

*The* **SISTER**  
*QUEENS*

SOPHIE PERINOT



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*The Sister Queens*

“In her debut novel, *The Sister Queens*, Sophie Perinot breathes life into two of history’s most fascinating siblings. What Philippa Gregory did for Anne and Mary Boleyn, Perinot has done for Marguerite and Eleanor of Provence. This is without a doubt one of the best novels I’ve read all year!”

—Michelle Moran, author of *Madame Tussaud*

“Ms. Perinot, who seems like a very seasoned author, not someone presenting a debut work, has quite clearly put in the sort of exquisite attention to detail that resonates so deeply with true historical fiction lovers. I know it did that for me, swiftly drawing me back in time and placing me right there with her characters amid all of their conflicts and passions. Every page of *The Sister Queens* for me was like a morsel to savor. *The Sister Queens* is one of the most beautifully written books I have read in a very long time. Absolutely superb! I will certainly be adding it to my ‘keeper’ shelf.”

—Diane Haeger, author of *The Queen’s Rival*

“*The Sister Queens* is a rich and stately medieval tapestry of a novel, with two royal couples weaving intertwined patterns of history and private life. Marguerite and Eleanor are the queens of France and England, yes, but Sophie Perinot reveals the living women behind the glittering pageantry—two young Provençal sisters, fiercely competitive and just as fiercely devoted. Through coronations and childbirth, wars and sieges, triumphs and betrayals, Marguerite’s and Eleanor’s lives are stitched against the colorful and meticulously researched background of thirteenth-century Europe—golden queens and steadfast sisters.”

—Elizabeth Loupas, author of *The Second Duchess*

“Sophie Perinot’s debut tour de force, *The Sister Queens*, gives the reader a detailed and racy look into the very public and most intimate lives of English and French royalty. The sister queens have two very different personalities, yet Perinot’s skills allow a modern woman to see herself in them and root for them both. This sweeping, compelling novel is a medieval, double-decker lifestyles of the rich, famous, and fascinating.”

—Karen Harper, author of *The Queen’s Governess*

“Sibling rivalry with the highest possible stakes! Sophie Perinot awards two of the luminaries of medieval royalty their due in a colorful and densely woven tapestry.”

—Leslie Carroll, author of *Notorious Royal Marriages* and *Royal Pains*

“In her wonderful debut, *The Sister Queens*, Sophie Perinot breathes life into the world of the High Middle Ages, bringing us into the age of knights and chivalry, of courtly love and crusades. Caught in a web of politics, the young sisters Marguerite and Eleanor find themselves queens in foreign courts, where both women must learn to call on all their strength to become the queens they are destined to be. With lyrical

prose, *The Sister Queens* tells a riveting story of sisterly rivalry and love, of war and betrayal. Marguerite and Eleanor remain united by bonds of love that cannot tarnish and that cannot break. A beautiful novel.”

—Christy English, author of *To Be Queen*

“Here is a glimpse into the private and public lives of two sisters, Eleanor and Marguerite of Provence, who were destined to become queens of England and France. I found it irresistible. In an engaging style that draws the reader in, Sophie Perinot allows us to enjoy the rivalry and compassion that exist between two young women of very different character. At the same time, she gives us insight into the political intrigues in England and France that governed their lives. If you enjoy a tale of passion, intrigue, and sisterly devotion that will keep you turning the pages, then *The Sister Queens* is a must for your reading list.”

—Anne O’Brien, author of *The Virgin Widow* and *Queen Defiant*

*The* SISTER  
QUEENS

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*For my sister, Laura.  
You were my first memory; you remain my best friend.*



*For my daughters, Erin and Katie.  
Remember that sometimes you see yourself most clearly  
through your sister's eyes.*



*For Frances,  
my sister-in-writing if not by blood.*



*And for Colin.  
You are my golden prince. May you grow up to be a good man and a great leader.*

## PREFACE



**T**he map of thirteenth-century Western Europe was a mosaic of regional kingdoms. Some—including France and England—still exist many centuries later; others—such as the Holy Roman Empire and the Kingdom of Castile—were eventually subsumed into different political configurations. Each piece of this patchwork was made up of both lands held directly by the kingdoms’ rulers and lands held by vassals owing fealty to those rulers. As the High Middle Ages drew to a close, few of these realms resembled their images on maps today.

