



*Welcome to
the World of*



STEPHANIE
LAURENS

Dear Reader,

I'm delighted to welcome you to the World of Stephanie Laurens. Why "the World"? Because that's the most accurate way of describing how my books relate to each other – each is a separate window onto the same largely fictional world.

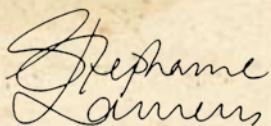
Family and friendships are what makes any world go around, at least on the personal and emotional plane. Consequently, although each of my books focuses on two principal characters, the hero and heroine, as neither exist in a vacuum, their brothers, sisters and other family members, or their close friends, appear in their story, and in return the hero and heroine of one book are very likely to waltz past in the background of one of their sibling's or friend's books.

My world is a part of the haut ton of Regency England, a specific social strata peopled by the "upper ten thousand," the aristocratic families and their connected offshoots. My characters all belong to this relatively small group of people, so it's unsurprising that some characters, like the fabled Lady Osbaldestone, and Helena, Dowager Duchess of St. Ives, appear in many stories, lending their wisdom and guidance as ladies of their age and experience tend to do. Similarly, various characters from the Cynster novels swan past in the backgrounds of the Bastion Club novels, and vice versa.

So each book, although focusing on one couple, gives you another glimpse into the lives of the same larger group in society.

I hope you enjoy visiting my world, through my books already published as well as the works to come. Read on to discover more – answers to questions about the world's structure, what's real, what's not, and numerous other issues readers love to know.

Have fun!

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Stephanie Laurens". The script is elegant and cursive, with the first name and last name clearly legible.

Some specific questions readers often want to know:

How real are the Cynsters? And their houses?

Not real at all. The Cynsters are not based on any family that actually existed. Some readers are convinced I'm working from some family's archives, but no—Cynsters, Bastion Club members, and all others are entirely figments of my imagination. The only characters in my novels who ever existed are historical figures such as the Prince Regent, the patronesses of Almack's and a few social and/or political figures mentioned in passing, like Wellington. Real people are never central characters in my works.

Likewise their houses. No, you cannot go on a tour of England viewing the various "Cynster" houses—they don't exist, and never have. They are not even modeled on houses that exist, or have ever existed. That said, I lived in England for four years and visited many stately homes, so my imaginary houses are "conglomerates" of houses I've walked through—the bedroom from here, the Adams fireplace from there—all mixed up and swirled together in the melting pot of my memory.

So what is real?

In my works, the geography map-wise is accurate—roads are where I say they are, and go from this town to the next as I say they do, and yes, it would take a curricule that long to travel that distance. My streets of London really are the streets of London, and the relative affluence of the various areas is as pertained during Regency times.

However, my topography is fictional—if I need a hill with a certain view along this particular road at that point, then that's where the hill will be. I'm describing views that are known to exist in the neighborhood, and which in many cases I've observed first-hand, but the precise location of that lookout is my creation.

As mentioned above, all known historical figures are accurately portrayed.

Otherwise . . . one point to bear in mind when reading the works of storytellers is that we are writing to entertain you, not to educate you. Consequently, while we necessarily must use sufficient historical accuracy to create the right ambience and atmosphere for whatever period we're using, getting buried in historical detail isn't entertaining, nor is adhering to historical detail to the detriment of the story. If there's a point where *minor* historical detail gets in the way of telling a good story, then history has to

give way to storytelling, because it's you, the reader, we have to satisfy, not the history police.

As an example of that last point, think of men's shirts. Buttons down the front of men's shirts were not widely used until the early 1830s. However, I've decided that my Cynster and Bastion Club novel male characters all went to a shirtmaker who was ahead of his time – logically there must have been at least one shirtmaker who started the trend; they'd had buttons for some time. So my male characters' shirts often have buttons down the front. Why? Because all my heroines are significantly shorter than their respective heroes, and there is no way on earth a shorter female can divest a taller, much broader male of a shirt that doesn't have buttons down the front. And believe me, there are only so many ways you can write a love scene where the hero has to break away, step back, and pull his shirt off over his head. Yes, you can do it well once or twice, but routinely, shirts without buttons down the front are . . . limiting.

On the other hand, what I write about society and its mores, social strictures, and boundaries is real—a fairly accurate portrayal of what went on in the upper echelons of society at that time. For those who are Austen fans and fondly believe she depicted how all English society behaved in terms of marriage and courtship—think again. Austen only wrote of one aristocrat in all her works (Lady de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*), and that picture is widely accepted by Austen scholars as a caricature. Austen's works are socially accurate, but she wisely limited the social class of which she wrote to her own. She was a country vicar's daughter, and had no experience of, and so never attempted to write of, the aristocracy—the haut ton to which all my characters belong. And all the factual evidence suggests that in wider society, and especially the higher echelons of the upper classes, then as now, intercourse was considered an integral and normal part of courtship, albeit serious courtship; it was not something left to the wedding night except in unusual circumstances. The average age at which women married varied between 22 and 24 throughout this period.

On matters such as politics, commerce, police and military actions, and so on—for instance the Peninsula War battles referred to in many of my novels, or the investment in building of railways in *The Taste of Innocence*—the actions described either did happen, or could have happened, at the time and in the way I have described them.

Overall, I adhere to the one guiding rule any author writing historical fiction should follow: whatever you describe has to be possible. It may not

be common, obvious, or even all that probable, but it absolutely has to be possible.

Why are so many historical romances, including all of mine, set in Regency England?

Most books set in England between 1800 and 1840 have a “Regency” feel. The reason that era is so useful for romance authors stems from the wide-ranging social changes that were occurring over that time, and the parallels, or echoes, those create with our time, and the lives of our readers.

To summarize these:

a) whether it was the influence of the romantic poets (late 1700s) or simply the passage of years, by the early 1800s it was becoming increasingly acceptable for aristocratic couples to marry for love, as distinct from what prior to that period had been considered the right and proper and indeed only acceptable reason for marriage—the transfer of property and the getting of an heir.

So for the first time, aristocratic heroes and heroines were faced with a real choice—to marry for love, or not. That is a choice that resonates with today’s readers—to marry for love, or not.

b) aristocratic females had a greater degree of freedom provided they were wealthy enough, and remained unwed, or married a man amenable to allowing them their independence. In other words, aristocratic females, unlike their more lowly born peers, could be sufficiently independent to create their own lives—like Phoebe Malleson in *To Distraction*, and Sarah Conningham in *The Taste of Innocence*. Such women could create lives that did not revolve around marriage, yet still remain accepted within their social circle. Some, like Penelope Ashford, could be quite eccentric, but because of their social standing and that of their families, remain accepted by the ton.

Sadly, this relative freedom did not long survive Victoria’s marriage to Albert, hence the “Regency” period is something of a window for independent women, and again, that independence, the search for their own lives outside of or beyond marriage, resonates powerfully with women today.

c) the haut ton—the upper echelon of society—lived in a fabulous, glittering world, with massive houses, expensive clothes, dashing carriages. The background to stories set in the haut ton is attractive to readers—a glimpse into a glamorous world of wealth and consequence. Just as the lives of wealthy modern-day celebrities exerts a powerful attraction for readers, so too do the lives of their historical counterparts.

d) there was a great deal of social upheaval going on throughout

the wider Regency period, leading to the emergence of social and political conscience that went further than noblesse oblige. This creates a background with a wide range of potential avenues to exploit for story plots—such as employment agencies, orphanages and investment schemes—as well as adding edge to the more usual intra-family plots.

Why are heroes and often heroines usually wealthy aristocrats?

The answer lies above. It was only those belonging to the haut ton who were faced with the question to marry for love or not—and who were free to and could decide either way. In all other social strata, the reason for marriage had for centuries been largely because of physical attraction. In Regency times, the middle class had not yet come into being. Below the aristocracy, there came various levels of gentry, then those involved in commerce, and the shopkeepers and traders, and then the workers and peasantry. As Austen's works demonstrate, within the gentry, even if there was a token nod toward wealth and family standing as criteria, liking for a partner played the major role in determining marriages.

Not so for the members of the haut ton—for them, this period is the first when they, free of all other constraints as no other class could be, came to face the question: To marry for love, or not?

Today that is still the crucial question in any romance.

So it's the characters and the social world of the aristocracy that most strongly resonate with modern day readers and the questions and challenges modern readers face. This is why in Regency-set novels, the aristocratic world is the favored setting.

Why aren't the books always in chronological order?

I've always resisted labelling my works a "series", because to readers "series" implies one of two things—the books are written in a fixed chronological order, and/or the plots are such that you must read the books in a fixed order, namely the order in which they were published. With my works, neither of those is true. The only aspect that links every book into the group are the characters. Each book can be read entirely on its own, without loss of meaning.

Much confusion is generated when readers assume that a long running group of novels are necessarily written in chronological order. Since the release of *The Taste of Innocence*, I've been inundated by emails from readers wishing to point out that in that volume, Simon Cynster and Portia

are not wed. “But they were married in book #10!” the readers cry. “Ah,” say I. “But have you noticed that *The Taste of Innocence* is set more than two years before the events of *The Perfect Lover*?” So no, Simon and Portia are not yet married in *The Taste of Innocence*.

Why jump around in time? Because of characters’ ages. There’s a gap of nine years between *The Perfect Lover* and the book before it, *On a Wicked Dawn*. But after *On a Wicked Dawn*, readers wanted to hear Simon and Portia’s story straight away as the next volume, and because of their respective ages in *On A Wicked Dawn*, that meant jumping from 1826 to 1835.

The following Cynster novel, *The Ideal Bride*, then had to step back to 1826, to pick up the story of Michael Anstruther-Wetherby immediately after he’d left a wedding breakfast that occurred midway through *On a Wicked Dawn*.

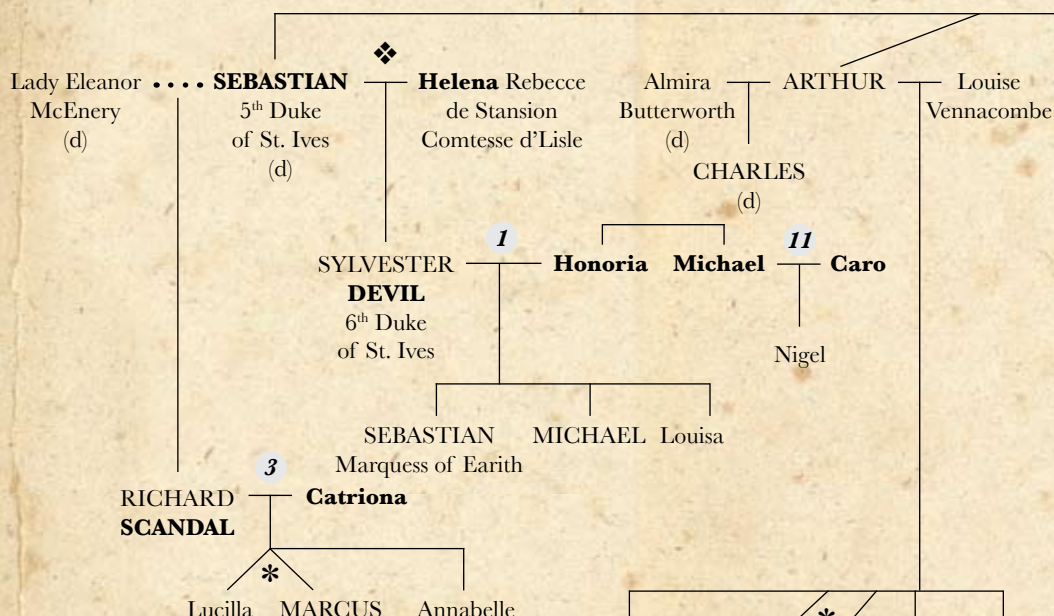
The subsequent Cynster novels were about a group of friends who were also Cynster connections, and were set in 1831, 1831, then 1833, and the upcoming Cynster novel, *Where The Heart Leads*, is set in November 1835—the first book to be set after *The Perfect Lover*. And yes, Simon and Portia are married in that.

