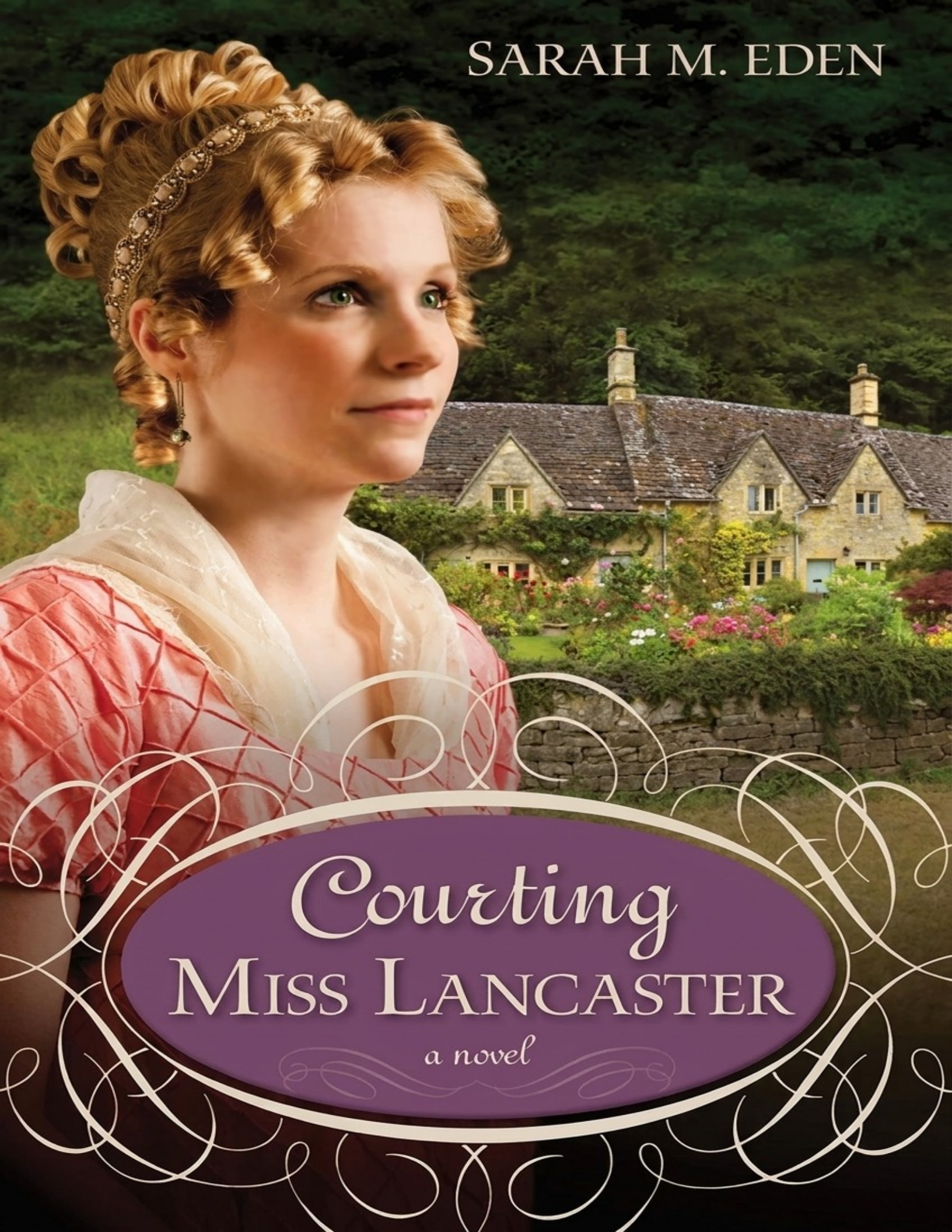




SARAH M. EDEN

Courting
MISS LANCASTER

a novel





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Sarah M. Eden

Covenant Communications, Inc.



