



LADIES OF
THE MANOR



LADY
UNRIVALED

ROSEANNA M. WHITE



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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 David, the real-life Cayton to my Ella.
You are strong where I am weak,
bold where I am quiet,
realistic where I'm a dreamer,
and yet you dream alongside me every day.
I'm so glad we get to travel this crazy life side by side.

CHARACTER LIST



Ella's Family

- Lady Ella Myerston** Sister of the Duke of Nottingham. Called Lady Ella.
- Charlotte, the (Dowager) Duchess of Nottingham** Ella's mother. Called Duchess or Duchess of Nottingham by peers, Your Grace by the public, Charlotte by friends.
- Duke and Duchess of Nottingham** Ella's older brother and his wife, Brice and Rowena from *The Reluctant Duchess*. Called Your Grace by commoners, Duke and Duchess of Nottingham by peers, Brice and Rowena by close friends and family.

Cayton's Family

- James Azerly** The Earl of Cayton. Called Cayton or Lord Cayton almost exclusively.
- Susan, the (Dowager) Countess of Cayton** Cayton's mother. Called Susan or Lady Cayton.
- Lady Adelaide Azerly** Cayton's infant daughter, called Addie.
- The Countess of Cayton** Cayton's deceased wife, Addie's mother. Formerly Miss Adelaide Rosten.
- Duke and Duchess of Stafford** Brook and Justin from *The Lost Heiress*. Justin is Cayton's first cousin. They have one son, William, the Marquess of Abingdon, who is also called Bing.

Other Characters

- Kira Belova** A ballerina in the Ballet Russe (Paris) until a recent knee injury; mistress of Andrei Varennikov. Hired as Lady Pratt's lady's maid, using name Sophie Lareau.
- Andrei Varennikov** Wealthy Russian mogul living in Paris.
- Catherine, Lady Pratt** Widowed viscountess. Called Lady Pratt by most, Catherine or Kitty by friends. Son, Viscount (Byron) Pratt, died as infant.
- Lord Rushworth** Catherine's brother, given name of Crispin. Called Lord Rushworth, Rushworth, or Rush.
- The Earl of Whitby** Brook's father, called Lord Whitby, Whitby, or Whit.
- Dorsey** Lord Rushworth's valet.
- Evans** Cayton's valet; Tabby's brother.
- Tabby** Addie's nursemaid; Evans's sister.
- Mrs. Higgins** Housekeeper at Anlic Manor.
- Felicity** Mrs. Higgins's niece, maid at Anlic, best friend and childhood companion of Adelaide, the Countess of Cayton.
- Lady Melissa Harrington** Brook's cousin; former romantic interest of Cayton.

Now hope does not disappoint,
because the love of God has been poured out
in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

—Romans 5:5 NKJV

One



THE COTSWOLDS, RALIN CASTLE
MARCH 1913

Lady Ella Myerston knew more than everyone thought she did—and more than they thought she should. She pressed her back to the warm stones, sliding silently behind an evergreen hedge to avoid a servant. Breath held, she waited for him to pass before daring to take another step.

Silence. Silence was absolutely essential if she intended to go unnoticed. One foot carefully down, and then another. Barely breathing. Reaching out inch by inch until her hand closed around the warm metal latch of the door. *Victory!*

She pulled open the heavy wooden slab and stole inside. “Drat.” Not the room she’d expected—this door brought her nowhere *near* the library that had been her aim.

Well, she was accustomed to such things. Creeping forward along the hall on silent feet, she reviewed her plan of attack. Get into the library. Find the book she needed. Escape back to her chamber before her friends and hosts, the Duke and Duchess of Stafford, were any the wiser. They didn’t need to know that she knew about the diamonds—much less that she intended to

intervene before the things could bring more harm to her brother and his expectant wife. If the duke and duchess realized her intent, they'd probably ship her straight back to Midwynd Hall.

