

## CHAPTER 1

### Speyer, Germany, Summer 1125

Holding her dead husband's imperial crown, Matilda felt the cold pressure of gemstones and hard gold against her fingertips and palms. The light from the window arch embossed the metal's soft patina with sharper glints of radiance. Heinrich had worn this crown on feast days and official occasions. She had an equivalent one of gold and sapphires, fashioned for her by the greatest goldsmiths in the empire, and in the course of their eleven year marriage had learned to bear its weight with grace and dignity.

She was the wife and consort of the Emperor. Her people called her "Matilda the Good." They had not always been her people, but it was how she thought of them now, and they of her and for a moment grief squeezed her heart so tightly that she caught her breath. Heinrich would never wear this diadem again, nor smile at her with that small curl of amused gravity. They would never sit together in the bedchamber discussing state matters in companionship, nor share the same golden cup at banquets. No offspring born of his loins and her womb would occupy the imperial throne. The cradle was empty because God had not seen fit to let their son live beyond the hour of his birth, and now Heinrich himself lay entombed in the great red stone cathedral here and another man ruled over what had been theirs.

Matilda the Good. Matilda the Empress. Matilda the childless widow. The words whispered through her mind like footfalls in a crypt. If she stayed, she would have to add Matilda the nun to her list of titles, and she had no intention of retiring to the cloister. She was twenty three, young, vigorous and strong and a new life awaited in Normandy and England, the latter her birthplace, but now barely remembered.

Turning, she gave the crown to her chamberlain so that he could dismantle and pack it safely in its leather travelling case.

'Domina, if it please you, your escort is ready.'

Matilda faced the white-haired knight bowing in the doorway. Like her, he was dressed for travel in a thick riding cloak and stout calf hide boots. His left hand rested lightly on his sword pommel.

‘Thank you, Drogo.’ As the servants removed the last of her baggage, she paced slowly around the chamber, studying the pale walls stripped of their bright hangings, the bare benches around the hearth, the dying fire. Soon there would be nothing left to say she had ever dwelt here.

‘It is difficult to bid farewell, Domina,’ Drogo said with sympathy.

Still looking around, as if her gaze was caught in a web of invisible threads, Matilda paused at the door. She remembered being eight years old, standing in the great hall at Liege, trembling with exhaustion at the end of her long journey from England. She could still recall the fear she had felt and all the pressure of being sent out of the nest to a foreign land and a betrothal with a grown man. The match had been arranged to suit her father’s political purpose and she had known she must do her duty and not court his displeasure by failing him, because he was a great king and she was a princess of high and royal blood. It could have been a disaster, but instead, it had been the making of her and the moulding of a frightened, studious little girl into a regal woman and able consort for the Emperor of Germany.

‘I have been happy here.’ She touched the carved doorpost in a gesture that clung and bade farewell at the same time.

‘Your lord father will be pleased to have you home.’

Matilda dropped her hand and straightened her cloak. ‘I do not need to be cajoled like a skittish horse.’

‘That was not my intent, Domina.’

‘Then what was your intent?’ Drogo had been with her since that first long journey to her betrothal. He was her bodyguard and leader of her household knights. Strong, dour, dependable. As a child she had thought him ancient because even then his hair had been white, although he had only been thirty years old. He looked little different now, except for a few new lines and the deepening of older ones.

‘To say that an open door awaits you.’

‘And that I should close this one?’

‘No, Domina, it has made you who and what you are - and that is also why your father has summoned you.’

‘It is but one of his reasons and driven by necessity,’ she replied shortly. ‘I may not have seen my father in many years, but I know him well.’ Taking a resolute breath, she left the room, carrying herself as if she were bearing the weight and grace of her crown.

Her entourage stood in a semi-circle of servants, retainers and officials. Most of her baggage had gone ahead by cart three days earlier and only the nucleus of her household remained with a handful of pack horses to carry light provisions and the items she wanted to keep with her. Her chaplain, Burchard, kept looking furtively at the gelding laden with the items from the portable chapel. Matilda followed his glance, her gaze resting but not lingering upon a certain leather casket in one of the panniers before she turned to her mare. The salmon-red saddle was a sumptuous affair, padded and brocaded almost like her hearth chair, with a support for her spine and a rest for her feet. While not the swiftest way to travel, it was dignified and magnificent. The towns and villages through which they passed would expect nothing less than splendour from the Emperor’s recent widow.