But we’re then going to swing back again, to 1826 for the story of Jonas Tallent, and then advance through time once more as we move through the romances of the five as-yet-unwed Cynster girls. Again, the year in which each of their stories are set will be determined by their ages. The month and year in which each novel commences is always stated at the start of Chapter One.

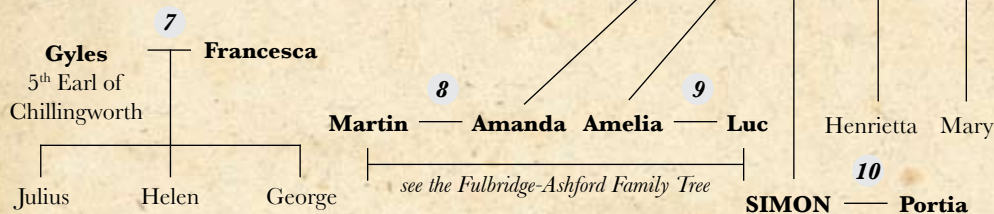
The Cynsters



The Cynster Family Tree

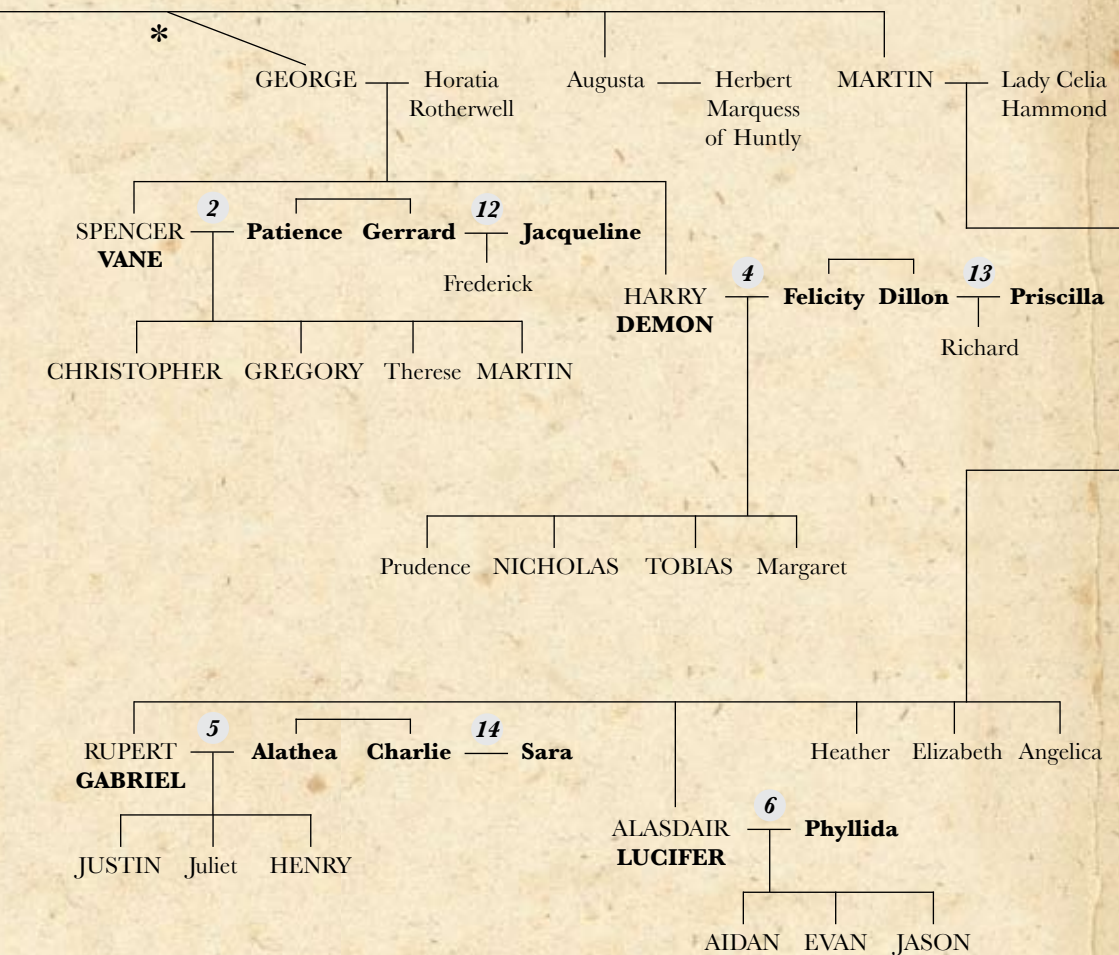


The Rawlings Family Tree



THE CYNSTER NOVELS

- | | | |
|--|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Devil's Bride</i> | 4. <i>A Rogue's Proposal</i> | 7. <i>All About Passion</i> |
| 2. <i>A Rake's Vow</i> | 5. <i>A Secret Love</i> | 8. <i>On a Wild Night</i> |
| 3. <i>Scandal's Bride</i> | 6. <i>All About Love</i> | 9. <i>On a Wicked Dawn</i> |
| ❖ <i>Special—The Promise in a Kiss</i> | | 10. <i>The Perfect Lover</i> |

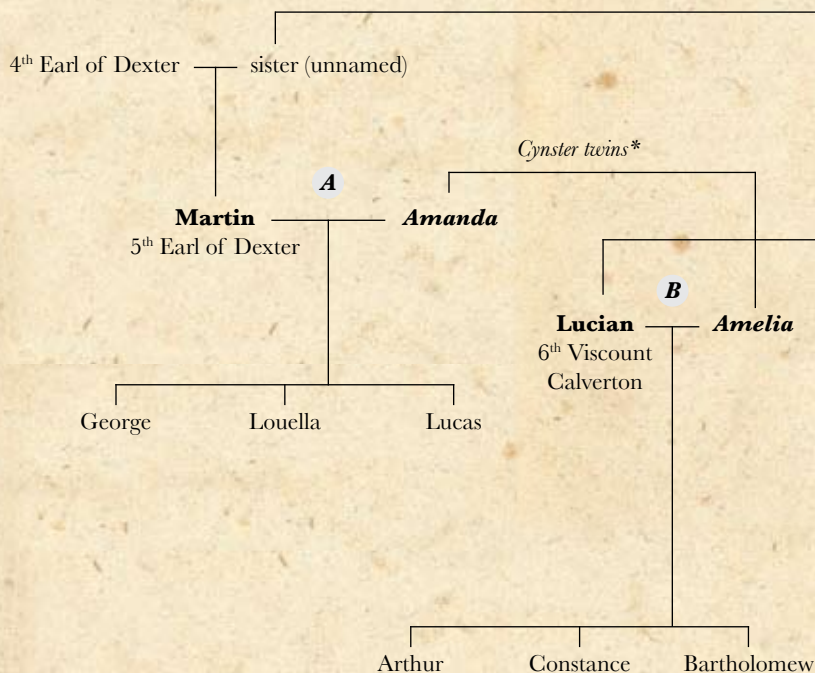


11. *The Ideal Bride*
 12. *The Truth About Love*
 13. *What Price Love?*
 14. *The Taste of Innocence*

MALE Cynsters in capitals

* denotes twins

The Fulbridge-Ashford Family Tree



THE RELEVANT NOVELS

A. *On a Wild Night*

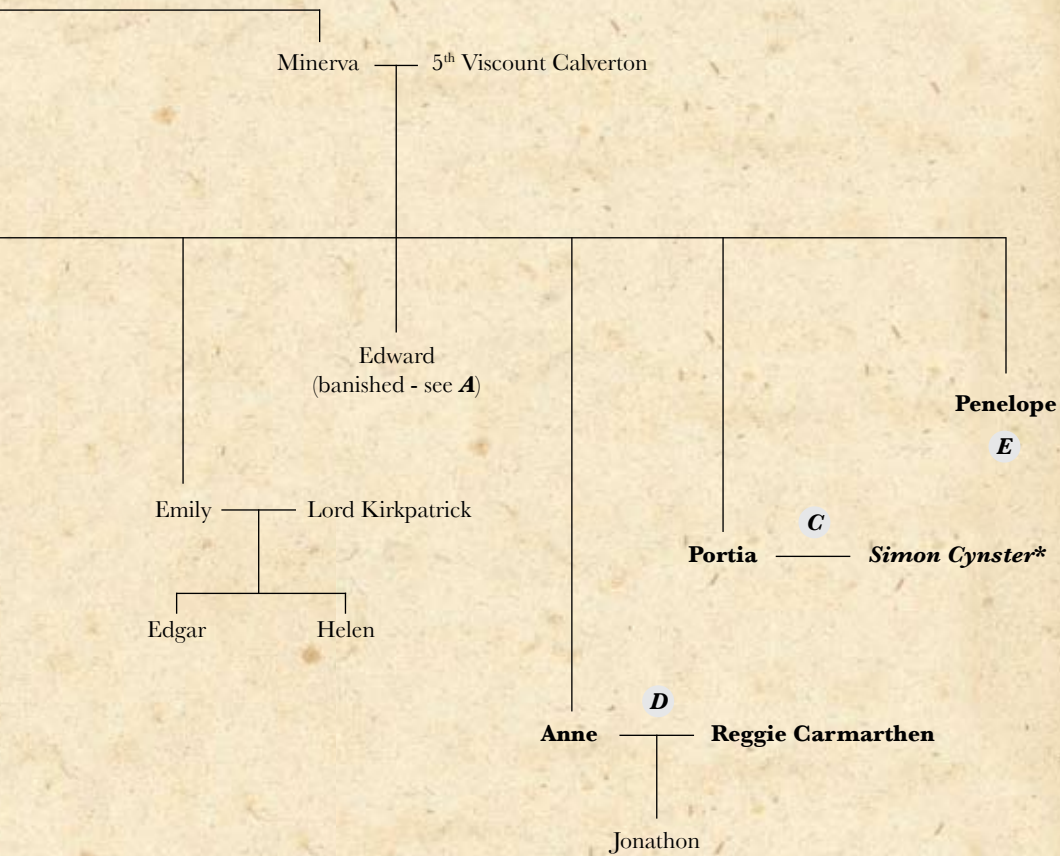
B. *On a Wicked Dawn*

C. *The Perfect Lover*

D. *Lost & Found* novella in anthology *Hero, Come Back*

E. *Where The Heart Leads* (February 2008)

Connections to Cynsters noted*



*See Cynster Family Tree



SETTING
1818 England

CHARACTERS
Devil Cynster
Honoria Anstruther-Wetherby

RECURRING CHARACTERS
Members of the Bar Cynster
Gyles Rawlings, Earl of Chillingworth
Helena, Dowager Duchess of St. Ives

Devil's Bride

First published March 1998

Was he the husband of her dreams . . . or a devil in disguise?

When Devil, the Duke of St. Ives and the most infamous member of the notorious Cynster family, is caught in a compromising position with plucky governess Honoria Wetherby, he astonishes the *ton* by proposing marriage. No one ever dreamed this scandalous rogue would ever take a bride!

Honoria, however, isn't about to bend to society's demands and marry a man simply because they've been discovered together unchaperoned. She craves adventure and longs to see the world—and though she's more than happy to assist him in solving the murder of a young Cynster cousin, once the crime is put to rest she intends to bid Devil farewell forever.

But she underestimates the seductive power of this daring, dangerous man, and the scalding heat of her own unsated desire. Does she dare let passion carry her into Devil's embrace . . . and into the most perilous, rapturous adventure of them all?

