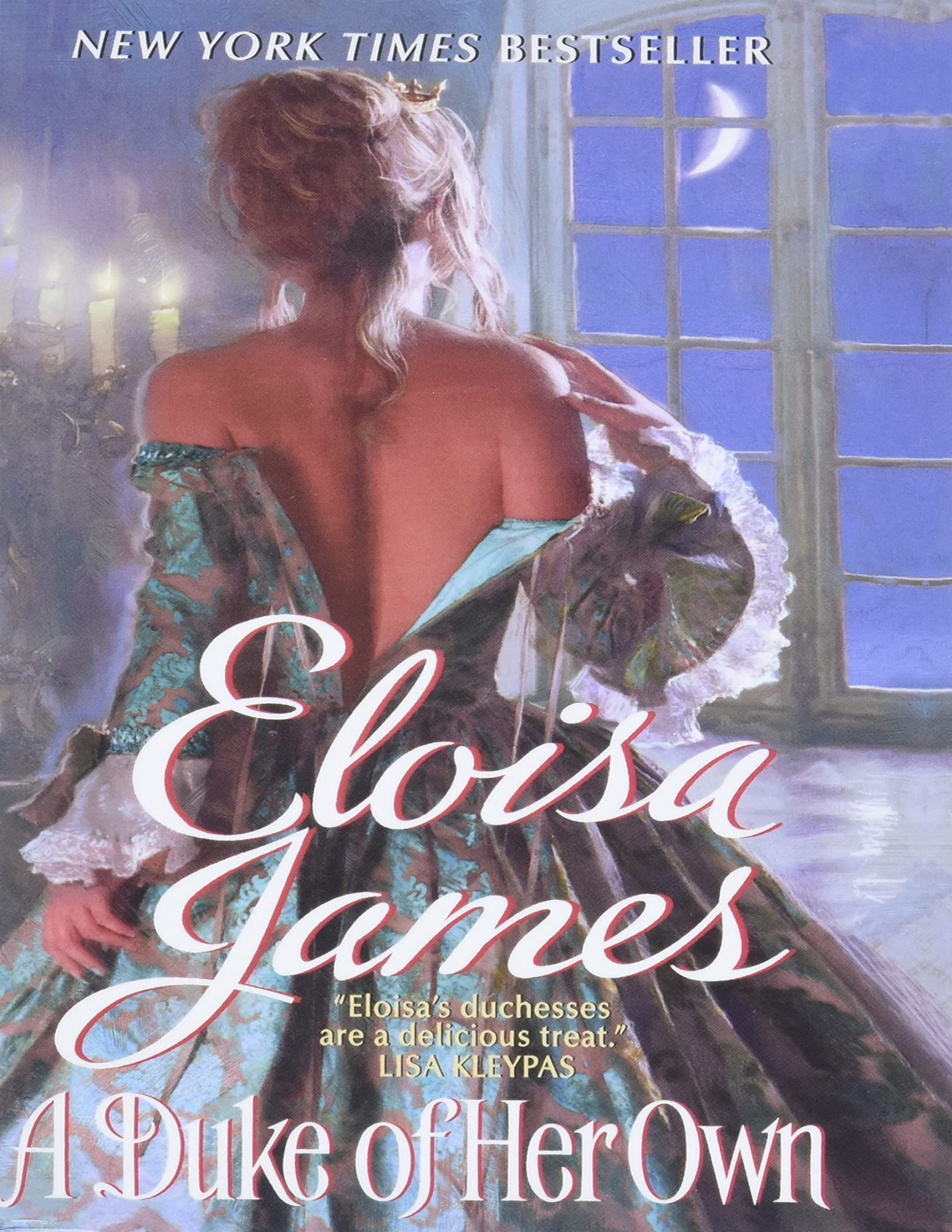


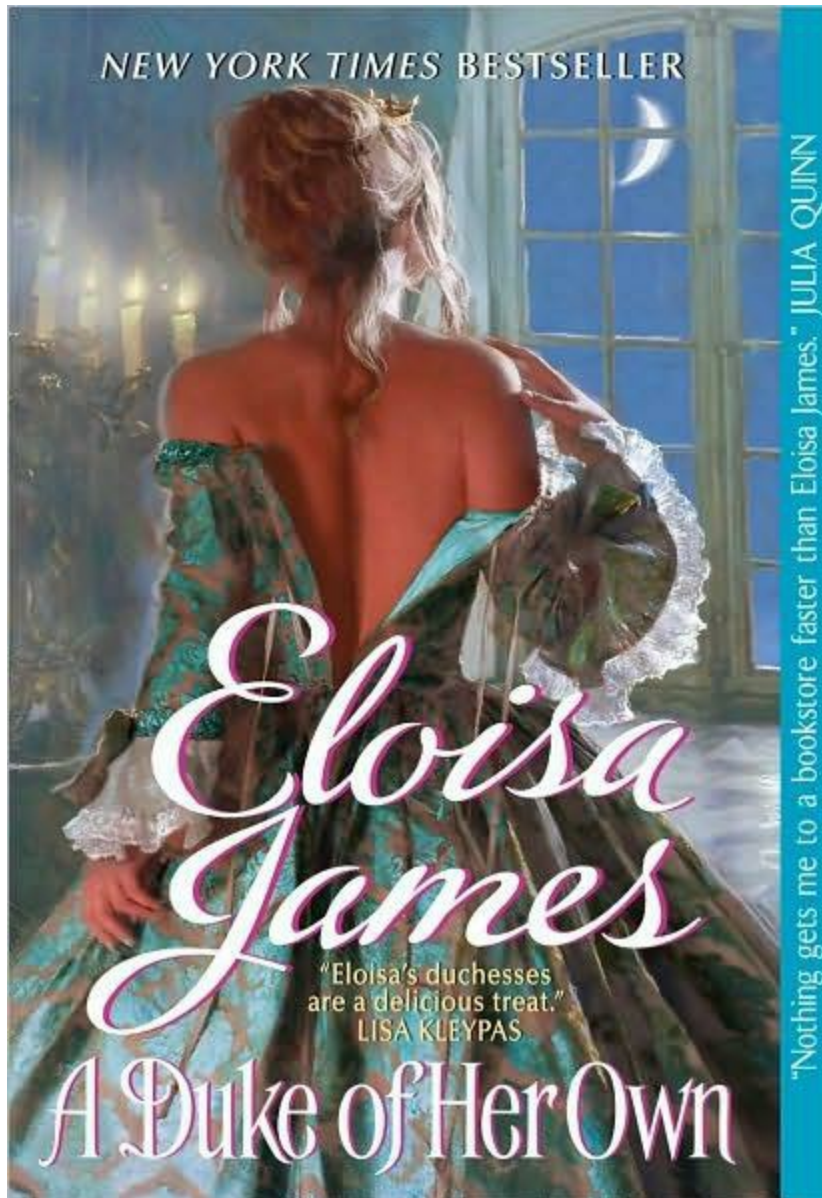
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



*Eloisa
James*

"Eloisa's duchesses
are a delicious treat."
LISA KLEYPAS

A Duke of Her Own



A Duke of Her Own

By

Eloisa James

This book is dedicated to all the readers who fell in love with the Desperate Duchesses series and begged me to write Extra Chapters for my website... When you finish reading *A Duke of Her Own*, stop by eloisajames.com and you'll find a final Extra Chapter that will catch up on every duchess and her beloved. I hope you enjoy it!

Contents

Chapter One

London's Roman Baths

Duchess of Beaumont's ball to benefit the Baths

June 14, 1784

"The duke must be here somewhere," said Mrs. Bouchon, née Lady Anne Lindel, tugging her older sister along like a child with a wheeled toy.

"And therefore we have to act like hunting dogs?" Lady Eleanor replied through clenched teeth.

"I'm worried that Villiers will leave before we find him. I can't let you waste another evening chatting with dowagers."

"Lord Killigrew would dislike being identified as a dowager," Eleanor protested. "Slow down, Anne!"

"Killigrew's not eligible either, is he? His daughter is at least your age." Her sister turned a corner and peered at a group of noblemen. "Villiers won't be in that nest of Whigs. He doesn't seem the type." She set off in the opposite direction.

Lord Thrush called after them, but Anne didn't even pause. Eleanor waved helplessly.

