

A close-up portrait of a woman with dark hair and bangs, looking slightly to the side with a soft expression. She is wearing a light blue, off-the-shoulder dress with a subtle floral pattern and a thin gold belt. Her right arm is visible, wearing a white sleeve. The background is dark and out of focus.

Romancing
DAPHNE

A Regency Romance

FROM USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SARAH M. EDEN

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Covenant Communications, Inc.



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Chapter One

London, October 1806

DAPHNE LANCASTER STOOD HIDDEN IN the shadows of her brother-in-law's terrace, spying on Society's first introduction to a young lady of unparalleled beauty. The belle of the ball that night was none other than her own older sister. Athena had always been inexpressibly stunning. No one, however, had ever lacked the words to describe how very plain Daphne was.

The first such comments had come from a Mrs. Carter when Daphne was six. "Such a lovely looking family, the Lancasters," Mrs. Carter had said to her sister. "Except for that little Daphne."

"Yes," had come the unwavering reply. "A little mouse of a thing. Has not a bit of her mother's beauty, poor girl. She'll not amount to much as far as looks, I'm afraid."

After overhearing that conversation, Daphne had spent an entire month attempting to overcome her unfortunate plainness. She had worn ribbons in her hair and had shined her own shoes twice a day. No matter the strength of her desire to run and play, she had kept still and quiet and, therefore, pristinely clean and well turned-out.

Some months later, the vicar's wife had told her how grateful she should be to not have her sisters' beauty, as a bit of plainness tended to keep young ladies from becoming overly pert. Surely a vicar's wife would know the truth of such a thing.

She hadn't bothered with the bows after that but had secretly hoped someone would tell her she'd grown into a lovely girl. No one ever had.

Now, at twelve, she'd learned to accept that she would not receive the attention she'd once longed for. She was too short, too plain, too shy, and too unnecessary.

Athena, though, was none of those things.

The Duke of Kielder's town house overflowed with fine gowns and glittering jewels. Voices slipped out through the open french doors, filling

the night air. The crowd wove in and out amongst itself. Not a soul kept still.

Watching Athena's ball was the closest Daphne would come to being loved by Society. It wasn't the *ton's* notice she wished for, truly. Though she had never told a single soul, she dreamed and wished and hoped, deep in the most hidden bits of herself, for someone to fall utterly in love with her.

Do not be such a sentimental gudgeon, Daphne silently chided herself. She'd known all her life she would likely end up a spinster. *You aren't pretty, but you are practical. That is something.*

But watching Athena dazzle the gathering, the "something" Daphne had to offer felt far too much like "nothing."

She turned away, feeling her spirits drop with every passing moment. She leaned against the railing that ran the length of the terrace and lifted her face to the skies, sighing more dramatically than she ever allowed herself to.

"Now, what could possibly have inspired such a sorrowful sound?"

She stiffened. The voice was unfamiliar. Who was this man who had found her alone on the balcony? She turned warily toward him.

"Have you been banished to the nursery and thus find yourself longing to join the party?" he asked.

She had in fact been told to remain in her bedchamber. Her eyes settled on his face and seemed to stick there. He was very young, likely as young as Athena, who had only just turned nineteen. He had the most wonderfully brown eyes lit by a lantern very near where he stood. Daphne's eyes were brown as well but a pitiful, muddy brown. This stranger's glowed a shade closer to copper than dirt.

She stepped into the shadowed corner of the empty terrace, feeling overwhelmingly plain and conspicuous. No one had ventured out but this gentleman. If she slipped away, no one else would know she'd disobeyed Adam's orders about staying in her room.

"Do not fear, Little Sparrow, I'll not tattle." He offered her an almost commiserating smile. "Sometimes one simply must have a peek at all that one is missing." He motioned toward the window, just distant enough for the activity within to be unseen.

It seemed he understood her need to look, to see what she had only been able to vaguely hear and frustratingly imagine.