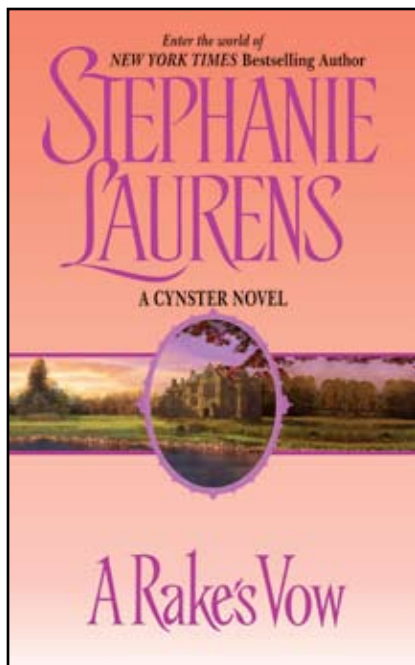
[Buy the e-book](#)

Peek at the Book



Her heart in her throat, Honoria lifted her gaze to the rider's face—and met his eyes. Even in the dimness, she was sure of their color. Pale, lucent green, they seemed ancient, all-seeing. Large, set deep under strongly arched black brows, they were the dominant feature in an impressively strong face. Their glance was penetrating, mesmerizing—unearthly. In that instant, Honoria was sure that the devil had come to claim one of his own. And her, too.

Then the air about her turned blue.



A Rake's Vow

First published October 1998

*He vowed never to marry. She
vowed no man would trap her.
But some vows are meant to be
broken . . .*

Vane Cynster greatly enjoys his dalliances, but he's always remained aloof when other Cynster men stepped up to the altar. Resolved to *never* submit to being leg-shackled to *any* woman, he believes he's found the ideal temporary refuge from London's infuriating husband hunters at Bellamy Hall. But an encounter with the irresistible Patience Debbington has his head—and his heart—spinning . . . and soon he has more than mere seduction on his mind.

But Patience is not about to succumb to arrogant, presumptuous Vane's sensuous propositions. Certainly his kisses leave her weak, his caresses leave her flushed and burning with desire. But he is bound to be unfaithful—just like every man—and despite his assurances, she will not trust the handsome, elegant rogue with her heart.

But can a promise to resist temptation stand firm when passion demands otherwise?

SETTING

1819 Northamptonshire

CHARACTERS

Vane Cynster

Patience Debbington

RECURRING CHARACTERS

Therese, Lady Osbaldestone

Minnie, Lady Bellamy

Timms

Gerrard Debbington

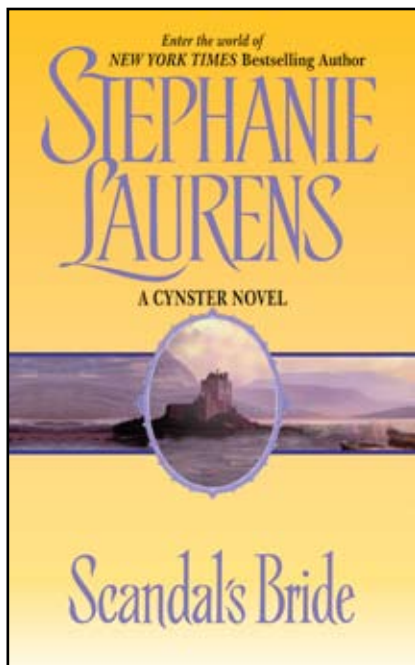
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Peek at the Book



Patience looked up and met the stranger's hooded gaze. As she watched, his grey eyes darkened. The expression they contained—intensely concentrated—sent a most peculiar thrill through her.

She blinked; her gaze fell—to the man's lips. Long, thin yet beautifully proportioned, they'd been sculpted with a view to fascination. They certainly fascinated her; she couldn't drag her gaze away. The mesmerizing contours shifted, almost imperceptibly softening; her own lips tingled. She swallowed, and dragged in much needed breath.



SETTING

1819 Scotland

CHARACTERS

**Scandal Cynster
Catriona Hennessy**

RECURRING CHARACTERS

Helena, Dowager Duchess of St. Ives
Devil Cynster, Duke of St. Ives
Honorio, Duchess of St. Ives

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Scandal's Bride

First published March 1999

*Catriona Hennessy wants an heir.
Richard Cynster wants the rights
of a husband. But neither wants
the inconvenience of a wedding*

Catriona is aghast to learn that her guardian's will decrees that she must marry Richard Cynster . . . *within the week!* How could the proud Scottish lass possibly consent to a union with the English rake they called "Scandal," a masterful man with a deplorable reputation? It is true his commanding presence charms her, his heated kisses excite her—and the mysterious Lady of the Vale whom she serves has prophesied that they *will* wed. But Catriona will *never* give up her independence.

Richard is equally stunned by the will's command, since marriage was not on his agenda. But lately he's been feeling strangely restless—and perhaps taming the exquisite lady is just the challenge he needs. He burns for Catriona—but can he entice her into the marriage bed *without* making any binding and revealing promises of love?

And when passion and love are truly destined, can even the most stubborn of hearts resist?

Peek at the Book



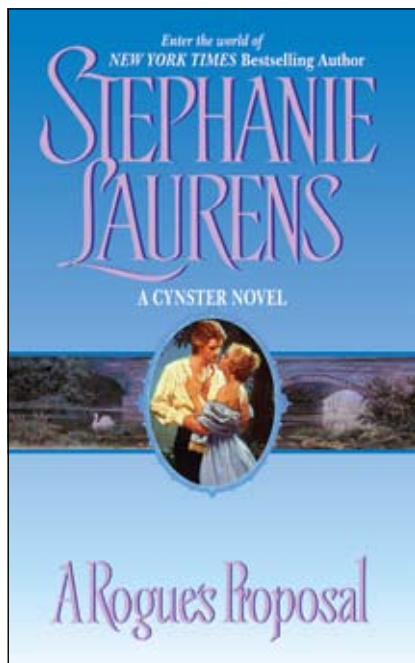
"I'll have you know this is all a *very big mistake!*"

With that, she whirled away. Snow crunched, louder than before, as, in a flurry of skirts and cloak, she stalked off. Brows rising, Richard watched her storm through the lychgate, saw the quick, frowning glance she threw him from the shadows beneath. Then, with a toss of her head, chin high, she marched up the road.

Toward the inn.

The ends of Richard's lips lifted. His brows rose another, more considering, notch. Mistake?

ISBN: 978-0-380-80568-6 • \$7.99 (\$10.99 Can.)



A Rogue's Proposal

First published October 1999

Once a Cynster man meets the woman of his dreams, he will not rest until he possesses her completely . . .

Demon Cynster has sworn that he will never let love bring him to his knees. But now Felicity Parteger stands before him, begging for assistance. The mere chit of a girl who Demon remembers is now all lush curves and sparkling eyes—so temptingly worthy of the devotion he's given to no woman.

SETTING
1820 England

CHARACTERS
Demon Cynster
Felicity Parteger

RECURRING CHARACTERS
Lady Horatia Cynster
Members of the Bar Cynster
Dillon Caxton

Felicity knows that Demon is a rogue and a rake, yet only he can help her free a cousin trapped in a desperate and dangerous coil. She knows this dashing, devil-may-care bachelor will never give her the love she seeks—despite his shocking and quite unnecessary proposal of marriage. The last thing she wants is a man marrying her because he thinks he should, yet a fevered, irresistible desire sweeps through her every time he takes her into his arms.

But can a union built on passion alone be satisfaction enough—especially for a man like Demon Cynster?

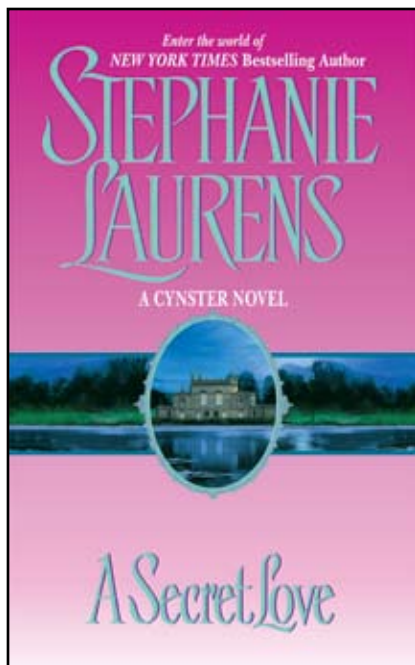
[Buy the e-book](#)

Peek at the Book



With an arrogant smile, Harold Henry Cynster—Demon to everyone, even to his mother in her weaker moments—drew his curricule to a flourishing halt in the yard behind his Newmarket stable. Tossing the reins to his groom, Gillies, who leaped from the back of the elegant equipage to catch them, Demon stepped down to the cobbles. In a buoyant mood, he ran a loving hand over the glossy bay hide of his leader and scanned the yard with a proprietorial eye.

There was not a scheming mama or disapproving, gimlet-eyed dowager in sight.



A Secret Love

First published July 2000

His fascination with her was obsession, overwhelming and complete. But she never dreamed she was so very different from all the others . . .

Gabriel Cynster cannot refuse the mysterious woman who has come to him seeking help. For though her face is hidden by a black veil, her allure is powerful and sensuous. But Gabriel intends to exact a payment only a Cynster would demand: for every bit of information he uncovers, the lady must reward him . . . with a kiss.

Lady Alatheia Morwellan is desperate—otherwise she would never have approached such a dangerous gentleman. Despite the sparks that fly between them, in truth they have never passed even a single civil moment together. But each kiss she offers in payment leads to an embrace—and Alatheia knows she will soon no longer be able to resist the ultimate seduction.

But what will Gabriel do when he learns her shocking secret?

SETTING

1820 London

CHARACTERS

Gabriel Cynster

Lady Alatheia Morwellan

RECURRING CHARACTERS

Lady Celia Cynster

Gyles Rawlings, Earl of Chillingworth

Lord Charles Morwellan

Mr. Heathcote Montague

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Peek at the Book



Gabriel raised both brows; he regarded her with veiled amusement, and a certain respect. She had a boldness rarely found in women—only that could account for this charade, well thought out, well executed. The countess had all her wits about her; she'd studied her mark and had laid her plans—her enticements—well.

She was deliberately offering him a challenge.

Did she imagine, he wondered, that he would focus solely on the company? Was the other challenge she was flaunting before him intentional, or . . . ?

Did it matter?

ISBN: 978-0-380-80570-9 • \$7.99 (\$10.99 Can.)



SETTING
1820 Devon

CHARACTERS
Alasdair “Lucifer” Cynster
Phyllida Tallent

RECURRING CHARACTERS
Jonas Tallent
Demon Cynster
Felicity Cynster

All About Love

First published February 2001

Alasdair Cynster has sworn never to pledge his heart—but destiny has other plans . . .

The last unwed member of the Bar Cynster, Alasdair—known as “Lucifer”—has escaped to Devonshire one step ahead of London’s infuriating matchmaking mamas. But despite his dedication to avoiding the parson’s “noose,” he finds he is quite taken by the irresistible Phyllida Tallent—a willful, independent lovely who brings all of his masterful Cynster instincts rioting to the fore. Perhaps by employing his fabled seduction skills, Lucifer can satisfy his raging desire for the enchantress without the inconvenience of wedding vows.

Her incomparable wit, charm, and beauty have guaranteed that Phyllida will never lack for suitors—though none has tempted her quite as much as this delightful rogue. Lucifer’s offer to school her in the ways of love is almost too tantalizing to refuse. And though she has not yet surrendered completely, Phyllida is aware that only a fool resists a Cynster . . .

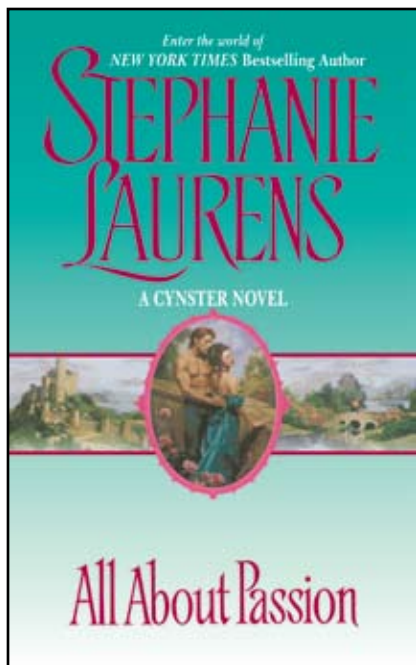
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Peek at the Book



Slowly she reached out. With her fingertips she lightly traced his cheek.