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To Annette, who knows talent when she sees it and, in a moment of delirium, lumped me into that group.

Chapter 1

London

August 1806

“First thing in the morning, I am throwing her in the Thames.”

Harry Windover grinned, though he was certain the dire pronouncement from the Duke of Kielder was meant to inspire anxious concern. While the rest of England trembled at the slightest hint of a threat from the infamous duke, Harry’s friendship with the notorious nobleman was of long-enough standing to allow him greater insight into the gentleman’s character. Adam Boyce, Duke of Kielder, was more than capable of and, if truth be told, entirely willing to follow through with the most drastic of threats. But, though he growled regularly, he acted rationally.

“And what has this doomed female done to deserve such an unenviable fate?” Harry asked, smiling still.

“She requires a Season,” Adam declared, his tone clearly communicating his utter disapproval as well as his complete disbelief.

“Most young ladies do,” Harry answered. “How else are the poor dears’ parents to see them married to the highest bidder, er, most suitable gentleman?”

He almost laughed at the black look Adam gave him. Adam had redefined “highest bidder” in his courtship. If one were being picky, *courtship* would not be the word to describe Adam’s successful acquiring of a bride. He’d written a letter, offered the equivalent of several small fortunes, and had been married—all within a few short weeks. Those gentlemen, like Harry, who did not possess one small fortune, let alone several entirely disposable ones, found themselves perpetually unsought-after, ineligible, and very, very single.

“Dare I ask why this particular young lady’s very commonplace requirement has warranted the ending of her no-doubt short life?”

“If she is dead, she will not need a Season.”

“True, but she would need a wake and a funeral. Those, too, can be tedious.”

“But far shorter in duration.”

A young gentleman, probably having no more than twenty years in his dish, passed near the chairs in the back of White’s, where Harry and Adam were spending the afternoon. With one look, Adam sent the young cub scurrying in the opposite direction, a look of pale-faced fear crossing his features.

Harry chuckled. “Must you torture the infantry?”

Adam ignored him. Which made Harry laugh more. It was their pattern, had been since their days at Harrow. Adam put on his “Fearsome Duke” façade. Harry laughed at the absurdity of it—he knowing that Adam was a good-hearted person beneath it—and that made Adam grumpy. Adam, Harry knew very well, realized he was a different person beneath his ironclad mask, and it unsettled him to think that his armor could be pierced. Adam hadn’t yet tossed Harry over, nor run him through, though he had many times threatened to do so.

Harry returned to the subject at hand. “Countless young ladies have their Seasons each year, Adam. Why should this particular case upset you so entirely?”

“In this particular case, I have the dubious distinction of being the debutante’s guardian.”

For a fraction of a second, Harry’s breath caught. He was certain he knew the identity of the soon-to-be victim of Adam’s distemper. *Athena Lancaster*. “You did apply for legal guardianship of your wife’s sisters and brother,” Harry reminded him. “When one acquires sisters-in-law, and when one has provided them with the kingdom’s most enviable dowries, such things as Seasons must be assumed.”

“I assumed guardianship because their father is losing hold of his faculties,” Adam corrected. “But if I am forced through the tedium of a come-out, I shall lose hold of mine.”

“And then where shall we be?” Harry laughed.

“My sanity is a source of amusement to you?” Adam raised that universally feared eyebrow.

“Everything about you is a source of amusement to me.” Harry smiled.

“I should call you out for that,” Adam threatened.

“As much fun as that would be, it does not solve *your* problem.”

Adam harrumphed and contented himself for a while with glaring at the other members of the club daring, or foolish, enough to sit within visual range. Harry’s mind spun as Adam brooded in silence.

Athena Lancaster.

