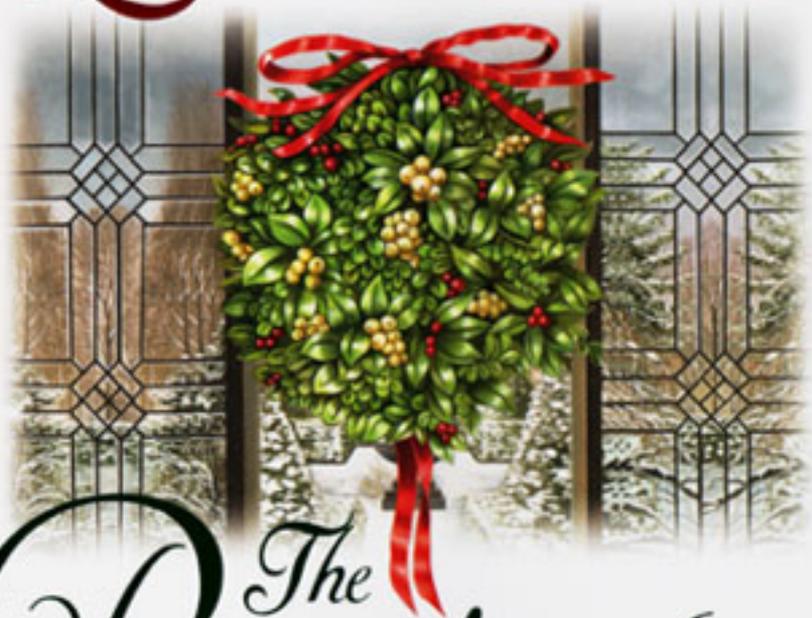


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# STEPHANIE LAURENS



## *The Promise in a Kiss*

*A Christmas Novel*





# **The Promise in a Kiss**

*A Christmas Novel*

**Stephanie  
Laurens**

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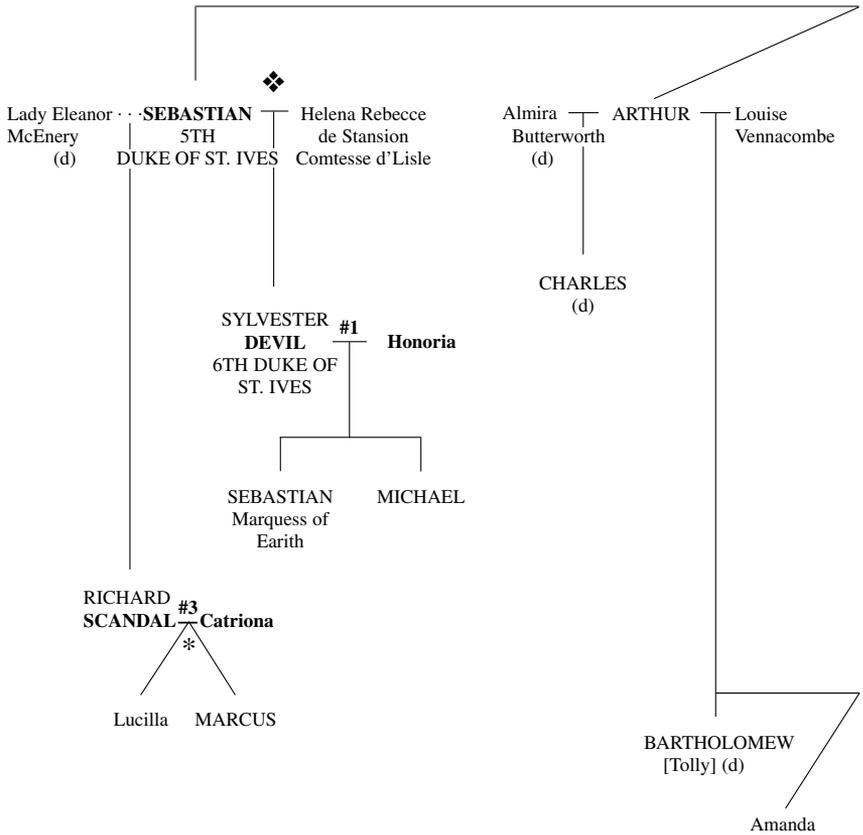
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To  
Keith, Stefanie, and Lauren  
&  
Nancy, Lucia, and Carrie  
&  
“The Lunch Mob”