The young gentleman strode casually closer to where she stood, and Daphne slipped farther into her corner. She'd learned very young how to make herself appear smaller.

"I am assuming, Little Sparrow, that you are a relation of either the duke or the duchess, seeing as you appear to be a guest in this house." The gentleman's expression remained kind, though it grew a bit conspiratorial. Daphne felt her nervousness ease by degrees. "I have heard it whispered about that all the Lancaster family are named for Greek mythological characters. I assume, though, that you were not christened Medusa."

Daphne shook her head, recognizing that he was teasing her. It was a very unfamiliar experience.

"You do smile after all." His brilliant eyes softened as he spoke. "A pretty young lady such as yourself ought to smile."

A pretty young lady. Had he truly called her pretty? No one ever had before—not her father nor any of her siblings. Even her dear Adam, who'd become closer to her than she imagined any brother-in-law ever had to his wife's sister, had never said as much. Though none of them had ever spoken unkindly or unflatteringly of her appearance, Daphne couldn't remember any of them calling her pretty.

"Now, in exchange for allowing me to see that smile, which I am beginning to suspect is a rare sight, I shall provide you with what I am certain will prove a crucial piece of information."

Her eyes had not left his face. She simply could not look away. Perhaps he would remain and talk with her for a while longer. If she smiled again, he might tell her once more that she was pretty. If she were really fortunate, he would call her Little Sparrow again. Though she could not say why, she very much liked the name he had fashioned for her.

"The Duke of Kielder is even now making his way toward the very window through which you have been spying on the ball," the young gentleman told Daphne. "If it is *his* orders you are defying, you would be well advised to

escape before His Dastardliness discovers your villainy. He does have a remarkably sinister reputation, as you are no doubt aware.”

Daphne nodded. She knew of Adam’s reputation and that he had earned every ounce of it. She further knew that he had a kind and caring heart beneath it all. He would not, however, be happy to find her on the terrace, at odds with his instructions. He was very accustomed to being obeyed in everything.

“Fly away, Little Sparrow,” the young gentleman instructed.

“Please do not tell the duke I am out here.” Her words did not reach above a whisper—they seldom did.

“You are not actually in danger, are you?” Genuine concern touched his words.

“No, but he will be very put out with me.”

“I give you my word not to reveal your secret. And I assure you, a promise from James Tilburn” —a tip of his head told her the name was his own—“is as good as gold.”

She sensed that about him—that he could be trusted. “Thank you, sir.”

“You are quite welcome.” He offered the very briefest of bows and one final smile before slowly making his way back toward the center of the terrace.

Daphne watched him for one drawn-out moment. *James Tilburn*. She committed the name to memory. James Tilburn, who thought her pretty and did not readily overlook her. James Tilburn, who called her Little Sparrow and spoke kindly to a young lady most dismissed on first glance.

He would not give her another thought. Indeed, he had probably already forgotten her. She, however, knew she would forever cherish the memory of him.

Daphne slipped into the empty book room and up the back staircase to her bedchamber, lost in her thoughts. She would likely find her mind wandering to him again and again over the days and weeks that stretched ahead of her. Perhaps she would see him again or hear of him in the passing comments of those around her.

“Someday,” she told herself, “I should very much like to marry a gentleman exactly like James Tilburn.”

* * *

James delayed his return to the ballroom as long as possible. At only eighteen years of age, he fit absolutely nowhere. He was too young to be a suitor, *far* too young to keep company with the matrons and seasoned gentlemen, and too old to be left at home, where he would much rather be.

His father, the Earl of Techney, had very strong opinions on the duties of his heir—attending Society’s most anticipated functions, studying at Oxford and *not* Cambridge, belonging to any gentlemen’s club that would accept an applicant from a family only two generations deep in the peerage, driving to an inch, being handy with his fives and deadly with a length of steel. Lord Techney permitted his son no say in his schedule nor his future.

