

Extract from...

CLAIMING THE REBEL'S HEART

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Chapter 1

Kinton Lacey Castle, Herefordshire

July 25, 1643

Startled out of an uneasy doze by the crackle of musket fire, Deliverance sent books and papers flying as she rummaged through the detritus on the table in her search for the flint. As the candle sputtered into the life, the door opened and her steward, Melchior Blakelocke, stood outlined in the doorway, holding a covered lantern.

“Are we being attacked?” Deliverance asked.

“I don't think so,” Melchior replied. “In fact, my lady, I think it is our besiegers who are being attacked.”

Hope sprang in Deliverance's heart. “Is it Father? Has he come to relieve us?”

She reached for the elegant French Wheelock musket her father used for hunting, running her hand over the well-polished wood of the stock. It had a kick that threatened to dislocate her shoulder every time she used it, but she took pride in her mastery of the weapon.

Outside, the entire garrison of Kinton Lacey Castle had deployed along the walls, but to her relief, the firing and shouts came from beyond the crumbling walls of the old castle. She took her now accustomed vantage point on the northern tower of the bastion gate and squinted into the darkness and confusion.

Smoke and flame from burning outbuildings lent a surreal light to the melee of men that whirled and danced in the shadows as if re-enacting some ancient pagan ceremony. Only the clash of steel instead of cymbals brought home the grim purpose of the bizarre pageant.

Two men on horseback appeared out of the smoke and cantered towards the castle. Backlit by the fires, they could have been a pair of vengeful spirits.

Her heart pounding, Deliverance raised her musket and fired, cursing in a most unladylike manner as the musket ball skimmed past the two men, taking the taller man's hat. His

horse, startled by its rider's jerk of alarm, reared up depositing the soldier on the ground. For a moment he lay still, before rising to his hands and knees. Shaking his head, he rose slowly to his feet, casting an upwards glance in the direction of the castle, as he dusted off his hat and remounted his horse.

Melchior cleared his throat. "While that is excellent shooting, I think you will find they are friends not foes."

Deliverance's stomach lurched. "How can you tell?"

"They wear the orange sash of the parliamentary forces, my lady."

Deliverance leaned the musket against the wall, clenching and unclenching her hand in an effort to disguise her shaking fingers. Nausea rose in her throat. It was the first time she had fired the weapon intending to kill and she had nearly killed one of their own relieving force.

She took a deep breath, struggling to regain her composure as the two men came to a halt at the bridge over the castle's defensive ditch. Facing them were the stout oaken gates to the castle that Deliverance had shut on her foe two weeks earlier.

"Hold your fire." The man she had shot at called up to the defenders. "We are sent by Sir John Felton to relieve this castle."

Deliverance picked up her musket and drew back to a vantage point where she could see without being seen. "You answer, Melchior."

Melchior cast her a sidelong glance and stepped forward to the battlements. "Your name, sir?"

"Captain Luke Collyer."

"How do we know they've come from Father?" Deliverance prompted her steward.

"How do I know you are sent by his lordship?" Melchior demanded.

The man who had identified himself as Captain Luke Collyer produced a paper from his jacket and waved it at the wall.

"These are my orders. While I don't wish to appear churlish, sir, we have no great desire to remain outside these walls when those knaves could be back at any moment."

"What do you mean?" Melchior asked, leaning further over the ramparts.

"We appear to have seen off your besiegers for the moment," the man's voice rose to make himself heard by all on the castle wall.

Deliverance drew a sharp intake of breath as relief flooded through her. The siege was over but she still had to be careful. She put no trust in Farrington not to try and gull her in this fashion.

“Very well, Melchior, let them in, but I want every man with a weapon to have it trained on them.” She tapped a fingernail on the stock of her musket. “I will meet them in the Great Hall.”

“May I suggest a change of dress, madam?”

She looked down at her breeches. “Demure and ladylike?”

Melchior nodded. “Demure and ladylike.”

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“Well, this is a warm welcome,” Luke said as he and his comrade, Ned Barret, rode under the gatehouse into the courtyard beneath a bristling bank of muskets. “First I’m shot at and now this. Hardly what I would have expected.”

He turned to Sergeant Hale, who had followed them in on foot. “Clear the village, Hale. Make sure none of the blackguards are left to bother us for the time being.”

