

JENELLE HOVDE

A NOVEL

No Stone
Unturned



Praise for Jenelle Hovde

In *No Stone Unturned*, Jenelle Hovde has written a sweeping Regency romance filled with heart and history. Fans of Mimi Matthews and Julie Klassen will find much to love in this tale which melds the atmospheric intrigue of *Jane Eyre* with the rugged beauty of *Poldark*. Against the backdrop of the rural English countryside, Hovde's characters unearth not only ancient Roman mosaics but also deep, hidden truths about themselves. I thoroughly enjoyed the novel for its intelligent characters and fresh take on a turbulent Regency romance.

ELIZABETH CAMDEN, RITA award-winning author

As fresh and lovely as its cover. . . . A feast of romance and suspense unfolds against the picturesque backdrop of West Sussex, a world inhabited with richly detailed characters you'll want to befriend. Jenelle Hovde makes an unforgettable debut!

LAURA FRANTZ, Christy Award-winning author of *The Indigo Heiress*

What a delightful story, filled with the intrigue and wit of *Bridgerton* and the deep emotional connection of *Downton Abbey*. If you love Regency romance with subtle but fascinating historical nuggets and novels that lead you to gently measure your heart, *No Stone Unturned* should be on your TBR list now!

MESU ANDREWS, Christy Award-winning author of *Isaiah's Daughter*

I was utterly enchanted by this story! The unconventional heroine and the broken hero were a perfect pairing in this novel of ancient ruins and noble families. Mystery, romance, and history come together beautifully in this heartfelt, endearing novel. Readers will be eager for Hovde's next book!

JOANNA DAVIDSON POLITANO, award-winning author of *The Curious Inheritance of Blakely House* and other novels

As someone with an endless fascination for archaeology and old homes, I was captivated by the charming yet dangerous estate of Hawthorn Abbey. *No Stone Unturned* is a mysterious treasure hunt with a dashing hero and an undaunted heroine, both determined to save the British manor in their own way. If you enjoy reading Jane Austen, you'll love Jenelle Hovde's Regency romance.

MELANIE DOBSON, award-winning author of *The Wings of Poppy Pendleton* and *The Curator's Daughter*

What could be better than a feisty heroine and a broodingly handsome hero? A story full of intrigue set against the windswept English countryside, that's what. Author Janelle Hovde has crafted a Regency tale that's as emotionally stirring as it is delightfully engaging. With every turn of the page, expect suspense, snappy dialogue, and heart-melting moments that linger long after the last chapter. This one is going on my keeper shelf!