Early in the century, two young boys inherited the crowns of their fathers, ascending to the thrones of England and France. The boy who came to the English throne as Henry III was a Norman through his paternal great-grandmother, a descendant of Vikings who carved out a position of power on the peninsula of Normandy long before William the Conqueror set his eyes and ambitions on England. Henry was also a Plantagenet, and his grandfather, by his marriage to Eleanor of Aquitaine, claimed lands in the kingdom of France, including Poitou and various provinces from the Loire River to the Pyrenees mountains. Clearly then, though Henry’s relations had ruled in England for 150 years, the new king and his kin remained thoroughly tied to continental Europe.

When nine-year-old Henry III inherited in 1216, his territories were both fewer and less secure than when his father, King John, inherited. John had managed to lose all of England’s continental holdings with the exception of Gascony. He also depleted the powers of the English kingship by signing the Magna Carta under duress, and managed to lose part of his own island. At the time of his coronation, young Henry did not hold the eastern portion of England proper, not even the great city of London. Those territories were in the hands of a Frenchman, Crown Prince Louis VIII, who seemed poised to become King of England. As a child, Henry III had every reason to both dislike and fear the French. Years later, with the French driven from his shores and the initial challenge to his authority suppressed, Henry the man sought to regain English dignity and English lands lost before he was crowned.

A decade after Henry inherited, the second boy, the son of the Frenchman who had threatened to steal England, became the King of France. The ancestors of the boy-king Louis IX were no invaders. Rather, the first Capetian king was a man selected by his fellow barons to take up the kingship of France. Encompassing a realm expanded over the two previous centuries, Louis’s territories included lands seized from the English, such as Normandy, Brittany, Maine, Anjou, and Poitou. Most of the former English holdings were fiefs of the King of France, but that never stopped the English from asserting otherwise, either while they were in possession of the territories or after they lost them. As ambitious as his predecessors, Louis IX worked to further consolidate Capetian power and expand the French realm. But in looking forward, Louis did not

forget to keep one eye always on the English, wary of losing what his ancestors had gained.

As the first third of the century drew to a close, the boy-kings became men—men needing brides. Louis, guided by his mother, sought a connection that would give him more influence in the Midi, near the territory of Languedoc, which he already held. And what did Henry III want in a bride? On the surface, Henry sought a marriage that would strengthen his bid to regain English continental possessions. In the end, however, like most men who feel they are playing catch-up, Henry wanted whatever his rival had, so one family provided brides for both men. The queens of France and England were sisters, Marguerite and Eleanor, the two eldest daughters of Raymond Berenger, Count of Provence, and Beatrice of Savoy. And, while the Count of Provence was certainly neither a man nor a connection to be slighted, the girls' appeal as "brides worthy of kings" stemmed in largest part from their relation through their mother to the House of Savoy.

While we tend to think of "celebrity" as a modern concept, the idea of a person or a family so successful, talented, and glamorous that everyone else wants to be them or at least to be near them is as old as history itself. The Savoyards were celebrities in the High Middle Ages. A family of considerable martial and political power, with members renowned for their personal attractiveness, much of what was said and thought about individuals of the House of Savoy stretched to hyperbole. One of the girls' uncles was called "the second Alexander" by his contemporaries, while another was labeled "the second Charlemagne," and their mother's beauty was sounded in terms straight out of a troubadour's poem. People wanted to be like the Savoyards, and people, even kings and popes, wanted to be seen with them.

Louis and Henry, along with the ambassadors they sent south, were quickly beguiled by the Savoyard myth as displayed in all its shining, lavish glory at the court of Provence. Oh yes, there was glamour to be had in proximity, but would there also be love?

