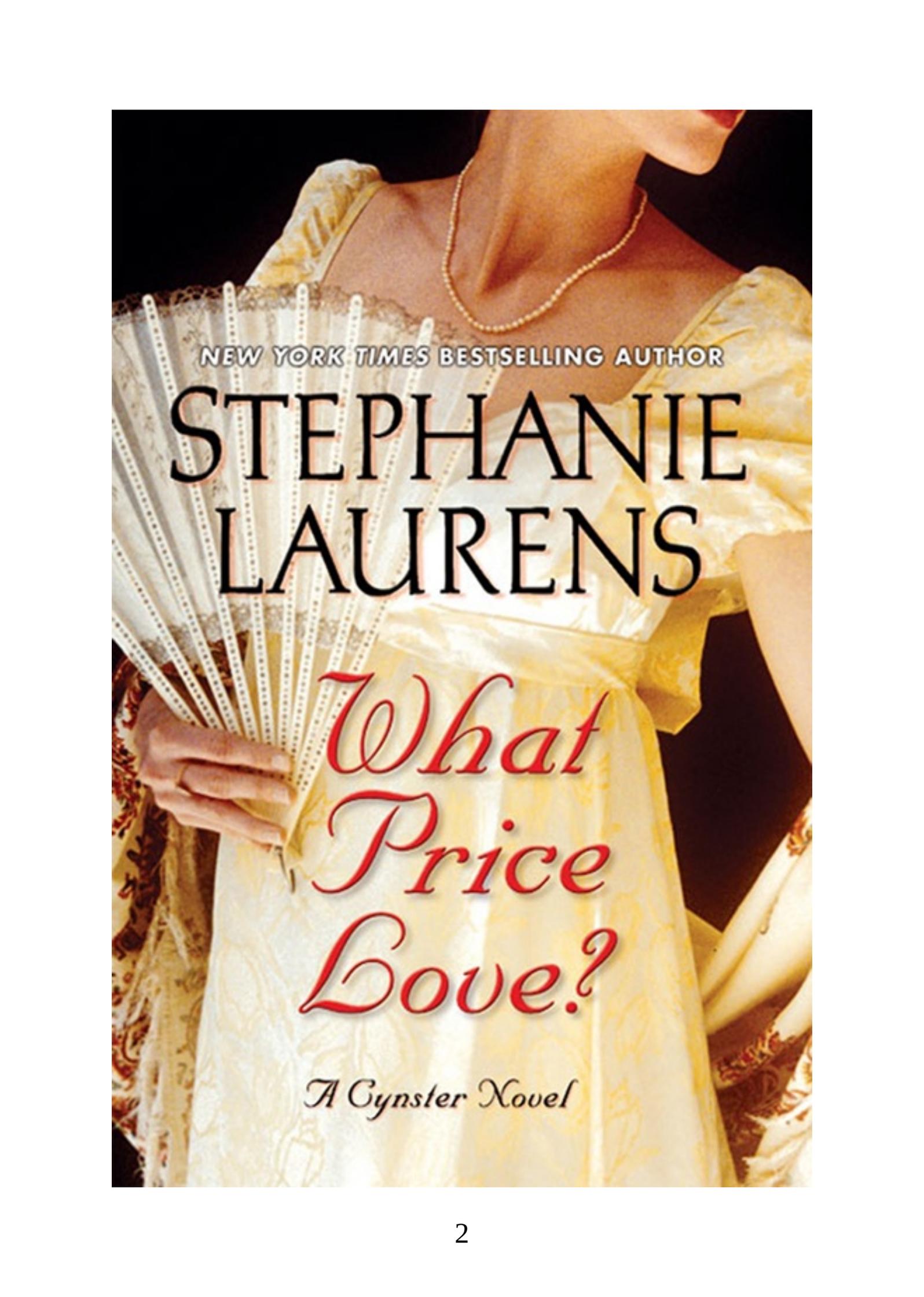


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

STEPHANIE  
LAURENS

*What  
Price  
Love?*

*A Cynster Novel*



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# *What Price Love?*

**STEPHANIE LAURENS**

 HarperCollins e-books