MICHELLE GRIEP, Christy Award-winning author of *Of Gold and Shadows*

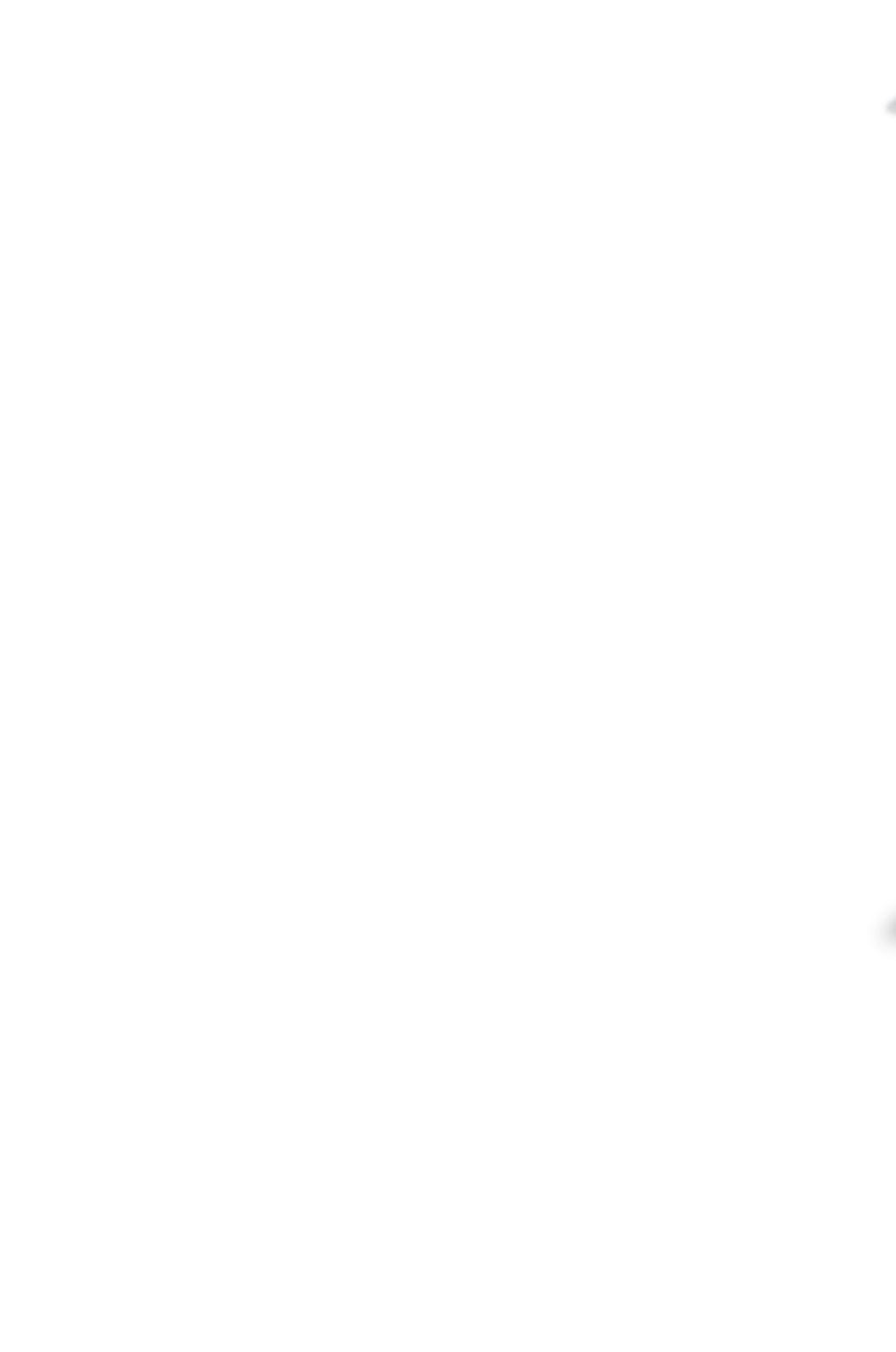
I loved the mix of history, romance, archaeology, and faith in this adventurous and delightful Regency tale. Bridget's determination to uncover Roman ruins and her search for recognition and love will inspire readers and take them on an exciting and surprising journey. Those who enjoy novels by Julie Klassen, Roseanna M. White, and Carolyn Miller will be delighted to find a new author who brings the era and English setting to life. Well written and highly recommended!

CARRIE TURANSKY, award-winning author of *A Token of Love* and *The Legacy of Longdale Manor*

What a delightful, heart-wrenching, edge-of-your-seat ride! This story is a must-read for fans of Julie Klassen, Michelle Griep, or Erica Vetsch. Jenelle Hovde is one to watch!

SHANNON MCNEAR, 2014 RITA award finalist, 2021 SELAH winner, and author of the *Daughters of the Lost Colony* series

