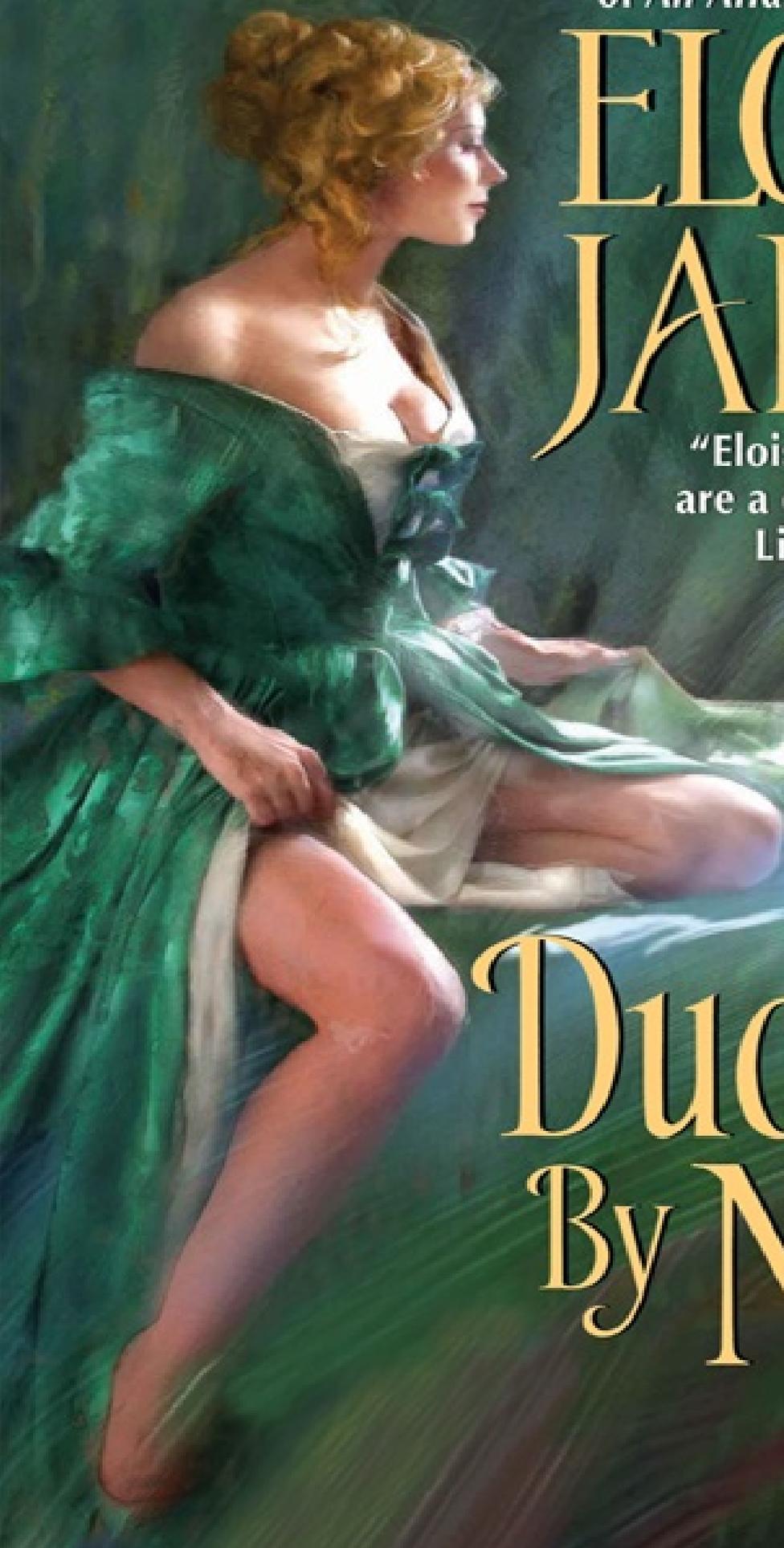


New York Times bestselling author
of *An Affair Before Christmas*

ELOISA JAMES

"Eloisa's duchesses
are a delicious treat."
Lisa Kleypas

Duchess By Night



Eloisa James

Duchess By Night

 HarperCollins e-books

This book is dedicated to Georgette Heyer. Though a few writers before her did dress women in male clothing (Shakespeare comes to mind), Ms. Heyer's brilliantly funny cross-dressed heroines set the standard for all modern romance novelists.

