

A Historical Regency Romance

Lady
Alicia's
Legacy



Marjorie J. Allen

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This book is dedicated to my husband,
Frank,
for his unwavering belief in me as a writer,
and to my friend and fellow author,
Velda,
without whose encouragement this
book might never have been written.



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Prologue



July, 1814. Washington, D.C.

William Blanton Jamison, Sixth Earl of Tisdale, had no intention of allowing anyone other than himself to lead the enchanting woman-child out in her first waltz. He reached for the dance card dangling from her wrist. Speaking quickly to forestall the approaching soldier, he gazed into the sparkling eyes of the young lady standing before him and asked, “May I have the honor of this dance, Miss Burnsford?”

Alicia knew she must have answered, for Lord Tisdale signed her card, cupped her elbow in his hand, and swept her onto the floor. When he turned her to face him and took her hand in his, the strangest of tremors tickled her spine. She placed her other hand on his shoulder, and he drew her into the enchanted circle of his arms. She worried her trembling would become apparent, but after her first brief hesitation, and reassurance

from the strength of her partner's arms and the sureness of his movements, she began to relax. Eyes closed, she seemed to float across the polished surface of the ballroom floor in rhythm to the music.

“Open your eyes.”

The gentle command held the softness of warm velvet, and for a moment she ignored it as the two of them continued to move easily about the floor. She felt secure, protected, and dizzily happy. Another moment passed before she thought to ask, “Why?” and opened her eyes to look up at him.

“Why?” His gaze locked on hers, and his brows, sunbleached blonde, drew together. “Why what?”

“Why open my eyes? Surely I am in no danger of losing my way, with you to guide me?”

Tisdale heard the light, teasing tone of Miss Burnsford's words, but the slight quiver in her voice brought his rigid code of honor, somewhat submerged since his coming of age on Spain's war-torn Peninsula, surging to the fore. He looked down into the violet eyes, dark with an emotion he recognized as being new to her. The heightened color on her cheeks and the rapid beating of the tiny pulse in the hollow of her throat did not go unnoticed. In that instant he realized he held something precious, something innocent.

Something his very touch could corrupt.

“Never shall you lose your way, my lady.” He smiled, playing the game of flirtation with theatrical exaggeration while the last notes of the waltz died away. His words, like hers, were light, but he realized the sentiment as being very close to real. “Not while I have the strength in my arms or the breath in my body to prevent such a happenstance.”

Alicia's delighted laughter rewarded his effort at playfulness, and her eyes danced beneath long, sooty lashes and arched black brows. Still smiling, she placed her hand lightly on his arm. As they promenaded around the ballroom floor, Tisdale watched the emotions so plainly displayed on her open countenance.

He knew he should walk away. Unless he was mistaken, and his experience with the fair sex told him he was not, Miss Burnsford was flirting with him with all the intensity inspired by a schoolgirl's first infatuation. Despite the reputation he had so carefully cultivated, he was no hardened rake to willingly engage the affections of such a delightful child. He should make his excuses to Burnsford. He should take his leave of President and Mrs. Madison.

And he should return to his rooms immediately. He played a dangerous game being here, flirting with the daughter of a powerful man, while the weight of his mission pulled him back to the British ships riding at anchor in Chesapeake Bay. How quickly would his neck stretch if Madison

discovered the real reason for his presence in Washington? But...

Alicia watched Lord Tisdale once more sign the card dangling from her wrist, and knew her dimple re-appeared. With his bold, flourishing script, he reserved the supper dance. When he excused himself to go stand by her father, other young men approached and Alicia's dance card filled rapidly. Each time the bandmaster lifted his baton, she took the floor with a different partner.

Nonetheless, she was aware of Lord Tisdale's movements, blissfully aware that he stayed by her father's side, not dancing. Despite the few years she counted in her basket, she was sophisticated enough to know that, had he responded to the flirtatious looks cast his way by the ladies in the room, he would not have been refused. Only once did she see him leave her father's side, and then only briefly.

Halfway through the second quadrille, while dancing with a nice Army lieutenant whose hoped-for waltz had been claimed by Lord Tisdale, Alicia became uncomfortably aware of being watched. While her feet moved in the familiar steps, her eyes sought and found the source of her discomfort. At the edge of the dance floor a strikingly beautiful woman stood alone. Her bearing bespoke an arrogant dignity. Honey blonde tresses, caught up in an exquisitely wrought golden clasp at the crown of her head,

tumbled to her shoulders with the type of artless abandon created only by the most expert of hair-dressers. Aquamarines of a surprising size and clarity dangled from the lobes of well-shaped ears.

When the width of a few steps lay between them, the woman's eyes, the same cold azure of the semi-precious jewels she wore, locked on Alicia's questing glance. The woman's perfectly painted lips curved in the semblance of a smile as devoid of warmth as a sunless winter's day. Alicia shivered, and the cold edge of an unknown fear raced along her spine. She moved away, following the pattern of the dance. When she looked back the lady in blue had disappeared.

As had Lord Tisdale.

Chapter One



Early October, 1814, Canada

Lord Tisdale guided a birchbark canoe across the sun-starred waters of Lake Huron. In the bow sat Chief Running Fox, Tisdale's schoolmate at Eton in the days when the Indian's father had been a representative to the Crown in London. On this crystal-clear Indian Summer morning their paddles moved in rhythm, and the two men, blood brothers, sent the craft skimming rapidly across the water. They rounded the tip of a rocky peninsula, and the wooded shoreline receded, creating a small bay. The faintest hint of woodsmoke wafted toward them on the crisp morning air.

The deerskin-clad men came quietly ashore and entered the forest. Abruptly, the trees gave way to a clearing, a wigwam visible at the far side. No sound issued forth from inside; not a wisp of smoke appeared above the fireholes.

Running Fox spoke softly. "I will search the trail."

Nodding, Tisdale pulled aside a tattered bearskin hanging across the doorway. He smelled the acrid scent of old campfires, blended with the odor of molding wood. He paused, letting his eyes adjust to the dimness, and saw dust motes trapped in narrow bands of light, glistening like flecks of silver in the air.

“Too late,” he murmured to the silence. Had that trapper at the last post warned Landon? He knelt, his hand outstretched toward ashes still warm beneath a smothering blanket of earth. Always, Samuel Landon, the man responsible for stealing the Earl of Tisdale’s fortune, kept a step ahead. Deep and bitter, disappointment welled inside Tisdale. To come so close!

But not close enough. The time allowed by the Admiralty for his personal quest grew short. He must return to Washington. If only he could find some sign... His eye caught sight of a small, bead-covered deerskin bag. Apparently someone, departing in haste, had unknowingly dropped it mere inches from the bed of ashes. Was that someone Samuel Landon? The bright bits of glass beading beckoned to him. Picking up the bag, he found it unexpectedly heavy. Suddenly alert, he sat cross-legged upon the ground to loosen the drawstring. A pocket watch bearing a worn coat of arms, together with a gold signet ring, slid silently from the pouch to rest upon the packed earth.

Tisdale reached for the watch and opened the cover with trembling fingers. He traced the words engraved there, his eyes blinded by tears, "To the Earls of Tisdale, for service rendered the Crown." Dazed, he placed the ring on his finger, the well-worn circle of gold smooth against his skin. Not surprisingly, his father's signet fit perfectly upon his hand. Tisdale sensed Running Fox's presence and turned, holding out the deerskin bag.

"My father's signet and watch are returned to me."

"The Great Spirit guides you, Brother." He reached out to clasp Tisdale's hand. "Soon you will find your thief, that same white trapper who would steal from the traps of the Algonquin. Then together we shall know the peace of your journey's end."

Tisdale shook his head gravely, his words quiet. "My time for searching is ended. I must return to England."

Bronzed hands gripped Tisdale's shoulders, and a piercing gaze held Tisdale's own as Running Fox's voice reverberated in the stillness of the lake shore. "On that long ago day in an English school, William Jamison saved the life of Running Fox, and two boys became blood brothers. Many moons passed. The boys grew to be men, but they are brothers still: an English earl, and an Algonquin chief. Running Fox will follow the trail of his brother's enemy, for he is the

Algonquin's enemy as well. I will find Landon and bring word to England."

"I shall await that day," Tisdale said, his thoughts sober. The Algonquin were known to show neither kindness nor mercy to their enemies. Gazing into Running Fox's fathomless black eyes, he could almost feel compassion for Landon.

Almost.

Mid-Atlantic Ocean, November, 1814

Alicia Jane Burnsford, the most reluctant Countess of Whithaven, braced against the rail of the forward deck. She stood, her face to the wind, gazing into the pre-dawn darkness toward England. Silently she beseeched God, who had become increasingly hard of hearing of late, to guide her swiftly through the coming year in England. A heartfelt sigh escaped her lips, only to be lost in the wind as it whistled through the rigging and propelled the ship through the choppy waters of the Atlantic.

Mixed in with the sadness and the yearning for her home in Baltimore was a certain exhilaration she could not deny. She reveled in the feel of the mist-shrouded, sea-fresh air, the dance of the white caps on the ever-changing ocean, the steady shifting of the wooden deck beneath her sturdy half-boots.

