

2008 Awe-Struck Regency Winner



**A determined young miss, a battle-weary lord,
and a reckless masquerade.
What will the Earl of Trelaine do when he discovers
his page's shocking secret?**

MORE THAN SHE BARGAINED FOR: Danielle Galloway is determined to visit her convalescing brother. She won't let her father's lack of permission stand in her way. Disguising herself as Danny, a servant boy, she takes to the road to begin her grand adventure...only to have her money stolen and her face battered by street ruffians. Now how will she get to the resort town of Bath?

MORE THAN HE BARGAINED FOR: The Earl of Trelaine rescues a down-on-his-luck young lad. Against his better judgment, he takes Danny on as his page as he journeys to Bath. But this boy harbors a shocking secret. What's the earl going to do when he discovers his latest act of kindness might hurl him into the parson's mousetrap?

Chapter One

"'Tis a sorra day to see you dressed as a lad, Miss Danielle." Kate, always a loyal maid, folded her arms across her ample chest and frowned. Tears puddled in her button eyes. "The Master will ring a peal over me head fer sure."

"Nonsense." As usual, Danielle Galloway paid little attention to her maid's prophesy of doom. Instead she pivoted in front of the bedchamber's cheval looking glass, and smiled at the masculine image in the mirror. Her cotton stockings were the correct shade of grey, and the woolen knee breeches--borrowed from one of the stableboys--fit her to perfection.

Danielle turned to the left, then the right. Something was not right. She frowned and slid her hand down her right hip. Perhaps the breeches hugged her form a bit too snugly for comfort.

Bother! Nothing could be done about that, so she shrugged and looked again at her

reflection. The collar on the white homespun shirt needed adjusting and vee opening on the sleeveless leather jerkin was askew. She straightened both items. Those two garments easily hid the curve of her bound breasts--not that she had much of that feminine attribute to hide, anyway.

Yes, by Jove, she did it; she could easily pass for a boy.

So much for her costume. What about her face? She raised her gaze to view her rice powder-lightened lips, her eyebrows browned and thickened with ground cloves, her creamy complexion darkened by carefully applied soot, and her hair....

Ouch. Danielle winced. She couldn't help it. Her only regret in this mad masquerade was that her hair, so gloriously long and gleaming like golden rays of sunshine, had needed to be cut. She'd sheared it herself; she couldn't trust her maid to do the job. No, when asked to perform the fearsome deed, Kate's eyes had blurred with more tears, no doubt fearing the repercussion of Sir Ambrose's displeasure if he found out about his daughter's escapade.

Danielle could not have counted on Cousin Jeanette to have a steady hand, either. Ever since Jeanette had learned the true reason for Danielle's visit to Harmony Manor, she'd fallen into a fit of the vapors--also fretting about the consequences of her Uncle Ambrose's anger.

Kate and Cousin Jeanette were plaguing themselves for naught. Danielle's father never troubled himself over his only daughter.

Danielle shook that unpleasant thought away. "Stuff and nonsense!" she exclaimed to no one in particular. It grieved her to be surrounded by milk-and-water misses. If there was one thing she knew for certain, Sir Ambrose would not find out about her great adventure. After all, who would tell him?

Certainly not the maid, nor any of Jeanette's servants. And Jeanette's father, Wesley Galloway, was away in London, leaving Jeanette to languish in the country by herself at Harmony Manor--a tailor-made situation for Danielle to take advantage of.

A gentle rap at the door caught Danielle's attention. Cousin Jeanette slowly opened the door, and leaned into the room. Her dark, corkscrew curls framed a full, rosy face...a face that had a woebegone cast. When Jeanette spotted the discarded sprigged muslin gown on the bed, she gasped, then her hazel eyes immediately focused in on Danielle.

"Oh! Danielle, I cannot bear to see you like this. It is so unseemly. Oh, your poor hair."

"Bother my hair!" Striding over to the bedchamber window in what she hoped was a manly manner, Danielle thrust open the drapes and gazed out at the brand new day.

The ormolu clock on the bureau belied her thoughts as it chimed nine times

consecutively. Nine o'clock. True, the day was not so brand new, especially for a Sunday morning, but 'twas still early.

"Aye, 'tis all too true." Kate also stood by the window, a pace behind her mistress. "Miss Danielle has gone and done it." She shook her head mournfully. "I canna get used to yer shorn hair, Miss. The Master will have a fit, he will."