I couldn't get my characters into clothing at all without the help of three fabulous people: my editor, Carrie Feron; my assistant, Kiki Castillo; and my research assistant, Franzeca Drouin. I am enormously grateful to each of you.

Finally, the readers on my online bulletin board (www.eloisajames.com) are a constant delight, provocation, and source for ideas. Please stop by and join us!

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Prologue

Justice By Duchess

December 15, 1783
Shire Court
The Duchy of Berrow
Honorable Reginald Truder, presiding

“I didn’t mean to marry both of them!”

“The problem,” said the duchess, leaning forward, “is not marrying twice, but marrying a second husband while the first is still alive.”

“Well, I didn’t want Avery to *die*,” Loveday Billing explained. “I just wanted to marry John, that’s all. I couldn’t stop myself. I was that tired, and lonely, and he...he sat with me of an evening.”

The judge snorted and Loveday thought he might have woken up, but then he started snoring again.

The Duchess of Berrow had very kind eyes, but she shook her head at Loveday. “You were already married to Avery, that is, Mr. Mosley, when you married John.”

Loveday hung her head. “Avery left me three years ago,” she said. “I didn’t know as how he wanted me anymore, because he said I was stupider than a sow in springtime.”

The duchess had a quiet sort of prettiness about her, like a preacher’s wife. Her gown was black, but it had a shine to it. Her hair was lovely too, looped and frilled and ruffed over her head, the way fine ladies did those things. And her eyes were so forgiving that Loveday suddenly felt like telling the truth. It was as if she were a youngster back in her mother’s kitchen, having stolen a cake.

“I ain’t really married to Avery Mosley,” she said. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Avery swing up his head. “I was already married before I married Avery. And I didn’t really marry him because it were an Irish minister named Usher and he told me privately that it weren’t a real marriage.”

Avery probably fell off his chair at that news, but Loveday was focused on the duchess. “My da married me off the first time, when I was twelve.”

“Twelve!”

The duchess looked a bit stricken, so she tried to explain. “It wasn’t so bad. I had developed, yo

see, and I was worth something, and it wasn't so bad."

"What is his name?"

"That was Mr. Buckley. But he died, so after Mr. Buckley passed on, I married Harold Eccles."

"I don't suppose that Mr. Eccles is dead?" The duchess sounded hopeful.

"He's about as alive as anyone could be in debtor's prison. I always visits him when I'm in London. Two hatbands and a coat, they got him for. He's been there almost eleven years now.

"So I married—" she paused for a moment, just to get it right "—Monsieur Giovanni Battista. He was an Italian man, and he said he'd take me away. But he gave me a pair of gloves, and then he went away instead."

"And then Mr. Mosley came along?" the duchess asked.

Loveday nodded. "I shouldn't have done it," she said. "I knows as I shouldn't have. But I didn't know what to do, and he asked me. But he left."

"You were in a difficult position," the duchess said. "If I have this right, your first husband died the second is in prison, the third went to Italy, the fourth was not a real marriage, and the fifth—"

"I had no one to care for myself and the babes because my dad doesn't speak to me after the Italian man."

"Children?" The duchess looked through the long pieces of paper that were floating around the table. "There's no mention of children in these pleadings."

The fancy London man standing next to John answered. "It was not considered relevant to the matter at hand, Your Grace. My client married her in good faith as the certificates indicate. And may I point out that these court proceedings are highly irregular? Surely the Honorable Judge Truder should be roused?"

The duchess ignored him. Loveday could have told the London man that in Berrow, this was the way of it. Truder was a drunk, but it didn't really matter as he and the duchess did the business together, just as it was in the old days, and that was good enough for the town of Berrow.

"Whose children are they?" the duchess said, turning back to Loveday.

"All of them, really," Loveday said hopelessly. "I gave them each one. Except for John, of course, because we only married a bit ago."

"You have four children?" the duchess asked.

"Five. Harold, him as is in prison, has two."

There was silence in the courtroom. Loveday could hear John moving his feet. If only...but it was too late.

“You are really Mrs. Eccles,” the duchess observed.

Loveday nodded. “I know as how you’re right, Mrs. Duchess.”

“Your Grace,” a man next to her hissed.

“Your Grace,” she said obediently. “But Harold is in debtor’s prison.”

The duchess looked over at the box, so Loveday looked too. There was John, with his blue eyes. And Avery with his angry small mouth, just like always.

“Why did you pursue this indictment, Mr. Mosley?” the duchess asked.