Within a day's sailing out of Baltimore she'd

grown accustomed to the motion of the ship. Now, four days later, she could almost believe she had been born at sea. Perhaps she had, for this voyage was in itself a rebirth of sorts, the keeping of a promise made long before she'd been born.

Papa, she supposed, had all but forgotten about that promise until the day in late July when Uncle Titus arrived from England. Titus Redfearn, Fifth Earl of Holbrook, she reminded herself, attempting to keep the title straight. He had come to inform them of the passing of his wife, Beatrice, and, he'd said, to impress upon both Burnsford and his daughter the importance of the vow Papa had made to Mama so many years ago.

Because there had been no male children in Mama's family for ever so long, and because of the way the Whithaven letters patent were drawn up, the entail had passed from mother to daughter for several generations. When Alicia's grandmother passed away, Beatrice, who was Mama's twin and older by six minutes, became Countess of Whithaven. Soon thereafter Aunt Beatrice realized she would never have children of her own. She wrote Mama, urging her to secure Papa's promise that if the entail should someday fall to a child of theirs, that child would travel to England to secure the Whithaven birthright. Papa had given his word, and now that the time had come, Alicia had no choice but to honor that vow.

If only Papa were with her! He should be, but

in August the British sailed into Chesapeake Bay, scattered the United States Army at the Battle of Bladensburg, and, finally, occupied and burned the town of Washington. To everyone's surprise, the British marched away from Washington almost as quickly as they marched in. The troops were spooked, some said, by the unexpected arrival of a seasonal hurricane.

In the rush of events that followed, President Madison sent George Burnsford to join the peace delegation, led by John Quincy Adams, Albert Gallatin, and Henry Clay. Her father left for Ghent, Belgium, just after Alicia's eighteenth birthday. In vain Alicia petitioned Papa to allow her to await his return before traveling to England.

No matter that she had the running of the household from an early age, knew the workings of the plantation from the job of the lowest scullery maid to that of the overseer of the vast fields resplendent now with the fulsome fall harvest. Mr. Burnsford would not permit his daughter to remain at home. The British would be too much of a threat to a woman alone, no matter that she was surrounded by faithful retainers and well-intentioned friends.

In this regard, Uncle Titus's timely arrival from England was a godsend, at least to her father. Uncle Titus arranged passage on the British ship of the line that had brought him to

America, though nearly three months passed before they sailed. As an English heiress, Alicia could travel safely under her uncle's protection, and her father would be less likely to worry about her. How different might have been the course of her life if her mama still lived.

Alicia struggled to put such thoughts aside. Mourning the past never changed one jot of it. Instead, she bent her full attention to listening to the wind as it sang through the rigging and whipped the heavy folds of her fur-lined pelisse about her limbs. She lifted her face to the stinging touch of the salt-scented air.

Her deep laughter burst forth, quite unlike the faint, ladylike titters heard in fashionable drawing rooms or, for that matter, in the quiet halls of Miss Josephine's Academy for Young Ladies in Boston. Once she had attained the advanced age of eighteen, she had been more than happy to leave that place behind.

Beneath the protection of her pelisse, Alicia still shivered. Raising her gloved hands from their place on the ship's rail, she reached for her hood, capturing her jet black, fly-away curls securely beneath the weight of the heavy fabric. Her gloves, damp from sea spray, made it difficult to re-tie the ribbons tightly beneath her chin, but she managed. If Mollie caught sight of her, that fusspot would most certainly ring a peal over her head!

Poor Mollie. Only in the past few hours had her abigail begun to get any relief from her unremitting seasickness. The malady had taken hold of her the first hour after they'd left the quiet waters of Chesapeake Bay and sailed into the open waters of the Atlantic. Alicia's uncle, on the other hand, suffered from no such weakness. She heard his snores each morning when she slipped past his closed door on her way up on deck.

Should Uncle Titus discover her secret dawn ritual, she would be in the briars! No well-bred young lady dared venture from her cabin unaccompanied, even in broadest daylight. To do so in the hour just before dawn was unthinkable. Unthinkable, unless one were Lady Whithaven. She smiled to herself over her new title, but instantly sobered, concerned over the strictures of English society to which she would shortly be introduced. She was more used to running free on the grounds of Papa's Maryland plantation.

However, Papa had promised she need only remain in England for one year to fulfill his vow to Mama. Then, if she still wished it, she could return home. Comforted, Alicia turned her attention to the horizon, just in time to watch the first hesitant strokes of light color the ocean waves a golden green.

"Oh, Papa," she whispered softly. "How I would have loved to share this ocean voyage with you."

The rising sun peeped ever higher from behind a band of low-lying clouds on the horizon, and Alicia tilted her head, lifting her face to the sky as she inhaled again the heady fragrance of the sea. Eyes closed, she gave herself up to the sensations assailing her from every side. The sun's gentle fingers caressed her face, and she sensed its brilliant light through the near-transparency of her shuttered eyes. With her fingertips clasping the rail, she stood quietly, half-waking, half in a dream.

A shadow fell across her face, masking the light.

Cautiously, Alicia peered through her lashes, her eyes focusing ever so slowly upon the figure of a tall, broad-shouldered man standing not three feet away from her place at the railing, blocking the warmth of the sun. As her eyes opened wider, her fingers tightened on the railing. Without speaking, unable for once in her eighteen years to utter a sound, she looked up at the intruder.

His strong, deep voice reached her ears clearly over the noises of the ship.

"My apologies. I fear I have given you a start."

"No... I mean, yes, I suppose you have."

She swallowed carefully, struggling to regain her composure. "But I assure you it is of no consequence. It is past time I returned to my cabin."

"I doubt such would be the case, had I not so rudely interrupted your morning solitude."

Alicia could hear the laughter in his voice, a voice that seemed somehow familiar, but, his face remained shadowed.

"In truth, sir," she replied, the tone of her voice revealing her reluctance, "I must go below before Uncle misses me... oh, fustian. I mean before—"

"The voyage promises to be a lengthy one. I for one cannot fault your desire to escape the prison of your cabin in favor of the fresh morning air on deck."

This time a flash of white teeth betrayed his smile.

"I give you my word as a gentleman, none shall learn your secret from me."

"You are kind, sir, but I find it most improper to continue speaking with a gentleman to whom I've not been properly introduced."

She felt her cheeks heat with embarrassment, for the words sounded stilted, even to her own ears.

"Ah, yes." His smile deepened. "Quite true. But our meeting is really quite unexceptional, for we were most properly introduced. The occasion was Mrs. Madison's Summer Ball. I am Tisdale— at your service, Miss Burnsford."

Doffing his curly-brimmed beaver, the gentleman bowed with practiced ease. Only then did he step to her side and allow the newly risen sun to bathe his face with light.

Instantly, she knew him.

“L—Lord Tisdale! Of course. Most properly introduced, as I recall, by my father.”

The words seemed to tangle themselves on her tongue as she gazed at his strongly chiseled features. Tousled blond curls blew about a face bronzed by the sun, while deep-set brown eyes studied hers in return. No wonder his voice seemed so familiar. Since that well-remembered, enchanted night had not the timbre of his voice echoed through many a dream, arousing within her strange longings for she knew not what?

Was she dreaming now? She closed her eyes, then opened them again. He was no dream. Her “gentleman of the waltz” stood beside her on the open deck, his presence washing over her more warmly than the rising sun.

She would not question such a miracle.

A fragment of a waltz drifted through Alicia’s mind, coupled with the most delicious tingling sensation, and—

She shook her head, dispelling the rest of the memory, before she spoke again.

“I was unaware you were aboard ship, my lord.”

“Nor I you, Miss Burnsford.” He smiled, offering his arm as he spoke. “However, I have spent most of my time in my cabin since coming aboard at Baltimore.”

Gratified at hearing the note of pleasure in his voice, Alicia placed her gloved fingers upon his

sleeve. He covered her hand with his own, and an inexplicable sense of happiness arose within her. As he guided her about the deck she felt the muscles of his arm move beneath her fingertips. No longer did she feel the cold.

She smiled up at him. "I know the ladies' promenade is on the other deck, but the sunrise is best viewed from here."

"Ah, yes. And that makes all the difference, does it not, Miss Burnsford?"

She realized word of her newly inherited title had apparently not reached him. Content to stroll the deck at his side, she saw no reason to enlighten him immediately.

"Why did I fail to see you come aboard?" she asked. "Were you spirited aboard by the sea nymphs?"

"Nothing so imaginative, I fear. I left the capital for Canada a few days after the ball, returning some weeks later to find my rooms in ashes, along with most of Washington. As a result, the Admiralty permitted me to board ship early. This morning I chanced to be about at sun-up, and saw you taking the air." His eyes echoed the warmth of his smile. "Pray allow me to make my apologies for startling you as I did. I can assure you I meant no harm."

"Your apology is accepted, sir. Also, I will admit to a certain pleasure at seeing a familiar face on board this vessel of strangers."

“My sentiments as well, Miss Burnsford.”

After a time he halted at the head of the gangway leading below, and a surprised Alicia realized they had circled the promenade more than once.