for the past, the present, and the future

# The Bar Cynster Family Tree



## THE BAR CYNSTER SERIES:

#1 *Devil's Bride*

#2 *A Rake's Vow*

#3 *Scandal's Bride*

#4 *A Rogue's Proposal*

#5 *A Secret Love*

#6 *All About Love*

❖ *This Volume*





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## Prologue



*December 19, 1776*

*Convent des Jardinières de Marie, Paris*

**M**IDNIGHT had come and gone. Helena heard the small bell of the church chime as she paused in the doorway of the infirmary. Three o'clock. Ariele, her younger sister, was at last sleeping deeply; her fever had broken—she would be safe enough in Sister Artemis's care. Reassured, relieved, Helena could again seek her own bed in the dormitory beyond the cloisters.

Drawing her woolen shawl about her shoulders, she stepped out from the shadows of the infirmary wing. Her wooden pattens clacked softly on the stone flags as she crossed through the gardens filling the convent's grounds. The night was icy, clear. She was wearing only her nightgown and robe—she'd been asleep when the night sister had summoned her to help with Ariele. Common sense urged her to hurry—her shawl was not that warm—yet she walked slowly, comfortable in the moon-drenched gardens, confident in this place where she'd spent most of the last nine years.

Soon, as soon as Ariele was well enough to travel, she would leave forever. She'd celebrated her sixteenth birthday three months ago; her

future lay before her—an introduction into society followed by marriage, an arranged union with some wealthy aristocrat. That was the way of her class. As the comtesse d’Lisle, with extensive estates in the Camargue and connected to the powerful de Mordaunts among others, her hand would be a sought-after prize.

The branches of a huge linden threw deep shadows across the path. Passing through them, stepping once again into the silvery light, she stopped, lifted her face to the infinite sky. Drank in the peace. So close to the Lord’s fete day, the convent was empty, the daughters of the wealthy already at home for the season’s celebrations. She and Ariele were still here only because of Ariele’s weak chest; she’d refused to leave until her sister could travel with her. Ariele and most of the others would return again in February, and their lessons would recommence. Until then . . .

Peace lay heavy on the silver-tipped bushes, shimmered in the moonlight pouring from the cloudless sky. Stars twinkled overhead, diamonds strewn across night’s velvet shroud. The stone cloisters stood before her, a familiar, comforting sight.

She wasn’t sure what awaited her outside the convent’s walls. Helena breathed deeply, ignoring the chill, savoring the sweetness of the last days of her girlhood. *The last days of freedom.*

Dry leaves rustled in the night. She looked to where she knew an old creeper, gnarled and ancient, hugged the high wall of the dormitory, just ahead to her left. The wall was in shadow, dark and impenetrable. She narrowed her eyes, trying to pierce the gloom, unafraid, even at this hour; the convent had a zealously guarded reputation for security, which was why so many noble families sent their daughters there.

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. It didn’t occur to her to shriek. Why shriek? The man—a very tall, broad-shouldered man—was unquestionably a

gentleman. Even in the uncertain moonlight she could make out the sheen of his silk coat, the gleam of a jewel in the lace at his throat. Another, bigger gleam adorned one finger of the hand he slowly raised to push back the locks that had pulled free of his queue to fall across his chiseled features.

He lay as he'd landed, half propped on his elbows. The position displayed his chest to advantage. His hips were narrow, his legs long, with well-muscled thighs clearly delineated under satin knee breeches. He was lean and large—his feet were, too, encased in black pumps with gold buckles. The heels were not high, confirming her guess he had no need to add to his height.

