

Chapter one

Three hundred acres...

“What the hell do you think you are doing?”

The grubby boy scrambled back to a sitting position and blinked up at the him through the thick lenses of his spectacles. When Max had first spotted the lad kneeling on the ground, he had assumed he was a poacher and was about to ride by, not caring if a few of his pheasants were liberated for a poor family’s cooking pot. Just because he no longer had any appetite didn’t mean the rest of the population couldn’t eat and he’d never had a taste for pheasant even when he had enjoyed his food, so it made no difference to him. But as he had crested the small rise near the eastern boundary of his new estate in his quest to fill some time, he spotted all the holes in the ground, the shovels, tools and wheelbarrow and realised the intruder was digging.

“I asked you a question!” He practically spat in annoyance, aggrieved that he had to make the effort to actually converse or to concern himself with another human being and their peculiar business when he was in no mood for either. The boy’s spectacles magnified his dark eyes. They were the oddest spectacles Max had ever seen. Instead of arms, the unsightly frame was tied around the back of his head with a bright red ribbon secured in a bow. Perhaps his first guess about the direness of the lad’s financial circumstances had been correct if he had to go out looking like that. His gaze drifted to the paintbrush and trowel in the boy’s hand, then fixed on the hole he was crouched before. Half exposed in the mud was a dark object. Spherical. Like a pot. Which was either being buried or exhumed. All very odd and all entirely unwelcome. All much too much effort. “Why are you trespassing on my land?”

“My land?” The boy didn’t sound like a boy and instantly he felt his hackles rise in panic at his own curious stupidity. The trespasser stood and his stomach plummeted to his toes.

Now he could see significant evidence that the *boy* was a woman which really made his blood boil. When he had first spotted her scratching around in the mud he had assumed her to be a young man- an easy mistake to make considering she was dressed in breaches and work boots. Odd work boots. One black. One very definitely brown.

“Oh hello! You must be the new Lord Rivenhall.”

It was so much easier to be an abomination in front of a man.

Had he known then she was female, he wouldn’t have brought his horse so close no matter what she had been doing to his property. But now Max could see the trousers hugged her female form like a second skin and there was no getting away from the fact that the hips which flared from her waist were as unmanly as it was possible for hips to be- more was the pity. Worse, the capacious linen shirt tucked haphazardly into the top of the waistband also did little to disguise the fine bosom protruding beneath. The wench had a body that was made for sin. Unfortunately, there was very little evidence that the rest of her lived up to that promise. Which, all things considered, was probably just as well. His sinning days were well and truly over.

The floppy brown felt hat she wore hid her hair, and it was anybody’s guess what the strange spectacle affair was all about, but it did a very good job of hiding her features. What the large round lenses did not cover was hidden behind a thick smear of wet dirt. She smiled

cheerfully as she idly patted his horse's muzzle with one hand and shielded her magnified eyes from the sun rising behind him.

"We are neighbours my lord. I called upon you yesterday and twice more last week to introduce myself but you were indisposed. I am so glad we have finally met. I am Miss Euphemia Nithercott, daughter of Doctor Henry Nithercott of Hill House."

She stuck out her hand for him to shake. It might as well have been a cobra as far as he was concerned, but he hid the visceral claw of fear of human contact behind what he hoped was a bland a surly mask, ignoring her friendly gesture and her hand to loom taller in his saddle menacingly. "I have a deep well of loathing for the medical profession."

"Not a medical doctor. He was an academic. Specialising in the translation of Anglo-Saxon texts. Papa was don at Cambridge for thirty-five years." She was also still waffling on in the false assumption that her words mattered. When nothing mattered anymore and all he wanted was to be left alone. Something he had hoped to be able to do with impunity on this sprawling estate miles from anywhere. Yet here he was, only two weeks in and already burdened with unwanted company.

Max curled his lip, letting her know in no uncertain terms he didn't hold academic doctors in much higher regard either and watched relieved as she withdrew her hand awkwardly and clasped it in the other one behind her back as her cheerful smile melted from her face under his intense scrutiny. "He was highly respected in his field."

