Nicola Cornick

Lord Greville's Captive

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Аннотация

Years before, he had come to Grafton Manor to be betrothed to the innocent and beautiful Lady Anne–a promise that was broken with the onset of war….Now Simon, Lord Greville, has returned as an enemy, besieging the manor and holding its lady hostage. Simon's devotion to his cause swayed by his desire for Anne, he will not settle for the manor house alone.He will have the lady–and her heart–into the bargain! Yet Anne has a secret that must be kept from him at all costs….

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Anne grabbed the hilt of the sword. It came free of the scabbard with a satisfying hiss of metal.

She spun around. Simon had started to move toward her, but he was too late. As he took the final step she brought the tip of the blade up to rest against his throat like a lover's caress. Simon stopped abruptly. The smile in his eyes deepened to something like admiration.

"I cannot believe," he said, "that I was so careless."

Lord Greville's Captive

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Prologue

Grafton, Oxfordshire, England

Summer 1641

It was high summer and the village of Grafton was garlanded for a feast to celebrate the betrothal of the Earl of Grafton's only daughter to the eldest son of Fulwar Greville, the Earl of Harington. This dynastic match was no surprise, for the two Earls were old friends, one-time comrades in arms and godfather to each other's children. It was a day of great rejoicing.

In her chamber in the west wing of the old manor house, Lady Anne Grafton's women were helping her dress for the banquet.

'Do you like Lord Greville, Nan?' Anne's young cousin Muna asked, as she slid the petticoats over Anne's head in a ruffle of white. 'He seems to me quite stern and cold.'

'Like his sire,' commented Edwina, Anne's former nurse, with a shiver. She pulled Anne's laces tight. 'They do not call him the Iron Earl for naught.'

Anne laughed, stopping abruptly as the pull of the laces stole her breath. 'Oof! Edwina, you are smothering me!' She slipped obediently into the red velvet gown that her nurse was holding for her. 'Uncle Fulwar is the kindest man in the world,' she said, muffled. 'As for Lord Greville—' She stopped. The truth was that she did not know Simon Greville well, for all that their fathers had served together in the wars on the continent. Simon was eight

years older than she and already a battle-hardened commander who had been commended for his bravery. Muna was right—there was something distant and a little stern in his demeanour, as though all that he had seen and done in his life had already made him older than she by far more than years.

In the week that the Earl of Harington and his son had been at Grafton, Anne had not spent any time alone with Simon. It was not expected. It might be her hand in marriage that he had come to sue for, but it was her father's permission he needed, not hers.

And yet, there had been a moment that had taken Anne quite by surprise. Simon had ridden in late one evening when the full moon was rising high over the tall crops in the fields. Anne had, naturally, been curious to see him; although she understood that it was her duty to marry this man, there was a part of her that hoped that she might find him personable as well. Thus it was that she had been leaning out of the mullioned window, in a most hoydenish fashion, when the horses had clattered over the drawbridge and into the courtyard.

She had known that she should draw back in all modesty, but something had held her still, watching. The air had been warm from the heat of the day and full of the scent of honeysuckle. There had been no sound except the flutter of the doves settling in the cote.

Simon Greville had swung down from the saddle and then he had looked up, directly at Anne's window. Instinct had prompted her to draw back. Curiosity had held her still. He had a hard,

handsome face tanned deep by the sun, and he had raised his plumed hat and brought it sweeping down in a low bow. His hair was thick and dark, and a wicked smile had lit his eyes as he looked upon her. To her astonishment Anne had felt a shiver run all the way down her spine. All thoughts of duty flew straight out of the window. She had a suspicion that it might be an absolute pleasure to marry Simon Greville.

'Look at my lady's face!' Edwina said now, her own beaming. 'You like him well enough, do you not, my pet, and quite right too! I'll wager Lord Greville is a lusty man who will make you happy.'

One of the maids giggled.

'Edwina!' Anne pressed her hands to her hot cheeks. She was seventeen, old to be unwed and painfully aware that her father's protectiveness and his negligence in arranging her marriage meant that she knew little of these mysterious matters. There were girls far younger than she who were already mothers.

'Peace, I beg you,' she said. 'I marry Lord Greville because it is Papa's will.'

Edwina smiled. 'That is all very well and good, pet, and indeed as it should be.' She bustled around Anne's head, fixing a circlet of silver in place. 'But I have been thinking about the wedding night.'

Anne looked up. She remembered Simon Greville's dark gaze upon her and gave a little shiver.

'I have been thinking,' Edwina continued, 'that as you have no

mama to speak to you, I should take that role.' She gestured to Muna. 'Come closer, pet. You must listen too, for no doubt you will soon be wed as well.'

Anne sighed. 'Must we endure this, Edwina? I have a feeling that Muna and I shall be monstrously embarrassed at what you have to tell.'

Muna giggled. 'Madam Elizabeth from the village told me that, as long as I kept quite still and closed my eyes and did not move, no matter what my husband did to me, I should prove a very satisfactory wife.'

'Lord have mercy,' Anne said drily. 'I do not think that sounds very satisfactory at all, Muna.'

Edwina put her hands on her hips and huffed. ''Tis not a matter for jest, my lady. The demands of a husband can come as a shock to a gentlewoman. Why, my own husband kept me busy nigh on five times a night.'

Muna clapped her hands to her mouth. 'Five times! Every night?'

'I heard tell that he was a very lusty fellow,' Anne said, smiling. 'I am not sure whether you are to be congratulated or commiserated with, Edwina. Did you ever get any sleep?'

'You are not taking this seriously,' the maid grumbled. 'Well, do not come complaining to me when you receive a shock on your wedding night!'

'I promise I shall not complain,' Anne said. 'And,' she added firmly, 'I should like a little time alone, if you please, before the

feasting starts.'

They went grumbling, Edwina herding Muna and the younger maids before her, closing the door on their chatter. Anne sank down on the window seat with a heartfelt sigh. She had so little quiet. The burden of managing the household had fallen on her shoulders since her mother had died. Always there was someone or something demanding her attention, from the maids who fussed and fluttered around her to the villagers who brought her their problems and requests, knowing that she would present their petitions to her father with soft and persuasive words. She loved the people of Grafton and she knew they loved her. Her entire life had been lived out in this land. And now through this betrothal she knew that the Earl of Grafton was seeking to ensure her a safe future, knowing that his health was starting to fail and that Grafton and its lady needed a strong lord to defend them.

Anne felt the prickle of tears in her throat. She swallowed hard, and deliberately turned her thoughts aside from her father's ill health. The room was hot, its walls confining. Suddenly she did not wish to sit waiting here for the summons to the betrothal feast. The air would be fresher in the garden.

So it proved. She skirted the kitchens, where the cook was bellowing at the scullions and sweating to provide the finest banquet that Grafton had ever seen. The villagers were already flocking to fill the ancient tithe barn and share in the feast. But no one saw Anne as she slipped through the doorway into the walled garden and walked slowly through the parterre to the sundial at

the centre. The shadows were lengthening and the smell of the lavender was still in the air. She ran her fingers over the sundial's smooth surface. Sometimes it felt as though time stood still at Grafton. In her memories there was always the sun.

'Lady Anne.'

Anne jumped, a small cry escaping her lips. She had not seen the man who was standing in the shadow of the doorway, but now he came forward, his footsteps crunching on the gravel, until he was standing before her.

'I beg your pardon,' Simon Greville said. 'I did not intend to startle you. Your father is looking for you, Lady Anne. We are ready for the feast.'

Anne nodded. Her heart was beating swiftly, not only from the shock of his sudden appearance but also from the knowledge that they were alone for the first time. During the previous week they had ridden out together, danced under the indulgent gaze of the household and conversed on generalities. But suddenly it seemed precious little upon which to build a marriage; even as Anne reminded herself of her duty, the fear clutched at her heart.

'Of course,' she said. 'Excuse me, Lord Greville.'

Simon did not move. He put out a hand and caught her arm. 'A moment, Lady Anne.'

Anne looked up. The evening sun was in her eyes and she could not see his expression. She waited, her heart racing.

Simon slid his hand down her sleeve to capture her fingers in his. His hand was warm, the shock of his touch sufficient to send

a shiver through Anne's entire body.

'I have your father's permission to wed you, Lady Anne,' he said, 'but I do not yet have yours.'

Anne stared. 'You do not need mine, my lord.'

Simon smiled into her eyes. 'Yes, I do. I will not force an unwilling maid. So speak now, Anne of Grafton, if you do not wish to take me as your husband, for soon we shall be troth-plight.'

His hands tightened on hers as he waited for her answer. Anne searched his face, so dark, so stern. She felt a little quiver of apprehension.

'I will do my duty—' she began.

'I do not want your duty.' Simon sounded angry now. 'I want you.' He moderated his tone. 'And I had thought—forgive me—that you might in some small way feel the same…'

Anne remembered the moment in the courtyard when she had first set eyes upon him. Then she remembered Edwina's words about the wedding night. An involuntary smile curved her lips.

'Well, I—'

She got no further, for Simon leaned down and kissed her, his hands suddenly mercilessly hard on her slender frame, his mouth hungry. Anne's exclamation of shock was smothered beneath the relentless demand of his lips. Her head spun and the blood pounded in her veins.

He released her gently and she steadied herself with one hand against the mossy stone of the sundial. She was trembling down

to the tips of her toes. She pressed her fingers against her lips in confusion and the beginnings of desire.

'So is that a yes?' Simon demanded. His eyes were bright and hard with passion. Anne saw it; for the first time in her life, she understood the truly awesome strength of her own power and felt the excitement flood her body. To be able to do this to such a man…She could bring him to his knees. She felt dizzy at the thought.

'I am considering it,' she said demurely. "Tis true, my lord, that you are very pleasant to look upon…'

His lips twitched in response, but she could feel the impatient desire in him, barely held under control. 'Thank you,' he murmured. 'And?'

'And I have…enjoyed…the time that we have spent in each other's company…'

'And?'

'And indeed I think you must kiss very nicely, my lord, although I have no means of comparison.'

Simon made a movement towards her, but she evaded him, dancing away down the path. She was laughing now, the exhilaration burning in her veins.

'So having given consideration to your offer…'

She paused, looked at him. He caught her wrist, pulled her close and held her still.

'Yes?' he said.

'I will marry you,' she whispered, as their lips met again. 'With

all my heart.’

Chapter One

Grafton, Oxfordshire, England

February 1645

The snow had been falling all day. It hung like a shroud between the besieged manor house of Grafton and the army that encircled it a bare half mile away. Now, as the church bell tolled midnight, the darkness had an unearthly glow that struck a chill into the men's hearts. In the morning they were to do battle, but for tonight they huddled in the byres and barns of the village, around the fitful fires. They drank the last of their ale, talked in low voices and tried not to think of the morrow.