Danielle fingered the edges of her bobbed hair, now tied into a queue. She sighed. Sacrificing her hair was her only regret. However, it was a small price to pay for peace of mind. Her brother Benjamin was unwell, wasn't he? She *had* to be certain he was getting the treatment he required in Bath. And the only way to do it was to embark on this journey.

"Benjamin is very dear to me," she murmured by way of explanation. Although her brother was older by three years, he needed constant mothering. And he had no one to look after him in Bath, no one to rescue him from his own harebrained schemes.

Her eyes misted over. Nor did he follow instructions. Hadn't she told him to write to her every day? Since he left a month ago, he'd sent just two missives.

Stuff! How could Benjamin be so inconsiderate? Or maybe he had gone into a decline. Maybe he suffered great pain.

Danielle left the window and paced inside the spacious bedchamber. "My father cares not a whit whether my locks are long or short. Indeed, I own he will not even notice."

The more she spoke, the angrier she became. "And if he complains, he only has himself to blame. He forbid me passage to see my darling Benjamin. I had no choice but to bamboozle Father with this trip to Harmony Manor.

As she had expected, Sir Ambrose had been pleased with her offer to keep an eye on her younger cousin. Or, to put it more correctly, her father had been pleased to have Danielle out of his hair, so to speak. He gladly granted her request for a fortnight stay with Cousin Jeanette. Indeed, he had inquired whether a fortnight stay was long enough.

Danielle smirked. Yes, two weeks were all that she would require. She would travel to Bath, back again to Harmony Manor, then onto home in the city of Leeds without her father being the wiser.

"Respectable females cannot travel alone, so that avenue is out for me. However, it is quite another story for males to take to the high roads. So, given that I cannot journey as Miss Galloway, I shall traverse the countryside as Danny, the servant boy."

She set her hands on her hips, standing akimbo, daring anyone to sway her from her purpose.

Jeanette nervously wrung her hands together. "Oh, my nerves are atwitter. My insides are all aflutter. You cannot possibly be serious--"

"Gracious me." Danielle practiced her swagger and strode in front of her cousin. "Your symptoms sound suspiciously like a besotted doe-eyed chit. I have it, 'tis your neighbor, Mr. Pritchett, is it not? Can it be that you have a decided partiality for him?"

"Danielle, I beg of you." Jeanette sank down on the bed as if her knees refused to support her. "Do not make light of this situation." Her pert lower lip trembled. "Besides, you are well aware Mr. Pritchett only has eyes for Lydia Hanover."

"That sniffing little turnip." Danielle grinned. "Lydia Hanover, I mean."

"Danielle!" Jeanette couldn't hide her agitation. She rose to her feet and restlessly moved about the room, her sweet jasmine fragrance following her. "You cannot mean to go through with this foolhardy charade."

"I can and I will." Stepping in front of the looking glass again, Danielle admired her masculine form. "Admit it, I do look like a boy."

Jeanette took her time in analyzing her cousin's appearance. "You have the shape of one, that I will grant you. And the look of a boy, of about four and ten. But your features are too fine for one of the male persuasion. Despite the tan darkening your complexion, your jaw is too narrow, your nose too small, and your eyes much too large."

"So I will practice squinting." Danielle lifted her nose, small or otherwise. Personally, she preferred the word *dainty*. Her many suitors often wrote odes about its delicate shape. "Moreover, people see what they expect to see. Who would give a peasant boy more than a passing glance?"

Kate settled herself in a corner of the bedchamber and wagged a sanctimonious finger. "Ach, there are those whose tastes run to pretty laddies, Miss Danielle."

Danielle blinked back her surprise at the maid's indelicate reference, but before Jeanette could decipher what the words meant, she grabbed her tapestry wool carpetbag to distract her cousin. "Come now, the hour grows late and I mean to be on my way. Are you ready?"

Jeanette bobbed her head, sending her spiral curls flying about her face. "Yes, I instructed Baker to have the curricle prepared. If we leave now, we will have plenty of time for you to catch the mail coach at eleven."

"Curricle, is it?" Danielle slung the long-handled bag over her shoulder. It was heavier than she expected, and she adjusted the weight. For two weeks she would be living out of this bag. "Can you handle two horses?"