He could picture her with perfect clarity: golden curls, sparkling green eyes, creamy complexion. Athena was taller than her sister, the Duchess of Kielder, coming to Harry’s chin, something he knew by virtue of having stood beside her as they’d signed as witnesses to Adam and Persephone’s wedding. He’d discovered in that same moment that she smelled like violets. His sister, Jane, wore the same scent but not at all in the same way. Harry had become a favorite of the little flower girl on the corner of Piccadilly. She always carried violets. And he always bought a posy. In other words, Harry knew himself to be well and truly besotted.

It was, in all reality, a tragedy.

Athena, thanks to the desperation of her then-future brother-in-law, was exceptionally well-dowered, having £20,000. She was also the most beautiful woman of his acquaintance, an assessment he was certain would be shared by every gentleman who met her. In addition, she had the world’s most overprotective guardian. Adam griped and grumbled over the inconvenience of his newly acquired wards, but Harry knew Adam secretly cared a great deal for them, due in large part to how deeply he loved their sister, his wife. And while the fearsome duke might allow Harry’s friendship, there was little hope that he would look favorably on a suit for the hand of

his sister-in-law from a gentleman who could boast only a marginally productive estate in the wilds of Northumberland and less than £700 per annum. Athena could do far better. Adam would make certain she did.

Harry had accepted the entire situation nearly a year earlier, within minutes of setting eyes on Athena. He had simply expected to have more time to resign himself to the fact that she would be courted by throngs of admirers with deeper pockets than his to recommend them.

“Athena arrived in London this morning with her horde of sisters in tow, along with their governess,” Adam grumbled.

Athena was in London? Harry couldn’t be sure if that was welcome news or not.

“The infuriating female informed me within moments of her arrival at Falstone House that she wishes to be brought out during the Little Season,” Adam continued. If Harry hadn’t known Adam so well, he might have taken exception to the “infuriating female” comment. “She explained that she was certain it would be a more agreeable option to *me*.” His look of patent disbelief clearly displayed his evaluation of that bit of logic.

“Either Miss Lancaster”—Harry didn’t feel it was safe to call the object of his regard by her Christian name in Adam’s hearing—“does not realize that you flee London quite religiously every August or she feels the smaller social throng of the Little Season would be more to your liking.”

“She was obviously misinformed,” Adam observed.

“And did you address the subject of her misapprehension?” Harry asked, careful to keep his tone casual so Adam wouldn’t guess at the slight increase in tension Harry was experiencing worrying over the outcome of Athena’s encounter with Adam’s testy temper.

Adam’s snort put Harry at ease. Adam very seldom made noises when cutting words would suffice. “The Lancaster women are manipulative,” Adam grumbled. “Athena informed me of her decision, smiled, and flitted from the room before I had a chance to say a single word. And the very next moment, Persephone was in my book room thanking me rather . . . gushingly

for taking such wonderful care of her sisters. By the time I realized I was being distracted, the arrangements were already being undertaken.”

Harry chuckled. “Manipulative, indeed.” And very well planned. He knew Persephone had a good head on her shoulders, and he suspected Athena did as well. One could not, after all, be named for the Greek goddess of divine intelligence and be a complete featherhead.

“I have half a mind to return to Falstone Castle and leave Athena to her own devices,” Adam declared. “Let her sort through the ridiculous moonlings who will line my drawing room day after tedious day. If it were up to me, I’d send every one of them packing and send Athena to a nunnery.”

“Do you think she would go?” Harry chuckled.

Adam muttered something that sounded suspiciously like “Lancaster women” and took up the paper again.

“Perhaps you should hire out, Adam,” Harry laughingly suggested. “Put an advertisement in the *Times* requesting the services of . . . How would one put that, exactly? . . . of an experienced suitor sorter. You would, of course, have to find someone who knew *society* and could sort the bad apples from the horrible apples and who not only could endure the endless prattle of the social whirl but, preferably, enjoy it.”

“If your estate ever completely falls to ruin, Harry, you could hire yourself out for just such a position,” Adam said, stiffening his paper and allowing his scowl to settle on its pages. “You have described yourself perfectly.”

