

**Lisa Kleypas** is the author of a number of historical and contemporary romance novels that have been published in fourteen languages. In 1985, she was named Miss Massachusetts and competed in the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City. After graduating from Wellesley College with a political science degree, she published her first novel at age twenty-one. Her books have appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller lists. Lisa is married and has two children.

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*To Carrie Feron,  
for all your incredible kindness, hard work, and insight,  
and for making my life and my books more joyful.*



# Prologue

EVANGELINE, THE DUCHESS OF KINGSTON, lifted her infant grandson from the nursery tub and wrapped him snugly in a soft white towel. Chortling, the baby braced his sturdy legs and attempted to stand in her lap. He explored her face and hair with grasping wet hands, and Evie laughed at his affectionate mauling. “Be gentle, Stephen.” She winced as he grabbed the double strand of pearls around her neck. “Oh, I knew I shouldn’t have worn those at your bath time. Too much t-temptation.” Evie had always spoken with a stammer, although it was now very slight compared to what it had been in her youth.

“Your Grace,” the young nursemaid, Ona, exclaimed, hurrying toward her. “I would have lifted Master Stephen out of the tub for you. A fair armful, he is. Solid as a brick.”

“He’s no trouble at all,” Evie assured her, kissing the baby’s rosy cheeks and prying his grip from her pearls.

“Your Grace is very kind to help with the children on Nanny’s day off.” Carefully the nursemaid took the baby from Evie’s arms. “Any of the housemaids would be glad to do it, since you have more important things to attend to.”

“There’s n-nothing more important than my grand-

children. And I enjoy spending time in the nursery—it reminds me of when my children were small.”

Ona chuckled as Stephen reached for the white ruffled cap on her head. “I’ll powder and dress him now.”

“I’ll tidy up the bath things,” Evie said.

“Your Grace, you *mustn’t*.” Clearly the nursemaid was trying to strike an effective balance between sternness and pleading. “Not in your fine silk dress—you must sit in the parlor and read a book, or embroider something.” As Evie parted her lips to argue, Ona added meaningfully, “Nanny would have my head if she knew I’d let you help as much as I have.”

Checkmate.

Knowing that Nanny would have *both* their heads, Evie responded with a resigned nod, although she was unable to resist muttering, “I’m wearing an apron.”

The nursemaid left the bathroom with a satisfied smile, carrying Stephen to the nursery.

Still kneeling on the bath rug in front of the tub, Evie reached behind her back for the flannel apron ties. Ruefully she reflected that it was no easy task to satisfy the servants’ expectations of how a duchess should behave. They were determined to prevent her from doing anything more strenuous than stirring her tea with a silver spoon. And while she was a grandmother of two, she was still slim and fit—easily able to lift a slippery infant from a washtub, or romp with the children through the orchard. Just last week, she had been lectured by the master gardener for climbing over a stacked stone wall to retrieve a few stray toy arrows.

As she fumbled with the stubborn apron knot, Evie heard a footstep behind her. Although there was no other sound or sign of the visitor’s identity, she knew who it was, even before he sank to his knees behind

her. Strong fingers brushed hers away, and the knot was freed with a deft tug.

A low, silken murmur caressed the sensitive skin at the back of her neck. “I see we’ve hired a new nanny. How delightful.” Clever masculine hands slipped beneath the loosening apron, moving in a supple caress from her waist to her breasts. “What a buxom little wench. I predict you’ll do well here.”

Evie closed her eyes, leaning back between his spread thighs. A gentle mouth, designed for sin and sensation, wandered lightly over her neck.

“I should probably warn you,” the seductive voice continued, “to keep your distance from the master. He’s an infamous lecher.”

A smile came to her lips. “So I’ve heard. Is he as wicked as they say?”

“No. Much worse. Especially when it comes to women with red hair.” He plucked a few pins from her coiffure until a long braid fell over her shoulder. “Poor lass—I’m afraid he won’t leave you alone.”

Evie shivered in reflexive pleasure as she felt him kiss his way along the side of her neck. “H-how should I handle him?”

“Frequently,” he said in between kisses.

A helpless giggle escaped her as she twisted in his arms to face him.