He smiled down at her. “The sun is well up, Miss Burnsford. The watch will be changing soon.” He paused, his eyes gleaming with amusement. “May I suggest this might be a good time to slip back to your cabin unobserved?”

Alicia grinned, her sense of the ridiculous beginning to surface. “You may, indeed. I bid you good-day, sir.”

She started down the gangway steps, but Lord Tisdale placed his hand on her arm, halting her descent. She turned to look up at him, a question in her eyes.

“Sir?”

“Before you go, pray allow me to give you my direction in London.”

As he handed her his card, the gentleman gave a courtly bow, a gesture that looked not at all out of place on the windy deck.

“Should you or your uncle inquire after one ‘Lord Tisdale’ in London, you should have no real difficulty in discovering my direction. However, it might be helpful for you to know I am William Blanton Jamison, Earl of Tisdale, formerly of Lancashire, late of Washington, and soon to be of London.”

As any well-bred lady would do, Alicia stepped

back on deck to curtsy, replying in kind, "Alicia Burnsford, Countess of Whithaven...." She paused, thinking carefully, only vaguely aware of the stunned look on Lord Tisdale's face. "I believe that to be correct, sir, but the title is so recently passed to me—"

"Countess of Whithaven? In Lancashire?" His sun-bleached brows drew together. "But how—?"

"Miss Alicia!" The words rang out as Mollie came scurrying up the steps. "Whatever can you be about?"

Her abigail's words diverted Alicia's attention. Mollie's usual robust color had yet to return to her cheeks, and a smattering of freckles stood out like bits of broken pennies strewn across the whiteness of her cheeks. Her green eyes had regained some of their sparkle, and the auburn hair, mussed and untidy during the worst of her seasickness, was once more fastened at her nape in a severe bun.

Concerned, Alicia stepped forward. "Mollie! Pray what are you doing out of your bed? You are not yet strong enough—"

"I'm strong enough to look after you, my lady, or whatever it is I'm to be a-callin' ye these days. A good thing it is I felt the need to take the air, an' you alone on deck with a strange gentleman!"

"I can assure you, his lordship has been all that is amiable," she stated. "Lord Tisdale and I met in Washington. Papa introduced us at Mrs. Madison's Ball."

Alicia turned to Lord Tisdale, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She extended her hand in farewell as formally as though standing in her uncle's drawing room.

"I bid you good day, sir. Thank you for sharing such a lovely morning."

Lord Tisdale touched his lips to her gloved hand.

"Good day, Lady Whithaven."

He retained his hold on her slender fingers a moment longer than good manners would dictate. Then, as though acting on a sudden impulse, he spoke again.

"Should ever you stand in need of a friend, my lady, I would be honored should you apply to me."

Her hand still tingling from the touch of his lips, she stammered, "But, Lord Tisdale, I... we..."

"The favor of your word, my lady, I beg of you."

She gazed intently into the depths of his smoky brown eyes, seeking the cause of his sudden seriousness. He was neither a close relative nor in a position of such intimacy as to warrant so marked an interest. Nonetheless, some instinct urged her to follow his bidding. What harm could come from such a promise? Her pulse quickened. Truly, she did wish to see him again.

Alicia looked at Tisdale for a long moment, memorizing his features: the well-defined lips, the aquiline nose, the tousled fair hair curling in the damp air. If... no, not if... when she saw him

again, she would know him.

“Very well, my lord. You have my word.”

The breath Tisdale had been holding escaped with something very like a sigh. As Alicia descended the stairs, he became aware of a troubling sense of unease. Lady Withaven... the Countess... an estate in Lancashire.... What had he heard? He shook his head, unable to answer his own question.

The ship's bells sounded the change of the watch, and Tisdale pulled out his pocket watch to check the time. His fingers moved lovingly over the worn crest on the cover. Was it only a few weeks ago he'd found it? And under such strange circumstances? He stood gazing out to sea, the watch clasped tightly in the palm of his hand. His journey to the great northern wilderness had passed swiftly. It had left him precious little time to complete his mission for Lord Castlereagh, but complete it he had. Only this morning he'd finished compiling his report on the value of British intelligence agents in the Battle of Bladensburg.

Below decks, Lady Alicia sat quietly as Mollie plied the hairbrush, bringing order to Alicia's riotous curls. Alicia smiled absently at a small patch of blue visible through the one tiny porthole of her cramped cabin. What a strange man was Lord Tisdale, and what a strange request he had made of her. Had she stepped beyond the bounds

of propriety in giving him her promise? Surely not, for the giving and the receiving of that promise seemed to please him, as well as herself.

Out of nowhere an unwelcome thought intruded upon her daydreams. Her light mood vanished. It had been more than three months since she had met Lord Tisdale at the President's Mansion. What reason could a British courier have to visit Canada for so many weeks? A courier whose business, her father had told her, was delivering diplomatic pouches to Washington? As a statesman's daughter, Alicia knew such men usually returned from whence they had come with all possible haste, their mail pouches filled with urgent communications. So why had Lord Tisdale traveled up the coast to Canada, unless... unless... but surely not. The charming gentleman had won her father's approval, had offered her his friendship.

He could not possibly be a British spy.

Or could he?

Alicia tossed her head. Such an idea was outside of enough! Lord Tisdale was her friend and her father's friend.

But should she find herself in need of that friend, how, in all of England, would she find one earl, formerly of Lancashire, lately of Washington, and soon to be of London?

Chapter Two



Bristol Harbour, England

From where she stood on deck, Alicia watched her uncle stride swiftly across the gangplank, a man intent only on reaching dry land at last. *Titus Redfearn, Fifth Earl of Holbrook*. She mouthed the words thoughtfully. Would she ever get used to identifying a person by a title rather than by a name? She drew her pelisse more tightly about her shoulders and followed Lord Holbrook down the gangplank. A feeling of unease, of something being not quite right, came over her.

She hastened onto the dock as a gull's cry diverted her attention. Glancing upward, she sought the seabird's graceful flight above the noise and confusion all about her. The heel of her sturdy jean half-boot caught in the rough planking of the dock. A strong hand gripped her elbow, or she would have fallen. Startled, she looked up into Lord Tisdale's lean, square-jawed face and

felt a sudden rosy hue brush her cheeks.

“You must be careful, Lady Whithaven.” Lord Tisdale’s eyes reflected the seriousness of his expression. “After so many days at sea, you are not ready for a world that does not shift beneath your feet.”

The sound of his familiar voice echoed down her spine, sending sudden tremors radiating outward beneath the concealing folds of her daffodil-yellow gown. She smiled uncertainly up at him. “Thank you, Lord Tisdale. I had not thought to be so clumsy.”

“Never could you be thought—”

“Tisdale!” The word cut sharply into the conversation. “Don’t mean to intrude, my boy, but by Jove! Thought you were rusticating up in Lancashire.” A dour-faced, middle-aged gentleman with thinning brown hair came to an abrupt halt in front of them, his penetrating nasal voice every bit as unpleasant to Alicia’s ear as were his ferret-like features and florid complexion to her eye.

“Since I just this moment stepped ashore, I can hardly be in Lancashire, can I, Saxton?”

The man Tisdale called Saxton looked at the disembarking passengers with open curiosity until Lord Tisdale grudgingly introduced his companions.

“Lord Holbrook, Lady Whithaven, may I present an acquaintance of mine from London, Viscount Saxton?”

“Lady Whithaven?” Surprise (or was it consternation quickly masked?) showed fleetingly in the pale blue eyes Saxton turned on Alicia.

“A pleasure, my lady.” He bowed low over her hand before acknowledging her uncle. Then, after carrying on a brief conversation, exchanging the most innocuous of pleasantries, and welcoming Lady Whithaven to England, he assumed an air of apology.

“My wits must have gone a-begging. Of course you don’t wish to tarry on the dockside when you just arrived in England, Lady Whithaven. Please forgive me. I allowed my delight at making your acquaintance to overcome my consideration for your undoubted wish to reach your destination.” Bowing hurriedly, almost as if impatient to escape, he scuttled away down the dockside.

“Strange,” murmured Tisdale, watching the viscount move quickly along the walkway to a waiting carriage.

“Yes, was it not?” Lord Holbrook agreed. “Almost as though he approached only to learn the identity of your companions.”

Alicia agreed, adding, “I am relieved he chose to leave.” She watched the viscount’s carriage drive out of sight. A vague feeling of unease crept over her, but was forgotten as soon as her uncle spoke again. She turned to him quickly, for his voice betrayed his fatigue.

“My dear, have engaged a carriage to transport

us to a fine coaching-house, with a comfortable, adequate table, on Corn Street. Named the Bush. Need to stay the night, avail myself of the Bristol Waters.”

She smiled at her uncle's abrupt way of speaking. His clipped speech had sounded strange to her at first, but she was becoming used to it. According to Tisdale, many members of the *ton* affected such mannerisms. “The Bristol Waters, Uncle?”