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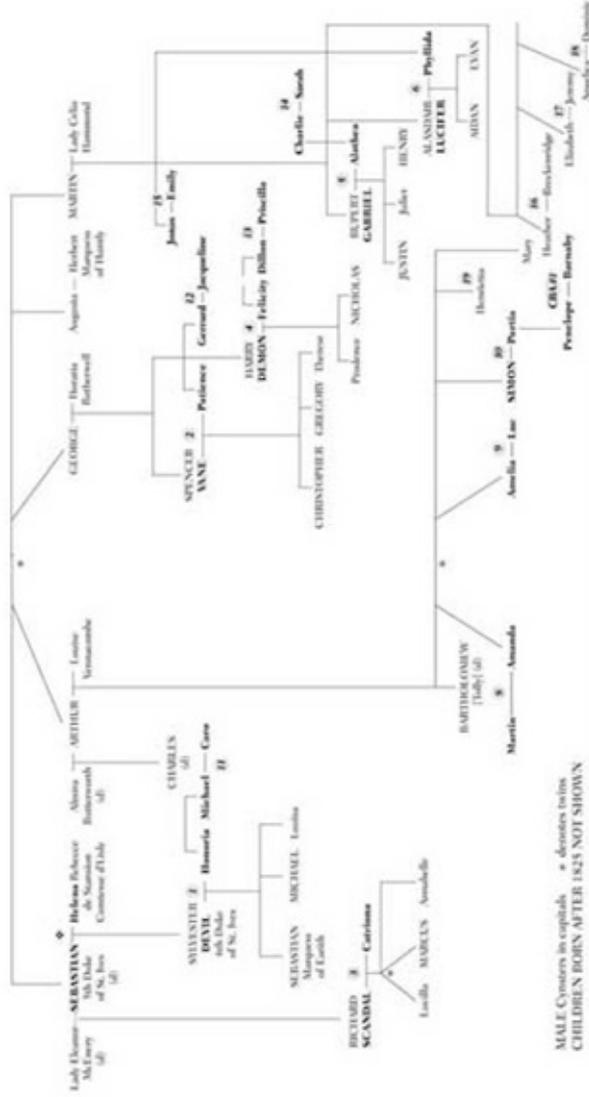
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## **The Family Tree**

# The Cynster Family Tree



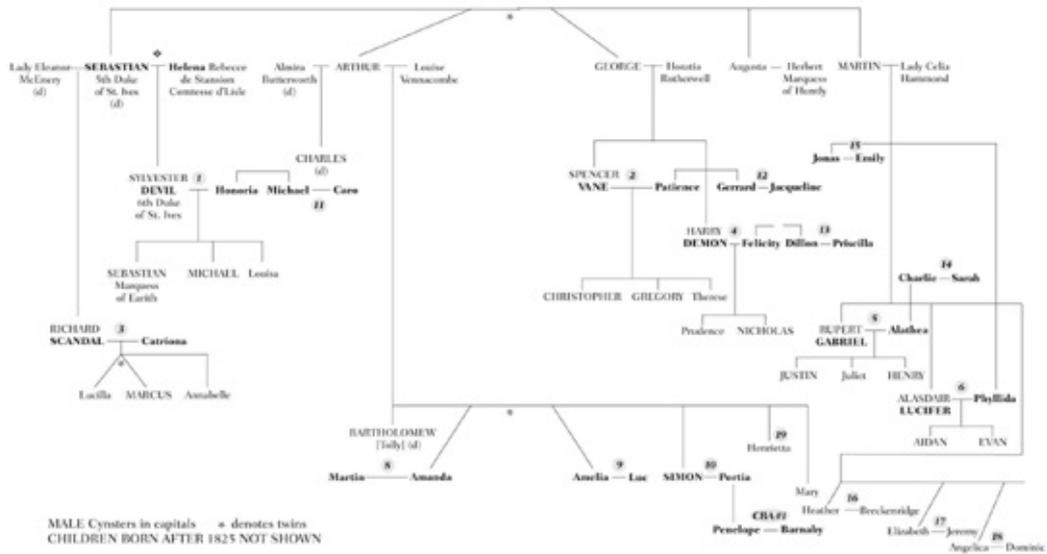
MALE Cynsters in capitals. ♠ denotes twins.  
 CHILDREN BORN AFTER 1823 NOT SHOWN