Inside the Falstone House ballroom, the current set came to a close. James quickly glanced at the tiny, dark-haired girl he’d found spying on the balcony. She slipped nearly silently into an adjacent room, no doubt returning to the nursery. He hoped the poor child would escape the wrath of her host. How closely related was she to the Dangerous Duke? If she was forced into his company often, it was really no wonder she seemed so painfully shy. He felt certain very few people had been treated to the sight of her adorable dimpled smile.

He resignedly stepped back into the thick of the crowd. There were times when he wholeheartedly wished he could disappear as easily as that quiet little girl had, because he very much feared that eventually his father would find a way to control him completely.

Chapter Two

London

April, six years later

“YOU WISHED TO SEE ME, Father.” James stood in the doorway of his father’s library, no idea why he’d been summoned. Father never requested his presence unless he required James to do something inconvenient or unpleasant.

“Sit, Tilburn.” Father always addressed him by his courtesy title and never with any degree of paternal affection. The man twisted his signet ring around his smallest finger. James recognized that smug gesture. Something had Father feeling exceptionally satisfied with himself. That was not a good omen.

Father’s mouth turned up in a pleased smile. “The Duke of Kielder summoned me to his home this afternoon.”

James’s lungs seized. No man in the entire kingdom inspired the level of heart-stopping fear His Grace did. His presence at any event brought Society to an awe-inspired halt. The mere mention of his name left gentlemen, old and young alike, quaking in their shoes. A summons from the *Dangerous Duke* was not generally considered a fortunate turn of events.

Father continued spinning his signet ring, his face alight with eager anticipation. “His Grace finds our family quite impressive.”

James doubted that very much. No one with His Grace’s standing could possibly be in awe of the family of a lesser-known earl whose great-grandfather had been nothing more significant than a minor land owner in an insignificant corner of Lancashire.

“His Grace spoke highly of us—of *you*, as a matter of fact—though I am certain you have no comprehension of how significant that is.” Father leaned over his desk, capturing James in a look of budding excitement. “This is your opportunity, Tilburn. You’ve captured the notice of a man who holds all of

Society in the palm of his hand. His approval can raise even the lowliest of the *ton* to places of influence and significance.”

James cared very little for the shallow and ever-changing opinions of Society’s *crème de la crème*. He came to London every Season and took part, to an extent, in the social whirl. But his focus had ever been on cultivating his place in political circles. One day when he assumed his father’s title, he wished to undertake his Parliamentary duties with some degree of competency. That he had found his footing, however comparatively humble, amongst some members of the *ton* and had received invitations to a few events was nice but not crucial to his happiness.

“His Grace made a suggestion,” Father added, blind to James’s lack of enthusiasm, “and I, of course, accepted on your behalf.”

A lump of apprehension began to form in James’s stomach. “What precisely did he suggest?”

“He spoke of his sister-in-law, the quiet one whose name no one can ever recall.”

James certainly couldn’t put a name to the young lady. Try as he might, he couldn’t even picture her.

“She possesses a dowry of £20,000 and is connected to the best families in the land,” Father said.

“How very fortunate for her.” James could think of nothing else to say. Why in heaven’s name was Father discussing the social cache of a lady so wholly unconnected with them?

“His Grace suggested you might show the girl a bit of attention.”

An odd request, to be sure. “I don’t understand.”

“You seldom do,” Father drawled. “The chit has made her bows and will be launched into Society shortly. Unlike the older sister, *this* sister has raised no anticipation nor eagerness. By all accounts, she is rather plain and ill at ease in the company of others. Her connections will prevent complete failure, but her shortcomings will certainly make marrying the girl off more difficult for His Grace than he would prefer. He is looking to ease her into her debut by asking you to call on her, court her.”

“He wants me to *court* her?” Surely the duke had meant no such thing.

Eagerness entered Father’s eyes. He had no doubt already begun calculating the good this would do for the standing of the Tilburn family. His heir would be seen going about with the Duke of Kielder. Father would likely find a way to be included himself. Even the tiny climbing boys working for chimney sweeps throughout London couldn’t boast the upward aspirations of the Earl of Techney.

