care.”

“He knows you weren’t loud and obnoxiously drunk. You’re never either of those things.”

“Brandon, Lyanna wouldn’t tell me what’s going on so now I’m asking you. Is she okay?”

Brandon took a deep breath. “She’s mixed up about some stuff, Ned. But yeah. She’s okay. Nothing’s happened to her, and I don’t intend to let anything happen to her. So just let it go, okay?”

“You’ve got it covered so I should just forget about it. That’s what you’re telling me?”

“Yeah.”

“Because you’re suddenly the responsible one of all of us. The trustworthy one.”

“Trustworthy?! I’m not the one fucking his brother’s girl, now am I?” He’d raised his voice more
than he intended, and the two of them received a few stares.

“Keep your damn voice down, Brandon. Better yet, come on.” Ned grabbed his arm and practically pulled him from the lodge.

“Hey! I was going to get some coffee.”

“You don’t need coffee. We need to talk.”

Brandon looked around and spotted Targaryen with Jory and the Glovers so at least he wasn’t free to hook up with Lya so he shrugged and followed Ned outside. They walked until they reached the treeline and then walked a little ways into the woods. “What do we need to talk about, Ned?”

“Catelyn is not your girl. Nor is she someone I am just ‘fucking.’ And you need to get that through your head right now.”

“So we’re talking about Cat now. Not Lya.” When Ned glared at him, he shrugged. “Hey, I just wanted to be clear what I’m being yelled at for.”

“Nobody is yelling. I am simply telling you that you ended your engagement to Cat, and . . .”

“Hey, brother, she’s the one that took my ring off her finger. I never wanted that!”

Ned sighed. “But you’re the one who couldn’t stop fucking every girl who smiled at you, Brandon. Do you honestly think she wanted to leave you? That she took some sort of pleasure in finally admitting that whatever the two of you had had been crushed to death under your complete disregard for her? She loved you, Brandon! And you never once appreciated how precious that was.”

“We could have worked it out. If she’d have stuck around, we could have worked it out. You know how hard I tried to get her to come and talk with me even after she left. I tried for months, Ned! Did you ever encourage her to listen? Or were you already fucking her—helping her get over her heartbreak? God, it’s pathetic, you know? You look like me, you even sound like me. And you honestly think it wasn’t me she was fucking when you got her into your bed? How many times has she said my name when she comes, huh? She liked to scream it pretty loudly for such a proper young lady. She . . .” Ned’s fist connected with his eye, effectively cutting off anything else he might have said.

“You bastard,” Ned said in a low, dangerously calm voice. “Don’t you ever speak about her like that again or I will kill you. You don’t own her, Brandon. You don’t get to determine what she does or whom she loves. She loved you once, but that is past. I suggest you get that through your head?”

Brandon actually laughed. “Changed your tune since Harrenhal, haven’t you? You fuck the woman I spent three years of my life with. The woman I asked to be my wife. And I’m supposed to what—offer you both my congratulations? I hooked up with a woman you fucked one time and you threatened to beat me to death! You can’t have it both ways, Eddard!”

“You know nothing about Harrenhal, Brandon!”

“I know nothing about Harrenhal? You’re wrong there, little brother. You think I’m not responsible enough to take care of Lyanna? Not trustworthy? Well, last night isn’t the first time she needed a big brother to rescue her, Ned. She was in trouble in Harrenhal, and you were so busy trying to get your cherry popped, you never had a clue. I took care of her. I protected her. Hell, I took care of you, too. ‘Shara never even would have spoken to you if it weren’t for me. And she
enjoyed your little roll in the hay, I’ll grant you that. But she didn’t *belong* to you, to use your
terminology, so where did you get off attacking me for being with her?"

“What happened to Lya in Harrenhal, Brandon?” Ned asked, ignoring everything else Brandon had
said.

“None of your bloody business! She didn’t want you to know and so I never told you! But answer
my question. Why do you get to be angry about Ashara Dayne but I’m not supposed to gut you for
Cat!!?”

Ned shook his head. “It was never about Ashara, Brandon. I was never angry because the girl you
so publicly shackled up with after that weekend was Ashara. I was angry because of what you’d
done to Cat. I didn’t know about the others then. And . . . I couldn’t believe that my brother would
do that to a woman he was supposed to love. A woman who obviously loved him with her whole
heart.” He shook his head again, almost violently. “That goddamn song you’re so obsessed with?
Well, she gave you her heart, Brandon! Long before last Christmas. And you didn’t give it way,
you son of a bitch, you walked all over it and then broke it into little pieces. And it took her a hell
of a long time to put it back together, but she did. She never did a damn thing to your heart,
Brandon. It’s her own she’s given away. And for whatever reason—whether it makes any sense to
you or to me, I’m the lucky bastard she gave it to. And I promise you, that I will never let you or
anyone else hurt it again.”

Ned turned and walked away leaving those words hanging in the air behind him. Whether it was
the hangover or the punch or the words themselves, Brandon found it harder to think than he had
the previous night when he’d been drunk. He felt like he didn’t understand anything anymore, but
he needed to talk to Cat.

The ride back to Winterfell was rather subdued as Brandon’s black eye was fairly obvious. Ned
had said simply, “I hit him” when Lyanna had come running up asking what happened. She’d
started to shout at Ned, but Brandon had quickly said, “I probably deserved it,” and she shut up.
No one else said a word about it. He figured he had been kind of an asshole when he talked to Ned
even if he didn’t agree that it was okay at all for Ned to be with Cat. And he didn’t want to talk
about any of it with six other people so he hadn’t hesitated to accept responsibility.

When they got back to Winterfell, Catelyn and Elia were in the great room with Benjen working on
that stupid puzzle. Brandon managed to come in behind everyone else and keep his head down
enough that his black eye wasn’t visible immediately. Cat had rushed over to hug Ned and
immediately asked him what was wrong. She really was good at reading him. Galbart said loudly
that it was probably time for everyone to pack up and head down the mountain to their cars. Ned
and Cat were speaking together in hushed tones, and Brandon suddenly didn’t want to be in the
room with any of these people anymore. He fled to his room and closed the door behind him. He
turned on some music—NOT Christmas music—very loudly and cold water over a washrag to put
on his eye. Then he lay on the bed and didn’t move until he heard loud knocking and Ben yelling at
his door. “Come on, Brandon! Everybody’s leaving! Dad knows you got a black eye, but he says
you have to come say goodbye to everyone anyway!

Sighing, Brandon got up and grabbed a hooded jacket, pulling the hood over his face as far as it
would go. He walked outside and was surprised to hear the sound of wild laughter. The SUVs were
apparently loaded up. He could see the skis on the racks. But everyone was in the yard laughing
and running wildly as an impromptu snowball fight had broken out. He leaned on the fence and
watched, feeling as if a snowball fight were the last thing in the world he wanted to participate in at
the moment. Ned and Cat were running away from Robert hand in hand. When the much larger
man chucked a snowball at them hard, Ned spotted it coming and jumped in front of it before it
could hit Cat. It knocked him off balance, and he fell to the ground. When Cat reached out a hand to help him up, he pulled her down instead, and they rolled in the snow with their arms around each other laughing as if they were the only two people in the world.

Suddenly, Brandon didn’t see them anymore. Or any of the other people in the yard. In his mind, it was last Christmas, and he and Cat were walking in the snow up on the ridge, and she tripped and nearly fell, and he laughed at her so she tackled him and then they were both lying in the snow, their arms around each other, their lips against each other’s, her ring safe in his pocket to give to her when they got back to the house and he could get down on one knee in front of the big Christmas tree.

He put his hand in his pocket. The ring was there now. He’d taken it from its box in his bedroom drawer when he first got to Winterfell this Christmas and put it in the pocket of whatever he wore every day since. Ned and Cat weren’t laughing anymore. They were sitting up in the snow, and they were kissing. Kissing in the snow. He was the one who was supposed to kiss Catelyn in the snow. He couldn’t watch them. He couldn’t be here anymore. Without even thinking about where he was going, Brandon Stark turned and walked toward the ridge without looking back.
Catelyn

Catelyn didn’t even feel the cold as Ned’s lips pressed against hers. He was kissing her, really kissing her—in front of God and everybody, as her father would say. She giggled as her mind heard those words in her father’s tones of mild disapproval, and Ned pulled his lips from hers to look at her quizzically.

“Don’t stop,” she whined. “My lips might get cold.”

He shook his head and laughed at her, but the moment was broken. Ned was not the world’s most demonstrative man, and this was about the most PDA she’d ever seen him indulge in. Still, they sat there in the snow like fools just grinning at each other, listening to the revelry all around them. It felt light and good and free, especially after the conversation they’d had after he returned from the ski trip. She knew they should stand up—she could now feel the damp cold of the snow seeping through the fabric of her pants and beginning to chill, but before she could say anything, Ned’s eyes moved toward something off to the side.

“Where the fuck is he going?” he muttered.

Catelyn didn’t need to ask whom he meant. She’d seen Brandon come out of the house—not rushing out to join in the snowball fight, but leaning on the fence with his hood pulled up and almost completely obscuring his face. Watching them all, but refusing to join in—like a petulant child who hadn’t gotten his way. She followed Ned’s eyes and saw that Brandon had left his post on the fence and was now stalking away—not toward the house, but up toward the ridge. Memories of the last time she’d walked that ridge assailed her, and she had to close her eyes tightly to hold back tears—both of anger and sadness.

“Cat?” Ned’s voice was filled with concern. And uncertainty.

God, she hated that uncertainty. She wished she could erase it, but honestly didn’t know how she could—short of erasing Brandon’s part in her life from existence. And that she couldn’t do. She wasn’t even certain she’d want to. She watched him walking away toward the ridge, and her heart ached. Not because she wanted him still. She didn’t. But he was hurt. It didn’t matter that he’d brought that pain on himself or even that he deserved it at least to some degree. She’d realized over the past twenty-four hours that she didn’t need him to hurt—didn’t even want him to hurt anymore. His pain now didn’t change what she’d been through this past year at all. And while she’d spent many angry days and nights wishing nothing more than for him to suffer, she couldn’t look at him and wish for it.

“Cat?” Ned asked again. “Are you all right?”

She pulled her thoughts from Brandon and focused entirely on the man sitting in the snow with her, the man whose arms still held her and whose grey eyes looked at her with far deeper and more encompassing questions than ‘Are you all right?’

“I’m fine, Ned,” she said. “And I love you. Nothing can change that, and I need you to know it.”

He nodded. She almost laughed. She’d never known anyone more reluctant to speak in her life. Sometimes it irritated her because Ned was far from awkward in his speech. When he did allow his words free rein, she’d discovered him to be thoughtful and well-spoken and quite good at expressing himself. Yet, for whatever reason, he tended to hold his words back, and she’d had to learn to understand what he spoke with his eyes, with a touch of his hand, or with a nod. She leaned
forward and kissed him. “We should stand up before we’re soaked through. Neither of us is wearing waterproof pants.”

“He’s going up to the ridge,” Ned said softly, and she realized she hadn’t distracted his thoughts from Brandon at all. But that didn’t truly surprise her. He could read her face as well as she could his. Better probably, as she didn’t have his trick of freezing her expressions.

“That’s where he always took you,” Ned continued.

“Yes,” she said simply. “It’s beautiful up there. Regardless of the season.” She bit her lip. “Ned . . . You know I have to talk to him, don’t you?”

He looked at her a long moment and then nodded again, more slowly this time. The revelry around them was dying down a bit, and he pushed himself up off the ground, extending a hand to help her rise as well. “Wait for me to get back,” he said. “I don’t want you talking to him alone.”

“Ned . . . Brandon won’t hurt me. And I’ve been yelled at by him before, you know. I can hold my own with him.” He looked grim, and she tried to get him to smile a bit by teasing, “And I can do it without punching him.”