Jeanette straightened to her full, unimposing height. "Danielle Augusta Galloway, I am not some shatterbrained miss, barely out of leading strings. My father has complete confidence in my driving abilities."

Uncle Wesley might, but from the way Kate's eyes widened, it was obvious the maid had heard tales about the young mistress of Harmony Manor's clumsy handling of the ribbons.

No matter. All Jeanette had to do was aim the horses in the direction of Heptonstall, the nearby village. Once there, Danielle would purchase passage on the public mail coach headed for Bath. Then, properly attended to by Kate, Jeanette would reverse her direction and head back to Harmony Manor. She would be safe, and Danielle would be bound for Bath and darling Benjamin. It was a foolproof plan.

Anticipating her brother's joy at her unexpected arrival, Danielle shooed her two unwilling accomplices out the door so they all could take their places in the waiting curricule.

Heptonstall, West Yorkshire, was a village taken over by industry--handloom weaving, in particular. From where Danielle stood, she could see nothing but rows of stone buildings and cobblestone streets. Foliage of any type was definitely in the minority. The price of progress, she supposed, but she couldn't wait to be on her way and breathe the clean fresh air that was plentiful in the surrounding countryside.

Standing in front of The Cross Inn, a quaint pub with bay windows looking out onto the steep main street, Danielle watched her cousin's receding carriage lumber out of sight. No doubt about it; no matter what Jeanette thought, the plain and naked truth was that the dear girl was cow-handed.

And poor Kate sat as a prisoner by Jeanette's side.

Danielle shrugged away these concerns. The hour was nigh on eleven, and soon the mail coach would arrive. Restless energy filled her, so she hiked her carpetbag back onto her shoulder and paced up the street. She turned and started to walk back down.

"Psst!"

A noise coming from an alley attracted her attention. She glanced over and saw two young boys, even younger than her pretended age, gesturing for her to come over. One of them had vivid red blood running down his bare forearm.

"Cor! Me chum's 'urt, 'e is! Can ya 'elp us?"

Danielle hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to do, then her natural sympathy broke through. She rushed toward the boys. "Yes, I can bind his arm with a scarf--"

Pain exploded under her left eye. She blinked, then felt the street urchins strike her again, this time with a blow to the other side of her face. Jagged colors of agony stabbed her, temporarily blinding her. Powerless to stop her movements, she fell to her knees, then down on the cobblestones.

"Wot a cork-brained puppy!" a rough voice exclaimed.

Through rapidly swelling eyelids, Danielle gazed up at her tormentors.

The "injured" boy wiped the blood off his arm, then yanked on her carpetbag until it was free. "Ya don't mind if we 'ave a look-see in yer bag, now do ya, brat? We be much obliged to ya."

"Not my bag," she groaned. Everything she needed for her trip was inside the satchel, although that, obviously, was the least of her problems now.

That she made a noise apparently angered her assailants. They both kicked her in the stomach, then ran out of the alley.

Danielle lost consciousness to the sound of raucous laughter pounding in her ears.

Edward Sterling, the fifth Earl of Trelaine--a title newly inherited and completely unwanted--urged his horse up the steep street toward the welcoming entrance of one of Heptonstall's pubs, The Cross Inn. How he longed for a drink of frothy pale ale.

Using his handkerchief, he wiped the sweat pouring from his brow. This perspiration had nothing to do with the temperate June weather. Indeed, he could blame his discomfort on his latest attempt to be a good Samaritan.

He pocketed the handkerchief. Damn, but he was too old to act the part of Sir Galahad to a young damsel in distress.

"I say, that was jolly good fun, what?" His companion, Xavier Raleigh--Viscount Raleigh to the uninitiated, X to his lady friends--easily kept his horse abreast. Under Raleigh's beaver hat, there was little sign of sweating, even though he had done equal, if not more of the rescue work.

Then again, Raleigh had fewer years to his name than Edward. Ten less, to be precise. And every one of Edward's seven and thirty years seemed to hang like boulders around his neck. War could do that to a man--age him beyond his years.

"Hardly fun, Raleigh." Edward took care to guide his horse over uneven cobblestones. "Propelling that curricule out of the ditch was damned hard. Fortunate for us that a wheel did not break." He shook his head. "That young chit had no business handling the reins on a two-horse rig. I will wager she was just out of leading strings."

