



LADIES OF
THE MANOR

The
RELUCTANT
DUCHESS

ROSEANNA M. WHITE



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To my childhood friends,
Brittney, Jennifer, Melissa, Elisa, Christy, Lisa.

We traveled many years together, grew together,
became who we are together.
And though now we've drifted apart,
nothing can ever change the memories forged
in the innocence of childhood.
That's a magic no amount of time can ever erase.

CHARACTER LIST



Rowena's Family

| | |
|--|--|
| Rowena Kinnaird | Daughter of Douglas and Nora Kinnaird. |
| The Earl of Lochaber and Chief of Clan Kinnaird | Rowena's father. Given name of Douglas Kinnaird, and though he should officially always be addressed as Lord Lochaber or Lochaber, he prefers his clan title to his peerage one and often answers to "the Kinnaird." |
| Nora | Rowena's mother, deceased. Called Lady Lochaber while she lived. American-born. |
| The Countess of Lochaber | Rowena's stepmother. Given name of Elspeth. Called Lady Lochaber. |
| Annie | Rowena's stepsister, daughter of Elspeth. Given name of Annys. |
| Lilias Cowan | Rowena's lady's maid and distant Kinnaird cousin. |
| Malcolm Kinnaird | Rowena's third cousin and the heir to the chieftom of Clan Kinnaird. |

Brice's Family

| | |
|---|--|
| Brice Myerston | The Duke of Nottingham. Called Nottingham or Duke. Called Brice by family. |
| Charlotte, the (Dowager) Duchess of Nottingham | Brice's mother. Called Duchess or Duchess of Nottingham by peers, Your Grace by the public, Charlotte by friends. Her family (family name Brice) was from Scotland—Highland ancestral home, Gaoth Lodge. |
| Lady Ella Myerston | Brice's younger sister. Called Lady Ella. |

Other Characters

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Duke and Duchess of Stafford | Brice's closest friends. Brook and Justin from <i>The Lost Heiress</i> . Young son, William—usually referred to as Lord Abingdon. |
| The Earl of Whitby | Brook's father, called Lord Whitby, Whitby, or Whit. |
| The Earl of Cayton | Justin's cousin. Given name is James, called Cayton. A recent widower. Infant daughter, Addie. Deceased wife, Adelaide. |
| Lady Pratt | Widowed viscountess. Called Lady Pratt by most, Catherine or Kitty by friends. |
| Lord Rushworth | Catherine's brother, given name of Crispin. Called Lord Rushworth, Rushworth, or Rush. |
| Geoff Abbott | Brice's oldest friend; soon to be a vicar in Bristol. Called Mr. Abbott or Abbott by most, Geoff by his sister and father. |
| Stella Abbott | Ella's oldest friend; soon to be a governess in Hertfordshire. Called Miss Abbott by most, Stella by friends. |
| Old Abbott | Steward of Midwynd Park; father of Geoff and Stella. |
| Davis | Brice's valet. |
| Lewis | Ella's lady's maid. |
| Lapham | Charlotte's lady's maid. |
| Mr. Gordon | Butler at Gaoth Lodge. |
| Mr. Macnab | Jeweler in Lochaber. |
| Mr. Child | Butler at Midwynd Park. |
| Mrs. Granger | Housekeeper at Midwynd Park. |
| Mr. Morris | The constable in Brighton. |



AUGUST 1912

LOCHABER, HIGHLANDS, SCOTLAND

She could have been more than she was. Rowena dug her toes into the cold sand, wrapped her wool-clad arms around her tweed-clad knees, and stared out into the clear, fathomless waters of Loch Morar. Here, land gave way gently to loch. Not so a mile northward, where the crags tumbled down into waters too deep to plumb. Deep and cold and wind-wracked.

She was a lady, by rights. Daughter of Douglas Kinnaird, the Earl of Lochaber and chief of Clan Kinnaird. Lady Rowena they had called her at school in Edinburgh for those two blessed years she had gotten away.