Lucifer felt like he’d been branded—and he recognized the brand. He surged up on one elbow, seizing her wrist, transfixing her with a glare. “It was you.”



SETTING

1820 London

CHARACTERS

**Gyles, Earl of Chillingworth
Francesca Rawlings**

RECURRING CHARACTERS

Devil Cynster, Duke of St. Ives
Honorina, Duchess of St. Ives

All About Passion

First published September 2001

*If one is not marrying for love,
one may as well marry for
something else*

Fate has made Gyles Rawlings a man determined to be in control of his destiny. He has decided to wed a well-bred lady who will dutifully bear him sons, yet turn a blind eye while he takes his pleasure elsewhere. By all good accounts, Francesca will fit his bill. As for the “elsewhere,” he’s recently encountered a beautiful, brazen siren who will make a fine mistress, one with a fiery nature to match his own.

But at the altar, Gyles discovers his bride is the bold enchantress who has inspired his deepest fantasies. Finding passion and love in the same woman has long been a secret fear. But as his world is rocked on its axis, Gyles becomes obsessed with possessing the one thing he thought he would never want: his wife’s heart.

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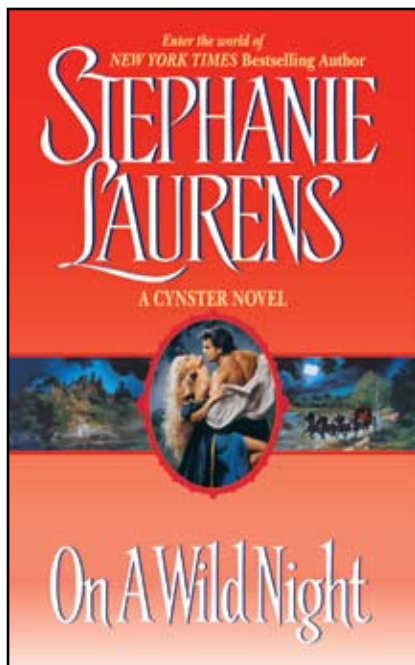
Peek at the Book

She was a goddess designed to fill male minds with salacious imaginings, to claim their senses, snare their hearts, and trap them forever in a world of sensual longing.

And she was his.

And furious.

With him.



SETTING

1825 London

CHARACTERS

Amanda Cynster

Martin Fulbridge, Earl of Dexter

RECURRING CHARACTERS

Amelia Cynster

Reggie Carmarthen

Luc Ashford

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On A Wild Night

First published April 2002

Where are all the exciting men in London?

After years spent in the glittering ballrooms of the *ton*, Amanda Cynster is utterly bored by the current crop of colorless suitors. One night, determined to take matters into her own hands, she shockingly goes where no respectable lady ever should, but where many an intriguing gentleman might be found.

Quite suddenly out of her depth, a panicked Amanda looks for help—and is unexpectedly rescued by Martin Fulbridge, the Earl of Dexter. Lean, sensuous, and mysterious—the epitome of the boldly passionate gentleman Amanda has been searching for—Martin has delayed re-entering society, preferring instead a more interesting existence on its fringes. And his sensuous touch makes it eminently clear that he would be happy to educate her in the arts of love.

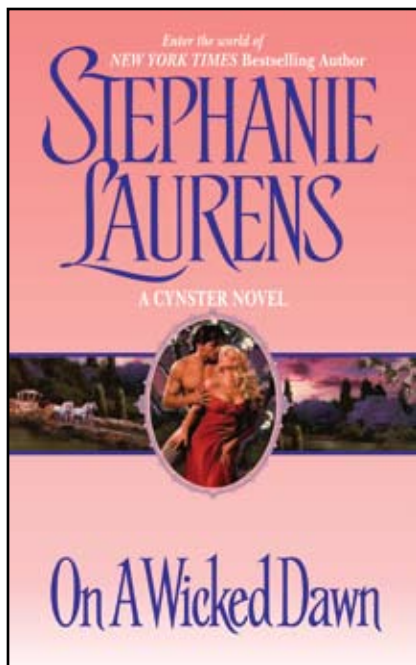
Now Amanda has to wonder: can such a masterful rake be sufficiently tamed into the ways of marriage?

Peek at the Book

Hauling her gaze from it, she looked up at him. It took a moment to get enough breath to even gasp, “You’re Dexter?”

The rakish, rumored-to-be-profligate, elusively mysterious Martin Fulbridge, fifth Earl of Dexter. She certainly knew of him, of his reputation, but tonight was the first time she’d set eyes on him.

When, stunned, she continued to stare, he raised one brow, cynical, yes, but world-weary as well. “Who else?”



On A Wicked Dawn

First published May 2002

“Marrying you will be entirely my pleasure.”

Amelia Cynster hears these words from the handsome, enigmatic Lucien Ashford and is stunned. It's near dawn and she's risked scandal by lying in wait for him just outside his London house. But he agrees to her outrageous marriage proposal—just prior to passing out at her feet. Amelia's torn between astounded relief and indignant affront, then decides she doesn't care. She has always loved him—no other man will do—and, frankly, she's tired of waiting.

Sometimes a young lady needs to take matters into her own hands.

But matters of the heart are never that simple. The first hitch in Amelia's plans comes when Luc refuses to agree to a hasty wedding but insists on properly wooing her . . . in public *and* private. Soon she longs for those moments away from the watchful gaze of the ton, in which she can learn all about seduction from a master. But unbeknown to Amelia, Luc has a very good reason for wooing her. Every wicked gentleman has his price.

SETTING

1825 London

CHARACTERS

Amelia Cynster

Lucien Ashford

RECURRING CHARACTERS

Portia Asford

Penelope Ashford

Anne Ashford

Helena, Dowager Duchess of St. Ives

[Buy the e-book](#)

Peek at the Book



That brief human contact, deadened by layers of fabric though it was, sent sensation rushing through him, and told Luc unequivocally who the dervish was. Amelia Cynster.

The wall behind his shoulders was the only thing keeping him upright. He stared astounded, utterly bemused . . . waited for the effect of her touch to subside . .



SETTING

1819 Northamptonshire

CHARACTERS

Sebastian Cynster

Helena de Stansion

RECURRING CHARACTERS

Therese, Lady Osbaldestone

Lord Arthur Cynster

Lord George Cynster

Lord Martin Cynster

The Promise In A Kiss

First published November 2002

What would you do if the stranger who kissed you—the most handsome man you'd ever seen—was one of the notorious Cynsters?

When a man literally fell at her feet while she was walking through the moonlit convent courtyard, Helena knew he must have been there for a scandalous liaison. Yet she kept his presence a secret from the questioning nuns—and for her silence the stranger rewarded her with an enticing, unforgettable kiss.

What Helena didn't know was that her wild Englishman was Sebastian Cynster, Duke of St. Ives . . . and that this dashing, dangerous nobleman was her destiny. And seven years later, when the tantalizing heiress is dazzling London society with her wit and beauty, Sebastian spies her from across a crowded ballroom.

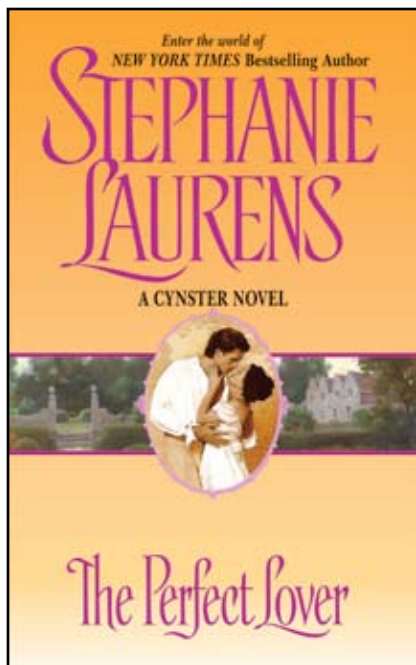
Helena has vowed she will accept no man who tries to tame her—but Sebastian, arrogant and unwavering, is determined to reclaim her . . . as his wife.

[Buy the e-book](#)

Peek at the Book

She heard a muted thud, then another, then, in a flurry of thumps, a body slid and tumbled from high on the wall, missing the edge of the cloister roof to land, sprawled, at her feet.

Helena stared.



SETTING

1831 Newmarket

CHARACTERS

Simon Frederick Cynster
Miss Portia Ashford

RECURRING CHARACTERS

Lady Osbaldestone
Barnaby Adair
Inspector Basil Stokes

The Perfect Lover

First published February 2003

Simon Frederick Cynster is looking for a mate to suite his specific desires—a perfect lady by day . . . and a wanton lover by night

But Simon is not about to broadcast his search to the entire ton and run the risk of every dowager foisting their flighty charges upon him. Instead, he carefully begins his search at a house party at Glossup Hall and is astonished when willfully independent Portia Ashford immediately captures his interest.

He's known Portia since childhood and certainly never considered her a potential wife . . . until an unexpectedly heated kiss changes his mind forever. But as they begin to explore the depths of their passion, a shocking event occurs, one that puts Portia in deadly peril.

Does Simon have the power and the influence to protect his once and always perfect lover?

[Buy the e-book](#)

Peek at the Book



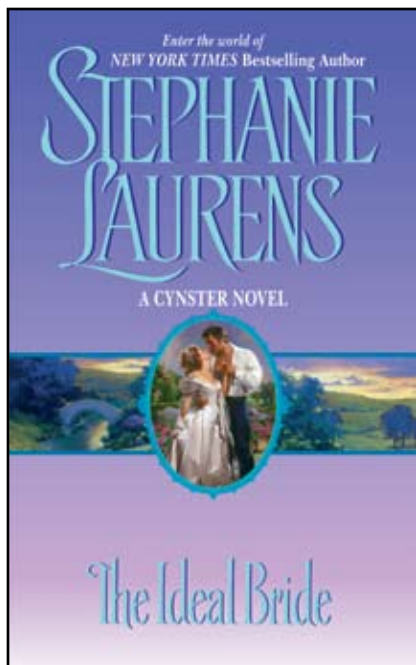
Simon felt thoroughly disconcerted. Not a common feeling, not for him; there wasn't much in tonnish life that could throw him off-balance.

Other than Portia.

If she'd railed at him, used her sharp tongue to its usual effect, all would have been normal. He wouldn't have enjoyed the encounter, but neither would he have felt this sudden disorientation.

Rack his brains though he might, he couldn't recall her ever behaving toward him with such . . . feminine softness was the description that sprang to mind

ISBN: 978-0-06-050572-1 • \$7.99 (\$10.99 Can.)



SETTING

1825 England

CHARACTERS

Michael Anstruther-Wetherby
Caroline Sutcliffe

RECURRING CHARACTERS

Devil, Duke of St. Ives
Honoraria, Duchess of St. Ives
Timothy, Viscount Breckenridge

The Ideal Bride

First published March 2004

Who is this man's ideal bride?

Michael Anstruther-Wetherby is a rising member of Parliament, a man who has everything . . . except a wife. So he begins the search for his ideal bride—a malleable, gently bred young lady, and thinks he has met the perfect match. However, he finds an obstacle in his path, the young lady's beautiful, strong-minded aunt, Caroline Sutcliffe.

Once one of London's foremost diplomatic hostesses, Caro has style and status—and she realizes her young niece is all wrong for Michael. This handsome, aristocratic man needs someone with strength, wit, and sensuality by his side . . . someone more like her.

