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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The King's Sister**

Written by Anne O'Brien

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ANNE O'BRIEN

The  
KING'S  
SISTER

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## Chapter One



*1380, Kenilworth Castle*

‘What’s afoot?’ Henry asked, loping along the wall walk, sliding to a standstill beside us.

It all began as a family gathering: a meeting of almost everyone I knew in the lush setting of Kenilworth where my father’s building plans had provided room after spacious room in which we could enjoy a summer sojourn. Intriguingly, though, the intimate number of acquaintances was soon extended with a constant arrival of guests. So, I considered. What indeed was afoot? A most prestigious occasion. From elders to children, aristocratic families from the length and breadth of the land rode up to our gates, filing across the causeway that kept their feet dry from the inundations of the mere.

Philippa and I watched them with keen anticipation, now in the company of our younger brother Henry, an ener-

getic, raucous lad, whose shrill voice more often than not filled the courtyards as he engaged in games with other boys of the household—dangerous games in which he pummelled and rolled with the best of them in combat *à l'outrance*. Even now he bore the testimony of a fading black eye. But today Henry was buffed and polished and on his best behaviour. As the thirteen-year-old heir of Lancaster, he knew his worth.

'Something momentous,' Philippa surmised.

'With music and dancing,' I suggested hopefully.

My father's royal brothers, the Dukes of Gloucester and York, together with their wives, made up a suitably ostentatious display of royal power. The vast connection of FitzAlans and the Northumberland Percies were there, heraldic badges making a bright splash of colour. There was Edward, our cousin of York, kicking at the flanks of a tolerant pony. Thin and wiry, Edward was still too much of a child for even Henry to notice. The only one notably absent was the King.

'We'll not miss him overmuch,' croaked Henry, on the cusp of adolescence.

True enough. Of an age with Henry, what would Richard add to the proceedings, other than a spirit of sharp mischief that seemed to have developed of late? There was little love lost between my brother and royal cousin.

The noble guests continued to arrive with much laughter and comment.

I was not one for being sensitive to tension in the air when I might be considering which dress would become me most, but on this occasion it rippled along my skin like

the brush of a goose feather quill. Chiefly because there were far too many eyes turned in my direction for comfort. It seemed to me that I was an object of some interest over and above the usual friendly comment on the rare beauty and precocious talents of the Duke of Lancaster's younger daughter. What's more, on that particular morning, I had been dressed by my women with extraordinary care.

Not that I had demurred. My sideless surcoat, of a particularly becoming blue silk damask, hushed expensively as I walked. My hair had been plaited into an intricate coronet, covered with a veil as transparent as one of the high clouds that barely masked the sun.

'Is it a celebration?' I mused. 'Have we made peace with France?'

'I doubt it. But it's a celebration for something.' My sister's mind was as engaged as mine as the FitzAlan Countess of Hereford and her opulent entourage arrived in the courtyard, soon followed by the Beauchamp contingent of the Earl of Warwick.

'It's a marriage alliance. A betrothal. It has to be,' I announced to Philippa, for surely this was the obvious cause for so great a foregathering, and one of such high-blooded grandeur festooned in sun-bright jewels and rich velvets. 'The Duke is bringing your new husband to meet with you.'

'A husband for me? If that's so, why is it that you are the one to be clad like a Twelfth Night gift?' Philippa said, eyeing my apparel. 'I am not clad for a betrothal. This is my second best gown, and the hem is becoming worn. While *you* are wearing my new undertunic.'

Which was true. And Philippa more waspish than her wont since my borrowed garment was of finest silk with gold stitching at hem and neck and the tiniest of buttons from elbow to wrist, yet despite her animadversions on her second best gown, Philippa looked positively regal in a deep red cote-hardie that would never have suited me. A prospective husband would never look beyond her face to notice the hem. If the honoured guest was invited here as a suitable match, he must be intended for my sister. As the elder by three years, Philippa would wed first. Did not older sisters always marry before younger ones? I stared at her familiar features, so like my own, marvelling at her serenity. There was still no husband for her, not even a betrothal of long standing, at twenty years. No husband had been attracted by her dark hair and darker eyes, inherited from our father. It was high time, as daughter of the royal Duke of Lancaster as well as first cousin to King Richard himself, even if he was only a tiresome boy, that she was sought and won by some powerful bridegroom.

Of course this would be her day.

I sighed that it behoved me to wait, for marriage to a handsome knight or illustrious prince was an elevation to which I aspired. The songs and tales of the troubadours, of fair maidens lost and won through chivalric deeds and noble self-sacrifice, had made a strong impression in my youthful heart. But today was no day for sighing.