"Everyone knows that Villiers came to this benefit specifically to meet you," Anne said. "I heard it from at least three people in the last half hour, so he might have been civil enough to remain in the open where he could be easily found."

"That would deny most of London the pleasure of realizing just how desperate I am to meet him,"

Eleanor snapped.

"No one will think that, not given what you're wearing," her sister said over her shoulder. "Rest assured: I would be surprised if you attained the label *interested*, let alone *desperate*"

Eleanor jerked her hand from her sister's. "If you don't like my gown, just say so.

There's no need to be so rude."

Anne swung around, hands on her hips. "I consider myself blunt, rather than rude. It would be rude if I pointed out that at first glance any reasonable gentleman would characterize you as a bacon-faced beldam, rather than a marriageable lady."

Eleanor clenched her hands so that she didn't inadvertently engage in violence. "Whereas you," she retorted, "look as close to a courtesan as Mother would allow."

"May I point out that my recent marriage suggests that a more tempting style might be in order?"

Your sleeves are elbow-length—with *flounces*," Anne added in disgust. "No one has worn that style for at least four years. Not to mention that togas are *de rigueur*, since your hostess requested the costume."

"I am not wearing a toga because I am not a trained spaniel," Eleanor said. "And if you think that one-shoulder style is any more flattering to you than my flounces are to me, you are sadly mistaken."

"This isn't about me. It's about *you*. You. You and the question of whether you're going to spend the rest of your time in dowdy clothing simply because you were spurned in love. And if that sentence sounds like a cliché, Eleanor, it's because your life is turning into one."

"My life is a cliché?" Despite herself, Eleanor felt a tightness in the back of her throat that signaled tears. She and Anne had amused themselves for years

with blistering fights, but she must be out of practice. Anne had been married for a whole two weeks, after all. With their youngest sister still in the nursery, there was no one to torment her on a daily basis.

Anne's face softened. "Just look at yourself, Eleanor. You're beautiful. Or at least you used to be beautiful, before—"

"Don't," Eleanor interrupted. "Just don't."

"Did you take a good look at your hair this evening?"

Of course she had. True, she had been reading while her maid worked, but she certainly glanced in the mirror before she left her chamber. "Rackfort worked very hard on these curls," Eleanor said, gingerly patting the plump curls suspended before her ears.

"Those curls make your cheeks round, Eleanor. Round, as in fat."

"I'm not fat," Eleanor said, taking a calming breath. "A moment ago you were insisting that I'm out of fashion, but these curls are the very newest mode."

"They might be among the older set," Anne said, poking at them. "But Rackfort's inadequate use of powder makes them anything but. For goodness sake, didn't you notice that she was using light brown curls, even though your hair is chestnut? It's oddly patchy where the powder has worn off."

One might even say mangy. No one would think that you are the more beautiful of the two of us. Or that you're more beautiful than Mother ever was, for that matter."

"Not true!"

"True," her sister said indomitably. "I've begun to wonder why our mother, so very proud of her glorious past, allows you to dress like a dowager."

"Is this sourness the effect of marriage?" Eleanor said, staring at her sister. "You wed barely a fortnight ago. If this is the consequence of wedded bliss, I might do best to avoid it."

"Marriage gives me time to think." Anne smirked. "In bed."

"I feel truly sorry for you if your bedtime activities involve consideration of my wardrobe, not to mention Rackfort's lackluster hairdressing," Eleanor said tartly.

Anne broke into laughter. "I just don't understand why you dress like a prissy dowd when underneath you are quite the opposite."

"I am not—" Eleanor flashed, and caught herself. "And I don't understand why you are wasting time fussing over me when you have the very handsome Mr. Jeremy Bouchon claiming your attention."

"In fact, Jeremy and I discussed you. In a slow moment, as it were."

"You didn't!"

"We both agree that men don't look past your dowdy clothing. Jeremy says he never even considered the possibility of courting you. He thought you an eccentric, too pious and haughty even to take notice of him. You, Eleanor! He thought that of *you*. How ridiculous!"

Eleanor managed to bite back her opinion of her brother-in-law. "We're in the middle of a ball," she pointed out. "Wouldn't you be more comfortable sharing Jeremy's charming commentary later, in private?"