He didn’t smile, just tightened the muscles in his jaw even harder. He hadn’t told her specifically what Brandon had said, only that he had punched him in the face over it and that he’d thoroughly deserved it. Ordinarily she’d have been angry at Ned for losing his temper and behaving like an idiot, but he’d been so obviously shaken by whatever happened between them, she didn’t have the heart to berate him over hitting Brandon. To be fair, she’d wanted to hit Brandon a few times over the years herself. “Are you sure you’re all right to drive all these crazy people down the hill?” she asked softly.

“One of course, I am. But I don’t like leaving you here. Why don’t you ride with me?”

She sighed. “Ned, it’ll take close to an hour to get down there and back. Longer, maybe, if the new snowfall hasn’t been cleared. It could be dark by then, and if Brandon hasn’t come back . . .”

“I don’t want you chasing after him.” He didn’t raise his voice, but his words had the unmistakable tone of a command, and that did make her angry.

“I am long past any desire to ‘chase after’ Brandon Stark, and you damn well know it, Ned!” she shot back at him. “But I do have to talk to him, and the two of us cannot have any real conversation with you standing over me like some sort of avenging knight ready to run him through if he insults me.” His frown deepened, and she sighed. “Ned,” she said, softening her voice. “I love you. And I know you love me. But this is something I have to do by myself. I need you to trust me—trust that I know what I’m doing and that I am fully capable of handling Brandon at his best and worst.”

“He still wants you,” Ned said. His grim expression didn’t change, but she saw that uncertainty again in his eyes, and it killed her a little he still let Brandon make him doubt himself. Doubt her.

“Well, he can’t have me,” she said almost flippantly. “And he only wants me because he knows that. He knows me, Ned. He knows me well enough to see that I’m in love with you, and he’s just selfish enough to want me back because of it.”

“I don’t care!” she said in exasperation. Then she shook her head. “I mean . . . I do care. I care because he’s your brother, and I don’t want to drive you apart. I care because I loved him once, and however big an asshole he can be, I know he cares more about people than he likes to admit. I care
because I’m so happy with you now that I don’t need him to suffer anymore. I just want . . . I just want all of us to be all right, Ned. Can you understand that? Can you try?”

“Stark!” Robert’s big voice boomed into the silence. “Are you gonna drive us down this fucking mountain or should we just start walking?”

Ned ignored him, keeping his eyes fixed on hers. “I understand, Cat,” he said after a moment. “I don’t like it . . . but I do understand.”

“Are you deaf, Eddard?” Robert shouted again. “It’s Christmas Eve, man! We’ve all got families who’ll kill us if we don’t show up soon!”

Ned turned and shouted back at his friend, “I should make you walk Baratheon after you tried to kill my girl with that snowball! But get your ass in the car, and I’ll play chauffeur!”

Robert laughed, and Ned turned back to Catelyn and kissed her quickly. “I love you,” he said, and then he turned to walk back toward the vehicles.

She followed him, saying her farewells and accepting hugs from Robert and Elia. Rhaegar stood somewhat apart from everyone except Elia, and after her own conversation with Elia this morning, Catelyn wasn’t surprised. The Northern men were a bit awkward around her since their return for the ski trip, and given what happened between Ned and Brandon, that didn’t surprise her either. But it did make her sad.

“It’ll be all right,” Elia whispered as she hugged her. “Ned’s a good guy. And he really loves you.”

Catelyn nodded, wishing she could offer her friend the same reassurance. But she honestly didn’t know Rhaegar well enough. She wondered if anyone really knew the man, and hoped Elia truly understood him as well as she thought she did. “Take care of yourself,” she whispered back. “You deserve all the happiness, Elia!”

Elia smiled at her and then stepped back to slip her hand into Rhaegar’s. Catelyn noticed that she led him to Ned’s vehicle rather than the one Lyanna would be driving. She said a quick, silent prayer that the man was worthy of Elia’s faith in him. Then she felt something heavy being draped over her shoulders and turned to see Ned behind her. He’d removed his big coat and was putting it over hers.

“How. I know you’re going up to the ridge, and you’ll freeze to death in just that little coat of yours.”

“I love you.”

He smiled at her. “I know.” They both laughed, but then he reached out to run his hand down a section of her hair that fell down over her shoulder. “I mean that, Cat. I love you. And I do know you love me.”

She smiled as he turned to climb into his SUV, and she stood there watching as both vehicles slowly made their way down the road until they were lost behind the trees. Then she turned and began the long climb up to the ridge.

Ned’s coat did keep her warm, but not as warm as his final words had. She hadn’t realized just how much she needed his confidence and trust and belief in her, but it certainly made this difficult walk easier. She hadn’t actually been alone with Brandon since before Barbrey Ryswell showed up with her stupid pregnancy test last year in a ridiculously melodramatic manner. Even after Ned had persuaded Catelyn to return to the house lest she suffer frostbite, she’d refused to speak or listen to
Brandon; and either Ned, Lyanna, or Mr. Stark had been present every time he’d tried. It felt odd now, to think that something as simple as a private conversation with a man who had shared so much of her life for so long was such a daunting prospect.

She saw him long before she reached him. He stood with his back to her, looking out over the spectacular view, unmoving. He heard her coming, though, because he spoke when she was about fifteen feet from him.

“I knew you’d come.” He didn’t turn around.

“Why do you think I’m here, Brandon?”

He did turn around then, and the sight of his bruised and swollen eye made her draw in a sharp breath in spite of herself.

Brandon laughed—a bitter, ugly sort of laugh. “He hits hard, my little brother. He doesn’t hit people very often, but damn, you know you’ve been hit when he does it.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Why? You didn’t hit me.” He turned his back on her again. “Or maybe you’re apologizing for fucking my brother in the first place. Is that it, Cat? Because that was a pretty low blow. I wouldn’t have expected it of you.”

Her sympathy for him evaporated and she found herself wanting to blacken his other eye. She took a deep breath instead. “What Ned and I have together is not about you, Brandon. I realize it’s hard for you to accept that anything in this world is not about you, but, in this case, it happens to be the truth.”

He slowly turned back around, “Truth. Funny word, truth. People say it like it’s so absolute, but I’ve never met two people who see it the same way.”

She sighed. “Brandon, I’m not here to talk philosophy with you. Or to fight with you. I just want you to stop trying to punish Ned when he hasn’t done anything wrong.”

He raised his eyebrow at her. “Me punish Ned? I think you’ve got it backwards, Cat. I’m the one with the black eye.”

“Which you undoubtedly deserved! You’ve been behaving like a child since we got here, Brandon, and it needs to stop.”

“I’m behaving like a child, huh? I’m not the one revenge fucking my ex-lover’s brother, sweetheart.”

Catelyn felt like she’d been slapped. Goddammit, I will not cry in front of him! “You son of a bitch,” she said softly, determined to keep her voice even. “That’s not what I’m doing, and you know it. You know it, Brandon! And if that’s what you said to Ned today, no wonder he hit you! It’s cruel! And untrue . . . and . . . how could you say such a thing to your own brother, Bran? Ned loves you!”

Brandon remained quiet for a moment. “He didn’t tell you what I said?” he asked finally.

She shook her head. “He only said that was a filthy lie, and that he couldn’t keep from hitting you for it.” She swallowed and added, “And that he’d hit you again if you ever repeated it.”
Brandon gave another bitter laugh and shook his head. “A lie, huh? For what it’s worth, Cat, I said something completely different to Ned. And I think he hit me because somewhere deep inside he knows what I said was the truth. And you know what? I feel like an asshole for saying it to him even though it is true. That’s why I didn’t hit him back. So don’t tell me how I feel about my own brother. Yeah, I’m mad as hell at him for going anywhere near you, but it’s you I blame. He doesn’t even realize what you’re doing to him, the poor guy. Or maybe he does, and he just doesn’t want to admit it. Hot women like you don’t generally throw themselves at Ned, so I guess I can’t blame him for thinking with his cock.”

“Well, you’d know all about thinking with your cock, wouldn’t you Bran?” she spat. She was so angry, she was shaking. She’d wanted to speak with him, not fight. But he was deliberately trying to hurt her. And God damn him, he was succeeding in it. “And what do you mean, ‘what I’m doing to Ned’? I’m in love with Ned, Brandon! How many times must you hear it before it sinks in?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head and actually walking toward her, closing a lot of the distance between them. “No. I’ve watched you, Cat, and I have to admit you put on a hell of a show. No wonder Ned’s buying it. But I’ve seen you watching me. At dinner. In the game room. You’re a clever girl, Catelyn Tully, but everything you feel eventually finds its way to your eyes, and I’ve spent a lot of time looking into those eyes. You can’t keep them off me, sweetheart, and it’s definitely not indifference I see when I look back at those baby blues of yours.”

He was staring into her eyes now, no more than two feet away from her, and Catelyn felt almost paralyzed by his gaze. “I’m not indifferent to you, Bran,” she whispered. “I never could be indifferent after all we’ve been through together.”

“I know,” he said, looking at her as if she were the only woman in the world. Looking at her in the way he had a thousand times before. Looking at her in the way that had always melted her heart and set her body on fire.

It made her a bit sad to realize the only thing that look caused her to feel now was pity. But when he put a hand under her chin, tilted up her face and leaned in to kiss her, that pity became anger again, and she pushed him away. “I don’t want you, Brandon. Why can’t you understand that?”

He didn’t seem angry at the rejection. He simply shrugged a little. “Maybe that would be easier to believe if you’d truly moved on, Cat. Instead of just using my brother as some sort of pathetic substitute for . . .”

“Substitute? Substitute?!?” she sputtered, unable to believe what she was hearing. Then she recalled the hurt and uncertainty in Ned’s eyes today. “Brandon, just what the hell did you say to Ned?”

“Aren’t you sure you want to know? You won’t like it. You like to talk about ‘truth’ almost as often as Ned does. Maybe you really are lying to yourself as much as he is. Maybe, I should just leave the two of you alone with your little lies and delusions until you wake up and realize the big bad truth all by yourselves.”

“What did you say to him? Tell me, Brandon!”

He paused as if in thought and then said very calmly, “I can’t recall the exact words, but essentially I reminded him that he does look and sound an awful lot like me so it must be easy for you to imagine me in his place when you’re fucking. And I did ask how often you scream my name when you come. Because you did like to do that, Cat.”

Catelyn felt colder than she’d ever felt in her life, and then she felt sick. To even imagine Ned
hearing those words... She closed her eyes tightly and all she could see were his grey eyes—which she could never mistake for Brandon’s for even a second—filled with love and trust and yet that lingering uncertainty. “You vile bastard,” she whispered, opening her eyes to look at the man she once had loved. And then had thought she hated. And finally had forgiven for hurting her. She didn’t know if she could forgive him for this. Any pain he’d ever caused her was insignificant compared to the way he’d now hurt Ned. “I honestly want to kill you right now.”

“Because the truth hurts. Nobody knows you like I do, Cat. And I know I’ve done some shitty things, but you can’t deny what’s between us. You’re angry at me because you love me. Because you’ve always loved me. It’s the same reason I’ve been so pissed off at you! It sucks that Ned’ll get hurt, but he’s a big boy, Cat. He chose to get involved where he had no right. It’s better that he find that out now.” He put his hands on her arms. “God you’re so hot when you’re furious! Look at you! Nobody else turns me inside out like this. Nobody, Cat!”

It was probably a good thing that he had hold of her arms, or she might have hit him. Instead, she made herself breathe deeply before saying, “Let go of me, Brandon.”

“Cat...”

“I said, let go of me.” He did. “Love and anger are not two sides of the same coin, Bran,” she said. “Yes, you can love someone who makes you angry, and you can certainly be angry with someone you love. But what you’re saying now... it’s just... wrong. I don’t love you, Brandon, and I’m honestly sorry if you think there’s something still between us. There isn’t. Not on my part. And there never will be. You can either accept that or... stay far away from me. But I won’t allow you to hurt Ned anymore. This ends now. He loves me, Brandon, and it hurts him too much for you to say such awful things about me.” She shook her head. “I... I had hoped talking with you might make things better, but now...” She bit her lip. “Just don’t hurt him, Brandon. Or I swear to God, I will hurt you.”

She turned and began to walk away from him.

