

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Leaving the castle**

They were coming for her.

She watched for her tower window. They were over a hundred strong. They'd ridden a long way, and the warriors and their horses had to be tired, but neither man nor beast showed any sign of fatigue. They were covered in dust but moved as though it was the first mile of their journey.

The thunderous sound of their approach had brought the sentinels to alert, and the walls were manned for a show of force. Lord Gareth ruled with an iron fist, and any who dared to defy him died a slow and usually painful death. The small army approaching obviously did not fear Lord Gareth. Was it because they were kindred spirits or, she hoped, because their strength was enough to dismiss the castle's inhabitants as negligible?

She heard the guard call out. The army did not fly any standard. A deep booming voice identified Lord Matthew. They had to wait for Lord Gareth to allow their entry. Only the knight and five men were permitted to pass. The remainder had to wait outside the walls.

It was time to get dressed and do her face and hair. Her bridegroom had arrived, and she needed to prepare to greet him.

An hour later, there was a knock on her door. A young maid had been dispatched to summon her to the main hall. Closing the door firmly behind her, she locked it and

turned it to follow the girl down the steps. It was a laborious process that took fifteen minutes.

Lord Gareth was impatient, and she could hear his bellow before she reached the great hall. "Where the devil is she? I sent for her half an hour ago. How long does it take to get down from the tower? I'll wager that the girl forgot her errand. I'll deal with her when I see her next," he concluded viciously.

Hearing this, the maid left her and rushed ahead to explain that Lady Catherine was right behind her. Gareth cuffed the girl for taking so long. He then looked closely at his unwanted guest. He wanted to savor the moment when his ward entered the hall.

Lord Matthew did not like the way his host was staring at him. In fact, he did not like the man at all. It was evident that Lord Gareth was accustomed to using brute force to rule his people. He also used the women poorly. His hand roamed over their bodies. He had seen him painfully squeeze the maid's breast before sending her on her errand. The girl accepted it stoically as she knew she had no choice.

He was watching her regain her feet after Lord Gareth's blow had knocked her to the ground when he heard the most god-awful sound.

"I am here, my Lord." The voice was high-pitched and grated his nerves like two knives rubbing against each other. He turned towards the source of the sound and stopped abruptly. This could not be the Lady Catherine. Surely not. This had to be an ill-thought-out joke on the part of his host. He had seen a portrait of Lady Adela, Lady Catherine's mother: she had been a woman of great beauty.

This creature, and there was no other word to describe her, was slowly straightening from a very awkward curtsy. His gaze traveled the length of her, and he still could not believe his eyes. Her muddy brown hair was coarse and disheveled, as though it had not seen a brush in ... forever. Her skin was pale, flat and mottled. There was a wart on the left side of her nose and another on her chin. Both sported a few wispy hairs. Her back had a slight curve, and her breasts were pendulous and hung almost to her waist. As she neared Lord Gareth, she passed in front of him. The smell that wafted in her wake was enough to bring tears to his eyes.

This was the woman he needed to wed in order to gain the land she had inherited from Lord Andrew upon her brother's death. He wondered how he had offended the king for him to consider this a reward for his service and loyalty to the crown.

Lord Andrew had been Lady Catherine's guardian even though she'd been sent to live with Lord Gareth. Her brother had managed the land her mother had left her as well as his own. The king had become her guardian upon Andrew's death and given her to Lord Matthew along with all the lands, which was what Matthew truly craved.

He suspected that the king had never seen Lady Catherine. He needed to believe that he was being rewarded instead of punished. He had not let any emotion cross his face, but the thought that he had to bed this creature to consummate the marriage was enough to make him quail.

He listened, seemingly impassively, as Lord Gareth informed Lady Catherine that she was to wed Lord Matthew.

"The king has chosen Lord Matthew to be your husband," he explained. "Father Micheal has accompanied Lord Matthew so there will be no delay. You will be wed at the nooning hour," he declared and braced himself for the screech of displeasure he knew would surely come. Lady Catherine was not known for her sweet and gentle temperament. She was a skilled healer, but no one wanted to incur her wrath: she might refuse to minister to them.

Her reaction to the news was surprising. "Really? This is most interesting," she said calmly in a voice that could shatter glass. She turned to look at Lord Matthew and batted her eyes flirtatiously. Gareth looked satisfied when he saw Lord Matthew swallow hard to keep his gorge from rising.

