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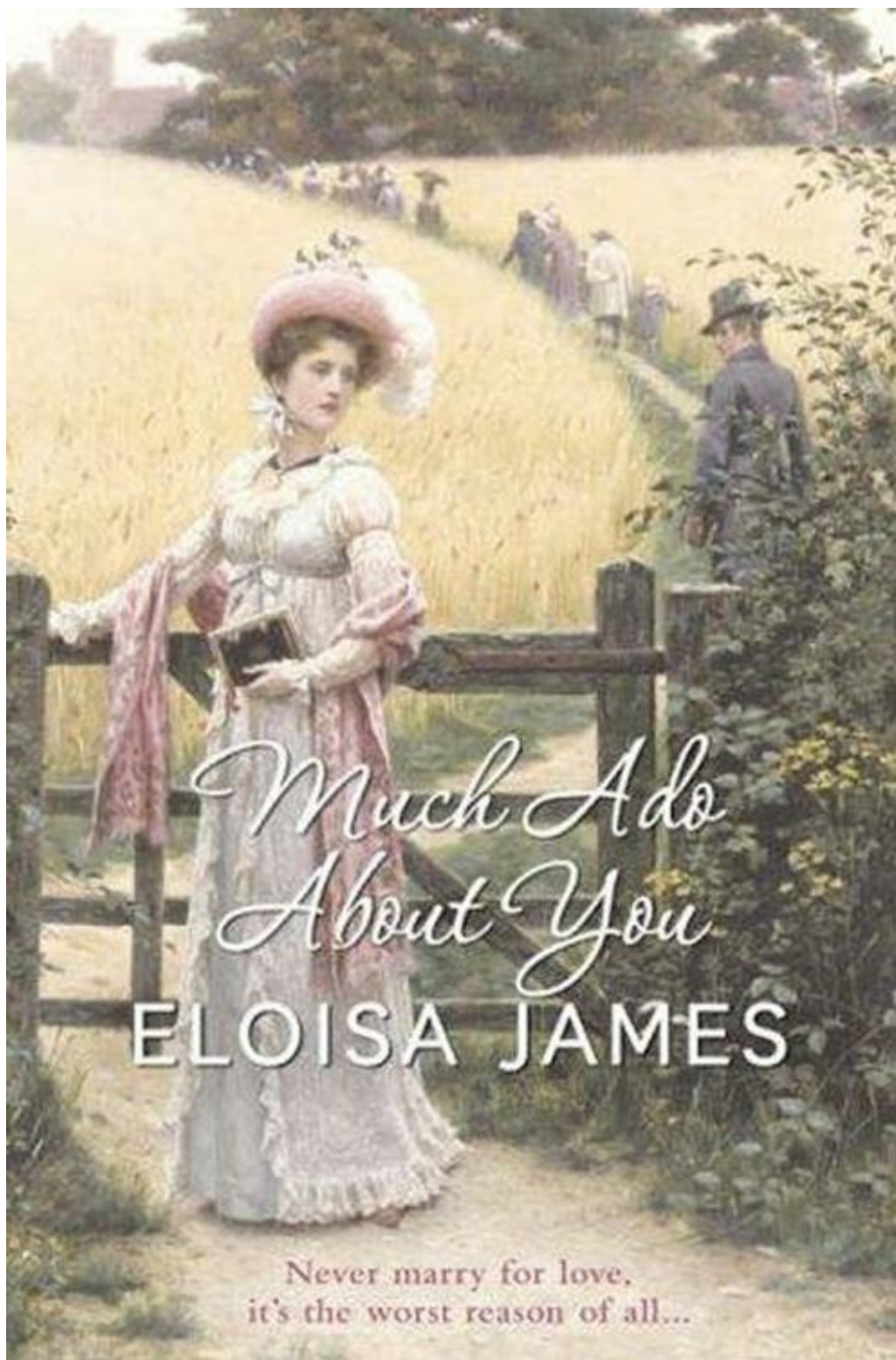
ELOISA JAMES

"Eloisa James's writing
is absolutely exquisite."

Teresa Medeiros



Such Ado About You



*Much Ado
About You*
ELOISA JAMES

Never marry for love,
it's the worst reason of all...

ELOISA JAMES

Much Ado About You



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Chapter

1

September 1816

Holbrook Court, seat of the Duke of Holbrook

On the outskirts of Silchester

In the afternoon

“**I** am happy to announce that the rocking horses have been delivered, Your Grace. I have placed them in the nursery for your inspection. As yet, there is no sign of the children.”

Raphael Jourdain, Duke of Holbrook, turned. He had been poking a fire smoldering in the cavernous fireplace of his study. There was a reserved tone in his butler’s voice that signaled displeasure. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Brinkley’s tone signaled the disgruntlement of the entire household of elderly servants, not one of whom was enchanted by the idea of accommodating themselves to the presence of four small, female children. Well, the hell with that, Rafe thought. It wasn’t as if he’d *asked* to have a passel of youngsters on the premises.

“Rocking horses?” came a drawling voice from a deep chair to the right of the fireplace. “Charming, Rafe. Charming. One can’t start too early making the little darlings interested in horseflesh.” Garret Langham, the Earl of Mayne, raised his glass toward his host. His black curls were in exquisite disarray, his comments arrogant to a fault, and his manners barely hid a seething fury. Not that he was furious at Rafe; Mayne had been in a slow

burn for the past few months. “To Papa and his brood of infant *equestriennes*,” he added, tossing back his drink.

“Stubble it!” Rafe said, but without much real animosity. Mayne was a damned uncomfortable companion at the moment, what with his poisonous comments and black humor. Still, one had to assume that the foul temper caused by the shock of being rejected by a woman would wear off in a matter of time.

“Why the plural, as in rocking *horses*?” Mayne asked. “As I recall, most nurseries contain only one rocking horse.”

Rafe took a gulp of his brandy. “I don’t know much about children,” he said, “but I distinctly remember my brother and me fighting over our toys. So I bought four of them.”

There was a second’s silence during which the earl considered whether to acknowledge the fact that Rafe obviously still missed his brother (dead these five years, now). He dismissed the impulse. Manlike, he observed no benefit to maudlin conversation.

“You’re doing those orphans proud,” he said instead. “Most guardians would stow the children out of sight. It’s not as if they’re your blood.”

“There’s no amount of dolls in the world that will make up for their situation,” Rafe said, shrugging. “Their father should have thought of his responsibilities before he climbed on a stallion.”

The conversation was getting dangerously close to the sort of emotion to be avoided at all costs, so Mayne sprang from his chair. “Let’s have a look at the rocking horses, then. I haven’t seen one in years.”

“Right,” Rafe said, putting his glass onto the table with a sharp clink. “Brinkley, if the children arrive, bring them upstairs, and I’ll receive them in the nursery.”

A few minutes later the two men stood in the middle of a large room on the