

REBEL

Heart

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*For my dear friend, Elizabeth –
fearless and true*

Also by Ally Sherrick

Black Powder

The Buried Crown

The Queen's Fool

Vita and the Gladiator




*Yet let's be content, and the
times lament, you see the
world turn'd upside down.*

From 'The World Turned Upside Down',
an English ballad of the mid-1640s

ENGLAND, JUNE 1645

For almost three years, the country has been torn apart by a bitter civil war. On the one side, the Royalists fighting in the name of King Charles I; on the other, those for Parliament. Split by both political and religious differences, the two sides are further apart than ever, and it's by no means clear who will win.

Meanwhile, in a world turned upside down, with communities and families divided, ordinary people have no choice but to take up arms to defend their homes and the ones they love . . .



CHAPTER ONE

OXFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND

Monday 9 June 1645

The musket ball whistled past Merriweather's left ear. She stifled a cry and threw herself to the ground, heart pounding.

A moment's pause, then a man's voice echoed back from the gatehouse battlements. 'What the blazes?' followed by grunts and curses from his comrades and the heavy clump of approaching boots.

Merriweather snatched a breath and shrank back into her hiding place against the turret wall as the shadow of a man loomed across the roof tiles in front of her.

The footsteps halted. 'Ah – there it is!' There was a creak of leather as the shadow sank into a squat. 'What I wouldn't give to blast that damned Roundhead sharpshooter off his perch to kingdom come.'

'Aye, him and the rest of those rebel dogs!' a voice cried in reply. 'Stick it in yer musket and fire it back at him!' Loud cheers echoed around the rooftop, bouncing against the walls and battlements. The first man growled his agreement, then lifted to his feet and hurried back towards his comrades.

Heaving a quick sigh, Merriweather touched a finger to her ear then examined it. No trace of any blood. She'd been lucky. She glanced at the statue of the lion gazing fiercely out at the distant horizon from its stone plinth in the centre of the gatehouse roof. It was said that hundreds of years ago, one of her Pryce ancestors had fought alongside King Richard I, the so-called 'Coeur de Lion', and adopted the beast as the family emblem in honour of the King's bravery. Soon after, a legend was born that as long as the lion stood guard, the manor of Compton Blaize would never fall. The creature was more battered now than when the house had first been built. Two centuries of sun, rain and snow plus the more recent peppering of shot and musket-ball strikes from the enemy had seen to that. But he still stood proud and strong, claws gripping the Pryce family shield, jaws fixed in a wide, sharp-toothed roar. And

while he did – Merriweather felt her own burst of pride at the thought – they would too.

She waited a moment longer, then steeling herself, edged forwards again to get a better view. The soldiers on guard – ten in total – were strung out around the battlements, muskets poking through slits in the weathered yellow-grey stonework, bodies crouched and heads ducked low. Merriweather bit her lip. She was desperate to see what was happening on the other side of the walls, but if the men spotted her, she'd be marched away to face the inevitable scolding from her stepmother, Lady Ellinor. Still, she'd made it this far. She wasn't going to give up now.

She'd been itching to come up here ever since the Roundhead troops had arrived and set up camp at the far end of the deer park just over a week ago. But her stepmother had kept her busy. If she wasn't studying scripture and taking French lessons with her tutor, Mister Anthony, then she was forced to spend hours on end in the long gallery with Agnes stitching her sampler, or else cooped up in her chamber practising the lute. And as if that wasn't enough, she was expected to keep her half-brother and -sister, Robert and baby Maria, entertained too.

The opportunity had finally come after an enemy messenger delivered a letter to the garrison commander, Captain Oakshott, yesterday at noon. Lady Ellinor had refused to reveal the contents to Merriweather, but she'd

been distracted and ill at ease ever since. And this morning, when Merriweather, playing skittles for the hundredth time with Robert, had spotted the captain disappearing, grim-faced, into her stepmother's drawing room, she'd seized her chance. What she needed now was for the men on guard up here to be distracted too, though preferably not by another potshot from that wretched rebel sharpshooter in the trees.

As if on cue the sound of labouring footsteps echoed up from inside the turret behind her. The door creaked open and a familiar, tousle-haired boy wearing a patched jerkin and breeches and a grease-spattered apron stepped out into the watery midday sunshine, a large leather jug in one hand, a dusty brown flour sack in the other.

Her heart gave a swoop of thanks. Will the kitchen boy, with the men's midday meal! She pulled back quickly against the wall and watched as he hurried over to the nearest soldier and, setting down his load, juted his hand to his forehead and stood to attention. 'I brought your supplies, sir.'

'Get down!' The man – the one who'd retrieved the enemy musket ball – glared at Will, who dropped to the ground like a stone.

'Sorry, sir! I-I was just bringin' you your bread and small beer.'

'So you said.' Giving Will a quick nod, he grabbed hold

of the sack and jug, and called to his comrades. 'Come on, lads! Apart from that beady-eyed scoundrel up in the elms, all's quiet. Likely to stay that way for a bit now too, or so the captain says. Peake, you keep watch. As for the rest, come and fill your bellies while you've got the chance.'

All except Peake laid down their muskets and, hands pressed tight to their leather caps, slunk back to a place of shelter on the far side of the turret.

Merriweather held her breath. Now all she needed was for Will to go back down below. Then, as long as she was careful, she could slide over unseen to the corner of the battlements for a perfect view of the enemy camp.

