

Chapter 1
The Palace of Poitiers, home of the Dukes of Aquitaine, January 1137

Alienor woke at dawn. The tall candle that had been left to burn all night was almost a stub and even through the closed shutters, she could hear the cockerels on roosts, walls and midden heaps, crowing the city of Poitiers awake. Mounded under the bedclothes, her sister Petronella slumbered, her dark hair spread on the pillow. Alienor crept from the bed, careful not to wake her, because she knew how grumpy Petronella could be when disturbed too early. Besides, Alienor wanted these moments to herself. This was no ordinary day, and once the noise and bustle began, it would not cease.

Alienor put on the gown folded over her painted coffer, and pushed her feet into soft kidskin shoes. She unlatched a small door in the shutters and, braiding her hair with nimble fingers, leaned out to inhale the new morning with pleasure. A mild, moist breeze filled her nose with the scents of smoke and stone and freshly baked bread. For a long moment she gazed at the alternating ribbons of charcoal, oyster and gold striating the eastern skyline, and eventually drew back with a pensive sigh. Lifting her cloak from its peg, she tip-toed from the chamber into the adjoining room where the maids were catching the last moments of sleep, or else yawning and scratching with bleary eyes. Alienor slipped past them like a sleek young vixen and on light and silent feet, wound her way down the stairs of the great Maubergeon tower.

A drowsy youth was setting out bread and wine on trestles in the great hall. Alienor stole a small loaf, still oven-warm from the bread basket, and went outside. Lanterns still shone their fuzzy light in some huts and outbuildings. She could hear the clatter of pots from the kitchens and a cook berating a scullion for spilling the milk. Ordinary, every day sounds, saying that all was well and familiar with the world, even on the cusp of change.

At the stables the grooms were preparing the horses for the coming journey. Ginnet, her grey mare and Morello, her sister's glossy black pony were still in their stalls, but the pack horses were being harnessed and carts stood ready in the yard to carry the baggage the hundred and fifty miles south from Poitiers to Bordeaux where she and Petronella were to spend the spring and summer at the Ombrière palace overlooking the River Garonne. Alienor enjoyed travelling, and she loved Bordeaux, but this time it was different and she felt unsettled, as if there was a storm just beyond the horizon.

Entering Ginnet's stall, she offered the Spanish palfrey a piece of new bread on the flat of her hand, and rubbed the strong, sleek neck. Ginnet snorted and lipped at Alienor's cloak, seeking more tidbits. 'Papa doesn't have to go all the way to Compostela,' she told the mare. 'Why can't he stay at home with us and pray? I hate it when he goes away.'

'Alienor.'

She jumped and hot with guilt, faced her father, seeing immediately from his expression that he had overheard her.

He was tall and long limbed, his brown hair patched with grey at ears and temples. Deep creases fanned from his eye corners and there were hollows beneath his well defined cheekbones. 'You are early awake daughter.' He gently tugged her thick braid of tawny hair. 'Where is Petronella?'

'Still abed papa. I left her to sleep.'

He gave her a grave look. 'You know that a pilgrimage is a serious commitment to God. This is no foolish jaunt made on a whim.'

‘Yes, papa,’ she said stiffly. She knew the pilgrimage was important to him, indeed necessary for the good of his soul, but she still did not want him to go. He had been different of late; reserved and more obviously burdened, and she did not understand why.

He tilted her chin on his forefinger. ‘You are my heir, Alienor, and you must behave as befits the daughter of the Duke of Aquitaine, not a sulky child.’

Feeling indignant, she pulled away. She was thirteen years old, a year past the age of consent, and considered herself grown up, even while she still craved the security of her father’s love and presence.

‘I see you understand me.’ His brow creased. ‘While I am gone, you are the ruler of Aquitaine. Our vassals have sworn to uphold you as my successor and you must honour their faith.’

Alienor bit her lip. ‘I am afraid you will not come back.’ Her voice shook. ‘- that I shall not see you again.’

‘Oh, child! If God wills it, of course I shall come back.’ He kissed her forehead tenderly. ‘Besides, you have me for a little while yet.’

A groom arrived to see to Ginnet and Morello and her father drew her into the courtyard where the pale grey of first light was yielding to warmer tints and colours. ‘Go now and wake your sister. It will be a fine thing to say you have walked part of the way along the pilgrim route of Saint James.’

Alienor gave him a long look, before walking away, her back straight and her steps measured. His eldest daughter was swiftly becoming a woman. Already tall, she had grown considerably in the past year, and developed light curves at breast and hip. She was exquisite; just looking at her, intensified his pain. She was too young for what was coming, God help them all.