James couldn’t like the idea of this nameless, faceless young lady being a means to Father’s social ends any more than he liked the unfeeling way Father and the duke had apparently spoken of her. But how to wiggle out of it when he knew climbing the ladder of Society was so important to Father?

“You said this was a suggestion, not an edict?”

“His Grace does not make ‘suggestions.’” Father’s pointed look only confirmed what James had heard about the Dangerous Duke. “He wishes you to be part of her entry into this Season, and you will. Kielder”—Father assumed a great deal addressing the duke so informally. James doubted His Grace had given him leave to do so—“is likely growing quite determined to prevent disaster. His invitation has given you a rare opportunity, has given *this family* an opportunity, and you will take advantage of it.”

No. He shook his head at the absurdity of it. Father must have misunderstood. “The duke certainly might wish to guarantee she has dance partners at the next ball or that someone will drop into their box at the theater, but why would he risk even the appearance of a suitor who would inevitably not come up to scratch?”

Father leaned his elbows on the desk. “I do not believe he *would* risk that. If you are cognizant of the opportunity he has laid before you and mean to earnestly pursue the girl, His Grace, I am certain, expects you to ‘come up to scratch.’ However, if you do not intend to accept the entirety of his offer and mean only to ease her way in Society a little with your friendship and attentions, he will require you to be very circumspect and not raise any expectations.”

“That is a fine line to walk.” Too fine to suit him.

Father nodded firmly. "But walk it you will. This family has hovered long enough in the shadow of obscurity. The duke and I have served in Parliament together his entire adult life. We have both come to Town every Season. Yet he has never once done anything more than vaguely acknowledge my existence."

James and His Grace had spoken on several occasions regarding matters of government and international upheaval. Their political leanings were similar, if not truly identical. He wouldn't call them friends by any stretch of the imagination, but neither were they complete strangers. If Father had failed to make any kind of impression on the duke, that was not James's fault.

"It is unfortunate your ambitions have not proven fruitful, Father. I am further sorry the girl is beginning her debut under such a cloud of low expectations, but I do not wish to take up the task laid out for me. That is a role far too fraught with pitfalls for my taste." James rose to his feet.

Father remained calm, collected. "Kielder is expecting you to make an appearance at tea tomorrow during Her Grace's first at-home of the Season."

"You shall simply have to inform His Grace that you were presumptive in your assurances." James offered a dip of his head before moving toward the door.

"You would truly turn your back on this opportunity?" Father's shock could scarcely have been more apparent in his tone. "Why on earth would you do such a harebrained thing?"

James kept his place a few paces from the doorway but turned to face his sire. "You are asking me to lie. That is something I refuse to do, even for you."

"I asked nothing of the sort."

"You did, in fact." The precise word may not have been spoken, but a lie it would be. "You've asked me to call on this young lady, whom I've never met and can't even picture in my mind, and pretend she has captured my attention. Every moment I spent with her would be based on an untruth."

Father released a short, annoyed sigh. "Well, certainly, if you showed up on her doorstep professing an undying love for her, that she was the answer to all your most earnest prayers." Father rose as he spoke and crossed nearly to where James stood. "I am not asking you to do that. Call on her, Tilburn. Make her acquaintance. Treat her to a ride in the park, or tip your hat to her if you see her out shopping or taking ices. These are not lies; these are social niceties."

While Father had a point, the undertaking still felt less than honest. "Those are niceties I would never have presumed to undertake nor so much as think of." How could he articulate his discomfort when he himself couldn't quite put his finger on it? "We are not connected to that family. They are astonishingly above our touch."

"And yet the duke has seen fit to close that gap. He has gone so far as to open the door for you to not merely join his circle but, should you seize his invitation, join his family."

He leaned against the wall near the door, Father standing but a few feet from him. "I cannot like this."