She didn't feel like a lady. Hadn't since her father barged into the gymnasium when she was fifteen and dragged her out in full view of all the girls she'd thought were her friends—all the girls who laughed at her and tittered about barbarian Celts. She hadn't felt like a lady since he told her that Mother had plunged from one of those crags, into the loch.

To escape him, no doubt. Assuming he hadn't given her a helpful push.

Rowena tugged the heavy woolen sleeves farther down over her wrists. The bruising hadn't yet faded. Not from her father's fingers though—not this time. Father had learned not to leave marks when he punished her for saying the wrong thing. For not being strong enough to honor the clan.

For being too much like Mother.

The wind whipped around her, stinging her eyes. That was why tears blurred the image of the golden eagle soaring above the lake. The wind. Not the thought of her mother . . . or Malcolm. Certainly not a vain wish for those carefree days of childhood, before she realized what a monster her father was. Before his laughter had died and his hand had turned so heavy. Sometimes she thought she must have imagined those lovely years of ease in Castle Kynn. Created the memories of a loving father, for there had been no evidence of him for the last decade.

She sniffed and dashed the scratchy sleeve over her eyes. It was brown, like the weathered grass three feet back, where sandy shore turned to hilly trail. Brown, like the leaves of the dead tree the eagle settled onto. Brown, like she felt inside.

Dead. Withered. Done.

Were she brave enough, she would follow in her mother's footsteps and toss herself into the loch. Let the cold waters close over top of her and swallow her, erase it all. But, nay, the very thought sent her heart pounding and had her throat closing off. Ending it all would be so quick—but she couldn't.

She would just have to suffer whatever blow life dealt her next. "There ye are, *mo muirín*."

The voice, dark and deep as the nightmares that had plagued her these weeks, sent her scrambling to her feet. Her eyes darted to and yon, but no path of escape lay open to her. The beach ran

into too-steep banks, the water lapped, and *he* blocked the way back to the castle. She spun to face him and saw the centuries-old stone on Castle Kynn's promontory in the loch, out of reach.

But then, her home hadn't kept her safe before, had it? Why should she think it would now?

Clutching her jacket closed, she backed away until she nearly stumbled over her discarded shoes. "Dinna come any closer, Malcolm. And dinna be calling me your darling."

He smiled. Looked for all the world as if he hadn't a care, hadn't a worry, hadn't a side so black and cruel.

A year he'd fooled her. Made her think he was something different than her father, made her think him kind and charming. The sort of man she would be grateful to call husband, whom she could trust to protect her from the rages of her father, the Kinnaird. How could she not have seen it?

"What's got into you, Rowena?" He held out a hand as if expecting her to place her fingers in his. "I'm gone two weeks to attend business, and ye turn to a cowering shrew? Come. Greet me properly."

A shiver made her shoulders convulse. That was what he had said then. *Come. Say good-bye properly.* But he hadn't just wanted a kiss as she'd given him before. She could still feel the stone floor he'd shoved her to when she'd tried to pull away. Still saw—every time she closed her eyes—his sneer as she'd begged him to stop.

The bruises on her wrist throbbed, though they hadn't hurt for a week. "As if ye dinna ken what's 'got into' me." She took another step back, but her legs hit against the bank. "Go away, Malcolm, and dinna be coming back."

It flashed in his eyes, that storm she hadn't seen until recently. Lightning and thunder and deadly, driving wind. "Is that any way to talk to the man ye'll marry?"

She shook like a leaf in his gale. “I’ll not marry you.” It would be a slower death than drowning, but no less certain than if she waded into the loch with stones in her pockets. “Ye’ll never touch me again, Malcolm Kinnaird.”

Three large steps, and the hands he curled around her arms proved otherwise. Shackles, even though they were—now—gentle. To match the charming smile she’d been fooled by. “*Mo muirín*. I’m sorry if I hurt you. I didna mean to.”