THE SISTER QUEENS



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## CHAPTER 1



M,

*The sun is out and so should we be. Pray ask Mother to release us from our studies. She is sure to agree if you ask. You will be her “little queen,” so she indulges your every whim. I wish you yourself were a little less satisfied with the title that will soon be yours. When I wanted to write you this note, I had a difficult time finding a scrap of parchment in our room not covered with “Marguerite, by the grace of God illustrious Queen of the French” in your handwriting.*

E

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MARGUERITE  
APRIL 1234  
AVIGNON, PROVENCE

The sun is on my face and I can smell the spring squill as its blue blossoms, too numerous for the counting, brush against my gown as I walk. I do not stoop to pick them. My left hand already holds a bouquet of elder-flowered orchids, their orange throats glowing from within purple petals, their brown and orange speckles a happy reminder that spring has come to Provence.

We wintered here at Avignon this year. Not my favorite of my father’s castles, nor my sister Eleanor’s. We would have preferred to pass the colder months snug at Aix. But Avignon was more convenient for Giles de Flagy, representative of Louis IX of France, who was tasked with paying a “surprise” visit to my father’s court for the express purpose of inspecting *me*.

Of course, we all knew he was coming. My father’s great friend and adviser, the Catalonian Romeo de Villeneuve, has been negotiating with de Flagy for some time to see if I might not become Queen of France. So my father, a better host even than he is a diplomat, made certain that our lively court, always full of feast and fest, took on an even greater grandeur. Such dresses I wore! Such extravagant gifts were presented to the Frenchman! Such lavish banquets, each comprised of more than a dozen courses, were given in his honor!

And always the eyes of the French envoy were upon me. I was not the least shy at having such attention. Have I not been trained for this? Tutored in posture and dancing to improve my natural grace; instructed in chess, my native language of Lenga d’òc, and even Latin, so that I might be erudite in my discourse? Placed in the saddle hundreds of times to ride to the chase and given a falcon for my seventh birthday so

that I might master that most noble of all sports? Have I not been given hour upon hour of religious instruction at Mother's knee?

Yes, I feel well prepared to be a great lady like my mother, Beatrice of Savoy, whose beauty, piety, tenderness, and wit are known far outside the borders of my father's territory. I am thirteen and well content to be looked at for a bride. But my darling sister Eleanor is less content. She has not my patience and could sorely use it, for she is second born, and, though she loves me dearly, Eleanor chafes to wait always behind me.

As if to confirm my thoughts, she bursts past me at a run—a blur of green and gold, skirts held nearly as high as her spirits.

“Ele-an-nor! Wait!”

The whining call is as inevitable as it is irritating. Mother insists that we take Beatrice with us on our rambles. But Beatrice is so very young—only three—that she is more of an annoyance than a companion.

Eleanor stops hard, turns with hands on hips, and regards Beatrice, who passes me with tears streaming down her face, with a saucy and somewhat malevolent air. “You had best stop your crying, Beatrice, before the Count of Toulouse hears you and comes to eat you.”

“Eleanor!” My exasperation is evident in my tone. For now not only is Beatrice sobbing in earnest, but Sanchia, so quiet that I had momentarily forgotten she walked beside me, has silent tears rolling down her face despite being nearly nine years old.

“*Elle me rend folle!*” Eleanor responds defiantly, throwing up her hands.

It takes me a moment to realize what she is saying. We are not native French speakers, and both of us have just begun to learn. Or, rather, I have begun to learn so that I may converse easily in the court of my future husband, and Eleanor, quicker at languages than I, is helping me. Always a talkative bedfellow, she now ex-hausts me once the candles are out by initiating conversations solely in French.

“I do not care,” I reply in Lenga d'òc, unwilling to struggle with my French even as I struggle with my sisters. I have reached Beatrice where she sits disconsolate on the ground. Squatting, I pull her into my arms and stroke her golden hair. “Bea,” I say softly, “the Count of Toulouse is many leagues away. He and Fa-ther are not at war presently and even if they were, as dreadful as the Count of Toulouse may be, he does not eat little girls.” I look up imperiously. “Eleanor.”