## THE CYNSTER NOVELS

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♠Cynster Special—The Promise in a Kiss  
 CEM41—Covebook of Barnaby Rudge #1—Where the Heart Leads

# The Cynster Family Tree

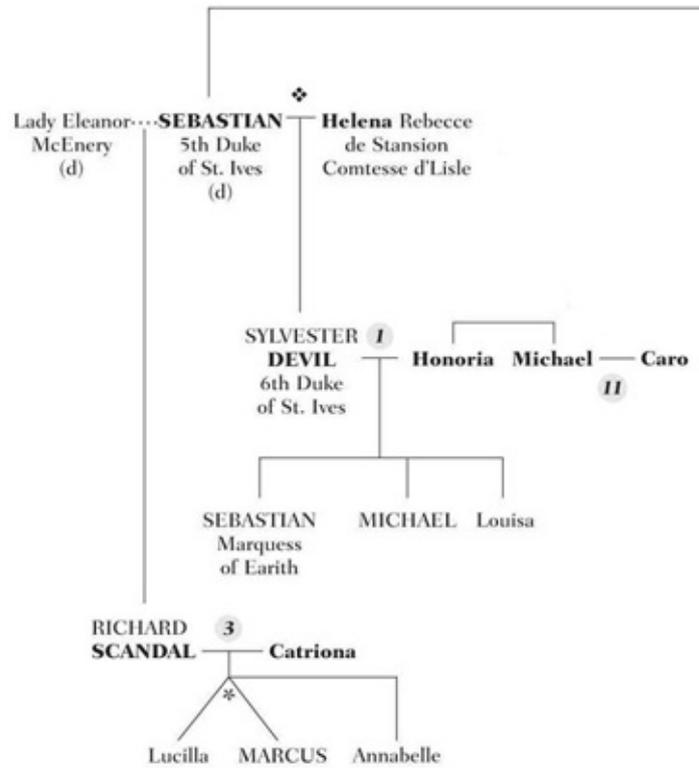


THE CYNSTER NOVELS					
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Click on a name listed below to expand their branch of the family tree.

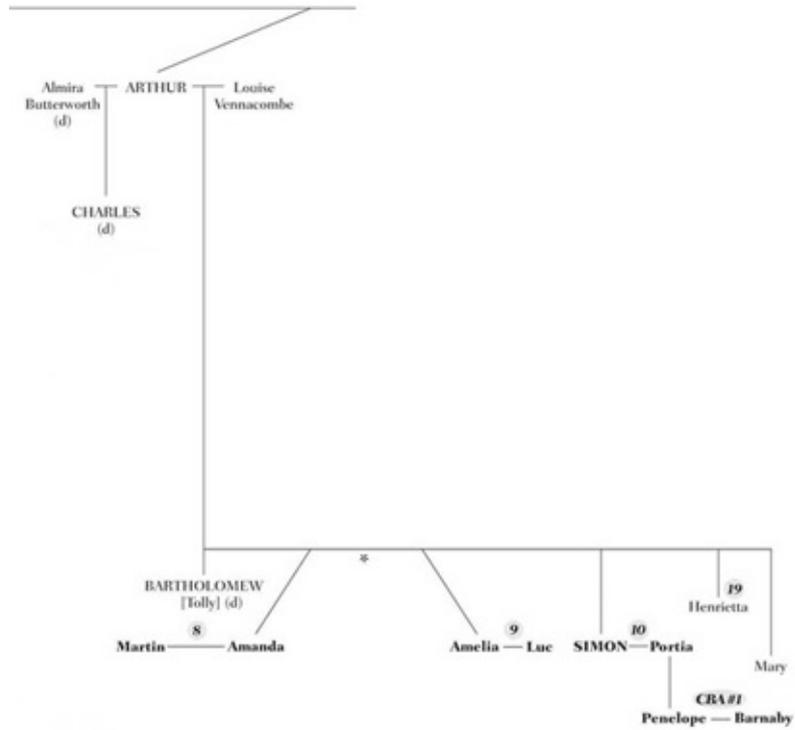
- SEBASTIAN
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# SEBASTIAN