When the knock came at the door, Simon Greville thought at first that he had imagined it. He had already met with his captains, they had talked of their strategy for the morning and had retired to wait for dawn and get what little sleep they could. He had given specific orders that he should not be disturbed further that night. Yet the knock came once again, soft but insistent, on the barn door. Simon was not angered to have his instructions gainsaid, but he was curious. His authority was such that only in the direst emergency would his men disobey his direct command.

He strode across the room and flung wide the door. It shook on its hinges and a flurry of wind swept in, bringing with it night chill and a scattering of snowflakes. The candles guttered and

the smell of tallow stung the air.

'What is it?' He knew that he sounded brusque. Even he, renowned for his steady nerve, could be forgiven a certain shortness of temper the night before a battle.

It was the youngest of his captains who stood there, a youth barely out of his teens called Guy Standish. He was looking terrified.

'Your pardon, my lord. There is a messenger from Grafton Manor.'

Simon turned away. He might have known that the Royalist garrison in the house would try this last-ditch attempt to beg a surrender and avoid bloodshed. He had been waiting all day for them to try to negotiate a truce. And now it had happened. It was typical of the cowardice of the King's general, Gerard Malvoisier, to try to bargain for his miserable life.

Two weeks before, Malvoisier had murdered Simon's younger brother, who had gone to the Manor under the Parliamentarians' flag of truce. Malvoisier had sent Henry back in pieces, no quarter given, but now he evidently expected Simon to spare his worthless life. Once again Simon felt the ripping tide of fury that had swamped him when he had learned of Henry's death. A fortnight had allowed no time for that grief to start to heal. He had had the anguished task of writing to their father with the news as well. Fulwar Greville, Earl of Harington, supported the King whilst his sons were loyal to the Parliamentarian cause. And now Simon had written to tell their father that one of those sons

was dead, fighting for a cause that betrayed their father's fealty.

Simon knew that his and Henry's defection had broken their father's heart. He had the deepest of respect for the Earl, despite their political differences. And now he felt a huge guilt for allowing Henry to die. All he could do was to turn that anger and hatred on to Gerard Malvoisier, stationed at Grafton. There would be no mercy for the besieged army in the Manor house, not now, not ever. It made no odds that Grafton—and its mistress—had once been promised to him. The Civil War had ripped such alliances apart.

Standish was waiting.

'I will not see the messenger,' Simon said. 'There is nothing to discuss. The time for parley is long past. We attack on the morrow and nothing can prevent it.'

His tone was colder than the snow-swept night and it should have been enough, but still Standish lingered, his face tight with strain.

'My lord…'

Simon spun around with repressed rage. 'What?'

'It is the Lady Anne Grafton who is here, my lord,' the boy stammered. 'We thought…That is, knowing that it was the lady herself…'

Simon swore under his breath. It was clever of Malvoisier to send Lady Anne, he thought, knowing that she was the one messenger he would find difficult to turn away in all courtesy. They were on opposing sides now, but it went against the grain

with him to show a lady anything less than respect, Royalist or not. Besides, he had been Anne Grafton's suitor four years before, in a more peaceful time before the bloody Civil War had come between them. There were memories there, promises made, that even now he found difficult to ignore.

But this was war and he had no time for chivalry. His brother's brutal death at Malvoisier's hands had seen to that.

'I will not see her,' he said. 'Send her away.'

Standish looked agonised. Despite the cold there was sweat on his brow. 'But, sir—'

'I said send her away.'

There was a clash of arms from further down the street and then the sound of raised voices and hurrying footsteps, muffled in the snow.

'Madam!' It was the anguished cry of one of the guards. 'You cannot go in there!'

But it was already too late. The barn door crashed back on its hinges and Lady Anne Grafton swept past Guy Standish and into the room. The snow swirled in and the fire hissed.

Lady Anne flung back the hood of her cloak and confronted Simon. She was wearing a deep blue gown beneath a fur-trimmed mantle and looked every inch the noble-born lady she was. Her face was pale, her hair inky black about her shoulders. She looked like a creature of ice and fire from a fairy tale.

Simon felt his heart lurch, as though all the air had been punched from his lungs. He had not seen Anne Grafton in four

years, for their betrothal had been broken almost as soon as it had been made. He heard Standish gasp as though he, too, was having difficulty remembering to breathe properly. Every man who besieged Grafton had heard the tales of the legendary beauty of the lady of the manor, but even so the impact of her appearance was quite literally enough to take a man's breath away.

It was not a comfortable beauty. Anne Grafton was small and slender, but for all that she had an aristocratic presence that could command a room. Her face was heart-shaped, with high cheekbones and winged black brows. There was no softness in it at all. Her eyes were very dark, only a couple of shades lighter than the ebony hair that spilled over the edge of her hood, and in them there was a fierce light that reminded Simon of a wild cat. This was no cosy armful to warm a winter's night.

At the beginning of the siege Simon had heard his soldiers joke about taming the wild beauty of the Lady of Grafton. They had said it softly, knowing he would stamp down hard on any ribaldry or licentiousness in the ranks and knowing too that the lady had once been promised to him. Now he watched those same boastful soldiers shift and shuffle, held spellbound by Anne's beauty but utterly unnerved by her defiant pride. Neither of the guards made any attempt to restrain her and Standish looked as though he would rather extract his own teeth than be obliged to confront her. Simon almost smiled. The Anne Grafton that he had known had been an unawakened girl of seventeen.

This woman was a very different matter—and an enemy to respect.

And then he saw Anne press her gloved hands together to quell their shaking. He realised with a shock that she was trembling, and with nervousness, not with the cold. That flash of vulnerability in her made him hesitate a second too long. He had been about to turn her away without a word. Now it was too late.

'Madam.' He sketched a curt bow. 'I regret that my guards saw fit to let you pass. It was ill considered of you to venture here tonight.'

Anne looked at him. Her gaze was bright and appraising and beneath it Simon felt very aware of himself—and of her. No woman had ever looked at him like that before. They had looked on him with pleasure and with lust and with calculation, but never with this cool assessment, soldier to soldier. He could feel her weighing his valour. He drew himself up a little straighter and met her gaze directly.

Four years had changed her beyond measure; changed everything between them beyond recall. The Civil War had taken all that was sweet and precious and new between them and had destroyed it along with the lives and hopes of thousands of others. When he had gone to Grafton all those years ago, it had been at his father's bidding and to make a dynastic match. He had not expected to be attracted to his potential bride. At twenty-five he had fancied himself a man of experience and he had been downright disconcerted to find Anne Grafton so irresistibly

alluring. He had desired her. He had been more than half in love with her. And then war had followed so swiftly. He had taken the Parliament's side and the King had summarily ordered the betrothal broken. And later, he had affianced Anne to Gerard Malvoisier.

It had been a long time ago, but it might only have been months, not years, so fresh it was in his mind. And now Anne Grafton was here and the unawakened fire he had sensed in her all those years ago when he had kissed her was blazing, powerful enough to burn a man down. He wondered what had awoken that spirit, then thought bitterly that during the intervening years of civil war, loss and sorrow had touched every man, woman and child in the kingdom. No one retained their innocence any longer in the face of such bitterness. Everyone had to fight and struggle to survive.

Anne came closer to him now and tilted her chin up so that she could meet his eyes. Her head only reached to his shoulder. He was over six foot tall. Yet it did not feel as though there was any disparity between them. She spoke to him as equal to equal.

'Good evening, Lord Greville,' she said. 'I am here because I want to speak with you.'

Her voice was soft, but it held an undertone of iron. She did not beg or even ask for his attention. She demanded it imperiously. And yet when Simon looked more closely at her face he could see the lines of fatigue and strain about her eyes. It was desperation that drove her on rather than defiance or anger.

She was very close to breaking.

Simon hardened his heart to the treacherous sympathy he was feeling for her. He did not want to speak with her at all. He wished that they had never met before and that his thoughts were not shadowed by memories of the girl she had once been. It was far too late for that, too late for regrets, too late for compassion. They supported opposing sides now. He knew that she was going to beg for the lives of the innocent inhabitants of Grafton Manor and he could not afford to hear such stories. Within every siege there were the helpless victims, the servants, the people caught up in the struggle who had no choice. It was brutal, but war was indiscriminate. His reputation was built on fairness and justice, but he was also known as a ruthless soldier. And he was not about to compromise now.

He rubbed a hand across his forehead. He looked at the two guards, who had skidded to a halt inside the door, clearly unwilling to lay violent hands on a lady. Now they stood ill at ease, hesitating and awaiting his orders. Guy Standish hovered in the background, looking equally uncomfortable.

'I will not speak to you,' Simon said. He dragged his gaze from hers and turned to the guards. 'Layton, Carter, escort the Lady Anne out.'

No one moved. The soldiers looked agonised and scuffed at the cobbled floor with their boots. A faint smile touched Anne Grafton's lips.

'Your men know that the only way they can get rid of me is to

pick me up bodily and throw me out,' she said drily. 'They seem strangely reluctant to do so.'

'Fortunately I suffer from no such scruples,' Simon said harshly. 'If you do not leave of your own free will, madam, I shall eject you personally. And believe me, I will have no difficulty in picking you up and throwing you out into the snow.'

He saw the flare of anger in her eyes at his bluntness.

'Such discourtesy,' she said sweetly. 'You have been too long a soldier, Lord Greville. You forget your manners.'

Simon inclined his head in ironic acknowledgement. 'This is a war, madam, and you are an enemy with whom I do not wish to have parley. Leave, before I show as little respect for the laws of truce as General Malvoisier did.'

He took a step closer to her so that he was within touching distance. At such close quarters he could see the pale sheen of her skin in the firelight and the telltale pulse that beat frantically in the hollow of her throat, betraying her nervousness. Her hair smelled of cold snow and the faint perfume of jasmine. Her eyes, very wide and dark, were fixed on his face. He put his hand out and took hold of her arm, intending to hustle her out of the door. And then he stopped.

It had been a mistake to move so near to her and even more of one actually to touch her. Simon's senses tightened and he was suddenly sharply aware of her. He remembered in exquisite detail exactly how it had felt to hold her in his arms all those years ago. He felt a powerful need to pull her to him and slake his misery

and his exhaustion against the softness of her skin. He needed her sweetness to cleanse all the brutality and wretchedness of war. He needed to forget it all. He longed to. He ached to go back to the way they had once been, and lose himself in her embrace.

