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# ELOISA JAMES

## When The Duke Returns

**"Eloisa's duchesses  
are a delicious treat."**

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**Eloisa James**

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 HarperCollins e-books

## Prologue

*Fonthill  
Lord Strange's country estate  
February 19, 1784*

Women have been dressing to entice men ever since Eve fashioned her first fig leaf. Adam was probably irritable after that business with the apple, so Eve would have done her best with some leaves and string.

So why was it still so hard to decide what to wear? As her maid tossed a seventh rejected gown onto the bed, Isidore, Duchess of Cosway, tried to decide whether her husband would prefer her in a ruby-colored velvet with a low décolletage or a sky-blue open robe with a little train.

The decision would be easier if she'd actually met the husband in question. "Your Grace looked delightful in the white lustring silk," her maid said, a mulish set to her jaw indicating that Lucille was losing patience with all the tiny buttons, hooks, petticoats, and panniers involved in each change.

"It would be so much less complicated if I only had a few vines to work with, the way Eve did," Isidore said. "Though my marriage could hardly be called Edenic."

Lucille rolled her eyes. She wasn't given to philosophical musings about

marriage.

Not only were Eve's sartorial options limited, but she and Adam went *into* the wilderness. Whereas she, Isidore, had lured her husband, the Duke of Cosway, *out* of the wilderness of equatorial Africa, and yet the note she'd received saying he'd arrive tonight sounded just as peeved as Adam. Men never liked to be given directions.

She should probably wear the pale yellow gown, the one embroidered with flower petals. It had a disarming air of female fragility. Isidore plucked it back off the bed and held it in front of herself, staring into the glass. Never mind the fact that docility wasn't her best virtue; she could certainly look the part. For a while.

"That's an excellent choice, Your Grace," Lucille said encouragingly. "You'll look as sweet as butter."

The dress was edged in delicate lace and dotted with pale ribbons. "We'll put flowers in your hair," Lucille continued. "Or perhaps small pearls. We could even add a bit of lace to the bodice." She waved her hand in the general area of Isidore's chest.

Masking her bosom (one of Isidore's best features, to her mind) seemed like taking wifely modesty too far. "Pearls?" she said dubiously.

"And," Lucille said, getting into the spirit, "you could carry that little prayer book from your mother, the one covered with lace."

"*Prayer book?* You want me to carry a prayer book downstairs? Lucille, have you forgotten that we are currently at the most notorious house party in all England? There's not a guest at Lord Strange's party who even *owns* a prayer book except myself!"

"Her Grace, the Duchess of Berrow, has a prayer book," Lucille pointed out.

"Since Harriet happens to be at this party incognito—and dressed as a man—I doubt that she will be wandering around with her prayer book in

hand.”

“It would give you an air of virtue,” her maid said stubbornly.

“It would give me the air of a vicar’s wife,” Isidore said, throwing the dress back onto the heap.

“You’re meeting His Grace for the first time. You don’t want to look as if you belong at one of Lord Strange’s parties. In that dress you look as young as a debutante,” Lucille added, obviously thinking she’d hit on a powerful point.

That settled it. Isidore was definitely not wearing the yellow gown, nor pearls either. She was no debutante: she was all of twenty-three years old, even if she was meeting her husband for the first time, after eleven years of marriage. They’d married by proxy, but Cosway hadn’t bothered to return when she was sixteen—or eighteen—or even twenty. He had no right to expect that she’d look like a debutante. He should have imagined what it was like to get older and older while her friends married and had children. It was a wonder that she wasn’t as dried up as an apple.

A chilling thought. What if he decided that she really *was* nothing more than a dried-up apple? She was far beyond the age of a debutante, after all.

The very thought made Isidore’s backbone straighten. She’d played the docile wife for years, preserving her reputation, waiting for her husband’s return. Longing for his return, if she admitted the truth to herself.

And what made Cosway finally come home? Did he suddenly remember that they’d never met? No. It was the news that his wife was visiting a house party more famous for its debauchery than its lemon cakes. She should have thrown away her reputation years ago, and he would have trotted happily out of the jungle like a dog on a leash.