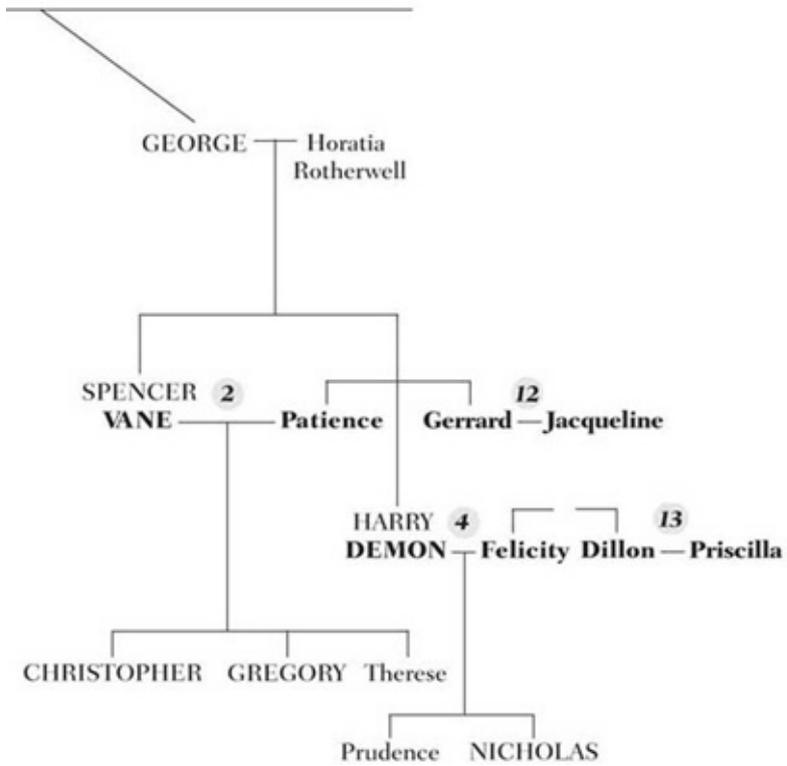
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# ARTHUR



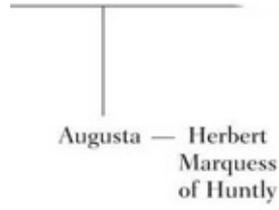
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# GEORGE



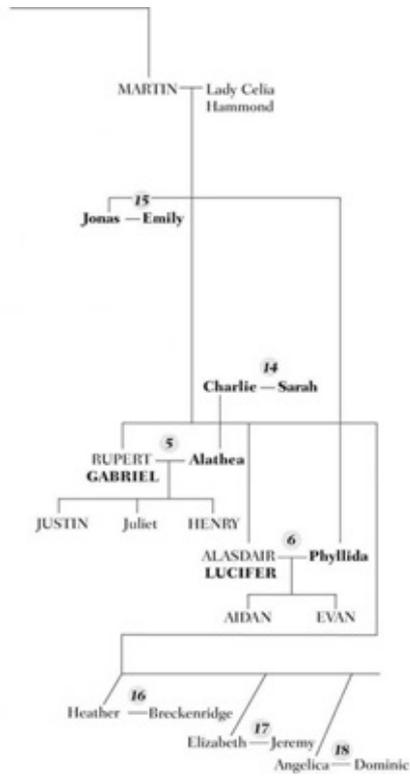
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# AUGUSTA