The overpowering intimacy of the feeling held him still, shocked, for a moment. He saw a tiny frown appear between Anne's brows and then her eyes searched his face and the need in him communicated itself to her. Her gaze widened and the colour swept up under her skin. Simon knew he was looking at her with a soldier's eyes and with the hungry desire of a man who had been on campaign too long. He had been without a woman for months and he wanted her. Yet there was something beyond mere lust here. The truly shocking thing was the deep feelings and memories that stirred when he touched her. They threatened to make him forget his purpose. She was a Royalist. She was his enemy.

He let go of her abruptly, furious with himself and with her.

'Go. Now.' His voice was rough. 'Captain Standish will escort you back to Grafton.'

He saw Guy Standish's reluctance to take the commission although the captain did not demur. He even stepped forward—slowly—to indicate his willingness to obey the order.

But Anne was shaking her head. She had moved a little away from him and Simon could sense that she wanted to be gone and that it was only sheer determination that kept her there. He was starting to feel frustrated as well as angry now. This was folly.

Was Anne Grafton simple-minded, that she did not understand the risk she was running in coming alone to the enemy camp? His soldiers were not as rough as some—his discipline was too good for that—but there was such a thing as looking for trouble. He could not guarantee her safety. Damn it, he needed to protect her from himself as much as from his men.

He took a step towards her, intending to throw her out without further ado, but she spoke quickly, staying him.

'You do not understand,' she said. 'I have urgent news, my lord. I need to talk to you—'

Simon's temper snapped. 'There can be nothing so urgent that I wish to hear it,' he said. 'I know you are only here to beg for mercy for Grafton and I have no wish to hear your pleas.' He allowed his gaze to travel over her with insolent thoroughness. 'Take this reply back to Gerard Malvoisier, my lady. Tell him that I am not interested in talking terms with him, no matter how… temptingly…they are packaged, and if he sees fit to send you to parley with the enemy I cannot promise you will return with your virtue, let alone your life, intact.'

Anne's eyes narrowed with disdain at the insult. Her chin came up.

'I am not accustomed to being spoken to like a camp follower,' she said coldly, 'nor do I come from General Malvoisier. I wish to speak with you on a personal matter.' Her gaze lingered on Guy Standish and the guards. 'Alone, if you please, my lord.'

Simon strolled across to the table and poured himself a goblet

of wine. He was shaking with a mixture of fury and frustration. He spoke with his back turned to her.

'Have you then come to plead for your own life rather than for your betrothed and the people of Grafton, Lady Anne?' he said. 'Your self-interest is enlightening.'

'I have not come to plead at all.' There was cold dislike in Anne's voice now. She took a deep, deliberate breath. 'I have come to strike a bargain with you. I am here to tell you of your brother, my lord.'

Simon heard Guy Standish gasp. The guards shifted, looking at him, their gazes flickering away swiftly as they saw the way his own expression had hardened into stone. His men had all been with him when Henry's body had been returned, bloody, beaten and unrecognisable, in defiance of all the laws of truce. They had seen his ungovernable rage and grief, and they were no doubt uncertain how he would react now that someone dared to raise the subject again.

'My brother is dead.' Simon's tone was unemotional, masking the images of death that still haunted his sleep. 'I imagine that you must know that, my lady. It was General Malvoisier who sent him back to me—in pieces.'

Anne met his shuttered gaze with a direct one. 'It is true that he sent a body back to you, my lord, but it was not that of your brother.'

This time, no one moved or spoke for what felt like an hour. It was as though none of them could believe what they had heard.

Simon found he could only observe tiny details: the crackling of the fire, the snow melting from Lady Anne's cloak and forming a small puddle on the cobbled floor. He looked about him. The small barn was untidy. Despite all his attempts to make it more homely, it still looked what it was—no more than a glorified cowshed. There were maps and plans lying scattered across the wooden table where he and his captains had plotted the following day's attack earlier that evening. There was a carafe of red wine—bad wine that tasted of vinegar—staining the surface of the parchment. His trestle bed was tumbled and disordered in testament to the fact that he had been unable to sleep. It was no place for a lady. Yet this lady had forced her way into his company and dared to broach the one subject that drove his rage and his anguish.

'What are you saying?' His voice sounded strange even to his own ears. He cleared his throat. 'That my brother is alive? I regret that I cannot merely take your word for it, my lady.'

Lady Anne drew a step nearer to him. She put out a hand and touched his sleeve. He wondered whether she could read in his face the desperate fear and the spark of hope that he felt inside. Her voice was soft.

'Take this, my lord, as a pledge that I tell you the truth.'

Simon looked down. She was holding a ring of gold with the arms of his family cut deep in the metal. It was true that Henry had not been wearing the signet ring when his body was sent back, but Simon had assumed that Malvoisier had added looting

the dead to his other sins. Now he was not so sure. Hope and dread warred within him. He found that his hand was shaking so much he dropped the ring on to the table, where it spun away in a glitter of gold, momentarily dazzling him. He heard the guards shuffle with superstitious discomfort. Standish was looking strained, incredulous.

'Forgive me, my lady, but it is easy to take a ring from a dead man.' His voice was rough. 'It proves nothing.'

The tension in the room tightened further.

'You do not trust me,' Anne said bluntly.

Their eyes met. 'No,' Simon said. 'I do not. I trust no one.' The anger seethed in him. He wanted to believe her; his heart ached to believe her, but that was the very weakness his enemies were trying to exploit. Suddenly his ungovernable rage swelled up. He swept the maps and plans from the table in one violent movement and turned on her.

'Does Malvoisier take me for a fool to send you here on the night before battle to pretend that my brother is alive? He does it deliberately, in the hope that I will call off the attack! Dead or alive, he seeks to use my brother as a bargaining tool!'

'General Malvoisier knows nothing of this,' Anne said. She sounded calm, but she was very pale now. 'Only your brother and a handful of my most trusted servants were party to the plan. I have come to ask that you call off the assault on Grafton, my lord. Your brother is alive; if you attack the Manor, you will surely kill him in the process.'

Simon stared at her, as though by searching her face he could read whether she told the truth. Her gaze was steady and unflinching. She looked as candid and honest as she had when she had accepted his proposal that hot summer evening in the gardens at Grafton. But that had been a long time ago and looks could be terribly deceptive.

He made a slight gesture. 'Why come now? I thought my brother dead these two weeks past. Why wait so long?'

'It was impossible to arrange safe passage out of Grafton sooner,' Anne said. 'General Malvoisier—' She broke off, then added carefully, 'The Manor is closely guarded.'

Simon knew that was true. He had been studying Grafton's defences for all the months of the siege and knew there were few weaknesses. The Manor was small, but it was battlemented like a castle and ringed with a moat and low-lying marshy ground. There were snipers on the battlements and the house was garrisoned with a whole regiment of foot soldiers. He also knew that, despite Malvoisier's reputation for drunkenness, his men were well drilled, and frightened into obedience. No, escape from Grafton was well nigh impossible.

'Sir Henry said that you would not believe me, my lord,' Anne said. She quoted wryly, 'He said, "Tell that stiff-necked fool brother of mine that he must listen to you, Anne, for all our sakes."'

Simon heard one of the guards give a guffaw, quickly silenced. It did indeed sound like the sort of comment that Henry would

make. He was irreverent and light-hearted even in the face of danger, but his flippancy hid a cool head and quick mind. On the other hand, Anne had known Henry when they were both young. She would remember enough about his brother to deceive him if she were so minded.

'If Henry has truly sent you,' Simon said, 'I will wager that he gave you some other proof to satisfy me.'

Anne's tone was dry. 'If you are minded not to trust me, my lord, then no proof on earth will persuade you, other than seeing your brother with your own eyes. And that I cannot arrange.' She paused. 'He did mention to me an anecdote that might convince you. It was not something that I had heard before, for all that we spent some of our childhood together.' She paused, as though the thought was a painful reminder of a past that could not be recaptured. Then she cleared her throat and resumed.

'Apparently there was an occasion on which you lost Henry in the woods when he was a child of eight. He told me that you preferred to dally with the milkmaid than act as nurse to your young brother that day…'

Simon froze. It was true, but he had long forgotten the incident. He had been eighteen and had much preferred to take his pleasure with a willing maid that summer afternoon so long ago. He had left Henry to fend for himself in the woods for a little while and had been mortified on his return to find that his brother had completely vanished. Now that Anne had reminded him, he could recall the desperation of the hasty search, the fear

that had gripped his heart before he had found his little brother hiding in a forester's hut. That fear had been a faint echo of the anguish he had felt when he had been told that Henry was dead. He had always tried to look after his brother.

He saw Guy Standish's face split into a broad, incredulous grin before the captain regained control of his expression. This story would be around the barracks before an hour had passed and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He laughed reluctantly and the tension in the room eased.

'Damn him,' he said. 'Henry swore he would never tell anyone about that. I made him promise on a dozen oaths.'

'Sir Henry swears that he has kept his word until now,' Anne said, 'but desperate times require desperate measures.'

'They do indeed.' Simon looked at her. 'Which is why you are here.' His tone hardened. 'You wish to bargain for Grafton's safety with my brother's life.'

Anne made a slight gesture with her hands. 'I would do anything to keep my people safe, Lord Greville.'

Simon nodded, though he did not answer at once. He had seen for himself just how much the people of Grafton loved their lady —and the devotion she had for them.

He turned back to his men. 'Layton, Carter, get back to your posts. Guy—' Standish bowed, the smile still lurking about his mouth '—be so good as to fetch a flagon of wine for us. The good stuff…' Simon gestured towards the table '…not this poor excuse for a drink.' He turned to Anne. 'You will join me in a

glass of wine, madam?'

Anne shook her head. 'I cannot tarry, my lord. I came only to give you the news that Sir Henry was still alive and to extract your promise that you will call off the attack on the house.'

Simon moved to bar her exit. His men had gone out into the snow, leaving them alone in the firelit shadows of the barn.

'You cannot run away now,' he said softly, his eyes on her face. 'You have told me but a quarter of the tale.'

He closed the door behind Standish and moved to set a chair for her. It was of the hard wooden variety, for there was not much pretence at comfort here in the barns and byres of the village of Grafton.

Simon had been shocked to find the village in ruins when his troops had arrived to lay siege to the Manor. He soon discovered that it had been Gerard Malvoisier's Royalist troops who had burned, looted and ravaged the area at will, taking whatever they wanted and destroying the rest for sport. Malvoisier's conduct had been all the more unforgivable since Grafton had always held for the King. Now the populace was scattered, the houses in ruins and the people sullen with resentment, though they still held fast to the Royalist allegiance of the old Earl.