If? If he’d hurt her? Did he not remember how he’d bloodied her lip, how he’d knocked her head to the stone floor so that the world went grey, how she’d cried out in agony as he—

“I love you.” One of his hands stroked through her hair, which the wind had already pulled free of its chignon. A month ago, the soft touch would have sent shivers of delight down her back. A month ago, the words would have made her shout for joy. Today, her stomach threatened to heave. “It got the better of me, is all. I forgot m’self.”

And she’d lose herself forever if she didn’t get free of him. He’d devour her whole, leaving nothing but the empty shell her mother had become. She tried to shrug him off, to push at his chest. He didn’t budge. “Let me go.” Her voice came out strangled and tremulous. “Please, Malcolm. Please let me go.”

“Why must ye fight me? If ye hadna fought me . . .”

Bile rose in her throat. “*Ye must have invited it, Rowena*”—that’s what her father had said when he found her, bloodied and sobbing, in the tower. “*I ken young Kinnaird. He’s a fine Highlander and will be a fine chief after me, and if ye’re glaikit enough to anger him, then it’s on yer own head. I’ll see that he marries you, and ye’d best be wise enough to thank me for it.*”

Never. She wouldn’t marry him—*that* would be the foolish thing, not daring to anger him. She wouldn’t. He’d never take again what he stole from her in the tower, and she would sooner

set herself outside for a winter night's freezing than thank her father for trying to force her to it.

"Rowena." Malcolm's hands slid from her arms to her back, pulling her closer. "Forgive me—I beg you. I'll never hurt you again. I swear it. I'll be a good husband." He sounded as he always had done. Charming, earnest. His dark hair still spilled onto his forehead in that way that made all the village lasses swoon. But she had no more blinders on her eyes.

She swallowed down the bile and put her arms up, against his chest. "No." She wanted it to sound strong—it didn't, but at least she managed to speak it. "I said I'll not marry you, and I mean it, ye ken? Now, let me go. My father'll be fashed if I'm not back in by tea."

"Ach." He grinned and trailed his fingers up her spine. "I was just in speaking with him, *mo muirnin*. He knows I've come out here to find you and make the betrothal official. He won't mind if we linger."

A stone sank deep in her stomach, churning rather than settling. She could fight them both. She could, and she would. But it would be an ugly business, and she was none too sure there was any way to win.

A flutter of movement dragged her gaze away from the monster's handsome mask and lit another flurry of panic in her stomach. Little Annie was galloping toward them, through the high grasses, happy oblivion on her face as she called out, "Wena! Mrs. MacPherson has made the cakes you like. Aren't you coming?"

The idea of cake, of any food, made the bile surge up again. But Malcolm's arms loosened as her eight-year-old stepsister loped their way, and Rowena seized the chance to step free of him. Her eyes scanned the space beyond Annie's fine dark head, spotting the child's mother walking at a more sedate pace, Liliás beside her.

No doubt it was Liliás who'd suggested they come fetch her. She must have seen, from Rowena's window, when Malcolm headed her way. Heaven knew Elspeth—Lady Lochaber for the last three years—never had aught but a sneer for Rowena.

Rowena summoned up a smile for her stepsister and bent to catch her in an embrace that felt warmer than anything else ever did. "Of course I'll come, Annie. I didn't realize the time." The wee one had hair the same shade as the Kinnaird's, and the first time Rowena saw her sitting on his knee, the resemblance had been unmistakable—not just his coloring, but his nose, his chin. She was his daughter as sure as Rowena was, though the man Annie thought was her father hadn't died until she was three, and Rowena's mother just a year before that.

In that moment she had been able to imagine what some of her parents' arguments had been about. She had shot her father a look, and another to Elspeth.

The woman had despised her ever since.

Malcolm bent down to put his face on a level with Annie's, his face wreathed in the grin that was such a convincing lie. "A bonny day to you, wee one. I declare, ye get prettier each time I see you."

Annie tucked herself to Rowena's side and scowled at him. "I'm not a wee one anymore, Malcolm Kinnaird, and I'll thank you to remember it. I'm nearly nine."

