

World Rights

## Chapter 1

The devil's boots don't creak.

—Scottish Proverb

*July 1831*

*Dartmoor, England*

The first time I laid eyes on Langstone Manor I could not blame my husband for staying away for over fifteen years. I'm sure it didn't help that the weather was far from hospitable. Heavy gray clouds filled the sky, releasing sheets of rain that obscured the horizon, all but concealing my view of the infamous moors rising to the east. But even on a bright, sunlit day, I struggled to imagine the house being more inviting. In truth, it appeared downright foreboding, even without the painful memories that plagued Gage.

Memories I could see weighing on him now. They were written in the tautness of his brow and the deep pools of his eyes as he stared up at the stone manor through our hired carriage's window. Sebastian Gage had conducted dozens of precarious inquiries, had faced down Turkish warriors in the Greek War of Independence, and had most recently been winged by a bullet fired by a temperamental Irish housemaid during our last inquiry only a week before, but this place somehow still troubled him.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised. After all, if I was about to enter my first husband, Sir

Anthony Darby's, London townhouse—that place of so many unhappy remembrances—I wouldn't have been so sanguine. It's never easy to confront the demons of our past. But to see my normally unflappable husband so apprehensive unsettled me.

I reached out to touch Gage's hand where it gripped his leg, hoping to offer him a bit of reassurance. I wanted to do more than that, but with our maid and valet seated across from us that would be highly inappropriate. As loyal and trustworthy as Bree and Anderley might be, and privy to more intimacies than most, having assisted us with numerous murderous inquiries, there were still some things that should remain private between husband and wife.

Gage turned his hand over to squeeze my fingers and offered me a fleeting smile before turning back to the view outside his window. I followed suit, curious about this place where he had spent so much of his childhood.

He'd told me little about his time here with his mother while his father had been away at sea, fighting Napoleon and manning the blockade. However, what he had revealed had spoken volumes, and I'd been able to infer even more than he probably realized from the things he hadn't said. Whatever else he felt about this place, it was clear he'd not been happy.

I stared upward at the manor's edifice of coarse stone and tall mullioned windows, their glass dark and oily in the gloom. Two symmetrical wings projected from the main block, their exteriors echoing that of the one before us, but for the long narrow windows which I suspected had once been arrow slits now fitted with glass. The roof was covered in small slate shingles only a shade lighter than the clouds. The tall chimneys and sprocket eaves with their gabled ends added angles and dimension to the bland façade, but they failed to lighten the overall melancholy feel of the setting in any way.

The manor didn't look much different than I anticipated the granite-shattered outcroppings of the tors would look. I wondered if that had been the builder's intention. If so, he'd succeeded, but at what cost? As beautiful as the landscape of Dartmoor was purported to be, it was also treacherous, and this home had taken on many of the same characteristics.

The garden which had sprung up in the courtyard before the manor also did nothing to help matters. Hedged in by an imposing metal gate and stone walls, thick beds of green plants and a few straggling pale flowers had taken root at the edges of the gravel lane. Trees ringed the edge of the property, their twisted trunks seeming to sprout from the very walls themselves as if they would not be denied access, or allowed to escape it. The garden was clearly well-kept, its verges rigidly maintained, but some more colorful flowers and a bit of judicious pruning would have done much to lighten the space. But perhaps those plants did not grow in this climate and the dense foliage refused to be stunted.

“Do you think they realize we’ve arrived?” I asked, beginning to question whether we should send Anderley to knock on the door.

In the failing light, it was impossible to see much of anything beneath the pale stone archway through which I presumed one accessed the main door, but a footman hurried forth from its recess, allaying my uncertainty. However, any question as to whether our arrival had been anticipated was swiftly answered by the widening of the young man’s eyes as he scrutinized our trunks strapped to the roof of the carriage.

“Good evening, sir,” he murmured upon opening the chaise’s door. “Were you expected?”

Gage’s mouth tightened in what looked like annoyance, but that I knew to be an emotion far more complicated. “Yes,” he announced before stepping down into the loose gravel without offering the servant any further explanation. Taking the umbrella from the startled footman’s hand, he reached back to assist me.

I wrapped my shawl tighter around me against the wind, and opened my mouth to remind him it wasn’t the servant’s fault he’d been caught unprepared. But one look at Gage’s face made me fall silent. He already knew this, and his tight-lipped displeasure was not directed at the footman, but at his grandfather, the Viscount Tavistock.

Regardless of our delayed arrival, the viscount should have made his staff aware of the prospect of our coming. After all, he’d been the one to write to Gage, begging him to visit—a move which Gage

assured me was entirely out of character for the proud, taciturn man. His urgent missive had originally been sent to London and had to be forwarded on to us in Ireland, where we had just wrapped up our latest murderous inquiry, causing a delay of more than a week. In our rush to reach Langstone Manor, we'd not paused to send a message ahead of us to confirm our plans, knowing it wouldn't have arrived much before we would.