“Sir!” Hale saluted smartly and turned back through the castle gate.

A tall, thin man with wispy, greying hair and a lugubrious expression waited on the steps of what would have once been the castle keep, but now more closely resembled a comfortable manor house, with mullioned windows knocked through its sturdy walls. Roses grew around the stonework. A few well aimed cannonballs would reduce it to rubble.

“My lady will receive you in the Great Hall,” the man announced, gesturing at the open door.

Fingering the hole in his hat, Luke, with Ned beside him, followed the man up the wide stone stairs toward the front entrance.

Despite its façade of tall walls, a tower at each corner and a solid gatehouse, even in the dark, he could see some of the walls had crumbled. The years had turned Kinton Lacey from one of Edward III’s ring of stout Marches castles to a family home that would be hard to defend.

They were shown through an ornately carved wooden screen into the Great Hall. A branch of candles on the long oak table cast a thin light in the cavernous room. In keeping with rest of the castle, it appeared to have been modernized to provide such comforts as fireplaces, glazed windows and wooden paneling. Another tribute to more peaceful times.

In the shadows of the lofty ceiling, faded, dusty standards hung from poles and rows of hooks on the walls, indicating the places where ancient weapons had once been displayed. These, Luke assumed with amusement, probably now armed the garrison.

“Are you the men who saved us?”

Both men turned back to face the screen. A woman walked toward them across the flagged floor. Luke's blood stirred as she came into the light thrown by the candles. This girl was a beauty. Soft fair curls framed a serene oval face and azure-blue eyes held his gaze from beneath long lashes. Her perfect rose-colored lips parted in a smile of delight as she looked from one to the other.

"Mistress Felton." Luke gave her the benefit of his most courtly bow before prodding Ned to do the same. He could see from the idiotic smile on Ned's face that he had fallen instantly in love. He just hoped Sir John Felton's assertions concerning his daughter's ability to defend her honor were not misplaced.

"You must be so brave," the young woman enthused. "There were so many of them."

"Captain Collyer?" Another woman's voice, clipped and businesslike, cut across Ned's stammered protestations of how simple the job had been.

Both men looked away from the fair-haired beauty. Another woman strode across the floor toward them.

"I see you've already met my sister, Penitence," she said as she reached them. "I am Deliverance Felton."

Luke stared. If this was Deliverance Felton, she could not have been more different from her sister. As dark as Penitence was fair, she was at least four fingers shorter, with a strong jawline, a long nose and large light green eyes. Where Penitence's hair hung in carefully coiffed curls, Deliverance's attempt at a similar style resembled bedraggled rats' tails.

"Deliverance Felton?" Luke enquired with a trace of uncertainty in his voice.

"Yes," she replied curtly, holding out her hand. "Your orders, Captain Collyer?"

Luke fumbled in his jacket, presenting her with the crumpled and stained paper.

"My orders," he said with an inclination of his head.

Deliverance Felton turned the paper over and broke the seal. A second, neatly sealed letter fell to the floor. She stooped and picked it up, turning it over to peer at the seal, before tucking the packet away in her skirts.

She looked at Luke. "I thought my father might have come himself."

Luke spread his hands. "He sends his apologies, Mistress Felton. The defense of Gloucester commands his full attention."

"How is he?" Penitence asked.

"Well," Luke replied. "Yes, very well, when I last saw him. In fine voice..." Ned's elbow pressed into his side.

Sir John Felton had only let them out of Gloucester after an hour long lecture on how to conduct themselves. They were both in disgrace. A few long nights in one of the inns and the complaints of several good burghers of Gloucester had brought them to Sir John's attention. He had judged their behavior unfitting for the forces of the godly parliamentarians and the affronted citizenry of Gloucester and had sent them to the relief of Kinton Lacey.

"I see you have orders to reinforce the garrison here." Deliverance looked up, cutting in on his reverie. "How many men did you bring with you?"

"Forty-five," Luke replied.

Her eyes widened and the corners of her mouth turned down at the corners. "Only forty-five?"

"How many do you have in the garrison at present?" he asked, with a sense of foreboding.

"Twenty-three," she said.

Luke glanced at Ned. "Colonel Felton led us to believe the garrison numbered over fifty."