Barely eight, but who wanted to quibble? Rowena smoothed back one of the dark locks that the wind tore free of Annie's ribbon. "And soon to be as tall as me."

Malcolm reached out, presumably to chuck the girl under the chin, but Rowena pulled her back a step, out of reach.

Thunder rumbled in his eyes as he straightened. "I could do with one of Mrs. MacPherson's cakes myself. We had better head in. We can finish our conversation later, *mo muirín*."

Alone, he meant. He'd ask her father for a few minutes with her, and then he'd shut the door. Back her into a corner. Clamp his hand down over her mouth again and shove her to the stones.

Her fingers dug into her sister's shoulder, but Annie just wrapped an arm around Rowena's waist, making no complaint. The wee one lifted her chin. "I didna say ye were invited, did I?"

The older women had, by now, drawn near, and Elspeth drew in a shocked gasp. "Annys! How dare ye speak so to Malcolm! Ye know well he's always a welcome guest."

By the look on Annie's face, she was about to let loose and kick the monster in the shins. Rowena had done her best to shield the girl from the truth, but the bruises and swollen lip had been impossible to hide, and the little one was too good a spy not to have heard who inflicted them—though she prayed the girl had heard no whisper of *how*.

Rowena steered her a step away before Annie's boldness could get them all in trouble. Thus far her father had shown only fondness for the girl—like he had once done toward Rowena. That wouldn't change on her account. She scooped up her shoes and stockings and then headed for the grass, giving Malcolm wide berth.

She expected a scolding to be upon Elspeth's lips as they drew near—for Rowena's bare feet, if not for Annie's rudeness—but the countess's gaze had latched on to a distant point, her pretty brown brows drawn in. "I had hoped they wouldn't come this year, after the duke's death last autumn. Ach, now the Kinnaird's sure to be scunnered for a week."

Rowena turned with the others to see what had captured her stepmother's attention. But she knew what she would see. The line of fine carriages were pulled by proud horses, and a gleaming red automobile even bounced over the rutted road—one of only a few of those Rowena had ever seen, and no doubt by far

the nicest. Though she couldn't make out details, she knew it would all bear the crest of the Duke of Nottingham. Gaoth Lodge would come alive, then, for a month or more. The duke's group would hunt and fish and invite all the Highland families of any note to dine and dance.

Not the Kinnairds, though. Never them.

Rowena rubbed a finger behind her ear. She could still feel the scar where the stone had bit that first time her father had lost his head with her and sent her reeling when she was ten. Her mother had gotten it worse, though, for daring to call on the duchess the first time they came to the Lodge.

Or, as it were, the first time they came *back*. Until that summer, the Duchess of Nottingham's Lowland parents had come to their second home often enough, but their daughter and her family had not. Apparently Father had known them though. And liked them none too well.

Malcolm grunted and altered his course away from the castle. "Let me know when it passes, eh, Lady Lochaber? No use trying to talk to him before."

"Aye. Though perhaps planning the wedding will distract him this year."

Annie's arm tightened around Rowena's waist. Her voice came at a murmur, barely audible over the wind. "Ye canna marry him, Wena. Ye canna. He hurt you."

Sweet girl. Rowena held her tight to her side and met Lili's blue gaze. "I dinna mean to, Annie. It's just I havena yet worked out how to avoid it."

Lili stepped to Rowena's other side as Malcolm strode to the horse hobbled near the road. "We'll find a way, lass. I promise."

Rowena leaned into the older woman's strength for a moment. But only one. Lili Cowan may be a distant cousin,

but hard times had forced her to a servant's post. She had first been her mother's lady's maid and was now hers. And much as Rowena loved her as a second mother, Liliias could do nothing Rowena herself couldn't.

She couldn't create hope where there was none.

Liliias leaned close. "We'll find one soon," she whispered directly into Rowena's ear, so Annie wouldn't hear. "We must. Lady Lochaber is with child, and the Kinnaird plans to wed you to Malcolm before it's known, fearing otherwise he won't be able to at all. If the babe's a boy . . ."