Suddenly Michael senses he has found his ideal bride—in Caro! Persuading her to accept his hand in marriage will take every ounce of his seductive charm. He tempts and tantalizes Caro beyond all reason—but can he convince her that becoming his wife will bring her all her heart desires . . . and more?

[**Buy the e-book**](#)

Peek at the Book

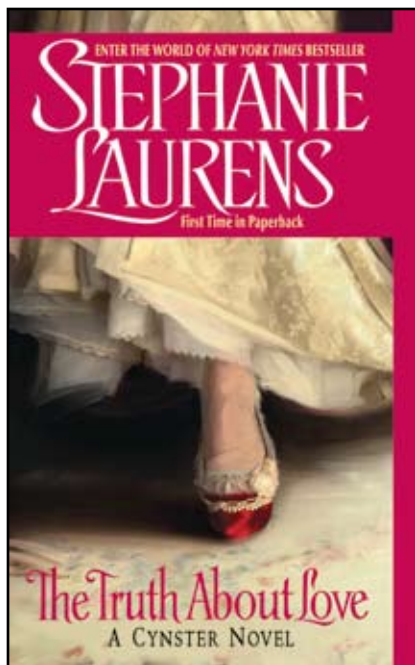


There were only five years between them, yet although they'd known each other since childhood and had spent their formative years growing up in this restricted area of the New Forest, he didn't truly know her at all.

He certainly didn't know the elegant and assured lady she'd become.

She looked at him—caught him looking at her—and smiled easily, as if acknowledging a mutual curiosity.

The temptation to assuage it grew.



The Truth About Love

First published March 2005

Bold, passionate and possessive, the Cynster men let nothing stand in their way when it comes to claiming the women of their hearts

Gerrard Debbington, Vane Cynster's brother-in-law, is one of London's most eligible gentlemen. Uninterested in marriage, his driving passion is to paint the fabled gardens of Lord Tregonning's Hellebore Hall—an opportunity that is now at hand . . . if Gerrard agrees to create an honest portrait of Tregonning's daughter as well.

SETTING

1831 England

CHARACTERS

Gerrard Debbington

Miss Jacqueline Tregonning

RECURRING CHARACTERS

Barnaby Adair

Amelia Cynster

Amanda Cynster

Gerrard chafes at wasting his talents on some simpering miss, only to discover that Jacqueline Tregonning stirs him as no other. Certainly, she is beautiful, but it is her passionate nature that strikes sparks with Gerrard's own, igniting desire and sweeping them into each other's arms, convincing Gerrard that he has found his ideal soul mate—the lady he must have as his wife.

But something is horribly wrong at Hellebore Hall. Evil and lies are reaching out to ensnare Jacqueline—and Gerrard will have to move heaven and earth to protect the remarkable woman who, for him, personifies the truth about love . . .

[**Buy the e-book**](#)

Peek at the Book

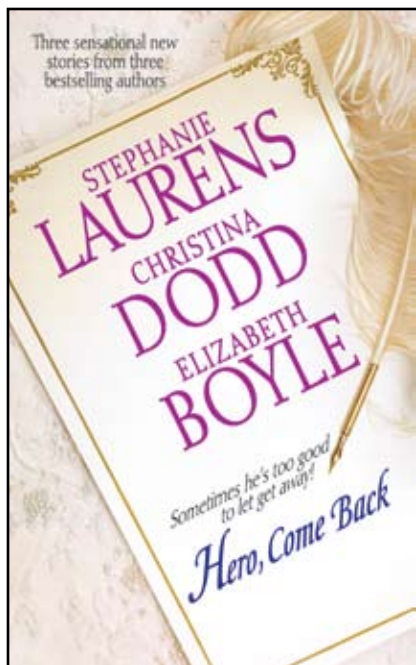


Pushing back from the rock, he straightened and turned.

Only to discover Jacqueline had leaned toward him, fighting to hold her hair with one hand.

They were suddenly very close, their faces only inches apart. Her eyes widened. Her lips were parted; she'd leaned close to say something.

Beyond his control, his gaze dropped to her lips. Soft, intensely feminine, shaped for passion, and mere inches away.



Lost and Found in Hero, Come Back

First published June 2005

In an innovative new twist for readers comes the story of a secondary character from a previous book, starring in his own story. Revisit your favorite Lost Heroes, and see old friends from your favorite books

SETTING

1834 London

CHARACTERS

**Reggie Carmarthen
Anne Ashford**

A resourceful beauty's determination to locate the true father of a poor foundling sets off a society scandal—and ignites a fire in handsome Reggie Carmarthen's world-weary, aristocratic heart, in the unforgettable . . . *Lost and Found*.

[**Buy the e-book**](#)

Peek at the Book



Stepping back again, she locked her eyes on his.

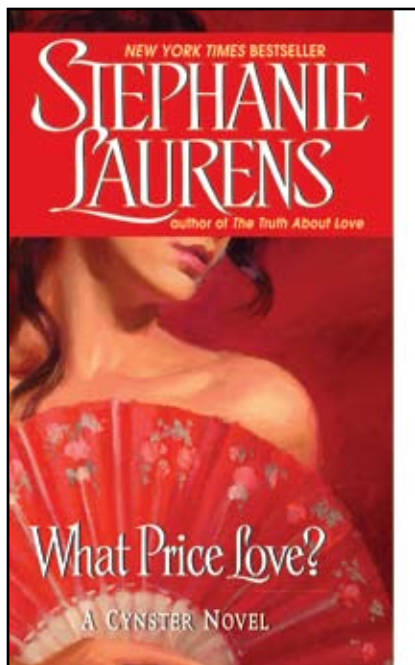
“Thomas now knows—and Hugh hasn’t forgotten, so—”

“All is well on the Benjy front. Quite.”

On the last, ferociously clipped word, Reggie stepped forward again—and her back hit the wall. She didn’t dare blink. He had to be able to see her reaction, yet he took still another step. Deliberately crowding her, leaving her not an inch to breathe.

She’d expected panic to overwhelm her, but it wasn’t fear that raced down her veins. She’d never felt excitement, expectation—exhilaration—to match this.

ISBN: 978-0-06-56450-6 • \$6.99 (\$9.99 Can.)



What Price Love?

First published March 2006

A passionate man and a daring woman confront the ultimate question—what price love?

Dillon Caxton, protégé of Demon Cynster, is disillusioned with love. Blessed with wealth, status, and stunning good looks, he has no time for marriage-hungry misses. As a guardian of the “Sport of Kings,” he has a daring criminal scheme to thwart—one that threatens to wreak havoc on the thoroughbred racing world.

Enter ravishingly beautiful Lady Priscilla Dalloway. She, too, has no time for romance—she has to rescue her horse-mad twin brother from the dangerous swindle in which he’s become embroiled. But the man holding the key to finding her twin is Dillon—who allows her to believe he is immune to her charms.

The lady is Dillon’s only lead to the criminals, and Pris will do *anything* to save her twin, including seducing the said-to-be unsexable. Linked in a journey riddled with danger and passion, they find themselves facing that terrifying question: *what price love?*

SETTING

1831 Newmarket

CHARACTERS

Dillon Caxton

Lady Priscilla Dalloway

RECURRING CHARACTERS

Barnaby Adair

Demon Cynster

Felicity Cynster

[**Buy the e-book**](#)

Peek at the Book

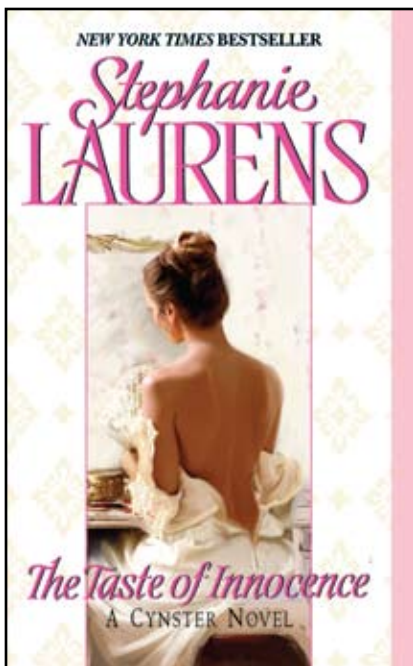


He drew close enough to see the expression in her eyes. There was temper there—an Irish temper to match her accent. It was presently leashed, but she was definitely irritated and annoyed with him.

Because she hadn’t been able to bend him to her will.

He felt his lips curve, saw annoyance coalesce and intensify in her eyes. She really ought to have known just by looking that he wasn’t likely to fall victim to her charms.

Manifold and very real though they were.



The Taste of Innocence

First published March 2007

He knows all too well how dangerous love can be . . .

Charles Morwellan, eighth Earl of Meredith, has seen many happy, successful Cynster unions, but he also watched his father's obsessive love nearly destroy their family, a mistake he has sworn he will not repeat. But he also knows his duty, so has chosen a bride. Sarah Conningham is beautiful enough to grace his arm, and intelligent enough to know the value of his offer. Imagine his shock when she refuses to wed for anything less than intense, unbridled, unbounded love.

SETTING

1833 Somerset

CHARACTERS

Charles Morwellan, Earl of Meredith
Sarah Conningham

RECURRING CHARACTERS

Barnaby Adair
Gabriel Cynster
Alathea Cynster

Now he's determined to win her! In a tantalizing game of pleasure and persuasion, Charles courts Sarah with excruciating propriety during the day, but each night spirits her away into the lush, moonlit gardens where he tutors her in the arts of passion. Sensual embraces soon turn to searing kisses, and much, much more. Yet after their wedding, his polite mask returns, leaving Sarah wondering which man she actually married: the controlled aristocrat, or the lover whose touch leaves her gasping.

[Buy the e-book](#)

Peek at the Book



Now he was talking to her, with her, no longer on any formal plane but on an increasingly personal one; his tone had deepened, becoming more private. More intimate.

She quelled a tiny shiver; at that lower note his voice reverberated through her. She'd wanted to increase the space between them for several minutes, but there was something in the way he looked at her, the way his gaze held her, that made her hesitate, as if to edge back would be tantamount to admitting weakness.

His eyes held hers. Although he didn't move, she felt as if he leaned closer . . .

ISBN: 978-0-06-084087-0 • \$7.99 (\$10.99 Can.)

On Sale in Paperback 10/30/07

The Honorable Barnaby Adair's Investigations involving Cynster connections



Cornwall, June, 1831—Hellebore Hall

Assisting Gerrard Debbington, brother of Patience Cynster,
brother-in-law of Vane Cynster and Miss Jacqueline Tregonning

In The Truth About Love

Newmarket, August, 1831—The Jockey Club

Assisting Dillon Caxton, cousin of Felicity Cynster, brother-in-law of
Demon Cynster and Lady Priscilla Dalloway

In What Price Love?

Somerset, February, 1833—Morwellan Park

Assisting Lord Charles Morwellan, Earl of Meredith, brother of Alatheia
Cynster, brother-in-law of Gabriel Cynster and Miss Sarah Conningham

In The Taste of Innocence

*London, November, 1835—The Foundling House,
Scotland Yard & the East End*

Assisting Miss Penelope Ashford, sister of Luc, Viscount Calverton,
sister-in-law of Amelia Cynster

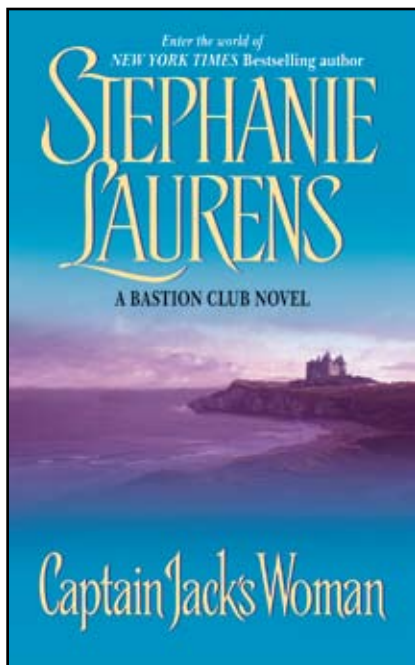
In Where the Heart Leads



A large, elegant, light brown swirl graphic that frames the title text on the left and top.