Although he'd landed on the stone path, he'd managed to slow his fall. Other than a few bruises, she doubted he'd hurt himself. He didn't look hurt—he looked aggravated, disenchanting. But wary, too.

He was watching her intently. Doubtless waiting for her to scream. He could wait. She hadn't finished looking.

Sebastian felt as if he'd fallen into a fairy tale. Fallen at the feet of an enchanted princess. It was her fault he'd fallen—he'd looked down, searching for his next foothold, and seen her step from the shadows. She'd lifted her face to the moonlight, he'd stared, forgotten what he was doing, and slipped.

His coat had fallen open; beneath the thrown-back flap, he shifted his hand, fingers searching the folds. He located the earring he'd come there to get, still safe in his pocket.

Fabien de Mordaunt's family dagger was now his.

Another wild wager, another crazy exploit to add to his tally—another victory.

And an unexpected encounter.

Some deeply buried instinct, long dormant, raised its head—recognized the moment, paid it due heed. The girl—she was surely no more than that—stood watching him calmly, studying him with an assurance that shouted her station more surely than the fine lace at

the neck of her demure night rail. She had to be one of the convent's highborn charges, still here for some reason.

Slowly, as smoothly as he could, he got to his feet. "*Mille pardons, mademoiselle.*"

He saw one dark, finely arched brow quirk; her lips, full but unfashionably wide, relaxed fractionally. Her hair, unrestrained, cascaded about her shoulders, wavy locks dead black in the moonlight.

"I didn't mean to frighten you."

She didn't look frightened; she looked like the princess he'd thought her, supremely assured, faintly amused. He straightened to his full height, but slowly. She was a small woman; he towered over her—her head didn't reach his chin.

She looked up at him. The moon lit her face. There was no trace of concern in her pale eyes, large under their hooded lids. Her long lashes laid a faint tracery of shadows over her cheeks. Her nose was straight, patrician; her features confirmed her birth, her likely station.

Her attitude was one of calm expectation. He should, he supposed, introduce himself.

"*Diable! Le fou—*"

He whirled. A clamor of voices spilled into the night, shattering the stillness. Flares sprang to life at the end of the cloister.

He stepped off the path, sliding into the shadow of a large bush. The princess could still see him, but he was hidden from the noisy crowd hurrying up the path. She could point him out in an instant, direct the guards his way . . .

Helena watched a bevy of nuns approach at a run, habits flapping wildly. Two gardeners were with them, both brandishing pitchforks.

They saw her.

"M'amzelle—have you seen him?" Sister Agatha skidded to a halt at the end of the cloisters.

"Seen a man." Mother Superior, already out of breath, struggled to preserve her dignity. "The comte de Vichesse sent a warning about a madman intent on meeting with Mlle Marchand . . . and that silly,

*stupid* girl—” Even in the dark, the Mother Superior’s eyes flashed. “The man’s been here—I’m sure of it! He must have climbed down the wall. Did he pass you? Did you glimpse him?”

Eyes wide, Helena turned her head to the right, away from the figure concealed by the bush. She looked toward the main gates, raised a hand . . .

“The gates! Quick—if we hurry, we’ll have him!”

The group charged off through the cloisters and plunged into the gardens beyond, fanning out, calling, beating the borders lining the drive, searching frantically—more like the mythical madman they sought than the man who had fallen at her feet.

Silence returned; the shouts and yells faded into the night. Rewrapping her shawl, refolding her arms, she turned to see the gentleman step from the shadows.

“My thanks, mademoiselle. I am not, needless to say, a madman.”

His deep voice, his cultured diction reassured her more than his words. Helena glanced at the wall from which he’d fallen. Collette Marchand had left the convent the year before but had been returned to its safety two days ago by her incensed relatives, there to await her brother who would come to fetch her away to the country. Collette’s behavior in the Paris salons had, it was rumored, caused quite a stir. Helena looked at the stranger, prowling nearer. “What manner of man are you, then?”