Eleanor moves forward, reaching her hand to take Beatrice's. “I am sorry, Sister,” she says. But she is far from contrite and, it seems, also far from finished. “But I do wish you would keep up. You are worse than a pebble in my shoe.”

Little pebble. Beatrice hates this moniker, which has lately begun to stick, but she smiles in a self-satisfied manner nonetheless. I know she will tell my father what has happened. Surely Eleanor must know it as well. Eleanor hands Beatrice off to Sanchia, who comes forward to hoist the toddler to her slender hip and bear her home again. As Sanchia struggles off uncomplaining under her burden, I lower my voice and say to Eleanor, “She will have your new samite mantle for this.”

“It is far too big for her.” Eleanor's confidence does not match her comment. She loves that cloak, all deep blue and gold, and knows better than any of us, as Beatrice's most frequent tormentor, that the youngest of us all is my father's openly avowed favorite.

“You must be nicer to her when I am married and gone,” I coax Eleanor, “more fair in your treatment. She cannot help being little. Nor can she help being spoiled.”

Eleanor looks as if she would take issue but instead changes the subject. “Are you frightened, Marguerite?” She reaches out to take my empty right hand and we begin to walk toward home.

“Why should I be frightened? All girls must marry unless they become nuns. And there is no question of that in my case. Father has dowry enough.” I feel my face grow warm the moment the words are out of my mouth. Eleanor and I both know that while the word of my betrothal to Louis of France was greeted with great joy by all of Provence, the ten thousand silver marks that the White Queen, Blanche of Castile, demanded in recognition of our unequal ranks were not easy for my father to come by. He had not a thousand marks of ready money. The mighty castle of Tarascon had to be pledged to the French king as surety. And if de Villeneuve had not managed by many clever means to raise one-fifth of the sum in plate and coin, this marriage, so provident for my family, might well have fallen by the wayside.

“Yes,” Eleanor agrees, squeezing my hand, “but you will be so far away. And it is cold in France—both the weather and the people.”

“Not Louis and my new mother, surely,” I say with cheerful conviction. “Mother showed me one of Queen Blanche’s letters. She seems a cordial lady and a charmingly attentive mother. As for King Louis, you know what Uncle Guillaume says of him.”

“The handsomest man and finest king in Christendom,” Eleanor recites in a singsong voice.

Perhaps my Savoyard uncle *has* gone on a bit in praise of my betrothed’s accomplishments and attributes, but I think Eleanor’s constant impatience to do as I do and go where I go contributes materially to her mocking tone. A moment later I am sure.

“Will you not be lonely?” Eleanor asks. Her eyes show every evidence that she will be the next of my sisters to cry.

“I am not going alone. Uncle Guillaume and Uncle Thomas will accompany me,” I remind her, “and at least one is sure to stay at the French court to provide me with good counsel in my role as queen.” I wonder for a moment if my mother’s powerful brothers, concerned as they will be with protecting the family’s interests in my marriage, will have time to keep me company. Then, brightly, I plunge onward. “My nurse, Lisette, goes as well, along with a number of ladies-in-waiting. And surely you heard Father’s fair promise to me last evening as we dined that I might take my favorite of the minstrels?”

Then, allowing myself to think for a moment of the greater separations lying at the heart of Eleanor’s concern, I stop walking and throw my arms around my sister’s neck. “I will miss you, my dearest Eleanor. If only you could come with me to France! How I wish King Louis could have two wives.”

Standing back from her again, I clap my right hand over my mouth, horribly conscious of the blasphemous nature of my utterance. Men do not have two wives at once; this I know for sure. But as I look at my sister doubled over in mirth where only moments before she was on the verge of tears, I realize with a sudden ache that there are many things I do not know about husbands and their wives.

I glance into the distance and see that Sanchia has placed Beatrice on the ground

and taken a seat beside her. I am conscious that I have shirked my duty as the eldest and allowed Sanchia, the frailest among us, to overtire herself. "Come, Eleanor. We had best go. There is still a long walk back, and you must carry Beatrice as your penance." I brace myself for the complaint that I know is coming. How many times in the last weeks have I heard her say, hands on hips, "You are not Queen of France yet, Marguerite, and even when you are, *I* do not live in France." To distract her from repeating this retort, I add, "Surely Father will pay less heed to her tale when he sees how gently you bear his little angel home."