Simon's troops had encircled the Manor, living alongside the remaining villagers for three months in an uneasy truce. They had won a grudging respect from the people through sheer hard work, by treating the villagers courteously, sharing their food and helping with everything from the felling of timber to the

rebuilding of cottages. Simon's men mingled with the people in the streets, but it was an uncomfortable co-existence with all the tension of occupation, and at any moment it could erupt.

To Simon's mind, sieges were the most wearing and dangerous form of warfare. Only time, starvation and ultimately brute force could break the garrison in the Manor, and during those long days a man could get bored or careless, and forget to watch his back and be picked off by a sniper or knifed by a Royalist agent in the dark alleys of the village. Simon had lost half a dozen men that way in three months and the constant vigilance was rubbing them raw. They were all desperate to see action on the morrow. But now this news, on the eve of battle…

Simon watched Anne as she reluctantly came closer to the fire, pulling her damp cloak closer about her like a shield. There was an uneasiness in her eyes as though she felt that she had already stayed too long. He thought of the haughty composure that she had assumed to get her past his men and into his presence. It could not be easy for a young woman in her situation to hold the people of Grafton together whilst her father lay dying, her home was overrun by Royalist troops and the threat of siege could end only in disaster and bloodshed. She was only one and twenty.

Once again the treacherous sympathy stirred in him and he pushed it violently away. He had a job of work to do and he did not trust Anne Grafton any more. He could not.

He moved to light another candle, keeping his eyes on her face. She looked so delicate and yet so determined. The line

of her throat was pure and white above the collar of her blue velvet gown and the material clung to her figure with a seductive elegance that put all kinds of images in his head that were nothing to do with war at all. Then her hand stole to her pocket and he remembered his own safety with a flash of cold reason and all desire fled.

'You carry a dagger, do you not?' he said. 'Give it to me.'

Her head came up sharply and she bit her lip. Her hands stilled in the folds of her cloak and she straightened. 'I should feel safer to keep it,' she said.

'No doubt,' Simon said, 'but it is a condition of our parley that you are not armed.' He gestured to his sword belt, which lay across the back of one of the chairs. 'I ask nothing of you that I am not prepared to concede myself.'

Still Anne did not move and Simon knew she was thinking of her virtue rather than her life. Then she sighed and reluctantly placed the dagger on the table between them.

'Thank you,' Simon said. 'You are in no danger, I assure you.' He smiled a little. 'Tell me,' he added casually, returning to a thought that had struck him as soon as she had entered the room that night, 'are all men afraid of you?'

She looked at him. Her eyes were so dark and her face so shuttered that for a moment it was impossible to read her thoughts.

'No,' she said. 'A few are not.'

Simon laughed. 'Name them, then.'

‘My father.’ Her face went still, as though mention of the ailing Earl of Grafton was almost too much for her to bear. ‘And your brother, Sir Henry, treats me as though I were his elder sister.’ She looked up again and met his gaze. ‘And then there is you, my lord. I heard tell that you were afraid of nothing.’

‘That is a convenient fiction to encourage my men.’ Simon spoke shortly. He was surprised to feel himself disconcerted by her words. ‘Only a fool is not afraid on the eve of battle.’

She nodded slowly. ‘And surely you are not that. One of the youngest colonels in the Parliamentarian army, renowned for your cool strategy and your courage, a soldier that the King’s men fear more than almost any other…’

They looked at one another for a long moment, then Simon moved away and settled the logs deeper in the grate with his booted foot. They broke apart with a hiss of flame and a spurt of light, spilling the scent of apple wood into the room. Inside it was shadowy and warm, giving a false impression of intimacy when outside the door the snow lay thick and an army of men prepared for battle.

‘I was very sorry to hear of your father’s illness,’ Simon said. ‘The Earl of Grafton is a fine man. We may not support the same cause, but I have always admired him.’

‘Thank you.’ Anne pushed the dark hair back from her face. It was drying in wisps now, shadowy and dark about her face. She looked pale and tired.

‘Will he recover?’

Anne shook her head. ‘He lives, my lord, but it would be as true to say he is dead. He neither moves nor speaks, and he takes little food. Nor does he recognise any of us any more. It is only a matter of time.’

Simon nodded. It was very much what he had already heard from the talk in the village. The Earl of Grafton had been ailing for years and it was no surprise that the King had recently sought to reinforce Grafton with troops from Oxford, under the control of General Gerard Malvoisier. Grafton was ideally placed to keep the route from the West Country to Oxford open for the King, and it had been strongly equipped with arms and men. The Parliamentarian generals also suspected that there was a quantity of treasure hidden at Grafton, sent by Royalists in the West Country to swell the King’s coffers. Therefore General Fairfax had sent Simon, with a battalion of foot soldiers and a division of cavalry, to take Grafton from the Royalists once and for all.

It was King Charles himself who had ordered the betrothal between Gerard Malvoisier and Anne soon after war had been declared in 1642, and Simon therefore had all the more of a grudge against the Royalist commander. Grafton had been promised to him—and so too had its heiress, before the King had intervened. Simon had always despised Gerard Malvoisier, whom he considered nothing more than a thug who tried to conceal his brutality beneath a cloak of soldiering. When he had thought Malvoisier had murdered Henry, he had hated him even more. As for the idea of Anne’s betrothal to him, it was

repugnant. The thought of Malvoisier claiming Anne, taking that slender body to his bed, breaking her to his will with all the brutality of which he was capable made Simon feel physically sick.

Looking at her now, with her hair drying in the warmth of the fire and the candlelight casting its shadow across the fine line of her cheekbone and jaw, he felt something snap deep within him. Malvoisier would never have her. Unless…Simon paused. Perhaps it was already too late. Rumour said that Gerard Malvoisier had made sure of Anne by following up their betrothal with a bedding immediately after. She was in all likelihood already his mistress.

There was a knock at the door and Standish stuck his head around.

'The wine, my lord.' He withdrew silently and the door closed with a quiet click.

Simon poured for them both and passed Anne a glass. His hand touched hers; her fingers were cold. A strange feeling, part-anger, part-protectiveness, took him then, once again piercing the chill that had encased him since Henry's death.

'Come closer to the fire,' he said abruptly. 'You are frozen. It is a bad night to be out.'

She shot him a quick look, but drew her chair obediently closer to the flames. Now that they were alone with no further interruption, she seemed to have withdrawn into her own thoughts. The vivid spirit that had burned before was banked

down, invisible, leaving nothing but the outward show of beauty. Simon took the chair opposite and studied her for a moment, until she lifted her gaze to his.

'What can we make the toast,' he said, 'given that we support different causes now?'

'All men's loyalties are tangled and confused by this conflict,' Anne said. 'It spirals out of our control. I know not where it will end.' She hesitated. 'I had heard that you were estranged from your father because of your allegiance—' She broke off, colouring slightly.

'You heard correctly,' Simon said abruptly.

Anne looked away. 'I am sorry,' she whispered.

Simon felt her grief touch his own heart. His estrangement from his father was never far from his mind. Less than five years before he had sat beside Fulwar Greville in Parliament. Looking back, it seemed that the country had slipped almost insensibly into civil war. Fulwar had not approved of the King's arrogance towards his subjects, but he had served the crown for forty years, had broken bread with his sovereign and could not forsake his allegiance now. Simon, on the other hand, had seen only a monarch who had gathered an army to fight his own countrymen and whose power had to be curtailed. When he had signed the militia oath to protect the Parliament he had seen his father's face grow old before his eyes. They both knew what it meant. Did he honour his father or his country? His loyalty was torn for ever.

‘Perhaps the only true toast can be to loyalty itself,’ Simon said, ‘though it may mean different things to different men.’ He touched his glass to Anne’s and a moment later she smiled and raised her glass in silent tribute, taking a small sip of the wine.

‘Loyalty,’ she said. ‘I can make that my pledge.’

A flush crept along her cheek, rose pink from the fire and the warming effects of the drink. It made her look very young.

Simon sat back. There was no sound, but for the brush of the snow against the roof and the crackle of the fire in the grate. For a moment the room was as close to peace as it could come.

Then Anne broke the silence. ‘So,’ she said, ‘will you stand down your troops, Lord Greville? Do we have an agreement?’

‘No,’ Simon said. ‘Not yet.’

Anne started to get to her feet. Her hand moved to take the dagger from the table, but Simon was too fast for her. He caught her wrist in a bruising grip.

‘You are too hasty.’ His tone was smooth, belying the fierceness of his clasp. ‘There are questions I wish answered before we strike a bargain. Stay a little.’

He released her and Anne sat back, rubbing her wrist. Simon picked up the knife and turned it over in his hands. The firelight sparkled on the diamonds in the hilt.

‘This is a fine piece of work,’ he said.

‘My father gave it to me.’

‘And no doubt he taught you to use it too.’ Simon pocketed the knife. ‘You will forgive me if I keep it for now. I have no wish

to feel it between my shoulder blades.'

Anne shrugged. Her gaze was stormy. He knew she was angered by his blunt refusal to agree terms, but she was unwilling to let it show.

'I have little choice, it seems,' she said. She looked at him. 'You said that you had questions, my lord. Ask them, then.'

Simon nodded slowly. 'Very well.' He paused. 'Is it true that General Malvoisier does not know that you are here and is not party to your decision to tell me about Henry or to bargain for the safety of the manor?'

Her gaze flickered at his use of Malvoisier's name, but it was too quick for Simon to read her expression. 'It is perfectly true,' she said. 'Malvoisier does not care for the welfare of the people of Grafton as I do. He would not have agreed to try to come to terms with you.'

'So you have betrayed your ally?'

The look she gave him would have flayed a lesser man alive. 'I am the ally of the King. I have not betrayed my Royalist cause and never would I do so!'

Simon inclined his head. She was not going to give an inch and would certainly do nothing to compromise her loyalty. He could feel the conflict in her; she wanted to tell him to go to hell, but too much was at stake. He could also sense her desperation. She cared passionately about the fate of Grafton. It had to mean that she was telling him the truth about Henry. Either that, or she was a damnably good actress.

‘So you maintain that it is true that Henry is alive and well, and that Malvoisier lied to me about his death,’ he pursued.

Again he saw that flicker of feeling in her eyes. ‘It is quite true,’ she said. Her gaze dropped. ‘That is, Sir Henry is alive, but he has suffered some hurt.’

Simon felt a violent rush of anger and hatred. ‘At Malvoisier’s hands?’ He brought his fist down hard on the table. ‘I might have known it. Damn him to hell and back for what he has done!’

