

Chapter One

Wiltshire

When she heard the sound of a car, Harriet peeped out of the sitting room window and saw two middle-aged men get out of what looked like an official vehicle. They stood staring at the house, muttering to one another.

‘They’re here, Joseph.’

Her husband joined her. ‘They don’t look very happy.’

‘I’m not happy, either. I wish I didn’t have to see them. I told the maids I’d let them in myself.’ She waited for the knocker to sound, then walked across the hall and opened the front door.

‘Good morning. I’m Mrs Latimer.’

‘Good morning, ma’am. We’re here to see your husband.’

That annoyed her for a start. ‘You’ve come about the house and I’m the owner, so it’s me you need to speak to, not my husband. And perhaps your driver would like to go round to the kitchen for a cup of tea while we have our tour and discussion?’

They stared at her in surprise, then exchanged puzzled glances before one waved to the driver and pointed to the rear.

The other man frowned at Harriet. ‘But your husband isn’t dead, so the house must be his?’

‘It isn’t. *Greyladies* is a trust, which passes down the female line only, and the husbands of its owners change their names to Latimer. Please come in.’

She ignored their surprised expressions and walked back briskly into the sitting room, leaving them to close the front door and follow her. ‘This is my husband.’

‘Joseph Latimer?’

As they offered him a handshake, they seemed to relax a little.

Ignoring Harriet again, one said, ‘I’m Mr Dorrance and my companion is Mr Pashley.’ They pressed two cards into his hand. ‘We’re here about the house.’

Joseph immediately passed the cards to Harriet. ‘*Greyladies* belongs to my wife, as she just told you, so you’ll need to discuss the requisition with her.’

Again, a moment of silence, as if they’d been spoken to in a foreign language and weren’t sure whether they understood it correctly.

Harriet would have smiled if she hadn’t been irritated by the way they’d tried to ignore her. She gestured to some armchairs. ‘We’ll all be more comfortable sitting down, I’m sure. Can we offer you some refreshments, gentlemen?’

‘No, thank you. Um, do you know why we’re here, Mrs Latimer?’

She couldn’t help answering sharply. ‘Of course I do!’

Joseph gave her a warning glance and shook his head slightly, so she tried to speak more calmly. ‘The letter explained it quite clearly. You’re from the Special Requisitions Section of the War Office. You’re here to see if this house will be suitable for your needs.’

And the letter had informed her that she had no choice about whether they requisitioned her home or not. They had the power to turn her and her family out – though she might be entitled to compensation for any damage at some unspecified stage after the war.

‘Perhaps I should show you round first, gentlemen? As you will have noticed, my husband walks with a limp and he finds the stairs a bit of a trial.’

‘Er, yes. If you don’t mind.’

She did mind. Very much.

‘I’d better explain that the house is in two parts. The older part at the rear is the original building. We don’t use that any longer. The front part is the newer section.’

She led them round the new part of the house, which was just under two hundred years old, then took them into the original house at the rear, which dated from the sixteenth century.

To her surprise, the old house looked run down and felt distinctly damp and chilly. It felt different today and she couldn't understand why until she walked to the other end of the main room, which had been the old Elizabethan hall. Where she was standing felt normal. Where the two men were standing even looked darker and more menacing – as if the house resented their presence as much as she did.

One of the men shivered. 'Such dampness wouldn't be good for convalescent men. Is that why you moved to the front part?'

'Er . . . yes.' She didn't contradict this impression, even though she knew the old house wasn't at all damp. Well, it wasn't normally.

Once back in the new house, the two men relaxed.

'I wonder if we could be left alone somewhere for half an hour or so to discuss what we call "matters pertaining",' Mr Dorrance said.

'You can stay here,' Harriet said curtly.

'Are you ready for a cup of tea now?' Joseph asked in a politer tone.

'Thank you. That would be much appreciated.'

'I'll have some sent in. My wife and I will wait for you in the library, just across the hall.'

Harriet couldn't settle, so paced up and down. 'They're going to take *Greyladies* from us, I know they are, Joseph.'

'There's nothing we can do about that, my darling. And if there is a war between Britain and Germany, then we must all do what we can for our country.'

'But the house could be damaged, ruined even.'

'I don't think they'll allow that. And Harriet – please try to be a bit more friendly. It'll do no good to put these men's backs up.'

After what seemed like hours, but was only forty minutes, according to the clock, there was a tap on the door. Mr Dorrance looked in. 'Could we speak to you now, please?'

They followed him across to the sitting room and sat together on the sofa facing the visitors. She resisted the temptation to clutch Joseph's hand.