**BACK**

# MARTIN



# BACK

## PROLOGUE

*August 1831  
Ballyranna, County Kilkenny, Ireland*

**I**'m looking for Paddy O'Loughlin."

Fronting the bar counter in the Pipe & Drum, Lady Priscilla Dalloway met the tavern keeper's arrested gaze and wished she'd thought to disguise her diction. But then she watched recognition flare in Miller's eyes and realized there would have been no point. She'd worn an old riding habit and a wide-brimmed hat, but there was nothing she could do to disguise her face; a veil wouldn't help gain Paddy O'Loughlin's confidence.

Miller, a beefy man with a round, bald head, continued to study her as if she might pose some exotic threat. Inwardly sighing, she leaned confidently on the counter. "He's not in any trouble—I just want to talk to him." She'd softened her already soft brogue, but Miller didn't budge or blink; she infused a touch more persuasiveness into her tone. "It's just that my brother's now filling the position from which Paddy recently retired, and I wanted to know what Paddy could tell me about the work and the place."

That was all she was willing to reveal. She wanted reassurance as to Rus's well-being, but she wasn't prepared to air the Dalloways' dirty linen before Miller, no doubt as big a gossip as his peers.

Miller frowned, and glanced around.

It was two o'clock; there were three workmen farther along the bar, and a few scattered at tables, all glancing surreptitiously at the Quality miss who'd walked into their den. The barroom windows were small, their glass thick and wavy, admitting little light; the room was a medley of browns and greens, dingy and drab, with only the gleam of glasses and bottles on the wall behind the counter to fix the eye.

Miller eyed his other customers, then set aside the glass he'd been drying, stepped closer and lowered his voice. "You're saying young Lord Russell's up and taken Paddy's old job?"

Pris managed not to hiss through her teeth. "Yes. I thought perhaps Paddy could tell me about Lord Cromarty's stables." She shrugged as if it were perfectly normal for an earl's son to become an assistant stableman, and equally mundane for his sister to ride for two hours cross-country to inquire of the previous incumbent as to the conditions of his erstwhile employment. "I'm just curious."

And concerned over why a man like Paddy O'Loughlin would leave what should

have been an excellent position. He was a local legend when it came to horses and horseflesh; he'd helped train a number of exceptional racehorses over the years. She hadn't met him, but had known he lived outside this village, known, therefore, where best to inquire for him.

Miller studied her, then angled his head at a large man in workman's garb nursing a pint at a table in the dimmest corner. "You'd best ask Seamus O'Malley. He and Paddy were best mates."

Pris's brows flew up at Miller's use of the past tense.

He nodded portentously. "Anyone can help you, it's Seamus." He stepped back, adding, "And if it were my brother in Paddy's old shoes, I'd ask."

Concern transformed to outright anxiety. Pris straightened. "Thank you."

Turning, she regarded Seamus O'Malley. She knew nothing of him. Quitting the bar, she walked across the room.

O'Malley sat hunched over a table, nursing a pint pot between work-roughened hands. Pausing beside him, she waited until his gaze rose to meet hers. He blinked owlishly at her, clearly recognizing her but at a loss as to why she was standing there.

Quietly, she stated, "I'm looking for Paddy O'Loughlin—Miller suggested I speak with you."

"He did?" Seamus shifted to peer at the bar.

Pris didn't turn to see. When, presumably reassured by Miller's nod, Seamus looked back at her uncertainly, she pulled out the second chair at the table and sat. "Miller said you knew Paddy well."

Seamus eyed her warily. "Aye."

"So—where is he?"

He blinked, then went back to staring into his almost full pot. "Don't know." Before Pris could prod, he went on, "None of us do. He was here one night, a sennight gone it was, and he ambled off home come closing time, like he always did. But he never reached home." Seamus glanced at her, briefly met her eyes. "The path to his cottage runs through the bogs."

Pris tamped down a sharp surge of panic, tried to think of some other interpretation, and couldn't. "You're saying he was murdered?"