"Be ready to leave afterward." Matthew did not want to stay the night and be forced to consummate this marriage immediately. He knew it would take him a few days to gather the courage and the strategy to enable him to take his wife to bed. As well, his host's unwholesome attention to his staff was unpleasant, and while he was certain to be offered any of the females in the castle if he expressed an interest, he really did not want any of Lord Gareth's leavings.

"As you wish, my lord. If you will excuse me, I will return to my rooms." Catherine made a wobbly curtsy and slowly, painfully made her way back to the tower room. Once there, she began quickly packing all she wanted or needed to take with her. She was uncertain if she was being rescued or if she was merely going to another jail. In case of the latter, she carefully packed a trail satchel. She'd be able to sneak away, and the items in her bag would ensure that no one recognized her.

It took two hours before all the rest was packed into three trucks. She was the castle's healer and was surprised Lord Gareth would let her go so easily. On the other hand, she frequently harangued the man until he left the room or hit one of the maids in order to punish her. He held them as hostages to her behavior. But he also needed her services, as did his men. However, most of her work was with the women he abused: if Gareth took a liking to a girl from the village, he'd have her brought to the castle. The girl was a prisoner in his quarters until he tired of her. The screams were usually cut off abruptly and only lasted a few days. The girls soon learned that screaming only encouraged Gareth. Catherine knew he enjoyed using his fists, and the girls were usually covered in bruises. Some had broken bones if they'd tried too hard to resist. It sometimes took her weeks to repair the damage to their bodies.

The worst of it was that his men imitated their lord. If Lord Gareth was particularly pleased with his men, he would gift them with one of the women. Some of them were unlucky enough to have up to twenty men mount them before they were deemed unusable. Once they were all finished, the girl was once again brought to Catherine's tower room for healing.

Before Catherine had come, the girls had been thrown out like so much refuse. They were considered whores, as so many men had had them, and no longer worthy of any consideration. Gareth now sent them to be healed so they could be used again and again for his entertainment.

Catherine's step-father and later her brother had also used women against their will: and just like Lord Gareth, they had passed them around as rewards. No woman was

safe from their depredations. Her mother had known and had sent her away when it became apparent that her husband was looking at her blossoming daughter with lust. She hadn't known she was sending her child into a worse hell.

If her new husband turned out to be a good man, she'd try to become a good wife; if not, she would escape into the night, and once she used the items in her satchel, no one would ever know her. She knew it was a weak plan, but she could not come up with anything better. She was being wed for her dowry: the lands that had belonged to her brother and those bequeathed to her by her mother. Once Lord Matthew married her, he would have the land. Hopefully, he would not search for his inconvenient wife if she ran away.

Lost in thought, Catherine did not hear the knock at the door as she crouched by a trunk to put away a few remaining items. She fell over backward when Lord Matthew entered the room.

He had needed a reason to escape Gareth's lascivious behavior. The man had wrapped his arms around a serving girl's waist and pinned her to him with his great strength. He had then lowered his hand and lifted her skirts enough to fondle her bare ass. The maid had stood seemingly impassive as she waited for her lord to be finished with her. Matthew had been unable to stand by and do nothing: using those you were sworn to protect made him furious. However, he could not challenge the man in his own hall, so he excused himself to see if his men had seen to his betrothed's needs.

Once away for the Great Hall, he changed his mind and sought her out himself. She was in the topmost room in the North Tower. She had probably tried Gareth's temper

once too much to have such undesirable accommodations: a long flight of stairs coupled with being subject to bitterly cold winter winds.

The room was as cold and foreboding as he had anticipated; it was, however, surprisingly sweet-smelling in contrast to his occupant. Lady Catherine was seated on the ground before an open trunk. Seeing her struggle to rise, he waved his hand at her: "Do not trouble yourself. I merely came to see if you require assistance with your luggage. I see you have finished packing. I will tell my men to bring down your trunks."

Catherine managed to get to her feet. The shock of his intrusion into her private sanctuary made her unusually awkward.

"My Lord, forgive me. I did not hear you knock," she accused.

Matthew frowned: was she chastising him? "Lady Catherine, I would never enter a lady's room without knocking."

"It is unseemly for you to be alone with me," Catherine started to protest.

