

Chapter One

April 1820

Colonel Lord Andrew Whitmire reined in his horse on the top of the hill and looked down upon the Malvern Chace. He stirred restlessly in his seat. He had to leave. Had to escape. The realization came to him in absolute and unquestionable certainty. But, there was no escape for men of his ilk. Men who recognized their duty and performed it, no matter the cost to his personal feelings on the matter.

Recognizing the futility of the trap in which he found himself, a deep sigh escaped. He had been home just a little over a fortnight, and he was already wishing for an excuse to return to the Canadian front and to permit someone else to assume the responsibilities for Whit Manor, the estate, and his daughter, but he could not permit anyone, especially himself, to bring more dishonor to his family name. There were so many ghosts he must see firmly placed away in their graves before he could claim even a shred of the peace for which he yearned. Bury the memories so deep they could never be resurrected again.

His father, Lord Albert Whitmire, had passed a little over six months prior. It had taken nearly three months for word of his father's death to reach him and another eleven weeks for him to resign his position with the British oversight of Canada and return to Worcestershire.

"Home." He whispered the word as his gaze settled again upon the land. Andrew had spent his youth racing across these hills and valleys with his friend Robert Coopersmith, but he had left his most faithful companion on the bloody, rain-soaked battlefield at Waterloo. His friend had died a most brutal death in his efforts to save Andrew. If the choice had been his, Andrew would have been the one to die that day, for Robert had had more life in his smallest finger than Andrew did in all his body. His friend had always said: *The reason you are a colonel, and I remain a captain, is because you thrive on the mundane of what today brings, while I live for tomorrow.* A beautiful memory of his friend's slightly crooked smile when Robert had said those words flitted through Andrew's mind, slipping in under the shadows of a few moments prior and then disappearing before Andrew could recall his response to Robert's declaration. His jaw tightened as he asked aloud, "We were to rule this all, Robert." He gestured with a wide sweep of his arm. "Do you remember? You and I and our adjoining estates? Families united?"

He and Robert had left home together in 1805 to join the maneuvers, which ultimately led to the Battle of Trafalgar. At the time, they had thought the war would be brief. It sorely grieved him that he and Robert had survived a decade of filth and blood and death only for him to lose his best chum and confidant at the end of the war.

"Best to return to Whit Manor," he told his mount, actually Robert's horse. His own had been lost during the battle. Andrew had spent a small fortune to return the

animal to England. It was his personal reminder of his loss, not that he required one. He was well aware of the “tragedy” of his life. “Matilda will be waiting,” he said, this time, with a sigh of exasperation. Instinctively, his brow crinkled with unease when he thought upon Miss Matilda Whitmire. His daughter. A comely girl of fifteen years, with whom he had spent time, much to his present regret, a like number of months over her lifetime. The fact he had abandoned his only child when he had walked away from his wife was a penitence, one for which atonement was impossible.

Matilda despised him, and, as far as he was concerned, the girl had a right to her contempt. What his daughter did not realize was, if he had stayed, he would have killed the girl’s mother in a fit of rage. A muscle jerked in his jaw. “In a heartbeat,” he growled.

Andrew held nothing but disdain for the woman to whom he had been betrothed from the age of thirteen. Why his father had bargained away Andrew’s future for thirty thousand pounds, he would never understand. He knew Albert Whitmire had inherited a title and an estate deep in debt, but surely there must have been other means to bring it around, rather than to bring nothing but misery into his son’s life. Their relationship had never been quite the same after Andrew learned of what he viewed as betrayal. Now that his father was gone, the weight of the loss had tripled. He had lost a legacy of remembrances with his father and his daughter. Moments he would never recover. All because of his intractable obstinacy. All because he had felt himself the sacrificial lamb.

