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Virgin Widow

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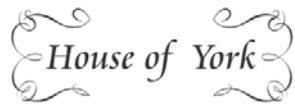
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Virgin Widow

ANNE O'BRIEN





Richard Plantagenet
Duke of York
m. Cecily Neville
sister to Warwick the Kingmaker

Edward IV
m. Elizabeth Woodville

George, Duke of Clarence
m. Isabel Neville

Richard, Duke of
Gloucester
m. Anne Neville

Edward of Middleham

Elizabeth of York, Queen
Consort of England

Edward V of England, one of the
Princes in the Tower

Richard, Duke of York, one of the
Princes in the Tower

(Also Mary of York, Cecily of York,
Margaret of York, Anne of York,
George Plantagenet, Catherine of
York, Bridget ofYork)

House of Lancaster

Henry V
m. Katherine de Valois

Henry VI
m. Margaret of Anjou

Edward of Lancaster, Prince of Wales
m. Anne Neville

The Nevilles & Plantagenets

Richard, Earl of Salisbury
m. Alice de Montacute

Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick
and Salisbury,
'Warwick the Kingmaker'
m. Anne Beauchamp heiress
of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of
Warwick and Isabel Despenser

Isabel m.George Plantagenet,
Duke of Clarence

Anne m.1. Edward of Lancaster,
Prince of Wales
m.2. Richard Plantagenet*
Duke of Gloucester
(*later Richard III)

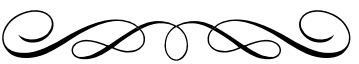
Cecily Neville
m. Richard Plantagenet
Duke of York

Edward

George

Richard

Chapter One



April 1469—on board ship,
off the English port of Calais

ISABEL whimpered. With creaks and groans the ship listed and thumped against the force of water as if it would be torn apart by the next wave, casting us into the depths. Isabel clapped her hands to her mouth, her eyes staring at the heaving wooden walls that hemmed us in, the sides of a coffin.

'Now what's wrong with you?' It was not fear of a watery death. I knew what it was, even as I prayed that it was not. The ship rolled again in the heavy swell, wallowing queasily in the dips before lifting and lurching. Sweat prickled on my forehead. Nausea clutched my belly before fear rapidly drove it out again. 'Isabel.' I nudged her arm sharply to get her attention. She was sitting in a high-backed chair, the

only available chair in the cabin and the property of the captain, her whole body rigid, braced. Eyes tight closed to shut out the desperate pitch and roll, one hand was closed claw-like on the arm. I shuffled forwards on my stool. 'Is it the baby?'

'Yes,' she gasped, then, 'No…no. Just a quick pain.' On a deep breath her body relaxed fractionally, fingers uncurling from the carved end. 'There, it's gone. Perhaps I mistook it.'

And perhaps she didn't. I watched her cautiously as she eased her body in the confined space. Her face was as livid and slick as milk, drawn with near-exhaustion. Wedged into the chair in that crowded, low-ceilinged cabin, her belly strained against the cloak she clutched to herself as if she were cold. It was so close and airless that I could feel the sweat work its way down my spine beneath the heavy cloth of my gown. Nine months pregnant, my sister Isabel was. And even I knew that this was no time to be at sea on a chancy expedition.

I got up to pour a mug of ale, staggering as the vessel lifted and sank. 'Drink this.'

Isabel sniffed as if the familiar aroma of malted hops repelled her. As it had for much of her pregnancy. 'I don't want it. I would rather it were wine.'

But I pushed it into her hands. 'It's all we have. Drink it and don't argue.' I struggled against telling her that this was no time for ungrateful petulance. I

was very close to gulping the small-beer myself and letting her go thirsty. 'It will ease your muscles if nothing else.'

'But not my bladder. The child presses heavily.' Another grimace, another groan, as she sipped. 'Pray God it will be born soon.' Isabel had never tolerated discomfort well.

