

Chapter 2

ANNE

*Ravensworth Castle, Yorkshire
January 1465*

In the winter of the year 1465, when I was five years old, my uncle, the Earl of Warwick, the Kingmaker, came to Ravensworth one night, and set my life on a course I could never have imagined. It was late, and the torches were lit in the courtyard and the fires hot in the hearths for there was deep snow on the ground. I was asleep when he came, and the first that I knew of it was when my elder sister Elizabeth shook my arm roughly to awaken me. There was an odd expression on her face, of mingled envy and pity.

“Mother wants you,” she said. “You are to go to the solar.”

“Go away.” I burrowed deeper into my nest of blankets and furs. Beside me my other sister Alice turned over in her sleep, pulling the covers away from me. I pulled them back.

Elizabeth was having none of it. This time she poked me in the ribs, hard enough to banish sleep completely. “Our uncle is here,” she hissed. “Get up!”

“I need the privy now you have woken me,” I grumbled. I slid from the bed and scurried across the chamber, the cold

stone of the floor chilling my bare feet before I had taken more than a couple of steps. The icy draft in the dark little corner wardrobe was vicious, straight off the snow-covered fells outside. My teeth were chattering as I came out and stumbled back toward the sanctuary of the bed. I had no intention of going to find Mother in her private rooms; it mattered little to me that Uncle Warwick was here. I was a child and I wanted to sleep.

“Anne.”

It was my father’s voice, soft and warm. A candle flared and then he was scooping me up and wrapping me in a fur-lined cloak, carrying me out into the corridor. I heard Alice’s sleep voice. “What is it? What’s happening?”

And Elizabeth’s short answer. “They want Anne. They always want Anne.”

My father smelled of his familiar scent, and the cloak was soft and warm. I slid my arm about his neck and clung closer. I adored my father, so equable and indulgent in comparison to my high-tempered mother. But Mother was a Neville born, which was to be special and important. This we all knew and understood, just as we knew she was stronger than my father whatever men say about the wife being subject to the husband’s authority.

The adult world after candles were out in the nursery was a strange and dazzling place. There was noise and light, the bustle of a castle awake whilst we, the children, slept. It made me feel both very grown-up and at the same time, at a disadvantage. I wriggled in my father’s arms, suddenly wanting my independence.

“I can walk,” I told my father. “I’m not a baby.”

He laughed, but there was an edge of regret to it. “No,” he said. “You are a Neville.” He placed me on my feet as we

reached the door of the solar, carefully wrapping the cloak about me so that it trailed behind me like a train. It was a rich azure blue, and I drew it close as I entered and felt like a queen.

My mother and her brother were standing heads bent close together as they talked at the fireside. They drew apart as we entered the room, giving the impression of two conspirators. The room was hot and bright, and the air smelled of wine and spices, making my head spin a little. The sense of a strange, adult world grew stronger. I had no place here and yet I had been summoned.

My mother's blue gaze was sharp as it swept over me as though looking for fault, but my uncle smiled.

"My daughter Anne, my lord." My father was suddenly formal. Holding his hand as I was, I could feel something tense in him. He might be lord here at Ravensworth, but in this company he would forever be an outsider. He had been chosen as my mother's consort; an ally, a liege man to the Neville clan who were the growing power in the North. Vaguely I understood this although I was too young to grasp the complexity of it.

I wondered whether I should curtsy to the Earl. It felt odd when I was in my nightclothes, but I did it anyway, drawing back and settling the cloak about me again so that it covered me modestly and warmed my bare feet.

My uncle Warwick seemed charmed. He crouched beside me. I had never been so close to him before, for he had previously paid no particular attention to his sister's brood of children, particularly not the girls. He was too busy, too important.

Like my mother—like me—he had the clear blue eyes of the Nevilles, but the rest of his face reminded me of a hawk, it was so fierce and predatory. People accused the Nevilles of

pride and arrogance, and it was written there for all to see, in the hard line of his cheek and jaw and the cold assessing gleam of his eye. He was a great man, second only to our kinsman King Edward, or he had been until the previous year when the King had married secretly and raised up a whole raft of his wife's relatives to the nobility. Uncle Warwick hated the Queen because of the influence she held; this was something else that I knew because I had overheard my parents speak of it. People will speak freely before children, just as they will before servants, thinking us deaf perhaps or too young to understand.

"How do you do, Mistress Anne," the Earl of Warwick said. "You have a great look of the Nevilles about you."

I was clever enough to recognize this as a compliment. "Thank you, my lord," I said.

"What age are you?"

"I am five years old, my lord."

He nodded. "Tell me, Mistress Anne, what do you know of marriage?"

My father was standing behind me. I felt him make an instinctive movement and saw the moment my mother caught his hand and the words on his tongue died unsaid. I looked the Earl of Warwick in the eye.

"Marriage is an alliance of wealth and power, my lord," I said, and he burst out laughing.

"Well said, little maid." He stood up, still smiling. "I like her, Alice," he said to my mother. "She is both comely and clever. You have chosen well."

My mother nodded. I could feel my father's anger stiff within him, but my mother ignored it. She too was smiling at me. Her approval, unlike my father's love, was a cold thing, but still I basked in it for it was rare.

“You are to wed, Mistress Anne,” Lord Warwick said. This time he did not trouble to stoop to my level but looked down at me from his great height. “I have the King’s ward in my care, a boy of eight years or so called Francis Lovell. He is handsome and rich and kind, a good match for you. Would you like him for your husband?”

I correctly guessed that this was not a question that required an answer since it had already been decided. I dropped another curtsey.

“My lord.”

“Good. So be it. We shall hold the nuptials next month—” He looked at my mother. “At Middleham.”

“Why not here at Ravensworth?” My father spoke for the first time. Silence followed his words, but it seemed to twitch with matters unsaid.

“If you wish it.” After a moment the Earl gave a careless shrug. “I thought to show my sponsorship of the couple—” he smiled at me again “—by hosting the celebration.”

Silence again, then my mother stepping smoothly in to break it. “We can discuss these matters in the morning. You’ll stay the night, Richard? It’s late and too inclement to travel back. Let me show you to a chamber.”

My uncle inclined his head. “Thank you.” He picked up his goblet. I saw his throat move as he finished his wine in one swift gulp. He gave my father a brief nod and followed my mother out. I knew then that he wanted to talk to her alone. My father watched them go. He did not move.

I tugged on his hand to recall his attention back to me. “May I go back to bed now, Father?”

He smiled then and ruffled my hair. “Of course, sweeting. I’ll take you.”

My sister Alice was asleep again as he tucked me in beside her and bent to kiss my brow. “Nothing will change,” he said, and it sounded like a vow, but I was too tired to ask him what he meant.

A moment after he had left, Elizabeth popped up beside the bed, her face lit from below by the candle flame, both her long hair and her dangling ribbons in danger of catching fire.

“What did they want?” she demanded.

I yawned. “I am to marry a boy with a saint’s name,” I said sleepily.

“Why you?” Elizabeth grouched. “I am the eldest. Even Alice is older than you.”

I snuggled down, already on the edge of sleep. “You marry him, then,” I said. “I don’t mind.”

Elizabeth was wide-awake, however, and full of spite. “Uncle Warwick saves his own daughters for better matches,” she said, “whilst he barter us away. I heard Father say he means them for the royal princes. Not for nothing is he called the Kingmaker.”

“Then I pity them,” I said. “Cousin George can be *horrid*.” I wriggled crossly, wishing she would take her grumbling elsewhere. I rolled over and turned my back. “Go away. I want to sleep.”

Nothing will change, Father had said. I had always trusted him. Life was so simple when I was but five years old.