

Chapter 1

Canterbury, January 1236

The road from Dover to Canterbury was mired with winter mud so progress was slow. Ailenor, Princess of Provence, had never seen such weather. She tugged back the oiled canvas that served to keep out the worst of the rain and peered from her long, box-like carriage into the January landscape. A collection of gaunt faces stared back; figures huddled in heavy cloaks, watching the golden lions of Savoy and Provence pass through Canterbury's southernmost gate into the cramped lanes of the city. Domina Willelma's rhythmic snores competed with the splashing of hooves moving laboriously through the gateway, the roll of wheels belonging to sumpter carts, the cracking of whips and the protesting snorts of an escort of three hundred horsemen. All the way from Dover, thirteen year-old Ailenor had listened to rain rattling on the curved roof of the carriage. With a hiss, it dripped through a minute crack onto the box of hot charcoal that warmed her feet. She let the curtain drop and withdrew into her furs. A tear slid down her cheek. Was this country a place of eternal deluges? It's so different to my golden Provençal fields on which sun shines winter and summer. She drew her mantle closer.

This was not what she imagined after Richard of Cornwall, King Henry's brother, had visited their castle of Les Baux last year and she had listened to his thrilling tales of romance. Nor was England the magical land she visualised when she wrote her best poem ever, set in Cornwall, verse that Prince Richard admired. It was not the green country filled with wild flowers she dreamed of when Henry, King of England, sent for her to become his bride. She shivered in her damp gown. She had not wanted woollen gowns and underskirts. Rather, she desired velvets, silks and satins, and the finest linen for under-garments. After two days' travel over the Narrow Sea, through waterlogged roads she understood the need for warmth. She was to dwell in a land where winter never ended and summer was but a distant prayer.

The carriage jolted to a halt and Uncle William, the Bishop Elect of Valence, thrust his head through the heavy hanging. 'We are approaching the Archbishop's palace. Prepare to descend.' He almost fell off his horse as he pushed his neck further into the carriage to waggle a long finger at Ailenor's lady. 'Waken that woman at once. Order her to tidy your dress.' With an impatient grunt, he withdrew before Ailenor could reply.

'Domina Willelma, wake up.' Ailenor gently shook her lady's shoulder. 'Uncle William says -'

'By our sainted Lady, my child, forgive me. Why have you permitted me to sleep?' Lady Willelma sat straight up, her dark eyes wide awake.

'Because, dear Willelma, you have hardly slept since we left Vienne and that was three weeks ago. We've almost arrived.'

'And I'm neglecting my duty to your mother.' Willelma fussed about the seat and opened the tassels of a velvet bag.

My mother, Ailenor thought, a leaden stone invading her throat, tears gathering again. If only she were here. She would make jests and have me laugh at it all. A heartbeat later her lady was holding a comb. Tugging hard, she plaited Ailenor's luxuriant dark hair - Ailenor let out a wail of protest. Willelma pulled again and it hurt. She coiled the plaits into crispinettes which felt uncomfortably

tight. Dragging a mantle lined with ermine from the travelling chest, Willelma wrapped it around her shoulders and pinned it closed with a jewelled brooch.

‘I feel like a wrapped-up gift,’ Ailenor cried out, her voice almost a screech.

‘There, much better.’ Domina Willelma sat back and tossed the cloak Ailenor had been wearing to one side. ‘Servants can look after that now.’

Ailenor had no choice but to compose herself. She wanted to shout, ‘Turn about. Take me home.’

It was too late. Another jolt and the carriage stopped. Uncle William pulled open the carriage door. They had landed into a vast courtyard. Ailenor allowed Willelma to arrange her mantle. A servant raced forward with a carpeted step. Placing her foot down on the top tread, Ailenor descended onto wet cobbles, her arms flapping outwards as she tried to steady and balance.

Above the courtyard a pale midday sun reached awkwardly through fat grey clouds.