Given that postponement, it was possible that the matter for which we'd been summoned had already been resolved. Or perhaps Lord Tavistock had simply given up on us. Whatever the reason, the household was not prepared for our visit.

Gage hurried us forward, pausing once we'd stepped through the arch into the covered porch, where he turned to address the footman who trailed behind us. "The coachman has driven us all the way from Plymouth, and I've promised him lodging for the night for himself and his horses. Please see to it, as well as our servants and luggage."

The flustered expression on the footman's face would have been comical had I not also felt some empathy for him. He was young and inexperienced, and so could not be blamed for his failure to recognize Gage after his long absence, or perhaps for even being cognizant of his existence. The footman glanced back and forth between us and the carriage, uncertain whether he should insist he announce us or do as Gage had instructed.

Fortunately, an older man came to his rescue. "Timothy, do as he asks," said a slight man standing in the shadows next to the door before shifting his gaze to meet my husband's. "I'll show Mr. Gage inside."

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dim light underneath the porch, but Gage already recognized the speaker.

"Hammett, I'm surprised to see you're still with us."

I stiffened, surprised by the rudeness of my husband's comment, but the other man didn't seem the least insulted if the grin that cracked his thin mouth was any indication.

“Aye. Yer cousins haven’t rent me from this mortal coil yet. Nor your grandfather neither.”

A flicker of a smile crossed Gage’s face.

The elderly man, who I now recognized must be the butler, ushered us out of the damp into a small vestibule. He tilted his head to inspect Gage and then me, dislodging the few stray gray hairs still clinging to the top of his head. “This’ll be yer bride, then?” Though, he was merely a servant, I felt I had been assessed and judged, and apparently found acceptable for his creaky voice warmed. “Welcome to Langstone Manor.”

“Thank you,” I replied.

Then his eyes narrowed on Gage. “You’ve been gone a long while.”

Gage was not fazed nor chagrined by the old retainer’s censure. “If I wasn’t already conscious of that, the sight of your wrinkled face would certainly remind me. But what are you still doing here? I thought you would have retired to one of the estate’s cottages or shuffled off to the seaside long ago.”

“And leave his lordship to fend off these leeches alone?” His scraggily brow lowered. “Not that it’ll matter much longer.”

The remainder of Gage’s levity fled at this comment. “How is he?”

“You’ll see for yerselves,” Hammett replied gruffly, turning at the sound of footsteps.

I followed his gaze toward the gleaming wooden staircase on the opposite side of the long, stone entry hall where a tall woman dressed in a midnight blue gown had paused a few feet from the base of the steps. I could not immediately discern who she was in relation to Gage, but it was evident from the manner in which his eyes hardened and his nostrils flared that she was not someone he was fond of. And the feeling was mutual.

I was accustomed to everyone liking my husband. Those who weren’t already won over by his good looks were quickly persuaded by his charm and easy nature. Even his father, who was derisive and sometimes unforgivably hard on him, still cared for him in his own contrary way. However, this woman took little pains to conceal the loathing shimmering in her eyes. Where this naked animosity came from,

I didn't know, but it took me aback.

Maintaining a façade of polite composure, Gage stepped forward to greet her, but halted when a dark-haired man came bustling into the hall through a doorway on the left.

“Mother, did you know a carriage has arrived? Do you think it could be . . .” His words faltered as he followed her gaze toward where we stood. His eyes widened.

Given my reputation, it was not the most awkward welcome I'd ever received, but considering the fact that I suspected these people were related to Gage in some way, it was certainly the most disconcerting. Indignation began to build inside me, not on my behalf, but on Gage's.

I was used to people thinking the worst of me. The scandal over my involvement with the work of my first husband, the great anatomist Sir Anthony Darby—specifically my sketching his dissections for an anatomical textbook he was writing—had blackened my name and made me a figure of fear and revulsion in many circles. Few cared to note that my participation had been forced, or that in spite of it, my drawings had been beautiful and flawless. For them it was proof enough of my unnaturalness that as a gentlewoman I had not only survived such a gruesome ordeal, but also gone on to use that reluctantly accrued knowledge to help solve murders and other crimes.

Gage, on the other hand, was a different story. As a gentleman inquiry agent of some renown, he did not suffer the same slights to his character. In fact, the work he undertook as a diversion—for he had no need to earn his living—only enhanced his reputation. Combined with the fact that he was perhaps the most charismatic and attractive young gentleman in all of England, he was practically guaranteed an eager invitation from every hostess in the country. I had feared that our marriage would harm his standing, but thus far our unlikely match had only raised his prominence to almost mythical proportions.

