

Loving
LIEUTENANT
LANCASTER

FROM USA TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
SARAH M. EDEN

Loving
LIEUTENANT
LANCASTER



a novel

SARAH M. EDEN

Covenant Communications, Inc.



Cover image: An 18th Century Man © Laura Kate Bradley, courtesy of
Arcangel.com

Cover design copyright © 2018 by Covenant Communications, Inc.

Author Photo copyright © 2018 Annalisa Photography

Published by Covenant Communications, Inc.

American Fork, Utah

Copyright © 2018 by Sarah M. Eden

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any format or in any medium without the written permission of the publisher, Covenant Communications, Inc., P.O. Box 416, American Fork, UT 84003. The views expressed within this work are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Covenant Communications, Inc., or any other entity.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, names, incidents, places, and dialogue are either products of the author's imagination, and are not to be construed as real, or are used fictitiously.

First Printing: June 2018

ISBN: 978-1-52440-525-0

To Nadeoui and Doug

for raising a wonderful son, for welcoming me into your lives

and family, for loving me like one of your own

Acknowledgments

With gratitude to . . .

- Annette Lyon and Luisa Perkins, for making Tuesdays my favorite writing day of the week
- Karen Adair keeping me on task, celebrating even miniscule word counts, cheering me on, and getting me in trouble at writing conferences
- Katherine Eden, for brainstorming this story with me and helping me address all the missing and broken bits of it. You are the best!
- Ginny Miller, for willing and eager proofreading, and for always finding errors I've missed
- Dr. Michael Darley, for helping me keep this body moving, functioning, and thriving, and for giving me hope for the future
- Pam Victorio and Bob Diforio, for endless and unwavering support
- Sam Millburn, for, as always, taking my words and making them better, stronger, and clearer
- My family, for helping out when the nights are long and the editing deadlines tight, for reminding me to take care of myself, and for being amazing

Chapter One

London, August 1816

ONLY A FOOL WOULD IGNORE an edict from the Duke of Kielder, and though Linus Lancaster was many things, he was not a fool.

Thus, as directed in a tersely worded note delivered to his rented London rooms, Linus reported to a very specific location in their club at the appointed hour, prepared to do whatever his universally feared brother-in-law required of him. He was not afraid of the duke—indeed, he liked him quite a lot—but the tone of the summons portended ill, and Linus braced himself for the worst.

He arrived at the club with a moment or two to spare. Nothing at all had changed in the month since he had last dropped in. Adam, the infamous duke himself, had sponsored him for membership shortly after he'd ended his time in the Royal Navy. The club had offered some diversions in those early days of adjustment, but having lived more than half his life at sea, Linus struggled to summon enthusiasm for hours of card games or pointless wagers. While he enjoyed a game of billiards now and then and found some enjoyment in quiet reading, day after day of nothing but idle pursuits had quickly grown tedious. He was, in a word, bored, a state of being he had nearly forgotten existed.

Adam was in the predetermined meeting spot: a somewhat secluded corner of the dark-paneled reading room. The web of scars marring his face pulled in sharp, disapproving angles. The Dangerous Duke, it appeared, was in a foul mood.

Seated beside him was another of Linus's brothers-in-law, Harry Windover, who was as personable as Adam was prickly. Linus took the empty chair near them. He exchanged an abbreviated, silent nod with Adam, then shot a confused look at Harry. "Do we know why we've been summoned?" he asked.

"Adam has chosen to be mysterious," Harry said. "My theory is he wants us to play a guessing game. I'll begin." He narrowed his eyes and stroked his chin. "I've hit upon it. His Grace has grown so inordinately fond of the both of us that he wishes to form our own private club. He will be providing us with matching hatbands and—"

"Shut up, Harry." Adam said that often. Remarkably often, in fact. Anyone listening in for the first time would think Adam disliked his brother-in-law, though that was not at all the case.

"Your turn to guess," Harry said, turning to Linus.