“The silver with diamonds,” she said decisively.

Lucille would have paled, but her *maquillage* didn’t allow for such extravagancies of emotion. “Oh, Your Grace,” she said, clasping her hands

like a heroine about to be thrown from the parapet, “if you won’t wear the yellow, at least choose a gown that has *some* claim to modesty!”

“No,” Isidore said, her mind made up. “Do you know what His Grace’s note says to me, Lucille?”

“Of course not, Your Grace.” Lucille was carefully displacing the pile of glowing silk and satin, looking for Isidore’s most scandalous costume, the one she rarely wore after its first airing resulted in an impromptu duel between two besotted Frenchmen, fought on the cobbles in front of Versailles.

“It says,” Isidore said, snatching up the piece of stationery that had arrived a few hours before: “*I discover I have some missing property. And he added a cryptic comment that seemingly announces his imminent arrival: Tonight.*”

Lucille looked up, blinking. “What?”

“My husband appears to think I’m a missing trunk. Perhaps he considers it too much work to travel from London to recover me from Lord Strange’s party. Perhaps he expected that I would be waiting on the pier for his boat to come in. Perhaps he thinks I’ve been there for years, tears dripping down my face as I waited for his return!”

Lucille had a hard-headed French turn of mind, so she ignored the edge in Isidore’s voice. She straightened with a gorgeous swath of pale silver silk, glittering with small diamonds. “Will you desire diamonds in your hair as well?” she inquired.

This particular dress fit so closely that Isidore could wear only the smallest corset, designed to plump her breasts and narrow her waist. The gown was sewn by a dressmaker to Queen Marie Antoinette, and it presupposed that its owner would grace the mirrored halls of Versailles—a far cry from the smoky corridors of Strange’s residence. Not to mention the fact that she would be rubbing shoulders with everyone from dukes to jugglers. Still...

“Yes,” she said. “I may lose a few diamonds by the end of the evening. But I want my husband to understand that I am no stray trunk that he can simply throw into his carriage and transport to London.”

Lucille laughed at that, and began to nimbly lace the proper corset. Isidore stared in the mirror, wondering just what the Duke of Cosway expected his wife to look like. She looked nothing like a pale English rose, given her generous curves and dark hair.

It rankled that Cosway had spent years jaunting around foreign lands, while she waited for him to return. Had he even thought of her in the past ten years? Had he ever wondered what had become of the twelve-year-old girl who married him by proxy?

She had a strong feeling that to Cosway she truly was nothing more than a piece of forgotten property. It made her feel slightly crazed: that she had spent so many years wondering what sort of man she’d married, while he wandered around looking for the source of the Nile, never giving her a second thought.

“Lip color,” she said to Lucille. “And I’ll wear the diamond-heeled shoes as well.”

“*La Grande Toilette*,” Lucille said, and then laughed, a Frenchwoman’s sudden laugh. “The duke won’t know what happened to him!”

“Precisely,” Isidore said with satisfaction. “I had it wrong, Lucille. Eve isn’t the right model. I should be thinking about Cleopatra.”

Lucille was wrestling with Isidore’s panniers and just mumbled something.

“Cleopatra sailed down the Nile in a ship plated in gold,” Isidore said dreamily. “Mark Antony took one look at her and lost his heart in a moment. And it wasn’t because she looked like a modest wife.”

Lucille straightened up. “Modest will not be the word that comes to the duke’s mind when he sees you in this gown.”

“Excellent,” Isidore said, smiling at herself as Lucille dropped a shimmering veil of silver over her head. The bodice fitted as if it were sewn to her body which, in fact, it had been. The fittings had been tedious, but worth every minute. At the waist the silk pulled back in soft billowing folds, revealing an underskirt of blue watered silk. One might not immediately notice the tiny diamonds sewn all over her bodice and skirts, but they made the gown luminescent. It was a gown that turned its wearer into a queen.

Queen Cleopatra, to be exact.

But all the diamonds in the world couldn't stop the cold fear that gripped Isidore's heart when she descended the stairs some time later. She was going to meet her *husband*. For the first time.