"No woman here has eyes like yours, Eleanor," her sister said, ignoring her comment entirely. "That dark blue is most unusual. I wish I had it. And they turn up at the corners. Don't you remember all those absurd poems Gideon wrote comparing your eyes to stormy seas and buttercups?"

"Not buttercups," Eleanor said. "Bluebells, though I don't see how this is relevant."

"Your mouth is just as lovely as it was years ago. Back before the buttercup king himself left for greener pastures."

"I don't like to talk about Gideon."

"I've obeyed you for three, almost four, years, but I'm tired of it," Anne replied, raising her voice again. "I'm a married woman now and you can't tell me what to do. Granted, you fell in love—"

"*Please*," Eleanor implored. "Keep your voice down, Anne!"

"You fell in love with a man who turned out to be a bad hat," her sister said, albeit a bit more quietly. "But what I don't understand is why Gideon's rejection has resulted in your becoming a squabby old maid. Do you really intend to wither into your grave mourning that man? Will you have no children, no marriage, no household of your own, *nothing*, all because Gideon left you?"

Eleanor felt as if the air actually burned her lungs. "I shall probably—"

"Just when are you planning to marry? At age twenty-five, or thirty? Who will marry you when you're that old, Eleanor? You may be beautiful, but if you don't make an effort, no one will notice.

In my experience, men are not terribly perceptive." She leaned forward, peering. "You aren't wearing even a touch of face paint, are you?"

"No," Eleanor said. "None." Of course she wanted children. And a husband. It was just that she wanted Gideon's children. She was a fool. Seven times a *fool*. Gideon was not hers, and that meant his children wouldn't be either. How on earth had the years passed so quickly?

"I am not finished," her sister added. "There's not a bit of your bosom to be seen, and your skirts are so long they're practically dragging in the mud. But it's your attitude that really matters. You look like a prude, and you jest and poke at men. They don't like it, Eleanor. They flee in the other direction, and why shouldn't they?"

"No reason." Eleanor resorted to praying that Anne would run out of words, though she saw no sign of it.

"Everyone thinks you're a snob," her sister said flatly. "All of London knows that you swore not to marry anyone below the rank of a duke—and they don't

think well of you for it. At least the men don't. In one fell swoop you made almost every eligible man in London think you are a condescending prig."

"I merely intended—"

"But now there's a duke on the market," Anne said, overriding her. "The Duke of Villiers, no less.

Rich as Croesus and apparently just as snobbish as you are, since everyone says he's intent on marrying a duke's daughter. That's you, Eleanor. You. I'm married, Elizabeth is still in the nursery, and there isn't another eligible lady of our rank in London."

"I realize that fact."

"You're the one who announced that you'd marry no one below the order of a duke," Anne continued, scarcely pausing for breath. "You said there were no eligible dukes and then one appeared like magic, and everyone says that he's thinking of marrying you—"

"I don't see anything particular to celebrate in that," Eleanor retorted. "Those same people describe Villiers as quite unpleasant."

"You said you'd marry no one but a duke," her sister repeated stubbornly, "and now there's one fallen into your hand like a ripe plum. It wouldn't matter if the duke were as broken down as a cart horse, or so you always said."

Eleanor opened her mouth and then realized with some horror that the Duke of Villiers was standing just behind her sister's shoulder.

"Remember dinner last Twelfth Night? You told Aunt Petunia that you'd marry a man who smelled of urine and dog hair if he had the right title, but no one below a duke."

Eleanor had never met the Duke of Villiers; nay, she had never even seen Villiers, but she had no doubt but that she was facing him now. He was precisely as described, with the kind of jaw and cheekbones that wavered between brutish and beautiful. By all accounts, Villiers never wore a wig, and

this man didn't even wear powder. His black hair was shot with two or three brilliant streaks of white and tied back at the neck. It couldn't be anyone else.

Her sister just kept going, with the relentless quality of a bad dream. "You said that you would marry a duke over another man, even if he were as stupid as Oyster and as fat as Mr. Hendicker's sow."

The Duke of Villiers's eyes were a chilly blackish-gray, the color of the evening sky when it threatened snow. He didn't look like a man with a sense of humor.

"Eleanor," Anne said, "Are you listening to me? Aren't you—" She turned "Oh!"