Not acceptable. The rest of them had already paid a steep enough price. They needed a reprieve, and if Ella couldn't give it to them openly, she would resort to the underhanded.

A hushed giggle reached her ears, propelling her into the shadowed space behind a suit of armor that looked properly medieval. Not the best hiding place, but the two housemaids who scurried along the corridor didn't notice her. Their heads were bent together, their giggles pulling a grin onto Ella's lips too. Probably whispering about some handsome footman or groom. Were she at Midwynd, where she knew all the maids and footmen, she might have joined them.

Were she not about covert business.

Once their footsteps had faded, she disentangled herself from the knight's shadow and resumed her creeping, making it to the library unhindered. A bit anticlimactic, but she would chalk it up as a job well done and get on with it.

The Stafford library was vast and thorough. Intimidatingly so. She'd known it was big, of course. She'd just forgotten *how* big.

Well, there was nothing for it but to dive in and pray no one interrupted her—or noticed her absence from her borrowed bedchamber upstairs. Nothing for it, that is, except for the catalog cabinet nestled in the corner, praise be to the Lord. Ella scurried over to it and flipped through the neatly typed cards in the D drawer.

Diamonds. Diamonds. Surely they had books on diamonds. Surely if anyone in this world had books on diamonds, it would be . . . “Aha!” Ella did a little jig . . . and clamped a hand over her mouth when her outburst echoed back to her.

Some spy.

But no one came bursting through the carved doors, so she took the direction from the card, shut the drawer, and headed to the appropriate section of shelves. One twelve-foot climb up a ladder later and she had it in her hands. The book she hoped would fill in a few of the blanks that remained after her previous attempts. It would certainly tell her about the rarity and worth of red diamonds. It would tell her where they originated. It would tell her all the scientific, factual data she could ever want.

What it wouldn't tell her, she knew, was about the Fire Eyes specifically, and how they had ended up first with Brook and then with Ella's brother, Brice. It wouldn't tell her why Brice and Rowena had fought over them so bitterly in the first months of their marriage. It wouldn't tell her about the curse her sister-in-law had feared would rip apart their world.

And their world had been ripped.

Maybe it was the curse, or maybe it was just the people who so greedily searched for the gems her brother had stashed somewhere or another. Ella didn't much care which was at fault. She just wanted to keep the diamonds from doing any more damage to the people she loved best in the world.

"Ella? I thought you were resting before our ride."

Ella shrieked, spun, barely thinking to clutch the book and its incriminating title to her chest.

Some spy indeed.

Brook, Duchess of Stafford, stood just inside the door. Blond hair coiffed, riding habit impeccable, amusement in her gaze. "*Désolée*. I didn't mean to startle you."

At least Ella had the wherewithal to laugh at herself. It would have looked beyond strange to her friend if she hadn't. "I *was* going to rest. But a book makes for the better resting, you know."

Brook flashed a grin right back. "That it does. What have

you selected? Did you find the latest Sherlock Holmes novel I told you about?”

“Oh.” Ella waved a hand and slid the book around to her back, praying it looked merely dismissive. She headed for the doorway, ready to edge her way around the duchess standing sentinel in it. “No, not yet. You’ve so many books in here, I thought I’d be adventurous.”

“You always find a way to be.” Brook’s brows lifted. “Though I can’t think what might be in these esteemed shelves that would require hiding it behind your back. What have you? Some cautionary tale your mother had forbidden you to read?”

“No, nothing like that.” Ella’s laugh wasn’t forced, exactly—though it may have been a bit more nervous than she wanted it to be.

“Then what?” Brook reached out, fingers wiggling in an unspoken demand. As if Ella were the duchess’s small son, to just hand over whatever forbidden object she had discovered. Not that little Lord Abingdon ever did either, come to think of it.

Ella lifted her chin. “You can have it when I’m through, but you’ll not be stealing my reading material from me again, thank you very much. Don’t think I’ve forgotten how my copy of *The Lost World* mysteriously disappeared at Midwynd while you were visiting.”