"I've fought more than enough battles in my life; I'll not invite another."

Adam nodded. "Wise."

"I will, however, admit myself intrigued by your summons," Linus said. "If you're of a mind to elaborate, I won't object."

Adam's expression hardened. "Your sister has accepted an invitation to a house party."

"Which sister?" Linus had four, after all.

Harry chuckled. "Would we be having this conversation if it were any of them other than his wife?"

Only Persephone's acceptance of an invitation required Adam to do the same. There were few things Adam disliked as much as parties—they being filled with people, whom he did not care for; socializing, which he loathed even more; and the requirement that he be away from home, something he allowed only under extreme duress.

"I still don't understand why Persephone's plans have necessitated this meeting," Linus said.

"Perhaps he means for us to kidnap him so he'll not have to participate in the party," Harry suggested, always one for lightening the mood no matter the necessity.

"You couldn't manage a kidnapping even with your abductee's full cooperation," Adam said.

Harry poked his thumb in Linus's direction. "I'd have the lieutenant, here, to help. He's likely a dab hand at subterfuge and scheming. We'd find ourselves quite in demand amongst gentlemen wishing to escape Society. We could advertise our services, have a few adventures."

"I could use a few adventures," Linus admitted. "Anything to escape the monotony of this life of leisure."

Harry lowered his voice and donned an overblown look of warning. "Do not tell Adam you are bored; he will find something incredibly miserable with which to fill your time."

As much as Linus welcomed both the company and banter, especially since Harry was an expert at the very entertaining ruffling of Adam's feathers, he suspected the duke was not patient enough for the undertaking just then.

“You have been known to skip invitations Persephone has accepted,” Linus said, returning to the topic at hand. “Why is this one different?”

“For one,” he said, “the party is more than two weeks long. I’ll not send her off to Nottinghamshire for a fortnight and not follow her there.” Adam, despite his very real preference for solitude, never could bear to be apart from his wife for long. “For another, she made absolutely certain I could not refuse.”

Harry’s grin grew. “How did she manage that?”

“She threatened to suggest the party be moved to Falstone Castle.” Adam’s expression grew blacker, something that struck fear into the eyes of everyone else in the room.

“Either you go to the party, or the party comes to you.” Linus couldn’t help but be impressed with his sister’s strategy. “You couldn’t refuse after that.”

Harry sighed. “Ah, I love the Lancaster women.”

The Lancaster women. How often Linus had to remind himself that his sisters were grown, even the youngest, who had that year undertaken her second London Season. In his mind’s eye, they were still as they’d been when he’d left home so many years earlier: little, struggling, and still quite attached to him.

“I know you too well to think you invited us here simply to bemoan your social obligations,” Harry said.

“If I have to go to this party, so do you two.” Adam glared at them both, lids lowered enough to render his gaze particularly sinister.

“I have not received an invitation to a house party,” Linus told him. “A life in the navy did not leave me so inexperienced with Society as to not know that I cannot simply arrive at a party unwanted.”

“You were included in the invitation that arrived at our home. It seems our hostess did not realize you have inflicted your sister with a months’ long bout of stubbornness by refusing to live at Falstone House whilst in London.”

It had been a point of difficulty between Linus and Persephone, but he’d refused to yield. In his sister’s home, he too often felt like a child still. More than that, he was unnecessary. He had no desire to spend every waking hour constantly bombarded with his own pointlessness.

“I am beginning to suspect I know what house party you are referring to,” Harry said. “Athena and I were invited as well.”

“Persephone has declared that this will be ‘quite the social event.’” Adam’s nostrils flared, and a breath growled from him as he quoted obviously verbatim his wife’s evaluation.

Another of Harry’s laughs began on a snort.

Linus couldn’t hold back his amusement any longer. “Our Persephone is quite brave to insist you attend in the same breath she explains why you will be miserable.”

