

Chapter 1 The Young King

Papa's old library was my sanctuary. I slumped into the chair at my desk and turned the pages of my journal. So much had happened.

Henry had arrived at the Palace of L'Ombrière to collect Hal. The time had come for him to be crowned the Young King of England in Westminster Abbey, but he balked at the prospect.

'Darling, your crowning is a great honour. It is your father's tradition. Not only that, it is your duty.'

'I do not care! I do not want the damn title, two meaningless words. And I am not going back to England, so there!' He stomped to the door.

I raised my voice. 'I am sorry, Hal, but you must obey. As I have said, you are duty-bound. Furthermore, this is your destiny. It is ordained...'

'No!' The door slammed.

But I was certain it was his suspicions regarding the state of Henry's and my marriage that was behind his reluctance. His father and I were estranged. I had walked out, bolted to the Aquitaine after discovering his affair with Rosamund Clifford, which was at its height when John was born. Amidst the hurt and humiliation, though, I think I still loved Henry, desired him...but?

When Henry arrived, he begged my forgiveness. He kissed me and tried to unlace my gown, but the braided cords knotted in his haste. Frustrated, he tried to rip the sumptuous robe from my body. We ended in a tangled heap on my bed fully clothed, boots and all. Henry tore at his braies with one hand, with the other, he tried to hoist the twisted silk above my knees. My passion for him almost over-ruled common sense. But, at the last moment, I could not bring myself to lie with a husband I no longer trusted. I struggled from his groping and pushed him away.

Hell was about to break loose between us when Jerome banged on my chamber door.

‘Lord Henry! Lord Henry!’ His voice was insistent. ‘A courier has just delivered a missive for you, Milord. He said it is most urgent and must be placed in your hands immediately.’

Henry stormed to the door, wrenched it open and snatched the letter from my dear childhood companion, now a Benedictine monk. I dashed towards my dressing room, but an animal howl halted me. The letter was from Henry’s brother William. Their mother, Empress Matilda, had died.

Within days, the family sailed to Barfleur and galloped to Rouen. Matilda had been interred in her beloved Abbey of Bec by the time we arrived. We attended memorial services and prayers for her immortal soul in Rouen Cathedral.

Henry readied himself to sail to England after the ceremonies were over. But Hal was still stubbornly protesting.

‘I am not going! I do not want to be crowned.’

I tried to calm him. ‘Hal, please, listen. I have told you; you have no choice. You are your father’s heir—by the Grace of God, the Young King of England.’

Hal was about to bolt. I barred the door.

‘Hal, please...please...do it for me.’

We stood eyeball to eyeball.

‘I am not going without you, Maman. I do not care what you say!’

I took Hal’s face in my hands. ‘I promise I will accompany you. I want to, and it is my duty.’ I kissed his forehead and left to inform Henry of my decision.

I steadied myself and entered Henry’s chamber.

‘Henry, I am sorry to interrupt, but I must speak to you.’ Icicles hung in the air. ‘I will be returning to England with you to attend Hal’s crowning as the Young King.’

‘And so you should, Eleanor. It is your duty, as my queen as well as to Hal.’

‘I am aware of my duties to Hal, Henry.’

His tone of voice had me gritting my teeth, so I turned to leave, muttering, ‘It is a pity you do not.’

‘So that is it, Eleanor?’ Henry shouted after me, ‘Why not just send a courier?’

We arrived in London. Preparations for the crowning were finalised. Richard, Geoffrey and the three girls were excited as was our youngest son John, who was with us from Fontevrault Abbey.

The ceremony proclaiming Hal as the Young King was deeply spiritual. The pride I had in my beloved son was immeasurable when the crown was placed on his head.

But Thomas Becket's bitterness hovered. Henry had forbidden him from crowning Hal, although it was his right as Archbishop of Canterbury. Instead, Archbishop Roger of York officiated. Becket was out for vengeance. He had refused to obey the Common Laws of England like his predecessor, and his defiance led to a schism between him and his king. Becket insisted unordained clerks who committed crimes while employed by the church should be judged by Canon Law, rather than within England's legal system. Thomas Becket then exiled himself in Paris and endeared himself to no-one other than like-minded clerics.