“Perhaps if Father had insisted we marry as quickly as Miss Hyacinth Dowerston became of age at twelve years, we might have salvaged our relationship, but by the time I had finished university and established myself as an aide to Pitt the Younger, Hyacinth had reached the age of twenty and my future viscountcy no longer appealed to her.” Unbeknownst to him, before their marriage, Hyacinth had set her sights on a marquess who had left Andrew’s betrothed with a ruined reputation and a loss of her womanhood, but, thankfully, not with a child. It did not take long before rumors of Andrew being cuckolded had spread. People in all walks of life spoke of his failure in controlling his future wife. He had the right to leave her and never marry her, but Andrew’s damnable sense of duty would not permit him to abandon the woman or the agreement struck by his father in order to save the viscountcy. After Hyacinth’s betrayal, he had made certain there would be no more salacious tales regarding his wife’s fostering a bastard on him, first, by ignoring his duty to continue to consummate his marriage for an extended period of time, and, secondly, by keeping Hyacinth figuratively locked away in the country. They had been married fifteen months when Matilda was born.

Later, after her delivery of his child, his wife returned to her profligate ways, flirting with first one and then another of his servants and his neighbors, and, so, he had sent her to live with her merchant father and had departed to serve his country in a different manner—performing a different duty, thus putting space between him and the reports widely disseminated among the *ton* about his inability to control his household. He had planned to be gone but a few years, but, somehow, fifteen had slipped by while he avoided a confrontation with, first, his father, then his wife, and finally, his daughter. “I thought it best if I were not about, but now I see how I not only cheated them of what could have been, but I am riddled with regrets over the chances I did not take. Perhaps if I

had treated Hyacinth with more tenderness, we could have made a passable marriage work, but I treated her with the same contempt she treated the world; therefore, she despised me. I forgot that she was as much a pawn in the manipulations of our fathers as was I.”

Reportedly, the late Mr. Dowerston held no more sway over his daughter than had Andrew. While Andrew was away placing himself between Napoleon and the world, Mrs. Whitmire took first one lover and then another, until she had born another child; unfortunately, for his wife, with this one, no one had a second thought of this one being his heir, and she had been shunned by both the well-established merchant class, who wished legitimacy for their own daughters, and the aristocracy, who loved a scandal. He had returned home at the time to render his adamant denial of the child. As he had been on the Continent for some two years, no court would permit his wife to claim the boy was his. “Mayhap if the child had been another daughter,” he mumbled, but Andrew knew his anger at the time would not have permitted him to acknowledge even an innocent female child and provide the babe a future. He wished for a son who held something of his features in the boy’s face, not another man’s by-blow, inheriting the viscountcy.

To the best of Andrew’s knowledge, the boy child had died along with Mr. Dowerston, who had passed from some sort of pox that had spread in that part of London in which the Dowerstons resided. Hyacinth, according to those who had repeated the story to him in unsolicited letters while he was on the Napoleonic front, had recovered from the disease, but had been heavily scarred by the sores, eventually taking her own life by consuming too much laudanum, unable to face the world she had created with her duplicity.

Meanwhile, Matilda had remained at Whit Manor, to be raised by a variety of governesses over the years. An odd tightness claimed his features, deep contrition bracketed the lines of his mouth. “Where her festering hatred for her father has grown,” he complained.

Turning the horse, so he might return to his estate, he noted the dark clouds forming in the distance. “Looks as if we’re in for another soaking,” he grumbled, as he instinctively turned up the collar of his coat.

* * *

She wished she had taken her aunt’s warning to heart, but Verity had been determined to mail her letter to her brother at the posting inn, assuring him, once again, she was satisfied with her life and that their aunt and uncle had promised they would bring her out into Society with the Short Season in the autumn. Robinson was concerned she would not be permitted a Season until he took the reins as the new baron, and, by then, she would be well on the shelf. No respectable gentleman would even consider her, for she would be nearing her five and twenty birthday by then.