'But not here!' The prospect stirred the fear in my gut again. It churned and clenched. 'We should soon make land. We've been at sea an age. When we get to Calais, that's the time to pray for God's help.'

'I don't think I can wait that long…' Her complaints dried on a gasp. Dropping the cup on the floor so that it rolled and returned, she hissed out a breath. Her hands clutched her mountainous belly.

'When we get to Calais…' Taking my stool beside her again, I tried to think of some mindless conversation. Anything to distract.

'When we get to Calais I'll never set foot on board ship again,' Isabel snapped. 'No matter how much—' She bit off the words, her renewed moans rising to the approximation of a howl. 'The baby… It must be. Where's our mother? I want her here with me… Send Margery to fetch her…'

'No. I'll get Margery to sit with you. *I'll* get the Countess.'

Relief to escape the squalid cabin. Relief to pass the burden of this child to more experienced hands than

mine. At fourteen years, I was old enough to know what would happen, but too young to seek the responsibility. I think I was always a selfish child. I summoned Margery, the Countess's serving woman, to remain at Isabel's side. And fled.

I found my mother exactly where I knew she would be on the deck. Despite the cold wind and the frequent squalls, I knew she would be with my father. The Countess of Warwick, swathed from head to foot in a heavy cloak, hood shadowing her face, stood in the shelter of the high stern, my father, the Earl, similarly wrapped about, harassed, thwarted in his planning, his fist clenched and opened on the gunwale. The two figures stood together in close conversation, looking out towards where we would soon see land, if the clouds, thick and heavy, enveloping us all in an opaque blanket of grey-green, ever saw fit to lift. Taken up with their concerns, their backs remained turned to me. So I listened. Eavesdropping was a skill I had perfected through my early years when, as the younger daughter, it was customary for our household to overlook my presence as if I were an infant or witless. I was neither. I approached with careful steps.

'What if he refuses us entry?' I heard the Countess ask.

'He will not. Lord Wenlock is as loyal a lieutenant as any man could ask.'

'I wish I could be as sure as you.'

'I have to hold to it,' the Earl stated with more conviction in his voice than the circumstances merited in my opinion. I knew that in recent days there were new lines of strain on his face between nose and mouth, engraved deep. Even so he placed an arm round the Countess's shoulders to enforce his certainty. 'We shall be safe here in Calais. From here we can plan our return, at the head of a force strong enough to displace the King…'

I was destined to hear no more as the deck heaved with more vehemence. I stumbled, tottered to regain my balance. And they turned. My mother immediately came towards me to catch my arm as if sensing the bad news.

'Anne. What are you doing out here? It's not safe… Is it your sister?' Isabel had been in the forefront of all our minds in recent days.

'Yes. She says the baby's coming.' No point in embroidering bad news.

My mother's teeth bit into her bottom lip, her fingers suddenly tight on my arm, but her words were for my father. 'We should not have set off so late. I warned you of the dangers. We knew she was too near her time.'

Then she was already on her way to my sister's side, dragging me with her, except that my father stopped her with a brusque movement of his hand.

'Tell her this, to ease her mind. Within the hour

we'll see Calais. Sooner if this cloud lifts. And then we will get her ashore. It will not stop the process of nature, but it may give her strength.' He tried a smile. I knew it to be false. I could see his eyes, the fear in them. 'Are not all first babies late?'

'No! They are not!' My mother shrugged off my father's attempts at reassurance. 'She should never have been put through this ordeal.'

A tall figure, similarly cloaked, loomed beside us from the direction of one of the rear cabins, pushing back the hood.

'What's amiss? Have we made landfall at last?'

Tall, golden haired, striking of face. George, Duke of Clarence, brother to King Edward and male heir apparent to the English throne. My sister's husband of less than a year. His eyes shone brilliantly blue, his fair skin glowed in the murk. So beautiful, as Isabel frequently crowed her victory in becoming his wife, a maiden's dream.

I loathed him.

'No. It's Isabel,' I told him with barely a glance. The Countess would reprimand me for my ill manners, but nothing she could say would ever reconcile me to my brother by marriage. Not that it mattered to him. He rarely deigned to notice me.