Eleanor smiles slyly. The mantle is not lost yet. "You will be a good queen, Marguerite. You have the skills of a diplomat already."

MY UNCLE GUILLAUME ARRIVES FIRST. He is thirty-three and has been the bishop-elect of Valence for most of my life. I think he looks more like my mother than any of her other brothers. Besides being handsome, he knows everyone—His Holiness the Pope, the Holy Roman Emperor, and my soon-to-be husband, King Louis of France. He sweeps into my mother's apartments, where we ladies have gathered to pass the afternoon.

"Beatrice," he says, embracing Mother warmly before his eyes turn naturally to me. "And here is the little bride. Come, Marguerite, see what I have brought you." Drawing a small velvet bag from the pouch at his waist, he opens it into my eager hand.

"Uncle!" I hold a ring-brooch more beautiful than any I have ever seen, even among my mother's ornaments. Gold with rubies, it is certainly of great value.

My mother must be thinking the same thing, because even as I throw my arms around my uncle's neck in thanks, she chides him, "Guillaume, it is too generous a gift."

"Shall I tell King Louis to take it back then?" he teases. "For 'twas he who sent it and he who selected the inscription."

I look more closely at the treasure in my hand and find the words *Ave Maria G*, a Latin abbreviation for "Hail Mary, full of grace." I wonder, does my betrothed call down the Virgin's blessing upon me, or does he compare me to Our Blessed Lady?

"This will be a great match," my uncle continues, rubbing his hands together; then, noticing Eleanor's poorly guarded jealous look in my direction, he puts a hand under her chin, draws her face up ever so slightly, and adds, "for all the members of the houses of Provence and Savoy. Make no mistake, Niece, you may perchance make a better marriage because your sister marries well before you. Now, help Marguerite to pin that on."

I hand the brooch to my sister, who does as she is bid. And if she pricks me in the process, there is no point in my mentioning it. No one will believe the gesture intentional because no one else saw the flash in her dark brown eyes as she did it.

Before the sun sets, Uncle Thomas arrives. He is older than Guillaume, but neither so handsome nor so prominent in the church. Mother always says she would not be surprised to see Uncle Thomas leave the church entirely and marry should a good opportunity present itself. Eleanor is Uncle Thomas's favorite, and, although she is nearly eleven years old, he swings her up in the air when he thinks no one is looking. He has a mind for detail. "I will see the clothing before retiring," he tells my mother as we settle down to dine. He is speaking of what I will wear on the long progress from

Avignon to Lyon and then onward to Sens where I am to be wed. “And the list of those courtiers and clergy who will accompany Lady Marguerite’s train.”

My father, far from being put out by these demands, laughs aloud. “My Lord of Piedmont, I have it on good authority that when the archbishop of Aix heard you were to be one of our party, he summoned his tailor at once. I hope you come prepared to compete.”

“Always, Raymond, and in every venue.”

“Well, I will lay odds on you every time.” My father slaps Thomas on the back and then summons a nearby servant for more wine. “Perhaps alone you can be bested, but you are never alone, not with six brothers for support.”

“Do you hear this, Beatrice?” Uncle Guillaume speaks over my father, appealing to my mother who sits on Father’s other side. “Your husband slights you.”

“By no means!” Father takes Mother’s hand on top of the table and regards her with the frank admiration that I am used to seeing and she is used to receiving. “To the contrary, my lady wife has political and diplomatic skills equal to either of yours in every respect. Why do you think I married her?”

“Because I was beautiful,” my mother suggests playfully.

“That too,” Father replies, “and you still are.” He raises Mother’s hand to his lips, then calls for the evening’s entertainment to begin.

Sitting between Eleanor and Sanchia with the latter’s drowsy head in my lap, listening to my father’s best minstrel play his harp and sing, I cannot imagine a life better than my own or a place warmer than the bosom of my family. Why am I leaving? I touch Louis’s brooch to ward off tears.