Repeatedly, she had told herself, it was not that either her Uncle Spenser or Aunt Margaret were neglectful of either her or Robinson: It was simply they always had another new discovery or another relic that took precedence over days spent in doing nothing more than attending balls, soirees, afternoon teas, and the like. She sincerely hoped she was correct in that assumption, but, of late, a niggling doubt had crept in and

would not be displaced. Unfortunately, she had nothing tangible upon which to hang her concerns, and so she had placed them aside, saying it was simply her loneliness and her desire to see Robinson once again that kept her in a state of melancholy.

Although Robinson was three years her junior, since their parents' untimely deaths, eight years prior, her brother had considered himself her protector, whereas, their father's will specifically stated that when she was one and twenty or when she married, Verity was to be Robinson's guardian, until he reached his majority. She and either her father's predetermined trustees, which included Uncle Spenser, or her husband would have been in a position to make life changing decisions for Robinson. Naturally, her parents had thought she would have had a husband and perhaps a child of her own by now, not still be living with her relations. They had expected her to be in a position to aid Robinson; regrettably, neither of her parents had considered the possibility of their early demise and the unthinkable outcome.

The fact Uncle Spenser and Aunt Margaret had interrupted their lives and his career to take in a twelve-year-old niece and a nine-year-old nephew when no one else stepped forward proved their worth in Verity's opinion. The fact she had not been given a Season was of little consequence in the realm of what all that had occurred. When the time came, she was certain Uncle Spenser would negotiate a reasonable marriage settlement on her behalf. In her limited experience with gentlemen, she had not even met anyone she might consider marrying, so she could not blame her uncle for his inaction.

Moreover, she had been given much more: experiences no fresh maid out of the schoolroom would ever be able to claim. And if not a "parent's love," her aunt and uncle had provided her their support and their encouragement. She and Robinson had been fortunate in many ways. Yet, of late, she wondered how *benevolent* her relations actually were. Certainly, they had placed their lives on hold for some six months, but, after those few months of grieving the family they all had lost, her aunt and uncle had packed up her and Robinson and taken them on an "adventure," meaning Uncle Spenser had resumed his life as an archaeologist and historian. In reality, there had been very little inconvenience to her father's only surviving relative. Surely, Uncle Spenser would have been expected to grieve for his brother at home. Society would have demanded it. Until recently, she and Robinson had trailed their family across exotic lands, viewing the world through her uncle's eyes.

"Just a bit eccentric." She grinned as she pulled her cloak tighter around her, taking note of how the wind had picked up. "Eccentric and kind and well-meaning, but somewhat abstracted," Verity declared aloud to convince herself of the truth of the words and then looked around, making certain no one had heard her talking to herself. "Everyone will soon think I am quite as odd a bird as is my uncle if he hears me having a conversation with myself."

It was then a large drop of rain landed upon the top of her hand, where she held her bonnet upon her head to avoid having it ripped from her head by the wind, which was now quite gusty. "Wonderful," she grumbled, picking up her pace. She would most likely be soaked to the bone before she reached Cooper Hall.

Unfortunately, she was making little progress, for, with every step Verity took, the rain increased in intensity to the point she could barely see a foot or more in front of her. It slanted down in torrents. Now, she again chastised herself for not taking the time to learn some of the alternate paths that led across the stiles and farmlands and woods, instead of taking the traditional road into the village every time she ventured that way. She had been at Cooper Hall but eight months; however, she knew little of the surrounding area, for she had spent most of her days serving as both housekeeper and companion to her Aunt Margaret, rather than the other way around. She had yet to meet any of the young people in the neighborhood, not even another young lady with whom she could spend her time conversing over things of no consequence, other than a quiet way to spend an afternoon.

Pausing to claim her bearings, Verity turned in a circle. In the rain and beneath the dark clouds that had stolen away much of the daylight, everything appeared different. *Had she reached the fork in the road that led to her family's residence?* "Surely not," she murmured in indecision. Swallowing her confusion, she plowed ahead, certain she would soon stumble across the entrance road to Cooper Hall.