“Helpful for the gout, you know. Then on to the White Hart in Bath. Visit the Pump Room to sample the waters before proceeding to London. Make the journey in my carriage, brought down from London, awaiting us at the Inn. Long journey, London. Two nights from Bath.” He smiled at Alicia. “Take up residence in Town for the Little Season. Introduce you to the *ton*.” He leaned closer. “That's top o' the trees English society, you know. Then venture on to Whithaven. A refurbishing of your wardrobe would not be amiss, would it, my dear?” Without pausing for her reply, he turned to Tisdale. “Care to ride with us to London?”

“Should you need my escort, sir, I would be honored to accompany you,” Lord Tisdale replied promptly.

“No, no. Have sufficient escort, Tisdale. My man, you see, travels ahead, making lodging arrangements 'twixt here and London. Shall

remain in Bristol until morning, stay the night in Bath tomorrow. Glad of your company, though, should you wish to journey with us.”

“I would join you, sir, with pleasure, but since you have no need of me, I shall take my leave. Having been so long out of England, I find it expedient to continue to London at once. Certain matters demand my attention. However, once advised of your arrival in London, I shall look forward to calling upon you, and upon Lady Whithaven.”

Tisdale took one of Alicia's gloved hands in both of his. “While aboard ship, you gave me your promise, dear lady. I pray you will remember and keep your word.”

The seriousness of his expression, coupled with the comforting timbre of his words, warmed Alicia as no cloak had ever done.

“I shall remember, my lord... and never do I break my word.” She gave him her most earnest look. “If I but remember the rules you have endeavored to impress upon me these many days past, I may move about in London's polite society without disgracing my uncle, after all.” She paused, breathless from his mere proximity, now the time had come for them to part. “I do thank you most kindly.”

“You are most kindly welcome, my lady.”

The touch of Tisdale's lips on the sensitive skin of her inner wrist accelerated the rapid beat

of Alicia's pulse. A delicious warmth curled deep inside her most secret places, all but destroying her ability to breathe. Then he straightened, returning her unsmiling gaze.

"Goodbye, my lady," he said softly, "for the nonce. Once you arrive in London you must allow me to be your guide. I look forward to showing you the city." A roguish grin appeared on his well-chiseled lips, and a teasing light gleamed from the chocolate depths of his eyes. "And of presenting you to the *beau monde*."

He gazed at her for the space of a quickly indrawn breath. His, he realized. With the added thought that he was not merely spouting flummery, Tisdale felt the smile fade from his lips. He truly did look forward to squiring this young lady about, to sharing another waltz with her, and to having those innocent eyes look up at him with such perfect trust.

What the devil ailed him? When had he ever waxed poetic about *any* young lady? Just when during the course of their lengthy voyage had this Bath Miss taken a place in his hea... in his *mind* as a young lady?

From the corner of his eye he noted the dust lingering in the air from the passage of Lord Saxton's carriage. Tisdale's brows drew together for the briefest of moments before he once more assumed a bland expression. Releasing Alicia's hand, he spoke to Lord Holbrook.

“If, for any reason, my lord, you find yourself in need of my assistance, I would deem it an honor should you send word at once. I gave your man my direction.”

“Should the occasion arise,” responded Lord Holbrook in his hearty manner, “shall take advantage of your offer, sir. Glad to. Shall certainly advise you of our arrival, but now we must repair to the Bush. Staying the night there. Fear Alicia’s too fatigued to attempt to continue our journey today.”

Somehow, Tisdale didn’t believe Alicia would tire so easily. Reading a similar thought in her eyes, he gave her a slow, conspiratorial wink, and grinned.

The new Lady Whithaven blushed so becomingly.

After seeing Holbrook, Alicia, and Mollie into their rented carriage, Tisdale watched the heavy coach move slowly up the road toward an inn a short distance from the docks. While his eyes focused vacantly on the small cloud of dust that rose in the vehicle’s wake, his mind played host to a multitude of images.

He recalled early morning strolls at sea, one of Alicia’s small gloved hands placed trustingly upon his sleeve, the other on her uncle’s arm, with the ever-loyal Mollie a step behind. His eyes misted over, and the beat of his heart accelerated... from pride, of course, and nothing more... as he

recalled Alicia's full-bodied laughter at his tales of life among the *ton*, her stumbling recitation of the family names and titles of the loftiest of the peers of England as she struggled to get them straight. Alicia was no blue stocking, but her desire to learn about her new home made her an eager student. Perhaps that was the reason he already felt her absence so keenly.

Of course it was.

With her agile mind, Alicia quickly grasped the difficult, often conflicting rules of London's society. The strictures of the noble ten thousand were not, after all, so very different from the rules of social behavior in Baltimore, or in Washington's political world. Tisdale assured the new Lady Whithaven she need have no fear of putting a foot wrong, not even when presented to those social dowagers who controlled access to the sacred halls of Almack's. At least he hoped not. He would as lief return to the battlefields of Spain as to witness the pain of rejection etched on those innocent features by the dragons of London society.

Why, he wondered for the hundredth time, did he feel so protective of this young miss? And what difference did it make? He knew enough of Alicia Burnsford to know her loyalty to the country of her birth ran deep and true. She would have little use for him if ever she discovered he was a British spy. That she was English as well as

American would change nothing in that respect.

A soft whinny drew his attention. Turning sharply on his heel, he joined his valet, patiently awaiting him just out of sight of the alighting passengers.

“Ah, Wilton, in good time, I see.” Taking the ribbons of a chestnut stallion from his valet’s hand, he reached up to stroke the animal’s sleek neck. Diablo whinnied again in response to his master’s scent and the gentle touch of his fingers.

“I knew you would not fail me.”

“Thank you, sir.” Wilton’s tone was formal, his expression quiet, but there was no mistaking his delight in being ashore again. “The horses were stabled and ready at the inn. Skinnings brought them down. He has since returned to Lancashire.”

“Good.” Tisdale mounted, easing into the saddle with the air of one long accustomed to the feel of a good horse between his legs. “Did you note a closed carriage pass this way but a few moments ago?”

“A spanking new carriage, sir? One drawn by four grays, fine bits of blood and bone, with a crest upon the door?” At Tisdale’s nod, he continued. “Yes, yer lordship. Lord Saxton appeared in a bloody big hurry to join the blonde-haired lady inside.”

“A blonde-haired lady? Ah, yes. The merry widow, Lady Mallicote, no doubt.” Tisdale permitted himself a sardonic smile. Saxton had lived in

Rebecca's pocket since before her marriage to the old baron. No doubt the viscount had his uses.

As he recalled, so had Rebecca.

"Where, I wonder..."

"The coachman took the road to Keynsham and Bath."

Tisdale felt all trace of a smile leave his face as he drew his brows together in a troubled frown. Saxton's estate did not lie in that direction.

A scant half hour later Tisdale and his valet left the inn, somewhat wiser by dint of the gold that exchanged hands during their visit. Earlier in the day a gentleman with thinning brown hair, escorting a well-favored golden-haired lady of quality, had alighted from a traveling carriage to partake of a light repast at the inn. If Tisdale surmised correctly, that same crested coach, belonging not to Saxton but to the Lady Mallicote, had appeared at the docks.

No doubt he would catch up with the baronial carriage before it reached Bath, though the town was situated only a dozen miles from Bristol. Securing rooms where Saxton and Rebecca chose to lodge would give him the opportunity to discern the couple's intent. If only he knew.... A sudden apprehension settled over him like a chilling shroud. Why did he believe so strongly that, whatever it was, it involved Alicia?

He'd seen Lady Rebecca Mallicote in Washington, at the Madison's Ball. He caught a

glimpse of her across the ballroom, her attention fixed unwaveringly on Alicia. He left the ballroom in search of her—and stepped outside only in time to see her climb quickly into a curricle and disappear down the President's drive. Unless he mistook the situation, the Lady Mallicote's interest in Alicia, coupled with Saxton's unexpected appearance at the dockside today, augured ill for the American heiress he had sworn to protect.

Upon his arrival in Bath a little over an hour later, Lord Tisdale found no sign of Rebecca, of Saxton, or of their coach. Nor had he passed such a conveyance; indeed, he passed but two carriages other than the Royal Mail, one at the village of Keynsham, the other shortly thereafter.

"Here, boy." Dismounting, he tossed his reins to the youngster who ran to take his horse at the White Hart Inn. "See to the horses."

He tossed him a glinting golden-boy, which the little urchin had the grinning audacity to check with strong teeth before he deposited it in some hidden storehouse in his ragged clothing.

"We shall have need of them at first light," he added before turning to Wilton. "We'll stay the night. The sun is too far toward the horizon to search any further today." Tisdale watched Wilton follow the boy through the light rain toward the stables, then strode into the White Hart.

Upon entering the common room, Tisdale removed his many-caped greatcoat and hung it

over a nearby chair to dry, setting his curly-brimmed beaver on the table beside it. A pint of ale and a casual conversation shared with the congenial innkeeper refreshed him after his long ride. Seated beside the roaring fire, he remained to eat a light supper of artichoke bottoms and broiled mutton with mushrooms, followed by his habitual choice of fruit and cheese. As he sipped his after-dinner port and watched the comings and goings of the other guests from his chair by the fireplace, Tisdale listened to the local gossip.