Matilda settled herself and positioned her feet precisely on the platform. Seated sideways, looking forward, and looking back. It was appropriate. She raised her slender right hand to Drogo, who acknowledged the signal with a salute, and trotted to the head of the troop. The banners unfurled, gold and red and black, the heralds cantered out and the cavalcade began to unwind along the road like jewels knotted on a string. The dowager Empress of Germany was leaving the home of her heart to return to the home of her birth and a new set of duties.

Adeliza gripped the bedclothes and stifled a gasp as Henry withdrew from her body. He was sixty years old, but still hale and vigorous. The force of

his thrusts had made her sore inside, and his stolid weight was crushing her into the bed. Mercifully, he gathered himself and flopped over onto his back, panting hard. Biting her lip, Adeliza placed her hand on her flat belly and strove to regain her own breath. Henry was well endowed, and the act of procreation was often awkward and uncomfortable between them but God willing, this time she would conceive.

She had been Henry's wife and the consecrated Queen of England for five years, and still each month her flux came at the appointed time in a red cramp of disappointment and failure. Thus far no amount of prayers, gifts, penances or potions had rectified her barrenness. Henry had a score of bastards by various mistresses, so he was potent with other women, but only had one living legitimate child, his daughter Matilda from his first marriage. His son from that union had died shortly before Henry took Adeliza to wife. He seldom spoke of the tragedy that had robbed him of his heir, drowned in a shipwreck on a bitter November night, but it had driven his policies ever since. Her part in those policies was to bear him a new male heir, but thus far she had failed in her duty.

Henry kissed her shoulder and squeezed her breast before parting the curtains and leaving the bed. She watched him scratch the curly silver hair on his broad chest. His stocky frame carried a slight paunch, but he was muscular and in proportion. Stretching, he made a sound like a contented lion. Their union, she thought, even if it brought forth no other fruit, had released his tension. His sexual appetite was prodigious and in between bedding her, he regularly sported with other women.

He poured himself wine from the flagon set on a painted coffer under the window, and on his return picked up his cloak and swept it around his shoulders. Silver and blue squirrel furs gleamed in the candle light. Adeliza sat up and folded her hands around her knees. The soreness between her thighs diminished to a dull throb. He offered her a drink from the cup and she took a dainty sip. 'Matilda will be arriving soon,' he said. 'Brian FitzCount is due to meet her tomorrow on the road.'

Adeliza could tell from his expression that his thoughts had turned inwards to the weaving of his political web. 'All is ready for her,' she replied. 'The servants are keeping a good fire in her chamber to make it warm and chase out the damp. I have instructed them to burn incense and put out bowls of rose petals to sweeten the air. They hung new tapestries on the walls this afternoon and the furniture is all assembled. I...'

Henry raised his hand to silence her. 'I am sure her chamber will be perfect.'

Adeliza flushed and looked down.

'I think you will be good company for each other being of a similar age.' Henry said, smiling as if at a whimsical notion.

'It will be strange to call her daughter when she is two years older than I am.'

'I am sure you will both quickly grow accustomed.' He was still smiling, but Adeliza could tell his intent lay elsewhere. Henry's conversations were never just idle gossip; there was always a purpose. 'I want you to cultivate her. She has been a long time absent, and I need to consider her future. Some matters are rightly for the counsel chamber and for father and daughter, but some things are better discussed between women.' He stroked the side of her face with a powerful, stubby hand. 'You have a skill with people; they open themselves to you.'

Adeliza frowned. 'You want me to draw confidences from her?'

'I would know her mind. I have seen her once in sixteen years, and then but for a few days. Her letters give me news, but they are couched in the language of scribes and I would know her true character.' A hard glint entered his eyes. 'I would know if she is strong enough.'

'Strong enough for what?'