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HAWTHORN ABBEY



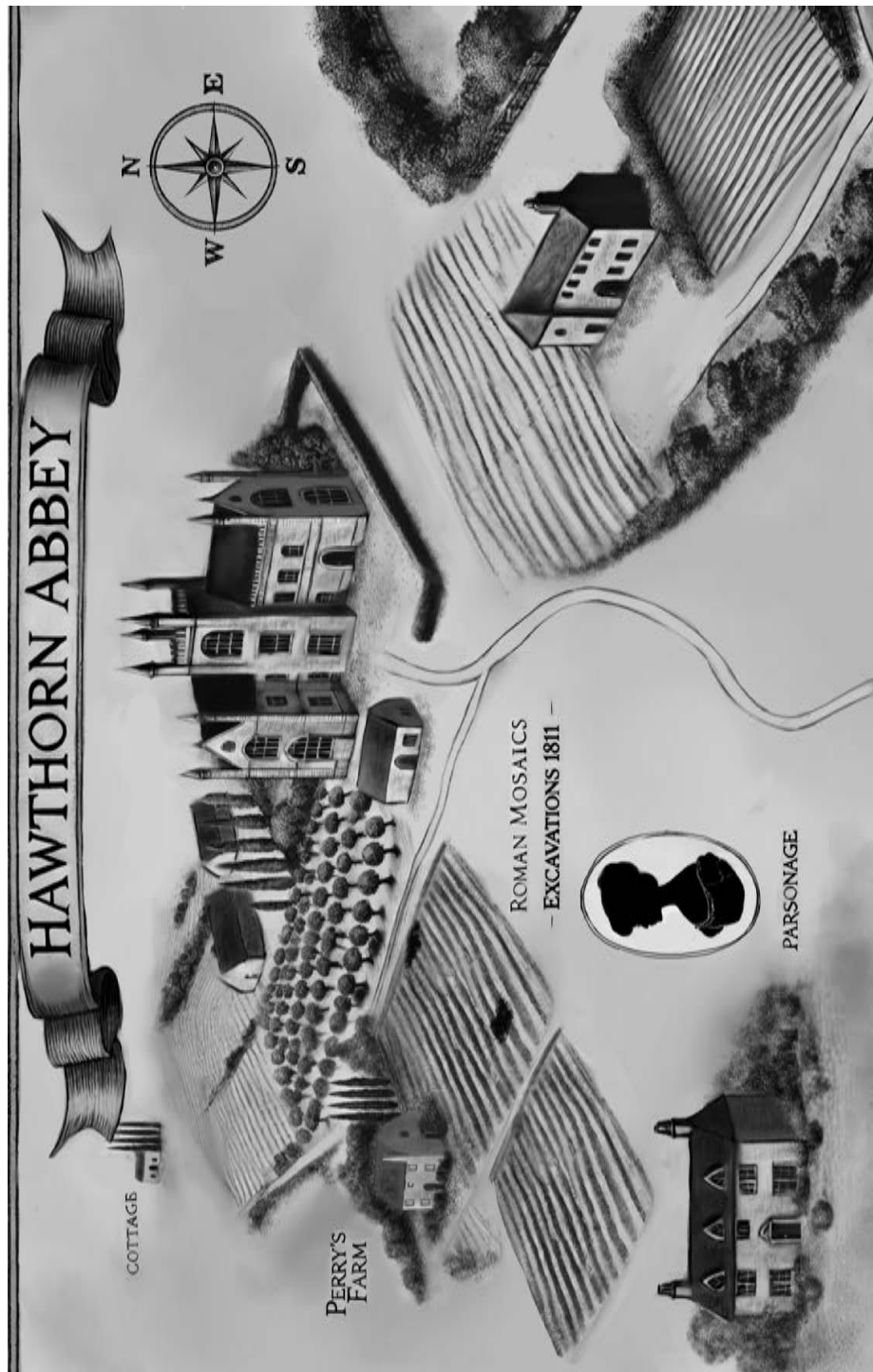
COTTAGE

PERRY'S
FARM

ROMAN MOSAICS
—
EXCAVATIONS 1811 —



PARSONAGE



Bridget

The gods favor the bold.

OVID

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal.

MATTHEW 6:19

BRAMNOR, WEST SUSSEX

MARCH 1811

On a Wednesday afternoon in the village of Bramnor, one does not expect much excitement beyond sugared gingerbread and tea. I had settled into a quiet afternoon, absorbed in the latest copy of *Archaeologia* when the steady clip-clop of hooves interrupted my thoughts. Molly answered the door swiftly, and moments later, muted voices reached me from the hallway.

A startled cry was followed by heels clattering against the floor as Molly ran past the drawing room and rattled the door handle to Father's study. My obsession with antiquities lay waiting on the desk as I strained to hear.

“Sir! Sir! A message about Daniel,” Molly’s strident voice echoed throughout the parsonage.