Returning his gaze to his glass, Seamus shrugged. "Don't know, do we? But Paddy'd walked that path ten thousand times, man and boy, and he weren't even drunk—barely tipsy. Hard to swallow that he'd lose his way and die like that, but no one's seen hide nor hair of him since."

Cold dread welled in Pris's stomach. "My brother, Lord Russell, has taken Paddy's old job." She heard her voice, steady but distant, was aware of Seamus's instant concern. "I wanted to ask Paddy about Cromarty's stables. Did he say anything about the place—about the people, the work?"

The expression on Seamus's face was a disturbing mix of worry and sympathy. He sipped, then in a low voice offered, "He'd worked there for three years. Liked the place well enough at first, said the horses were fine, but recently...he said there was something going on that he didn't hold with. That's why he left."

"Something going on?" Pris leaned forward. "Did he say anything more? Give any hint as to what the something was?"

Seamus grimaced. "All he said was that that devil Harkness—he who's head

stableman at Cromarty's—was in it up to his ears, and that it, whatever it was, involved some register."

She frowned. "Register?"

"Paddy never said what register nor how it mattered." Seamus contemplated his beer, then looked at Pris. "I've heard tell your brother's a great one with the horses, but I ain't never heard him spoken of as one who'd tip a man the wink, nor be likely to nobble a horse, nor be involved in any other shady dealing. Lord knows Paddy weren't no saint, but if there were something going on at Cromarty's stables he couldn't stomach, then seems likely your brother might have difficulties with it, too."

Pris stared at him. "And now Paddy's gone."

"Aye. I'm thinking it might be wise to let your brother know." Seamus hesitated, then more gently asked, "He's your twin, ain't he?"

Pris nodded. "Yes." She had to work to strengthen her voice. "And thank you. I'll tell him about Paddy."

She started to rise, then paused and fished in her pocket. Standing, she slipped a silver sixpence onto the table. "Have another pint—for Paddy."

Seamus looked at the sixpence, then grunted softly. "Thank ye. And you tell that brother o' yours to watch himself."

Pris turned and strode out of the tavern.

**T**wo hours later, she swept into the back parlor of Dalloway Hall.

Her paternal aunt Eugenia, a widow who had come to live with the family on Pris's mother's death seven years before, sat on the chaise calmly tating. Curled on the window seat, Adelaide, Eugenia's orphaned goddaughter, now her ward, had been idly perusing a novel.

A pretty girl with glossy brown hair, two years younger than Pris's twenty-four, Adelaide looked up and set aside her book. "Did you learn anything?"

Grimly stripping off her gloves, Pris headed for the ladies' desk by the windows. "I have to write to Rus immediately."

Eugenia lowered her needles. "From which I take it you discovered something disturbing. What?"

Pris dropped her gloves on the desk, swung the heavy skirts of her habit around, and sat in the chair angled before the desk. Both Eugenia and Adelaide knew where she'd gone, and why. "I'd expected to hear that Paddy had had a fight with the head stableman, or something of the sort. I'd hoped his reason for leaving Cromarty's would be simple and innocuous. Unfortunately, it's not."

Across the faded splendor of the Aubusson rug, Pris met Eugenia's wise eyes. "Paddy spoke of something going on at Cromarty's that he couldn't stomach—that's why he left. And now he's disappeared—his friends think he's been done away with."

Eugenia's brown eyes widened. "Great heavens!"

"Oh, dear!" Hand rising to her throat, Adelaide stared.

Turning to the desk, Pris opened the drawer. "I'm going to write to Rus and tell him he has to leave Cromarty's employ at once. If there's something bad happening with the horses—well, you know Rus. He'll get involved trying to put it right. But I don't

want him in any danger, not if it's the sort where people disappear, never to be heard of again. If he can't bear to come home and deal with Papa, then he'll have to look for work training horses for someone else."

To her horror, her voice threatened to quaver; she paused to draw a steady breath.