Shoving back the drooping bonnet for the fifth time, in a fit of anger at herself for being caught out in this onslaught, Verity ripped the dratted thing from her head, which allowed her hair to fall around her shoulders in a matted mess. Water ran into her eyes, but she stumbled forward again. She hoped she would come across Vicar Simonsen's cottage soon. Even though he did not appear to be the most hospitable of men, the vicar would offer her shelter until the storm ended.

Spotting what she thought must be the steeple of the village church, she paused to use her handkerchief to clean away the steady flow of rain from the hair sliding over her forehead and into her eyes. "Must be the church," she said aloud, as she turned to the left to follow a path she thought she remembered as being wider and smoother. "I pray I have not taken a misstep." She glanced tentatively behind her, but decided she should follow her first instincts.

Decision made, Verity again stepped smartly along the road, attempting to sidestep the quickly-forming puddles full of muddy water. Her half-boots were soggy, water seeping in every time her stride was too short to miss the accumulating water overflowing the ditches, leaving her gown some six inches deep in brown smudges. In irritation, she roughly ran her fingers through her hair, displacing what pins remained so that she could slick it back away from her face. She needed to be able to see what was ahead of her.

The farther she walked the less familiar her surroundings became. She debated on turning back, but she was not certain she could find the main road again, for she had likely made more than a dozen turns along the way. Her relations were not sociable people, not the type to make calls and have people over for company, and they rarely went into the village. In fact, she suspected they would "forget" she had departed the house earlier for the village, so consumed with their work, and she would be missing for several hours out in the storm before they set up an alarm.

They all resided in Uncle Spenser's childhood home, the seat of the barony that Robinson would inherit, and Aunt Margaret's people had been from an estate some five miles on the other side of the village. They were well aware of the roads when they all moved into Cooper Hall, and they had never thought to teach either Verity or Robinson their way around the neighborhood, and, moreover, Verity had never thought to ask them because she knew their doing so would take them away from Uncle Spenser's employment. Renowned as an archaeologist and a military history expert, his work was very important to the history of England and the world. She was proud to be Spenser Coopersmith's niece; however, at the moment, uncharitable as the thought was, she wished he had been a bit more attentive to her presence in his life.

Feeling her gown and cloak weighing her down, Verity shortened her stride. It was rare for her to know fear, but she prayed the rain would stop, so she could claim something familiar. Thunder rumbled through her as easily as it did the sky. And each bolt of lightning made her literally jump in alarm. Not knowing for certain where she was had caused a knot of urgency to settle in her chest—making it harder to breathe. Before she could decide what to do next, another tremendous crack of thunder, followed closely by a blinding bolt of lightning told her the storm was on top of her. Her steps clicked and stomped along the road, echoing back to her. For a moment, she wondered if a wild animal might have caught her scent and was, at that very minute, stalking her. She looked repeatedly over her shoulder to note its approach. *Were there wild animals in Worcestershire? Highwaymen? Smugglers?*

As the fear began to fill her chest, she turned to study the path behind her. *Was there movement marking the bend in the trail where the wind stirred up the trees, or had someone stepped back from view?* Staring intently at the spot, she prayed she had not stumbled upon the land of some irate farmer or into a den of poachers. Another bolt of lightning close by had her blinking to clear her vision, insistent upon watching for approaching trouble. Without realizing what she did, Verity slowly backed away from the spot, where, again, she noted movement.

Unfortunately, in her retreat, she had not taken into account how soggy the ground had become until she took a giant step backward, only to feel her right leg sink into a watery bog. "Demme!" she growled. "Now what?" Mud and slime settled around the leg, which held her upright. In her panic to pull free, she teetered, nearly falling face-first into the muck.