"I am not insisting you marry Kielder's sister-in-law; he isn't truly insisting upon it either. He has created the possibility. Even the very smallest fulfillment of his request would be little more than being a friend to someone who is sorely in need of one. That is a fine thing to do, is it not?"

It was an unusually thoughtful sentiment from Father, who generally overlooked those he felt deserved to be neglected.

"Surely you are enough of a gentleman that you would not turn your back on a lady in distress."

How could he argue with that? And yet he wavered. "Something about this still feels wrong."

Father crossed to the sideboard, unstopping a decanter of sherry. "What the Duke of Kielder has declared right is not for us to deem wrong."

"Are you certain you are not confusing His Grace with the Almighty?"

"I do know the difference, Tilburn. One possesses endless power, holds the fate of nations in his hand, and is universally feared by saint and sinner

alike. The other is—”

“The Almighty,” James drawled. He knew the quip well, having heard similar versions for years. “You and the duke may not have qualms about this arrangement, but what about Miss Lancaster? Does she not deserve some say in the scheme?”

Father poured himself a bit of the amber-colored liquor. “She cannot be ignorant of how Society works and must realize how ill-suited she is to the task at hand. Her brother-in-law has, no doubt, enlisted the aid of many young people to act as friend to her. His rallying of the troops will not be done without her knowledge.”

“You make her sound coldheartedly calculating.” James didn’t at all like the picture his father painted.

“Who on Society’s upper rungs isn’t?” Father shrugged as he took a drink. “We may or may not like it, but this is the way of things. If we wish to walk in exalted circles, we must know how the game is played.”

James shook his head. “I don’t care to play that game.”

Father walked to the tall window, his glass yet in his hand. “I don’t care for it myself.” James had never heard his father express such a sentiment. “But you cannot comprehend the difficulties I have passed through because our family lacks standing. Some things, important things, can only be accomplished with the right connections. Those in a position of wealth and influence can open locked doors.”

“What doors of any importance have truly been closed to us, Father?” This was an old complaint, one James had heard throughout his childhood. He’d actually fully believed it until coming to Town and seeing the truth of things for himself. “We may not be regularly called to attend the Queen’s drawing rooms nor invited to the most exclusive balls and entertainments, but we have not been denied membership at our club. We receive more invitations during the Season than we can possibly accept. With a seat in Lords, our family has the opportunity to have a say in the future of the kingdom.” Of course, Father very seldom attended Lords, the very reason James felt the necessity of making the acquaintance of party leaders and policy makers.

Someday the neglected Techney seat would be his own. "These are not insignificant, Father."

But his father had already begun shaking his head. "You are not here often enough nor were you old enough to remember the very real limitations of our position."

"We are not royalty," James reminded him. "Of course our standing has limits."

"Your mother comes from the gentry," Father said.

"Yes, I know. A very respectable family."

Father took another drink. "Respectable, yes, but in the eyes of the *ton*, nearly irrelevant. She was not raised in Society. She has no connections there. Her first two Seasons in Town came after our marriage. She hadn't so much as a friend among any of the ladies in the upper crust. She held at-homes that no one attended. She never received vouchers for Almack's. Though I was heir apparent to an earl, I hadn't the standing to ease her way."

James's heart ached at the thought of his quiet, sensitive mother enduring such humiliation. She took difficulties very much to heart, easily wounded and hurt.

Father drained the contents of his cup. "She avoids London as though the plague yet raged here." He shook his head. "I've never been able to convince her to return, though I cannot blame her. Society's proverbial door is closed to her, and neither you nor I have the ability to open it."

"Mother has not been to Town since before I began coming, and that's been six years." James had always assumed she simply didn't care to leave home.

"She has not been to Town in twenty years, Tilburn. The very suggestion brings her to tears." Father set his empty cup on the windowsill, his gaze on the cobblestone street below.

"I always assumed she did not come because her health is so often poor."