Rus had always been horse-mad. His one burning ambition was to train an Irish Derby champion. While she didn't share his enthusiasm, Pris fully understood the fervor of his dreams. Unfortunately, their father, Denham Dalloway, Earl of Kentland, had rigid views on what constituted an appropriate occupation for his son and heir, namely the care and management of the family estates. Breeding and training horses was all very well for others, the implication being others of lesser degree, but was an unacceptable occupation for the next Earl of Kentland.

Of the earl's three sons, Rus was the least likely to be satisfied with the role of county landowner as his sole focus in life. Like Pris, he took after their mother, more Celt than English, wild and dramatic and mercurially alive. Both twins could see the benefit in the estate being well managed, but estate management lacked allure. Luckily, their nearest brother, Albert, now twenty-one, took after their father—solid, dependable, stoic; Albert delighted in and would unquestionably excel at all aspects of estate management.

Pris, Rus, and Albert had always been close, as indeed all the Dalloway children were, but the other three, Margaret, Rupert, and Aileen, were much younger—twelve, ten, and seven years old, respectively—more to be protected than viewed as coconspirators. Even before their mother had died, the three eldest siblings had made a pact: Rus would do as their father wished and look after the estate until Albert returned from university in Dublin, then they would put their plan to their sire, that Albert should manage the estate in Rus's name while Rus devoted himself to establishing and running a racing stud.

It was a prescription for the future the three of them could happily follow and make work.

Two months ago, Albert had returned from Dublin, his studies at an end. Once he'd reacquainted himself with the estate, the three had duly put their plan to the earl—who had rejected it out of hand.

Rus would continue to manage the estate. If he had a mind to it, Albert could assist him. Regardless, however, no Dalloway would ever stoop to indulging in horse breeding on a commercial scale.

So declared the earl.

Rus had exploded. Pris and Albert quite saw his point; he'd curbed his driving desire and done everything their father had asked of him for seven years, and now felt he was owed a chance to live the life he yearned to live.

The earl had curled his lip and refused point-blank to even consider their scheme.

Words had been exchanged, things said, wounds dealt on both sides. Pushed beyond bearing, Rus had stormed out of Dalloway Hall in a wild fury. He'd taken nothing more than what he could cram in his saddlebags, and ridden away.

Seven days later, just over three weeks ago, Pris had received a letter to say he'd found work at Lord Cromarty's stables, one of the major racing establishments in neighboring County Wexford.

The schism between her father and brother was now deeper than it had ever been.

Pris was determined to repair the rupture in her family, but the wounds would take time to heal. She accepted that. But with Rus gone, out of her world for the first time in her life, she felt truly alone, truly bereft, as if some part of her had been excised, cut away. The feeling was much more intense than when her mother had died; then she'd had Rus beside her.

She'd gone looking for Paddy seeking reassurance, something to soothe her growing uneasiness over Rus's safety. Instead, she'd learned Rus was in a situation where his life might come under threat.

Pulling a sheet of paper from the drawer, she laid it on the blotter. "If I write a note immediately, Patrick can ride over and deliver it this evening."

"Actually, my dear, before you write I daresay you should read this."

Pris turned to see Eugenia extracting a letter from beneath the endless fall of her tatting.

Eugenia held out the missive. "From Rus. It was delivered with the post after lunch. When he couldn't find you, Bradley gave it to me rather than leave it on the salver in the hall."

Where their father might see it. Bradley was their butler; like most of the household, his sympathies lay with Rus.

Rising, Pris took the letter. Returning to the desk, she broke her brother's seal, then, sinking onto the chair, unfolded the sheets, smoothed them, and read.

The only sounds in the room were the repetitive clack of Eugenia's needles, counterpointed by the tick of the mantelpiece clock.

"Oh, no! What is it? What's happened?"

Adelaide's agitated questions snapped Pris back to the present. Glancing at Adelaide, then at Eugenia, taking in their worried expressions, she realized her own must reflect her mounting horror.