“Catelyn!” he called after a few moments. She stopped and turned around to see him looking at her with an expression full of both hurt and anger. “Maybe you really do think you’re in love with my brother. But there’s something you ought to think about before you convince yourself that he punched me out of undying devotion to you.” He paused and looked at her a long moment. “The last time Ned hit me, it was because a hot girl preferred fucking me, too. So maybe you’re the one being fooled here. Maybe you’re just one of Ned’s attempts to beat me at something.”

Catelyn stared at him. He looked like a wounded animal with his black eye and angry expression. He was certainly lashing out as wildly as a wounded animal, and she found she had no real desire to strike back with similar viciousness. She just looked at him a moment before saying sadly, “You’re the one who’s always had to beat everyone, Bran. Ned doesn’t need to take anything from you, and if you ever actually took a good, honest look at him, you’d know that.”

She turned then and continued to walk away without looking back. After a few more moments, she heard him yell, “Ask him about Harrenhal! I bet he’s never told you about that! There’s some truth for you!”

She didn’t stop, but she did sigh. Harrenhal. How in hell could a long weekend almost two years ago at a place she’d never even been cast such a long shadow over so many people in her life? She’d heard enough about Harrenhal from Elia this morning and honestly wasn’t certain she wanted to know any specifics of the rumors about Ned and Ashara Dayne. She’d always found it easier (and more painful, given that she’d been Brandon’s girlfriend at the time) to believe the rumors about Brandon than about Ned, but Elia’s careful evasions any time Ned came up in their
conversation about Harrenhal made her wonder. Elia had been friends with the little Dornish tramp forever, for reasons passing understanding, and undoubtedly knew the truth of the matter.

She told herself it didn’t matter anyway. She and Ned had not been together then. Given that her past was the biggest hurdle in their relationship, she could hardly begrudge him his own past. But he was still oddly defensive of the Dayne girl, and that had always irritated her. And while she knew perfectly well Ned loved her, she couldn’t get Brandon’s words completely out of her mind.

“Damn you, Brandon,” she muttered aloud. This is exactly what he had done to Ned with his hateful words. She really did want to kill him.

The SUVs were still gone when she got back to the house, so she walked on up to Ned’s room. She liked the upper floors of Winterfell. They seemed more homey and less imposing and formal than the main floor. She’d rarely gone upstairs before this visit as Brandon’s suite was on the main floor. She sighed and wondered if she would ever be able to spend time here without comparing her experience of the place with Brandon to her experience with Ned. She’d loved coming here with Brandon. He was more at ease here than anywhere she’d known him. Of course, he had an easy sort of confidence wherever he was, but here it seemed less practiced—less a performance. She always thought she saw more of the ‘real’ Brandon here. Until this visit, of course. Brandon had been nothing short of spiteful pretty much the entire time during this visit. As for Ned here . . . well Ned couldn’t relax and be himself at all while spending every waking moment worrying about her. About her and Brandon. Her memories of Ned in Winterfell before this visit weren’t terribly clear because she’d never been here before except with Brandon. And Brandon always had a way of filling up most of her awareness.

And he’s doing it now! she thought miserably as she opened the door and walked into Ned’s room. She smiled a bit upon entering his private space. It was neat and uncluttered—like him. No ostentation. But it was still attractive, warm, and welcoming. It felt like home to her. She’d taken off his coat and hers and hung them on pegs downstairs, and she shivered slightly now. She walked into his bathroom and grabbed his robe, first pressing her face into it. It smelled like him, and that helped steady her a bit. She put it on over her clothes for both warmth and to feel him with her. Then she sat down by the window to wait for him. He shouldn’t be much longer. He’d be worried about her, and he’d want her to tell him everything Brandon said. Although he didn’t tell me everything Brandon said to him! she thought. Had he honestly feared some truth in Brandon’s words? Surely, not! But then she reminded herself that she’d worked herself into a state over things Brandon had said which were just as ridiculous.

Ned loves me. I love Ned. Brandon can go hang. Even as she thought it, she realized the problem the two of them had. Neither of them could even think about their love for each other now without thinking of Brandon—even if his presence in their thoughts had no power over their own feelings. What they truly needed was for him to have no presence in their thoughts at all. And after these two days, she couldn’t help wondering if that was even possible.

“Cat?”

She looked up to see Ned standing in the doorway, looking at her with obvious concern in his eyes. She smiled at him. “I’m so glad your back,” she said, jumping up to rush into his arms. He felt wonderful—his physical presence around her so much more comforting and reassuring than just his robe.

He kissed her and then grinned at her attire. “I take it you were cold?” he teased. “There’s firewood by the hearth.”

“And if I’d lit a fire, I’d have to listen to you complain about the room being too hot!” she laughed.
“Besides, I like wearing your robe. It smells like you.”

He made a face. “I guess I should wash it.”

She smacked him lightly on the arm. “No silly! I like it.”

“Well, it looks better on you than it does on me.” He pulled at it a little. “Kind of disappointing that you’re clothed underneath it, though.”

“When have I ever objected to you undressing me, Mr. Stark?” Unfortunately, the sexy talk took her mind back to Brandon’s awful words.

“Cat? What’s wrong?”

Obviously, he’d seen her distress in her face. “Brandon told me what he said to you. Before you hit him.”

He let go of her and began walking back and forth, clenching and unclenching his fist. “I’ll fucking kill him,” he muttered.

“It isn’t true,” she said softly.

“What?” He was so agitated, he’d barely registered her words.


“Jesus, Cat!” He was beside her again in an instant, holding onto her and looking into her eyes. “I know that. Please don’t doubt that I know that.”

She nodded. “I know it. I just felt I needed to say it anyway.” She hesitated. “Why didn’t you tell me what he said?”

His eyes darkened and he scowled. “Because it was ugly, and hateful, and cruel, and false. And I don’t ever want you to hear something like that about yourself—especially from someone you once loved.”

She nodded. “I did love him. Does that bother you, Ned? Even though I love you with all my heart and feel nothing for Brandon at all anymore. Tell me honestly, my love. Does it bother you that I ever did?”

He sighed deeply and took her hand, leading her to sit on the bed beside him. “I wish I could answer that easily, Cat,” he said quietly. “I wish I could tell you I never thought of you with Brandon at all, but you asked me to be honest.” He looked directly into her eyes. “Most days, it doesn’t bother me at all. I don’t even think of it. But it does bother me sometimes that all of the most important people in my life knew you first as my brother’s girl. It bothers me that they look at us and think about Brandon. And sometimes I worry that it will never change.” He reached a hand out to touch her face. “None of that matters, though, Cat. Not compared to what I feel for you. If I occasionally wish that you and I could be together with less . . . baggage, well I’ll deal with that. The only thing I couldn’t deal with is contemplating a life without you in it.”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered and she felt the damned tears that had threatened so many times today begin to fill her eyes.

“I just wish . . .” She shook her head, letting the words trail off. He knew well enough what she wished. “Tell me, though. When Brandon said those awful things to you, did you worry for even the briefest moment that there might be any truth to them? I know you trust me, Ned. That you trust us. But . . . did he make you doubt at all that I . . .”

“No.” He cut her off with a single emphatically spoken word and placed gentle kisses to both her damp eyes. Then he looked down for a moment, and she saw his jaw muscle twitch. He looked back up at her before he spoke again. “I do not doubt you. Neither Brandon nor anyone else could ever make me do that. But . . . my brother . . . I’m afraid he’s quite good at making me doubt myself at times. Brandon is . . . Brandon is a force of nature. He always has been. I came into this world as Brandon Stark’s little brother, and from the time I was very young I both loved being that and feared that I might never be anything else. Does that make any sense?” She nodded. “I . . . I’ve never wanted to compete with him. He doesn’t believe that, but it’s true. But I have always wanted something of my own. I wanted to excel at and achieve things on my own terms—nothing to do with Brandon. And I’ve never wanted anything in my life more than I want you. And it’s like some cosmic cruel joke that he loved you first. And that you loved him. He never makes me doubt you, Cat. But I admit that for just a little while today, he made me doubt myself. Doubt that I can truly be . . . enough . . . for someone as wonderful as you.”

“You are everything to me, Eddard Stark,” she said, willing all that she felt to be evident in her face and voice. “You are far more than enough.” She kissed him then, a long, gentle kiss that she hoped could speak even more than her words of her love for him.

When they finally broke that kiss, he held her in his arms as he gently asked her, “What else did you and Brandon speak of today, Cat? If you wish to tell me. Did he hear you at all or simply persist in behaving like child who’s had his toy taken away?”

She sighed. “He struck me more as a wounded animal than a bratty child by the end of our conversation. He was vicious and pitiful all at the same time. I . . . I felt sorry for him, Ned. And I wanted to kick him in the teeth.”

He ran his fingers through her hair. “He can have that effect on people. Funny thing is he hates the idea of being pitied. He’d be livid if he heard you describe him that way.”

“He was, though,” she said sadly.

“Cat,” he said, tilting her chin up to look at him. “I love my brother, but don’t forget that if he’s wounded, those wounds are self-inflicted. You didn’t cause them. Nor did I.”

She nodded. “What you said about him making you doubt yourself? He can do that to me, too.” Her words came out as little more than a whisper.

“What did he say to you?”

“Did you really hit him before over a girl you both . . .” She didn’t know if she should say ‘loved’ and she didn’t want to say ‘fucked’ so she just let the sentence drop.

His eyes darkened again. “Damn him! He really wants us to hurt, doesn’t he?”

“Ned? He was talking about Harrenhal, wasn’t he? I think maybe it’s time we talk about Harrenhal. I’m not angry with you,” she added hurriedly as she felt him tense. “We weren’t together then, and nothing you did is any of my business, but . . . I don’t want it to be something he can just toss out at me like punch I can’t defend. I just want to know the truth about that damn weekend. All of the truth.”
“The truth,” he said heavily. Then he ran his fingers through his hair. “Cat, I honestly don’t know if anyone knows all the truth about that weekend. I found out this morning that Lyanna got into some kind of trouble there, and I knew nothing about it.”

“Lyanna told you about it?”

Ned shook his head. “Brandon. When we were . . . talking . . . before we left the ski slopes. Apparently, he took care of something there for her and has kept it a secret.”

“Rhaegar Targaryen,” Catelyn said simply.

Ned’s eyebrows raised a moment, and then his eyes narrowed rather menacingly. “I wondered about them after last night. But Harrenhal? Lyanna was only sixteen when we were there!”

“Nothing happened, Ned!” Catelyn said quickly. “Well, nothing more than some flirting and a couple of kisses. Which was a damn sight more than should have happened,” she said quickly, seeing that he was about to protest. “I only mean that it was all stopped before they went too far.”

“That bastard,” Ned nearly spat. “Elia Martell was with him at Harrenhal.”

“That’s how I know about this,” Catelyn said gently. “She told me about it this morning.”

“She knows?” Ned asked incredulously.

“She knew then. Confronted him about it after that weekend, and he told her it was some sort of insane infatuation. Apparently, Rhaegar’s given to great romantic notions and ideas. And she was willing to write it off as one of his . . . I don’t know . . . fantasies, I suppose.”

“My sister is very real, Catelyn. She’s a girl, not a fantasy.”

“Yes, Ned, I know that. Anyway, as far as Elia knows, he hadn’t even seen Lyanna again until yesterday, but the two of them were ridiculous at dinner. Couldn’t have been more obvious if they’d started making out on the table.”

Ned’s eyebrows went nearly to his hairline, and she actually laughed. “I love you, darling,” she said, “And when you choose to be, you are one of the most observant men I have ever met. But you’ve barely noticed the existence of anyone other than Brandon and myself since I got here so I’m not surprised you didn’t take notice of them at dinner.”

“Last night,” Ned choked out. “When the two of them went out for wood. And she didn’t come back . . .”

“Nothing happened, Ned. Well, nothing aside from a makeout session in the shed. Brandon interrupted them. Elia isn’t a fool. She confronted Rhaegar about it after they went to their room, and he confessed everything. They stayed up most of the night talking about how he needs to figure out what he wants in life, and he swore that he wants to be with her.”

“And she believes him?”