Responding with anything soundly remotely like interest would only open the floodgates of more inane chatter. "Miss Nithercott, this is private property and you have no right to be on it. Leave. Now."

"Actually- I was just going. However, I do have permission to be here. I am not a trespasser, my lord." She offered him her best this-is-all-a-misunderstanding grin and went back to petting his horse. "Although I understand how you might have been a little alarmed to see someone here so early in the morning. The previous owner of this land, your Uncle Richard, granted me access to dig around these ruins years ago. Perhaps he mentioned me to you in his letters?"

"He did not." As his uncle and his father had been estranged for the entirety of his life, there had been no letters as far as he was concerned- bar the one he had read posthumously, months after both his father and the uncle he had never met had both left this mortal coil, expressing sympathy for Max's loss and his bitter regret at never healing the breach. At the time, he had barely registered the loss himself. He'd been too busy fighting for his own life. When he had finally emerged from that agonising pit of hell into the new darkness of his life, he grieved his indifferent father alongside everything else- albeit grieving everything else more. He still grieved it and cursed fate daily for not taking him too.

"Oh... well... Never mind." She swatted the detail away with one muddy hand. "Lord Richard was fascinated by all the things I found and took a great interest in the ancient history of Rivenhall. As you can see..." She made a sweeping motion of the extensive dig site with her arms. "I have found a great deal of important archaeology

here. There has been a settlement at Rivenhall Abbey for at least a thousand years and I have been gradually excavating its secrets for the last decade. It is *so* very interesting.”

Max gave the rocks and stones sticking out of the ground a cursory glance. He could make out the odd suggestion of a long-fallen wall here, and there, but apart from that there was nothing about the area that she was gesticulating towards so enthusiastically that he found even remotely interesting. Not that he had expected to be interested. He had lost all interest in everything and everyone a long time ago.

“If you would care to dismount my lord, I would be more than happy to show you everything I have found so far.”

He would rather gouge out his eyeballs with his own thumbs. Cut off his toes with blunt shears. Curl up in a ball and feel sorry for himself. He hated himself for that but could not seem to haul himself out of the deep pit of despair he languished in. “Your permission to dig here is now revoked Miss whatever-your-name-is. Pack up your things and get off my land.” His voice was flat and suddenly emotionless as the familiar hopelessness swamped him. “If I catch you here again, I will set my dogs on you!” He managed somehow to give the idle threat the gravitas it deserved before he quickly turned his horse until his back was fully to her and then began to ride away as if she deserved no more of his consideration, vowing to buy some dogs at his earliest convenience in case she called his bluff.

“You cannot do that! This site is of great historic importance...” He could hear her work boots thump the ground as she jogged after him. Smelled the faintest whiff of rose petals as she came alongside. “I have to dig here. There is so much still to uncover. Can’t you see that?”

He should have ignored her. Should have – but couldn’t. He tugged on his reins to bring his mount to a stop and he turned to stare at her, then regretting it instantly when he saw the hope in her eyes.

“Go home Miss Nodcock.” *Please, for the love of God go home.*

“It’s Nithercott.” She shrugged without offence, which he couldn’t help but admire when he was trying hard to be so very offensive. “A bit of a mouthful I know, but it is what it is and there aren’t many Nithercotts left in the world. The name comes from Somerset originally, but Papa moved here to Cambridgeshire before I was born. Which was fortuitous for me as I doubt I would have found anything quite as inspiring to dig as Rivenhall Abbey. Let me show you the site... I guarantee you will find *your* history fascinating.”

“I wouldn’t place a bet on that.”

“The ruins of the Abbey date back from the fifteenth century.” She was pointing to the broken, empty shell of a building in the distance, the one he knew had given Rivenhall Abbey its name. He knew this because he had managed to read an entire chapter of a book about it in his new library the day after he arrived, before he had tossed it angrily aside to stare at his new walls and continue to wallow in self-pity. Something his sister was convinced he over-indulged in. Max agreed but did not possess the strength of the desire to stop. At the very least, self-pity gave him something to do during the interminable hours of the day. “Although the earliest parts of the knave are *obviously* Norman. There have been some very interesting medieval finds in and around the abbey walls. However, it is only when I began to excavate a little beyond the

immediate boundary of that building that I began to discover evidence of earlier settlement here.”