‘Sir Henry will recover,’ Anne said. He saw her put her hand out towards him briefly, but then she let it fall. ‘Your brother is young and strong, my lord, and given time…’ She stopped and the silence hung heavily between them. Simon knew what that silence meant. Henry would recover if he survived the assault on the Manor the next day. He would recover if Gerard Malvoisier did not use him as a hostage, or make an example of him by hanging him from the battlements.

He got to his feet in a surge of restlessness. He was torn. When he had thought Henry dead there was nothing to lose with an all-out attack on Grafton. But to attack now, knowing that his brother was a prisoner within…It was dangerous—perhaps even reckless—but he was not going to let a man like Malvoisier hold him to ransom.

He strode across the room, unable to keep still and contain the rage within him. ‘He sent me a body,’ he said, through shut teeth. ‘If Henry is alive, how is that possible?’

Anne’s very stillness seemed a counterpoint to his fury. She

did not even turn her head to answer him, but he saw her clench her hands together in her lap and realised that she was nowhere near as calm as she pretended.

'The dead man was one of Malvoisier's own troops,' she said. 'He died of a fever.'

Simon felt revolted. He spun around to look at her. 'Malvoisier denied one of his soldiers a true burial? His body was defaced to make me believe that it genuinely was Henry?'

Anne's expression was sombre. 'They were the same height and build, my lord. All Malvoisier had to do was to dress the body in your brother's clothes.'

Simon's fingers tightened about his wineglass so that the crystal shivered. He had never questioned that the dead man had been Henry. The body had been so mutilated that it had been impossible to recognise, and, drowned in his misery and regret, he had never once imagined that Malvoisier had deliberately played him false. He had buried his brother with all honour, had written to their father apprising him of his younger son's death in action, and had laid his own plans for a cold and brutal revenge. No matter that to attempt an assault on the garrison of Grafton was a foolhardy undertaking. He cared nothing for that. All he wanted was to wipe out the stain on the family honour and grind Gerard Malvoisier into the dust.

'Why did he do it?' he asked softly. 'Why make me believe my brother was dead?'

'You are the strategist, my lord,' Anne said. 'Why do you think

he did it?'

Simon considered. 'He wanted me to believe Henry dead in order to provoke me,' he said slowly. 'He wanted to end the siege, to drive me out into the open so that he had a better chance to defeat me.'

'Exactly so.'

'So now he has two advantages.' Simon was thinking aloud. 'He has forced me into a rash course of action and he still holds my brother.' He nodded slowly. 'It is very cunning. I might almost admire his tactics.' He came across to Anne's seat and leaned on the table beside her, so close that his breath stirred her hair. 'That is—if it is true, Lady Anne. Almost I believe you.'

He knew that to trust her was madness. Even now she might be lying to him, tempting him to withdraw his troops, tricking him to defeat. Every instinct in his body protested that she was honest, but he could not afford the weakness of allowing himself to feel sympathy for her. He was tired. His mind was clouded with fatigue and the prospect of the killing to come and he knew it could be fatal to his judgement.

Anne turned her head abruptly. Her dark glare pinned him down like the dagger's point. She tried to rise, but Simon caught her arm and held her still. They were so close now. A mere hair's breadth separated them.

'I do not lie,' Anne said disdainfully. 'If I were a man, you would answer for such an insult.'

Simon pulled her to her feet so abruptly that her chair rocked

back and almost fell. She felt taut beneath his hands, shaking with anger and resentment.

'Fine words, my lady,' he said. 'Yet you must have lied to one of us, to Malvoisier or to me. And he is your ally now.'

Anne wrenched her arm from his grip, suddenly furious. 'Do not dare to accuse me of disloyalty to my cause,' she said. Her voice shook. 'I serve the King and until and unless he releases me of that charge my loyalty is absolute. Malvoisier—' She stopped, and there was an odd silence.

'Aye?' Simon's voice was harsh as he prompted her. He was breathing fast. 'What of him?'

Anne paused. 'Malvoisier and I share the Royalist cause, but our other loyalties are different,' she said slowly. 'My first loyalty is to the King, but my next is to my people. I have to protect Grafton. So…' She spread her hands. 'I came here of my own accord this night to beg a truce, my lord. If you attack the Manor, you will almost certainly kill your brother along with half the population of the castle. You have cannon—we cannot survive such an onslaught! Call it off and spare Sir Henry's life and that of my people!'

The silence spun out between them, taut with tension. It was, Simon knew, the closest that Anne of Grafton would ever come to begging. She had so much pride and she had humbled it to come here tonight to ask him to spare the lives of the people she cared for. And now he had to deny her. He shook his head slowly.

'No. I will not call off the assault.'

He saw the shock and horror on her face and realised that she had been certain, convinced, that he would do as she asked. She straightened up, her eyes riveted on his face.

'Do you not understand, my lord?' she demanded. 'Sir Henry is too weak to move—too weak to fight! When you attack he will be killed in the battle or, worse, Malvoisier will take him and string him up from the battlements! He is a hostage and Malvoisier will use him to barter for his freedom—or to buy yours! Whichever way you look at it your brother is a dead man!'

'And do you care about that?' Simon asked harshly.

'Of course I care!' Anne snapped. 'Your father is my godfather, Lord Greville. Henry is as dear to me as—' She broke off and finished quietly, 'as dear to me as a brother.'

'And yet you thought to use him to buy the safety of Grafton,' Simon said bitterly, 'and I cannot surrender to such blackmail.'

Anne stared at him, her eyes full of anger and disbelief. 'What, you will do nothing to help him?' she challenged. 'I do believe you have run mad. You would sacrifice your brother for nothing!' Her voice warmed into fury. 'Why not tell me the truth, my lord? You will not withdraw your troops because you have committed to make the attack on Grafton and you cannot be seen to weaken. Henry counts for nothing! It is all about your reputation in front of your men. That is all that you care for!'

They stared at one another for a long moment, dark eyes locked with dark.

'Even if I called off the attack, I could not free Henry,' Simon

said. He tried to ignore her taunts and the anger they stirred in him. ‘You are correct—he is Malvoisier’s hostage. The only way I can save him is through taking the Manor.’

Anne grabbed her cloak. ‘Then I am wasting my time here. Henry said you would listen to reason. Clearly he overestimates you.’

Simon reached the door in two strides and blocked her path. He leaned his shoulders against the panels and folded his arms. Anne had come to a halt before him and was waiting impatiently for him to let her pass. He did not move.

‘Of course it is the case that you have given me the means to counteract General Malvoisier’s plan,’ he said quietly.

Anne looked up at him and he saw the bewilderment in her eyes.

‘What do you mean?’ she said.

Simon gestured about the room. ‘It is true that Malvoisier holds Henry, but you are here now, in my power. A hostage for a hostage, a life for a life.’ He held her gaze. ‘I will use you to free Henry, Lady Anne. You are my prisoner now.’

Chapter Two

The disbelief and disillusionment hit Anne with a shattering joint blow. For a moment all she could do was remember Henry Greville's words:

'My brother is an honourable man. He will thank you for your intervention. He will treat you with all respect…'

And she had believed him. She had remembered the Simon Greville that she had known all those years ago and she had believed without question. How unutterably foolish she had been. In her desire to do the right thing, to tell Simon Greville the truth about his brother and save both Henry and her own people, she had walked directly into peril and into the hands of a man at least as dangerous and ruthless as Gerard Malvoisier himself. She had risked all for justice and this was how Simon Greville, her former suitor, had repaid her.

She spun around so quickly that, on the table beside her, the wine cup trembled and almost fell.

'You will not do it!' Her voice broke, betraying her desperation. 'I trusted you! I came here in good faith to negotiate a truce.'

She saw Simon's expression harden. 'As I said before, it is best to trust no one.'

There was silence for a brief second. Anne looked at him. Clearly, the memories she cherished of their previous

acquaintance had been misleading. In her mind's eyes she could still recall that long, hot summer at Grafton four years ago when Simon Greville had courted her—and kissed her with such passion and tenderness that she had tumbled into love with him. In all the time that had followed she had never met another man who had measured up to her memory of him. Consciously or unconsciously she had judged all men by his standard—and found them wanting. And now it seemed that it was her judgement that had been lacking. Simon Greville had no honour and no integrity and would use her for his own ends.

Physically he looked much the same. He had filled out over the intervening years so that now he was not only tall but broadly built as well. He was very dark, with the watchful gaze and the chiselled, patrician looks of a plaster church saint. Unlike his brother, he seldom smiled. But Henry Greville was little more than a charming boy. Simon was a man and altogether more formidable. He was powerful, cold, calculating—and merciless. She should have seen it. She should have run when she had the chance. Instead she had been lulled into a false sense of security by believing Henry and trusting her memories of his brother. She had put her safety in this man's hands. She felt betrayed. All her disgust, with herself as well as him, rose to the surface.

'I thought you a man of honour,' she said. 'It seems I was wrong.'

Simon was leaning against the door, arms folded, with a carelessness that she despised. It seemed so contemptuous. She

could not see any evidence in his face that her accusation had stung him at all.

'Perhaps there is no room for honour in war,' he said. 'You have played into my hands by coming here, madam. It would be foolish of me not to take the advantages I am given.'

Anne made a sound of disgust. 'I thought you different.' She clenched her fists by her sides. 'Sir Henry swore that you were. It seems I made a mistake to trust him.'

Simon straightened up and faced her across the room. His presence was intimidating, but Anne was determined not to be afraid.

'You thought that I was different from whom?' he enquired softly. 'Malvoisier?'

'Perhaps. Different from most men—' Anne caught herself up on the betraying words, biting her lip. She was not going to pour out all her hatred of Malvoisier here and now to this man who had proved himself her enemy. She had detested Gerard Malvoisier from the first moment he had come to Grafton, with his bullying cruelty and his way of riding roughshod over people to get what he desired. Their political alliance had held together by the merest thread. She had rejected his proposal of marriage and had been incensed that he had put about the rumour that they were betrothed. She looked at Simon, who was watching her with that dark, impassive gaze. He was not like Malvoisier—he did not bluster or shout or threaten—but he was twice as dangerous.

'I mistook you,' she finished starkly. 'You are just like all the

rest.'

She saw something like anger flare in Simon's eyes, but when he spoke his tone was still even.

'I cannot afford to let such an advantage slip,' he said. 'Surely you understand? This way I may exchange you for Henry and no one is hurt.'

Anne felt the hope surge sharply within her. 'You mean that once the hostages are exchanged, you will call off the assault on the Manor?'

'No.' Simon shook his head. 'I will exchange your freedom for that of my brother, but Grafton must still fall to Parliament.'