"Do not be a simpleton," Father said. "Her unreliable health ought to have propelled her to town. Here, she would have access to the best physicians, the best care, and yet she stays away. Why do you suppose that is, Tilburn?"

James had long ago learned to recognize when his father was posing a rhetorical question. He no longer wasted his breath attempting to answer.

“She cannot bear the rejection or the loneliness. I have attempted to convince her to come. What have you, her oldest son, done to ease her way?”

“What could I have done? I didn’t know any of this.”

Father held him with a steely gaze. “And now that you do know? To have the right friend, even *one* friend of influence, would make all the difference in the world.”

James paced away, his mind full of revelations and possibilities and questions. “The duke would smooth the way for her?” No. That didn’t sound right. Everyone knew the duke rather despised people.

“Not the duke, but the duchess. She herself comes from humble origins but made a name for herself among the *ton*. She would be unlikely to look down on your mother for having married above herself. Her Grace could whisper a word or two in the right ears, and your mother would have the allies she needs.”

James leaned against the tall back of the chair he’d sat in earlier. He’d not given a second thought to his mother’s isolation in the country. She’d always insisted that she had no desire to go to Town, and he’d taken her at her word. Had she really avoided it all these years out of humiliation, for want of friends? She must have longed to join him when he’d made his annual trip to London. She had needed competent physicians. If only he’d known, he might have done something.

But what could he have done? His connections were not only mostly political but mostly male, though he did receive invitations to a good number of balls and soirees, being an unmarried heir to a title with a small but respectable fortune awaiting him. Enough of the matchmaking mamas in Town viewed him as a relatively good prospect for their daughters, provided someone of greater significance didn’t come around. But he didn’t think he was enough in demand to warrant invitations being extended to his mother for teas and ladies’ entertainments.

You haven’t the ability to unlock those doors.

“The duke has given you the opportunity to help your mother, to give her a taste of Society, a friend or two. In London, she could receive a doctor’s care. You might improve her entire life, and yet you refuse because it would be uncomfortable.” Father’s reprimand hit its mark. “Are you truly so unfeeling?”

With something of a sinking feeling, James realized his father was more right than he’d thought. Here was an opportunity to do something for his family, and he was refusing. Surely he could undertake something so simple as being a friend to a young lady. The duke had suggested a courtship but did not appear to be actually requiring one.

“Must I pretend I am calling of my own volition?” The hint of dishonesty was the only part of the arrangement that truly bothered him. He would be very circumspect in his attentions so no one seeing him would believe him truly courting her. But to feign a connection between them when none existed was not precisely aboveboard.

“You cannot arrive at their home declaring you have come only because the duke forced you to do so.” Father shook his head, a scold clear in the gesture. “While that may be the truth, it is hardly a gentlemanly sentiment to throw at a young lady.”

James allowed a smile. Though the conversation hadn’t truly been a friendly one—they never were—it had been an improvement over most. “I don’t know that I would have explained things in quite those words.”

“I should hope not.” Father absentmindedly tipped his empty glass back and forth. “You needn’t pretend the two of you are the very closest of friends. Find a happy compromise.”

For a moment, his determination wavered. But then he thought of Mother, alone in Lancashire. Not even Bennett, James’s younger brother, remained at home to keep her company, having his own admittedly dilapidated estate. With the right connections, Mother might one day come to Town rather than remain behind on her own. She might at last regain her health.

“If I am careful, I could likely manage to walk that line,” James said.

Father began spinning his signet ring once more. He dropped a firm hand on James's shoulder. "A wise course, Tilburn. Kielder's sister-in-law will benefit from your assistance. You'll have a fine set of new acquaintances. Your mother may even, in time, benefit from these efforts you are making."

James nodded. Spending a little time with someone he hardly knew wasn't much to ask, really. And if the duke and his sister-in-law both knew the reason for James's attention, then he wasn't deceiving them.

This will work out fine. Just fine.

He hoped.