Avery burst into words, but the gist of it was that he wanted her back, even after the things he said about her.

The duchess looked at him steadily. Then she turned back to Loveday. “Have you any money?” she asked.

“Oh, no,” Loveday said. “I’ve no money but what my husbands give me.”

There was quiet for a moment, and then the duchess said, even more gently, “Is your father still alive, Mrs. Eccles?”

“Yes, but he—” and she stopped.

The duchess folded her hands and looked so sweet. “He’s ill, isn’t he?”

“I heard so,” Loveday whispered.

“And your father has some money that he might leave you?”

Loveday looked back at John’s blue eyes, and she felt like a fool. “That’s why Avery wants me back. Because of the mill. And John...I suppose that’s why John courted me. For the mill.”

John got up and left, so that sort of spoke for itself.

Avery left too, so Loveday cried for a little bit, and then the duchess said, “You were very wrong to marry so many men, Loveday.”

“I know,” Loveday said, sniffing.

“I’m going to advise the judge to acquit you. But you mustn’t marry again. I want you to bail out Mr. Eccles. And then live with him.”

“I will,” Loveday promised.

The duchess reached over and poked the judge. He snorted once or twice and woke up. She said something to him and he snorted again and said, “Case dismissed!” Then he slumped back down in his

chair.

Loveday stood there for a moment before she realized she was free to go. Except the duchess wanted to see her. So she went to the front, and the duchess took her hand. She told her a fairy tale, about how Mr. Eccles—that would be Harold, in prison—should treat her like a princess, because she was to be a mill owner.

Loveday just smiled and smiled. That duchess was the most lovely, best-smelling woman in the world. She had a funny way of talking, and daft ideas, but you couldn't help liking her. Especially when she sat right there, holding Loveday's hand—Loveday, who everyone said was as stupid as a so though she wasn't.

And finally the duchess gave her five pounds, which she could use to get Harold out of prison right away. Harold didn't owe more than a pound or two, even counting charges for board, so Loveday tried to give some back, but the duchess wouldn't take it.

Then the judge woke up again and he seemed to have a terrible problem with gas, so the duchess smiled at Loveday just as if she were a normal person, and they both left the room.

Loveday Billing had never been so happy in her life.

A duchess liked her, and had quitted her, whatever that meant, and told her what to do.

And she did just that.

Chapter One

In Which Cinderella Dresses for the Ball and Her Fairy Godmother Brings a Goose Instead of a Pumpkin

January 6 (Twelfth Night), 1784

A Costume Ball

The Country Seat of the Duke of Beaumont

Nursery tales are full of fascinating widows, although they aren't always the nicest characters. Cinderella's stepmother likely put on a dazzling gown for the prince's ball, even if her daughters did inherit her big feet and sharp tongue.

Harriet, Duchess of Berrow, realized soon after her husband died that there are glamorous widows, and then there are widows who live in shoes with too many children, like poor Loveday Billing. There are widows who dance all night with younger men, and then there are dowdy widows who are offered only pinched smiles.

Harriet had no illusions about what kind of widow she was. She was the kind who lived in a shoe and never mind the fact that she had no children and her estate was much larger than a shoe.

Her husband had been dead for two years and no younger—or older—men were lining up to ask her to dance. Most of her acquaintances still got a tragic sheen in their eyes and promptly moved away after greeting her, as if sadness was catching.

Apparently, if one's husband committed suicide, one automatically became the unappealing type of widow.

Partly it was her fault. Here she was at the Duchess of Beaumont's impromptu costume ball—but was she dressing as a glamorous character? Or even an evil one?

"Who are you?" her friend Jemma (the aforesaid Duchess of Beaumont) asked.

"A nursery rhyme character. Can you guess which one?" Harriet was wearing a motherly nightgown of plain cotton that her maid had recruited from the housekeeper. Underneath she had three petticoats, as well as four woolen stockings in her bodice. Just to show off a bit, she arched her back.

“A nursery rhyme character with big breasts,” Jemma said. “Very big breasts. Very very—”

“*Motherly* breasts,” Harriet prompted.

“Actually you don’t look motherly as much as wildly curvaceous. The problem will be if one of our houseguests lures you into a corner and attempts a cheerful grope. Wasn’t there some nursery rhyme about lighting the way to bed?”

“I’m not on my way to bed,” Harriet said, somewhat deflated. “And no one ever tries to grope me. What character are you?”

