

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

ELOISA JAMES

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are a delicious treat."
Lisa Kleypas

Duchess By Night

A NOVEL
BEACH ESCAPE
See inside for
details

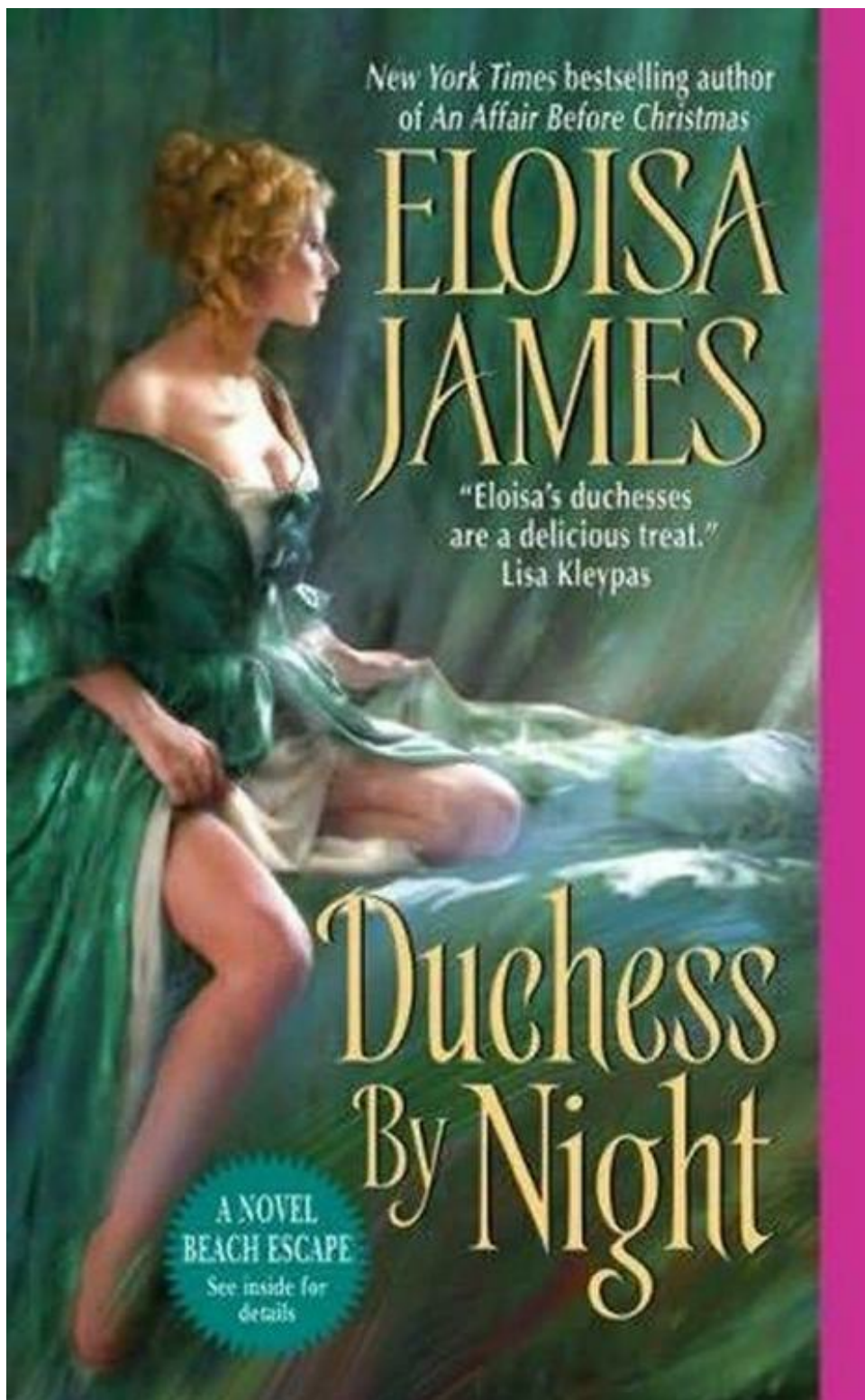
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Duchess By Night

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, Kim 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, you 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.