His lips, long, somewhat thin, fascinatingly mobile, quirked as he halted before her. “An Englishman.”

She would never have guessed from his speech—he spoke with no discernible accent. The revelation did, however, explain much. She’d heard that the English were often large, and quite mad, wild beyond even Parisians’ lax standards.

She’d never met one before.

The fact was clearly written in her expression, in those hauntingly lovely pale eyes. In the silvery light, Sebastian couldn’t tell if they were blue, gray or green. And regretted that he couldn’t dally to find

out. Raising a hand, with the back of one finger he traced the upward line of her cheek. "Again, mademoiselle, my thanks."

He tensed to step away, told himself he should, that he must. Yet still he hesitated.

Something shimmered in the gloom—he glanced up. Just behind her, a clump of mistletoe hung from one of the linden's branches.

It was almost Christmas.

She looked up, following his gaze. Considered the trailing mistletoe. Then her gaze slowly lowered, to his eyes, to his lips.

Her face was that of a French madonna—not Parisian but more dramatic, more vital. Sebastian felt a tug more primal than any he'd felt before. He lowered his head.

Slowly. He gave her plenty of time to step back if she would.

She didn't. She tipped up her face.

His lips touched hers, then settled in the most chaste kiss of his life. He felt her lips quiver under his, sensed her innocence in his bones.

*Thank you.* That was all the kiss said, all he allowed it to say.

He lifted his head yet still didn't draw back. Couldn't bring himself to do it. Their gazes met, their breaths mingled . . .

He bent his head again.

Her lips met his this time, soft, generous, hesitant. The urge to devour was strong, but he reined it in, took only what she innocently offered, and returned no more than that. An exchange—a promise—even though he recognized the impossibility, and was sure she did, too.

Ending the kiss took effort and left him slightly dazed. He could feel her warmth along his body even though he hadn't touched her. He forced himself to step back, to look up, draw breath.

His gaze touched the mistletoe. On impulse, he reached up and snapped one trailing tendril—the feel of the twig between his fingers gave him something real, something of this world, to cling to.

He took another step back before letting his gaze meet hers. Then he saluted her with the twig, inclined his head. "*Joyeux Noël.*"

He kept moving back, forcing his gaze past her to the main gates over which he'd entered.

"Go that way."

Her blood pounding in her ears, her head oddly dizzy, Helena waved him farther back, in the opposite direction to the main gates. "When you reach the wall, follow it away from the convent. You'll find a wooden gate. I don't know if it's unlocked or..." She shrugged. "It's the way girls go when they sneak outside. It gives onto a lane."

The Englishman looked at her, studied her, then again inclined his head; his hand had shifted to his pocket, slipping the twig into its depths. His gaze remained on her as he stated, "*Au revoir, mademoiselle.*"

Then he turned and melted into the darkness.

In less than a minute she could no longer see or hear him. Hugging her shawl more tightly about her, Helena drew in a breath, held it—tried to hold in the magic that had embraced them—then, reluctantly, walked on.

As if she'd stepped from a dream, the cold she hadn't noticed cut through her gown; she shivered and walked faster. Raising a hand, she touched her fingers to her lips, gently, wonderingly. She could still feel the lingering warmth, the knowing pressure.

Who was he? She wished she'd been bold enough to ask. Then again, perhaps it was better she didn't know. Nothing, after all, could come of such a meeting—from the intangible promise in a kiss.

Why had he been here? No doubt she would learn from Collette in the morning. But a madman?

She smiled cynically. She would never trust anything the comte de Vichesse might say. And if the Englishman was in some way engaged in tweaking her guardian's nose, she was only too happy to have helped.

## Chapter One



*November 1783*

*London*

COLLETTE had refused to divulge his name, her mad Englishman, yet there he stood, long, lean, and as handsome as ever, albeit seven years older. Surrounded by fashionable conversation, on her way from one group to the next, Helena halted, transfixed.