'Is she sick?'

The Countess interrupted my pert reply. 'She is distressed. The child is imminent…'

Clarence scowled. 'A pity we had not made landfall. Will the child be safe?'

I felt my lip curl and made no attempt to disguise it, even when my mother saw and stared warningly at me. She thought my hostility was a younger sister's jealousy of Isabel's good fortune, but I knew differently. Not, *Will my wife suffer?* Or, *Can we do anything to ease her distress?* Just, *Will the child be safe?* I hated him from the depths of my heart. How Richard, my own Richard, who was now separated from me and would remain so for ever as far as I could see, could be brother to this arrogant prince I could never fathom.

The Countess swept Clarence's inopportune query aside, but found time and compassion to smile at me. 'Don't look so worried, Anne. She's young and healthy. She'll forget all her pain and discomfort when she holds her child in her arms.'

'The child must be saved! At all costs.' Clarence's face was handsome no longer.

'I shall bear your instructions in mind, your Grace. But my first concern is for my daughter.' The Countess was already striding across the deck.

With relish at the curt reprimand, I also turned my back on the Duke of Clarence and scuttled after my mother. When I arrived in the cabin she had already taken charge. Her cloak dropped on to a stool, she had replaced Margery at Isabel's side and was dispensing advice and soothing words in a forthright manner that

would brook no refusal. In our northern home in Middleham where I had spent the years of my childhood, my mother, despite her high-born status, had a reputation for knowledge and skill in the affairs of childbirth. I feared that we would need all of it before the night was out.

My mother was right in one thing. With Isabel as far on as she was, we should never have put to sea when we did. Not that we had much choice in the matter, with the King and his army breathing down our traitorous necks and out for blood. A disastrous mix of ill luck, poor weather and royal Yorkist cunning—and we were reduced to this voyage on this mean little vessel in unreliable April weather. Here we were in this hot, dark, confined space, lurching on a sulky sea, with Isabel's screams echoing off the rough walls to make me feel a need to cover my ears—except that my mother was watching—and reject any notion of motherhood for myself.

A fist hammered on the door.

'Who is it?' The Countess's attention remained fixed on Isabel's flushed face.

A disembodied voice. 'My lord says to tell you, my lady, the heavy cloud has lifted and Calais is in sight. We are approaching the harbour, to disembark within the hour.'

'Do you hear that, Isabel?' The Countess gripped

Isabel's hand hard as Margery wiped the sweat from my sister's forehead. 'You'll soon be in your own room, in the comfort of your own bed in Calais.' Heart-warming words, but I did not think the Countess's expression matched them as she helped Isabel to lie down on the narrow bed.

Isabel snatched her hand away. 'How can I bear this pain, no matter where I am?'

At that exact moment, bringing a deathly silence to the cabin, there came the easily recognisable crack of distant cannon fire. One! Two! And then another. Shouts erupted on deck, the rush of running feet. The ship reeled and huffed against the wind as sails were hauled in and she swung round with head-spinning speed. The scrape of metal on wood rumbled as the anchor chain was dropped overboard.

We all froze, even Isabel's attention dragged from her woes.

'Heaven preserve us!' Margery promptly fell to her knees, hands clasped on her ample bosom.

'Cannon fire!' I whispered.

'Are they firing at us?' Isabel croaked.

'No.' The Countess stood, voice strong with conviction. 'Get up, Margery. Of course they are not firing at us. Lord Wenlock would never refuse us entry to Calais.'

But again the crash of cannon. We all tensed, expecting a broadside hit at any moment. Then Isabel

groaned. Clutched the bed with talon-like fingers. Her once-flushed face was suddenly grey, her lips ashen. The groan became a scream.

Our mother approached the bed, barely turned her head towards me, but fired off her own instructions, as terse as any cannon. 'Anne! Go and see what's amiss. Tell your father we need to get to land immediately.'

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