A shudder stole through Rowena. If her stepmother produced the long-awaited son, then Rowena would no longer be the heiress of Lochaber. And Malcolm's "love" for her would likely go the way of mist in the summer.

Perhaps hope existed after all. "Then if we can but put him off—or tell Malcolm."

"Maybe." Though the squeeze of Liliias's arm around Rowena's shoulder carried a warning. "But if you do that, yer father will be as angry as Malcolm is like to be—and if . . . if ye're in the same way . . ."

Nothing but pure determination kept Rowena on her feet. Other young ladies who found themselves so compromised would be sent away on tour, where they could deliver the child in anonymity and into the hands of a family who would raise it in secret.

But the Kinnaird would never do that. No, if she refused to wed Malcolm while carrying his child, her father would likely give her beating enough to guarantee a miscarriage. Quite possibly to kill her too, now that he had another heir on the way.

She ran a hand down Annie's arm to chafe some warmth into it and felt the strangest pang in her middle.

She didn't want to die. Much as it felt she had nothing to live for, there it was. She wanted a chance to make a life. To forge a path for herself.

But if the courses already a day late never came, if she were with child . . . She squeezed her eyes shut against a stinging gust of wind and sucked in a breath. If the Lord still heard her prayers, she would pray against such a thing. But what point was there to that? He had left her long ago. He must have, for her to have ended up here, like this. Hated by her father, violated by the man she had thought loved her.

Perhaps this was just fitting. The hated child bearing a hated child. Another link in the chain. A perpetuation of the cycle.

No! I willna. A sob nearly burst its way out of her throat. She subdued all but a gasp that had her little sister looking up at her with question in her eyes, and then she managed a tight smile that she doubted would convince her all was well.

But she wouldn't hate the bairn if she had one—she *wouldn't*. She knew how it felt to live knowing you were detested for who you were born to. Father despised her because she was Mother's daughter—how could she in turn hate a child for being Malcolm's? It was no fault of the babe's, if a babe there was.

No. If she was with child, then . . . then it meant she had some innocence inside her, despite being stripped of her own. And she would love it. She would. Despite everything, she would—she would be a better parent than either of hers had been.

“Annys! Come here.”

With a sigh older than her eight years, Annie gave Rowena's waist one last squeeze and joined her mother.

Rowena turned to Lilias. “Maybe I should run away. I could go to Gasta Hall.”

“It's the first place he'd look, given how ye once loved the place, before he let it go to rot.” Lilias shook her head, looking

back toward Gaoth Lodge, where the last of the duke's procession was disappearing from sight.

Rowena's shoulders slumped. Two homes—the one he had inherited from his mother, and the castle that came from the Kinnairds—and neither open to her. Not if she disobeyed her father. "I've my mother's people in America."

"Finding them could be a task, since the Kinnaird cut off all communication." Liliás sighed, her focus still locked on the Lodge. "Nay, lass. Ye need a more immediate means of escape."

Then why was she looking that direction? Rowena folded her arms over the shoes she had pressed to her middle. That summer a decade past, when Father had been in London for the Sessions and the duke's carriages had first rolled up the road alongside those belonging to the Brice family, she had made a friend. She and Lady Ella, two years her junior, had gotten on from the first and had played together most every day.

But Ella would be a society lady now, no doubt with a dozen suitors and the fanciest gowns and that way of walking and talking that Rowena hadn't mastered in her two years at school in Edinburgh. Ella would now be like all the other girls she'd once called friends—quick to laugh at her and declare her naught but the bumpkin daughter of a barbarian clinging to an age long dead.

Yet . . . yet if she could somehow renew the acquaintance. If she could somehow convince Ella to invite her south, down to England. If her father for some reason let her go. Things would surely look different away from here. Away from her father and Malcolm, from the ghosts of Loch Morar. Maybe in the south of England she could seize a stray wisp of freedom.

But it would take a true miracle to get her there—and the ghosts of Loch Morar were fonder of giving curses than blessings.