"I assure you, you are quite safe. I am not given to attacking women, and I am your betrothed husband."

Lady Catherine had straightened and positioned herself to leave if he tried to get too close. Perhaps a beautiful woman might be wary, considering Gareth's inclinations, but surely her guardian hadn't tried anything with Lady Catherine.

Catherine stared hard and asked the question that had been nagging at her: "You have traveled far to come here. Will your men need to rest the night before we leave?"

Matthew smiled wolfishly: "My men are always ready, whether it be for battle or travel. Are you trying to delay our departure, madam?"

"No," Catherine denied quickly. "I would prefer to leave as soon as possible." The possibility that Gareth might consider using her wedding as an excuse for recruiting more girls to the castle was terrifying, especially as she would not be there to help them afterward. She knew that she was safe from Gareth's attentions, but she also did not want to discover that Lord Matthew enjoyed the same use of strength. Too many of the men in her life used their position to intimidate. Her mother had told her that this was not the norm, but she had never experienced anything different.

Matthew wondered what Lady Catherine was thinking when he saw her hands tremble.

"Do you fear me?" he asked.

Catherine gave the question the consideration it deserved and answered it truthfully. "I am not certain. You have not done anything as yet to make me fear you." After a slight pause, she asked boldly: "Should I?"

"No," he answered confidently. "I have never raised my hand to a woman and do not plan to start now."

"It's not your hand I am worried about," she murmured quietly.

Matthew heard her but did not reply. There wasn't much he could say. This creature feared he would lust after her and take her violently? Before he could say anything at all, they were interrupted.

"Milady, are you truly leaving?"

The stench of the intruder preceded the wail, and Matthew moved closer to the window and fresh air while watching the two women.



The newcomer had to be a swine herder. The smell was unmistakable, yet Catherine allowed the girl to embrace her. At this point, the smell wouldn't bother her as she is so fragrant herself, he thought.

He watched and was puzzled. Catherine soothed the crying girl with a great deal of crooning and soft words. After a few minutes, she lifted her gaze to Matthew, and the plea was there in her eyes.

"May I take Mathilda with me? As my maid perhaps?"

He noted the hopeful look on both their faces. "As you will. Perhaps there would be time before we leave for her to help you take a bath."

"No," they both yelled immediately. In a quieter tone, Catherine continued, "I thank you for your consideration, but Mathilda will need time to pack."

She turned to her new maid: "Go now and be ready in one hour." To Matthew, she added, "I have completed my packing. We can go."

Matthew gestured for her to precede him. He followed at a distance, in fact, as far as he could. The miasma of the two women was a fog that wrapped around him and swapped his senses. He felt his gorge rise. He would be unable to marry Lady Catherine in the close confines of the Great Hall.

He sought out his host and advised him that the wedding ceremony would take place in the meadow in order that his men could bear witness. As Lord Gareth did not want Lord Matthew in his castle, he had no objections. Better still, he would be rid of the hag much sooner than he had hoped.

Everything was quickly reorganized, and a makeshift altar was prepared. Father Michael, the priest that Matthew had brought along, was ready. After being in his betrothed's vicinity, several men had gathered flowers for the bride in a vain attempt to dampen the stench.

Lady Catherine walked towards him with Lord Gareth at her side. She smiled inwardly. He did not dare touch her lest the smell contaminate him. Good. He gestured her in the direction of Lord Matthew, giving her in marriage.

Lord Matthew was made of sterner stuff as he actually took her dirty hand. She would need to be careful with this man until she decided whether or not to trust him. He was more observant than Lord Gareth and might discern something out of place. She would need to stay away from him.

Father Michael began the wedding ceremony. When it came time for Matthew to proclaim his vows, he pledged to protect her. He couldn't bring himself to promise anything else: to cherish was out of the question.

He would protect her. Catherine listened to his words and heard the underlying promise: no one would ever harm her. She would have to discover if he was a man of his word.

Then it was her turn. She promised to respect Lord Matthew and obey him in everything related to her safety. That was all she could promise in good conscience before God.

"Good Lady," Father Michael began, "a good wife must obey her husband in all things."

Catherine opened her mouth to explain, but Matthew beat her to it.

"Lady Catherine's promise means she has carefully thought out her vows. If she obeys in matters of safety, I am satisfied. Proceed."