Jemma’s gown was made of a clear pale pink that looked wonderful with the dark gold color of her unpowdered hair. There were small silk poppies sewn all over her skirts, and poppies tucked in her hair. She managed to look elegant and yet untamed, all at once.

“Titania, Queen of the Fairies.”

“I’m Mother Goose. Which fairly sums up the difference between us.”

“What are you talking about!” Jemma scolded, wrapping an arm around Harriet. “Look at you, darling. You are far too young and fresh to be Mother Goose!”

“No one will know who I am,” Harriet said, pulling away from Jemma and sitting on the bed. “They’ll think I’m a fat white ghost.”

Jemma started laughing. “The ghost of a murdered cook. No, all you need is a clue to your Mother Goose status, and people will admire the cleverness of your costume. Wait until you see Lord Pladget as Henry VIII: he has a hearth rug tied around his middle and he looks as big as a barn.”

“I already look as big as a barn, at least on top.”

“A goose!” Jemma said. “Of course, you need a goose and I know just the one!”

“Oh, but—”

Two minutes later, Jemma was back. With a goose.

“Is that real?” Harriet asked warily.

“In a matter of speaking. I’m afraid it’s a little stiff. It usually flies along the wall in the south parlor. My mother-in-law has a morbid attitude toward decorating that involved arranging all kinds of dead animals on the walls. You can use the poor goose tonight, darling, and then we’ll set him free to fly to a better place, if you understand me.”

Harriet took the goose in her hands rather dubiously. It was stuffed so that its neck stayed stiff, as if it were in flight.

“Just tuck it under your arm,” Jemma said. Harriet stood up and tried it. “Not like that. Here, turn his head upright so he looks like a friend whispering in your ear.”

Harriet stared down at the bird's glossy eyes. "This is not a friendly goose." It looked ready to lunge from her hands and peck someone.

"There is no such thing as a friendly goose," Jemma said. "I must go see how Isidore is coming with her costume. I checked on her earlier and her maids were frantically tearing apart two dresses. She says she's going to be a queen, but I'm afraid she's going to enter the ballroom wrapped in a handkerchief."

"Why doesn't Isidore go by her title of Duchess of Cosway?" Harriet asked. "Last night she was announced as Lady Isidore Del'Fino."

"I don't think she's ever met the duke. Her husband, I mean," Jemma said. "Or if she did, it was for five minutes years ago. So she uses her own title, although for tonight she's the Queen of Palmyra."

"If you had told me that you were planning a Twelfth Night costume party," Harriet said, putting the goose down, "I could have been a queen as well."

"Apparently queens don't wear much clothing, so you'll definitely be more comfortable this way. And I'm sorry about not warning you, darling, but it's so much fun doing it last minute. You should see people rushing about the house looking for costumes. The butler is going mad! It's wonderful."

And with that, Jemma sailed out of the room leaving Harriet with the goose.

It was absurd to feel so sorry for herself. Every time she walked into Judge Truder's court she heard of people whose lives were far more desperate. Why just last month there was a girl who stole half a jar of mustard and six oranges. Truder had actually woken up and wanted to give the poor child hard labor, fool that he was.

But she, Harriet, had no need to steal oranges. She was a duchess; she was still relatively young, she was healthy...

She was lonely.

A tear splashed on the duck and she absently smoothed his feathers.

She didn't really want to be a queen, either of fairies or Palmyra, wherever that was. She just wanted a husband.

Someone to sit with her of an evening, just like Loveday said.

Chapter Two

[Another chapter in Which Breasts Play a Not-insignificant Role](#)

Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, threw back her head and laughed. Her bodice gaped, precariously clinging to the slope of her breasts. The dapper man before her twirled on his toes, one hand up in the air, like a gypsy dancer at Bartholomew Fair. Zenobia laughed again, and flung both hands in the air in imitation of him.

The Queen of Palmyra's corset, if one existed, was thoroughly inadequate.

It crossed Harriet's mind that a true friend would alert Zenobia—more commonly known as Isidore—that her breasts were about to make an appearance on the ballroom floor.

But Harriet was tucked in a chair at the side of the ballroom, and Isidore had her eyes fixed on the man she was seducing, though seducing wasn't quite the appropriate word. Harriet had the idea that Isidore was chaste. Just bored. And Harriet couldn't possibly catch her attention. She felt invisible; she certainly seemed to be invisible to most of the men in the room.

Widows dressed as Mother Goose were not as much in demand as half-naked queens, no matter how much stuffing their bodices contained. What little cloth existed in Isidore's bodice was thickly embroidered with peacock feathers, the eyes picked out in jewels.