Catelyn shrugged. “She loves him. I don’t know how he feels, really. He’s a hard person to know. But I do understand Elia’s wanting to believe in him.”

Ned nodded. They both knew how much she’d forgiven Brandon—long after she should have stopped doing so.
After a moment’s silence, she took a deep breath and forced herself to speak. “But that’s not what I wanted to discuss about Harrenhal, Ned,” she said. “What Brandon told me . . . am I correct in assuming you hit him over Ashara Dayne?”

“I . . . Yes and no. Obviously, he didn’t hear a damn word I said to him yesterday if that’s what he threw out at you, though.”

“Yes AND no? What does that even mean, Ned?”

He took a deep breath. “I suppose I should start at the beginning. But, Cat--some of this maybe hard for you to hear.”

“We weren’t together then, Ned. It’s all right,” she said with more confidence than she felt.

“No. I mean Brandon. You and he were . . .”

“Well, we aren’t now. I’ve long suspected he fucked the little Dornish slut that weekend, but nothing he’s ever done can hurt me anymore.”

Ned frowned. “She isn’t a slut, Cat. And she wasn’t to blame for what happened.”

“Oh? She fucked my boyfriend on accident? She knew damn well Brandon wasn’t single, Ned.”

“Can I please just tell it from the beginning?” She must have still looked agitated because he leaned over to kiss her. “I understand your anger, my love. But I believe it’s misplaced because you don’t know the whole story.”

“All right then. Tell it to me.”

“Brandon had known Ashara for awhile. They’re nearly the same age. I think she’s actually almost a year older than him. I’d never met her before that weekend, and I had never seen any woman so beautiful.” He very quickly squeezed her hands. “Until you, of course.”

She still felt irrationally jealous of his past infatuation and current need to defend the damn girl, but she had to laugh at him. “You already knew me, darling,” she teased. When he looked uncomfortable, she laughed again. “Oh, just go on, Ned! I’ve seen the girl, and I’m aware that you are neither blind nor unaffected by womanly charms, so it’s no surprise that she got your attention.”

“She got my attention, all right. I couldn’t breathe, much less speak, whenever she was around. I don’t think she knew I was alive. Oh, Brandon had introduced us at one point. ‘Hey ‘Shara, this is my little brother Ned.’ And she kind of smiled at me, and I nearly died, and that was it. Brandon gradually figured out how obsessed I was, though. And the second night, he tried to get me to ask her to dance in the club. I wouldn’t, of course. I couldn’t. So he did for me.” Ned shook his head. “What I didn’t know at the time was that Brandon and ‘Shara had had a brief fling a couple years before—before he started dating you, Cat, and that they’d remained sort of friends with benefits up until the two of you got together. Anyway, Brandon told her I had it bad for her, and the bastard told her I’d never actually gone all the way with a girl.” Catelyn had been frowning over Ned’s insistence that Brandon’s and Ashara’s sexual relationship had ended once Brandon started dating her, but then had to keep herself from giggling at Ned’s use of the term ‘going all the way.’ It seemed that in the telling, her lover was transformed into the shy, sexually inexperienced barely twenty year old he had been at Harrenhal. “She came over to me and said, ‘Let’s dance,’ and I sort of nodded, and she pulled me out on the dance floor, smiling like there was nothing she wanted more to do. I don’t think I spoke a word for the first two songs. You know I can’t dance worth a damn, but watching her dance in front of me with that smile on her face made me forget to care
about how ridiculous I looked. The third song was a slow dance, and she pressed herself up against
me, and I just held on to her and prayed to every God I could think of that the song never ended.
Halfway through it, though, she whispered, ‘You wanna get out of here, Ned?’ I don’t remember if
I even answered, but we left the club. There are gardens at Harrenhal—big beautiful gardens with
fountains and pools, and we went walking there. I remembered how to talk at some point, and we
ended up talking quite a lot. And we kissed quite a lot, too. At some point, I asked her, ‘What are
we doing, Ashara?’ And she told me we were doing whatever we liked because she liked me a lot
and thought we both deserved to have a good time.’ He shrugged as if to pull himself back into the
present and looked at Catelyn half apologetically. ‘We went to her room, and we had sex. I didn’t
know what the hell I was doing, and the first time I don’t think I lasted thirty seconds, but . . .’

“The first time?” Catelyn asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Cat . . . I . . . the whole experience was surreal. I couldn’t believe something like this was
happening to me. I’m Ned Stark, for God’s sake. I’d never even danced with the most beautiful girl
in a room back then—much less ended up in her bed. As first times go, it was certainly better than
I’d imagined it would be.”

She willed herself not to frown. She’d lost her virginity to Brandon, and while their breakup had
soured the memory somewhat, it had been a very special experience. She tried not to give into her
irrational jealousy over Ned’s own experience and prayed fervently that he never asked her about
hers. If the story of his hook-up with girl she didn’t even really know affected her like this, no way
would he tolerate hearing about her first night (or any night) with Brandon. “I’m only teasing you,”
she lied. “Go on.”

“By morning, I thought I was in love,” he continued. “I started planning how we could get together
again soon and told her how much she meant to me and . . . she very gently shot me down.” He
actually smiled at the memory. “She said, ‘You’re very sweet, Ned, and I had a lovely time. I hope
you did, too. But don’t confuse love and sex. They’re two different things. But for some people,
they need to nearly always go together, and for others, they almost never do. I have a feeling that
you are much more the first kind of person, and I’m much more the second.’ I was crushed—for
about fifteen minutes at least. But I realized quickly she was right. I wasn’t in love with her. I was
in love with the way she made my body feel. And while I didn’t regret the night, I wanted more
than that. And she didn’t. “

“Just like that, you got over her?” Catelyn asked doubtfully.

“Well, perhaps it took longer than fifteen minutes,” he laughed. “The point is that she never lied to
me, never pretended to offer more than an evening’s . . . recreation. And while it was certainly
enjoyable, I learned pretty quickly that recreational sex simply isn’t enough for me. I had only
convinced myself I was falling in love because I needed it to be something more. And she
understood that about me before I did. I was grateful to her for that.”

“So why did you hit Brandon? Assuming he didn’t make that up?”

He looked away from her before speaking. “He didn’t make it up. The last day there, I couldn’t
find him. Lya and I were packed up and ready to go. She was in a terrible mood—which I suppose
makes more sense now—and driving me up a wall, and I really just wanted to get going. I’d looked
all over the place when somebody, I don’t even remember who, told me they’d seen him with
Ashara late the previous night. I went to her room and I could hear the two of them—um, together-
- before I knocked. I kept knocking and shouting his name until he finally came to the door. He
was naked except for some boxers he’d thrown on, and his greeting to me was ‘What the fuck,
Ned?’ I was so angry, I couldn’t see straight. I told him we were ready to go. He said he thought
somebody would have told me. He and Ashara had decided to go down to her beach house in Dorne for a couple more days, so he wouldn’t be coming home with Lya and me. And I got angrier than I’d ever been at him. I got one punch in and was yelling something about killing him, and then Ashara grabbed me and told me to stop. She was crying, and I just . . . I just turned around and left.”

“So you weren’t over her, were you?” Catelyn hated the rather accusatory tone that crept into her voice.

“What? Oh. That’s what Brandon thought.” He looked directly at her. “I wasn’t pissed at Brandon over ‘Shara, Cat. I was pissed at him because of you. I didn’t know then . . . about his cheating. I was so young and stupid—and yes, I know it wasn’t even two whole years ago—but I considered myself to have had this great big epiphany about love and sex, and I thought he loved you. And there he was . . . It wasn’t right. You didn’t deserve that. And the bastard still left with her. And bastard that I am, I never told you about it. I still don’t know what he told you about why he didn’t come straight home after that holiday.”

“He told her what?!?” Brandon may have lost the power to hurt her, but he certainly hadn’t lost the power to infuriate her.

“I found out because she was worried about me. Got my number from Brandon’s phone and called me—concerned that she’d hurt me after all. When I explained to her why I was so furious with Brandon, she told me about the ‘secret breakup.’ Of course, I found out that was bullshit quickly enough, and so did she. She didn’t speak to Brandon for almost a year, I don’t think. Then after you broke up for real, he started calling her every now and then, and they’ve gotten together a few times.” He shrugged. “As messed up as the whole situation was for so long, I honestly thought those two might work together. Then their trip fell through and . . . all this happened.”

“All this,” Catelyn said with a sad little laugh. “God, Ned. What the hell are we supposed to do with ‘all this’?”

“I love you,” she said softly. They kissed for a long moment. “I have to say, however, that I don’t share your assessment of Ashara Dayne’s innocence,” she smirked when they finally broke apart. “She did willingly shack up with another woman’s boyfriend.”

Ned shook his head. “That’s just it. She didn’t. Brandon told her that you had broken up with him, and that’s why he took Lya and me on the long weekend trip. He was trying to cheer himself up with a family holiday. But he hadn’t told anyone about the breakup because he didn’t want people feeling sorry for him, and it was hard having to pretend.”

“He told her what?!?” Brandon may have lost the power to hurt her, but he certainly hadn’t lost the power to infuriate her.

“All this,” Catelyn said with a sad little laugh. “God, Ned. What the hell are we supposed to do with ‘all this’?”

“He’s your brother,” she said miserably. “Nothing changes that.”

“Look at me,” he said, putting his hands on either side of her face. “Brandon will always be my
brother. I will love him whether he is a part of my life or not. But I won’t let him determine
whether or not you are a part of my life. Do you understand that? Nothing is more important to me
than you are. Nothing. As long as we hold on to each other, we can do anything, Catelyn. I believe
that. And everyone else can either get on board or not. It doesn’t change anything.” He spoke with
conviction, but she could see the strain in his eyes. His family meant a lot to him. And he and
Brandon had always been close even if they were as different as night and day in so many ways.

“I don’t want to take your family from you. That isn’t fair.”

“Life isn’t fair! Life is full of all sorts of shit, Cat, but every now and then, we get lucky enough to
fall into something that’s really good. We’re really good, Cat. You and I. You know it as well as I
do. And I won’t let anyone take that away from us. You’re worth it, my love. We’re worth it.”

A knock at the door and Benjen’s voice calling out, “Come and eat! Lya brought back pizza and
it’s getting cold!” interrupted any response she might have made, but she held tightly to Ned’s
words as they made their way downstairs to join the rest of the Starks. *We’re worth it.* Whatever
happened, she would remember that.

They ended up eating in the kitchen rather than the big formal dining room—Mr. Stark, Lyanna,
Benjen, Ned, and herself. Brandon hadn’t returned in spite of the fact that it had gotten quite dark.
Catelyn began to worry although if the any of the Starks were concerned, they certainly did an
excellent job concealing it. Dinner conversation was somewhat subdued, but Ben kept up a pretty
good monologue on the snowboarding trip Rickard was allowing him to take with the friends over
New Year’s. Finally, Catelyn couldn’t take it anymore.

“Shouldn’t someone go look for Brandon?” she asked.

Lyanna and Benjen both looked shocked. Ben then looked down, and Lyanna shot Ned an
accusing sort of look. Catelyn followed her eyes and was stunned to see that her boyfriend looked
positively guilty.

“Ned?” she asked him hesitantly.

“Brandon’s never stays here on Christmas Eve, Cat,” he said softly. “I thought you knew that.”

“But . . . but we were here last year,” she protested.

Ned shook his head. “The two of you went to the Mormonts, remember?”

“We didn’t stay there! We came back here and . . .” She stopped speaking. They’d stayed out until
well past midnight. She’d thought it odd at the time as Christmas Eve was always a special time
with her own family, but Brandon had assured her the Starks did all their celebrating on Christmas
Day. Everyone had been asleep when they’d returned, and they’d been awakened by Benjen
beating on their door at ten o’clock Christmas morning, yelling ‘Merry Christmas! And it’s time to
come to brunch’!”

“But he can’t just stay out in the cold,” she protested.

“He isn’t,” Mr. Stark said softly. “His car is gone.”

“Oh my God! He left because of me, and none of you even . . .” She rounded on Ned. “Why didn’t
you tell me he’d gone?”