Brook laughed—and lunged for her. “Desperate times. *Your* library is not so well stocked. Come, Ella. Show me!”

“Never!” Knowing Brook would just think it a game—praying so—Ella squealed a laugh of her own and made a break for it, meaning to sidestep her nosy hostess and make for the door.

She should have known Brook would be too quick. She spent her days chasing an errant toddler, after all, despite having a team of servants to do it for her. And despite one last shriek

of protest on Ella's part, the duchess pried the book from her hands.

Ella sighed and turned to face her friend, knowing well what was coming.

Brook was never one to disappoint. The good humor on her face changed in a flash to temper. "*Diamonds.*" She lifted narrowed eyes to Ella. "Do tell me you're just plotting what kind of engagement ring you'd like when you finally decide on a suitor."

As if any of those stuffy men in London—who saw her only as a connection to her brother, the Duke of Nottingham—would ever get so far with her as to present a ring. But Ella smiled. "You're always so astute."

Brook blustered out a growl and raised the book in the air as if in testimony to Ella's insanity. "You know. You know about the Fire Eyes, and your brother is going to kill me for getting you involved in all this, and I'm going to kill *him* for taking them to begin with after I *begged* him to leave the trouble to me and Justin, and . . ."

From there, the rant moved into Monegasque. Had it been French, Ella would have had at least a hope of following, but not Monegasque. She listened for a moment . . . and then tried to snatch at the book Brook wielded like a sword. That just propelled her friend back into English. "You don't understand, Ella! This is not some . . . some adventure story. It is *real*, and it is deadly, and I won't have you involved!"

Ella stiffened, her chin coming up. "I know perfectly well how real it is, and how deadly. You almost died over those gems. My *brother* almost died over them, and his wife."

Brook visibly drew her emotions back in and took a deep breath. "It was not the diamonds that nearly killed Brice and Rowena."

"No." Ella's nostrils flared as that ache, still fresh, consumed

her. “It was *my* oldest friend who did it. My oldest friend, with whom I’d spent every day last autumn—and I didn’t see it. I didn’t see what Stella had become.”

What else hadn’t she seen—*didn’t* she see?

“Ella.” Brook slid closer and rested her long, tapered fingers on Ella’s wrist. “You can’t blame yourself for that. No one saw it.”

No excuse—but there was nothing she could do about the past. Nothing except determine to make the future something different. To pay attention. To do whatever she must to protect her family. “It may have been Stella Abbott who pulled that trigger six months ago—but it was the Rushworths who used her because they wanted the diamonds. The Rushworths who used Rowena. The Rushworths who sent that monstrous Highland laird after her.”

“And the Rushworths who have retreated altogether now.” The fingers squeezed on her wrist. “They are not even in the country. You needn’t worry.”

Worry was a waste of time, true. But consideration . . . Consideration wasn’t to be neglected. “They will be back—you know it as well as I. And when they come . . .”

Ella shook her head and pulled away. “Brice took the diamonds from you because you were just married, starting a family. Now *he* is the one who will be a father within a few weeks. I’ll not let him pay the price the Fire Eyes seem to demand. I won’t let him or Rowena or their child suffer, not when there just *may* be something I can do to stop it all.”

Brook turned back toward the shelf and the ladder Ella had just climbed a few minutes prior. No need for *her* to check her catalog to know where it belonged. “There is nothing you can do. There is nothing anyone can do—not now.”

“But there is! We can *learn*, Brook. You, of all people, should

know that. We can learn more about the Fire Eyes, about this curse, about why the Rushworths want them and—”

“Is that why you invited yourself to Ralin?” Temper sparked again as Brook shoved the book back into place with a *thud*. “Not to visit me, not to give your brother and his wife some time alone before the baby comes—but to snoop around my library?”

Ella tried on a cheeky grin. “Well, if there’s any library in the world that could help me, it’s yours. You know it’s true.”