"Maybe so, old fellow, maybe so." Raleigh's blue eyes twinkled under the shade of his large hat. "But the girl was very easy on the eyes, wouldn't you say? Such a dark-haired beauty, and those delicious curls!" He sighed. "'Tis a pity she refused to divulge her name."

"Most likely afraid word of her misadventure will reach her father." As Edward headed toward The Cross Inn's postboy, the thought of a cool beverage teased his lips. "Cannot blame her, though. If she were my daughter, I would tan the gel's hide."

His friend laughed, exposing his even, white teeth. "Rather indelicate action, Sterling, especially as you are not the maiden's father."

He returned his companion's laugh. "Nor would I wish to be, having never fallen prey to the parson's mousetrap."

His friend's easy smile now dimmed. "How cynical you have become in the years away from your estate in Gainford. And perhaps I should call you Trelaine now that you're an earl."

"It is of no import." Edward shrugged. He was too old for the pomp and circumstance of titles--titles of nobility, at any rate. He had been known, until recently, as Captain Sterling. Now it was Lord Trelaine. He preferred the former.

And as for being cynical; he had every right to be. Raleigh would never understand. He had never experienced the horrors of war. All he was concerned about was the tie of his cravat.

Arriving at the inn, Edward allowed the postboy to hold his horse while he alighted. Just as he did, he spotted two unsavory looking youths dashing out of an alley a short ways up the street.

"Damnation," he exclaimed wearily. If one plus one equaled two, then fleeing street urchins meant some unfortunate had just been rolled.

He hesitated. Although the multi-colored sign of The Cross Inn beckoned, his tedious do-gooder side won out. "Raleigh, shall we save the day once again?"

Without waiting for a reply, Edward sprinted up the hill. Regrettably, the two miscreants traveled much faster. By the time he reached the alley, the boys had left him in the dust. They also had left behind a tapestry wool carpetbag, partially open and thrown into the street.

Panting heavily, Edward glanced inside the narrow lane and spotted a crumpled figure. Dressed in knee breeches that had seen better days, the victim remained as still as the dead.

He called back to his friend. "Raleigh, you get the bag. I will check on this hapless fellow."

As Edward approached the prone figure, a foul odor assailed his nostrils. The smell didn't emanate from the wounded man, but from the bricks and stones of the alleyway itself.

Edward wrinkled his nose, then got down on one knee. He turned the fallen body over. Good Lord! It was only a boy. A mere stripling of a lad. Perhaps four and ten. The young cub's delicate features had suffered cruel blows to the cheeks and jaw. His eyes, swollen shut, puffed out like hot air balloons. Skin newly-bruised turned pink, blue, and purple, to disguise whatever fine form the lad had.

In truth, the sting of a tear marred Edward's vision. This handsome boy had been pummeled past recognition. Did he still breathe?

His meager chest rose and fell. Yes, the good Lord was merciful. The cub's mother would have no cause to wear mourning clothes tonight.

Without another thought, Edward swept up the lad in his arms and headed toward The Cross Inn. Begad, a sack of potatoes had more weight than this inconsequential piece of baggage.

The wool carpetbag slung over his shoulder, Raleigh fell into step beside him. "Poor little beggar," Raleigh tsk-tsked as he gazed at the boy's wounds. "One more blow and 'tis a certainty, he'd have been done for."

Edward didn't reply. He carried the boy up the inn's steps and through the open oak door. "A private parlor," he ordered of the inn's proprietor. "Bring along a washbowl with hot water. Clean cloths as well. Make it quick, my good man."

"Yes, my lord." The proprietor led them into a spacious room. As the man was about to leave, no doubt to accomplish the rest of his tasks, Raleigh, as practical as ever, stopped him.

"And do bring us a hearty repast as well." Raleigh glanced at Edward, then blushed. "Er, I am sure the boy must be famished."

"Very good, my lord." The proprietor bowed, then closed the door behind him.

Edward laid the boy on an upholstered settee. He rested his gaze on the lad for a

moment. For some reason he was disconcerted.

He abruptly turned away. "Always thinking about your stomach, are you not, Raleigh?"

"A fellow has to eat," Raleigh said simply. "As the good doctor, Samuel Johnson, once remarked, "He who does not mind his belly will hardly mind anything else."