Petronella was awake when Aliénor returned to their chamber and was busy putting her favourite trinkets into a large cloth bag ready for the journey. Floreta, their nurse and chaperone, had braided Petronella’s shiny dark hair with blue ribbons and tied it back from her heart-shaped face, revealing the downy curve of her cheek in profile.

‘Where did you go?’ Petronella demanded.

‘Nowhere, just a walk. You were still asleep.’

Petronella closed the drawstring on the bag and waggled the tassels at the end of the ties. ‘Papa says he’ll bring us blessed crosses from the shrine of St James.’

As if blessed crosses were any sort of compensation for their father’s forthcoming absence, Alienor thought, but she held her tongue. Petronella was eleven, but still so much the child. Despite their closeness, the two years between them was often a gulf. Alienor fulfilled the role of their missing mother to Petronella as often as she did sister.

‘And when he comes back after Easter, we’ll have a big celebration, won’t we?’ Petronella’s wide brown gaze sought reassurance. ‘Won’t we?’

Alienor nodded. ‘Of course we will,’ she said and hugged Petronella, and found comfort in their mutual embrace.

It was mid-morning by the time the ducal party set out for Bordeaux following a mass celebrated in the pilgrim church of St. Hilaire, its walls blazoned with the eagle device of the lords of Aquitaine.

Ragged patches of pale blue peeped between the clouds and sudden swift spangles of sunlight flashed on horse harnesses and belt fittings. The entourage unravelled along the road like a fine thread, woven with the silver of armour, the rich hues of expensive gowns, crimson, violet and gold, and muted blends of tawny and grey belonging to

servants and carters. Everyone set out on foot, not just Duke William. This first day, all would walk the twenty miles to the overnight stop at St Sauvant.

Alienor paced out, holding Petronella's hand one side, and lifting her gown the other so that it would not trail in the dirt. Now and again, Petronella gave a hop and a skip. A jongleur started to sing to the accompaniment of a small harp and Alienor recognised the words of her grandfather, William the ninth Duke of Aquitaine who had revelled in a notorious reputation. Many of his songs were sexual in content, unsettling in their rawness and unfit for the bower, but this particular one was plangent and haunting, and sent a shiver down Alienor's spine.

I know not when I am asleep or awake

Unless someone tells me

My heart is nearly bursting with a deep sorrow,

But I care not a fig about it

By St. Martial!

Her father kept company with her and Petronella for a while, but his stride was longer than theirs, and gradually he drew ahead and left them in the company of the household women. Alienor watched him walk away, and fixed her gaze on his hand where it gripped his pilgrim staff. The sapphire ring of his ducal authority glittered at her like a dark eye. She wanted him to turn and look at her, but he continued to focus on the road ahead, and she felt as if he were deliberately distancing himself, and that in a while he would be gone completely, leaving only the dust of his footsteps to follow.

She was not even cheered when her father's constable Geoffrey de Rancon joined her and Petronella. He was in his late twenties with rich brown hair, deep-set green eyes, and a ready smile. She had known him since she was born because he was one of her father's close friends and confidantes. He had lost his wife two years ago, and had not yet sought to remarry, but his need for heirs was not pressing because he had two daughters and a son from the match. 'Why so glum?' He peered round into her face. 'You'll make the clouds come back scowling like that.'

Petronella giggled and Geoffrey winked at her.

'Don't be foolish,' Alienor lifted her chin and strode out.

Geoffrey matched her pace. 'Then tell me what is wrong.'

'Nothing,' she said. 'Nothing is wrong. 'Why should there be?'

He pursed his lips. 'Because your father is going to Compostela and leaving you in Bordeaux?'

Alienor's throat tightened. Geoffrey saw too much. 'Of course not,' she snapped.

He gave her a thoughtful look. 'I am sorry. You are right, I am foolish, but will you forgive me and let me walk with you a while?'

Alienor gave a grudging nod. Geoffrey clasped her hand in his and took Petronella's on his other side.

After a while and almost without her knowing, the frown cleared from Alienor's brow. Geoffrey was no substitute for her father, but his presence was a reassuring comfort and enabled her to go forward with renewed courage.

Chapter 2
Bordeaux, February 1137

Sitting in his chamber of the Ombrieres palace in Bordeaux, William the tenth Duke of Aquitaine looked down at the documents the scribe had left for him to read. He picked up the top one and studied its contents while rubbing his side.

‘Sire, you are still set on this journey?’

He glanced across the hearth at the cleric standing before the fire clad in heavy fur-lined robes. Geoffrey de Louroux was the Archbishop of Bordeaux and despite occasional clashes of opinion, they were friends of longstanding. William had appointed Geoffrey as tutor to his two daughters. ‘I am,’ he replied.....