The Bastion Club

“a last bastion against the matchmakers of the ton”



SETTING
1811 Norfolk

CHARACTERS
Jonathon, Lord Hendon
Miss Kathryn Cranmer

RECURRING CHARACTERS
Anthony Blake, Viscount Torrington

Captain Jack's Woman

First published October 1997

*Before there was the Bastion Club,
there was Captain Jack*

Bored by society's rules and strictures, Kathryn "Kit" Cranmer yearns for adventure—and she finds it on Britain's rugged eastern coast, dressed as a boy at the head of a rag-tag band of smugglers. But there is another who rules the night: the notorious Captain Jack, the ruthless leader of a rival gang who will allow no trespassers . . . and who stops Kit's breath with his handsome, etched features and powerful physique.

In no time, Captain Jack sees through Kit's brazen disguise—and tempts her with kisses that compel the beautiful adventuress to surrender her cherished independence for nights of incomparable bliss. But her lover is much more than he seems—a man of secrets and dangerous mystery—and becoming Captain Jack's woman will carry Kit into a world of sensuous pleasures and unparalleled perils . . . and to new heights of excitement beyond anything she's ever dreamed.

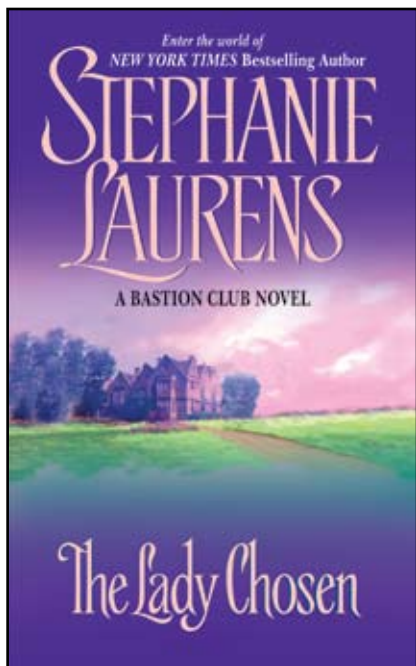
[Buy the e-book](#)

Peek at the Book



Jack's eyes narrowed. Surely there'd been too much swing in the lad's swagger? When on a horse, it was difficult to judge, yet the boy's legs seemed uncommonly long for his height, and more tapered than they ought to be.

With no more than a nod for his men, the lad headed the mare out of the clearing. Jack stared at the black-garbed figure until it merged into the night, leaving him with a headache and, infinitely worse, no proof of the conviction of his senses



SETTING
1815 London

CHARACTERS
Tristan Wemyss, Earl of Trentham
Miss Leonora Carling

RECURRING CHARACTERS
Deverell, Viscount Paignton
Charles St. Austell, Earl of Lostwithiel
Dalziel

[**Buy the e-book**](#)

The Lady Chosen

First published September 2003

Seven of London's most eligible—and adventurous—bachelors have banded together to form the Bastion Club, an elite society of gentlemen dedicated to determining their own futures when it comes to marriage

Tristan Wemyss, Earl of Trentham, never expected he'd have to wed within a year or forfeit his inheritance. But he won't bow to the ton's matchmaking mamas. Instead, he'll marry someone of his own choosing—specifically his enchanting neighbor, Miss Leonora Carling. The lady has beauty, spirit, and passion—qualities Tristan seeks in a mate. Matrimony, however, is the last thing on her mind . . .

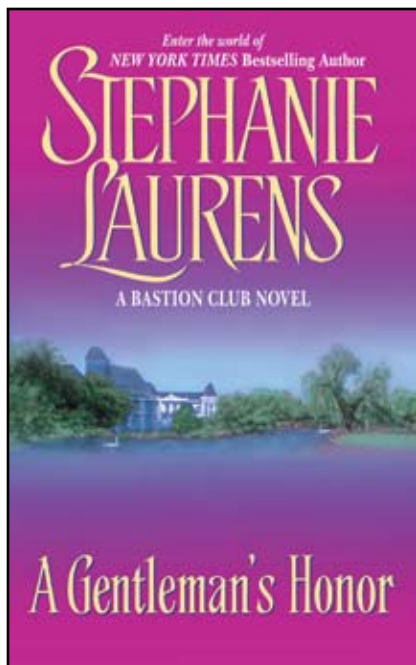
Once bitten, forever shy—never again will Leonora allow any man to capture her heart and break it. But Tristan is a seasoned campaigner who will not accept defeat, especially when a mysterious blackguard with dark designs on Leonora's family home gives him the perfect excuse to come to the lady's aid—as her protector, confidant, seducer . . . and husband.

Peek at the Book



With a wave, he invited her to walk with him the few steps back to the gate.

She turned, only then realized her acquiescence was a tacit acknowledgement that she's come racing out purely to meet him. She glanced up, caught his gaze—knew he'd seen the action for the admission it was. Bad enough. The glint she glimpsed in his hazel eyes, a flash that made her senses seize, her breath catch, was infinitely more disturbing.



SETTING
1816 London

CHARACTERS
Anthony Blake, Viscount Torrington
Alicia Pevensey

RECURRING CHARACTERS
Jonathon, Lord Hendon
Kathryn "Kit", Lady Hendon
Helena, Duchess of St. Ives
Dalziel

[**Buy the e-book**](#)

A Gentleman's Honor

First published October 2003

The season has yet to begin, and Bastion Club member Anthony Blake, Viscount Torrington, is already a target for every matchmaking mama in London. But there is only one lady who sparks his interest . . .

Desperate and penniless, but determined, Alicia will make a spectacular match for her ravishing younger sister! Masquerading as the widowed "Mrs. Carrington"—the perfect society chaperone—Alicia intends to boldly launch her sibling into the ton. But fashionable ladies are not normally accused of murder . . .

Every instinct Tony Blake possesses tells him that Alicia—the exquisite, distraught beauty he discovers standing over a dead body in his godmother's garden—is innocent of serious wrongdoing. His connections will allow him to take control of the investigation, his social prominence will certainly provide her public support.

But it is more than honor alone that compels Tony to protect this remarkable, imperiled beauty—and he will do everything in his seductive power to make Alicia his.

Peek at the Book

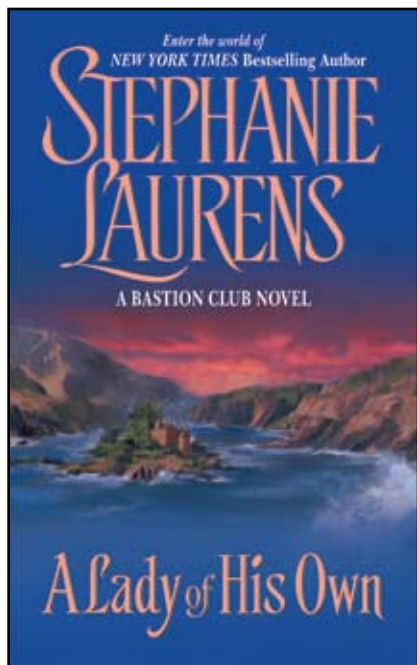


The tableau exploded into Tony's vision as he gained the top of the steps. Senses instantly alert, fully deployed, he paused.

Slim, svelte, gowned for the evening in silk, her dark hair piled high, with a silvery shawl wrapped about her shoulders and clutched tight with one hand, the lady slowly, very slowly, rose. In her other hand, she held a long, scalloped stiletto; a streak of blood beaded on the wicked blade.

She held the dagger by the hilt, loosely grasped between her fingers, pointing downward. She stared at the blade as if it were a snake.

ISBN: 978-0-06-000207-7 • \$7.99 (\$10.99 Can.)



SETTING

1816 Cornwall

CHARACTERS

Charles St. Austell, Earl of Lostwithiel
Lady Penelope Selborne

RECURRING CHARACTERS

Jack, Baron Warnefleet
Gervase Tregarth, Earl of Crowhurst
Dalziel

A Lady of His Own

First published October 2004

After years of dedicated service to the Crown, the seven members of the Bastion Club have banded together to support each other through the most perilous mission of all: finding a bride

Impatient to find his bride-to-be yet appalled by the damsels of the ton, Charles St. Austell seeks refuge in his castle—and discovers Lady Penelope Selborne walking the deserted corridors at midnight. Years ago, they'd consummated their youthful passion on one unforgettable afternoon. And while the ardent interlude haunts Charles still, Penny wants nothing more to do with him.

But resisting a stronger, battle-hardened Charles proves difficult, even though Penny has vowed she won't settle for anything less than true love. And when a traitorous intrigue threatens them both, she discovers that her first love—a man who will not rest until he has made her his own—is her fated champion and protector.

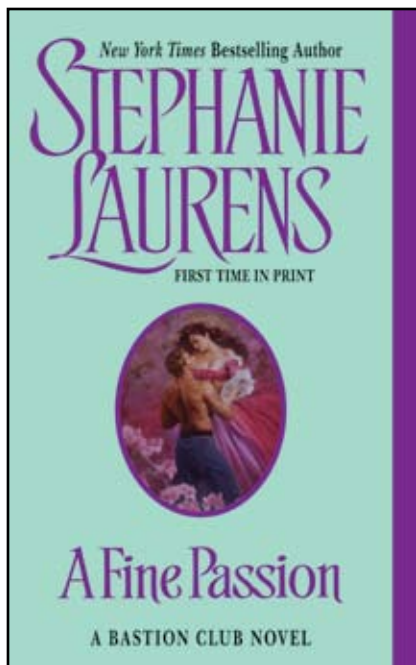
[**Buy the e-book**](#)

Peek at the Book



Charles wished the light was better or the chair closer to the bed; he couldn't see Penny's eyes and her expressions—the real ones—were too fleeting to read in the dimness. He'd chosen the safe distance of the chair to avoid aggravating their mutually twitching nerves. That moment in the corridor had been bad enough; the urge to seize her, to have his hands on her again, had been so strong, so unexpectedly intense, it had taken every ounce of his will to resist.

He still felt off-balance, just a touch insane . . .



SETTING

1816 Gloucester

CHARACTERS

Jack, Baron Warnefleet
Lady Clarice Altwood

RECURRING CHARACTERS

Lady Osbaldestone
Deverell, Viscount Paignton
Dalziel

[Buy the e-book](#)

A Fine Passion

First published September 2005

After years of loyal service to the Crown, the men of the Bastion Club—one by one—must face that greatest danger of all . . . love

The last of his line, Jack, Baron Warnefleet, has fled London after nearly being compromised into marrying a dreadful female. Turning his back on the entire notion of marriage, he rides home to the estate he has not seen for years, determined to set in motion an alternative course of action.

But then in the lane before his gate, Jack rescues a startlingly beautiful lady from a menacing, unmanageable horse. While he begins by taking command, the lady continues by taking it back. Lady Clarice Altwood is no meek and mild miss. She is the very antithesis of the wooly-headed young ladies Jack has rejected. Clarice is delectably attractive, beyond eligible, undeniably capable, and completely unforgettable. Why on earth is she rusticated in the country?

That enigma is compounded by mystery, and it's quickly clear that Clarice is in danger. Jack must use every ounce of his cunning and wit to protect this highly independent and richly passionate woman . . . who has so quickly stolen his heart.