As the boy crawled towards the turret door, his cheeks still red from the soldier's scolding, she felt a squeeze of sympathy. Poor Will! The man shouldn't have shouted at him like that. He was only trying to—

A fly landed suddenly on the tip of her nose. She batted it away, but it was too late.

'Ah-ah-ah-choo!'

Will started and swung round. She pulled into the shadows, but he'd spotted her, she knew.

A gruff voice sounded from the other side of the turret. 'What was that?'

Will coughed. 'Nothin', sir. Somethin' got up my nose.'

The soldier grunted and said something Merriweather couldn't hear. A bunch of rough guffaws rang out followed

by the clatter of wooden beakers and the sound of someone belching.

Will scuttled over to Merriweather's hiding place and spoke in an urgent whisper. 'Miss Merriweather, what in the King's name are you doin' up here? If the mistress finds out—'

'But she's not going to. Not unless you tell her . . .' Merriweather narrowed her eyes in warning.

Will threw her a hurt look. 'I'd never do that, and you know it.'

Her cheeks flushed with sudden guilt. 'You're right. I'm sorry.' He may have been a humble kitchen boy but Will was a true and loyal friend. Her only one, apart from Merlin.

He sighed, then his face pulled into a frown. 'Anyway, what *are* you doin' up here? If you was to get shot—'

Merriweather half-raised a hand to her ear, reminded of the recent close call with the rebel musket ball, then drew it down again. 'I won't. I just wanted to see what was happening. Out there, I mean.' She pointed at the deer park.

Will chewed on his lip, then, with a quick check about, signalled for Merriweather to follow. Keeping low, they darted towards the cover of the lion, then, with another look around, dashed across the roof tiles to the far corner of the battlements.

As Merriweather made to poke her head through the gap, Will shot out his arm. 'Wait!' He took a deep breath

and peered out, then nodded and let his hand fall. She pushed alongside him and, shielding her eyes against the white glare of the sky, scanned the scene in front of them.

She'd loved exploring the deer park when she was younger. Racing bonnet-less over the rolling green slopes, her hair streaming out behind her. Tucking in her petticoats to climb the magnificent old oak trees that dotted the landscape. Or creeping as close as she could to the deer while they rested in the shade on a hot summer's day.

But that was before. Before Father had got married again. Before the quarrel between the King and the Parliament had worsened too . . .

Now, thanks to the terrible war that had been raging between the two sides for nearly three years, what lay before them wasn't a deer park at all. With its shattered tree stumps and torn-up turf, the scene was more what Merriweather imagined it must be like outside the gates to Hell – though a very watery one after all the rain that had fallen of late.

Most of the damage had been done during the first siege of Compton Blaize last summer. Father had still been here then and had done everything in his power to fortify their home against the enemy's attack. With the help of Captain John Oakshott, a soldier friend from Father's adventuring days and now freshly returned from the wars in Europe, they'd recruited a band of loyal local men to

form a defensive garrison. Then, on Father's command, they'd hacked down the trees and turned the grassy slopes into ugly great earthworks to keep the Roundhead troops at bay. As for the deer – Merriweather gave a quick shiver – she'd rather not think about what had become of them.

Back then, the fortifications were manned by a full garrison and they'd been able to hold out for several weeks. Then sickness in the enemy camp, along with news of a relief force sent to Father's aid by King Charles himself from his wartime capital in nearby Oxford, persuaded the cowardly rebels to turn tail and run.

But this time things were different. The Parliamentary forces camped across the park were much greater in number – Merriweather could see that now for herself. There were more men and horses. More guns too – though they hadn't used them yet. And with Father and half the garrison now away fighting with the King, only a handful of their own men could be spared to defend the muddy, half-flooded earthworks outside the walls.

When the rumours first reached them that the rebel general, Sir Thomas Fairfax – now laying siege to Oxford with a fearsome new fighting force called the New Model Army – had ordered a company of soldiers to Compton Blaize to finish what they'd started the year before, Lady Ellinor had sent their stable-hands – Jacob Legge and Samuel Jeames – for help. But the servants hadn't returned

yet, and with each passing day it looked less and less likely that they would. As for Father, there'd been no news from him since his last letter from Oxford over a month ago, though Merriweather's stepmother had told her, with fighting breaking out up and down the country, he could be anywhere by now.

Merriweather's eyes pricked. She blinked and peered down the sandy strip of road running across the ruined park from the gatehouse to the enemy camp and then on to the distant line of low hills beyond. If she squeezed her eyes tight shut and wished hard enough, perhaps when she opened them again Father would come riding along it to their rescue at the head of a troop of gallant Cavaliers . . .

The distant clop of horses' hooves and the sudden sharp beat of a drum jerked her back to the present. She snapped her eyes open, pulse quickening.

'Someone's comin'!' Will pointed to a small group of buff-leather-coated men on horseback – four, maybe five – trotting down the road behind a man marching with a drum slung across his chest.

For a fleeting moment Merriweather thought her wish had worked, then chided herself for her foolishness. Even if Father were to try and return to them, there was no way the Roundheads would let him through unharmed. Which meant the men were from the rebel camp. But what did they want? And why weren't Captain Oakshott's men – all

now back at their posts and peering down at the small procession – getting ready to fire? She was about to call out to them, when a low grinding sound echoed up from below. The gates. Someone was opening them! She jumped to her feet and picking up her skirts, raced back across the rooftop towards the turret door.