Even after three decades of marriage, Evie’s heart still skipped a beat at the sight of her husband, formerly Lord St. Vincent, now the Duke of Kingston. Sebastian had matured into a magnificent man with a presence that both intimidated and dazzled. Since ascending to the dukedom ten years ago, he had acquired a veneer of dignity that befitted a man of his considerable power. But no one could look into those remarkable light blue

eyes, alive with glints of fire and ice, without recalling that he had once been the most wicked rake in England. He still was—Evie could attest to that.

Time had treated Sebastian lovingly, and always would. He was a beautiful man, lean and elegant, his tawny-golden hair now lightly brushed with silver at the temples. A lion in winter, whom no one would cross except at their peril. Maturity had given him a look of cool, incisive authority, the sense of a man who had seen and experienced enough that he could rarely, if ever, be outmaneuvered. But when something amused or touched him, his smile was both incandescent and irresistible.

“Oh, it’s you,” Sebastian said in a tone of mild surprise, seeming to ponder how he had ended up kneeling on a bathroom rug with his wife in his arms. “I was prepared to debauch a resisting servant girl, but you’re a more difficult case.”

“You can debauch me,” Evie offered cheerfully.

Her husband smiled, his glowing gaze moving gently over her face. He smoothed back a few escaping curls that had lightened from ruby to soft apricot. “My love, I’ve tried for thirty years. But despite my dedicated efforts . . .” A sweetly erotic kiss grazed her lips. “. . . you still have the innocent eyes of that shy wallflower I eloped with. Can’t you try to look at least a little jaded? Disillusioned?” He laughed quietly at her efforts and kissed her again, this time with a teasing, sensuous pressure that caused her pulse to quicken.

“Why did you come to find me?” Evie asked languidly, her head tilting back as his lips slid to her throat.

“I’ve just received news about your son.”

“Which one?”

“Gabriel. There’s been a scandal.”

“Why is he your son when you’re pleased with him, and my son whenever he’s done something wicked?” Evie asked as Sebastian removed her apron and began to unfasten the front of her bodice.

“Since I’m the virtuous parent,” he said, “it only stands to reason that his wickedness must come from you.”

“You h-have that exactly backward,” she informed him.

“Do I?” Sebastian fondled her slowly as he considered her words. “*I’m* the wicked one? No, my pet, that can’t be right. I’m sure it’s you.”

“You,” she said decisively, and her breath hastened as his caresses became more intimate.

“Hmm. This must be sorted out at once. I’m taking you straight to bed.”

“Wait. Tell me more about Gabriel. Does the scandal have something to do with . . . that woman?” It was more or less public knowledge that Gabriel was having an affair with the American ambassador’s wife. Evie had heartily disapproved of the relationship from the beginning, of course, and had hoped it would end soon. That had been two years ago.

Lifting his head, Sebastian looked down at her with a slight frown. He sighed shortly. “He’s managed to compromise an earl’s daughter. One of the Ravenels.”

Evie frowned, pondering the name, which sounded familiar. “Do we know that family?”

“I was acquainted with the old earl, Lord Trenear. His wife was a flighty, shallow sort—you met her once at a garden show and discussed her orchid collection.”

“Yes, I remember.” Unfortunately, Evie hadn’t liked the woman. “They had a daughter?”

“Twins. Out for their first Season this year. It seems that your idiot son was caught *in flagrante delicto* with one of them.”

“He takes after his father,” Evie said.

Looking highly insulted, Sebastian rose to his feet in a graceful motion and pulled her up with him. “His father was never caught.”

“Except by me,” Evie said smugly.

Sebastian laughed. “True.”

“What does *in flagrante delicto* mean, exactly?”

“The literal translation? ‘While the crime is blazing.’” Picking her up easily, he said, “I believe a demonstration is in order.”

“But what about the s-scandal? What about Gabriel, and the Ravenel girl, and—”

“The rest of the world can wait,” Sebastian said firmly. “I’m going to debauch you for the ten thousandth time, Evie—and for once, I want you to pay attention.”

“Yes, sir,” she said demurely, and looped her arms around her husband’s neck as he carried her to their bedroom.



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