Edward wandered around the parlor, taking care to duck under a particularly low-hanging ceiling beam. His feet soon brought him back to the unconscious boy and his battered face. Edward frowned. Where the devil was that hot water he requested?

He smoothed flaxen hair off the child's forehead. "Fencing with quotes, Raleigh? Then what about this trifle of wisdom from the Colonial statesman, Ben Franklin? 'One should eat to live, not live to eat.'"

Raleigh walked over to the table, pulled out a roughly hewn chair, and sat down with a thud. He clapped his hands against his slightly bulging midsection. "I cry peace, old fellow. We have been traveling since eight, this a.m. 'Tis only natural we seek to replenish ourselves."

"Speak for yourself, Raleigh." Edward could go without food for several days--because of necessity, not preference. The high seas were known to be a harsh mistress. Oftentimes, starvation became the norm.

The doors opened and the serving staff of The Cross Inn entered bearing fragrant dishes. While Raleigh's attention was riveted to the table, Edward was more interested in a steaming washbowl. He indicated that it be placed next to the settee, waited for the servants to finish their tasks, then dismissed them.

Instead of sitting at the table, he moved a chair over to the settee.

"I say, don't mind if I start without you, hey?" Raleigh hungrily eyed a large rump of beef.

"Just make certain you leave me a morsel." Edward picked up a clean cloth and dipped it into the water. He'd had much practice in nursing fallen comrades. "Make that two morsels. This lad could use a substantial meal."

As he dabbed at the bloody scrapes, the boy groaned. The next second, vivid green eyes blinked at Edward.

"Oh!"

Edward laid a hand on the child's shoulder to prevent him from sitting up. "Stay, young bantling. You are among friends." He spoke as he would to soothe a frightened colt. "I fear you have sustained some injuries."

Blinking rapidly, the boy darted his gaze from Edward to the dining table.

Fork in hand, Raleigh waved. "Heigho!"

Who could remain afraid in the presence of Raleigh's easy and unaffected manners? The boy settled back against the cushions.

"What is your name, lad?" Edward continued cleaning the wounds.

"D-Danny," the boy whispered.

"Have a last name, son?"

The green eyes widened for a split second, then Danny replied, "Um, Augustus. I-I do not remember...."

"Of course you don't, young fellow," Raleigh exclaimed as he chewed his food. "Two hell-hatched street urchins used you as a punching bag. Pounded the stuffing out of you. Lucky to be alive."

Danny patted down his body as if verifying that the stuffing was indeed beaten out of him. When his hand came into contact with Edward's, the boy pulled back as if scalded.

Edward smiled at the lad to put him at ease. "I am Edward Sterling and my ravenous friend over there is Xavier Raleigh."

The blood on Danny's face had finished flowing freely, but swelling and a rainbow of bruising colors distorted his appearance. Indeed, he looked like an overgrown pomegranate.

Holding out his hand to help the boy up, Edward smiled again. "Come, you must join us in this repast. You need some solid food under your belt."

As Danny sat up, a pained expression disfigured his face even further. Poor little bugger said nary a word in complaint, however. He staggered to his feet. Whether he could remain standing was anyone's guess.

Taking matters in his own hands, Edward easily lifted the boy and set him at the table. "You are bound to be a bit shaky after that experience. Not to worry, Danny. Youth is on your side. You will heal quickly."

Then Edward dismissed the boy from his mind. The food was displayed buffet style, so he helped himself to a large slice of beef, a heaping of potato salad, a spoonful of stewed cucumbers, and two hot rolls.

For a time silence ruled the parlor. Each occupant concerned himself with the business of eating. The Cross Inn had prepared a tasty meal, and Edward strove to do it justice. He was on his third buttered roll when Raleigh broke the quiet.

"I say, we're as lively as corpses, aren't we?" Raleigh leaned back from the table and stretched out his arms. His mouth also stretched into a yawn. "Damme, but I could take a snooze right about now."

"Sluggard." Edward spoke with no malice. He polished off the last of his beer. "Miles to go before we reach our destination."

Raleigh's hands rested on top of his now engorged middle. "Why the deuce don't we journey someplace closer? Too far away, Bath is."

The boy gasped. Up until this moment, not a peep had escaped him.