We returned to the Palace at Westminster after the ceremony for a sumptuous banquet in the Great Hall, now as bare as a monastery refectory. After I discovered Henry's affair, I stripped our royal residences of all adornment that came from my dowry. I started at Woodstock and worked my way through Windsor, Westminster and Winchester, our major royal residences. Henry was lucky to be left with a bed to sleep in, let alone a feather mattress.

As far as I was concerned, Henry deserved the austerity with no rich décor to impress his barons or another woman. Luckily, the weather was balmy or the elaborate tapestries that had kept out the draughts would be missed. I wondered what excuses Henry used to explain their disappearance. Sir Robert whispered he was having a war against extravagance.

After the celebrations were over, the rest of the children and I prepared to return to the Aquitaine. Hal had to remain with his father. He was miserable. I took him to the library, the only place I had not torn asunder, and sat him down.

He begged. 'Maman, please, please stay. It is going to be hell without you.'

'Do not despair, darling...'

'But, Maman, what will I do? Papa barely talks to me. I will be twiddling my thumbs.'

'I will speak to your father, make him realise he must give you duties to train you for your regal responsibilities.'

'That will be the day. You are the one who teaches us; Papa just yells.'

'I will do my best to make him understand.'

Hal thumped his fist on my desk.

'Why will you not tell me what is really going on between you and Papa?'

'It is better we live apart to give us time to heal our differences,' I muttered.

I knew it was a lame excuse. Hal was on the cusp of manhood. I had no idea what he knew about laying with a woman. It was something I could not discuss as his mother, nor could I reveal the gruesome facts as to why I could not stay in England as Henry's wife. I believed Hal was still too young to understand the causes of his parent's marital problems.

I had discovered other infidelities on Henry's part while in London. These were women of noble birth, not just a couple of milkmaids or tavern strumpets, but women who no doubt were attracted to the king by his title. Some had borne him children.

I confronted him. 'What is your explanation, Henry?'

'It is a pack of lies by those who want to discredit me and come between us. Was it Owain Pendragon, or Brynn, that Welsh witch?'

I ignored his insinuations and handed him a list.

'Anyone could have written that!'

'The proof comes from a convent where at least one of your bastard daughters is housed.'

He went pale, but I remained calm. 'I will be leaving within the week for Bordeaux with the rest of the children. It is also time you fulfilled your promise to Geoffrey by bestowing on

him the title of Duke of Brittany. Try to get on with Hal, and for God's sake, Henry, give him duties! Teach him about the governance and laws of his kingdom. I have started the process. It is time for you to continue it. Now I must prepare for my departure.'

Henry put his hand on my arm.

'Take your hand off me,' I demanded.

When he did not, I slapped it away and walked with as much dignity as I could.

'We have a political alliance, Eleanor. You are still my queen.'

With my hand on the doorknob, I paused.

'Mop up your own mess, 'enri Plantagenet-a. I brokered peace then you destroy it. As I was trained by my father, I will govern the Aquitaine. I will work to repair the damage you caused in my County of Poitou by sending your mercenaries to pillage the land and rape innocent villagers. I will endeavour to regain the trust of my vassals by applying the laws of my duchy, not the Anglo-Norman tyranny you live by. Now I will take my leave.'

The day before my departure, Hal again begged me not to leave him with his father. I hugged him and reminded him I would see him in Normandy when he was to marry Princess Margaret of France. Hal ranted and raved, sounding horribly like Henry.

'It is bad enough that I must wear a hollow crown. Now I must marry a baby.'

Hal's indignation made me laugh. 'Darling, Princess Margaret is about your age.'

'Really?' Hal then smiled. 'Yes, I suppose she would have grown. What does Margaret look like? She could be ugly?'

'I have never seen her. King Louis prevented that. But Louis was good looking when I knew him. Margaret's mother, the late Queen Constance, was said to be attractive, dark-haired, Spanish looking.'

'What if Margaret is narrow-minded like King Louis?'

'That I cannot answer, but as she has not been reared in the French court, she may have had a wider upbringing.'