The mention of my missing brother brought a fire to my veins. For the past eight months, we had searched high and low for him, his last letter sent from Portsmouth instead of the London address. I rushed to the study at the back of the parsonage overlooking a small garden where Father claimed he needed perfect quiet and peace to finish his sermons.

By the time I reached the door, it was locked. He always locked the door when drafting a sermon, or whenever he felt morose.

“Let me in, Father. I must know what has happened,” I demanded after I jiggled the handle. Molly, her brown hair hidden beneath her cap and her eyes wide, backed away to return to her work. “I heard you received a letter.”

No answer.

I rapped until my knuckles hurt. “Father! Please.”

Finally, he opened the door, his thin features wan and the wire-rimmed spectacles slipping down his long nose. His hair, a white halo, appeared mussed and his cravat lopsided. He thrust the letter into my hands where a bold scrawl from our barrister made me flinch.

“There is nothing, Bridget. Nothing to tell us of my son.”

I regret to inform you that Daniel remains missing.

My heart plummeted at the matter-of-fact language. My younger brother, at one and twenty, had been pressed by the Royal Navy. We had not received a single communication during the past eight months. Was he lost at sea? Dead in battle with Napoleon’s fleets? Or . . . had he stirred up trouble at another gaming hell while on liberty from his duties? I scarcely knew what to think. Two years prior, he had been forced by Father to study at seminary in Cambridge. A futile task for the wildest member of the Littleton family.

“I need a moment alone, Bridget. This is but another dead end and I haven’t the heart for much more disappointment.” How weary, nay—how broken—Father sounded as he pushed up his spectacles. His eyes welled and tears spilled down his cheeks.

The letter in my hand brought a heaviness to my chest, but I was not so willing to cave in to defeat. “Send for a Bow Street runner instead of a barrister. You cannot abandon him so readily, can you?”

Father sucked in a loud breath at my suggestion. “I daresay I have drained all available funds in our search for him. We have employed so many men in London and I have no more money beyond providing for our necessities. My son is beyond my reach and has been for several years. He repeatedly refused my counsel and is now in some predicament of his own making. Until he repents of his errors, there is nothing else I can do but pray and wait for his return. You cannot save him either, my girl. I must instead focus on my parishioners and finish my sermon. Any day the new viscount will arrive to take over his estate, and he will expect to see his vicar at work. I cannot let my duties slide.”

Your duty is also to your family, I wanted to protest. Not to the new viscount. Not to the parishioners who clamored for his attention.

But I didn’t say anything, crumpling the note in my palm as Father motioned for me to exit his sanctuary. He shut the door with a decided click. And locked it again, creating a solid barrier between us as he often did when grieving.

Numb, I backed away even though I craved some comfort, some assurance that all would be well. After retreating to the drawing room, I sank into my chair and reached for the antiquities journal. Daniel and I used to pore over them in the evenings. Somehow, it made me feel closer to him since he had taught me the joy of the ancient world, adding to my education in ways that a girl’s finishing school never could.

Molly cast me a sympathetic glance as she hurried past to the kitchen to prepare afternoon tea. I had no appetite for treacle or any other sweets.

Reading the fine print of the journal proved futile with my vision now blurred with tears. At four and twenty years of age and most certainly on the shelf, I felt very alone and useless within the stuffy parsonage.

After Mother's death from scarlet fever eight years ago, I had raised my brother as my own. I'd promised her I would look after him.

And I had failed. Terribly.

Blinking furiously, I resigned myself to further silence with only our housekeeper, Mrs. Herriot, and Molly to keep me company. A curious section of the journal published by the Society of Antiquaries drew my attention as I dashed at my eyes with the back of my hand.

A Call for Learned Submissions

The Society of Antiquaries of London cordially invites all enthusiasts of antiquity to submit their research, observations, and discoveries concerning the ancient history, monuments, and artifacts of Britain and other lands. A grand prize of £50 will be awarded . . .

When I was five and ten, I had found Roman coins near the now-deceased viscount's estate, only two miles north of the parsonage. On many occasions, I accompanied my father to visit the former lord, who had passed away two months ago. Despite being a melancholic man, he had chuckled at my obsession with historical discoveries, patting my arm in dismissal as if I were his basset hound.