There—a breath of laughter as Brook gained the ground again. “Let it drop, Ella. I beg of you. Let’s just enjoy your time here and forget all about the Fire Eyes. Find your adventure somewhere else, go and get lost in the wood. Imagine a few good stories about the faeries in the hills. Just not the Fire Eyes. *S’il te plait*.”

Everyone in her world thought they had to protect her—that she had to be coddled, that she hadn’t the stuff it required to stand up and fight for what she loved. No one ever listened to her when she tried to speak hope into life—they just assumed her naïve.

Well, she wasn’t. Perhaps her judgment had proven faulty in the past, but not anymore. And she would prove it. With or without their help.

“Now.” Brook drew near and wove her arm around Ella’s. “If you’re not going to rest, how about that ride?”

Her hostess certainly wasn’t going to leave her alone in the library just now, so why not? Ella produced a mischievous smile and let Brook turn her toward the door. “Can I ride Oscuro?”

Her friend glared, but with a hint of amusement back in the corners of her mouth. “It isn’t *my* decision, *mon amie*. It is he who will not allow it. But you can take his sister. Tempesta is nearly as quick.”

“Ha!” The stallion was indeed finicky about who he would let near. So far as she knew only Brook, Stafford, Brook’s father, and one jockey had ever managed to keep their seat in his saddle. She would, frankly, prefer Tempesta, but appearances must be upheld—so she put a bounce in her step as she headed for the library’s door. She would come back tonight, when everyone else was asleep.

“There is a reason *she* isn’t the one you take to the races, Brook, and don’t think for a moment I’m fooled by your blaming it all on the horse. I am a natural, you know. Utterly irresistible to any living creature. Animals and children all flock to me.” She charged through the doorway, Brook’s chuckle already following her. “And the gentlemen! We cannot overlook how they all fall—”

“Whoa!” The warning, deep and urgent, came too late.

Ella squealed like a ninny as she plowed directly into a solid, nicely clad chest and nearly tumbled backward from the impact—likely would have fallen had strong hands not caught her about the waist. She looked up, expecting to find Brook’s husband, Stafford, or perhaps Brook’s father, Lord Whitby, who was also visiting. Embarrassing, but they would have laughed it off—and teased her about the claim she’d been in the midst of making regarding how all the gentlemen fell at her feet.

But she looked up into deep green eyes, not blue or brown. A face somewhat familiar, given its resemblance to Stafford’s, but capped with warm brown hair instead of blond or silver-streaked raven.

Lord Cayton, it must be. Stafford’s cousin. And his scowl was exactly like the duke’s.

Funny though . . . Stafford had never made her stomach knot up like it did just now, nor made heat surge when he happened to touch her. Not like it did when Lord Cayton’s hands slid

from her back to the sides of her waist, testing her balance before releasing her.

Would she be too much a ninny if she swooned a bit, just to force him to hold on a few seconds longer?

Probably. So she forced herself to straighten her spine and say, “Pardon me.” At least she tried to say it, though her voice sounded odd—all fluttering and uncertain—to her own ears.

Lord Cayton just stared at her, the scowl deepening, and let her go.

“Hello, Cayton.” Brook—probably in the doorway, given the nearness of her voice—sounded only slightly amused. “Looking for Justin, or are you here only to bowl over my friend?”

“Your friend.” His voice was exactly what a man’s voice should be. Rich and deep, but not *too* deep. A lovely, honeyed baritone—if tinged with a rather baffling accusation. “I thought I knew all your friends. I don’t believe I’ve met this one.”

Ella may have been irritated at being spoken of as if she weren’t present, had his gaze not remained latched so unwaveringly upon her face. She could only hope the thundering of her heart wasn’t audible. Or visible. Were this one of the romantic tales she so loved, birds would start singing in chorus, Brook would vanish, and Lord Cayton would declare his instant, undying love.

After, of course, he stopped frowning at her.

Brook edged into Ella’s periphery. She, too, was frowning. “Of course you have. Haven’t you? This is Nottingham’s sister. Lady Ella Myerston.”