A soft breeze materialised out of nowhere, ruffling the hair from his face and she saw the scars. Her dark eyes briefly widened behind the ridiculous lenses she wore and for just the briefest moment he saw her smile falter before she politely nailed it back in place. It was a good approximation of a friendly smile, better than most managed when they first encountered his deformity but still tinged with the awful polite and pasted smile of pity he had come to loathe with every fibre of his being. Then felt sick to his stomach and ashamed that she had seen it.

Instinctively, he twisted his body and his horse away so that she could only see the undamaged side of his face in profile then speared her with his most irritated gaze, keeping the hideousness safely out of view even though he knew she had seen it and there was no point trying to fool himself she hadn't.

She was smiling again, trying to appeal to his better nature and that galled because it was a pretty smile and it did appeal. She was one of those people who spoke with her hands. They were waving wildly, pointing to this and that or making strange shapes in the air while she continued to assault his ears with her chatter and offend his eyes with her femininity while beneath his ribs his heart wept.

“Those walls over there, for instance, are definitely Roman, the size of the buildings suggest that they are the small dwellings of the poorer citizens, and I have already amassed an extensive collection of everyday artefacts from the period which paint a vivid picture of what life was like here then. In the last year, I have been digging on this eastern boundary in the hope of finding a temple or villa- something substantial that would explain why there were so many smaller dwellings in such close proximity, but my investigations have only recently taken a decidedly different course from the one I anticipated.” Two magnified brown eyes blinked back at him in excitement through the thick lenses as she beamed up at him. She reminded him a little of a barn owl. “In actual fact, I believe I am on the cusp of proving that the settlement actually predates the Roman conquest. Lord Richard would have been *thrilled* to know about that. I cannot wait to uncover it all.”

Good grief, the woman could talk. Max had barely been in her company for a few scant minutes and already his ears were ringing. He avoided conversations now. Had less time for them than he did people. This unwelcome onslaught would need nipping in the bud right this instant if he was ever to get the peace and solitude he craved, as it was quite apparent the academic's daughter cared a great deal about all the holes she had dug and wanted to continue digging them. Something that was entirely out of the question. The last thing he needed or wanted was a woman on his grounds. Or anybody come to that.

“I am not sure how to break this to you...” Sarcasm had become a second language. Another line of defence to hide all the hurt. “But Lord Richard is *dead*. Which means any agreements you had with him to dig up this land are also *dead*.” As she furiously blinked back at him he noticed her thick, dark lashes were also ridiculously long. Each blink caused them to sweep across the inside of the glass lenses like tiny paint brushes. Max felt himself frown at them because the sight of them offended. He was all done with noticing attractive details like eyelashes. That part of his life was over and the sooner he accepted it the happier he would be. Then, because clearly she had not unsettled him

enough, one muddy finger tugged at the ribbon behind her head and the thick lenses dropped away to reveal a lovely pair of eyes the exact same colour as aged Scotch whiskey. They were much too lovely and much too intelligent as far as he was concerned as they stared back at him levelly.

“Get your things and get the hell off my land Miss Nithercott! I do not want to see you here again.”

She bristled instantly, those insultingly fine eyes shimmering at the stubborn flash of temper which suddenly burned in her golden flecked irises, and her hands positioned themselves staunchly on her generous hips, drawing his eyes reluctantly to them before he tore them away. “Now see here...”

Max held up his palm to stop whatever tirade she was about to launch into. He really had no patience for politeness anymore nor did he see the point in it. The need to behave like a gentleman died the exact same day as his face and his dreams.

“We are done, Miss Nincompoop. Take your shovels, and whatever all that other nonsense is, and go. From this point forth, you are banned from setting one foot at Rivenhall Abbey and all agreements you once had with the uncle I never knew have been rescinded.” He did not bother to wait for a reaction, instead, desperate to escape, he nudged Drake in the ribs and let the big horse gallop away as fast as he could make it.