About her, Lady Morpleth's *soirée* was in full spate. It was mid-November, and the ton had turned their collective mind to the festive season. Holly abounded; the scent from evergreen boughs filled the air. In France, the approach to *la nuit de Noël* had long been another excuse for extravagance. Although the ties between London and Paris were slackening, in this, London still concurred; for glitter, for glamour, for richness and splendor, the ton's entertainments rivaled those of the French court. In terms of honest cheer, they excelled, for here there was no threat of social unrest, no *canaille* gathering in the shadows beyond the walls. Here, those wellborn and wealthy enough to belong to the elite could laugh, smile, and freely enjoy the whirl of activities filling the weeks leading to the celebration of the Nativity.

The smaller room into which Helena had ventured was crowded; as she stood staring into the main salon, the incessant chatter faded from her mind.

Framed by a connecting archway, he—the wild Englishman who had been the first ever to kiss her—paused to chat to some lady. A subtle smile curved his lips, still thin, still indolently mobile. Helena remembered how they'd felt on hers.

Seven years.

Her gaze raced over him. She hadn't seen him well enough in the gardens of the convent to catalog any changes, yet he still moved with the prowling grace she remembered, surprising in one so large. Devoid of powder and patches, the planes of his pale face seemed harder, more austere. His hair, now she could see its color, was a honey-toned brown, wavy locks drawn back in a queue secured with a black ribbon.

He was dressed with understated richness. Every garment bore the subtle stamp of a master, from the froth of expensive Mechlin lace at his throat, the abundant fall of the same lace over his long hands, to the exquisite cut of his silver-gray coat and darker gray breeches. Others would have had the coat trimmed with lace or braid. He had left it unadorned but for its big silver buttons. His waistcoat, darker gray heavily embroidered with silver, glimpsed as he moved, combined with the coat to create the impression of sleekly luxurious packaging concealing a prize even more sinfully rich.

In the salon crammed with lace, feathers, braids, and jewels, he dominated, and not just because of his height.

If the last seven years had left any mark at all, it was in his presence—that indefinable aura that clung to powerful men. He'd grown more powerful, more arrogant, more ruthless. The same seven years had made her an expert; power was, to her, as blatant as the color of skin.

Fabien de Mordaunt, comte de Vichesse, the aristocrat who'd

exploited various family connections to have himself declared her guardian, exuded the same aura. The last seven years had left her both weary and wary of powerful men.

“*Eh, bien*. How goes it, *ma cousine*?”

Helena turned; she nodded coldly. “*Bon soir*, Louis.” He wasn’t her cousin, not even distantly related; she refrained from haughtily reminding him of the fact. Louis was less than nothing; he was her keeper, no more than an extension of his uncle and master, Fabien de Mordaunt.

She could ignore Louis. Fabien she’d learned never to forget.

Louis’s dark eyes were roving the room. “There are some likely prospects here.” He leaned his powdered head closer to murmur, “I’ve heard there’s an English duke present. Unmarried. St. Ives. You would do well to garner an introduction.”

Helena raised her brows faintly and glanced about the salon. A duke? Louis did have his uses. He was devoted to his uncle’s schemes, and in this instance she and Fabien were pursuing the same agenda, albeit for different reasons.

For the past seven years—almost from the time the Englishman had kissed her—Fabien had used her as a pawn in his games. Her hand was a prize much sought after by the powerful and wealthy families of France; she’d been *almost* betrothed more times than she could recall. But the volatility of the French state and the vicissitudes in the fortunes of the aristocratic families, so dependent on the king’s whims, had meant cementing an alliance through her marriage had never been an option sufficiently attractive to Fabien. More attractive had been the game of dangling her fortune and person as a lure to draw those with influence into his net. Once he’d gained from them all he wanted, he would cast them out and again send her into the Paris salons to catch the attention of his next conquest.

How long the game would have gone on she dreaded to think—until she was too gray to be a lure? Luckily, at least for her, the increasing disaffection in France, the groundswell of discontent, had