Anne's heart plummeted into her shoes. 'So all you mean to do is buy your brother's life with mine and then attack my home and my people anyway!' She put her hands to her cheeks in a gesture of despair. 'Your callousness disgusts me, Lord Greville! You once promised my father to give your protection to this land!'

This time she heard the answering spurt of rage in Simon's voice. 'I regret that you see matters that way, madam,' he said. 'This is war—'

Anne's voice was contemptuous. 'Always you seek to justify your actions with that phrase!' She braced her hands on the back of one of the chairs. Simon's sword belt still rested there. She could feel the leather smooth beneath her fingers.

'Let us hope that Malvoisier thinks this bargain worth the making,' she said. 'I am not certain that he will.'

'Of course he will,' Simon said. 'You are the King's god-

daughter.'

'Ah, yes,' Anne said, and she could not keep the bitterness from her tone. 'He will save me for that reason if no other.'

There was silence. The fire hissed. The room felt very hot now and heavy with the turbulent emotions between them. Anne suddenly flung her arms wide in fury, encompassing the table and its scattering of parchment. She was trying to keep her anger mute and under control, but it was difficult when she wanted to rail at him in her frustration and misery.

'Send to him, then!' she said. 'Why do you delay? Tell Malvoisier that you hold me hostage. My father is dying and I would rather be by his side than trapped here with you.'

Simon drained his second glass of wine and placed the goblet carefully on the table. His precision maddened Anne when she felt so close to losing control.

'I do not intend to negotiate with Malvoisier now,' he said. 'I will wait until the morning, when he drags Henry up on to the battlements to parley. Then I shall bring you out and strike a bargain with him.'

Anne whitened. 'Damn you! In that time my father may die, and you keep me from him.' She started to walk towards the door again. 'Well, if you wish to restrain me you must do so by force. I'll not go quietly with your plans!'

Simon moved between her and the door. He spoke quietly. 'Do not resist me, Lady Anne. If you make a scene before my men, it will end badly for you. They may have let you in here,

but they will not let you out against my orders.'

Anne flashed him a look of challenge. 'Lay a hand on me, Lord Greville, and I shall bite you.'

'That would be a mistake.'

He moved before Anne could respond, grabbing her by the upper arms, dragging her against his body and holding her close with an arm about her waist. His grip was fierce and unrelenting. She tried to twist out of his arms, but he held her cruelly tight.

'Yield to me,' he said in her ear.

'Never!' Anne tried to kick him. 'You may go to the devil!'

Simon laughed. 'No doubt I shall do so in my own time. Now yield to me.'

In answer Anne turned her head and fastened her teeth on one of the hands that held her. She knew it pained him and felt a violent rush of satisfaction. Simon swore savagely under his breath and wound his hand into her silky black hair, ruthlessly pulling her head back. It did not hurt, but it rendered her incapable of further struggle without causing herself pain.

'Little wildcat!' he said. 'Surrender to me.'

Anne hesitated. She knew there was nothing she could do. She had to concede even though she hated to do it.

She relaxed a little and felt his grip ease in her hair. Her mind was whirling. She could not surrender to him. She surrendered to no one. There had to be another way…

'If I promise not to run,' she said, 'you must release me so that we may talk.'

Simon's fingers slid through the strands of her hair as he let her go. It made her feel strange, almost light-headed. His touch was feather-soft now, gentle, caressing. She found that she wanted to turn into his embrace now rather than escape it. She remembered the hardness of his body against hers and the breath of his lips against her ear with the oddest quiver of feeling.

His hands slid down her arms to hold her very lightly. He kept his gaze locked with hers.

'I agree,' he said. 'So promise me you will not try to flee.'

Anne hesitated. The touch of his hands and the steadiness of his gaze were confusing her. For a fleeting moment she remembered the desire she had seen in his eyes earlier in the evening. That had aroused a response in her that she had never expected to feel, did not want to feel. It reminded her too much of the pangs of first love she had felt when she was seventeen. Knowing that they had no future, she had tried to tell herself that her feelings for Simon Greville had been a childish infatuation. She had never quite succeeded in believing it.

'Well?' Simon prompted.

Anne inclined her head slightly, crushing down the treacherous ripple of feeling that coursed through her body.

'Very well. I promise not to run.'

She expected him to let her go at once, but Simon also hesitated, still holding her close to him even though his grip was gentle now. Anne could felt the warmth emanating from his hands and his body, and with it a sensation of reassurance and

strength. She found that she wanted to press closer to him again and draw on his strength to comfort her. She started to tremble, both at the perfidiousness of her own body and the wayward nature of her thoughts. This was Simon Greville, her enemy, the man who held her hostage. She could show him no weakness.

But it was too late. The expression in his eyes changed and he pulled her to him, not hastily but slowly, inexorably, until her mouth was about an inch away from his. And then he stopped. She could see the stubble darkening his skin where he had not shaved and the shadow cast by his eyelashes against the line of his cheek.

Anne's throat dried. 'Release me,' she whispered. 'I do not trust you.'

'I know.' Simon's firm mouth curved into a smile. 'You are wise to trust no one.'

He let her go slowly and Anne stepped back. Her heart was pounding hard and her legs trembled. She caught the back of a chair to steady herself and prayed that Simon believed her weakness stemmed from fear rather than susceptibility to his touch. She raised her eyes to meet his mocking gaze.

'What would you like to talk about?' he asked. His gaze raked her, as it had done earlier. 'You know that you have nothing to negotiate with.' He paused. 'At the least, I assume you do not intend to try and bribe me with your body…'

Anne gave him a scornful look. Her fingers tightened on the chair back. There, beneath her hand was the sword belt. A plan

was forming in her head. She prayed that she could carry it off. She had to keep him talking, distract him…

'You are contemptible,' she said.

'And you are helpless.' He looked rather amused.

Anne glared. 'That is not correct, of course,' she said. 'I have plenty of advantages. I know the lie of the land of Grafton, I know its weaknesses and I know Malvoisier's plans. I could even give you safe passage into the Manor were I minded to do so.'

Simon's gaze had narrowed on her face. 'But you would not do that,' he said. 'You would never betray your cause.'

'No,' Anne agreed bitterly. 'Everything I have done tonight has been to save Grafton. I do not sell my honour cheap.'

Simon smiled ironically. 'Touché, my lady.' He made a slight gesture. 'But since you are not prepared to sell either your principles or yourself, you have nothing with which to barter.'

'I do not intend to barter,' Anne said. 'I intend to make you let me go.'

Simon folded his arms. He was smiling. It was all the extra incentive Anne needed.

'How will you achieve that?' he enquired.

In response Anne grabbed the hilt of the sword. It came free of the scabbard with a satisfying hiss of metal. She spun around. Simon had already started to move towards her, but he was too late. As he took the final step she brought the tip of the blade up to rest against his throat like a lover's caress. Simon stopped abruptly.

‘Like this,’ Anne said breathlessly.

The smile in Simon’s eyes deepened into something like admiration.

‘I cannot believe,’ he said, ‘that I was so careless.’

‘Well,’ Anne said. ‘You were.’

‘Please be careful,’ Simon said. ‘I sharpened the sword myself, this very night. It is very dangerous.’

‘Good,’ Anne said. She knew that he was using her own tactics now, keeping her talking to try and distract her. It was hideously dangerous to point a sword at a trained soldier, particularly one as experienced as Simon Greville. One second’s loss of concentration and he would disarm her. He would be quick and ruthless. She kept her gaze fixed on the sword’s point and did not look into his eyes.

‘I have your life to barter with now, Lord Greville,’ she said. ‘Mine for yours. It is a fair exchange. Step away from the door. Slowly.’

Simon did as she ordered. Anne started to edge towards the door, still keeping the murderous weapon levelled at him. She did not want to have to kill him, but she did know exactly how to use it. The Earl of Grafton had never had a son, but he had certainly taught his daughter how to defend herself.

‘Put up the blade,’ Simon said. He raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. ‘I will let you go.’

Anne laughed. ‘You will let me go? You think that I believe you, after all that you have done? Nor do I need your permission

to leave, my lord. I am the one holding the sword.'

Simon nodded. 'I acknowledge that. But you would not get five yards without my men capturing you. I demand parley. Put up the sword and declare a truce.'

Anne met his eyes briefly. It was a mistake. There was such a look of ruthless determination in them that she almost quailed. She dropped her gaze once more to the shining blade.

'Malvoisier did not respect the rules of parley,' she said. 'Why should you—or I?'

Simon did not move. 'You are not Malvoisier and neither am I, Lady Anne. Put up the sword and talk to me.'

There were rules of engagement. He knew it. She knew it. The fact that Gerard Malvoisier had no honour should not, Anne knew, bring her down to his level. She did not want to stay a moment longer and speak with Simon Greville. She did not trust him. But she had a code of honour and he had appealed to it.

'If I agree to parley and then you betray me,' she said, 'I will kill you.'

Simon nodded. He was not smiling now, but the respect was still in his eyes. 'That,' he said, 'is understood.'

Anne retreated until her back was against the door and then she lowered the sword until the tip was resting on the ground. She turned it thoughtfully in her hands, examining the balance of it. It had a long blade and a beautifully curved hilt.

'It is a fine weapon,' she said. 'A cavalryman's sword.'

'It was my father's.' Simon rubbed his brow. 'He gave me his

sword and now I use it to fight for his enemy.'

Anne's heart contracted to hear the pain in his voice. It would be easy to accuse Simon Greville of having no integrity and selling out the Royalist cause of his father, yet she knew that countless men had had to make the decision to put their honour and principles before their family. They were fighting for what they believed to be right. The King had raised an army against his own Parliament and even she, for all her allegiance, could see that there were those who felt that Charles had betrayed his people.

'I am sorry,' she said softly.

Simon shifted slightly. 'It may be sentimental in me, but I would like to take that sword back from you, Lady Anne.'

Anne nodded. 'I imagine that you would.'

Simon's hand moved towards the pocket of his coat and Anne suddenly remembered that he had put her knife there. She raised the sword point to his chest and he stopped.

'Not so fast, Lord Greville.'

'I beg your pardon.' Simon said. 'I merely wanted to give you back your knife in case you hold it of similar worth.'

Anne felt the treacherous tears sting her eyes. She valued each and every thing that her father had ever given her, material or otherwise, and as he grew steadily weaker so the desperation in her grew steadily more acute. Soon he would be dead and she would have nothing of him left to hold on to but the example of his allegiance to the King and his loyalty to the people of Grafton. She had come to Simon's quarters that night because she knew

it was what her father would have done. He would have put the welfare of his people first, before pride or military conquest.