“Cat, it isn’t because of you . . . I honestly didn’t know he’d come back for his car, but if he’s left
Winterfell, it’s not . . .”
“You weren’t there, Ned! You didn’t see him! You didn’t . . .” She suddenly realized she was shouting and that all the Starks were staring at her. Embarrassment, anger, and guilt overwhelmed her and she ran from the room, but not before hearing Lyanna’s angry, “You didn’t tell her, Ned?”

She didn’t consciously choose a direction to flee, but found herself running down the steps into the game room. She stopped before Lyarra Stark’s tree, and found herself drawn to the misshapen orange ball that had seemed to affect Brandon so much—the one Ned had said Brandon had made. She reached out and to hold it in her hand.

“It’s the sun.”

Ned’s voice was soft and sad, and it touched her heart as no one else could, but she didn’t turn around. What hadn’t he told her?

“I thought you knew, Cat. I swear I did. I didn’t think Brandon would have brought you here for Christmas without . . . telling you.”

“Brandon?” she said, turning around. “It seems Brandon told me very little when we were together, but I thought that you . . .” She shook her head. “Why did you bring me here? I don’t belong here!”

He looked as if she’d hit him. “No one belongs here, it seems,” he sighed. “Not on Christmas Eve. I thought perhaps I could change that.” He shook his head slowly. “A new start. That’s what I thought we’d have. Brandon wouldn’t be here, and Dad told me I could put up Mom’s tree—she always put it in their bedroom, but that’s Brandon’s now, so I thought this would be . . .” He shook his head again. “It doesn’t matter. As soon as Brandon showed up, I knew it would all go wrong.”

“You’re plans for a happy Christmas with me and your family, you mean?”

“Yes,” he said. “And my selfish, egotistical hope that I could somehow give Christmas back to my family this year.”

“Because I ruined last Christmas?” she asked sharply.

He sighed. “You have never ruined anything, Cat. Brandon bears all the blame for what happened last Christmas, but in his own way, I think he was trying to do what I tried to do this year.”

“Oh god! You’re not going to give me a ring, are you? Because I couldn’t . . . that would be . . .”

“Of course not!” Her face must have fallen at the vehemence of his response because he quickly added softly, “I fully intend to spend the rest of my life with you Catelyn, but when I officially ask you to be my wife, it will be a moment that belongs to no one but the two of us. And it will have no echoes of anyone’s past.”

He looked utterly devastated, and she couldn’t stay angry at him. “Talk to me, Ned,” she said. “Tell me where Brandon is.”

He sighed. “I don’t know where he is. He’ll be back in the morning.” He shook his head. “Or maybe not. Since everything . . . Sit down, Cat, and I’ll tell you what it seems he didn’t.”

She let him lead her to a little sofa and sat beside him silently waiting for him to speak.

“You know my mother died when Brandon was twelve,” he said. “Do you know how?”

“Cancer,” she said. “Brandon told me about it.”
Ned nodded. “She’d had it for more than a year when she died. It started as breast cancer, but it was a particularly aggressive form and spread to her bones before she even knew she was sick. By her last Christmas, she and Dad knew she was dying, but she refused to let us know. She always told us she was feeling better every day, and talked about what we would do together next week. Next month. Next year. Next Christmas.” Ned swallowed hard, and Catelyn reached out to take his hand. “We knew, I think, Brandon and me, that she wasn’t getting better. We just didn’t let ourselves know it. Lya was little enough to believe whatever she was told, and Ben was just a baby really. Her family had a lot of Christmas traditions—one was that you had to have a real Christmas tree—and all the ornaments had to mean something. Handmade ornaments were the best. No lights. Just all these mismatched mementos of a lifetime . . . of a family. Winterfell always had enormous trees—professionally decorated—even before my parents got married. My father wouldn’t have anything that didn’t go with the décor in any of the public rooms so when Brandon was born, she put a tree in their bedroom.” Ned actually smiled. “I’d like to have seen his reaction to that. But it made her happy, and for all his faults, my father truly did want her happy, so the tree in her bedroom became an annual thing. And Brandon and I . . . and eventually Lyanna . . . helped her decorate it every year. My father would always roll his eyes and call it an eyesore, but I think he secretly liked that we all did that together. He’d sit there and drink a scotch and pretend to ignore us and make protests about his bedroom being taken over by hooligans, but he’d give us candy and pour my mother wine.”

He paused a long time, and Catelyn was stunned to see actual tears in his eyes. She leaned in and kissed his eyelids as he had done for her earlier in the day, and he squeezed her hand. “By her last Christmas, Mom wasn’t supposed to be out of her bed unless Dad or one of the nurses helped. Her bones were brittle, you see. The cancer made it very easy for them to break, although we didn’t know that at the time. So she lay back on her bed and smiled and gave directions while Dad helped us decorate the tree in her room. When we finished, she asked Dad for a glass of wine which she wasn’t supposed to have, but she said, ‘Please, Rickard. It’s Christmas Eve. One tiny glass won’t hurt me.’ He couldn’t tell her no and went to get it. Then Brandon started complaining that Dad had hung the sun on a bottom branch. ‘It’s your sunshine, Mother! It’s supposed to be at the top!’ He’d made the thing when he was about five I think, and he pretty much acted like a five year old over it’s being hung perfectly every Christmas after that.” Ned didn’t sound irritated or angry when he spoke of Brandon’s behavior now. “He was making such a fuss over it that Dad yelled at him when he came back in. He yelled at all of us a lot in those days. He’d go from perfectly fine to completely furious with no warning. And we were all too young to understand why. Even Brandon. But Brandon was old enough to start yelling back. He told Dad he shouldn’t touch Mom’s tree anyway, that it didn’t belong to him, and he went to rehang the sun himself, and Dad told him not to touch it, but Brandon wouldn’t stop.” Ned closed his eyes. “And Dad hit him. He’d never hit any of us. But he smacked Brandon’s arm as he reached for that stupid ornament so hard that Brandon fell down. And then he just stared at him for a moment and walked out.”

“Oh, Ned,” Catelyn said, tears in her own eyes. Rickard Stark was a hard man. But she’d never known him to be anything but fair and generally kind to his children. Even if he and Brandon did argue quite a lot.

“Mom kept telling Brandon that it wasn’t his fault, that he hadn’t done anything wrong, and that Dad hadn’t meant it. But he wouldn’t even talk. He was so angry. He got up and left the room, too, and Mom told me to go after him and make sure he was all right. So I did. I followed him out to the kitchen. He wouldn’t talk to me, but he didn’t tell me to go away, so we just sat there at the kitchen table like we were waiting for something. Until we heard the thud and the scream.”

“Oh no,” Catelyn whispered, fearing she knew what had happened.

“She’d gotten out of bed after I left and climbed onto the little step ladder to move the sun to the
top of the tree, but she’d lost her balance and fallen. It was Lya who screamed, and we ran back to
Mom’s room when we heard it. Lyanna and Benjen were both crying. Mom was lying on the floor
so still. Dad wasn’t there. I started crying, too, and yelling at Mom to wake up. She opened her
eyes, but looked at Brandon and said, ‘Get your father.’ And he did. He looked all over the house,
but Dad wasn’t there. He finally ran up to the ridge and told him Mom had fallen, and brought him
back to the house. He called an ambulance and shouted at us for not having done that already.” He
paused again. “Mom had broken four vertebrae and one of her legs in the fall. She never came
home again. She stayed in the hospital until she died in February.”

“Oh god, Ned. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought you knew,” he said. “Even if he hadn’t told you all of it . . . I thought . . . he always
spent all of Christmas at Riverrun until last year so I thought you knew.”

She hadn’t asked. She’d been with Brandon for three Christmases and hadn’t even blinked when
he’d suggested they spend the first two Christmases entirely with her family. She’d been so
relieved at not facing the prospect of spending Christmas away from Riverrun that she hadn’t asked
any questions. And when he’d brought her here last year, he’d told her the Stark family did all of
their celebrating on Christmas Day so they’d spend Christmas Eve with friends. That’s all he’d
ever said. “He blamed your father, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” Ned said softly. “But not as much as he blamed himself. He’s always thought Dad blamed
him, but Dad blames himself. I couldn’t see that when I was ten, but I do now. Dad . . . he was
mostly at work or the hospital the last six weeks of Mother’s life. And then he was here . . . but not
here. And when he refused to even enter their bedroom, Brandon thought it was because of what
happened on Christmas Eve. Not because everything about that suite reminded him of Mother.”
Eve was just never a thing here again. Christmas wasn’t much at all for the first couple years after
she died, but Dad eventually brought back most of what we’d always done on Christmas Day. And
always let us have a house full of friends if we liked for any part of the school break their parents
would let them come. But Dad never really seemed himself during any part of Christmas. And then
last year, on Thanksgiving, out of the clear blue sky, he told us all how he’d asked Mom to marry
him in front of the big tree in the great room on Christmas Day. We all knew Brandon had been
paying on a ring for you, and I think Brandon took it as a chance at some sort of chance at
absolution.” He shook his head. “For something that was never his fault in the first place.”

Catelyn sat very still, uncertain what she should feel. Her heart broke for the child that Brandon
had been. For all of them, really. Yet, she couldn’t help but wonder now if Brandon’s marriage
proposal had ever been about her at all—or if it had been entirely about his parents. About trying to
fix something that couldn’t be fixed. She recalled Ned’s words about bringing her here this
Christmas—comparing it to Brandon’s proposing to her last Christmas. I think he was trying to do
what I tried to do this year.

“Ned,” she asked softly. “Why did you bring me here this Christmas?”

“Because I’m a selfish bastard,” he replied. “Because I love you, and you make everything about
my life better, and I was stupid and selfish enough to think that bringing you here could make this
part of my life better, too. I thought . . . without Brandon here, we could start all over with
Christmas as a family—with you as a part of it. And maybe someday Brandon could be a part of it,
too. But . . . I didn’t want him here this year. I admit that, Cat. I wanted it to be about us. But I
wanted it to be about my mother, too. Brandon’s never spent a Christmas Eve in this house since he
was twelve years old. We’ve never celebrated Christmas Eve since I was ten years old. And I . . . I
never knew how much I missed that until I realized how much I wanted to share all those things

with you. All the things I remember from when Mom was alive.”

She looked at the man who accepted all the pieces of her broken heart and steadfastly insisted upon loving her regardless of how difficult the situation was. “Ned, why haven’t you ever told me this story before? I mean . . . even if you thought Brandon had told me the essence of why avoided Winterfell on Christmas—or even that he did avoid it. This is your story, too. She was your mother. This is your family. We’ve talked about what it was like losing our mothers. More than once. Why . . . why did you hide this piece of you from me, my love?”

To her complete surprise, tears formed in his eyes again and even began to fall. “Because I broke a promise,” he said hoarsely.

*Everyone breaks promises*, she thought. She almost said it but then remembered this was Ned. If there was one man in all the world that only made promises he meant to keep, he was sitting beside her now. Instead, she asked very softly, “Do you want to tell me?”

“They wouldn’t even let us see her for the first three weeks she was in the hospital. Something about us being too young and having too many germs. Brandon was convinced she was dead and no one would tell us. Then finally, one day in January my father took me and Brandon to the hospital. She didn’t look like my mother anymore. She’d already gotten thin before she fell, but now she was just skin stretched over bones, and that skin was a dull yellow color. We were used to her hair being gone, but she didn’t have any of the colorful little caps she wore, and the skin on top of her head was wrinkled and bruised looking. Her eyes were huge. I was afraid to go near her, but Brandon ran up to the bed and grabbed her and started saying he was sorry over and over. He was crying, and Brandon pretty much never cried by the time he was twelve. Mom was trying to say something but he didn’t listen. He just kept crying and apologizing and holding on to her until a nurse told him he had to let her go. But Mom had put one of her arms over his back. It frightened me because it looked like a stick and her hand was a claw. But she wouldn’t move it when the nurse tried to get Brandon off her, and Dad asked the nurse to leave them alone. So we all just stood there until Brandon was finished crying, and then he kissed Mother’s cheek. It looked like paper to me, and I was half surprised it didn’t tear when he did that. I didn’t touch her at all that visit. I was too afraid. On the way home, Dad told me I had been a brave little man, not to cry in front of her. He didn’t say anything to Brandon. Brandon never went back to the hospital. Dad took me twice more. Once, with Lyanna who screamed when she saw Mom and then the last time by myself.”