“It is not her ready acceptance on my behalf that concerns me most,” Adam said. “She has warned me that if I maim or torture anyone in attendance, or otherwise cause any degree of unpleasantness, she will kill me.”

Harry's eyes danced with merriment. "You're a little afraid of her, aren't you?"

Adam ignored the question.

"Do you suspect maiming and torture will be particularly difficult for you to avoid?" Linus asked.

"Knowing where the party is being held," Harry said, "the answer to your question is an emphatic yes."

Linus's interest was even more piqued. He looked from one brother-in-law to the other. "Who is hosting the party?"

Adam's mouth turned down in a severe frown.

Once again, Harry answered the question Adam refused to acknowledge. "The Dowager Countess of Lampton."

"Adam intends to maim and torture a dowager?" Linus didn't believe it for a moment.

"Do not be ridiculous," Adam shot back.

"It is her son, the earl, who is in greatest danger, I would wager," Harry said.

Lord Lampton. Linus cast his mind back. He had spent very little time amongst Society, so people did not pop into his thoughts easily. "He is the one who dresses in bright colors, I seem to remember."

"I have never known anyone who preens and prances and generally annoys to the degree he does," Adam said. "He takes delight in being ridiculous. I

am required to summon every bit of self-control I possess to simply not run him through every time we meet in Lords.”

“I personally think marriage has mellowed the dandified earl,” Harry said. “He will always be something of a madcap, but he’s not nearly as flamboyant as he once was.”

“He wore lime-green pantaloons to Lords not a fortnight ago,” Adam said. “And I am absolutely certain he watched me, in particular, for my reaction. I don’t know if he was attempting to impress or annoy me.”

Linus inserted himself into the discussion once more. “Do you truly think this ludicrous lord will render you murderous?”

“Lampton is practically begging to be strangled,” Adam said.

“And you would be more than happy to oblige,” Harry added.

Adam nodded slowly and with emphasis. Linus wasn’t truly worried. While Adam wasn’t overly fond of people and had a tendency to be very forceful when he was put out with someone, he generally knew how to behave, and despite his insistence that Persephone’s threats were the reason for his willingness to be civil, he had actually improved considerably over the years.

Harry whistled low. “Adam in the same house as Lord Lampton for a fortnight? We’ll never be victorious in this battle, Linus. There will be death and suffering, likely our own.”

“Then it is a very good thing for the both of you that you will have a military man on your side.” Linus was actually a little excited. Preventing Adam from ruining Persephone’s stay in Nottinghamshire and keeping the dandified

Lord Lampton from annoying Adam into truly unfriendly behavior would be a tremendous challenge. He needed a challenge.

“You believe we will succeed?” Harry still looked amused despite his obvious doubts.

“Or die trying.”

“Do not fret,” Adam said, rising from his chair, “if you fail, you will not be the one who dies.”

“Are you thinking of yourself now?” Harry asked. “Or Lampton?”

“Both,” Adam said. “Both.”

Chapter Two

Hampton House, Nottinghamshire

ARABELLA HAMPTON'S HEART SANK AS she watched her aunt paw through her meager assortment of dresses, tossing most of them aside. "You will have no need of so many bright colors. A lady's companion is meant to be quietly helpful, not the center of attention."

None of the dresses would truly be considered attention-grabbing, but Arabella had to admit that the robin-egg-blue dress her aunt discarded did not match the image one usually conjured when thinking of a lady's companion—somber, serene, sedate. Browns and grays and dark colors were likely best.

"Surely this green is subdued enough." She held up a wool day dress. It would be warm when winter arrived, and the cut was flattering, a vain argument, perhaps, but a strong one. She felt so very unsure of herself in this new position and needed every bit of buoying she could muster.

Her aunt eyed the dress. "The neckline is a touch low." She tossed the dress on the pile with the others that would not be making the journey with Arabella.