But apparently this partiality did not extend to his late mother's family. Watching the trio eye each other, their expressions ranging from wariness to outright enmity, I now better understood my husband's initial reluctance to come here. Even though it had been quickly overridden, by his own inclination and my admittedly uninformed opinion, it said a great deal about his relationship with the maternal relatives

he'd spent much of his childhood with that he wouldn't immediately wish to come to their aid.

The dark-haired man was the first to speak. He took a few hesitant steps towards us before resuming a more assured stride. "Gage, is that you?" His mouth curled into an uncertain grin. "By Jove, it is!" He reached out to shake his hand. "Dashed it's been a long time."

"It's good to see you, Rory," Gage replied. Much of the hostility he'd directed at the woman had faded from his eyes as he greeted the other man, but there was still a guardedness to his demeanor.

"And this must be your wife," Rory guessed. "Grandfather told us you'd wed." His expression couldn't help but hold rabid interest, though he did at least try, rather unsuccessfully, to mask it.

"Yes." Gage gazed down at me with a glint of protective pride. "Kiera, allow me to introduce my cousin, the Honorable Roland Trevelyan."

I offered him my hand, which he clasped respectfully. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Trevelyan."

"Likewise, Mrs. Gage." His pale blue eyes, just a few shades darker than Gage's wintry hue—obviously a Trevelyan trait—softened with regard. "Is this your first time visiting the West Country?"

"Yes," I replied. "Before today, I'm afraid I'd never set foot on English soil farther west than Oxford." I paused to consider. "Unless you count Cumberland. I suppose that's farther west than Oxfordshire."

Rory's expression turned self-deprecating. "I wouldn't know. I'm afraid I never was very good at geography." His eyes flicked to Gage. "Got my knuckles rapped more than a few times for not being able to point out Devonshire on the map."

I smiled at his attempt at levity even as his jest failed to amuse the others. Though I didn't yet know what his relationship with Gage had been like in the past, I couldn't help warming to the man before me. There was something about his lack of pretension and his almost bumbling charm that made him quite agreeable. He wasn't as handsome or alluring as Gage, but in this instance I think such slick assurance would have worked against him, making me question his sincerity.

The click of footsteps crossing the granite floor recalled us to the presence of the other woman in

the room, who had observed her son's greetings with cool detachment. Rory glanced over his shoulder. "Mother, come meet Mrs. Gage."

Though past fifty, she was still a remarkably beautiful woman with dark hair sparsely streaked with gray, smooth skin, and flashing dark eyes. I could see now that the lovely gown I'd viewed from a distance was also terribly stylish, and undoubtedly purchased from a London shop. Combined with her rigid posture, elegant coiffure, and what I suspected were artfully applied cosmetics, I began to feel rather unkempt and dowdy in my striped carriage dress of straw, rose, and pale blue. Little as I cared for fashion, I felt grateful my more sophisticated sister had insisted on helping me choose the new gowns for my trousseau before I wed Gage three months prior. Otherwise, I had no doubt the woman before me would have judged me even more harshly than I could see she'd already done.

She lifted her chin to stare down her nose at me as her eyes gleamed with cold calculation. "But it isn't Mrs. Gage, is it? Properly you should be addressed as Lady Darby, should you not?"

It was questioned with quiet civility, but I knew better. So did Gage, though he didn't even flinch as she skillfully slid the dagger of her insult into his side. She was not the first person to point out this ridiculous bit of etiquette to us. Because my first husband had been a baronet, a higher rank than Gage as a mere mister, by courtesy—though not by right—I was allowed to keep Sir Anthony Darby's name and rank. To address me as Mrs. Gage would be considered a snub by many in society, but I was more than eager to shed my first husband's name, regardless of the correct forms of address.

And so I told her. "Actually, I prefer to take my new husband's name." I favored Gage with a loving smile lest she think he had been the one to insist upon this request.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rory's grin broaden.

"I see," the woman replied stonily, though it didn't slip my notice she hadn't actually agreed to my appeal.

"Good evening, Aunt Vanessa," Gage proclaimed, the sharp glint returning to his eyes.

Her perfectly arched eyebrows lifted. "Sebastian."

I didn't like the grating manner in which she pronounced his name, absurdly adding an extra syllable, which she accented. I was quite certain she was doing it that way on purpose.

"Kiera, allow me to present my aunt, the Dowager Baroness Langstone."

So she was not a blood relation, but Gage's uncle's widow, and his late mother's sister-in-law.

"Not that I'm not happy to see you," she said to Gage after nodding to me, her inflection stating that's exactly what she meant. "But what are you doing here?"

I looked up at Gage, wondering how he would take the news that his grandfather had evidently not shared his plans with the other members of the family, but he did not seem surprised. That in and of itself said a great deal.

"Grandfather sent for me," he explained, giving us both the satisfaction of startling Lady Langstone. "We're here to find Alfred."

