

For Lloyd,  
Who has listened to me for many years  
And still smiles

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *North Watch*

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#### 1 | North Watch Keep

Sir Kelvrin, the King's Hound of Justice, paused at the outer edge of the village of North Watch. His dark hair, dark beard, and cloak let him stand without notice in the shadows. An observer would see his horse, a great beast standing 17 hands high at the shoulders, and the long sword that hung at his side and think he was a soldier for hire. Many soldiers had come to the village since the family that lived in the keep had been 'murdered by bandits' before Twelve Night. But a little longer observation and the watcher would wonder. There was something about how he stood and watched, his face carefully neutral, his back straight and stance wide that made one question the facade.

He held the reins of his horse firmly as he stood watching the early risers of the village. At first glance, the village of North Watch looked like every other village he'd seen on his miserable northward journey. A few thatched houses, a few goats, the square in the center of the village with a well that drew women in the morning, fetching water. He wasn't sure what small detail had caught his attention in the fitful morning light. The three girls paused, buckets and harnesses on their shoulders, their hair bound back, their chatter barely piercing the dawning dew. A fourth waited, silent and unmoving with a single bucket at her feet, ignored by the others.

Months ago, the King had woken the morning after a hard snow fall and called Kelvrin to his chambers before the rest of the court had even risen. "Something is wrong at North Watch," he had stated, seated beside the fire in his fur and flocked wool. Kelvrin had frowned only briefly at his King and then turned to stare out the window at the steadily falling snow. "I want you to go to North Watch, and find out what is happening. You need to go alone." He stared out the window. "A party of even three would be remarked on, and .. We need information."

Sir Kelvrin had only nodded. His King was known for his fancies and his uncanny ability to know what was happening in his Kingdom. North Watch Keep kept the court supplied with stone fruits, apples and cider of the best kind. Kelvrin had eaten their apples and plums at

court. Not to mention the rumors, whispered tales that the family of North Watch was somehow blessed by the fey of the forest. He discounted the rumors as silly tales for the foolish. But Kelvrin was loyal to the King he served. It was mad folly to travel in the middle of winter to the Keep at the Northern Edge of the Kingdom even for Kelvrin, an experienced Knight, and the King's champion. But if the King wanted him to take a foolish and long journey in the dead of the winter snows to prove that the family in the north was fine, he would take the long journey, no matter his personal opinions about the matter.

With his back against the stone wall of the nearest house, he stared at the alabaster face of the fourth girl. She waited for her turn at the well after the three chattering magpies, unmoving, nearly statue like. She was not more than sixteen, he thought. Her hair lay in two long braids to her waist. The style was not unusual, except her braids were tied by knotted embroidered silks, and he was nearly certain that ties that held her faded burgundy tunic of linen closed were also rich purple silk cords. While the others chattered like magpies in the morning's first gaze, she remained silent, stony, a pool of pain he could feel in the midst of the others.

No one spoke to her. If any laughter had ever bubbled through the cracks in her soul, he thought, it had long since fled to some other, greener, fresher face. But she was striking in her beauty. He realized then what had caught his attention: the silent girl had an uncanny resemblance to the King's youngest sister.