My collection of coins remained tucked within a handkerchief in my dresser, much like my dreams shelved for another day.

Daniel had suggested that I write to the Society of Antiquaries and the Dilettanti in hopes of stirring their excitement regarding the find. The society never bothered to answer, and the secretary of the Dilettanti sent a clipped reply, admonishing me to confine my activities to embroidery.

I pushed aside the paper just as Mrs. Herriot, dressed in severe black with her white frilly cap, entered the drawing room with Molly following behind carrying a tray of tea.

“Good heavens!” She stopped abruptly. “Is that Miss Perry *running* down the path toward us?”

I perked at the mention of my dearest friend, who was the same age as Daniel. Rising from my seat, I glanced out the window and knew something must be amiss. When she burst into the drawing room moments later, her chest heaving, she pushed back her straw bonnet and loose gold curls, so different from my red frizz, tumbled onto her shoulders. With her gray gown splattered at the hem and her slippers covered in dirt, she held up a hand to stop Mrs. Herriot from inviting her for tea.

“Oh, Bridget, do call for the vicar. Father has found a demon in his field!”

“A demon?” I repeated slowly while Mrs. Herriot snorted.

Abigail nodded, her cheeks flushed pink. “Yes, and Papa is quite beside himself. He swears it is a terrible omen, especially since—since the last harvest . . .”

She faltered but I knew what she meant. The previous harvest proved miserable for the entire valley, and as a result of mounting debts, Abigail and her father might have no choice but to leave for the factories in the coming year, like so many other families who had abandoned the valley.

“I daresay the vicar won’t want to be disturbed.” Mrs. Herriot sniffed as she poured the tea. Ever a stickler for propriety, she guarded my father’s study hours well.

My friend cast me a stricken look, silently begging for my intervention. Ever since her mother passed three years ago from childbirth complications, Abigail ran the Perry household by herself as the only child. Just as I did with my absent-minded father, too immersed in his theological studies to pay much attention to me. We were more like sisters, doing everything we could together.

“Tell me more,” I demanded.

“Horns, Bridget,” she hissed in a loud whisper. “I saw them myself.” She pointed in the direction of the Perry farm, a short walk from the parsonage. “Devil horns protruding from the fairest face you can imagine!”

Goose pimples flared across my skin at my friend’s declaration. “I daresay I need a change of scenery and Father remains indisposed. Let me gather my shawl and we shall battle this monster together.” I took my friend’s hand when she frowned and gave it a squeeze.

She exhaled as I drew her away from the drawing room. “I’m ever so grateful, Bridget. I can’t imagine what Papa will do. He’s been so worried, stewing over his finances and the farm. Now this . . .”

I blew out a long breath, eager to escape the confines of the parsonage and head outside into nature, away from the weight of my family’s concerns.

I would rather confront a demon in the field than the frustration roiling within me at my father’s distance and my brother’s disappearance.



Mr. Lewis Perry, in his excitement, quite forgot himself, and his muddy boots encroached on the hem of my oatmeal-hued muslin gown while Abigail and I knelt on the damp ground.

With trembling fingers, I brushed away the crumbling dirt his plow had shaken loose and inspected the hole at the edge of the field next to Hawthorn Abbey.

Sheep bleated far off, their soon-to-be-shorn wool dotting the emerald-green landscape, and in front of me, rows of apple trees formed straight lines leading off to the moss-covered abbey in the distance.

“Look at the tiles, Bridget. So many broken ones. Do you think there are more? Who is he?” Abigail’s curiosity was stronger than her father’s nerves.

I took out my long-handled art brush and swept away the dirt. A roguish face emerged, the tiles of his ivy-crowned head cracked, yet still visible. Faded tones of red, gold, and green peeked through the grime. The workmanship was undeniable, the tiny tesserae fitted together with care.

Abigail leaned closer, studying the mosaic in silence while her father muttered a quiet prayer.

“Bacchus,” I proclaimed.