"Rus has gone to England—to Newmarket—with the Cromarty racing string." She licked her suddenly dry lips and looked again at the pages in her hand. "He says..." She paused to steady her voice. "He says he thinks Harkness, the head stableman, is planning to run some racket that somehow revolves about horse breeding while in Newmarket. He overheard Harkness explaining to the head lad—Rus says he's a villainous sort—about how the illicit undertaking worked, and that it involves some register. He, Rus, didn't hear enough to understand the scheme, but he thinks the register Harkness was referring to is the register of all horses entitled by their breeding to race on English tracks."

She flipped over a page, scanned, then reported, "Rus says he knows nothing of the details in the register, but if he's ever going to become a breeder of racehorses, he should obviously learn more about it regardless, and he'll be able to follow it up as that register is kept at the Jockey Club in Newmarket."

She turned the last page, then made a disgusted sound. "The rest is full of platitudes assuring me he'll be safe, that it'll all be perfectly fine, that even if there *is* anything wrong, all he has to do is tell Lord Cromarty, and it'll all be right as rain, don't worry...and then he signs himself 'your loving brother off on an adventure'!"

Tossing the letter on the desk, she faced Eugenia and Adelaide. "I'll have to go to Newmarket."

Adelaide's chin firmed. "We'll go to Newmarket—you can't go alone."

Pris sent her a fleeting smile, then looked at Eugenia.

Her aunt studied her, then nodded, and calmly folded her tatting. “Indeed, dear. I see no alternative. Much as I love Rus, we cannot leave him to deal with whatever this is alone, and if there is some illicit scheme being hatched, you cannot, to my mind, risk even a letter to warn him, in case it falls into the wrong hands. You will need to speak with him. So!”

Folding her hands on the pile of tatting in her lap, Eugenia looked inquiringly at Pris. “What tale are we going to tell your father to explain our sudden need for a sojourn in England?”

# 1

*September 1831  
Newmarket, Suffolk*

I had hoped we'd have longer in reasonable privacy." Letting the door of the Twig & Bough coffee shop on Newmarket High Street swing shut behind him, Dillon Caxton stepped down to the pavement beside Barnaby Adair. "Unfortunately, the sunshine has brought the ladies and their daughters out in force."

Scanning the conveyances thronging the High Street, Dillon was forced to smile and acknowledge two matrons, each with beaming daughters. Tapping Barnaby's arm, he started strolling. "If we stand still, we'll invite attack."

Chuckling, Barnaby fell in beside him. "You sound even more disenchanted with the sweet young things than Gerrard was."

"Living in London, you're doubtless accustomed to far worse, but spare a thought for us who value our bucolic existence. To us, even the Little Season is an unwanted reminder of that which we fervently wish to avoid."

"At least with this latest mystery you have something to distract you. An excellent excuse to be elsewhere, doing other things."

Seeing a matron instructing her coachman to draw her landau to the curb ten paces farther on, Dillon swore beneath his breath. "Unfortunately, as our mystery must remain a strict secret, I fear Lady Kershaw is going to draw first blood."

Her ladyship, a local high stickler, beckoned imperiously. There was no help for it; Dillon strolled on to her now-stationary carriage. He exchanged greetings with her ladyship and her daughter, Margot, then introduced Barnaby. They stood chatting for five minutes. From the corner of his eye, Dillon noted how many arrested glances they drew, how many other matrons were now jockeying for position farther along the curb.

Glancing at Barnaby, doing his best to live up to Miss Kershaw's expectations, Dillon inwardly grimaced. He could imagine the picture they made, he with his dark, dramatic looks most commonly described as Byronic, with Barnaby, a golden Adonis with curly hair and bright blue eyes, by his side, the perfect foil. They were both tall, well set up, and elegantly and fashionably turned out. In the restricted society of Newmarket, it was no wonder the ladies were lining up to accost them. Unfortunately, their destination—the Jockey Club—lay some hundred yards distant; they had to run the gauntlet.

They proceeded to do so with the glib assurance that came from untold hours spent in