

Chapter 1. London

We celebrated the birth of Christ in Westminster Abbey. It felt odd after all the pomp of our Coronation to be back in the that mighty house of God, but also a relief the concerns and nerves leading up to that momentous day were over. However, the ritual, the spirituality and solemnity of the occasion would remain forever in my heart.

What a fateful year it had been for Henry and me. Stephen of Blois and his evil son Eustace were no longer. Henry's mother, Empress Matilda was at last avenged, and England her rightful inheritance, returned to its dynastic roots.

The year of 1154 was carved like an inscription on a monument in my mind. Judith's prophesy all those years ago in Antioch had provoked within me every emotion from doubt to anger. Now that it was coming true, I wrestled still with its predictions: *You will marry the love of your life, you will bear him many sons, but your life will be tumultuous. You are destined to become a great queen.*

This morning while we knelt in Westminster Abbey, I glanced at Henry with his head bowed and I pondered what his thoughts might be. The responsibilities of his kingdom lay heavily on his young shoulders even though his mother had groomed him for this role. I prayed not only for God's guidance of our onerous future, but to endow Henry and me with the wisdom to unite this war-torn nation. Henry was a natural leader of men, a soldier, a valiant knight, but not a patient diplomat. I prayed I could provide that influence.

After we returned to the old Saxon Palace of Bermondsey, our temporary home, our families enjoyed themselves and were able to relax. Our Christmas court

was informal, allowing us to partake in simple fun. We exchanged little gifts, drank mulled wine, and ate goose and other fowl such as grouse and pheasant. With sticky fingers we relished sweetmeats made from dried fruits and nuts flavoured with spices and laced with honey.

This would be the first Christmas little William would remember; such a joy. My Aquitainian court was as excited as puppies with the appearance of snow. Laughter and sport took place in the fairyland-like gardens as we made snowballs and hurled them in all directions. It became quite a joust with the Plantagenet men trying to outdo each other. Henry's brothers, Geoffrey, and William were as competitive as he was. Nilla's children ran about squealing with joy, for the first time since their father Raoul's death. Wrapped up in furs, my sister and I looked like cuddly bears. We joined in the fun. But the cold eventually won as flurries of snowflakes sent us indoors to the warmth of the braziers, but not before I hit Henry on his ear with a snowball, dislodging his cap. He whirled around.

'What the... Eleanor!'

I saw him wrestling with his thoughts – should he retaliate with someone in my condition or not. But, with a peel of laughter and speed that surprised him, I had shot indoors before he could hurl his handful of snow.

Henry caught me puffing up the stairs. He backed me into a corner. My expanding belly was no barrier as he forced the snow down my neck. My shrieks brought everyone to see what the commotion was. With a fiendish chuckle, Henry picked me up despite my protests and carried me to the great hall.

'No! Henry, stop. Put me down!'

To get my own back, I shoved my freezing hands under his tunic.

'Ahhh! God's teeth Eleanor. Your hands are freezing!'

Sir Robert de Lucy Henry's squire who was standing with a goblet of mulled wine in his hand and a

mischievous look in his eye, quipped, 'Oh, dear oh dear! Such questionable behaviour from the King and Queen of England!'

'Ah ha, de Lucy! Enough cheek from you.'

Henry and I pounced on him and thawed our freezing hands on his face and neck. Our attendants thought we had lost our senses.

Mulled wine soon warmed us as we collapsed into chairs or onto stools, still laughing and panting. Nilla and I were reminded of our childhood Christmases at Poitiers or L'Ombrière, though snow was almost unknown in the Aquitaine. Nonetheless, Christmastide was always a time for family festivities as much as a day to celebrate Christ's birth.

Our first Christmas day in England was a joyous event, a reprieve from the obligations to come. Later in bed, Henry and I reflected on his plans and dreams for our kingdom and our lands across the channel.

We talked of London. The contrast with Paris, full of students and learning combined with the piety of the French court of my first marriage, was profound. London was so different, full of burghers and commerce. The wide river Thames carried ships from as far away as Venice and Syria. The city was bustling, recovering from years of economic uncertainty, but many buildings were in poor repair after Stephen's reign, and many people were destitute from years of deprivation. It was the same in the provinces where castles, manor houses and whole villages had been destroyed. Barons' lands were covered in brambles where crops should be thriving. Abbeys and monasteries were hard pressed. There was still dissent among certain members of the nobility that spread to their serfs. We spoke long into the night. Henry said as soon as possible we must undertake a royal progress across the land, to restore law and order. The rebellions that took place between my Aquitaine vassals from time to time were mild compared to what had happened in England.

Stephen's invasion had thrown it into civil war. The barons had taken sides. There were those who supported Empress Matilda, others Stephen, and the unscrupulous played one hand off against the other. From prosperity, England had fallen into anarchy and ruin. Henry must repair the damage and unite the country. As he snuggled up to me, I said,

'Henry I will do everything in my power as your wife and queen to assist you. You have my promise. I will do my duty.'

Henry stroked my bulging stomach.

'I think you are already doing your duty.'

'Yes, but... I want to do more than just have babies. There is much I can offer.'

'Hmm! Indeed... you already do.'

Henry chuckled lasciviously. There are times no matter how much I loved him; I wanted to swat him.

The New Year - 1155 I recorded - was full of anticipation. Henry and I made several trips across the Thames to survey the state of the Palace of Westminster. The outer structure was blackened and scarred, but, like the palace at Winchester, the damage was worse in certain sections of the building. The living quarters were the least affected, but the great hall and audience chambers needed rebuilding. Broken windowpanes had to be replaced with new glass to keep out the weather as well as the pigeons which were roosting everywhere. It will be an excellent opportunity to introduce the new Gothic architecture and to fit fireplaces, a novelty in Britain. This will be expensive. I will need to convince Henry, and Uncle Ralph for that matter, to loosen the Aquitaine purse strings. If Gothic influences are introduced, I will have to source architects and engineers from France and, as much as it sticks in my craw, from St Denis, Abbé Suger's old stronghold. His cruelty within the French court when I was Louis's young

queen still haunts me. I hope he rots in hell!

I was relating my plans to Henry when he interrupted, 'Eleanor, I think you should attend to your condition rather than taking charge of the refurbishment of our London residence as originally planned.'

'Henry, being with child is not an illness. I can still give instructions. Dear God, I am not carrying bricks. Anyway, I asked Sir Robert to do a few errands for me. I have a list of stonemasons, glaziers, carpenters and other artisans I need to interview whom he can summon on my behalf, so stop fussing.'

'Darling, I need Robert to travel with me to Canterbury. I will appoint Thomas Becket to your services instead.'

'Becket, that sanctimonious fellow I met at Winchester? He is rather too intellectual for such pursuits is he not? What rapport would he have with carpenters or others of the craftsmen's guilds?'

'Get off your high horse, Eleanor. Becket is a Londoner, born and bred. He has an eye for fine workmanship and more importantly, knows how to bargain.'

I was still not so sure. I found Becket – odd.

Henry was impatient to leave for Canterbury. The weather, however, came to my aid, keeping him close at hand with Archbishop Theodore and others who were bound for Kent.

By early February, work was underway at Westminster. The pigeons were driven out once the new glass was in place. The kitchens though not damaged, needed renewal. New spits, pullies and grates were installed. I was impressed with the diligence of the men employed to rebuild and renovate. Now that peace was spreading throughout the land, they could follow their crafts without fear their work would be destroyed by another wave of rebellion.