'I have been counting all the unwed heirs of the English aristocracy who will make suitable husbands for you,' I said, to make Philippa smile. 'I have a tally of at least a dozen to choose from.'

It was Henry who grunted a laugh. 'But how many of them are either senile or imbecile?'

I stepped smartly and might have punched his shoulder but Henry was agile, putting distance between us. And because we were finely dressed, he did not retaliate. I turned my back on him.

'He could be a foreign prince, of course.' This was Philippa, ever serious.

'So he could.' I turned back to the carpet of richly-hued velvet and silk below, imagining such an eventuality. Would I enjoy leaving England, living far away from my family, those I had known and loved all my life? 'I don't think I would like that.'

'I would not mind.' Philippa lifted her shoulders in a little shrug.

'You will do whatever you are told to do.'

Her arm, in sisterly affection, slid round my waist. 'As will you.'

It did not need the saying. I might be wrapped in girlhood dreams of romantic notions of knights errant, but I had been raised since birth to know the role I must play in my father's schemes. Alliances were all important, friendships and connections built on shared interests and the disposition of daughters. Henry might be the heir, and much prized as a promising son, but Philippa and I were valuable commodities in furthering the ambitions of Lancaster. My husband would, assuredly, be a man of high status and proud name. He would be an owner of vast estates and significant wealth, possessing an extensive web of connections of his own to meld with those of the Duke into one over-



arching structure of power. He would have significance at the royal court, where I would take my place, glowing from his reflected authority and, I hoped, glamour. There was nothing so attractive as a powerful man, as I well knew. And, of course, this man would be worthy of my Plantagenet blood. I would never be given away to a mere nobody, a man without distinction.

When my woman combed my hair to braid it for the night and I inspected my features in my looking glass I knew that my husband would have an affection for me. Was it possible for a man of perception not to fall in love with a face as perfectly proportioned as mine? There was the elegant Plantagenet nose, the dark hooded eyes that suggested a mine of secrets to be explored. My lips were quick to smile, my brows, surprisingly dark and nicely arched, and my hair, unlike Philippa's, the same lustrous fairness of my mother whose memory faded from me as the years passed. It was a face that promised romance and passion, I decided. No, my husband would be unable to resist and would continue to indulge my desires in formidable style. I was destined to enjoy my future life.

When a shout of laughter went up from one of the groups in the courtyard—enticing Henry to condemn us as dull company and leave us, bounding down the steps to join the throng—I too descended from our high vantage point in search of enlightenment, and discovered Dame Katherine Swynford. Our governess and much more than a mere member of the Lancaster household, she was as close as an oyster, preoccupied with some matter to do with the guests, although why it should fall to her I could not fathom. Did

we not employ a steward, a chamberlain, a vast array of servants to oversee every aspect of life at Kenilworth? Indeed I was interested to see a brief shadow flit over her face, a sudden discomfiture that I suspected had no connection with her own illicit and highly scandalous relationship with the Duke.

'What is it?' I asked. No point in subtlety as yet another festive group arrived.

When Dame Katherine, intent on speeding away, shook her head so that her veils shivered, suspicions began to flutter in my belly. There was something here that she did not wish to discuss with me.

'What is it that you know, Dame Katherine, and that I will not like?'

'Nothing, to my knowledge. What should there be?' Lightly said but her eye did not quite meet mine.

'What are we celebrating?'

'The Duke does not tell me everything, Elizabeth.'

I frowned, not believing her for one moment. I would swear that Dame Katherine could read my father's mind, and what she could not read she could inveigle him into telling her when she seduced him into moments of love. Or he seduced her. I thought there were no secrets between them now that she had been my father's mistress for eight years. She was quick to take me to task.

'Go and wait with your sister, Elizabeth, and show patience. All you need to know is that we look for an important guest. He comes with your father.'

'And who is this important guest?' I asked, grasping her trailing oversleeve with no care for its embroidered edge,

determined to prevent her escape, so that she sighed and at last turned to face me. I thought there was trouble in her face.

'It is John Hastings. He is the Earl of Pembroke.' It meant nothing to me. If I had ever met the Earl of Pembroke I could not recall. 'He is coming here for a betrothal.'

I smiled. 'So I thought,' I admitted. 'For my sister.'

'Oh no. For you, Elizabeth.'

'For me? Why me?' How gauche I sounded in sudden consternation, and felt my cheeks flush.

'Because it will be a valuable alliance. He is the grandson of the Countess of Norfolk.'

'Will I like him?' Was that the only thought in my mind? At that moment all my powers of reasoned thought were hopelessly awry.