Harry laughed, earning a look of amazement from the youngling Adam had earlier sent into life-threatening palpitations of fear. Harry got that look a lot. Anyone who regularly laughed in the duke’s presence was either entirely mad or placed very little value on the continuation of his existence. It was a rather fine line, when he thought about it. Rather like being a court jester in the days when royalty could behead on a whim.

The sudden jerking of Adam’s paper should have been a warning. But Harry missed it, something he was later certain he would regret time and again.

“Suitor sorter,” Adam quite suddenly said, a look on his usually somber face that on anyone else might have been described as gleeful. “Harry, name your price.”

“My what?” Harry chuckled, certain Adam was truly addled.

“For taking over the tedious aspects of this ridiculous come-out.”

“I beg your—”

“Don’t be obtuse,” Adam snapped at him. The gleeful look was gone. “I have no desire to spend every night of the next few months at balls and soirees or drowning in tea with morning callers. You relish such things.”

“You are asking me to help your sister-in-law find a husband?” Adam couldn’t possibly have known the irony of that request.

“Only to sort out the bad apples, as you said,” Adam corrected. “I’ll handle the formalities.”

“Like tearing limb by limb any less-than-worthies who apply for her hand?”

Adam’s face clearly communicated the joy he would find in that undertaking. “But the social niceties, I could do without. And as you are an almost constant guest in the house and a family acquaintance of inordinately long standing—”

Harry held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. He had only a shabby set of rooms in London to call his own and lacked the means of living in any semblance of style. He would not go to Falstone Castle in Northumberland when Adam was not there, and visiting his own dilapidated estate was always an exercise in futile frustration. One needed capital to repair generations of neglect—capital he did not have. Being the constant guest of his oldest friend was something of a necessity, a means of obtaining regular food and sitting in warmth he did not have to pay for. Adam had never asked anything of him in return for his hospitality. But Harry could not, in good conscience, deny Adam a favor when he wished for it.

“Just sort through the bushel?” Harry asked doubtfully.

“Unless you think Athena will receive little attention.” Adam raised an eyebrow. He obviously knew Athena would be something of an immediate

sensation when she made her bows to society.

Harry shook his head. "She will receive ample attention," he answered, trying not to grumble.

"And it is crucial that the less-than-deserving be dispatched rather immediately," Adam answered.

Something in the wording of that appealed to Harry. Dispatching the less-than-deserving. He couldn't have her for himself, he understood that. But he could see to it that she found a gentleman who would treat her well, who would care for more than her dowry and connections. It would be torture, no denying that, but there would be at least a measure of satisfaction in the undertaking.

"Perhaps you should define 'less-than-deserving,'" Harry ventured.

Adam gave Harry the look he reserved for moments when Harry didn't live up to Adam's standard of intelligence. "Philanderers, divorcés, rogues and rakes, anyone whose standing is not at least among the gentry, anyone too old or too young. Certainly no one stupid or cowardly. Absolutely no member of my extended family." Harry actually smiled at that. There were few people in Adam's extended family, and Harry knew Adam heartily disapproved of every last one of them. "And under no circumstances should she be permitted to be courted by a fortune hunter. A fortune hunter is one thing I will absolutely not abide."

And that was the death knoll to any flicker of hope Harry might have had. While he cared little for Athena's dowry, he knew himself to be pathetically short of funds. In the eyes of the world, even in the eyes of his best friend, Harry would be seen as that most despised of creatures: the dreaded fortune hunter.

"I believe I can steer Miss Lancaster clear of any undesirable types," Harry said, resigning himself to a torturous few months—*weeks* if Athena was as popular as he expected she would be.

"Then let us hope she does not descend upon you with demands and ideas." Adam shook his head with weary disbelief. "*You* will hardly be rid of her through the Little Season."

Hardly be rid of her.

A smile crept across Harry's face.