The usual hangers-on lounged in the public rooms. A group of merchants had booked passage on the Royal Mail and had taken rooms to await the coach's early morning departure for London. He learned of the failure of the Regent's plans for the marriage of Princess Charlotte to William of Orange. He was apprised of the facts, so far as the gossips knew them, concerning the Queen's mid-August departure from England. However, he learned nothing to his own purpose.

From his vantage point Tisdale watched members of the gentry alight from shining carriages to take their meals in private parlours. At length, in view of the lateness of the hour, Tisdale decided he'd guessed wrong. Saxton wasn't coming back.

He climbed the narrow stairway and let himself into his room, hoping his bed would be warm, well aired, dry, and preferably without tiny lodgers between the sheets. After allowing his

valet to assist him to undress, he eased his tired and saddle-sore body into the warm water of the hip bath Wilton had prepared. Only then did he share his news with his valet.

“No crested coach such as we seek stopped at the inn today, Wilton. But gentry answering the description of Lady Mallicote and Saxton stayed the night on Sunday last. The innkeeper was certain of the date, because his grandchildren visit here each Sabbath, following the early church services.”

Wilton looked up from brushing the day's soil from his lordship's jacket. “Did we miss their direction in Bristol, your lordship? Or have they lodged elsewhere these past four days?”

“Elsewhere, I believe. According to the innkeeper's wife, Lady Mallicote left the inn accompanied by not one gentleman, but two. The first gentleman was Saxton, surely, but I couldn't discern the identity of the second.”

Putting the jacket aside, Wilton took a brocade dressing gown from a small traveling case and placed it close to the heat of the fire. “Did you discover the direction the coach went?”

“Better than that. Lady Mallicote and her companions were traveling at a leisurely pace, en route to a houseparty at Willow Bend.” The remembered warmth of an abiding friendship brought a smile to his lips. “You recall the Collingwoods, don't you, Wilton?”

“Yes, m'lord.”

“Willow Bend, their estate, lies some few miles west of Bristol toward the sea. I know it well enough, though I’ve seldom visited there since my return from the Peninsula.”

“But if they’re rustivating at Lord Collingwood’s estate, why did Saxton seek you out when our ship docked? And how, yer lordship, did he know you’d be arriving there?”

“I cannot answer why Saxton should appear at the docks, behave in such a strange manner, and immediately vanish from whence he came.” He clenched his jaw. “I fear he accosted me solely to effect an introduction to Lady Whithaven. But why? That is what puzzles me.” He paused, and fresh warm water poured over his head, compliments of his efficient valet.

“As for knowing when we’d dock, the admiralty could’ve furnished information concerning our expected date of arrival. Or someone from the ship-of-the-line that left Baltimore ahead of us could have brought them word. Also, we passed Willow Bend on our journey up the Avon to Bristol. A carriage would have had little difficulty anticipating our arrival.”

Tisdale stepped from the water, his thoughts busy. Absently, he made quick use of a thick white towel and slipped his arms into the warm dressing gown Wilton held for him.

“Many questions have been buzzing about in my brain-box since first I spoke with the the

innkeeper,” he said thoughtfully. “We shall learn something more to the point soon. I sent my card to Willow Bend, requesting Collingwood call upon me at the Bush on the morrow. He knows the countryside well.”

Tisdale looked forward to his visit with Collingwood. The young lords had run tame in each others' homes from the time they were in leading strings, their fathers having been fast friends. Collingwood was one of the few who realized Tisdale had crafted his reputation as a rake most carefully and for a purpose. Now, with Napoleon on Elba and the statesmen of England and America discussing a treaty in Belgium, he would soon be able to abandon that pose.

His thoughts traveled back to the dock, to his leave-taking of Lady Whithaven. He hoped Alicia would never discover the real reason Castlereagh sent him to Washington. The thought occurred once more that the lady wouldn't think kindly of him for spying on her countrymen. Who could blame her?

With an effort Tisdale brought his thoughts back to his current sense of uneasiness, the undefinable feeling that something was about to happen, something that would prove to be not at all pleasant. He looked up as Wilton re-entered the room, a pair of gleaming Wellingtons in his hand.

“To quote Mr. Shakespeare, Wilton, ‘Something’s

rotten in the state of Denmark,' only in this case, it's in the countryside near Bristol. I cannot be easy in my mind until I discover what that something may be. And how it involves Lady Whithaven."

Tisdale rode out of the innyard the next morning as the sun's slender fingers reached over the surrounding hills to touch the city of Bath with gold. Wilton again at his side, he retraced his previous route, riding more slowly this time, and conscious still of a growing sense of unease. Thus they'd begun many a mission behind enemy lines before the British forces imprisoned the Little Emperor on the Isle of Elba. Then he was only Major Jamison, not yet elevated to the title of Earl of Tisdale, but on occasion he had saved his batman's life, and the batman had repaid the favor in spades.

When word reached Jamison of his elevation to his father's title, the loyal Wilton returned with him to England. Arriving in Lancaster they found Tisdale Abbey all but deserted and in disrepair. The new earl discovered his father's steward, Samuel Landon, had been stealing from the estate for years. When Tisdale's father finally tumbled to the steward's on-going deception, Landon took his stolen fortune, emptied the priest's hole, and fled. Jamison's father and brother were in close pursuit when their carriage overturned, killing

them both. Landon escaped aboard a ship bound for America.

As Tisdale continued west toward Bristol his senses remained alert, though his thoughts wandered. A few miles out of Keynsham, he reined in Diablo. Dismounting, he inspected the imprint of carriage wheels, clearly visible in the muddy ground at the edge of the London Road. The tracks led into a tree-shaded lane stretching south toward the River Avon.

“By Jove!” He glanced back at Wilton. “Had I not been so intent on reaching Bath, I would have noted these carriage tracks when we first came this way.”

“Quite so. But, if I may point out, my lord, inasmuch as you sought a coach, your sight was aimed a bit higher.”

Tisdale grinned. “Point taken.” He stared intently at the tracks laid down by the carriage and at the tell-tale signs left by the horses that pulled it. “There are newer tracks as well. The carriage returned to the Bristol Road. After this morning’s shower, it traveled the lane again.”

Looking up, Tisdale met Wilton’s gaze across the narrow space between the two horses. “Collingwood and Willow Bend must wait, Wilton. I know of no valid reason why a carriage drawn by four well-shod horses would travel down an apparently deserted lane, not once, but twice. There is every chance it may be the one we

seek. Playing a hunch has kept us out of the briars more than once. Should we prove it to be nothing, we shall still arrive at Bristol in good time to receive Lord Collingwood.”

Some little distance down the lane they came upon a shabby caretaker's hut, its thatched roof badly in need of repair. Close beside the hut stood the charred remains of what had once been a large manor house. The stables, situated some hundred yards further down the partially overgrown drive, showed evidence of recent usage. Inside the open doors stood a black carriage, its wheels picked out in yellow, its once-glistening paint now dimmed with dust. The paint bore deep scratches, most likely from low-hanging branches along the narrow roadway, and the coat of arms on one door panel had been badly damaged. The heavily antlered stag pictured in the upper right quadrant had been all but obliterated. Tisdale shook his head. That would take time, patience, and skill to repair.

Tisdale guided Diablo into the ancient building, inhaling deeply of the sweet-smelling hay and the lingering scent of old leather in an atmosphere familiar since childhood. The blooded grays, stabled and munching contentedly on their rations of oats, had been rubbed down, their harness cleaned and hung in place in the tack room. Of Saxton, of Rebecca, or of their mysterious companion there was no trace.

Riding back into the yard, both men dismounted. In companionable silence they led their horses to drink at a gurgling brook that meandered lazily through the meadow below the stables. Not far beyond the spot where they stood, the little stream joined the River Avon in its race to the sea. Tisdale knelt beside the clear water to slake his thirst, then waited until Wilton had drunk his fill.

“Take a closer look around the stable, Wilton, and the caretaker’s hut. They must have had mounts waiting.” The earl studied the damp ground beside the rippling water, looking for some tell-tale sign. He grinned suddenly. Where was Running Fox when he needed his blood brother—that most experienced tracker?

Untying Diablo’s reins from the small bush where he had secured them, he led the horse with care along the stream’s edge before he mounted. His pace deliberate, his gaze on the ground below him, he rode across a field lying fallow in the early winter sun. A few minutes later he rode up to Wilton as he exited the dilapidated hut.

“There are five riders and one riderless horse. The riders watered their horses, mounted a few yards upstream from here, then rode across country toward the Bath road. We cannot be more than an hour behind them.” His expression suddenly grim, he waited for Wilton to swing into the saddle.

“It is time our questions had some answers.”

Not far from where Tisdale and Wilton discovered Lady Mallicote's carriage, Alicia, Lord Heatherford, and Mollie were traveling toward Bath. Alicia leaned back against the dark green velvet cushions of the well-sprung berline coach, her eyelids growing increasingly heavy. Her uncle's four matched chestnuts covered the distance between Bristol and Bath at a steady pace. Mollie had already dozed off, lulled by the rhythm of the horses' hooves on the well-maintained road. Her occasional soft snore brought an indulgent smile to Alicia's lips.