'We feel that the front part of the house is suitable for our needs, Mr – er, Mrs Latimer. Not perfect, with so many stairs, but it'll do.'

Harriet's heart sank. 'Oh.'

'If there's war, we shall need the house for the duration of the hostilities. We're suggesting it be used as an officers' convalescent home, because it's not large enough for an auxiliary hospital. If peace prevails and there is no war, as we all pray, then the house will be given back to you within a few months.'

She didn't know what to say, felt very close to tears, and now she did reach out for the comfort of her husband's hand.

'We shall not require the older part of the house, however, because of the damp. Also, the rooms there are rather dark and unpleasant.' Mr Dorrance paused, then added, 'Therefore, if you feel you and your family can tolerate those conditions, we would have no objection to you living in the older part of the building.'

Harriet looked at Joseph and he nodded in answer to her unspoken question. 'We would definitely like to live there. And . . . if we can help in any way, we will.'

'That will be up to the commandant and matron, but I'm sure they'll be happy for you to volunteer your services, if only in tasks like reading to the men or writing letters for them.' He looked round. 'In a place of this size, which is not a hospital, the medical officer will probably act as commandant.'

She nodded, feeling relieved that they could stay in the old house, at least. They had nowhere else to go, really. She'd been a maid at Dalton House before marrying Joseph, so relations were always a little awkward. His oldest brother, Selwyn, would inherit the family estate and, of course, Dalton House might be requisitioned too.

Joseph took over from her, gesturing round the room. 'We shall, of course, remove and store any items of value, like the paintings and books, but I wonder whether your department

would agree to a requirement that those using the house look after the historical features of the building itself? The doors, windows, panelling and stained glass are all original. I always feel such places are part of our national heritage, rather than the possessions of one family.'

The shorter of the two men nodded vigorously. 'I agree with you entirely. I would definitely be prepared to support that requirement being stated, Mr Latimer. I too believe our country's history is important. It's good to hear you say that. Too many landowners take their possessions for granted.'

Dorrance obviously didn't share his colleague's love of history, and merely shrugged. 'As long as it doesn't interfere with the patients' welfare, I have no objection to such a requirement.'

Mr Pashley smiled at Joseph. 'This panelling is superb.' He gazed up at the ceiling. 'As for the plasterwork, it's magnificent, even though it's later than the period it tries to imitate. I shall make a note of this on the *Greyladies* file. If you have any trouble about the house, this is my card.'

Harriet watched in annoyance as Joseph easily got his way. She was quite sure she'd not have succeeded. The men had continued to talk to her in a patronising manner, and Pashley had even explained the obvious features of her own home to her. They no doubt considered all women inferior in understanding.

But she'd had many years of biting her tongue and hiding her emotions when younger and working as a housemaid, before she unexpectedly inherited this house, so though she couldn't manage a friendly smile, she did manage to say nothing.

Once the car had driven away, Joseph gave her a quick hug. 'Well done. I know it nearly killed you to keep quiet, but I got more concessions out of them than you could have done.' He frowned. 'I wonder why they thought the older part of the house so unpleasant.'

'It did feel damp and dark today, even to me. I couldn't understand it. Not the whole place, but the part where they were standing.'

'Yes. I noticed. It's as if the house itself had taken a dislike to them. I half expected to see our ghost.'

'Me too. The diaries say Anne Latimer still keeps watch on her house and the legacy she's left behind. And we've both seen her many times.'

'Well, whatever caused the feeling of dampness and unhappiness today, I'm glad of it. It means we won't have to leave *Greyladies*.'

'But *we* won't be in charge of the main part. They might do anything in here.'

'If we help out, we can keep an eye on things part of the time. And as some of the people from the village will no doubt be employed here, I'm sure they'll let us know if they see anything happening that seems harmful.'

She sighed. 'I suppose so. Joseph, do you think there really will be a war?'

'Yes, my darling, I do. It's as if people have learnt nothing from the Boer Wars.'

She knew he'd lost an uncle during the second Boer War and that he felt very strongly about the shameful tactics used by the British against the enemy women and children, many of whom had died because of their poor treatment as prisoners.

If Britain entered into a war with Germany now, how many others would die? Her heart ached for what the young men of England would have to face.

She turned to the post with a sigh, then a smile. A letter had arrived to say that Joseph's sister had had another daughter, and that Richard's wife was due to give birth in a few weeks.

She wished all news was as pleasant as this.

Comment [f1]: See Comment 4(p9).

Comment [MJ2]: Change 'in a few weeks' to 'soon'? Will that solve this problem and p9 compatibility?