A few weeks with Athena. The few hours he'd spent with her after Adam's wedding had been more than pleasant. He'd spent time with her again over the Christmas holiday. Athena and her sisters had arrived at Falstone Castle that spring several weeks before Harry's departure for London. The sweetness of her disposition had been obvious—another trait she shared with her sister—but so had her keen mind and witty sense of humor. It had only deepened his attraction to her.

“So when do I begin my duties?” Harry asked, feeling a surge of anticipation.

“As soon as the ladies are content with her wardrobe. Heaven knows that could take time.”

Harry nodded absently. The next few weeks would be the most acutely torturous of his life, and he would relish every moment.

Chapter 2

A well-bred young lady does not cry at a ball.

Athena Lancaster knew that very basic rule. She knew every rule, basic or otherwise, that governed society. She had fastidiously practiced every country dance she'd ever heard of, mentally reviewed the movements of the minuet, though she truly disliked it. She was well-versed in the many intricacies and nuances of wielding her fan and the message each movement was meant to convey. Athena had studied the copy of Debrett's she'd found in her brother-in-law's library—having slipped into that room when she was absolutely certain His Grace was away from home—and was confident she could place every member of the aristocracy into their respective families. She had trembled through her presentation and had managed not to disgrace herself before the queen. She was gowned in the first stare of fashion, her gold ringlets coiffed flatteringly.

And Athena was moments from sobbing.

She had pictured her first ball hundreds of times as a young girl. She had imagined standing poised and confident, smiling bewitchingly at the fashionable gentlemen she would meet. Athena had danced in her dreams with confidence and grace. Never in all her imaginings had she seen herself sitting on an exceedingly uncomfortable chair watching the dances slip past without a single soul soliciting her hand.

“Such a beauty,” she had heard countless people say over the years. “With her sweet nature and lovely countenance, Miss Athena will make a grand match.” She had rather counted on being a success, but not in a preening or self-absorbed way. Indeed, she had often seen that forthcoming “grand match” as the answer to all her family's problems. A well-heeled gentleman who loved her enough to marry her without a penny to her name would certainly possess enough generosity to save her loved ones from the threat of poverty. She had planned on it.

Athena glanced around the glittering ballroom once more. Couples glided through the steps of a country dance. Athena knew the movements by heart. How she had practiced and reviewed! Just that morning she had spent a full hour studiously covering every dance she might possibly be called on to perform. She ought to have rehearsed being rejected; that would most certainly have proven more useful.

The attempt at wit helped keep the tears at bay for the moment.

At least, Athena told herself, she'd danced once upon first arriving. Her brother-in-law, the infamous Duke of Kielder, had—no doubt at the request of his wife, Athena's older sister, Persephone—stood up with her for the length of an entire quadrille. Immediately after which he had taken up his post just behind Athena's chair. Adam, as His Grace had suggested she call him when they were at home—again, probably at the suggestion of his wife—was not overly fond of going about in society. And society, Athena was fairly certain, rather supported him in that preference. He frightened people. He terrified Athena.

Around her the music was coming to its conclusion, another dance ending. With a mighty effort, Athena kept the tears at bay as she cast her eyes about, hoping a gentleman would magically materialize and request her hand for the next set. She had been at the Debensham's ball for nearly two hours. The next set was the supper dance. Many gentlemen had approached. Athena had offered a tentative smile. And, every time, moments before reaching her side, each gentleman's expression had turned from approval to dismay, and they had simply walked past her. One had actually turned on the spot and walked back in the direction from which he had come. Athena felt heat stain her cheeks as she remembered the embarrassment of that moment.

She closed her eyes for a moment, forced a calming breath, and silently uttered yet another prayer. She would survive. No matter what else went wrong, she would survive. The Lancasters were nothing if not persevering.

“Miss Lancaster.”

The sound of a gentleman's voice so near her startled Athena. She opened her eyes, afraid her sudden nervousness would be embarrassingly obvious. Her discomfort slid away in an instant.

"Hello, Mr. Windover," she said with palpable relief. Mr. Windover was unfailingly kind and could be counted on to lighten even the most difficult of situations. At that moment, he was a godsend.