The bodice was so high not even her clavicle showed when she wore it. Perhaps it was more daring than a companion was permitted. She had not lived a life of luxury, being naught but a poor relation in her uncle's house from the time she was seven years old, but being companion to a dowager countess was something different entirely.

Was it wrong of her to hope she would be permitted to wear a cheerful color now and then?

“Lady Lampton has given you an opportunity, Arabella. She could have chosen an experienced companion, one not in need of training or instruction. And though your youth will prove helpful in fetching things, I can only imagine she would have preferred the companionship of someone nearer her in age and, heavens, somewhere near her in birth. But she chose you, and you would do well to focus all your energy on making certain she does not regret that.”

Arabella was not unaware of her good fortune. Truth be told, she was baffled by it. The position had been offered to her only a few days earlier, without preamble, without forewarning. Lady Lampton had simply come and made the offer in a tone of unflinching authority. Arabella’s aunt and uncle had managed little beyond an overawed, halting agreement. Arabella had begun packing that very night.

Here was an unforeseen way out of the misery that had been life in her uncle’s home. His first wife had passed away many years earlier, bringing a bit of peace to Arabella’s life; however, the second Mrs. Hampton was very much like the first one had been.

Better even than escaping, Arabella would be living at Lampton Park, the nearest thing to heaven one could find on earth. She would spend her days amongst the Jonquil family, just as she used to imagine when she was a little girl.

The late earl had been the kindest man in all the world. He had never failed to greet her with the same deference he offered the daughters of the fine local families, though she could claim no real significance, an unwanted and neglected orphan in the care of an aunt and uncle who resented her.

Her earliest memory of the earl was clear, despite the passage of so many years. Her parents had died not long before that day. She had come to the churchyard to place a handful of wildflowers at their graveside but, not knowing how to read, could not find them. Her grief had spilled over as the realization of how very lost they were to her became too much for her tiny heart to bear. He had found her, had taken her in his strong and gentle arms, and had carried her to the place where her mother and father lay, holding her as she cried.

She had sought him out again and again after that, not realizing in her innocence how very presumptuous it was for her to monopolize the time and attention of an earl. At times, she had simply sat beside him and cried; other times, she had told him of her day, of something interesting that had entered her thoughts. He listened no matter the topic. He had held her, laughed with her, reassured her.

He had cared about her when no one else had, and she loved him for it.

“Are you paying any attention?” her aunt demanded, pulling her back to the present.

“I am sorry.”

With a tsk and a shake of her head, her aunt launched into a scold. “You are meant to be a help to the dowager. If you spend all your time woolgathering, she will quickly grow frustrated with you. You will find yourself without a position. Should that happen, do not think to return here.”

Arabella nodded. She would not prove a disappointment for all the world. “I do wish to do a good job, but I am not entirely certain how.”

“You do as you are told,” was the first instruction. “Do not make trouble. Do not draw attention to yourself nor forget that you are but the smallest step above a servant.”

Arabella nodded. That was not so very different from her place in this house, a role she had learned well over the past sixteen years.

“And do not give them reason to be ashamed of you,” her aunt added. “The Lampton title is old and respected, no matter that the current holder is a little odd. They are as far above you as the sky itself.”

Arabella nodded. How well she knew that truth. She had once asked the earl if she could live with him and be part of his family. Though he had not been unkind in his response, he had told her she could not. “Family stays with family,” he had said gently. He had not needed to elaborate. She was not his family. She belonged where she was, and dreams of something better were just that . . . dreams.

“Good.” Her aunt pursed her thin lips. “We had best go through your adornments next.”

Arabella took out her small shell-covered box, a discarded container she had found behind Sarvol House when she’d gone scavenging at eight years old and in which she kept her few baubles. As quickly and subtly as she could, she pulled from it a slender chain, on which hung a single glass bead. She clutched it in her fist, hidden from view, and handed the box to her aunt. Any of the rest of its contents could be denied her without causing pain, but that chain and bead meant the world to her.