Edward set his mug down and steadily regarded Danny. His behavior was all a young lad's should be in the company of his betters. Indeed, if it were not for his ragged clothes, Edward would've guessed the boy to be of gentle birth. His table manners were pleasing--unexpectedly so. Napkin in lap, Danny had kept his gaze down for the entire meal and had concentrated on his food. Until now.

So what had disturbed the boy's equanimity?

"Is that where you're headed, my fine lad?" Raleigh asked. "To the fashionable resort town of Bath?"

Danny returned his gaze to his empty plate. A strand of his pale hair hung down over his cheek. "If it please you, sir, yes. Yes, I am."

"And why is that?" Edward was unaccountably troubled. The reason for this was quite simple. In addition to its famous healing waters, Bath had a reputation as a pleasure city. Despite the ravishes to Danny's face, he was a handsome boy. Did he seek his fortune based upon that fact?

"I visit my, um, cousin, sir. He is ill and I wish to...to help him."

An admirable sentiment, however Edward couldn't banish the growing feeling that the boy was hiding something. "Where are you from? Who do you serve?"

"I hail from a place east of Heptonstall, sir, and do odd jobs for the local gentry." Danny's slender fingers fiddled with a button on his leather jerkin. "I have no master," he added defiantly.

"And without a feather to fly with either, I will wager," Raleigh interjected. "I found your carpetbag. You've been stripped clean, young fellow."

The boy's face turned white--as much as it was possible for bruised skin to lose color. "No money! What will I do now?" he whispered.

Edward shrugged. "Lick your wounds back at home, bantling. Your great adventure has died a cruel death."

Danny's eyes flashed and his voice grew hard. "No! I cannot. I will not." He cleared his throat. "I am an...orphan."

Blast. Edward scowled. How could he not intervene on the boy's behalf?

Danny excused himself from the table. "Where is my carpetbag, sir? I-I would like to see what remains of my possessions."

Raleigh answered first. "By the fireplace." He then gave Edward a pointed look. Obviously he wanted Edward to take a hand in the boy's affairs.

Edward sighed his defeat. Would there be no end to his good Samaritan deeds today?

Sitting on the stone floor by the fireplace, Danny rifled through the large bag all the while rubbing his midsection with his hand. A play of emotions flitted across his swollen face. Emotions all pertaining to sorrow.

"What's missing, lad?" Edward questioned.

"Only the most important item. The purse." Danny's slight shoulders slumped.

He was a dejected sight indeed.

"Well, buck up," Raleigh stood. He brushed the nuncheon's crumbs from his breeches. "Sterling here, or rather I should say the Earl of Trelaine, has a proposal for you."

Damn the man. Edward frowned again. Why did his friend have to be such a gabster?

"Earl? Proposal?" Still on the floor, Danny lifted his watery gaze to Edward.

Edward glared his annoyance at his friend, then turned his attention to the boy. "What my irritating companion means is that as we are journeying to Bath, you may accompany us. As my page. Doing light jobs--carrying, fetching, attending to our needs. That sort of thing. What say you?"

A war must have waged inside Danny's head. His puffy lips trembled and he darted his gaze left and right, obviously indecisive.

Begad, he should have been jumping for joy--the little ingrate.

Edward paused at that thought. Why was he being so hard on the boy?

Danny slowly stood, favoring his left side. He made his way over to Edward and stopped in front of him. "Thank you, my lord. You have been very kind. 'Tis good of you to offer me this position. I shall do my best."

Edward couldn't help but admire the young lad. Plucky little thing, he was.

"So," Edward got up from the table and arched his back. Sitting for any length of time tightened his muscles. "Let us finish here at The Cross Inn and continue on to Bath."

Raleigh glanced out the window at the nearby stable. "Danny here will need a horse."

Edward sighed. Until he met with his solicitor in Bath, he had no idea how his finances stood. And now here was another unexpected expense.

He looked at Danny's meager form. The boy could ride in front of him on his horse.

He only thought that for a moment. No. For some peculiar reason, the idea was too appealing by half.

"Come," Edward walked to the parlor's double doors. "I must procure a horse for my new page."



Copyright 2009 by Susanne Marie Knight. Available January 2009. To order ebook, go to Awe-Struck eBooks, <http://www.awe-struck.net>. To order print go to www.susanneknight.com.orders.htm.