"About time you got here, you worthless maggot," Adam said behind Athena. She tensed at his voice, the way she always did.

"I missed you too, Your Grace." Mr. Windover grinned up at the single most dangerous man in the room. Only Mr. Windover could have done as much.

Athena very nearly smiled for the first time in hours. Adam was less frightening when Mr. Windover was nearby.

"Make yourself useful, Harry, and dance with Athena," Adam ordered.

Athena felt her cheeks flame. How horrifyingly humiliating. If her two hours of uninterrupted sitting had not confirmed her a wallflower, having her guardian order a gentleman to stand up with her certainly solidified the label.

"Bad form, old man." Mr. Windover shook his head in a mock display of disapproval. "I had intended to ask the lady myself. But now she will be convinced I am doing so only on your orders. Bad form." Mr. Windover smiled at Athena, his blue eyes twinkling down at her. "Dare I hope your supper dance is unclaimed?"

"No," Athena managed, her heart suddenly leaping. She would not be forced to sit out the supper dance!

"No, I ought not to hope? Or *no*, it is not claimed?" Mr. Windover smiled more broadly.

A smile slid across Athena's face. "It is unclaimed," she clarified.

"If you stand there talking endlessly like a gossiping matron, it will remain unclaimed after the music begins," Adam said. "Get on with it, sapskull."

Harry held his gloved hand out to Athena. She slipped her hand in his and rose to walk with him to the set forming nearest her seat. For only a moment, her heart fluttered nervously. But Mr. Windover smiled across at her, and she felt herself grow more at ease. He was a comfortable sort of person—a drastic change from Adam, who had been at her side the entire evening.

The quick movements of the dance made any degree of conversation between them impossible. It was just as well. Despite her frequent practicing, Athena was concentrating on her steps, determined not to embarrass herself.

The dancers, including Mr. Windover, applauded as the orchestra emitted one last, drawn-out note before the mass exodus to the supper room. Athena laid her hand quite properly on the arm Mr. Windover offered her and walked with him out of the ballroom, a little out of breath.

“I understand from your sister that your presentation went well yesterday,” Mr. Windover said after they were both seated with plates of delectable food before them.

“I did not even trip once,” Athena said lightly.

“And you were so certain you would.” Mr. Windover smiled back. Her nervousness had been discussed at some length at a family dinner the evening before her presentation. Mr. Windover was always present at family dinners, something Athena appreciated. Persephone may have been entirely at ease with her husband, but his often surly and always intimidating presence never failed to rid Athena of her appetite. At Falstone Castle she had not been so entirely overset by him. But the combination of her fearsome brother-in-law—his disgruntled nature more keenly accentuated in London—with the prospect of a Season, even a Little one, had proven nearly too much for her nerves.

“I wish you could have been there,” Athena mused, pushing a puff pastry around her plate with her fork. “Persephone was nearly as nervous as I, and His Grace looked . . .” What was the right word?

“Annoyed?” Mr. Windover ventured.

“Precisely.” Athena smiled. “How did you know that? You were not even present.”

“The Fearsome Duke of Kielder generally looks annoyed when interacting with the royal family,” Mr. Windover whispered, leaning closer to her as he did. The last remnants of nervousness slipped away at his nearness. Mr. Windover had that effect on her, had from the moment she’d first met him at Persephone’s wedding. He was calming, peaceful. “I believe he finds them tedious.”

“What amazes me is that he makes no effort to hide his feelings.” Athena shook her head. She could not imagine being so unconcerned with the opinions of the very highest of society. “Does he not worry that he might offend?”

“I do not believe he cares one whit if the royal family is offended by him. They, on the other hand, appear quite concerned about offending *him*,” Mr. Windover answered. “The queen, I am certain, finds our duke quite fascinating. I understand she goes to great lengths to make him welcome whenever he condescends to attend her drawing rooms.”