Quickly releasing her cloak, realizing it weighed her down and would only complicate her exit from the situation in which she found herself, she wadded the garment into a ball, attempting to toss it toward what she hoped was solid ground; however, the movement set her wobbling again, balancing in an awkward stance where her right leg was stuck in the bog, while her left one was raised in the air, placing her in what would have been a high kick if she were standing upon a stage in some Parisian burlesque, her toes resting upon the soggy ground surrounding the pit in which she was trapped. Her day dress hiked up around her thighs.

The trees overhead provided some protection from the rain, but the new leaves hid whatever light remained of the day. "I still have one leg on solid ground," she reasoned.

“Or as close to solid ground as this rain provides. But I possess no means to pull myself out. Not a fingerhold anywhere.” A sigh of frustration escaped as she examined her position. “Claws. What I require are claws. Long claws to catch on something along the rim of the bog,” she said with a second sigh, this one in disbelief. She was afraid to move too quickly, fearing, if she slipped, her other leg might slide into the waiting bog. It was reposed slightly above the muck at the moment, but she did not expect to be able to hold it in place for long. If her left leg also slid below the surface, she could be pulled under completely. Already, that leg cramped from being held in such an awkward position.

“What do we have here?”

A very masculine voice came from behind her, but Verity made no attempt to turn. Not that the sound of the gentleman’s voice did not pique her interest, but, rather, she feared the slightest movement would spell her doom.

“How does it appear to you, sir?” she quipped in irritation, more at her own foolishness than his curiosity, but, nevertheless, he could recognize her peril without making her feel a fool.

“It appears you thought the bog was a warm mineral spring.” The man’s voice held levity, something she attempted to convince herself was understandable considering her situation, but Verity found nothing amusing about the circumstances in which she found herself. She heard the man dismount and begin to walk slowly in her direction. “It is not often people dare to trespass upon my land, and, especially, not any as comely as you.” Although he attempted to sound intimidating, Verity suspected he simply thought her situation a diverting tale to share with his chums over ale at the inn. There was no hardness in his tone.

He continued to stroll casually around the outside rim of the bog. At length, he stopped before her and squatted as if to have a closer look at her. “Perhaps you are one of those fairies who creates the steps which are impossible to climb—so impossible you took a fall and were caught in your own trap.”

Verity scowled, enough was enough. “I would appreciate it, sir, if you would cease with your attempts to make light of my situation and, instead, provide me a hand out of this muck.”

He grinned again, and Verity realized how breathtakingly handsome he was. Certainly, he was not a young man, likely old enough to be her father; yet, there was nothing lacking in his appearance. His eyebrows were everything masculine. A roughly-hewn face well accustomed to being out in nature’s worst. He possessed a nose that was a bit crooked—as if he had known more than one round of fisticuffs—but, nevertheless, it was very aristocratic. And his mouth, although purposefully set in a straight line, remained unable to disguise his humor. She wished she could view the color of his eyes and the exact shade of his hair. She thought he would make an excellent study for her paints. *Would she be capable of capturing the life and the depth she viewed in his countenance?*

He gazed at her for a long moment, without comment. Finally, he asked, “How did you come to be caught in the bog?”

“It was a mistake,” she began.

“You do not appear to be a half-wit,” he declared, “so I assumed your situation was not enterprising.”

She glanced off to the path slightly to his left. “I permitted my imagination free rein. For a few minutes, I thought someone followed me.” Despite the awkwardness of her thoughts, Verity made her gaze meet his. “In fact, how do I know it was not you who trailed me?” she accused.

“I assure you, a man of my age has better things to do than to frighten young ladies in the midst of a rain storm.” As if on cue, a crack of thunder and a bolt of lightning accented his words. With an expert thrusting motion of his arm, he tossed his hat behind him, and, without notice, he stepped into the bog and edged forward. “At least my batman can kill me but once for the abuse my clothes and boots have known today.” Although he did not ask her permission first, he placed his arm around her waist, locking her into his embrace with his hand splayed about her middle. “It would be of use if you would wrap your arms around my neck,” he instructed. “I plan to lift you into my embrace.”