Catelyn could see clearly in the man before her the quiet ten year old, terrified and heartbroken, who wouldn’t cry. She wanted to tell him he didn’t have to say anymore, but she felt that this was something he’d needed to say for a long time so she didn’t speak, and after a moment, he continued.

“She looked more like herself that last time, even though she had a clear mask on her face. Oxygen, although nobody told me that at the time. She had on an actual nightgown with long sleeves so her arms didn’t look like sticks, and she had one of her little caps. She was propped up on some pillows so it looked almost like she was sitting up. As soon as Dad took me over to the bed, she reached out to me, and I took her hand. I’d held her hand before after Lya started screaming so I wasn’t afraid to touch her anymore. Then she asked my dad to leave us alone. He didn’t want to, but she said please so he did. And she took the oxygen mask off her face so I could see her better and she could talk better. She told me she was going to miss me and I told her I would see her again as soon as Dad could bring me. And she told me she was going to die. Just like that. She said it just like that. And she said I would be sad and that it was okay. And that I could cry if I wanted or not cry if I wanted. And that she was going to ask me for something that wasn’t fair. I didn’t think her dying was fair so I told her she could ask me for anything. And she said, ‘You will be very sad, sweet Ned, but I think your father and Brandon will be sad the longest. And they will be very angry. You
might want to be angry, too, but I need you to promise me you’ll try not to be.’ I didn’t understand, but I promised her I wouldn’t be angry. Then she told me, ‘You’re the most like me of all my children. And you’re the strongest. But don’t tell your brother Brandon that. He wouldn’t like it.’ I knew Brandon was a lot stronger than I was, but I promised her anyway. And then she told me, ‘You’re strong. Lyanna and Benjen are young enough not to be haunted by me. But I’m afraid Brandon will have a hard time finding real happiness, Ned. You don’t even know what that means now, but you will. Bran may not know it even if he finds it. So, promise me. Promise me you’ll help him hold on to some happiness in his life. Will you do that for me?’ And I told her I promised.” He swallowed. “She died the next day.”

The implications of his words gradually sank in, and Catelyn found herself angry at a woman she’d never met and who’d been dead for more than a decade. Lyarra Stark had undoubtedly loved her children, but to place upon a ten year old boy the burden of being responsible for his older brother’s happiness for the rest of their lives? Maybe another child would have forgotten his words, but not Ned. Catelyn had no doubt that he’d repeated to her just now the precise words his mother had spoken, and she also had no doubt he’d never spoken them to anyone before. He’d kept them in his head all these years, thinking on them as he grew older, trying to understand precisely what she’d meant as he grew up, and trying to keep a promise that was unkeepable. The way he kept Brandon’s secrets but resented having to do it, called Brandon out for his faults but would nevertheless stand by him when needed, cheered Brandon’s every success and squashed every tiny bit of jealousy that he might feel—even when Brandon intentionally tried to provoke him. Catelyn saw all of these things in an entirely new light.

And his love for herself. Ned’s hesitance, his uncertainty, his guilt—all of it was as much Lyarra Stark’s doing as it was Brandon’s. “I am not Brandon’s happiness,” she said firmly. “Loving me isn’t breaking a promise to anyone.”

He nodded. “I know that. I tell myself that every day. But . . . wishing he had just stayed away from Christmas this year? Hitting him? Being willing to essentially cut him out of my life if he can’t stop hurting you? Cat, I meant what I said to you earlier. Nothing is more important than you. Than us. If I am forced to choose, I will choose you over Brandon every time, because whatever my mother believed of me, I am not strong enough to give you up. Not even if it hurts Brandon.”

His words made her almost as angry as the made her sad. “Listen to me, Eddard Stark. Your mother loved you. And she loved Brandon. And Lyanna and Ben and your father. And you can’t always do or say the best thing for everyone you love all the time. I learned that when my own mother died, and Father needed me, and Lysa needed me, and poor little Ed needed me, and they all needed different things, and I couldn’t be everything to everybody all the time! And sometimes I tried harder to take care of one than the other. But that doesn’t mean that one was more important! Your mother was dying, Ned. And she was scared and probably in pain, and obviously not getting enough oxygen, and she was worried about Brandon. Worried about him more than any of you because of everything that had happened. Not because she loved him most but because she thought he needed her the most, and she couldn’t be there.” There were tears in her own eyes matching those that still shone in Ned’s. “So she asked a child for a promise that no grown man or woman could ever keep. It’s an impossible promise, Ned, and had you ever told anyone about it, including Brandon, they’d have told you that. Brandon has to find his own happiness. You can’t give it to him. And I’ll never make you choose between us. Somehow, some way, Brandon will come to terms with the fact that he and I were never meant to be, and that you and I are. And that loving is never about winning and losing. And neither of us will give up on him until he learns that. I promise you that. Even if we have to take turns cracking him in the head every so often until he gets it.” She realized she was nearly shouting at him when she finally paused and took a breath.

His hands were trembling and he didn’t speak. “Ned,” she said, “My love. Your mother wants you
happy, too. She just assumed you’d know that. Remember that she told you you’d know what real happiness was one day. How could she say that, if she didn’t expect you to find it for yourself?”

He reached for her, and she held him in her arms as the trembling turned to shaking, and she realized he was crying. Actually sobbing there in her arms. She wondered if he’d cried like this since he’d been ten years old, and she held him as tightly as she could. When at last, he still, he took a deep breath and raised his head to meet her eyes. “You are more than I deserve, Cat. But I promise you that I will love you for the rest of my life.”

She smiled at him and wiped his cheeks with her hands. “You deserve everything, Ned. But that promise you just made me is one I know you can keep. And I intend to hold you to it. So you’re stuck with me.”

The went back up the stairs hand in hand and didn’t see any of the other Starks on the main floor as they walked through on their way to the stairs up to Ned’s room. They didn’t say much more to each other as they lay down in his bed, words and tears seeming to be entirely spent by both of them, but they made love to each other with a fierce sort of passion and devotion as if both were making a physical declaration to stand against whatever might attempt to come between them—even the ghosts of the living and the dead.

When Catelyn awoke early the next morning, his arm still encircled her, holding her to him. Gently, she scooted out from under it, and looked at his face for a moment before rising from the bed. He still slept deeply, and his face was free of any hint of a frown—a rare sight since since they’d arrived at Winterfell. She kissed his forehead gently and got up, showered quickly, and dressed. Still, he slept, and she found herself wondering if he’d slept at all since Brandon had arrived in Winterfell.

Brandon. She wondered if he’d returned now that Christmas Eve was over or if her presence here on Christmas Day, the anniversary of their ill-fated engagement, would keep him away still. She couldn’t help but worry for him even if the Starks were accustomed to his disappearing on Christmas Eve. Quietly, she tiptoed down the stairs to the main floor, and made her way to the door of Brandon’s suite. The door was open, which was unusual. Hesitant, she knocked lightly on the door frame before peering in. Standing before the ornate dressing mirror on the far wall was Rickard Stark. He’d turned toward the door at her knock.

“He isn’t here,” he said simply.

“Oh,” she said. “Should we be worried that he hasn’t returned?”

“He did return,” Mr. Stark said. “And now he’s gone again.”

Catelyn swallowed. “Mr. Stark. I’m truly sorry about everything that’s happened between Brandon and myself. And I know that Ned’s bringing me here made Christmas more difficult than it needed to be.”

“Christmas here has been more difficult than it needed to be for a long time,” he said brusquely, turning back to look at the mirror. “This was hers, you know. It’s the only thing of hers that’s left in these rooms. And only because it’s mounted so securely, Brandon couldn’t get it off the damn wall.”

“Brandon . . .”

“The boys tell you I got rid of all of her things?”
“They didn’t really...”

“Ned thinks I’m responsible for it, I know. I couldn’t look at anything of hers for a long time. I shut this place up like a mausoleum. When Brandon asked to move in, I told him he could do whatever he wanted, and he had every bit of evidence that she’d ever been here taken out. Except for this.”

“I always liked that mirror,” Catelyn said. “The scrolling is beautiful.”

“Mmmm. I had it made for her. The wood’s so heavy, and the mirror’s so large, I was told it would never stay fixed to the wall.” He laughed. “Proved ‘em wrong I guess.”

“Mr. Stark, am I the reason Brandon left?”

“Yes.”

His blunt, single-word answer stung. “I’m... I’m sorry. I never meant...”

“To fall in love with Ned? I don’t imagine you did. And I know my son well enough to know he fought it like hell. But fall in love, you did. Any fool can see it. Even Brandon.”

“Brandon’s not a fool,” she said, almost reflexively.

The Stark patriarch looked at her and raised a brow just the same way Ned did when he questioned someone’s words.

“You know very well he’s not,” she insisted.

“He’s not,” Rickard acknowledged. “Although, he can give a damn good impersonation of one. He’s been doing a hell of a job of that these past few days.”

“This can’t be easy for him,” Catelyn said. Everything she’d learned last night had made her more protective of Brandon than she’d been in a long time, even if she’d still kick him in the teeth before she let him hurt Ned.

“No, it isn’t. But that’s his own doing. At least inasmuch as his relationship with you is concerned. As for other things... I suppose Eddard told you about her last Christmas.”

It struck Catelyn that Rickard Stark had not once said his late wife’s name. She simply nodded.

“And Brandon never had. That doesn’t surprise me as much as it likely did Eddard. You see, Brandon is my son. Eddard is Lyarra’s.”

It was her turn to raise a brow.

“Oh, they both belong to the two of us,” he said with a bit of a laugh. “But while Brandon will talk your ear off, and Ned just about won’t talk unless you put a gun to his head, Brandon can barely share anything remotely personal, especially if it’s painful, even someone he loves. He gets that from me.” He gave a self-deprecating half-smile. “The not sharing part, I mean. I’ve never been accused of talking anyone’s ear off. Lyarra often accused me of being the most impossibly closed off man she’d ever met and wondered why she bothered with me.”

That was now twice in two utterances, he’d spoken Lyarra’s name, and Catelyn thought it made him seem somewhat less closed off than she normally found him. “You’re right,” she said. “About Brandon, I mean. I don’t truly know you well enough to have an opinion, Mr. Stark.” She smiled.
“And Ned is not closed off. Not to me.” She made a face. “Monosyllabic at times, but not closed off.”

Rickard Stark laughed, and Catelyn smiled at him. She became quickly serious again, though, thinking that last evening, Ned had been the exact opposite of closed off, and he’d spoken in far more detail than his usual. Of course, he’d done that because he loved her, and she honestly didn’t know what to think about Brandon’s feelings for her at this point.

“My son did love you, you know,” Mr. Stark said then, and Catelyn wondered if the man were able to read minds. “Brandon, I mean. Ned loves you, of course, but you know that. And he loves you better than Brandon ever could have.”

Catelyn felt a strange desire to defend Brandon to his father, but she couldn’t really dispute that statement so she remained quiet.

“That’s on me, I’m afraid. Speaking genetically. Lyarra loved me far better than I was able to love her, however much I loved her.” He sighed heavily. “I am not proud of the way I handled Lyarra’s illness and death, but I didn’t know anything else to do. I . . . had no way to make sense of someone who had so much life having every bit of that life slowly robbed from them while I had to stand there and watch.” He paused a moment, but then met her eyes. It reminded her of how Ned behaved when he had to tell her something difficult. Brandon had always tended to look away, and she found herself wondering if Rickard Stark hadn’t put more of himself into his second son than he realized. “I have regretted what I did to Brandon that Christmas Eve every day of my life since it happened, and I am aware that much of what befell my family afterward can be traced to that one awful moment. If I could change only one act in my life, I would go back there and just move that damned orange blob to the highest branch and then watch her gather the four of them around her in our bed and sing that silly song.” She didn’t know what he meant about the song, but he didn’t seem to be finished so she simply waited for him to say more. “Perhaps then, she would have died in our bed. Perhaps then, there wouldn’t have been so much anger. In Brandon. In myself.” He cleared his throat. “I’d like to apologize to you, Miss Tully. It can’t have been easy—loving Brandon. It wasn’t easy for Lyarra—loving me. And Brandon has . . . well, he has demons of his own. I fully acknowledge my contribution to them, even though I’ve pushed him to take responsibility for all his own choices and actions. It’s the only way he can ever hope to write his own destiny, and that is one thing I would hope for all my children.”