Father Michael was not ready to argue with Lord Matthew about church doctrine. If he was satisfied, then so be it.

"With the powers vested in me by the holy church, I pronounce you man and wife," he intoned, blessing the couple. "You may kiss the bride."

Catherine turned to Matthew, wondering what he would do. She knew that she was not a great beauty. I am actually quite gruesome, she thought with some satisfaction.

Matthew turned his head and looked down at his bride. "I do not believe it is a requirement," he stated. "Lady Catherine is my wife; the ceremony has been duly witnessed."

The lady may not be a prize, but her lands surely are, he thought. He now held the title to five keeps and one castle. The family had owned the castle and three keeps and Lady Catherine had two keeps from her mother. He had been surprised that a lady with such a dowry had remained unmarried. He now knew the reason. No matter, the deed was done, and the land and property were his. He kept what was his.

They set out immediately. He had expected his bride to make some objections and had been prepared to deny her. She surprised him. She only asked to wait for Mathilda, her new maid. When they reached the wagon, the woman was already seated in the wagon, waiting for her mistress. Seeing her so settled, Lady Catherine slowly walked over and, without assistance, climbed aboard and looked at Lord Matthew inquiringly.

His new lady wanted to leave, and so did her. Within ten minutes of the completion of the wedding ceremony, the army was again on the move.

Lord Matthew rode at the head, as was his custom. His first, Gerald, was riding with the new recruits towards the back and came forward to speak to his lord after a time.

"Your Lady fears someone at Lord Gareth's keep. As does her maid. They are forever glancing back. At first, I thought they were uncomfortable with soldiers at their backs, but then I realized that they both look beyond us."

Matthew looked back to the women's wagon; sure enough, they were looking behind them.

"Perhaps you should reassure her that we will protect her," prompted Gerald.

Matthew looked at Gerald incredulously.

"I do not wish to be any closer to Lady Catherine than I must. Even upwind, the stench is incredible. I have what I want from her. As to her fears, she will realize in time that I will protect her as I vowed to do," he concluded grimly.

"You do realize that you will have to bed her, at least once, to consummate the marriage."

"There is no need to remind me," Matthew said with distaste. "I am well aware of it." Matthew looked ahead. "I am not a coward, Gerald, but this is one task I am not looking forward to completing."

Gerald looked at his lord in sympathy. It was not a task he would relish either. He dropped back and continued to observe his new lady.

After a few hours, Lady Catherine convinced Mathilda that Lord Gareth would not be coming after them, and the girl quieted down enough to allow her to think. She would have to wash up enough to remove most of the stench. It would take several days for the smell to be gone entirely, but she needed to be able to approach Matthew and his soldiers. He was her husband, and she needed what kind of man he was.

So when they stopped for the night, Catherine pulled out some soap and cleansing salts. She had known that she would need to properly wash and had taken the time to make some sweet smelling soap and used coarse salt infused with oils to find a media that could eradicate the dirt and stench accumulated over the years.

She also convinced Mathilda to do the same. This was more difficult than anticipated. Mathilda used the dirt and the smell of pigs to hide from the eyes of men. In her mind, and not unreasonably so, cleanliness equaled vulnerability. She had witnessed Lord Gareth's depravity and had no wish to become the prime attraction of his evening's entertainment. Catherine explained that they would do this in stages: first the smell and the obvious dirt. Did not she long to be truly clean?

Mathilda finally agreed as long as Catherine also washed to the same degree. So they both headed to the river. It took a long time, but they managed to get most of the ingrained dirt and smell to wash away downstream. When they reappeared at camp, the only noticeable difference was that their hands and faces were somewhat cleaner. The smell was still noticeable as the soldiers wrinkled their noses at them. Catherine realized they were still wearing the same clothes, and the smell clung to that.

The men had erected a tent for Lady Catherine and Mathilda. It wasn't to protect them from the elements or to guard their modesty. They sought to separate themselves from the smell. They were sworn to defend their mistress, but they couldn't all sleep upwind.

Catherine was grateful and expressed her thanks in her usual grating voice. She truly was grateful: out of sight, out of mind. Once she and Matilda had retired into the tent, the men spoke more freely. She learned a great deal about her husband, listening to his soldiers.

Over the next ten days, Catherine learned that her husband was unlike any man she had ever encountered. They were a day's ride from the family castle. It was time.