In short, peacock eyes were more popular than goose eyes. Lord Beesby, for example, didn't seem to be able to take his eyes off of Isidore's bodice, whereas Harriet's goose put men off. It was lying beside her, head drooping off the chair so that its beady eyes stared at the floor.

Isidore twirled again, hands in the air. A lock of hair fell from her elaborate arrangement. The dancers nearby paused in their own steps, entranced by the sway of her hips. There was something so un-English about Isidore's curves, her scarlet lips, the way she was smiling at Beesby as if he were thanking himself. It had to be her Italian ancestry. Most Englishwomen looked—and felt—like Harriet herself: dumpy. Maternal.

Though she, Harriet, had no reason to feel maternal, given her lack of children. At this point, the only man likely to approach her would be called Georgie Porgie.

Harriet bit her lip. She'd welcome Georgie Porgie. Who knew it was just as humiliating to sit out dances when one is widowed, as when one first entered the marriage market? Yet another one of life's charming surprises.

Lord Beesby was dancing as he had never danced before. One hand still in the air like a gypsy king, he capered and pranced before his partner, his knees rising higher and higher. He reminded Harriet of nothing so much as her beloved spaniel, Mrs. Custard. If Beesby had a tail, he'd be wagging it with pure bliss. He was rapt, enchanted, in love. According to the pattern of the dance, he should have long ago moved to another partner, but he and Isidore had—scandalously—eschewed exchanging partners, and the dance had continued without them.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, Harriet caught a glimpse of an irate-looking Lady Beesby making her way toward the couple. Isidore's bodice was at the very point of disaster. Harriet jumped to her feet, caught Isidore's eye, and jerked her head in the direction of Lady Beesby.

Isidore flashed one look at the matron heading toward her, drew back, and shouted, "Lord Beesby, you do me wrong!"

Caught in a dream, Lord Beesby didn't hear and circled blissfully, one more time.

Isidore bellowed something else; Lord Beesby started blinking and stopped short in the midst of a turn. Isidore's hand flashed out and she slapped him.

The entire ballroom went stone silent. "You led me to believe that you found me attractive!" Isidore shrieked, with all the bravado of an Italian opera singer. "How dare you spurn me after presenting me with such temptation!"

Jemma appeared from nowhere and wrapped an arm around Isidore's waist. "Alas, Lord Beesby is a man of high moral fiber," she said, with magnificent emphasis.

"Oh, how shall I recover!" Isidore cried, casting a drooping hand to her brow.

Jemma swept her off the dance floor. Harriet barely stopped herself from applauding.

Lord Beesby was still standing there, mouth agape, when his wife reached his side. Harriet thought she looked at him with a measure of new respect. It was one thing to have one's husband making a fool of himself on the dance floor with a gorgeous young woman. It was another to have the same husband spurn the wench in a public arena.

Lady Beesby even smiled at her husband, which had to be the first such affectionate gesture in days. Perhaps years. Then she spun on her heel and marched off the dance floor, her smaller, bemused husband trailing after her. It reminded Harriet of when her fat sow Rebecca would suddenly march off in indignation. Rebecca generally trailed at least one piglet behind her. Or—Harriet stopped.

Her thoughts were made up of spaniels and piglets. She was so tedious that she bored herself. She was countrified, tedious, and melancholic.

She could feel her eyes getting dangerously hot. But she was tired of tears. Benjamin had died over two years ago. She'd wept when he died, and after. Wept more than she thought it was possible for a human body to cry. Wept, she realized now, from a mixture of grief and rage and mortification.

But her husband was gone, and she was still here.

Dressing in Mother Goose costumes wouldn't bring him back. Sitting like a mouse at the side of the ballroom wouldn't bring him back. Nothing would bring him back.

Yet what could she do? Widows were supposed to be dignified. Not only that, but she was a duchess. Given that Benjamin's nephew, the current Duke of Berrow, was only eleven years old and still at Eton, she wasn't even a dowager duchess. She was a duchess and a widow and a twenty-seven-year-old woman: and which of those three terms was the most depressing she couldn't even decide.

She swallowed hard. Could she bear to spend the rest of her life growing paler, as her hair faded and her shoulders stooped? Would she merely watch other women seduce and entice, while she mused about fat piglets and loyal spaniels? A dog, no matter how loyal, is only a dog.

She couldn't spend the rest of her life clinging to the sides of ballrooms, dressed as the mother she wasn't and never would be.