“I think Brandon will find his way, Mr. Stark. As I said before, he is not a fool.” She smiled ruefully. “Even if he is often his own worst enemy.”

“Ah, Miss Tully, if you weren’t so damnably well suited to making Eddard for the rest of his life, I think I’d be begging you to give my firstborn another chance. You do seem to understand the boy.”

“He isn’t a boy. And I’m not that special. I’ve no doubt someone else will someday understand him better than I do.”

“He left something for you.”

That startled her. She watched Rickard open a drawer of the dresser and pull out a small box and what appeared to be a letter. He must have seen the look of dismay on her face when she recognized the box, because he quickly said, “He asked me to assure you he is not asking you to marry him or give him another chance or even speak to him ever again. He simply asks that you read the letter and then decide what to do with this. He nodded toward the ring box as he said ‘this,’ and Catelyn frowned. “He also specifically told me he’d like you to let Ned read the letter as well, but that’s up to you.”
“Where did he go, Mr. Stark? Do you know?” she asked as she took the box and letter from him.

“Dorne. Apparently the Martell brothers are hosting some sort of New Year’s event and have invited guests to arrive as early as tomorrow. As he’s due back in the office on the second of January, I suppose he intends to make the most of the time he has free.”

Catelyn nodded, thinking that Ashara Dayne would likely be free of her family obligations before the new year and realizing that truly didn’t bother her. “Thank you, Mr. Stark. For giving me this and for speaking to me this morning.”

“Perhaps you should begin calling me by first name, Miss Tully as it seems you are highly likely to become a member of my family eventually, after all.”

She laughed. “You first. You’ve been calling me Miss Tully since Brandon introduced us, and absolutely no one else on the planet calls me that.”

He smiled at her. “Christmas brunch is at ten-thirty. See that my son is awake by then, would you?”

She nodded at him, and turned to go. “And Merry Christmas, Catelyn,” he said before she’d gone a step.

She turned back and said, “Merry Christmas, Rickard.” It didn’t come easily to her tongue, but the smile he gave her in return was worth it. As she left the room, she actually heard him humming. She paused in the hallway, wondering what sort of Christmas music Rickard Stark might hum, and realized it wasn’t a carol at all. The man who many people believed absolutely humorless was humming, “You Are My Sunshine.”

On her way back up to Ned’s room, Catelyn quite literally ran into Lyanna. Or rather, Lyanna ran into her. “Cat!” she exclaimed. “You’ve been downstairs. Has Brandon come back?”

“Yes,” she said, “But he only stayed long enough to tell your father he’s going to Dorne.”

“Dorne!” Lyanna exclaimed with a laugh. “Damn! ‘Shara’s definitely got something that boy can’t stay away from!” Then seemingly remembering with whom she was speaking, she said, “Oh, shit! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean . . .”

Catelyn laughed. “It’s okay, Lya. Brandon isn’t your brother whose sex life is any of my business now, remember?”

Lyanna’s face looked stunned for about three seconds before she laughed uproariously. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “That reminds me. I’ve got a Christmas present for you. Come to my room.”

“A Christmas present! Lyanna, you didn’t even know I was coming.”

“I know, I know. It’s actually something of mine, but I have another and it’s perfect for you.”

“Okay . . .” Catelyn said, wondering what on earth it could be. Lyanna hadn’t asked about the letter in her hand, and Catelyn was very glad the knit jacket she was wearing actually had a pocket large enough for the ring box. She didn’t need questions about that right now. “Speaking of Brandon, though, Lya, aren’t you upset that he left?”

The younger girl shrugged. “Christmas isn’t really his thing. Not here anyway. And it’s not your fault. Although I guess Ned told you that.”
“I am sorry, Lya,” Catelyn started to say.

“Don’t be. I barely remember any of the stuff with Mom, you weren’t the asshole in your relationship with Brandon, and Christmas is what it is. The brunch is to die for, by the way. Here we are!” She opened the door to her room which was the only other bedroom suite in the same hall as Ned’s. “Here you go.”

“A . . . radio?” Catelyn asked, looking at the item Lyanna had handed her. It wasn’t wrapped, but it did have a big red bow on it.

“Yeah. Um . . . you see where my room is, Cat. And Ned’s room is NOT downstairs like Brandon’s private palace. So . . . um, do a sister a solid and play some music or something, all right? There are things I don’t need to hear.”

Catelyn could feel her face heat up as she blushed scarlet, and Lyanna howled. “See you at brunch, Cat!” She dashed back out into the hall toward the stairs where she’d initially run into Catelyn. “Oh!” she called over her shoulder. “Benjen is a bit worried you’ll be too tired to work on the puzzle after brunch. His room’s right above Ned’s!”

Catelyn stood there in Lyanna’s bedroom whether she wished more fervently for the ground to open up and swallow her whole or for Lyanna Stark to choke on a cinnamon roll at brunch, but then she recalled the ring box in her pocket and realized that Ned’s siblings’ awareness of her sex life was not the most pressing matter on her Christmas morning agenda. She walked back to Ned’s room where she could hear the shower running.

“Merry Christmas, my love! I’m in here!” she called out.

“Care to join me?”

Catelyn’s heart lifted to hear none of last night’s sadness in his voice, and she laughed. “I’ve already showered. And brunch is in . . .” She looked at her watch. “Forty-five minutes. So I don’t have time for you to get me all messed up and then have to clean up again!”

“Cruel woman!” he called back.

She sat down in the seat by the window and looked at the envelope with her name on it in Brandon’s distinctive handwriting. The shower was still running. She took a deep breath and opened it.

Cat,

You know, I think this is the first actual letter I’ve ever written you. Maybe my dad is right and text messaging has turned all of us into shitty communicators when it comes to anything longer than a line or two. But I’m going to try. I need to tell you some things, and I can’t talk to you. If I talk to you, you’ll say something that I just have to make some nasty comment about, and the whole conversation will go to hell. Not saying that’s your fault. It’s just the way I am. If you say something I don’t like, I’m going to come back at you. Even if I deserved whatever you said.

For what it’s worth, I probably deserved ninety percent of everything you ever said to me that I didn’t like. And that’s being generous to me. But you leaving last Christmas really fucked me up. I know I messed up. I do. And I’m sorry. And I know that sorry doesn’t make it better. Especially when you heard it before. But I still thought you’d forgive me. I counted on it. I got used to counting on you to always be there for me no matter how bad I messed up, and when you suddenly weren’t there any more, I went a little crazy. I did love you, Cat. Maybe I still do. Shit, I don’t even
know how I feel. I just know it still hurts to see you. And I know you loved me. Before you get pissed off and toss this letter in the trash, note that I said loved. You don’t love me anymore. I know that. If I’m being brutally honest, I’ve fucked quite a few girls this year—some of them reminded me of you. And some of them didn’t. And there were a few times, I was with somebody, and just really happy and okay with my life in those times, and I didn’t think of you at all for weeks. But as soon as I was by myself for too long, I’d think of you, and I’d want you back. So maybe I don’t love you so much anymore as I just hate the idea of not being loved. And nobody ever loved me the way you did. I’m laughing right now, Cat, because I can see you reading this paragraph, narrowing those blue eyes of yours, and calling me a self-centered son of a bitch!

I was wanting you bad when I came home for Christmas. And you know I had plans with someone else that fell through. So I’m not going to pretend that wasn’t what happened. And if I’d gone with her like I was supposed to, I probably wouldn’t have spared you a thought. But I came home and suddenly you were everywhere. Every room in the damn house, I could see you. Especially in my room. I have such vivid memories of you in my room. Yeah, I told Dad I was writing you a letter. He told me I should write Ned, too, and I told him to tell you to share this one. So I’m just going to leave my memories of you in my room off this page. And now I’m mad again. Because just when I decided I’d make this Christmas all about seriously getting you back, you showed up with Ned.

I wasn’t prepared for that, Cat. Not even after Dad’s little intervention. I thought it was shitty for Ned not to tell me himself, but then he always did do whatever Dad tells him. Anyway, I was really pissed off at Ned and you both before I even saw you, and when I did see you . . . Damn. I don’t even know what happened to me. My brain seemed to stop functioning entirely. I know I said a lot of awful things to both of you, and I wanted so much for whatever was going on with the two of you to be bullshit. I wanted you to want me. And now here’s another ugly confession. I wanted you to NOT love Ned even more than I wanted you to love me. How’s that for shitty? Ned is probably the best guy I’ve ever known. And he happens to be my brother. And he’s never been a jealous asshole over the things I get. Or the women. And I wanted nothing more than to make certain he didn’t have you. If you want to hate me for that, I don’t blame you. I wouldn’t blame him for hating me, either. But he won’t. Ned won’t ever hate me, no matter how pissed off he gets. He can’t. Just like I can’t hate him. And I wanted to. God I wanted to when I watched the two of you rolling around in the snow. And then I saw the way you kissed him, and he had his hands in that sunset hair. I wanted to hate you both, and I convinced myself I did. But I don’t. I couldn’t really hate you any more than I could hate Ned. That’s just the truth.

I came home at about 4:30 this morning and was shocked as hell to find old Rickard waiting up for me. He and I usually give each other a pretty wide berth on Christmas Eve. It’s not a good day for us. But he says you know about that now, too. Or at least he assumes Ned told you after I disappeared. I’m not going to delve much into that bit of history. It hurts. Not what my father did, but that my mother was the best person in my life, and the last time I was with her in Winterfell, I was a fucking brat, Dad was an asshole, and she wound up dying quicker than she should have. That’s the Reader’s Digest version. Ned probably told you more. But he has a habit of making it sound like it was all Rickard’s fault, and that isn’t fair. My father’s acknowledged he was an asshole, and I’ve acknowledged that I was a brat. We’re never going to sit down and talk about our feelings, but we’re okay. I didn’t cheat on you because I’m mad at my father. I didn’t cheat on you because my mother died, either. I cheated because I’m not good at putting anybody’s needs ahead of my own. Hell, I wanted Mom to love me more than she loved Ned for as long as I can remember, but I didn’t try to behave any better. So it should come as no great surprise that I wanted you to love me more than you loved Ned or anybody else while I refused to do anything to earn that kind of love. I won’t use my parents as an excuse. Even if I think my father was on the verge of blaming himself this morning. The old man must be sleep deprived.

Sleep-deprived or not, we talked for more than an hour. He actually came and sat in my room, and
he never comes in my room. It’s where it all happened, after all. And it was mostly a good talk. But then he tried to get me to give him your ring. And I told him to fuck off. And he told me I can’t hold on to the ring because it makes me feel like I’m holding on to you. And you know what? He’s right. Pisses me off to be almost a quarter century old and have my daddy lecture me in the wee hours of the morning on my love life. Pisses me off even more that he was right.

I can’t hold onto this ring, because I can’t hold on to you. You aren’t mine anymore. You and Ned are good together, Cat. Even I can see that if I let myself. Maybe I can even be happy for you some day. I do want both of you to be happy. I just can’t quite wrap my brain or any other part of me around the idea of you being happy together. Still hurts. But I can’t hold onto you. So I need to stop holding onto this ring. But I can’t just fucking throw it away. I’ve tried to about a hundred times at least since you left it there on the table. I tried again up on the ridge today. Or I guess that’s yesterday now. Fuck. Today’s Christmas Day. The day I gave the damn thing to you in the first place. I meant it, Cat. Everything I said to you. Everything I promised. I meant it. Even if I made promises I knew damn well I couldn’t keep. I wanted to keep them.