“But, sir—” she began to protest.

“Dear lady,” he corrected, speaking as if she were some sort of simpleton, which irritated her most thoroughly, “there is no tree or rock close enough to the edge for you to use as leverage to release yourself. If I am to remove you from this scum, you must assist me. I intend to lift you and to cradle you in my arms, and we will walk out together.”

After an elongated second, in which she considered the merits of boxing his ears or slapping his too confident face, she presented him a nod of acceptance. Carefully, he bent his knees and slid an arm underneath and around her legs and lifted her to him. With a grunt of obvious exertion, he pivoted to return to solid ground. It was then that her right leg finally pulled free with a popping sound, and she released a gasp of pain before she could swallow it. However, her rescuer did not stop his progress until they stood along the tree line, with her still cradled in his arms. “What occurred?” he asked, as he set her on a downed tree, true concern sounding in the question.

Verity was still shaky, but she was not certain whether it was the pain in her limb or the compelling countenance of her rescuer which had stolen away her breath. Realizing he waited for an answer, she managed a response. “My boot stayed in the bog. My ankle—” She gestured toward the foot that throbbed as thoroughly as if it were a rotten tooth.

“May I?” He indicated her ankle. All the teasing was gone from his tone.

Verity could not remove her eyes from his. They were the precise color of the storm that had swirled around her during the height of the rain. He studied her with a compelling intensity, and, although she was soaked to the bone, she felt heat radiate through her.

He cleared his throat, and, again, asked, “Miss, may I examine your ankle?”

Tears crept into her eyes, but Verity was not certain whether she grieved the loss of their connection or whether she anticipated the pain shooting up her leg. At length, she again, nodded her agreement.

The gentleman knelt before her and discreetly lifted her skirt before bracing her right heel in the palm of his hand. With the fingers of his other hand, he rotated her foot and studied the movement before poking the soft tissue with his finger. She winced at the sudden stabbing pain crisscrossing her foot. Verity bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out. “The ankle is not broken, but I fear it will turn black and blue before it knows no pain.” Standing again, he said, “Permit me to see you home. I will put you up before me on Tyr.”

Just as she thought to remark on the horse’s name being the same as that of the son of the Norse god, Odin, and a god of war, the man bent to lift her to him again. He was certainly an implacable man accustomed to having his way—a man, a gentleman, no doubt, who gave orders and expected them to be obeyed. She would have set up a large protest, but there was something about him that told her she was in no danger. He was a man of resolve. Of action. She could feel his concern, primitive and fierce. She possessed no fears of what he might do to her, for he was cut from a cloth of honor.

He strode toward the waiting horse and lifted her, with ease, to the saddle. Verity was, most assuredly, on the lean side, but she was tall and “solid,” as her father had often called her. Even so, her rescuer lifted her as if she weighed no more than a sack of corn. “Be careful, my dear,” he cautioned. “The saddle is wet and, therefore, slippery.” Then he retrieved her discarded cloak and bonnet and handed the items to her. With that, he stepped into the stirrup and swung himself onto the saddle behind her.

Before he took up the reins, he lifted her onto his lap. His closeness brought back the heat to her person. A heat she had never felt previously. “Slide your left hand around my waist and catch hold. If you like, you may rest your head against my shoulder.” He had unbuttoned his coat and wrapped it around her. “Such will provide you more balance, and ladies unaccustomed to riding often require assistance with balance.”

Despite the man’s kind deed, Verity’s temper arrived. Perhaps it was her defense against this unusual attraction to a man more than twice her age. Therefore, she told herself she was simply *unaccustomed* to men making condescending remarks about her, specifically, or about the female populace, as a whole. Neither her father nor her uncle spoke as such, but she had heard many men do so in the various countries she had visited with her relations. Just because she had heard the tone before did not mean she would tolerate anyone using it in her presence. “I assure you, sir, I am no weeping violet. You will notice I did not cry when I found myself in the bog nor when your rough handling caused me injury, as well as the loss of my boot.”