Philip Jonquil, the oldest of the earl’s sons, had brought her the simple bit of jewelry shortly after his father’s death, having found it among his father’s things with a note indicating it was meant for her. She had been but eleven

years old. Her dear earl had not forgotten her, even in death. She'd accepted the offering and wept, her heart breaking. Philip, far too young to be bearing such a burden, had, like his father before him, put an arm around her and offered her his strength, comforting her in her grief even as he'd battled his own.

If only she had been permitted to be a part of that family. Among them, she would never have been lonely or broken or forgotten. But eleven years had passed, eleven years without her Lord Lampton, eleven years of loneliness and struggle. She was now more than twice the age she had been when she'd received the necklace, the earl's final act of kindness toward her, yet she felt the loss almost as acutely as she had then.

Her aunt dropped the shell box onto Arabella's bed. "All of this will have to remain behind."

Arabella clutched her treasure ever tighter, making absolutely certain it was entirely hidden.

"You will have four dresses and two gowns suitable for dinners or entertainments," her aunt said. "No one will expect you to have jewels or fine hair combs."

Leaving behind what few adornments she had and resigning herself to her most dowdy gowns was a small price to pay. She would be away from her aunt and uncle and the misery they inflicted. Better still, she would be among the Jonquil family, walking the corridors where her dear Lord Lampton had spent his days. Being there, even as a companion rather than an honorary daughter as she'd once dreamed of being, would help fill the void she'd felt all her life.

In Lampton Park, she might at last find home.

* * *

Arabella's heart sped as the carriage traveled the manicured drive to the front portico of the Lampton Park manor house. The regal prospect, park land stretching out in all directions, the imposing façade of the grand home, and the stately trees placed at deliberate intervals all declared to new arrivals that this was the seat of an important family. Only a very naive, very lonely little girl would ever believe such a place could be her home simply by asking for it to be.

But it will be now. In a sense. She would be living there, and that would be enough.

Arabella, along with her uncle and aunt, was ushered inside directly to a sitting room where the dowager countess, the late earl's widow, clad, as always, in unrelieved black, received them. Bows and curtsies were exchanged.

"What a pleasure—" Aunt Hampton began.

"I will not keep you," the dowager said. "Your niece and I are perfectly capable of sorting everything on our own."

Aunt and Uncle Hampton could do nothing but accept their dismissal. To argue would be to imply that the dowager was not, in fact, capable of seeing to the business at hand.

Quick as that, Arabella was free of the two people who had controlled every aspect of her life for years. She stood a moment in shock. No matter that she was a grown woman; she'd never been granted any true freedom. She hardly knew what to think.

“I am so pleased you are here.” The dowager took her hands and squeezed her fingers.

“You are?”

The dowager’s smile grew. “Oh, dear. I can see your aunt and uncle have dampened your enthusiasm.” She slipped her arm through Arabella’s and guided her from the room and toward the grand staircase. “If I told you we are soon to have a house party, would that lift your spirits?”

Arabella nodded. House parties required a great deal of work. She would have plenty to do, which would help secure her welcome here.

“Wonderful,” the dowager said. “For now, though, let us focus on getting you settled.”

Arabella ran her hand along the banister as they climbed the stairs. The earl must have often done the same. He had been at home here, happy and content. She could so easily picture him in this place, greeting guests in the entry hall, standing at the top of the stairs. Were he here just now, he would smile at his wife in that way he always had, with love so palpable no one seeing his expression could ever have doubted the depth of his feelings.

He had loved his wife with an open affection few gentlemen allowed. And Arabella knew with absolute certainty that he would have welcomed her here as well, hugging her as he had so often done. Of course, she was much older now, but she wanted to believe that he would not have stopped comforting her with those paternal embraces she had depended upon so much.

“Your room is just down here.” The dowager’s voice broke the spell of Arabella’s reminiscences. “I should warn you, we will be removing to the dower house when the party ends, so you will need to pack again. Let that