"It did," Deliverance replied. "But Father took the able-bodied men and those left behind returned to their fields and to defend their own homes, particularly once Sir Richard Farrington started to send out raiding parties."

"Sir Richard Farrington?" Ned asked.

"The local royalist commander."

"An odious man, even before the war began." Deliverance shuddered. "Always thought himself superior to us. It is his men who have been camped outside our walls for the last weeks."

Luke smiled. "You do not seem particularly worse the wear for the inconvenience."

Deliverance met his eyes with a smile of satisfaction. "That is because we were well prepared, Captain Collyer. We could withstand a siege of some months if need be."

"I see." Luke looked up at the bare walls. "And your weapons?"

She followed his gaze and a little color stained her cheeks. "Ah...you guess rightly, Captain Collyer. We're not well armed."

"We've brought fresh arms and powder and a couple of small cannonade," Ned said.

Deliverance Felton beamed, the smile transforming her face. "Oh, that is wonderful news." Her eyes gleamed in the candlelight. "Cannonade—"

Luke cleared his throat. "Are there other Parliamentary garrisons in the area?"

“This is a county that holds strongly for the King, Captain Collyer, but there is a small garrison held for Parliament at Byton Castle, five miles north.” Deliverance sighed. “Other than that, we find ourselves in the midst of very unfriendly neighbors.”

Luke considered the odds as she had presented them: Two tiny outposts of parliamentary sympathy in a county professing itself loyal to the King. Did Felton really think he could hold Kinton Lacey? This Farrington, whoever he was, would have greater resources to draw on, and would return to swat this annoying little insect of a garrison at the earliest possibility.

He looked down at Deliverance.

She watched him, with the same bright, intelligent gaze as her father.

“I have the plans for the defense of the castle in my father's library. I just haven't had the men to do the work. Of course, now you're here...Come this way gentlemen,”

She set off across the hall, leaving the two men scurrying to catch up with her. At the screen, the tall man stopped them, inclining his head to Luke.

“Your sergeant tells me the town is clear of the malignants,” he said.

“Excellent,” Luke said, allowing himself a small instant of self satisfaction. There would be precious few such moments in the weeks to come he suspected.

Deliverance regarded him from beneath her dark fringe, her hands on her hips.

“Captain Collyer, I am impressed. With less than fifty men you have seen off a force of three times that number?”

Luke smiled and inclined his head. “It would seem so. Darkness and a little subterfuge, madam.”

Deliverance turned to her man. “Melchior, I was just taking Captain Collyer and...” She looked at Ned. “I'm sorry, what was your name?”

“Ned Barret, ma'am,” Ned replied., “Your servant.”

“This is Melchior Blakelocke, our steward and my second-in-command.”

“Your steward is your second-in-command?” Luke asked, the ill-concealed disbelief coloring his tone.

Deliverance cast him a frowning glance of disapproval. “Melchior saw service with my father on the continent, Captain Collyer.”

Luke glanced at Blakelocke and then back at his mistress. “I didn't mean to imply”—” She cut him short with a wave of her hand.

“People are not always what they seem, Captain Collyer.”

She turned to a set of stairs, pausing to look back at the two men. "Are you coming?"

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Deliverance opened the door to the pleasant room that served her father as a library, when he was at home. In his absence she had taken it over, and it had become her sanctuary from the world. The familiar scent of dust, bees wax polish and musty books greeted her.

The papers she had dislodged in her haste to get to the walls, still littered the floor and the large table in the centre of the room could not be seen beneath the piles of books which were stacked haphazardly around a drawing of of the castle and its surrounds. She had spent hours preparing this plan for the defense of her home.

Captain Collyer picked up a much thumbed copy of *The Exercise of Armes* from one of the piles on the desk and she caught the quick glance he exchanged with his colleague.

Heat rose in Deliverance's face. "I am afraid all my learning is from my father's books."

She didn't add that those books she had not found in her father's collection had been secretly ordered from her longsuffering book seller in Ludlow.

"Well, it's an excellent book," Luke Collyer said, setting it back on the table. The quirk of his lips into a quickly suppressed smile did not escape her notice. Her skin prickled at the condescension in his tone.

She pulled the plan of the castle from beneath the tomes.

"I've had ample time in the last two weeks to consider the defense of the castle." She flattened the creases from the paper. "Now, I think if we put a redoubt in here..." She stabbed at the paper with her forefinger. "And a defensive ditch, along here."