TWO WEEKS LATER I PONDER the same question. The party from Sens arrived at Avignon three days ago.

We went in great splendor to the gates of the city to meet them. I rode the most beautiful palfrey imaginable, a white of great price selected by my uncle Guillaume as a symbol of my purity. The smooth, ambling gait of the beast did little to slow the agitated beating of my heart. I could not wait for someone to spot the French.

Like the animal beneath me, I was bedecked in every splendor. Each detail of my attire had been carefully selected and approved by Uncle Thomas, who sought to present me as the queen I will shortly become. My tunic was made of the rich blue *perse* for which my father’s county is so rightly famous. Elaborate bands of golden embroidered orphrey decorated its bottom as well as the ends of my tightly fitting sleeves. My *surcote*, of heavy samite the color of fresh cream, was so luxurious that I had to remind myself not to keep fingering it as we sat waiting. Finally, my mantle, held fast by Louis’s ruby brooch, was the *orchil* of a spring violet and lined in softest gray and white vair, with a rolled trim of that same luxurious fur.

I sat between my mother and father, each also magnificently mounted. Beatrice, too young to be thought any competition to me, sat before Mother on her saddle. But Eleanor, nearly marriageable herself, and Sanchia, so beautiful that from the youngest age she stopped the breath of men, were kept well back with their nurses. It would not do, my uncle Thomas told my father solemnly, for there to be any confusion as to the identity of the bride or any opportunity for comparison that might render me less superior in the minds of the Frenchmen. So, arranged on either side of my mother and

father, instead of their remaining children, were my Savoyard uncles—not just Guillaume and Thomas, but the Count of Savoy, Amadeus IV, who made the journey with his family and a portion of his court and men-at-arms for the occasion, and Mother’s younger brothers, Peter and Boniface. It is a firm tenant of the Savoyards that in family lies the root of all power and glory.

We were so many and so lively a party that I was certain we would dazzle the archbishop of Sens and the senior ambassadors of my betrothed. Nor was my confidence much shaken when the French at last arrived, for while the days they passed among us showed them to be elegant and well educated, my father’s court did not suffer by comparison.

But now, on the evening before I must leave my home forever, with all the preparations for my departure complete, I feel neither dazzling nor confident. My mother orders me early to bed. I must be well rested; a journey of more than one hundred thirty-five leagues lies before me. I take leave of my parents with only muted sadness. They will ride with me as far as Lyon, so separation from them is still distant enough to forestall the melancholy that must accompany it. But my eyes linger long on the great hall itself, and on every feature of my walk to my bedchamber.

Eleanor is with me, uncharacteristically solemn and silent. Her nurse and mine trail behind. Tonight every moment of our ordinary readying for bed seems to take on the sanctity of ritual: the stirring of the embers into a cheery fire by Lisette; the undressing; our sitting side by side on matching stools while our nurses comb through our waist-length hair thrice with different combs—each finer toothed than the one before it—as a remedy against lice; the warming of our cups of spiced wine. But it is *not* the same as most nights. Not a word passes between me and Eleanor. The only conversation is between Lisette and Agnes who natter in the background, their words no more distinct to me than the humming of bees.

Then, as Eleanor and I sit beside the fire to take our evening libation, she speaks at last. Turning partway round, she regards the nurses where they are carefully laying out my garments for the morrow and covering them with chainsil cloths.

“Leave us!”

For a moment I hear not my Eleanor, but the commanding and sometimes imperious voice of my father. Such hauteur from a girl only now approaching the age of marriage! I am astounded. I do not know whether to admire it or fear where it may lead my sister. Upon the nurses, who are accustomed to doing without complaint the bidding of others, the effect is immediate. They slip from the room, gone too quickly to see that Eleanor’s firm self-possession is illusory.

As the door shuts behind them, my sister begins to weep. But she does not surrender quietly, even to sobs. Rounding on me with near-wild eyes, she demands, “How can you leave me? Who will I have to gossip with when I surprise one of the serving girls in a corner of the garden with a stable boy? Who will sing me to sleep when the air is so full of summer flowers that my head aches and I have difficulty drawing breath?”