'Your father will never choose anyone you dislike.' Dame Katherine was brisk, enough to quell any further discussion. 'When has he ever used the whip or the spur to take you to task?'

And then, an aura of unease still palpable, she was forcing a path through the throng with an urgent, muttered instruction for the poulterer.

A marriage. I was too delighted to be anxious. This unknown Earl would soon be riding across the causeway and then I could see for myself. If he was an Earl how could he not make me a desirable husband? With the Countess of Norfolk as his grandmother, his importance was guaranteed. For a long moment I simply stood and breathed in the excitement of my future until it seemed that my whole body

was suffused with it. Soon, very soon, I would see him for myself.

Why was everyone so reluctant to talk about this dynastically vital occurrence?

Joyful expectancy stamped out any concerns as I rejoined my sister, saying nothing more of my discovery. It would only hurt Philippa that I had been chosen over her for this match. And then when it was becoming more and more impossible to keep my lips tight, my blood sparkling with the opening of this new window in my life, there was warning of the arrival.

'Come with me!' I seized Philippa's hand and dragged her with me, running down the steps into the courtyard.

'Why?' she asked, laughing and breathless.

'You'll see!'

'Elizabeth...!' Dame Katherine called after me as we threaded our way through all the chattering ranks of the nobility of England.

'Later,' I called back. Whatever it was, it could wait. Everything could wait. Here was the superbly well-connected man with whom I would spend the rest of my life. I shook out my skirts, smoothed the deeply embroidered panels, ensured that my light veil fell in seemly folds about my face, and prepared to meet my future.



The gates were already open to receive the impressive entourage with mounted retainers, a curtained palanquin, and various wagons loaded with the necessities for a lengthy stay. Most prominent on pennon and flag was the flowing

red sleeve, accompanied by a cluster of red martlets on silver and blue, which I took to belong to the Earl of Pembroke. Mightily impressive, I decided, although nothing to compare with my father's royal leopards, his standards snapping in red and gold and blue in the brisk wind.

I straightened my spine, lifted my chin. The Earl of Pembroke must be aware of the jewel he was getting with marriage to a daughter of Lancaster, first cousin to King Richard himself. If the solid might and luxury of Kenilworth did not impress him—and how could it not?—then *I* certainly would.

I wondered fleetingly why I had no recall of meeting him before this, since most of the high nobility had come within my orbit at Richard's coronation three years ago. Perhaps he had been fighting in France. Perhaps he had a high reputation as a knight on the battlefield or in the tournament like my father. I would like that.

And then there was quite a fuss as two ladies were helped to step from the cumbersome travelling litters. The Countess of Norfolk, whom I knew: as thin and acerbic as vinegar, her hair severely contained in the metal and jewelled coils much in fashion when she was a girl. And a lady, younger, whom I did not. But where was he?

'Where is the Earl?' I whispered, when I could wait no longer.

Dame Katherine, who had come to watch with us, stepped behind me, her hands closing lightly on my shoulders.

'There,' she remarked softly. 'There he is. John Hastings, Earl of Pembroke.'

I could not see. I looked back at her, to follow the direction of her gaze. I could see no Earl of Pembroke, no man dressed finely, or mounted on a blood horse, who had come to wed me, but I felt no presentiment. Until, behind me I heard my governess sigh and her fingers tightened just a little.

'There is he. Just dismounting,' Dame Katherine repeated. 'With his grandmother, the Countess of Norfolk, and his mother, the Dowager Countess of Pembroke.'

And so I saw him, in the act of leaping down from his horse.

I sucked in a breath of air, every muscle in my body taut. My lips parted. And at that moment I felt Dame Katherine's palm press down firmly on my shoulder. She knew. She knew me well enough to know what I might do, what I might say in a moment of wilful passion. My head whipped round to read her expression, and the pressure, increasing, was enough to anchor me into all the courtesy and good manners in which I had been raised.

'Say it later,' she whispered. 'Not now. Now it is all about the impression you make. Consider what is due to your birth and your breeding, and to your father's pride.'

And so I sank into the required obeisance before our well-born guests.

The women of Norfolk and Pembroke returned the greeting. The Earl bowed. Then scuffed the toe of his boot on the stones, rubbing his chin with his fist.

'He is younger than Henry,' I whispered back in disbelief, in a mounting horror, when I could.

He was a boy. A child.

'Yes, he is,' Dame Katherine murmured back with a weight of compassion in her reply. 'He is eight years old.'

And I was seventeen. I could not look at Philippa. I could not bear the pity I knew I would read in her face.