“She spoke with him for nearly ten minutes,” Athena confirmed, remembering her shock at the unexpected break with convention. “Exclusively.”

“And he probably glared at her the entire time,” Mr. Windover added.

“He had the temerity to check the time on his pocket watch as Her Majesty was addressing him,” Athena said, knowing her eyes were wide with the memory.

Mr. Windover laughed out loud. “Lands, I wish I had been there to see that.”

“And he caught out the prince watching him rather pointedly and—”

“The prince was actually foolish enough to stare at the Dangerous Duke?”

Athena nodded. “And far more foolish to have been caught doing it.”

“Don’t tell me he called His Royal Highness out again.” Mr. Windover shook his head.

“Again?” Athena felt her heart lurch. “He has previously challenged the Prince of Wales?”

“It is of no account, really. Prinny apologized. The entire thing was smoothed over.”

“Good heavens,” Athena muttered. What kind of guardian did she have? He wrested apologies from the prince himself and found conversation with the queen irritatingly boring. Was it any wonder Athena was so uncomfortable with him?

“Let us discuss more pleasant topics,” Mr. Windover said, smiling as always. He had a very reassuring smile. “How have you enjoyed your very first ball?”

Mortified, Athena felt tears prick at her eyes the instant his question was uttered. How had she enjoyed her first ball? Not at all.

“Tears, Miss Lancaster?” Mr. Windover’s voice lowered to the quietest of whispers. “That will never do.”

“I am sorry,” Athena whispered in reply, trying valiantly to keep herself in check.

“If you will pretend an exorbitant degree of interest in the contents of your plate,” Mr. Windover suggested, “I shall endeavor to appear entirely at my ease. Then, you see, the other guests will think nothing untoward has occurred, and you may recover your poise with no one the wiser.”

Athena immediately lowered her eyes to her plate, keeping her head bowed enough to hide the sudden sheen of tears evident on her lashes. A young lady did not cry at a ball. Nor did she cry over supper at a ball. A few moments of silence passed while Athena worked to rein in her emotions.

“Has someone upset you?” Mr. Windover asked, his voice still low.

“No,” Athena answered, grateful for the concern she heard in his voice.

“Are you disappointed in the ball?” he ventured. “Or perhaps simply in your partners?”

That nearly undid her. “I h-haven’t had any,” she whispered, hearing the break in her voice.

“You haven’t had any? Any partners?”

Athena glanced up. Mr. Windover's eyes were on her, a look of empathy on his face. "Except for Adam, when we first arrived. And then you. There were a few times I thought a gentleman was going to approach, but, except for you, they all, without fail, did not. One even spun around and fled." She took a shaky breath. "I am not sure what is so wrong with me that . . . that . . ."

"Miss Lancaster." Mr. Windover smiled kindly. "Do you truly believe these gentlemen did not approach you because of something they found lacking in you?"

"What other reason could there be?"

Harry shook his head, as if amused in spite of himself. "There is a rather glaringly obvious reason."

Athena furrowed her brow, confused. She couldn't think of anything beyond some monumental failing in herself that she had not discovered yet.

"I believe your lack of partners had everything to do with the fact that the Duke of Kielder was standing at your shoulder with his hand resting rather ominously on the hilt of his dress sword. I am certain many of the gentlemen in attendance were rather afraid that the infamous duke would borrow a page from not-too-distant French history and behead the aristocracy should they disgruntle him in any way."

"He scared them off," Athena surmised.

"Precisely."

It was a far more welcome possibility than the reasoning she had previously applied to the situation. Adam had frightened away her prospective partners. There might be hope for her yet. Except, she immediately amended, Adam was her guardian. Any gentleman who wished to solicit her hand for a dance would have to be willing to approach even with him hovering nearby.

"That does not bode well, does it?" Athena sighed, setting her fork beside her plate, her appetite having fled entirely.

"Never fear. Adam is not likely to attend many more social functions. Persephone is far less intimidating."