When her remarks were met with silence, she looked up. Both men stared at her as if she had walked into the room stark naked.

"Is there a problem?"

Luke cleared his throat. "With respect, madam, but your father... Sir John Felton... has placed me in command of this garrison and I—"

"Do you not think me capable of having an opinion on the defense of my own home?" She fixed him with a well-practiced stare which would make a weaker man quail.

Luke Collyer returned the gaze without blinking. "I respect your opinion, madam, and if... when... I need your advice I shall ask for it."

How dare this man speak to me in that condescending manner. She took a steadying breath and squared her shoulders. She was Deliverance Felton, chatelaine of this castle and this Collyer a mere...a mere...

“And what experience do you have, captain?”

The man’s gaze held hers and he too straightened, resting his hand on *The Exercise of Armes*. “I have been a soldier since I was nineteen, madam. I have fought on the continent and in the Scottish wars. Your father chose me for this task with every confidence in my abilities. You can trust me to the defense of this castle, and you can return to more appropriate concerns.”

“More appropriate concerns?” Deliverance bridled. “What is more appropriate than the defense of my home?”

Luke Collyer’s eyes narrowed. He had a lean, tanned face and the hazel eyes that were fixed on her had lost all trace of humour. She saw a hard, uncompromising soldier. “Forgive me, madam, but military matters are not for gently-bred women. All I am saying is that you are free to return to”—

“My embroidery, perhaps?” she said in a tone that dripped ice. “I assure you, Captain Collyer that the defense of my home is of far greater importance to me than its decoration. I have read all these books,” she gestured at the table, “and I warrant I know as much of matters military as you, Captain Collyer.”

“And I have had years of practical experience, madam,” he responded in a tone that matched hers for frigidity.

Melchior cleared his throat. “I think, madam, this is a discussion for the morning. These two gentlemen have ridden from Gloucester and fought a battle, vanquishing our foes. Sirs, you must be tired and hungry. Let me show you to your quarters and see you are fed. In the morning we will all be in a better position to discuss defensive works.”

Deliverance shot her steward a quick, angry glance. She did not need or want Melchior’s intervention but it had the desired effect, the tension in the room dissipating as if he had opened the window and let in the breeze.

She tossed the paper back on to the table and sniffed. “Very well. If you need me, I shall be in my chamber hard at work... at my embroidery.”

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“Insufferable man.” Deliverance ranted to her sister as she concluded her summation of the discussion with Captain Collyer.

Penitence looked up from her needlework. “He is a man, Liv. Of course he is going to want to take command. What does Father say?”

Deliverance pulled out their father’s letter and began to read.

“Dearest daughter, I trust this letter finds you and your sister in good health. Reports of Sir Richard Farrington’s increasing movements in the area of Kinton Lacey has caused me some concern, so I am sending one of my best men to you to reinforce the

garrison and command the defenses in the event of an attack by the King's men. I trust you to defer to Captain Collyer in all matters military. I feel more certain in my mind knowing you and my beloved Kinton Lacey are in a man's hands."

"There you are," Penitence commented. "Father is quite explicit. Your Captain Collyer is here to take command."

Deliverance sniffed and continued, her eyes widening as she silently read the next sentence.

"Deliverance, daughter, I must warn you that Captain Collyer has something of a reputation and an eye for a pretty face, so I trust you to see to the protection of your sister's honor and to report to me should any indiscretion occur. Yr loving father JF."

Deliverance set the letter down, wounded by the tone of the letter, particularly her father's last words. Beautiful, gentle and serene Penitence would always be considered the one worthy of protecting, never her.

"What's the matter?" Penitence, always intuitive to her sister's moods, looked up, her brow creased with concern. "What else did Father say?"

Deliverance forced a smile. "Nothing. Just sent us his love." She ran a hand across her forehead. "It has been rather a trying day."

She refolded her father's letter and tucked it into her skirts.

"Deliverance?" her sister prompted.

"I should be grateful to Captain Collyer for relieving me of the terrible responsibility of the castle's defense. Grateful? This is my home, my castle..."

As Deliverance paced the floor, Penitence bent her head to her embroidery.

Deliverance heard her sister murmur as she stabbed the needle through the cloth. "Poor man."

<end extract>