She blinked back the weak tears. 'Put the knife on the table,' she said, a little huskily. 'Do it slowly. Do not come any closer.'

'I will not make that mistake,' Simon agreed.

Anne watched as he slipped a hand into his pocket and extracted the dagger, placing it carefully on the table between their two empty wine glasses. When he let his hands fall to his side and stepped back, she let out the breath she had been holding.

'Good. So…' She made her tone a match for his earlier. 'You asked for parley. What would you like to discuss?'

Simon rubbed his brow. 'There is nothing to discuss,' he said. 'I promised that I would not play you false. You are free to go.'

Once again the hope flared in Anne's heart, but this time she was more wary.

'What are you saying?' she whispered.

Simon gestured fiercely towards the door. 'I am telling you to leave. Go back to Grafton Manor. You came here to negotiate and I will not accept your terms. I have changed my mind about exchanging you for Henry. It will not serve. So there is nothing more to say.'

Anne did not move immediately. She felt bemused by this sudden change of heart. If Simon were to let her go now, what was to become of Henry? Malvoisier would still have him hostage and Simon would have nothing with which to bargain.

‘But what of your brother?’ she asked.

Simon laughed and there was a bitter edge to it. ‘I am gambling, Lady Anne,’ he said. ‘I am risking my brother’s life so that I can take Grafton Manor. The house must fall to Parliament. To negotiate with hostages now will only delay the inevitable battle.’

Anne shook her head, bewildered. ‘But if Malvoisier should kill Henry…’

Simon shifted uncomfortably. ‘Malvoisier will reason that a live hostage is worth more to him than a dead man,’ he said. ‘He will want to keep Henry safe in case he needs to barter to save his own miserable neck.’ He turned away with a dismissive gesture, but not before Anne had seen the flash of genuine pain in his eyes and knew that he was not as indifferent as he claimed. He was merely hoping against hope that his words were true.

‘This is not so easy for you as you pretend,’ she accused. ‘You know you are taking a desperate chance!’

Simon turned on her, his mouth twisted wryly. ‘Aye, I know it! And if Henry dies because of it, I will have years of grief in which to regret my decision.’

Anne looked at him steadily. She sensed that his deliberate harshness was a defence to keep her at arm’s length. He did not want her sympathy—or her thanks. He wanted nothing that threatened to bring them closer, threatened to make him feel.

‘You care deeply for your brother,’ she said. ‘Aye, and for your father too. I believe that you are letting me go because you do

not wish my father to die alone and uncomforted. You respect him. And you know what it is to be estranged from your family and to lose all that you hold dear.'

Simon's dark gaze was murderous now. There was so much repressed violence in him that she shivered to see it.

'Enough!' he said. He moderated his tone almost at once. 'You have said quite enough, madam. You may think that you know me, but you know nothing at all.' He straightened. 'You may disabuse yourself of the notion that I am letting you go through chivalry, or for pity, or generosity or any other virtuous reason.' There was a self-mocking tone to his voice now. 'I know nothing of such emotions now, if I ever did. The simple fact is that I do not need a hostage. I can take Grafton without.'

Anne's breath caught at the callousness of his words. 'You speak so easily of destroying my home,' she whispered. 'You are about to lay waste to my people's livelihood and I cannot stop you.'

For a moment she thought she saw something behind the unrelenting hardness of Simon's expression, some element of pity or sorrow or regret. She had already put out a hand to him in appeal when he spoke, and his tone was unyielding.

'No, you cannot stop me,' he said, 'but I admire you for trying to do so.' His tone hardened still further, cold as the winter night. 'Now go.'

Anne laid the sword down on the table, very gently, and started to gather up her cloak. Her throat was thick with tears. She did

not believe his cruel words, but she knew that she could never make him admit to the truth. She knew he cared desperately for Henry. She had seen it in his face in the very first moments when she had told him his brother lived, when he could not repress the blaze of joy and relief and thankfulness. But there was too much at stake here for either of them to admit anything to the other. It was too dangerous to admit even to the slightest affinity in this conflict where one stood for the King and the other for the people.

And yet she could feel Simon watching her with those dark, dark eyes and his look made the awareness shiver along her skin. She could feel that look in every fibre of her being. It stripped away all her defences. Against all odds and against all sense there was still something between them, something shockingly powerful. There should not be. There could not be, for they were sworn enemies, and a part of her hated him whilst she was equally, frighteningly, as drawn to him as she had been four years before.

She slipped the cloak about her shoulders. Simon was standing by the door and she had to pass him to go out. She was desperate to be gone, yet when she got to the door she hesitated, and looked up into his face. Suddenly she did not know what to say to him.

Abruptly he caught her hands in his. The intensity of his gaze burned her. 'You are betrothed to my sworn enemy,' he said softly. 'I am about to lay waste to your home and your people's livelihood. If I say that I am sorry, you will only think me a liar,

but believe that I will do what I may to lighten the blow that falls on Grafton.'

Anne trembled. She made an involuntary movement and his grip tightened.

'I understand,' she said. A faint, bitter smile touched her lips. 'As you have said before, this is war. In a war people will get hurt.'

'Be careful tomorrow,' Simon said. He looked down briefly at their joined hands, then up into her face again. 'Even if you do not trust me, take this advice. When the attack begins, take only those closest to you and lock yourself in the safest place in the house. I will send word to you as soon as I can.'

Anne stared up at him. 'You really do believe that you will win?' she whispered.

'Yes.'

Anne bit her lip. 'I fear for you,' she said.

The words were out before she had time to consider them and she heard his swift intake of breath. Standing there so close to him, feeling the warmth of his touch and the tension latent in his body, it was impossible to keep any secrets one from the other. Simon's dark eyes were brilliant with desire now and Anne knew that he wanted to drag her into his arms and kiss her until she was senseless. She wanted it too. Her whole body ached to meet his passion with her own, kindle fire with fire. She did not know why, she did not understand how this could happen when a part of her hated him for what he was about to do, but it was almost

irresistible.

Simon took a harsh breath. 'If I should find Gerard Malvoisier before he finds me tomorrow,' he said roughly, 'do you want me to save his life for you?'

There was a pause, full of feeling, and then the hatred smashed through Anne in a wave of emotion. All evening she had managed to conceal from Simon her utter contempt for Gerard Malvoisier. A loyalty to the King's cause had been the only thing that had held her silent. Malvoisier was her ally, but now it was not possible to deceive Simon any longer. Nor did she want to.

'No,' she said, and her voice shook with feeling. 'I would not wish you to spare Gerard Malvoisier on my account, Lord Greville. He has taken everything that I care for and destroyed it or desecrated it beyond redemption.' She could feel herself trembling with hatred and passion, and knew Simon must be able to feel it too. 'He has taken my father's life, my home, the loyalty of my people…' She tilted her face up and met the intensity of Simon's gaze. 'If you wish to show your gratitude to me, Lord Greville, then you will take his life. Kill him for me.'

There was a moment when Simon stared down into her eyes and then he pulled her to him with one violent motion. His hand tangled in her hair and his mouth was hard on hers and Anne yielded to him with a tiny gasp and parted her lips beneath his. The fire in him woke her senses to life. Anne's head spun with sudden passion—and with recognition. The years fell away and she was seventeen again, and back in the walled garden

at Grafton, feeling the sun beating down and the hardness of Simon's body against hers as he held her close.

But this was no youthful kiss now. It held all the fierce demand and desire of a man for a woman and it evoked an instinctive response in her. She yielded helplessly, conscious of nothing but the touch and the taste of him, the feel of his hands on her body, the scent of his skin so surprisingly and achingly familiar to her. Her knees weakened and Simon scooped her up with an arm about her waist and took two strides across to the truckle bed.

He laid her on the hard pallet and followed her down, taking her mouth with his again, fierce in his demand and his need. Anne responded with no reservations. All the anger and the fear and the desperation that she had felt that evening fused into one huge explosion of passion. She knew she ought to hate him, but she did not. She wanted the safety and promise their past had offered them. What she felt for him was dangerously akin to love.

She could feel Simon's hands shaking as he dealt with the hooks and bows and loosened her bodice. He bent to kiss the side of her neck as he slid his hand within her shift. A lock of his dark hair brushed her cheek and Anne trembled with need. In the mixture of fire and candlelight his expression was hard, concentrated, desire distilled.

He brushed her shift aside and bent to cup her breast, taking one rosy nipple in his mouth. Anne moaned and writhed beneath his touch, running her fingers into his hair and holding his head down against the hot damp skin of her breast. She was naked

to the waist now, her bodice undone, her hair spilling across the pallet.

She felt Simon's hand on her thigh beneath the heavy weight of her skirts. The air was cold against her skin. Then he eased back for a moment. Anne felt the loss and reached blindly for him, her mind still a swirl of confusion and desire. He was not there. She felt cold and lonely.

She opened her eyes. Simon was sitting on the edge of the pallet bed, his hands braced beside him as though he was forcibly preventing himself from taking her in his arms again. He was breathing very fast and very harshly. And although his face was half-turned from her, Anne could see the same shock that she felt inside reflected in his expression.

The truth hit her then like a blast of winter air. Simon Greville had been about to take her, there in his quarters, like a soldier tumbling a camp whore in a ditch. And she had been about to let him do it. Simon Greville, her sworn enemy. It had happened so fast and so irresistibly. Now that sanity was returning to her she could not understand it at all.

The colour flooded her face; she made an inarticulate sound of shock and struggled to get to her feet, her hands shaking as she swiftly rearranged her bodice and dragged the fur-lined cloak about her. She held it wrapped tight to her like armour. She wanted to run away.

Simon had also got to his feet.

'Anne,' he said, calling her by her name only for the first time

that night. His voice was husky with passion and she shivered to hear it. She thought that he looked as dazed as she, and she knew that in another second he would gather her up in his arms and carry her to the tumbled truckle bed and make love to her. He was as much deceived by the ghosts of the past as she.

She shook her head sharply. 'Do not. Do not say anything.' She huddled deeper within the cloak. She felt desperately cold and alone.

'I made a mistake,' she said. 'I thought we could go back, but we cannot.'

They looked at one another and Anne could see in his eyes that both of them were poignantly aware that they would never meet like this again. Perhaps they might never meet again at all, if Gerard Malvoisier won the day. Simon might die in the heat and pain of a bloody battle. Anne knew she could perish along with her people if the Manor was taken. This sudden and unexpected sweetness between the two of them, this dangerous temptation, was a moment out of time. She told herself fiercely that it was the product of memory only and the result of the heat and passion of the night before battle.

'Take care,' she said, 'on the morrow.'

