Hi, I'm Vesper Stamper, the author of *A Cloud of Outrageous Blue*, and I'm going to be reading some selections from the book for you today.

Winter 1348. Chapter 1.

Everyone in the canvas-covered cart is asleep. Four other travelers nestle into the deep straw of the wagon bed—strangers, all of us, except for a father and his son of maybe nine or ten years. The old monk there’s a snorer, and it takes him the whole trip to get his bones comfortable. When I got into this cart, the only space had been next to the woman with the gray hair, the pink fleshy face, the gentle-eyed, reticent smile. She made as much room as she could, but someone’s knee or elbow is always in my side—like the proverbial thorn. That’s what Mam would have said. “Tusmore village,” says the driver. “Everyone out who needs a piss.” The monk needs help getting out, so I lend him a hand. From the gap in the cart cover, the white winter sun blinds me, and when my eyes adjust, it’s like I haven’t left Hartley Cross after all. They look the same, these villages, and each one makes me hurt for home. I don’t dare leave my satchel in the cart for curious eyes or fingers. It wouldn’t be right to say that all of my worldly possessions are here in my stitched-up bag. Most things I had to leave behind. The blankets. The cooking kettle. Pounce barking me home, and Juniper winding around my ankles with that deep purr. The sheep, the trees, the forest trail. Don’t forget the fort you built with Henry against that uprooted oak. Don’t forget the scent of the fields in the rain.

Don’t forget the crack on the daub wall that looked like a fawn’s face. Don’t. Forget. I reach into the satchel and run my fingers over each item until I feel the drawings I made of my parents. What’s left is barely discernible, the fine lines made with the brass stylus on fire-browned parchment, burned in a moment of anger. Don’t forget Da’s face. And don’t forget Mam’s face. And don’t forget baby sis’s face. Nor even your brother Henry’s. I would have stuffed the entire house into the satchel if I could. But I only took what fit—Mam’s cloak and dark woad-blue gown, the small clay honey pot Henry gave me, my best willow charcoal twigs, rolled in a piece of linen, to draw with. I hold the stone cross from Mason and sense his impact on it, his hands shaping and smoothing it. And don’t forget Mason’s hands. I may have to surrender all these things when I get to the priory, but it’s a risk worth taking—they’re all I have left of everyone I love. It was only yesterday, midmorning, when everything changed. “Edie?” Henry’s voice was alarmed. He shook me. Shook and shook. “Edie, wake up!” I stirred, shoved his hand off my shoulder and looked sideways at my big brother. Suddenly everything came rushing
back like a tempest: Da’s murder. Mam’s death, birthing little baby sis. Mason avoiding me, just like the rest of the villagers. The fear of starvation.

The intensifying fights with Henry as we got more and more desperate. Death and loss and fury and hunger. “Get away from me,” I grunted, rolling back over. “You weren’t waking up,” he said. “Are you, all right?” “No.” Henry ignored me, grinning, almost dancing with excitement. I sat up slowly, suspicion gnawing at my belly. “Edie, I know where you’re going to go!” “Henry, we talked about this,” I reminded him. “You said we were leaving together. In the spring. You said that Lord Geoffrey would wait until then to evict us. Remember?” “I know, but this is better. Brother Robert’s got a prioress friend up north, and she said she’d take you in. Lord Geoffrey agreed. It’s Saint Christopher’s Priory, in Thornchester. It’s all sorted. They normally only take noblewomen, but out of charity they’ll take you as a conversa!” A priory? The word felt like a fresh, icy slap to the side of my head. And a conversa—a lay sister, a servant? So instead of being a wooler’s daughter with at least some dignity, I’d be cleaning the latrines of prissy nuns? How was that better? “What do you mean, it’s all sorted?” I pressed him. “Who put you in charge of me?” “Da did, Edie. When they murdered him.” Of course it was Henry’s decision; I knew that. The moment Da died, Henry became head of house, but that didn’t really give him options. He still had to answer to Lord Geoffrey Caxton, the very man who killed our father. We were bound to Lord Geoffrey, and I was bound to Henry. But I didn’t want to accept it. Henry was only two years older than me—my brother, not my lord. “But don’t you understand?” he coaxed. “It’s better than we could have hoped! You and I would have been lucky to find a house half this size to let, in some strange place, scraping by on someone else’s land—we could have been beggars!”

I tried to be calm, but I just couldn’t. “This is it, then, Henry? Sixteen years old, and the best thing I can hope for is to rot away in some convent? Where they send the old hags and toady girls? And I should be grateful? Go to hell!” The words singed my mouth as I spat them, and Henry flinched, all the optimism drained from his face in a moment. He set his jaw and spoke with an unnerving softness. “Fine, Edyth. I tried to do my best by you. If this is your thanks . . . then we’ll say goodbye now. The wagon will be here for you at dawn.” He opened the cupboard and grabbed half a loaf and filled his waterskin with ale. I had never been angry with my big brother before, my best friend, my hero—but desperation lit one last flaming arrow on my tongue. “Traitor! It’s you and me, Edie,” I mocked his childhood promise. “What a lie! You don’t care about anyone but yourself! It’s Henry and Henry, and to hell with little sister! Edyth, Edyth, Round and Red, might as well be left for dead!” Henry turned and gave me a look I’d never seen. Something about the muscles in his face made him look much older than eighteen, like fate had cornered and caged him. He clenched his teeth and his muscles pulsed; he sniffed hard, walked quickly out of the house and slammed the door to my enraged scream. I sank to the floor, skirts in a pool around me, and cried. The day darkened early. A raindrop hung pregnant from the edge of the windowsill, all silvers except for a thin strip of rainbow edging its metal belly, and I could feel those colors on my tongue, like the time when I tried licking the edge of the cold kettle, just to see if it tasted like I thought it would: yes, like blood and ash, like the dark brown stripes that appeared at the outsides of my eyes. That was when Mam could stir things
in the kettle, the green alexanders with the fresh spring butter. She could stir things in a kettle, because she was alive. That was when Da was alive, too, and he would dip the hardest edges of the brown bread and sop up the iron-tinged butter, and it would drop in his beard and glisten there for a bit, until he’d grab the corner of Mam’s apron and wipe his mouth proper, like a gentleman. But my father was no gentleman, much as Mam would have liked him to be. He was stout and red-bearded and loud and butter-drippy. Da, with a belly like the rain-drop, with a belly rivaling Mam’s, carrying the child that would end her life. Nothing can be done about it now. Come spring, Lord Caxton will turn Henry out, and someone else will be living in that house where I was born. Someone else will make their pottage on our fire, rise their bread dough in our proofing pot. But before the next family moves in, they’ll bring the priest to cleanse the house of the evil that once resided there, the scourge that caused a whole family to fail.

[Author speaking]

Thanks for listening, and I hope you’ll keep reading A Cloud of Outrageous Blue and enjoy it.