'For what I have in mind for her.' He turned away to pace the chamber, picking up a scroll and setting it down, fiddling with a jewelled staff, turning it end over end. Watching him, Adeliza thought that he was like one of the jugglers he employed to entertain his courtiers, keeping the balls all rotating in

the air, knowing where each one was and what to do with it, adapting swiftly as a new one was tossed into the rotation, discarding another when he had no more need. Lacking a legitimate son, he had to look to the succession. He was grooming his nephew Stephen as a possible successor, but now Matilda was a widow and free to come home and make a new marriage, the game had changed again. To think of making Matilda heir to England and Normandy was beyond audacious. The notion of a woman ruler would make even the most liberal of his barons choke on his wine. Adeliza's brows drew together. Her husband often gambled, but he was never rash and he was accustomed to imposing his iron will on everyone.

'She is young and healthy,' he said. 'And she has borne a child, even if it did not survive the birthing. She will make another marriage and bear more sons if God is merciful.'

A pang went through Adeliza. If God was merciful, she herself would bear sons, but she understood his need to pursue other avenues. 'Do you have anyone in mind?'

'Several candidates,' he replied in an offhand tone. 'You need not trouble yourself on that score.'

'But when the time comes, you expect me to smooth the path.'

Henry climbed back into bed and pulled the covers over them both. He kissed her again, with a hard mouth. 'It is a queen's duty, prerogative and privilege to be a peacemaker,' he replied. 'I do not think for one moment you will fail me.'

'I won't,' Adeliza said, and as he pinched out the bedside candle, set her hand between her thighs, felt the slipperiness of his seed, and prayed this time for success.

**Chapter 2**  
**The Road to Rouen, Autumn 1125**

A wet unpleasant morning had cleared to the east as Matilda's entourage wound its way through the forests of the Beauvais towards the great city of Rouen, heart of Normandy on the banks of the Seine, but although the blue sky was welcome, the wind had picked up, and with an hour to sunset, was blustering hard. Tonight they were making camp by the roadside. They should have been met at noon by a party from Rouen led by one of her father's barons, Brien FitzCount, but thus far there was no sign, and Matilda was growing annoyed and impatient. Her mare was lame on her offside hind leg and she was having to ride pillion on Drogo's crupper as if she were a woman of his household under his authority, rather than his liege lady. Her knights and attendants were giving her a wide berth. Drogo's placatory remark that by tomorrow night they would be in Rouen with every comfort to hand, had not improved her mood; she was accustomed to precision and smooth order.

A gust of wind struck her side-on and she had to grab Drogo's belt. 'I refuse to ride into Rouen like this,' she hissed.

'Domina, if it comes to the worst, I will give you this horse and saddle up my remount, but there is no point doing so for what is left of the daylight.' He spoke with the pragmatic calm of one accustomed to her ways and expectations.

She eyed the melted gold of the westering sun and knew he was right; there was no point, but it made her angry. Why couldn't people keep their promises?

Suddenly the knight drew rein and the jolt threw her against his spine. 'My apologies, Domina,' he said, 'It appears our escort is here.'

Peering round him, Matilda saw a troop approaching at a steady trot. 'Help me down,' she snapped 'I cannot to receive them sitting pillion on your horse.'

Drogo dismounted and swiftly assisted her to do the same. She shook

out her gown, adjusted her cloak, and stood erect. The wind snatched at her veil, but fortunately it was well pinned to her undercap. She had to lock her legs to keep her balance.

The oncoming troop splashed to a muddy halt. Their leader flung down from the saddle of a handsome black stallion, and removing his hat, dropped to one knee before her.

‘You are late,’ she said icily. ‘We have been looking for you since noon.’

‘Domina, I am deeply sorry. We would have been here sooner, but one of the cart wheels broke, and there was a fallen tree across our path. The wind has made everything more difficult and slowed our pace.’

She was cold, tired and not in the mood for excuses. ‘Get up,’ she said with a brusque gesture.