She opened the door and the snow swirled in for a moment and she stepped outside. It was cold out in the night and she wanted to run back to the warmth and safety of that room, and, treacherously, into Simon's arms. But she knew that when they met again—if they met—she would be Anne of Grafton

and Simon Greville would be the victor. Everything would be different. There would be bitter hostility between them. Once more he would be her enemy.

Chapter Three

'Madam!' Edwina met Anne as soon as she reached the top of the tower steps and was about to open the door of her chamber. In the torchlight the woman's face was strained. 'General Malvoisier is here,' she said meaningfully. 'He has been asking for you.'

Anne paused a moment as she felt the customary surge of aversion sweep through her body. Trust Malvoisier to have come looking for her on the one occasion when she had managed to slip away from his vigilance. Had he guessed that she had stolen out of the house and gone to visit his enemy? She shuddered at the thought and tried to calm herself. Closing her eyes briefly, she put her hand against the cold wood and pushed open the door of the chamber.

'Thank you, Edwina.'

There were so few seconds in which to prepare herself. Gerard Malvoisier was standing with his back to the fire, feet spread apart, hands clasped behind him. He was a large and fleshy man who commanded the room through his height and girth, and because he had the air of one who knows himself superior to other mortals. His bloodshot eyes were narrowed in his reddened face where the veins mottled the skin. Years of good living had stolen much of his youth and vigour, and now Anne could smell the alcohol on his breath, even across the room. She felt that probing gaze search her face and drew her cloak a little closer.

Her lips still stung with Simon Greville's kisses and her skin was still alive to his touch. Would Malvoisier be able to read any of that in her face? Thank God she had paused inside the tower door to rearrange her hair and make sure her gown was secure. For a moment she allowed herself to remember Simon's hands on her body and his lips against hers, and she suppressed a shiver at the same time as she suppressed her wayward thoughts. Time enough to think on that when the current danger was past. Squaring her shoulders, she slipped off the cloak and turned to greet Malvoisier with every assumption of ease.

'Good evening, sir. In what way may I assist you?'

Anne was always formal with Sir Gerard Malvoisier. It was one of the many ways that she kept him at arm's length and held her fragile defences together against the threat of his presence. She saw him frown with displeasure as he took in her tone.

'You may tell me where you have been for a start, madam.' His voice was brusque. 'Your chamber women did not appear to know where you had gone.'

Over his shoulder, Anne saw Edwina make a slight shrug of apology and spread her hands wide. The other occupants of the room, Anne's cousin Muna, a slender girl of eighteen, and her devoted servant John Causton, stood mute. Muna's head was bent and her eyes on the ground. Anne knew that her cousin hated Malvoisier as much as she did herself, but that she had the sense to hide it behind a show of dumb deference. As for John, every line of his body seethed with dislike. Malvoisier lashed out at

him often, goading him until Anne knew not how John resisted retaliating. Somehow he kept quiet. When Malvoisier was about they all played their parts.

'I have been in the church,' she lied coolly, 'praying for a just outcome on the morrow.'

She could not be sure if Malvoisier believed her. There was an unconscionable amount of snow on her cloak to be accounted for on the short journey across the courtyard to the church. Malvoisier took a step towards her. It was clear that he was drunk and pugnacious, spoiling for a fight.

'And what would be a just outcome, Lady Anne?'

Anne opened her eyes innocently. 'Why, that is in God's hands, sir. I trust in him.'

Malvoisier made a noise of disgust. He had no time for divine intervention. 'We shall prevail tomorrow. After all, we hold Sir Henry Greville and will show that cur of a brother of his what he must do to get his flesh and blood back.'

Anne felt Muna make a slight move of protest, quickly stilled. The girl had been nursing Henry Greville herself and had fallen victim to his boyish charm very easily. It had been amusing to Anne to see how Muna's view of Henry had changed so swiftly. One minute her cousin had been speaking of a tiresome boy who had pulled her pigtails as a child, and the next she had a dreamy expression in her eyes and a light spring in her step. It would have been sweet were it not for the unavoidable fact that Henry, like his elder brother, was a Parliamentarian soldier.

Anne had warmed to Henry too, even knowing that he was her enemy. There was something about the vulnerability of an injured man that made it difficult to remember that he held a different allegiance. So she could hardly blame Muna, inexperienced and in the throes of a first love that was all too painfully familiar, for falling in love with a Greville.

Anne cast her cousin a swift, consoling look. Edwina had come forward to stand by her side, stoutly comforting. Muna looked dejected, knowing that in the morning Henry would be paraded from the battlements and either be dead or free within a few hours. Either way, she would never see him again.

'Sir Henry is too ill to be moved,' Anne said quickly, folding up her cloak and laying it on top of the Armada chest. 'I beg you to leave him to rest.'

Malvoisier snorted. 'Rest! He'll get precious little rest on the morrow. He'll be there as our shield against the enemy if I have to drag his unconscious body up on the roof. Save your concern for your father, girl. How does the old man?'

The careless disrespect in his voice made Anne's skin prickle with dislike, but she answered civilly enough.

'Lord Grafton is much the same, sir. I pray hourly for his recovery.'

She felt a small flash of triumph as she saw the flicker of fear in Malvoisier's eyes. She knew that he could not quite disabuse himself of the superstitious belief that the Earl of Grafton would recover his health and strength, and demand from

him an explanation of Malvoisier's stewardship of the Manor in the interim. Anne knew that it would never happen. Her father was dying and the tenacious desperation with which she wanted him to live could make no difference. But every day she used Malvoisier's anxieties against him, reminding him subtly of her father's presence, using the Earl as another line of defence. When Malvoisier had been drunken and enraged one night, and had come to her chamber intent upon rape, she had even resorted to invoking the name of King Charles. It had been enough to play upon the general's dread of reprisal and he had stumbled off down the stairs, raining curses on her head. Since then he had never attempted to touch her. Her resistance held, but she felt frighteningly imperilled and it was so exhausting that she was sure one day she would simply crumble. Not now though. Not tonight.

'We all pray for the master's recovery, madam,' John said loyally, and Malvoisier gave him a murderous look before he spun on his heel and made for the door.

'Have Greville ready in a few hours so that I may use him as my bargaining tool,' he said over his shoulder. 'As for the rest of you, you may rot in hell for all I care.'

The door thudded behind him and his angry footsteps clattered down the stone steps to the bottom of the tower. There was silence for a few seconds, then Edwina tip-toed across to the door and opened it a crack. The lantern light fell on the empty stairwell. 'John, some hot milk for my lady from the kitchens,

if you please,' she said. She came over and took Anne's frozen hands in hers. 'You are chilled to the bone, pet, and too pale. Come closer to the fire.'

Anne let her draw her nearer the blaze, shivering a little as she remembered Simon Greville instructing her to do the same thing only an hour earlier. From the moment she had stepped into his room that night she had felt feverish, hot and cold as though she had an ague. In part her nerves had sprung from guilt; she had felt as though she was being disloyal in some way by going to him to try to strike a bargain for Grafton. Yet it had been the only thing that she could do to try to save everyone who depended upon her. Now she had to tell them she had failed. Anne wrapped her arms about herself for comfort as she thought of the devastation that might follow the battle.

Simon Greville…She had expected to be nervous to see him again. His reputation as a shrewd, cold strategist was sufficient to strike fear in the hearts of any man or woman he opposed. Cool, calculating, utterly ruthless, he was more than a match for the hot-blooded drunkenness of Gerard Malvoisier. What she had not expected that night, though, was that the attraction to him that she had experienced four years ago would return, all the more potent, all the more treacherous since Simon was now her sworn enemy…

Muna was touching her sleeve. 'Did you meet Lord Greville, Nan?' she whispered. A tiny, slender creature with huge dark eyes, Muna looked as though she would crumble at the first

unkind breeze, but she was stronger than she looked. The illegitimate daughter of the Earl's younger brother, Muna had been taken into the Grafton household when her father had died and had been educated alongside Anne. Anne had never had any siblings and valued her cousin's friendship highly.

Now she smiled at her, a little sadly. 'I did meet him, Muna. I told him that his brother is alive.' She hesitated. 'He was mightily relieved to hear the news.'

Muna gave a small sigh. 'And what manner of man is he these days, Nan? Is he like Sir Henry?' She blushed a little as she spoke Henry's name and Edwina caught Anne's gaze and rolled her eyes indulgently. The sweet, passionless courtship of Muna and Henry Greville had consisted of nothing more than love poetry and hand holding, which, Anne maintained, was exactly as it should be. Edwina, a more earthy soul, snorted at the sonnets and laughed aloud at the bad poetry Henry penned. But Anne, with the memory of Simon Greville's caresses still in her mind, reflected it was a good job that his brother had been badly injured. If Henry's courtship was normally as direct as Simon's, then Muna's virtue would have been under dire threat.

Both Muna and Edwina were watching her with curiosity in their eyes. Anne sat down on the wooden settle with a heartfelt sigh.

'Lord Greville is very like Sir Henry, only more—' She stopped, aware of her audience's round-eyed interest. 'More forceful,' she finished carefully, anxious not to give too much of

her feelings away.

'Lord have mercy!' Edwina said drily. 'Like Sir Henry, but more forceful!' She looked closely at her former charge. 'You are very pink in the face, my lady. I seem to remember that you had a great regard for this Lord Greville when he came a-courting here at Grafton.'

There was the scrape of wood on stone as the door opened and John re-entered the chamber. Anne gratefully accepted the cup of warm milk that he pressed into her hands, wrapping her cold fingers about it and using the time it gave her to fend off Edwina's enquiries.

'It was many years ago that Simon Greville came here, Edwina,' she said. 'Have you forgotten that we are on different sides now?'

Edwina made a humphing sound. The loyalty of Anne's close servants was absolute, but they had a simpler view than she of allegiance to the King or the Parliament. To them such civil strife caused nothing but trouble, took food from the mouths of the poor, split brother from brother and took sons from their mothers. They supported the King mainly because the Earl was the King's man and they held fast to their fealty to him and to his daughter. And now Anne realized, with a sinking heart, that she had to tell them she had failed them.

'Lord Greville will not call off the assault on the Manor,' she said baldly. 'I asked him and he refused.'

She looked at them over the rim of the cup. There was a

moment of stillness when she could see her own horror and misery etched clear on the faces of them all. They had thought that she would save them.

Then John cleared his throat.

‘You did your best, milady,’ he said gruffly. ‘It was far more than that miserable cur Malvoisier would do for us. Don’t you go feeling bad about that.’

Muna gripped her hand hard. ‘He would not even do it to save Sir Henry? Oh, Nan…’

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