Yesterday, after enjoying a tea of fragrant Bohea and delicately cut cucumber sandwiches, Alicia had chosen to rest in her room. While she read and re-read the long-anticipated letter from her father to an attentive Mollie, her uncle hastened to avail himself of the curative powers of the Bristol Waters. The three of them had retired early in preparation for today's journey to Bath. If only her father were with her.

Alicia fought back tears stinging the backs of her eyes, as her lips trembled. Her father's letter had been full of tales of his arrival in Ghent, of his attendance at meetings between the American delegation and Gambier, Goulburn, and William Adams, the three representatives of Britain.

The Britons had the same contemptuous, well-bred, exasperating bearing that her father told her he remembered so well from his youth as

being an integral part of their class. Never did they challenge anything the American team presented, never did they reveal their own thoughts, never did they ask for concessions. They merely presented the articles forwarded to them from the Prime Minister without comment or explanation and urged their acceptance. Papa, along with John Adams, Gallatin, and Clay, were actually becoming bored almost to extinction by the delays.

Papa had no idea when he might be free to join her, surely not for several weeks, possibly not for months. Not until Alicia received his letter had she realized how much she had counted on discovering Papa in London upon her arrival. She so badly wanted Papa at her side when the time came to make her bow to London society.

Alicia closed her eyes, fighting back tears of loneliness and of homesickness. She leaned against the softness of the squabs, her face toward the window. It would not do for her uncle to read her distress upon her features. Since first he had arrived at her home in Maryland, Uncle Titus had been all that was kind.

Alicia must have dozed off, for a shout coming from near the carriage startled her into wakefulness.

“Stand and deliver!” came the harsh command, followed quickly by the sound of a gunshot and the neighing of horses.

Chapter Three



As the coachman hurriedly brought her uncle's carriage to a halt, a man on horseback appeared outside the window. He leaped from his horse to fling open the carriage door. A slouch hat covered his hair and rested low over his eyes; a mask hid the lower portion of the man's face. Behind him were three mounted horsemen, similarly masked, one of whom held the reins to another riderless horse.

"If you would be so good as to step down, you would save yourselves a great deal of inconvenience," the silky voice said. Though the voice was obviously disguised, the accent did not seem that of a common highwayman, or so Alicia thought.

Alicia observed Lord Holbrook as he stealthily reached for the gun concealed in a door pocket, but an ornately carved ebony cane wielded by the highwayman rapped sharply across her uncle's knuckles.

“You would do well to do as you are told, sir. Your niece has three guns trained directly at her head, should we fail to receive your cooperation.”

Looking up, Alicia realized the man spoke the truth. She and her uncle exchanged looks that spoke more of anger than of fear, but, possessing more than a modicum of common sense, they descended to the side of the road. A shaken Mollie followed close behind. The three of them joined the coachman and the guard, who were apparently caught napping on such a peaceful-looking stretch of road.

Without another word, the highwayman nodded to his companions. Two of the men dismounted, quickly rendering Lord Holbrook, Mollie, the coachman, and the guard unconscious. The shorter of the two henchmen climbed up on the carriage and drove it into the ditch.

Alicia's stunned mind attempted to grasp the reality of what was happening. Were they being robbed? Her unspoken question was answered quickly enough. The well-spoken highwayman tied Alicia's hands before her and, taking the trailing rope in one hand, led her to a waiting horse.

“You will be so good as to mount, my lady, lest your uncle's unconscious state be rendered permanent.”

Alicia's feeling of shock, of the unreality of what was happening, disappeared at the threat to her uncle. She whirled on her captor, the stiff rope

biting into the soft skin of her wrists.

“Think you, sirrah, your base actions will go undetected? Or unpunished?” she cried angrily. “And how came you by your knowledge of my relationship to the gentleman? What is it you wish that you may obtain only by abducting...”

Her words ceased abruptly as her jailer shoved a makeshift gag, fashioned from a soft, clean-smelling handkerchief drawn from his pocket, into her mouth.

“I fear you talk too much.” After securing the gag with another cloth, he tossed her into the side-saddle of a chestnut mare. Taking the reins of both horses in one gloved hand, he mounted a bay gelding. “But I see no harm in answering your questions. You are in no position to ask more,” he added, a dry humour coloring his words. For a time, he concentrated on leading his party down a steep incline and toward a stand of trees. When he spoke, he seemed to choose his words with care.

“I can assure you my actions will go unpunished. Whether they will be detected is another matter, but of no importance. As to your uncle... it is known throughout Lancashire he left England some weeks ago in search of his wife’s niece. I have eyes. Having met the Lady Beatrice, I do not question the connection.”

Listening, and unable to see the features beneath the mask, Alicia made a quick study of her captor’s attire. The ragged, many-caped cloak

hanging loosely from his shoulders had fallen open to reveal a miniature tiger, fashioned of gold, staring back at her from the pristine whiteness of his cravat. The tiny jungle cat crouched within the intricate folds of its silken lair, its emerald eyes winking in the sunlight. Her gaze traveled downward. In the stirrup nearest her, she noted a mud-spattered Wellington. Its scuffed state and an oddly-shaped nick in the heel leather showed evidence of recent hard usage, but failed to disguise the boot's once-gleaming polish. She looked up, only to discover her captor had noted the direction of her glance.

"I fear I must also bind your eyes, my lady. 'Twould have been to your advantage had you fainted." He apparently noted the sudden fury in her eyes, for he chuckled, as though somehow gratified by her show of spirit. "I surmise you are not so missish. No matter. I assure you, you will not be compelled to suffer such discomfort long."

A woman's voice sounded authoritatively in the still air, coming from the deep shadow of the grove of trees they were fast approaching. "Quickly, gentlemen. Others will be traveling the road to Bath."

Alicia jerked her head toward the cultured voice, intent on discovering the identity of the one who appeared to be in command of what was obviously a well-planned kidnapping. Her kidnapping.

Too late. Before her eyes could adjust to the leaf-filtered light beneath the thick-growing branches, her captor secured the blindfold and drew the concealing hood of her pelisse carefully forward.

The lady spoke again. “Must you move so slowly, Bar—”

The highwayman’s voice sliced into her flow of words. “No names, my lady.”

“Does it matter? She will not be above ground long enough to make micefeet of our plans. Let us be on our way with all possible speed.”

Another voice intruded, that of the masked rider at Alicia’s other side. “Patience, my dear. Surely you would not risk discovery by proceeding with unseemly haste along a country lane on such a lovely afternoon?” Despite the speaker’s attempt to alter his voice, Alicia was certain she had heard those distinctly unpleasant nasal tones before, and recently.

The woman spoke again. “You are right. We need not create unnecessary problems. We have only to ride quietly through the countryside to the stables, attend to the necessary, and let the River Avon complete our task.”

The woman’s words turned Alicia’s blood to icewater in her veins. She fought to stem a rising sense of panic. Did they mean to kill her? And were her captors so lost to all sensibility that they could discuss her proposed fate openly in her

presence? Or did they assume, since she could neither see nor speak, she also could not hear?

A wave of bleak despair blanked out further thought. She could only close her eyes tightly behind the rough cloth of the blindfold in an attempt to stay the tears that threatened to fall. With a sudden determination born of desperation she fought against a paralyzing fear. She was not giving up!

In one decisive movement her head came up, her back stiffened, and her shoulders squared as she rode in muzzled silence between the two men. Men whose words, she remarked in puzzled surprise, carried the cultured accents of gentlemen, though she felt certain the tone of voice was altered. Alicia Burnsford, Countess Whithaven, might be in a great deal of trouble, and that lady might be expected by the "noble ten thousand" to bow to her fate in dignified, missish resignation. But George Burnsford's daughter had another heritage as well. Miss Alicia would somehow find a way to escape this deadly coil.

Had the gag not prevented it, a wry smile would have curved her lips. The picture of a wind-bronzed face beneath a thatch of sunbleached hair came to mind.

And just where are you, Lord Tisdale, now that I would deem it proper to accept your offer of assistance?

Tisdale and Wilton followed the trail away from the hidden stables. They soon lost the hoof-prints in the darkness of a home wood, and only picked them up again on the other side after a lengthy delay. More than an hour passed before the trail led them back onto the Bristol-to-Bath Road.

Just a few dozen yards from the point at which their path joined the roadway, the earl and his valet came upon a strange tableau: Lord Holbrook was prone upon the ground, seemingly unconscious, his head on Mollie's bountiful lap. With a dainty lace handkerchief she wiped away what appeared to be traces of blood from his forehead. The Holbrook carriage rested upright in the ditch. Tom Coachman and the guard, his arm bandaged, were attempting to guide the horses back onto the road. Giving a shout, Tisdale leaped from the saddle and strode quickly to the elderly gentleman's side. Wilton dismounted as well, going at once to assist with the carriage.

"Lord Holbrook! Did your coachman drive you off the road? Or was it a drunken pink of the *ton* trying to pass where the road was too narrow?" He glanced inside the carriage, then at the dusty roadside. "Where is Lady Whithaven?"