“Eh?” Mr. Perry squinted as he bent lower to study the mosaic partially hidden within the ground.

“Bacchus. The god of drink and desire and . . .” I pressed my lips together. Most people wouldn’t consider Bacchus appropriate knowledge for a young lady. No need to scandalize Mr. Perry any further, especially as I was the vicar’s daughter. Abigail winked at me, her rosy mouth turning into a saucy curve.

I crouched lower, my heart racing as I stared at the mosaic. Something more lay here—just beneath the surface. The tiles were worn and cracked, but the way they stretched beyond the dirt hinted at a design far grander than the small patch Mr. Perry had uncovered. A larger piece of the past, waiting to be unearthed. I could scarcely believe my eyes. Daniel and I had always assumed more artifacts lay within the Bramnor vicinity after I had discovered the Roman coins on the very edge of Hawthorn land.

The advertisement in my latest antiquities journal came to mind, along with the call for submissions of research. Fifty pounds

would prove more than enough since most Bow Street runners collected a guinea a day.

I cleared my throat, tucking away painful thoughts of Daniel, who would have so enjoyed this cheeky fellow's grin. "It's a Roman god, Mr. Perry, and your field sits upon the ruins of something large, I suspect. An ancient villa, perhaps part of an atrium or another grand room."

Mr. Perry shifted nervously, muttering something under his breath. "First the crops, now this . . . It's those curses again, I swear it. That estate of Hawthorn's has always brought bad luck to Bramnor."

I glanced at Abigail, raising an eyebrow. "Curses?" I asked lightly, trying to keep the mood from turning too ominous. Father had alluded to the former lord's melancholic spirit and penchant for liquor, but as a vicar, Father also never broke a confidence. And I had never cared for gossip.

Mr. Perry waved his hand dismissively. "Oh, the old tales, Miss Littleton. Nothing good comes from this estate, and with the old lord's passing and this ghoul on my land? How can I remain on my farm when I can scarcely earn enough to put food on the table?"

I shook my head, refusing to be swayed by superstitions surrounding the reclusive old Lord Hawthorn. "It's history. Not a curse. And this find might bring you much-needed funds since it's on your land."

Mr. Perry spat on the ground. "Nay. What man alive has time for such fancies? I've got a daughter's dowry to manage. I must plant the field, not dig up this cursed tile or . . . atroo? Aloo?" He coughed into his fist, his weathered cheeks blooming red.

"Atrium," I supplied as I brushed my gloves to remove some of the dirt. "It was the middle room in a grand mansion with an inner pool to collect water. Only a wealthy Roman would have had access to such a floor. If you excavate properly, you might uncover

a statue or pottery you can sell to a museum or private collection. The highest circles collect Roman and Grecian art.”

“Oh, do listen, Papa. An atrium sounds delightful!” Abigail exclaimed as she gestured to the tiles. Her blue eyes glowed.

“Bah!” Mr. Perry nudged at the dirt with the patched heel of his leather boot.

Bacchus continued to leer at us with a knowing grin. I couldn’t let him hide any longer. Not while I devoured every book I could find regarding Greek and Roman history, thanks to Daniel’s encouragement. For as long as I could remember, I’d dreamed of uncovering artifacts.

I turned to Mr. Perry. “Allow me to excavate. I promise to include you in the accolades. I simply want the opportunity to document and catalog the mosaic and submit my findings to *Archeologia*. They are offering fifty pounds to the best discovery. And whatever I find will belong to you. Bacchus, demon or not, might prove priceless.”

“You need the money?” He frowned.

I nodded, ashamed to admit it, but tithes had been meager in recent years due to the financial strain in Bramnor. “I must resume searching for Daniel, and we have exhausted our savings.”

Abigail crossed her arms as she cast a pointed stare at her father. “We must help the good vicar and his daughter. Besides, think of the fame when the papers declare you found lost treasure! Consider our family and how we might benefit. Why, we might even travel to Bath, and I—” She bit her lip to stop her words, but I knew what she’d almost said. For the past several months she had spoken of almost nothing but her desire for a season—a proper season, with balls and gowns and maybe a dance or two with a broad-shouldered soldier. Or maybe even a squire. Half of the unmarried local farmers, of which there weren’t many, fluttered around her as helpless as flies drawn to a picnic lunch.