Anyway, I took your ring out of my pocket and held it up over my head, willing myself to fling it out into the sky. But I couldn’t. Because I can’t throw you away. I just can’t. I haven’t loved that many people in my life, and I lost the person I loved most when I was twelve. I can’t just throw another person I love away even if I can’t have her. So what am I supposed to do? I can’t hold onto the ring or throw it away. I can’t hold onto you or throw you away. So I’m giving you the damn ring. Do whatever you want with it. It’s your ring. It’s your life. What you do with it isn’t my choice. Fling it off the ridge yourself. Sell it and start a college fund for some baby that looks like Ned with red hair, poor thing. Give it to a homeless person. I just want to give it to you, Cat. With no expectations of what you need to do with it. I want to give it to you because it doesn’t belong to me anymore. Just like you, it hasn’t really been mine since last Christmas.

Damn. This is longer than most papers I wrote in college. And I’m so sleep-deprived, it probably makes no sense. I’ve got to go before I’m too sleepy to drive to the train station. Give my love to Ned. Fuck that. I know you’re reading this, Ned. I love you, brother. I kind of hate you right now, but I love you. I’m going to Dorne for a week, and maybe I’ll talk to you after that. Take care of her. She deserves that.

Ned won’t let you down, Cat. Don’t let him down, either.

Bran

“Must be quite a letter.”

Catelyn looked up to see Ned standing by her chair. “It’s from Bran. He was here early this morning, apparently. Spoke with your dad and left for Dorne.”

“Dorne?” he asked, eyeing her as if checking for any reaction.

“A days long New Year’s bash at the Martells, apparently.”

“Huh. Elia didn’t say anything.”

“Her brothers are hosting, apparently. Elia’s staying up here until after New Year’s with the Targaryens.”

“Are you all right, Cat?” Ned asked carefully. “That looks like quite a letter. I can’t recall Brandon ever writing one before.”
“I . . . I don’t know,” she said honestly. “Here,” she handed it to him. “Some of it will make you mad, but . . . I think he’s sort of apologizing. And trying to explain without lying. I’ve never heard him say anything quite like this.”

Ned held the letter up to begin reading. “It’s only addressed to you. Are you sure you want me to read it?”

She nodded. “He told your dad to tell me to show it to you. There’s actually a bit written to you at the end.” She stood up, needing to touch him. “And I would want you to read it anyway.”

“All right.” He put an arm around her, and she stood there, leaning into him as he read it.

“Jesus, Bran,” he whispered when he’d finished.

“Yeah.” She wasn’t sure what else to say.

“Do you have it? Your ring, I mean?”

She didn’t think of it as her ring, but she pulled the box out of her pocket and handed it to Ned. He opened it and looked at the white gold band with the half carat diamond surrounded by tiny sapphires. “Like your eyes. That’s what he told me,” he whispered.

Catelyn nodded. He’d told her that, too.

“I’d forgotten how very pretty it was,” Ned said. He kissed the top of her head. “What are going to do with it?”

“I have no idea. I don’t want it, Ned. I haven’t wanted it since I took it off.”

“You want to fling it off the ridge? Like he suggested?”

“No!” she said almost too quickly. “I can’t . . . He did love me, Ned, even if he never loved me as well as he should have. And to him, throwing the ring away is like throwing me away. I can’t just . . . throw away his love. I mean, it’s gone already—whatever Brandon and I had. But it isn’t garbage. I can’t treat it like garbage.”

“I understand, Cat. I really do. I’m okay with anything you do with it—except for using it to send any children we may decide to have to college. All of whom will be beautiful, by the way, because they’ll look like you. And he’d better not be making fun of red hair there when I listened to him practically singing the praises of hair like a sunset repeatedly forever.”

_Singing. Hair like sunset._ “Ned! Your mother used to sing to you, didn’t she? She sang ‘You Are My Sunshine’. That’s the song, isn’t it?”

Ned looked at her in surprise. “Yes. I mean she sang a lot of songs to us, but that was her favorite. Did Brandon tell you about that?”

She shook her head. “No. Your father was humming it this morning. In Brandon’s room.”

“My father doesn’t hum,” he said with certainty. “And he never goes in that room.”

“And Brandon doesn’t write letters. It seems a day to do the unexpected.” She smiled at him. “Brandon sang me that song once, you know. Mind you, he was a bit drunk at the time. He changed sunrise to sunset and sang it as an ode to my hair.”

Ned smiled at her. “Brandon sings about as well as I do. Your poor ears.” He ran a hand through
the hair in question. “He loved that song, though. Drunk or not, he wouldn’t have sung it to you if he didn’t care about you. Mother sang it to all of us, but she always told us how she started it first with Brandon because it’s the only way she could get him to sleep.”

“What time is it?” she asked him.

“You’re the one wearing the watch,” he teased her.

“Not quite ten-fifteen,” she said almost to herself. “That’s enough time. Give me the ring and come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” She thought perhaps this was a crazy, stupid idea, but it seemed right to her, and she led Ned down to the main floor and then to the staircase down to the game room. She didn’t speak until they were in front of the little tree laden with Lyarra Stark’s ornaments.

“Give me Brandon’s sunshine,” she said to Ned. He handed it her and she tugged hard on the ribbon embedded in it—the one used to attach the hook. “Do you have your knife?”

“Yes. Cat, you aren’t going to break that, are you?”

“Of course not! Give me your pocket knife.”

He reached into his pocket and handed her the little knife he liked to carry when he was here—one his father had given him years ago. She used it to slice through the loop of the ribbon. Before Ned could say anything, she slipped the diamond and sapphire ring over the ribbon and began to knot it so that the ring was held tightly against the little clay sun. Then she tied a knot in the very ends so that the ribbon made a loop again and handed the ornament to Ned to hang back on the tree. He smiled at her.

“Brandon wrote that he hasn’t loved that many people in his life,” she said softly. “And that the one he loved most is gone. But that little orange oddly shaped sun is a tribute to the love he shared with your mother. Even though she’s gone. And that ring is a sort of tribute to the love he and I shared once, even though it wasn’t a love that could last.”

“An ornament to commemorate your Brandon’s love for you.” He sounded less than enthusiastic.”

“Ned,” she said, taking both his hands in hers. “You said you wanted Christmas back for your family. That you wanted new traditions, and for me to be a part of it. Well, like it or not, if we tell all the stories of this family’s history, there’s going to be a brief chapter about Brandon and me. We can try to ignore it, but that hasn’t worked very well, has it? Or we can accept it. Just acknowledge the fact that while not every love is a lifetime love, every love is important in its time. I love you, Ned, and I’m going to love you next Christmas and the next Christmas, and all of the Christmases of our lives. And all of the days between Christmases. I love that your father didn’t object to bringing this tree back. But I think we should make it more than just your mother’s tree. It already is, really—most of the ornaments are pictures of you and Brandon and Lyanna or things that you made. We need more picture ornaments of Benjen. More of all of you, as you are now. A picture of you and me, perhaps—the first of many. And eventually, pictures of those beautiful red headed little Starks you’re predicting. But some new dark-haired little Starks, too!”

“And when those little Starks ask why there’s a diamond ring on an orange lumpy ball?” Ned asked her.

“Then we smile and tell them about their grandmother Lyarra who would have loved all of them so
very much and would sing ‘You Are My Sunshine’ to them if she were here. And we tell them that
Uncle Brandon loved his mommy enough to make her a sunshine of his own. And years later, he
once loved their mommy enough to give her a ring with little blue stones like her eyes. And we put
them together on the Christmas tree to remind everyone that Christmas is a time to remember how
wonderful it is to love people.”

“We’ll have to start getting much larger trees,” Ned told her.

“We will?”

“Yes. Because if I’m to fully embrace this new tradition, then every year we’re adding an ornament
to illustrate precisely how much their daddy loves their mommy so they can see for themselves
what forever looks like.”

She laughed. “I like that idea very much. I love you, Ned. I love you like I’ve never loved anyone
else, and like I never will love anyone else. And we will make our Christmases magical for
ourselves, our children, AND your father and brothers and sister—even if we have to drag them
into it for awhile.”

“And your father, and brother, and sister. We can’t leave your family out of these magical
Christmases you intend to orchestrate.”

She laughed. “Of course not! We may have to Christmas for a month, but we’ll get to everyone!”

Brandon was still gone this Christmas. Their past relationship was still certain to produce more
awkward moments than Catelyn would like. Ned was still a bit jealous even if he was handling it
like a champ. Brandon was still a bit resentful and bitter and well . . . attempting to handle it in
some way at least. And it seemed the Starks had more baggage associated with Christmas than any
one family should be allowed. Yet, Catelyn felt more hopeful than she’d been since last Christmas
Day. Actually more hopeful than she’d felt even on last Christmas Day because standing in a
basement game room with Ned’s arms around her while they invented silly ways to turn awkward
family history into cherished Christmas traditions filled her with more joy and certainty about the
future than Brandon getting down on his knee and presenting her with that ring had done. She
couldn’t help but think that meeting and falling in love with Brandon had been a necessary step in
finding her way to Ned. And finding her way to Ned was the most wonderful thing that had ever
happened to her. Ned seemed to feel lighter and more hopeful as well, and she hoped he’d really
listened to her about Lyarra’s final words to him.

The two of them had quit talking entirely and were thoroughly wrapped up in each other when
Lyanna cleared her throat loudly. “Give it a rest and come to brunch. It’s now after 10:30, and Mr.
Punctuality Police is making increasingly nasty remarks about your habitual tardiness,” she
smirked.

Catelyn blushed, and Ned shooed his laughing sister up the stairs before taking Catelyn’s hand to
lead her up. “I love it when you blush,” he whispered.

“Only because you seem immune to it.”

“Oh, I can blush,” he assured her. “Just not nearly as easily as you do.”

“Really?” she asked. “I’d like to see that. Oh! I nearly forgot! Your sister gave me a Christmas
present this morning. Wasn’t that sweet?”

“Wow! I wonder how she managed to pull that off when she didn’t know you were coming until
the day you arrived!"

“I don’t know! But she put a lot of thought into her gift. I was very impressed. Oh, I should let her
tell you about it, though! Make sure you ask her what she got me and how she decided exactly
what I needed at brunch!”

“I thought we weren’t exchanging gifts until tonight.”

“We aren’t. She just really couldn’t wait to give me mine.”

They were standing at the top of the stairs now, and he pulled in for one last kiss before they
walked into the dining room. He might laugh about his sister catching them in a lip lock, but he
wasn’t about kiss her like this in front of his father.

“Are you two coming?” Lyanna called from the dining room. “And I do mean coming to brunch! Not coming in any other possible meaning of the word.”

“Lyanna Stark!” Rickard said sharply.

“Come on,” Ned told her. “Let’s get in there before my father has a coronary. And I’m now rather
anxious to find out about this Christmas gift you got from Lyanna.”

“You’ll think it’s brilliant,” Catelyn assured him, hoping Lyanna would be as fearless in her
conversation as she thought she’d be, steeling herself to be highly embarrassed in front of Mr.
Stark, but considering it well worth it if she could see her inhumanly stoic boyfriend blush and
squirm just the tiniest bit. And this house needed more laughter on Christmas.

Last Christmas was her past. This Christmas felt like the start of a wonderful future with the man
whose hand she held—the incredibly loving man she still couldn’t quite believe had given her his
heart. And regardless of how many times Brandon or anyone else played that stupid song any
Christmas from now on, there was no chance she would ever give it away. She intended to love
and cherish Ned for the rest of their lives.

“Merry Christmas, everyone!” Ned called out cheerfully. “Hey, Lya! Catelyn was really touched
by your gift! She told me to ask you all about it.”

Catelyn caught the rather evil glint in Lyanna Stark’s eye, and sat down quickly, arranging her
facial features into the most innocent expression possible as she looked at Ned’s curious grey eyes
regarding his sister. Yes, she would love and cherish this man for the rest of her life—even if he
wanted to murder her within the next five minutes.

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