Peek at the Book

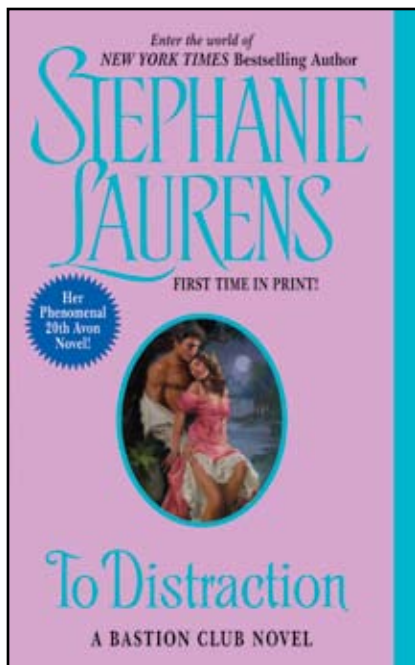


Jack shot a glance at the lady. Riding up, all he'd seen was her back—that she had a wealth of dark mahogany hair worn in an elegantly plaited and coiled chignon, was wearing a plum-colored walking dress, and was uncommonly tall.

Sprawled on her back on the bank beyond the ditch, she struggled onto her elbows. Across the ditch, their gazes locked.

Her face was classically beautiful.

Her dark gaze was a fulminating glare.



SETTING

1816 London

CHARACTERS

Jocelyn Deverell, Viscount Paignton
Miss Phoebe Malleson

RECURRING CHARACTERS

Gervase Tregarth, Earl of Crowhurst
Christian Allardyce, Marquess of Dearnie
Dalziel

[Buy the e-book](#)

To Distraction

First published September 2006

The gentlemen of the Bastion club have proven their courage while fighting England's enemies, but nothing has prepared them for dealing with that most formidable of challenges: the opposite sex

Deverell, Viscount Paignton, is in desperate need of a wife. Unmoved by the matchmaking "herd," he seeks help from his aunt, who directs him to a lady she vows is perfect for him. Dispatched to a country house party to look the lady over, he discovers her not swanning about among the guests but with her nose buried in a book in the library.

Phoebe Malleson is tempted to distraction by Deverell, but marrying him isn't part of her plan. Moved by an incident in her past, Phoebe has a secret cause to which she's committed. Unfortunately, telling Deverell to go away doesn't work, and he quickly learns of her secret. But someone powerful has her cause targeted for destruction—and her in their sights. Phoebe must accept Deverell's help . . . though the cost to them both might be dear—and deadly.

Peek at the Book



Fascinating green eyes . . . and a direct gaze that was, even more to her surprise, frankly disconcerting. She wanted to look away, to break the contact, yet some part of her didn't dare . . .

Who the devil was he?

More to the point, her inner self whispered, *what* was he?

The Bastion Club

MEMBERS

Christian Allardyce, Marquess of Dearne (7)

Lady Letitia Randall

Anthony Blake, Viscount Torrington (2)

Alicia "Carrington" Pevensey

Jocelyn Deverell, Viscount Paignton (5)

Phoebe Malleson

Charles St. Austell, Earl of Lostwithiel (3)

Lady Penelope Selborne

Gervase Tregarth, Earl of Crowhurst (6)

Madeline Gascoigne

Jack Warnefleet, Baron Warnefleet of Minchinbury (4)

Lady Clarice Altwood

Tristan Wemyss, Earl of Trentham (1)

Leonora Carling

1. *The Lady Chosen*

2. *A Gentleman's Honor*

3. *A Lady of His Own*

4. *A Fine Passion*

5. *To Distraction*

6. *Beyond Seduction*

7. *The Edge of Desire*

**The following is an excerpt from *Where the Heart Leads*,
Stephanie Laurens' newest Cynster Novel, coming
next February in hardcover from**

wm WILLIAM MORROW

November, 1835.

London.

"Thank you, Mostyn." Slumped at ease in an armchair before the fire in the parlor of his fashionable lodgings in Jermyn Street, Barnaby Adair, third son of the Earl of Cothelstone, lifted the crystal tumbler from the salver his man offered. "I won't need anything further."

"Very good, sir. I'll wish you a good night." The epitome of his calling, Mostyn bowed and silently withdrew.

Straining his ears, Barnaby heard the door shut. He smiled, sipped. Mostyn had been foisted on him by his mother when he'd first come up to town in the fond hope that the man would instill some degree of tractability into a son who, as she frequently declared, was ungovernable. Yet despite Mostyn's rigid adherence to the mores of class distinction and his belief in the deference due to the son of an earl, master and man had quickly reached an accommodation. Barnaby could no longer imagine being in London without the succor Mostyn provided, largely, as with the glass of fine brandy in his hand, without prompting.

Over the years, Mostyn had mellowed. Or perhaps both of them had. Regardless, theirs was now a very comfortable household.

Stretching his long legs toward the hearth, crossing his ankles, sinking his chin on his cravat, Barnaby studied the polished toes of his boots, bathed in the light of the crackling flames. *All should* have been well in his world, but. . . .

He was comfortable yet . . . restless.

At peace—no, *wrapped* in blessed peace—yet dissatisfied.

It wasn't as if the last months hadn't been successful. After more than nine months of careful sleuthing he'd exposed a cadre of young gentlemen, all from ton families, who, not content with using dens of iniquity had thought it a lark to run them. He'd delivered enough proof to charge and convict them despite their station. It had been a difficult, long-drawn and arduous case; its successful conclusion had earned him

grateful accolades from the peers who oversaw London's Metropolitan Police Force.

On hearing the news his mother would no doubt have primmed her lips, perhaps evinced an acid wish that he would develop as much interest in fox-hunting as in villain-hunting, but she wouldn't—couldn't—say more, not with his father being one of the aforementioned peers.

In any modern society, justice needed to be seen to be served even-handedly, without fear or favor, despite those among the ton who refused to believe that Parliament's laws applied to them. The prime minister himself had been moved to compliment him over this latest triumph.

Raising his glass, Barnaby sipped. The success had been sweet, yet had left him strangely hollow. Unfulfilled in some unexpected way. Certainly he'd anticipated feeling happier, rather than empty and peculiarly rudderless, aimlessly drifting now he no longer had a case to absorb him, to challenge his ingenuity and fill his time.

Perhaps his mood was simply a reflection of the season—the closing phases of another year, the time when cold fogs descended and polite society fled to the warmth of ancestral hearths, there to prepare for the coming festive season and the attendant revels. For him this time of year had always been difficult—difficult to find any viable excuse to avoid his mother's artfully engineered social gatherings.

She'd married both his elder brothers and his sister, Melissa, far too easily; in him, she'd met her Waterloo, yet she continued more doggedly and indefatigably than Napoleon. She was determined to see him, the last of her brood, suitably wed, and was fully prepared to bring to bear whatever weapons were necessary to achieve that goal.

Despite being at loose ends, he didn't want to deliver himself up at the Cothelstone Castle gates, a candidate for his mother's matrimonial machinations. What if it snowed and he couldn't escape?

Unfortunately, even villains tended to hibernate over winter.

A sharp *rat-a-tat-tat* shattered the comfortable silence.

Glancing at the parlor door, Barnaby realized he'd heard a carriage on the cobbles. The rattle of wheels had ceased outside his residence. He listened as Mostyn's measured tread passed the parlor on the way to the front door. Who could be calling at such an hour—a quick glance at the mantelpiece clock confirmed it was after eleven—and on such a night?

Beyond the heavily curtained windows the night was bleak, a dense chill fog wreathing the streets, swallowing houses and converting familiar streetscapes into ghostly gothic realms.

No one would venture out on such a night without good reason. Voices, muted, reached him. It appeared Mostyn was engaged in dissuading whoever was attempting to disrupt his master's peace.

Abruptly the voices fell silent.

A moment later the door opened and Mostyn entered, carefully closing the door behind him. One glance at Mostyn's tight lips and studiously blank expression informed Barnaby that Mostyn did not approve of whomever had called. Even more interesting was the transparent implication that Mostyn had been routed—efficiently and comprehensively—in his attempt to deny the visitor.

"A . . . lady to see you, sir. A Miss—"

"Penelope Ashford."

The crisp, determined tones had both Barnaby and Mostyn looking to the door—which now stood open, swung wide to admit a lady in a dark, severe yet fashionable pelisse. A sable-lined muff dangled from one wrist and her hands were encased in fur-edged leather gloves.

Lustrous mahogany hair, pulled into a knot at the back of her head, gleamed as she crossed the room with a grace and self-confidence that screamed her station even more than her delicate, quintessentially aristocratic features. Features that were animated by so much determination, so much sheer will, that the force of her personality seemed to roll like a wave before her.

Mostyn stepped back as she neared.

His eyes never leaving her, Barnaby unhurriedly uncrossed his legs and rose. "Miss Ashford."

An exceptional pair of dark brown eyes framed by finely wrought gold-rimmed spectacles fixed on his face. "Mr. Adair. We met nearly two years ago, at Morwellan Park in the ballroom at Charlie and Sarah's wedding." Halting two paces away, she studied him, as if estimating the quality of his memory. "We spoke briefly if you recall."

She didn't offer her hand. Barnaby looked down into her uptilted face—her head barely cleared his shoulder—and found he remembered her surprisingly well. "You asked if I was the one who investigates crimes."

She smiled—brilliantly. "Yes. That's right."

Barnaby blinked; he felt a trifle winded. He could, he realized, recall how, all those months ago, her small fingers had felt in his. They'd merely shaken hands, yet he could remember it perfectly; even now, his fingers tingled with tactile memory.

She'd obviously made an impression on him even if he hadn't been so aware of it at the time. At the time he'd been focused on another case, and had been more intent on deflecting her interest than on her.

Since he'd last seen her, she'd grown. Not taller. Indeed, he wasn't sure she'd gained inches anywhere; she was as neatly rounded as his memory painted her. Yet she'd gained in stature, in self assurance and confidence; although he doubted she'd ever been lacking in the latter, she was now the sort of lady any fool would recognize as a natural force of nature, to be crossed at one's peril.

Little wonder she'd rolled up Mostyn.

Her smile had faded. She'd been examining him openly; in most others he would have termed it brazenly, but she seemed to be evaluating him intellectually rather than physically.

Rosy lips, distractingly lush, firmed, as if she'd made some decision.

Curious, he tilted his head. "To what do I owe this visit?"

This highly irregular, not to say potentially scandalous visit. She was a gently bred lady of marriageable age, calling on a single gentleman who was in no way related very late at night. Alone. Entirely unchaperoned.

He should protest and send her away. Mostyn certainly thought so.

Her fine dark eyes met his. Squarely, without the slightest hint of guile or trepidation. "I want you to help me solve a crime."

He held her gaze.

She returned the favor.

A pregnant moment passed, then he gestured elegantly to the other armchair. "Please sit. Perhaps you'd like some refreshment?"

Her smile—it transformed her face from vividly attractive to stunning—flashed as she moved to the chair facing his. "Thank you, but no. I require nothing but your time." She waved Mostyn away. "You may go."

Mostyn stiffened. He cast an outraged glance at Barnaby.

Battling a grin, Barnaby endorsed the order with a nod. Mostyn

didn't like it, but departed, bowing himself out, but leaving the door ajar. Barnaby noted it, but said nothing. Mostyn knew he was hunted, often quite inventively, by young ladies; he clearly believed Miss Ashford might be such a schemer. Barnaby knew better. Penelope Ashford might scheme with the best of them, but marriage would not be her goal. While she arranged her muff on her lap, he sank back into his armchair and studied her anew.

She was the most unusual young lady he'd ever encountered.

He'd decided that even before she said, "Mr. Adair, I need your help to find four missing boys, and stop any more being kidnapped."

Penelope raised her eyes and locked them on Barnaby Adair's face. And tried her damndest not to see. When she'd determined to call on him, she hadn't imagined he—his appearance—would have the slightest effect on her. Why would she? No man had ever made her feel breathless, so why should he? It was distinctly annoying.

Golden hair clustering in wavy curls about a well-shaped head, strong, aquiline features and cerulean blue eyes that held a piercing intelligence were doubtless interesting enough, yet quite aside from his features there was something about him, about his presence, that was playing on her nerves in a disconcerting way.