What if he were ugly? Well, he was certain to be weather-beaten, at the very least. Likely there wasn't good hygiene in Africa, Isidore told herself. Cosway might be missing some teeth. He might be missing an *eye*! He might be—

But she stopped herself before she began lopping off his limbs. Whatever he was and however he looked, she would finally have a real husband. She could have children. She could be a real duchess, rather than a woman known to some as the Duchess of Cosway, and to others as Lady Del'Fino. She'd longed for this event for years.

The thought sustained her as she strolled into Lord Strange's sitting room. There was a vivid moment of silence as the gentlemen in the room took stock of Isidore—or perhaps more precisely, Isidore's tiny bodice—followed by such a concerted rush in her direction that she actually flinched. No duke was among them. Cosway had yet to arrive.

Men were men, she kept telling herself whenever she felt a pulse of nervousness about her husband. French or English, explorer or juggler, the silver gown brought them all to their knees.

But the sensuality of the gown felt different this time. In the past, she'd

ignored men who gaped at her bosom. Now she suddenly realized that a husband's response involved more than just a lustful gaze. To put it bluntly, Cosway had every right to drag her straight up the stairs.

To bed.

Bed!

Of course she wanted to sleep with her husband. She was curious, she wanted children, she wanted...she wanted to throw up.

Her friend Harriet took one look at her and pulled her out of the sitting room—when it happened.

The front door was open and snow was blowing in. The butler was saying something about unseasonably cold weather, and then...

A man laughed, and in that instant, Isidore knew. It was Cosway. She could only see his back: he was enormous, wrapped in a greatcoat with a fur hat. She panicked. "I have to go upstairs!" she whispered, stepping backwards, nearly tripping in her eagerness to flee.

"Too late," Harriet said, holding her arm.

And it was. The great mountain of a man turned and then, as if there were no one else in the entry, his eyes met hers and he recognized her. He didn't even glance at her dress, just looked into her eyes. Isidore gulped.

Black hair tumbled over his collar as he pulled off his hat and handed it to a butler. But he didn't take his eyes from hers. His skin looked warm, a honey-dark color that no one could call weather-beaten.

Without saying a word he swept into a deep bow. Isidore's lips parted to say—what?—as she watched him bow and then she curtsied, a moment too late. She felt as if she were caught in the acts of the play. He was—

If Cosway were Mark Antony, Cleopatra would have fallen at his feet, rather than the other way around. He didn't look like an English duke. He didn't have powdered hair, or a cravat, or even a waistcoat. He looked

untamed.

“My duchess, I presume,” he said, catching her hand and kissing it.

Isidore managed to pull herself together enough to introduce him to Harriet, but her mind was reeling. Somehow in all her imaginings, she’d forgotten to imagine—a *man*.

Not a nobleman, with delicate fingernails, and powdered hair. Not a ruffian, like many of the men attending Lord Strange’s house party. But a man who moved easily, like a lion, who seemed to swallow all the air in the entry, whose eyes ranged over her face with a sense of ownership...Her heart was beating so quickly that she couldn’t hear anything.

He wasn’t one-legged, or toothless. He was probably one of the most beautiful men she’d ever met. She had lost track of the conversation.

“The duchess and I leave in the morning,” he was telling the butler.

In the morning? Isidore was gripped by a sense of fear so great that she couldn’t imagine even walking to the carriage. If she were utterly honest, she had imagined a man who would be slavishly grateful to discover that his wife was so beautiful. But now...

She thought she had all the power. She didn’t.

She had to take command. *Cleopatra*, she thought desperately. Cleopatra would not allow herself to be transported like a piece of luggage.

“I myself do not plan to leave for several days,” she said, smiling at him even though her heart was thundering in her chest.

It wasn’t just that Cosway wore no cravat. He wore a gorgeous jacket of pale blue, but it was open straight down the front. Long cuffs fell over his hands, the wrist button undone. He looked as if he were ready for bed. The very thought stoked her nerves.

He took her hand in his, and raised it to his lips again. Isidore watched his lips touch her glove and felt herself shiver.