He leaned back as if to have a closer look at her—to study her as if she were a rare specimen. His grey eyes were cool and watchful. Verity could feel her cheeks redden under his prolonged gaze; yet, she willed herself not to look away. In spite of her previous ire, she found herself suddenly quite lightheaded. Those eyes she had wished to view when she first encountered him were now only a few inches removed and focused purely on her. Silver. Molten. And darkening in what appeared to be concern.

He held her tightly to him—so close she could feel the heat of his body through her day dress. She was surprised not to view steam lifting off both their persons. “Perhaps

your previous fear of an attacker has finally known fruition,” he declared in self-assurance. “You are trembling.”

They were close, so close she could view the turbulent play of his emotions, darkening his eyes to pewter. Although she knew the gentleman she faced had more to do with her sudden loss of control than she would care to admit, she declared, “I am soaked to the bone! My ankle is injured! And one of my boots—a favorite pair, I might add—is lost to the muck of a bog located upon your land!”

“So, your woes all arrived at my hand?” he asked incredulously.

“All except for the rain,” she retorted.

He leaned closer. They were at eye level, and Verity found the experience quite disconcerting. Never in her life had any man affected her as this one did. “At least you did not place that fault also at my feet,” he said boldly. “Mayhap you would prefer I replace you where I found you. I would be less than a gentleman if I ignored the wishes of a lady. That is what you are, is it not? A lady?” He paused as if he knew how he inflamed her pride. His words had been purposeful, but Verity had no means to control her growing temper nor the feeling the man had just undressed her with his eyes. She blushed thoroughly.

She inhaled shakily. “You rogue!” she accused. “I am most certainly a lady. My brother is a baron or will be a baron when he reaches his majority!”

A look of puzzlement crossed his countenance. “The only baron in this area was Theodore Coopersmith of Cooper Hall.”

A faint laugh escaped. “Exactly,” she confirmed in triumph.

His features hardened. “Both Theodore and his son Robert are dead. The latter died at Waterloo. I understand Lord Theodore Coopersmith suffered a bout with his heart and passed nearly two years removed.”

The rain had lessened to a steady drizzle, but Verity barely noticed the difference. “Although you obviously consider yourself the chronicler of the aristocracy in this little section of Worcestershire, you forget Theodore was not an only child. My uncle had two brothers: Murdoch and Spenser. My brother and I are products of the marriage of Mr. Murdoch Coopersmith and Miss Clare Hadley.”

“But Murdoch passed some ten years before Theodore,” he argued in tones that spoke of disbelief and of an emotion she could not identify.

“Very true, sir,” she said through trembling lips that betrayed her state of mind. Speaking of her parents’ deaths always had that effect on her. They were sorely missed. “But it was eight years, not ten, and such is why I am blessed that Uncle Spenser and Aunt Margaret showed compassion and accepted the responsibilities for my brother Robinson and me. We returned to Cooper Hall when Uncle Spenser determined that before Robinson could claim his title, my brother would require an English education.”

“Then you are Miss Coopersmith?” he asked in bewilderment.

“Did I not just say so, sir?” She raised her chin on a dare. “And you are?”

He pulled himself up straight in the saddle. The abrupt change in his expression nearly unnerved her. “I fear I am your neighbor.”

“Colonel Lord Whitmire?” she said with a small gasp. “But I thought you were still in Canada.” She knew much of the exploits of Lord Whitmire. He was a decorated hero on two Continents. She wished to melt away—to vanish with a snap of her fingers for appearing before a man she had admired from afar for many years.

His gaze clashed with hers. “Hardly. If Spenser Coopersmith is anything like the man I recall from my youth, it is no wonder you are behind in the latest gossip of the neighborhood. I returned to Whit Manor a fortnight ago.”