The older man replied in a voice that showed his years. "Gone, Tisdale,"

"Gone?" Tisdale looked both directions, his eyes searching the empty roadway. "Where?"

“Kidnapped by ruffians on horseback. Four of them.”

Had Gentleman Jackson caught Lord Tisdale off guard in his London boxing ring, the blow to his midsection could not more effectively have robbed him of his breath.

Mollie took up the tale. “Sure an’ our Miss Alicia was taken away by the same highwayman set those ugly thugs upon us and shot the guard. Only winged him, they did, saints be praised.” She paused to press the wisp of lace once more to Holbrook’s temple. “Covered our faces with evil-smelling rags, they did. Put us in as deep a sleep as ever I recall. Lord Holbrook, here, he took a nasty fall when they did their dirty work.”

While Tisdale struggled to come to grips with Alicia’s abduction, his actions became those of the trained military officer he once had been. He stooped beside the older gentleman and moved Mollie’s hand aside to examine the wound from which blood seeped. “Here.” Pulling his handkerchief from his pocket, he handed it to Mollie. “Bind his head while you talk. Can you describe those men, Mollie? Think now. It is of the utmost importance.”

But Mollie had been roused from a deep slumber by the sound of gunfire and rendered almost immediately unconscious. At first, she had only the sketchiest of recollections. Holbrook possessed information more to the point.

“Highwayman held a pistol could only have been crafted by Manton. Mark of a gentleman.”

“A gentleman? You are certain?”

“Had an old slouch hat pulled low in front. Clean-looking rag over his face, though. Topcoat was old, material coarse. Could have picked it up most anyplace. Speech marked him a gentleman. Demme if he could hide that, or his Wellingtons! Boots well made, too. Valet will ring a peal over his head. Leastways, mine would. Badly scuffed. Needed a good polishing.”

Hiding his impatience with Holbrook’s rambling, Tisdale asked, “What of the others?”

“Working men. Smelled of the stables.”

“Yes, sir,” agreed Mollie, her mind beginning to clear, “but that one man, the one sitting his horse with not one word to say for good or for bad, that one had the air of a gentleman about him.”

“Devil a bit! Why would gentlemen be involved in such a dastardly act?” Lord Holbrook asked.

Tisdale shook his head, his thoughts confused as he tried to sort out the tiny bit of information he’d managed to glean from Alicia’s uncle and her abigail.

As they talked, his valet, the coachman, and the guard worked together, and soon returned the carriage to the road. Tisdale assisted Lord Holbrook and Mollie into the carriage, then took Diablo’s reins from Wilton. Astride Diablo, anxious to be after the bold highwaymen, he turned back when

the coachman called to him from the high perch atop the carriage.

“An’ one thing more, yer worship. They knew well enough what they were about: I heard the fancy cove warning Lady Whithaven to do as she’s bid, lest he fix her uncle good.”

He had Tisdale’s attention.

“Are you sure he called Lord Holbrook her uncle?”

“Aye, yer worship, I’m fer bein’ sure. I was slower losing the daylight than his lordship and Miss Mollie there, may be ‘cuz there’s more o’ me, but I heard him sayin’ if she didn’ do his biddin’, he’d make sure her uncle wouldn’t be a-wakin’.”

The coachman gave the cattle the office to start, and the carriage began moving toward Bath with all prudent speed. Once at the White Hart Inn, Lord Holbrook would alert the authorities and await word from Tisdale. In the meanwhile, Mollie would send someone for a doctor to look after the wounds suffered by his lordship and the guard.

With eyes narrowed against the glare of the sun, Tisdale watched the coach move down the road. When it disappeared around a sharp curve, he signaled to Wilton, and the two of them set out to track the men holding Alicia. All the while, his mind worked busily. The trail they’d followed from the Mallicote carriage at the deserted manor house had led directly to the scene of the kidnapping.

“Wilton, if, as I strongly suspect, Lady Mallicote is behind this act, why wasn’t she present at the scene? She didn’t remain behind at the stables, or we would have seen her.”

“Mayhap she wasn’t too keen to be recognized. Not likely such a lady would be.” His keen gaze rested momentarily on a hoofprint in the soft ground beneath the low-hanging branches of a stately oak. “Or mayhap she waited here.”

Tisdale studied the collection of hoofprints in the damp earth. “I believe you’re right—and I believe we know the direction they’re headed.”

Urging their mounts to a gallop, the two men raced across the fields toward the stables of the burned-out estate.

The sun was still high in the sky when a weary Alicia, knowing only that she had ridden through open fields and shady woods, was taken from her horse without ceremony. She had spent most of her life on horseback, riding free in the countryside around Burnsford Manor. Such remembered joy made her present circumstances all the more depressing.

Her hands were still bound, the blindfold and gag still in place, when one of her other captors—a workman from the smell of him—seized her roughly by the arm. He pulled her along into what she recognized from the musty smell as a stable and shoved her into a stall. Unable to stop herself,

she tumbled to the straw-covered ground. As she fell, she heard the sound of tearing cloth and knew the lace of her sleeve had caught on the rough boards.

The highwayman's muffled voice came from somewhere nearby. "What a pity such a lovely lady must pay such an ugly price."

Price! The word echoed in her head. What price? Even as her mind asked the question, she knew. The woman had as much as told her that her life was forfeit, but for what reason must she pay such a price? Alicia strained to catch every word, careful not to betray her conscious state to her captors by the least movement on her part.

"Could we not simply secure her signature and put her aboard a ship to return from whence she came?" The gentleman's voice was cool, his words clipped. "She is but a child."

"Because she *is* but a child, her signature would be worthless. You know as well as I that such would not serve." The woman laughed, a distinctly unpleasant sound to Alicia's ears. "We agreed on this course of action. I would not have supposed you to be such a pudding-heart over naught but a pretty face. You know what is at stake here."

The woman's voice cut into her captive's consciousness like cold steel. When the lady spoke again Alicia barely managed to suppress a shiver of dread.

“The two of you must make certain the chit never reaches London.”

“As you wish,” the highwayman replied. “My men have their instructions. They will do the necessary.”

Alicia heard him step away from the mound of straw where she lay huddled on the stable floor, pretending sleep. She could still hear the sibilant whisper of her captor’s words, but could no longer discern their meaning. The guards’ muttered replies were lost to her as well. What she did hear but a moment later was the shatter of glass, followed by a most explicit curse.

“You clumsy oaf,” the lady all but screeched. “Would you ruin everything?”

“Ned, the cloth,” broke in the highwayman. “Quickly, soak up the liquid before it seeps into the ground!”

One of the men, Alicia supposed it to be Ned, replied. “Here ye’ go, yer ladyship.” There was a brief silence. “Digger, ye’d best get the horses inter the air afore this stuff gets to ‘em.”

Hurried movements and lowered voices accompanied the sounds of animals being led from nearby stalls. An unfamiliar, cloying scent was carried to Alicia’s nostrils by a whisper of wind.

“Ye have yet enough of th’ potion in th’ bottom of th’ jar, my lord. More’n enough.” Ned laughed. The evil sound sheeted across her skin on an

involuntary shudder of revulsion, striking a new note of fear in Alicia's mind. "It'll take but a few drops under her ladyship's nose, an' she won't be knowin' her own name. Come mornin', I'll wager she'll be past carin'."

After a moment, one of the henchmen knelt beside her, the horrible sound of his laughter rumbling from deep in his throat. Alicia again felt roughened hands on the tender skin of her arms and face as he turned her onto her back. The man covered her nose with a damp cloth permeated with the same sweet-smelling liquid. The cloying odor was nauseating in its intensity, and her darkened world began to spin. Multi-colored circles of light flashed across her closed eyelids, interspersed with misty phantom shapes that beckoned her toward the realm of oblivion. The last words she heard were in the cultured though still disguised accents of her abductor.

"Come, my dear, you must make haste to return to Willow Bend. Digger will take care of the girl. Your host must not become suspicious of your absence."

Willow Bend... Willow Bend....

The voice echoed in Alicia's ears, drowning out all else as she retreated down the deepening corridor toward a drugged unconsciousness.



The shadows lengthened. Long fingers of grey and mauve reached from a line of tall trees to touch the edges of the open fields. In the stillness of early twilight the sound of birds seeking their nests carried clearly to Tisdale and Wilton as they rode cautiously down the narrow lane toward the stables, alert for the slightest movement. The crispness of the breeze from off the Avon cooled their heated faces and filled their lungs with the earthy smell of the riverbank.

When they passed a farm cart moving slowly toward the Bristol Road, they drew in their mounts to a more decorous pace. Tisdale acknowledged the farmer, who sat atop his heavily-laden wagon pulling his cap in respect. Another man, his head down as though dozing, sat beside him. Tisdale surmised they would more likely catch cold than catch the crowd at the farmer's market, unless they planned on tipping a few tonight and trying their luck at the market on the morrow.