He rose to his feet and his legs were so long that they seemed to unfold forever. They were encased in fine leather riding boots laced with red cords. His black hair swirled about his face and his eyes were a deep, peat-pool brown. His mouth had a natural upward curve that made him look as if he were smiling, even though his demeanour was serious, ‘Domina, I am Brian, son of Count Alan of Brittany, and lord of Wallingford Castle. I do not expect you to remember me. The last time we were in each other’s presence, you were witnessing one of your father’s charters in Nottingham before you went to Germany and I had not long entered your father’s household as a squire.’

‘That was a long time ago,’ she said, still annoyed.

‘Indeed, Domina.’ He gestured over his shoulder at the men of his troop who had also dismounted and were kneeling. ‘We have brought a fine pavilion and provisions. It will not take us long to make camp.’

‘It will take you even less time if you tell those men of yours to get up off their knees and start work,’ she said tartly. ‘My own will help if you have need.’

His expression impassive, he bowed impassively and went to give brisk orders. A host of workmen and serjeants began unpacking sections of a large,

circular, red and blue tent from a two-wheeled cart. The outer canvas was stamped with golden lions. There was a pale silk inner lining and rich woollen hangings set on curved rods for the interior. The wind billowed the canvas like the sail of a ship in a storm. Matilda watched the men struggle with their burden and mentally shook her head. Had she not been so tired and cross, she would have burst out laughing.

One of Brian's company was examining her mare, running his hand down her lame foreleg and soothing her with soft talk. When he saw Matilda watching, he bowed and said, 'She needs rest and a warm bran poultice on that knee, Domina. 'There is nothing wrong with her beyond the strain of the road.' He gently scratched the mare's neck.

He was not a groom for his cloak was fur-lined and his tunic embroidered. His open features were raised above the average by striking hazel-gold eyes. 'Were you at Nottingham with my lord FitzCount too?' she asked.

He shook his head. 'No Domina, but my father would have been. He is William D'Albini, lord of Buckenham in Norfolk and one of your father's stewards.'

'I do not recall him, she said, 'but I know of your family.' Obviously he was a spare young blood at court, sent out with FitzCount on escort duty. 'Your own name?'

'Domina, it is William, the same as my father.'

'Well then, William D'Albini, you seem to know about horses.'

He gave her a wide smile, exposing fine, strong teeth. 'Well enough, Domina.' He rubbed the mare's soft muzzle with a gentle hand.

'I hope my lord FitzCount has a spare mount.'

'I am sure he does, Domina.'

Matilda was not so certain. Sounds of a heated exchange flashed across to them. Someone had mislaid the tent pegs and everyone was blaming everyone else. 'This would not have happened at my husband's court,' she said with displeasure.

D'Albini gave an equable shrug. 'There are difficult days when whatever you do, you suffer mishaps and today is one such.' Clucking his tongue to the mare, he led her away to tether her with the other horses.

The tent pegs turned up in a different panner to the expected one, and following more bad-tempered oaths, were driven into the ground and the canvas secured. Brian FitzCount directed operations, now and then scraping his hands through his hair, looking increasingly embarrassed and exasperated.

Gradually, however, order emerged out of chaos and Matilda was able to enter the tent and at least be out of the wind, even if the canvas sides flapped like wings striving to lift the structure into the air. Her women set about making her bed, layering several mattresses onto the strung frame and topping them with clean sheets and soft blankets. A manservant hooked a partition across the middle of the tent and someone else fetched a chair with a quilted cushion. A bench and a small table arrived. Matilda remained standing, arms folded.

Brian FitzCount entered the tent followed by servants bearing a flagon and cups, loaves of bread and assorted cheeses and smoked meats. 'The men are making a windbreak,' he said. 'At least it isn't raining.'

'No,' she agreed, thinking that rain would have been the final seasoning. She sat down on the chair. The servants spread the table with an embroidered cloth and brought food and drink. Before she could change her mind, she indicated that Brian should join her.

He hesitated, went to the tent entrance to bellow more instructions, then dropped the flap and returned to serve her himself. She studied his long fingers as he poured wine into silver cups. An emerald ring glinted, and another of plaited gold. His hands were clean, the nails clipped short, but they were ink-stained, as if he were a common clerk. She tried to remember him from her childhood, but there was nothing. It had been too long ago and he would have been just another youth at court...