She had to do something. Change her life! Start thinking about—

About—

Pleasure.

The word popped into her mind unexpectedly and stayed there, with all the gracious coolness of a drop of cool rain on a blistering day. Isidore was obviously enjoying herself, flirting with Beesby. He loved their dance.

Pleasure.

She could think about pleasure.

Her pleasure.

Chapter Three

In Which the Geography of Pleasure is Dissected

Harriet found the Duchess of Beaumont and the Duchess of Cosway—i.e, Jemma and Isidore—in a small parlor after a dismaying search of other rooms. Every alcove held a pair of heads, male and female. Every settee featured people paired off like robins in spring. Or, since it was a costume party, like a sailor and the Queen of Sheba.

She pasted a cheery Mother Goose type of smile on her face and kept saying mindless things like “Oh, very sorry! Right then, I’ll just—just move along, shall I?” The sailor didn’t even look up when she walked into the yellow salon. His head bent over the Queen of Sheba’s with such tenderness and possession that Harriet felt as if her heart would break in two.

She and Benjamin never...of course not. They had been a married couple, hadn’t they? Married couples didn’t kiss at balls.

But had Benjamin *ever* kissed her like that? He used to kiss her in a brisk, affectionate manner. The way she kissed her spaniel.

“You saved me!” Isidore cried when Harriet finally located Jemma and Isidore in a small sitting room. “Lady Beesby would have eaten me for breakfast.”

“Darling, come and sit beside me; I’m feeling blue,” Jemma said, peering around the side of her chair. They were seated around the fire.

Harriet rounded the little circle and halted. Her least favorite acquaintance in the world, the Duke of Villiers, lay on a settee just to the left of the hearth. He was recovering from an infection caused by a dueling wound, and his face was angular and pale. Even so, one look at him made her feel every inch an unattractive, dumpy widow. His dressing gown was made of Italian silk, dark lavender embroidered with a delicate border of black tulips. It was exquisite, unexpected, and utterly beautiful.

“I apologize, Your Grace,” she said. “I didn’t realize you had left your chambers.”

“I was threatening to rise to my feet and dance the sara-band,” he said, in his slightly drawling accent, “so my dragonish valet finally allowed me to be near the festivities, if not part of them.”

Harriet sat down stiffly, promising herself that she could leave within five minutes. She could

plead a headache, she could say the fire was too hot for her, she could say that she had promised to meet someone in the ballroom...Anything to get away from Villiers.

“As you entered, Harriet,” Isidore announced, “I was just saying that I have decided to create a scandal.”

“Poor Lady Beesby,” Harriet said.

Isidore laughed. “Not with Beesby. That was just entertainment. No, I mean to create a true scandal. The kind of scandal that will force my husband to return to England.” Harriet suddenly noticed that Isidore had a very firm jaw.

“I hate to use my misbegotten history as an example,” Jemma said, “but my husband never found my scandals an adequate reason to travel from England to France. And your husband is somewhere in the Far East, isn’t he?”

Harriet silently agreed. Propping up a drunken judge had caused her to see any number of cases involving scandals caused by women. Often their husbands didn’t bother to travel to the next county to rescue them. But then, dukes and duchesses never showed up in the shire court of the Berrow duchy and presumably the duke cared for his reputation.

“I pity Cosway,” Villiers said languidly. “Jemma, have you a chess set in this parlor?”

She shook her head. “No. And you know that the doctor told you to stay away from chess. You need to recover from those fevers, not exacerbate your tired brain by thinking up intricate plays.”

“Life without chess is paltry,” Villiers growled. “Not worth living.”

“Benjamin would have agreed with you,” Harriet said, before she thought. Her husband had killed himself after losing a game of chess.

To Villiers.

There was a drop of silence in the room, a moment in which no one breathed. Then Jemma said, “We all wish Benjamin were here to play chess with us.”

Villiers turned his face to the fire and said nothing, but Harriet felt a rush of acute shame, along with the memory of his stammering apology. Villiers had been dying, literally burning up with a fever, and he’d come all the way to Jemma’s house just to apologize to her for winning the game that led to Benjamin’s suicide.

“I wasn’t referring to his—his death,” Harriet scrambled into words. “Merely that, if a doctor had told Benjamin that he couldn’t play chess—”

“For a whole *month*,” Villiers put in.

“Poor Benjamin would have been enraged. Crazy.”

“I would be rather crazy myself, I think,” Jemma said.

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