As he neared the stable, Tisdale quickly dismounted, Wilton at his side, to approach the building on silent feet. Drawing near, he remarked about the stillness. The cavernous barn where earlier in the day the stamping of ironshod feet and the sound of feeding horses had carried across the meadow, now issued forth no sound at all. Tisdale moved quickly across the intervening space, keeping well into the shadow.

An entire regiment might as easily have

marched undetected through the open stable doors. Dustbeams danced in the slanted light of the fading sun, and barnyard mice skittered noisily about the rafters, but not a living soul stood guard to bar his entry.

Neither were there horses, nor carriage, nor baroness. Tisdale's brows drew together as a cloying scent invaded his nostrils. It permeated the air of the barn. Walking along the stalls, his handkerchief over his mouth and nose, Tisdale came upon a mound of shattered glass. The air reeked with the sweetish smell of ether. A few feet further inside the stable he found a torn bit of lace caught between the wide-set wooden planks of the manger.

As Tisdale thrust the lacy bit of hope inside his jacket, for an instant the heavy burden of despair seemed to lift from his shoulders. He glanced up to meet Wilton's worried gaze.

"Alicia had to be alive, Wilton, to leave it here." Leaning on the chest-high railing beside the manger, he rubbed a hand across his face. "God willing, she lives still." His words, scarce more than a whisper, carried the force of a heartfelt prayer. "But if we do not find her soon..." He straightened to his full height, his features once more schooled to be unreadable. "At least we are on the right track, Wilton. Let's make the most of the daylight, then on to Bristol to alert the magistrate there."

When the lady moon rose above the trees to flirt with her reflection in the rippled surface of the nearby stream, she found Lord Tisdale and his valet riding hard for Bristol.

Later, though she knew not how much time had passed, Alicia found herself on the hard bed of a moving wagon, sandwiched between baskets of farm produce. Surprised to find her wrists no longer bound, she raised cold fingers to her lips. Her gag, too, was gone, though her mouth was dry as dust. Forcing her unwilling eyelids to open, Alicia gazed with unfocused eyes at a star-studded sky. The moon, almost at the full, peeped over the wagon rail, painting her tiny world a ghostly silver. She tried to sit up, to see beyond the bags of grain and boxes of farm produce that blocked her view, but to no avail. She could not will herself to move. Why should she? She wanted only to sleep.

But there were voices. She heard voices....

“I still say better we’d’a dumped ‘er ladyship back there, Ned, below the barn where the river runs fast and deep. Would’a done the job.”

“Not bloody likely.”

“W’y not?”

“Some brain-box you got, Digger. An’ wot if she’d a washed up in the harbour at Bristol? Wot then? We got to get the gentry-mort past the docks, closer t’ the sea, afore we can chance gettin’ rid of her.”

“Where?”

“Down a lane, t’other side o’ Bristol. ‘Is Lordship said t’go three miles past Bristol, an’ there’s a road’ll lead us right smack into the river again.” Ned urged his tired horses to a faster pace. “Better to get there afore the tide turns, or we’ll have a long wait ’til it turn again. The gel might wake.”

Digger was quiet for a while, then spoke again.

“I know uv a better spot, Ned, below the docks, past the Clifton Gate. It’s afore ye get to St. Vincente Rocks at the edge o’ Clifton Down. Th’ Avon’s wide below the rocks, an’ we’d be sure to catch the outgoin’ tide.”

Ned clapped Digger on the shoulder. “Why not? I’m sure th’ gen’l’m’n don’t care, long as we dump ‘er past them floatin’ docks.”

Drifting once again toward the dark realm of the unconscious, one thought penetrated Alicia’s benumbed mind: Night had fallen. Someone... something... the river? She snatched at a fragment of ether-clogged memory. The carriage... her uncle... must get away....

Darkness claimed her. For a time she knew no more. Until...

A cessation of movement, a sudden quiet... the painful, uncontrolled tumbling of her body to grass-covered earth... the stench of unwashed clothing... carried like one of those sacks of meal in the wagon... head bobbing against the solid

wall of a man's back... a rush of air... the shock of icy water and her own sharply indrawn breath... choking as she sank like a stone... water closing over her head.

An urgent need for air roused Alicia from her drug-induced stupor. Still groggy, she clawed to the river's surface. Gasping for air, she thought herself swimming in the stream at Burnsford Manor. Strange, the current was more powerful than she remembered.

Where was Papa? Papa taught her to swim almost as soon as she had learned to walk, but never was she so foolhardy as to swim alone. Nor in all her clothing. The heavy material pulled at every part of her body like so many greedy fingers, guiding her to the river's bed. She went under, struggled to regain the surface and the blessed air.

This was no dream! The carriage ride... the highwayman...

How *dare* they!

Then she was swimming, swimming for her very life, but managing only to keep afloat... letting the current carry her downstream toward a narrow bend in the river where a tree's still-leafy boughs glistened in the silvery moonlight. The tree beckoned, ghostlike, its trailing branches touching the water in silent invitation.

The current threatened to carry her beyond the

hoped-for safety of the tree. Alicia barely managed to grasp gnarled roots thrusting deep into the river. Her body shaking convulsively, she pulled herself into a kind of backwater, doubly hidden by the silver-tipped leaves of the weeping willow and the dark shadow of a large boulder jutting upward from the riverbank.

Through teeth clenched tightly to halt their chattering, she gratefully inhaled air rich with the scent of river life and moldering vegetation. After gaining a foothold on a water-carved ledge at the base of the protruding rock, she looked about her in the gleaming darkness; then she sighed. To climb the ladder of roots to the riverbank above her would take more strength than she possessed.

At length her breathing became less labored. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and she rested her forehead against the backs of her hands where they gripped the twisted roots. In spite of her distress, the wonders of the living night enveloped her senses. The saline taste of the tidal river lingered in her mouth. From within the branches of the willow came the screech of an owl. Nearby a frog resumed an interrupted serenade.

The owl took wing with no sign of his passage other than the shadow of a chilling breeze across Alicia's damp cheeks as he swooped close to her hiding place. Beside her, the frog ringed the surface of the water with a gentle plop.

Another reality intruded in the form of a woman's voice, far colder than the water which held her in its tomb-like embrace. As consciousness faded, a piercing, albeit meaningless whisper wafted eerily from the river bank to Alicia's ears, mingling with the half-remembered voices of her captors, and she knew no more.

“One down.”

The whispered words followed the unexpected splash of a rock just beyond the concealing tree roots, arousing Alicia from her near-trancelike state. A man's voice this time, but again directly above her hiding place. Her breath caught in her throat: dared she make her presence known? She opened her mouth, attempting to cry out, but no sound issued forth from a throat both swollen and painful—a result, she felt sure, more of the nauseating drug than of her terrifying plunge into the river.

Two more rocks, aimed with careless precision, sank beneath the rippling waves.

“Two more to go.”

Silence... followed by a gradual awareness of booted feet crunching on gravel. Then the creak of saddle leather, mingled with soft whinney and soothing, whispered words. Horse and rider moved away, slowly at first, then more rapidly as the distance increased and the hoofbeats quietly faded in the distance. Quietly? Had the rider

muffled the horse's hooves?

Alicia strained to hear more, but only the quiet cries of small night creatures and the rustling of autumn leaves moving in the wind carried above the riversong.

She must gain the riverbank. As Alicia wearily worked her way out of the water and onto solid ground, her breath came in painful gasps. Half-conscious, unaware of the scrapes and cuts left by tangled tree roots on feet and hands numb with cold, she was somehow cognizant of the rising wind that cut like a knife through her sodden garments to rob her body of its life-giving heat.

Crawling just beyond the edge of the bank, she curled into a shivering ball at the foot of the tree which had beckoned her from a watery grave. With her back against a large rock as a safeguard against slipping once more into the treacherous waters, she drifted toward the welcome embrace of total oblivion.

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Marjorie J. Allen

Life is full of mountains and valleys. Marj embraces life, her love of theater, literature and good dialogue. She was stage manager for a touring theatre group; a secretary to UNRWA in Lebanon; officer manager for a law firm; a classroom teacher; and theater director at Texas State School for the Blind. Her blind students competed at state level 1977-1980!

A now retired junior and high school librarian, she loved teaching/co-directing theater students. One high school play, *The Insanity of Mary Girard*, is an historical set in Philadelphia during the War of 1812—she's read thousands of Regencies and hundreds of contemporary novels.

What else?

England and Scotland lured her, along with husband, son, and Scottish daughter-in-law, to research another Regency. Marj returned to Lebanon after forty-seven years to visit friends. There she gathered information for another possible book.

In Smithville, Texas, Marj writes, works, and plots her next bright idea. She is a family woman with three children, seven grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. A military wife, her husband of forty-seven years is a veteran of three wars, WW II, Korea, and VietNam.

She loves to hear from readers. Email her at Marjallen@aol.com.



Marjorie J Allen

A delightful Regency world with a sparkling cast of characters and a thrilling mystery.

Pamela McKinley

William Blanton Jamison, sixth Earl of Tisdale, is enchanted with American-born Alicia Burnsford from the moment he first sees her in Washington. Onboard ship to England, he finds his enchantment changing to something much deeper. But dare he care for her when he has secrets that could destroy both their hearts?

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