Why he should affect her at all was a mystery. He was tall, with a long-limbed, rangy build, yet he was no taller than her brother Luc, and while his shoulders were broad, they were no broader than her brother-in-law Simon's. And he was certainly not prettier than either Luc or Simon, although he could easily hold his own in the handsome stakes; she'd heard Barnaby Adair described as an Adonis and had to concede the point.

All of which was entirely by the by and she had no clue why she was even noticing.

She focused instead on the numerous questions she could see forming behind his blue eyes. "The reason I am here, and not a host of outraged parents, is because the boys in question are paupers and foundlings."

He frowned.

Stripping off her gloves, she grimaced lightly. "I'd better start at the beginning."

He nodded. "That would probably facilitate matters—namely my understanding—significantly."

She laid her gloves on top of her muff. She wasn't sure she appreciated his tone, but decided to ignore it. "I don't know if you're aware of it, but my sister Portia—she's now married to Simon Cynster—three other ladies of the ton, and I, established the Foundling House opposite the Foundling Hospital in Bloomsbury. That was back in '30. The House has been in operation ever since, taking in foundlings, mostly from the East End, and training them as maids, footmen, and more recently in various trades."

"You were asking Sarah about her orphanage's training programs when we last met."

"Indeed." She hadn't known he'd overheard that. "My older sister Anne, now Anne Carmarthen, is also involved, but since their marriages, with their own households to run, both Anne and lately Portia have had to curtail the time they spend at the Foundling House. The other three ladies likewise have many calls on their time. Consequently, at present I am in charge of overseeing the day-to-day administration of the place. It's in that capacity that I'm here tonight."

Folding her hands over her gloves, she met his eyes, held his steady gaze. "The normal procedure is for children to be formally placed in the care of the Foundling House by the authorities, or by their last surviving guardian.

"The latter is quite common. What usually occurs is that a dying relative, recognizing that their ward will soon be alone in the world, contacts us and we visit and make arrangements. The child usually stays with their guardian until the last, then, on the guardian's death, we're informed, usually by helpful neighbors, and we return and fetch the orphan and take him or her to the Foundling House."

He nodded, signifying all to that point was clear.

Drawing breath, she went on, feeling her lungs tighten, her diction growing crisp as anger resurged, "Over the last month, on four separate occasions we've arrived to fetch away a boy, only to discover some man has been before us. He told the neighbors he was a local official, but there is no central authority that collects orphans. If there were, we'd know."

Adair's blue gaze had grown razor-sharp. "Is it always the same man?"

"From all I've heard, it could be. But equally, it might not be."

She waited while he mulled over that. She bit her tongue, forced

herself to sit still and not fidget, and instead watch the concentration in his face.

Her inclination was to forge ahead, to demand he act and tell him how. She was used to directing, to taking charge and ordering all as she deemed fit. She was usually right in her thinking, and generally people were a great deal better off if they simply did as she said. But . . . she needed Barnaby Adair's help, and instinct was warning her, stridently, to tread carefully. To guide rather than push.

To persuade rather than dictate.

His gaze had grown distant, but now abruptly refocused on her face. "You take boys and girls. Is it only boys who've gone missing?"

"Yes." She nodded for emphasis. "We've accepted more girls than boys in recent months, but it's only boys this man has taken."

A moment passed. "He's taken four—tell me about each. Start from the first—everything you know, every detail, no matter how apparently inconsequential."

Barnaby watched as she delved into her memory; her dark gaze turned inward, her features smoothed, losing some of their characteristic vitality.

She drew breath; her gaze fixed on the fire as if she were reading from the flames. "The first was from Chicksand Street in Spitalfields, off Brick Lane north of the Whitechapel Road. He was eight years old, or so his uncle told us. He, the uncle, was dying, and . . ."

Barnaby listened as she, not entirely to his surprise, did precisely as he'd requested and recited the details of each occurrence, chapter and verse. Other than an occasional minor query, he didn't have to prod her or her memory.

He was accustomed to dealing with ladies of the ton, to interrogating young ladies whose minds skittered and wandered around subjects, and flitted and danced around facts, so that it took the wisdom of Solomon and the patience of Jove to gain any understanding of what they actually knew.

Penelope Ashford was a different breed. He'd heard that she was something of a firebrand, one who paid scant attention to social restraints if said restraints stood in her way. He'd heard her described as too intelligent for her own good, and direct and forthright to a fault, that combination of traits being popularly held to account for her unmarried state.

As she was remarkably attractive in an unusual way—not pretty or beautiful but so vividly alive she effortlessly drew men’s eyes—as well as being extremely well-connected, the daughter of a viscount, and with her brother Luc, the current title holder, eminently wealthy and able to dower her more than appropriately, that popular judgment might well be correct. Yet her sister Portia had recently married Simon Cynster, and while Portia might perhaps be more subtle in her dealings, Barnaby recalled that the Cynster ladies, judges he trusted in such matters, saw little difference between Portia and Penelope beyond Penelope’s directness.

And, if he was remembering aright, her utterly implacable will. From what little he’d seen of the sisters, he, too, would have said that Portia would bend, or at least agree to negotiate, far earlier than Penelope.

“And just as with the others, when we went to Herb Lane to fetch Dick this morning, he was gone. He’d been collected by this mystery man at seven o’clock, barely after dawn.”

Her story concluded, she shifted her dark, compelling eyes from the flames to his face.

Barnaby held her gaze for a moment, then slowly nodded. “So somehow these people—let’s assume it’s one group collecting these boys—”

“I can’t see it being more than one group. We’ve never had this happen before, and now four instances in less than a month, and all with the same *modus operandi*.” Brows raised, she met his eyes.

Somewhat tersely, he nodded. “Precisely. As I was saying, these people, whoever they are, seem to know of your potential charges—”

“Before you suggest that they might be learning of the boys through someone at the Foundling House, let me assure you that’s highly unlikely. If you knew the people involved, you’d understand why I’m so sure of that. And indeed, although I’ve come to you with our four cases, there’s nothing to say other newly orphaned boys in the East End aren’t also disappearing. Most orphans aren’t brought to our attention. There may be many more vanishing, but who is there who would sound any alarm?”

Barnaby stared at her while the scenario she was describing took shape in his mind.

“I had hoped,” she said; the light glinted off her spectacles as she

glanced down and smoothed her gloves, “that you might agree to look into this latest disappearance, seeing as Dick was whisked away only this morning. I do realize that you generally investigate crimes involving the ton, but I wondered, as it is November and most of us have upped stakes for the country, whether you might have time to consider our problem.” Looking up, she met his gaze; there was nothing remotely diffident in her eyes. “I could, of course, pursue the matter myself—”

Barnaby only just stopped himself from reacting.

“But I thought enlisting someone with more experience in such matters might lead to a more rapid resolution.”

Penelope held his gaze and hoped he was as quick-witted as he was purported to be. Then again, in her experience, it rarely hurt to be blunt. “To be perfectly clear, Mr. Adair, I am here seeking aid in pursuing our lost charges, rather than merely wishing to inform someone of their disappearance and thereafter wash my hands of them. I fully intend to search for Dick and the other three boys until I find them. Not being a simpleton, I would prefer to have beside me someone with experience of crime and the necessary investigative methods. Moreover, while through our work we naturally have contacts in the East End, few if any of those move among the criminal elements, so my ability to gain information in that arena is limited.”

Halting, she searched his face. His expression gave little away; his broad brow, straight brown brows, the strong, well-delineated cheekbones, the rather austere lines of cheek and jaw, remained set and unrevealing.

She spread her hands. “I’ve described our situation—will you help us?”

To her irritation, he didn’t immediately reply. Didn’t leap in, goaded to action by the notion of her tramping through the East End by herself.

He didn’t, however, refuse. For a long moment, he studied her, his expression unreadable—long enough for her to wonder if he’d seen through her ploy—then he shifted, resettling his shoulders against the chair, and gestured to her in invitation. “How do you imagine our investigation would proceed?”

She hid her smile. “I thought, if you were free, you might visit the Foundling House tomorrow, to get some idea of the way we work and the type of children we take in. Then . . .”

Barnaby listened while she outlined an eminently rational strategy that would expose him to the basic facts, enough to ascertain where an investigation might lead, and consequently how best to proceed.

Watching the sensible, logical words fall from her ruby lips—still lush and ripe, still distracting—only confirmed that Penelope Ashford was dangerous. Every bit as dangerous as her reputation suggested, possibly more.

In his case undoubtedly more, given his fascination with her lips.

In addition, she was offering him something no other young lady had ever thought to wave before his nose.

A case. Just when he was in dire need of one.

“Once we’ve talked to the neighbors who saw Dick taken away, I’m hoping you’ll be able to suggest some way forward from there.”

Her lips stopped moving. He raised his gaze to her eyes.

“Indeed.” He hesitated; it was patently obvious that she had every intention of playing an active role in the ensuing investigation. Given he knew her family, he was unquestionably honor-bound to dissuade her from such a reckless endeavor, yet equally unquestionably any suggestion she retreat to the hearth and leave him to chase the villains would meet with stiff opposition. He inclined his head. “As it happens I’m free tomorrow. Perhaps I could meet you at the Foundling House in the morning?”

He’d steer her out of the investigation after he had all the facts, after he’d learned everything she knew about this strange business. She smiled brilliantly, once again disrupting his thoughts.

“Excellent!” Penelope gathered her gloves and muff, and stood. She’d gained what she wanted; it was time to leave. Before he could say anything she didn’t want to hear. Best not to get into any argument now. Not yet.

He rose and waved her to the door. She led the way, pulling on her gloves. He had the loveliest hands she’d ever seen on a man, long-fingered, elegant and utterly distracting. She’d remembered them from before, which was why she hadn’t offered to shake his hand.

He walked beside her across his front hall. “Is your carriage outside?”

“Yes.” Halting before the front door, she glanced up at him. “It’s waiting outside the house next door.”

His lips twitched. "I see." His man was hovering; he waved him back and reached for the doorknob. "I'll walk you to it."

She inclined her head. When he opened the door, she walked out onto the narrow front porch. Her nerves flickered as he joined her; large and rather overpoweringly male, he escorted her down the three steps to the pavement, then along to where her brother's town carriage stood, the coachman patient and resigned on the box.

Adair reached for the carriage door, opened it and offered his hand. Holding her breath, she gave him her fingers—and tried hard not to register the sensation of her slender digits being engulfed by his much larger ones, tried not to notice the warmth of his firm clasp as he helped her up into the carriage.

And failed.

She didn't—couldn't—breathe until he released her hand. She sank onto the leather seat, managed a smile and a nod. "Thank you, Mr. Adair. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

Through the enveloping gloom he studied her, then he raised his hand in salute, stepped back and closed the door.

The coachman jiggled his reins and the carriage jerked forward, then settled to a steady roll. With a sigh, Penelope sat back, and smiled into the darkness. Satisfied, and a trifle smug. She'd recruited Barnaby Adair to her cause, and despite her unprecedented attack of sensibility had managed the encounter without revealing her affliction.

All in all, her night had been a success.

Barnaby stood in the street, in the wreathing fog, and watched the carriage roll away. Once the rattle of its wheels had faded, he grinned and turned back to his door.

Climbing his front steps, he realized his mood had lifted. His earlier despondency had vanished, replaced with a keen anticipation for what the morrow would bring.

And for that he had Penelope Ashford to thank.

Not only had she brought him a case, one outside his normal arena and therefore likely to challenge him and expand his knowledge, but even more importantly that case was one not even his mother would disapprove of him pursuing.

Mentally composing the letter he would pen to his parent first thing the next morning, he entered his house whistling beneath his breath, and let Mostyn bolt the door behind him.



New York Times bestselling author Stephanie Laurens began writing as an escape from the dry world of professional science. Her hobby quickly became a career. Her novels set in Regency England have captivated readers around the globe, making her one of the romance world's most beloved and popular authors. She lives in Melbourne, Australia with her husband and two daughters.

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