Now I am crying too.

Eleanor throws herself into my arms, equally heedless of the cup she casts aside and the wine that spills from it.

“Oh Eleanor, if only you could come with me! How cruel that Jeanne de Toulouse is betrothed to one of the king’s brothers rather than you! The lady is no doubt vile like

her father, and even were she not, even were she all accomplishment and good humor, no one can bear me such company as you do. You hold all my secrets and I yours.”

My chest is heaving. I am crying so hard that I cannot continue. Even if I could, what would I say? No words of mine uttered in either protest or prayer can change my destiny. I will be Queen of France and must therefore be parted from the sister whom I love more than any other person.

Her continued distress allows me to rein in my own. I must make an effort to support her spirits. “Eleanor, do you remember the time, at Mother’s castle, at Brignoles, when we planned to run away and become *trobairitz*?”

Eleanor sniffs, and, wiping both eyes, manages to look ever so slightly saucy. “Are we going now?”

“That would be ill-advised,” I reply. “For, if you remember, we gave the scheme a miss, upon discovering that neither of us has a facility for rhyme, though I sing as beautifully as a lark.”

“You? I have the sweeter voice.” Eleanor is smug, and that is better than seeing her miserable.

“And I the sweeter temperament.” I feel my own spirits rise as the evening suddenly becomes very much like thousands of others we have passed in similar banter. A friendly competition, like a joust or a contest among troubadours, is what we have. Eleanor may win one day and I another, but the pleasure lies in contesting the other, not in vanquishing her.

“You must write to me often,” I demand.

“What shall I tell? Nothing will change here.”

“And that is precisely what I will wish most to hear; that all I love remains as I left it.”

“Then I promise to write to you nearly as often as I will think of you.”

“Nearly?”

“I cannot be at my *escritoire* every minute. And you must write to me in return. As queen, you will be better able to command messengers into the saddle than I will.”

“I will write,” I reply, suddenly feeling solemn again. “And let us exchange tokens of our promise.” I rise and go to the foot of our bed, expecting to find my trunk, but it is not there. I stop dead, feeling panic rising within me. All my things are packed away for my journey north. I have nothing left in the rooms of my childhood but the clothing I took off this evening and the clothing I will don at sunrise.

Lifting the protective coverings from my new garments, I wonder what I can give to Eleanor without being caught by my mother or my eagle-eyed uncle Thomas. My glance alights on my new slippers with the wonderfully pointed toes and a strap that closes them at the ankle above an open instep. Made of soft, light-colored doeskin, they are embroidered with a myriad of small gold stars. Such shoes are meant to be seen protruding from the bottom of my skirts once I am astride my horse rather than to be walked in. However, if I am careful with my skirts, I may easily wear the plain black slippers that I took off this evening with no one being the wiser. So I catch the pretty slippers up and hold them out to Eleanor. “Here. Only pray don’t lift your skirts when you wear them, or Mother will know.”

Eleanor laughs. “And what do you expect her to do? You will be many leagues away, a married woman.”

“But not, I suspect, safe from maternal scolding. Mother can write to me as easily as you can.”

Eleanor appears genuinely puzzled by my reply. When she is convinced she is right, words have never been enough to persuade her otherwise. She doubtless cannot imagine being chastened by a letter. Going to her own things, she returns with the fine woolen broadcloth *aumônière* she has been laboriously embroidering for months. Eleanor does not like to embroider; she has not the patience for it, while I excel at it. But, having been struck by the idea of decorating the bag with the poppies that are everywhere about Aix by the beginning of the summer, she has lavished much attention on this particular work. Always drawn to displays of finery, she planned to wear the *aumônière* suspended from her favorite scarlet girdle.

“You must take this, Marguerite, and make sure when you wear it that one of my letters is always inside with your coins and other things.”

“Are you certain?”

“Entirely, for I love no one so much as you.”

But I notice as I take the bag from her hands that she holds on to the strings until the last possible moment.