Mr. Perry lifted his leg as if to kick aside the soon-to-be mud. I wasn't certain if he intended to further uncover Bacchus or destroy him.

"No!" I placed a warning hand on his arm, stopping him mid-step. "This is an endeavor for a careful scholar, for a . . ." *A man*, my mind immediately supplied. I shook my head as soon as the thought took form. No, I couldn't let such a discovery go unattended.

Tomorrow I would bring a sketchbook and copy the Roman god at my feet and draft a series of notes for a paper. But would the societies reject me as before?

How unfair that the word *dilettare*, which meant "to take delight in," could only apply to men and not to me. Father liked to remind me that I, as a vicar's daughter, however admirable that might be, had no place pestering men who insisted on studying pagan artifacts. But I was determined to try again and make the antiquity societies take notice.

I turned to Mr. Perry, resolve flaring in my chest. "What you need, Mr. Perry, is a lady of quality and intellect. Look no further," I declared. "Abigail and I shall handle your monster for you, but not with your boot or shovel."

Before Mr. Perry could respond, the sound of hooves pounding against the dirt interrupted us. Abigail stiffened beside me, her hand clutching her bonnet as we all turned toward the pitted main road.

Emerging from the thick brush, a thin, gangly figure on horseback approached. His face was lined with age, a hooked nose casting a shadow over his pinched expression. The horse trotted toward us, stopping a few feet away with a snort.

Mr. Spencer, the steward of Hawthorn Abbey.

His sharp eyes darted between us and the excavation site at the very edge of Mr. Perry's field, where the land sloped toward the abbey, no more than a quarter of a mile away.

Mr. Spencer pushed up the brim of his hat. "Pushing into

Hawthorn boundaries, again, aren't we? Don't you dare be digging posts to fence in your sheep, man. I won't allow it."

"This is my land, you toothless gaffer," Mr. Perry snarled as he placed his hands on his hips. "You are wrong on the boundary lines and you have no proof. Show me the papers that say I'm in the wrong."

An old feud simmered between Hawthorn Abbey's steward and Mr. Perry. The former lord, too lost in his cups, had neglected his affairs, and Mr. Perry, unable to read, lacked the proof to settle his claims. An uneasy peace persisted, stirred only by the steward's overzealousness.

Mr. Spencer narrowed his eyes as he shifted his weight on the horse. "The new Lord Hawthorn is on his way, and this land dispute will be settled soon enough."

My heart gave a small jolt. Father had mentioned the new lord's arrival in passing, but it had seemed a distant, almost trivial matter—until now. The idea of someone new, with fresh authority and a claim to these contested lands, suddenly felt more real, more urgent.

Mr. Perry's face drained of color. "The new lord?"

"Aye," Mr. Spencer confirmed. "Soon. And I'll warn you—the new viscount won't take kindly to any digging or trespassing. Best you pack up and head back home before you find yourselves in more trouble than you bargained for."

Instead of retreating, I straightened my back, determination swelling in my chest. "Thank you for the warning, Mr. Spencer. But the former lord never took action on those threats. Why would the new lord prove any different?"

Mr. Spencer's thin lips curled into a tight smile. "We'll see, Miss Littleton. We'll see."

With that, he tugged on the reins, turning his horse with a sharp jerk before riding off, leaving us standing in the field.

NO STONE UNTURNED

I exchanged a glance with Abigail, her face pale. But I felt something else stirring within me—something far more powerful than the fear of curses or lords. It was the pull of discovery, the thrill of history waiting to be unearthed.

Beside me, Mr. Perry scowled. “I won’t be told what to do on my own property.”

I turned back to the mosaic. Bacchus stared up at me from the ground, his smirk daring me to continue, just like Daniel’s wink when he was about to embark on something rebellious.

The land had been waiting for centuries to give up its secrets, and I intended to uncover every last one. My brother would want me to. Whatever the new lord might say or do, neither I nor the Perry family had felt hope for a long while.

I would not abandon it so lightly.