“Lady Ella.” This was usually where the fawning began, where eyes lit with longing—not for her, but for her associations and dowry.

Not Cayton. His eyes flashed some message she couldn’t decipher as he took a giant step back. He sketched a quick,

abbreviated bow and focused his gaze on the space over her shoulder. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, my lady. Forgive me for bowling you over.”

“I think we all know it was my fault. But I shall graciously forgive you, if you’re so determined to accept the blame.” Her smile felt a little off, a little shaky. He certainly wasn’t behaving like most men. But then, why should he? Lord Cayton was no stranger to dukes—he was grandson to the late Duke of Stafford, after all. She searched her mind for what else she knew about him.

Those knots in her stomach turned heavy. He was the one who had been courting Brook’s cousin, Lady Melissa, only to toss her over for a rich, sickly heiress two years ago. His wife had died the very weekend Brice and Rowena wed, if she recalled aright, after giving birth prematurely to a daughter.

Not her type of gentleman. Not at *all* her type of gentleman, if he cared more for shoring up his bank accounts than for true love.

And, for that matter, if his true love were another woman.

Which was just as well. It would be difficult enough to achieve her purpose here with Brook set against it—she hardly needed the distraction of possible romance. Her galloping heart would just have to calm itself and her logic get a rein on her imagination. Handsome as he may be, Lord Cayton was obviously not the man she’d been awaiting for her fairy-tale romance.

Though when his gaze landed on her again, his frown smoothing out, that logic nearly fled. “Gracious of you indeed, my lady.” He edged backward another step, turning his face toward Brook. “I thought Stafford would be in the library this time of day.”

“A report just arrived from his holdings in Africa—he’s looking it over in his study in the tower.”

“Ah. Then I shall . . .” Taking another step backward, he cleared his throat. And darted another vaguely accusatory look Ella’s way. Which was so baffling she couldn’t help but find it fascinating. What could he possibly have against her when they’d never even met? “Good day, Duchess. My lady.”

“Cayton, wait.” Brook took a step after him and with a hand on his arm halted his flight—he had already spun and looked ready to dash down the hallway at full speed. “You’re coming on Friday, aren’t you?”

Friday—the Staffords were hosting their annual Cotswolds Ball. Ella had known about it before she invited herself for a visit. To hear Brook tell it, every family of note in the entire region came, some from three counties away.

Cayton sighed. “Brook . . .”

“You need to get out once in a while, James.”

Ella frowned at the use of his given name. True, Brook used them more than most, but Ella had never heard her do so in reference to this cousin of Stafford’s whom she didn’t much care for. She obviously had some motive as clandestine as Ella’s.

Now the duchess tried on a persuasive smile. “Bring Addie with you, and plan on staying the night. She and Abingdon can play. You know how they love seeing each other.”

“But—”

“You haven’t missed the Cotswolds Ball in a decade—the neighborhood needs to see you. They all miss Adelaide. They need to speak to you of her. Of Addie.”

His shoulders went a bit more rigid with each word she spoke. “Do you never tire of bullying me?”

To Ella’s eye, Brook’s grin looked a bit forced. “*Jamais*. And your only recourse is to give in. I’ll not relent.”

Mumbling something about the likelihood of being hunted

down in one's own home, Cayton jerked his head in a nod and strode away.

Ella sidled next to Brook, watching him until he turned a corner. She couldn't quite hold back the hum of appreciation. "I think the only time I've seen him was a glimpse across the lawn at the house party your father hosted, before I was out." She had badgered her parents for a solid week to convince them to let her attend with Brice, only to have the party cut short the day they arrived by the death of Cayton and Stafford's grandfather. "I didn't realize what a handsome man he is."

Brook tilted her head to the side, but her face remained stony. "He does bear a certain resemblance to my husband, I admit." With a blustery sigh, she looped her arm through Ella's and led her toward the stairs at the opposite end of the hall. "You are the sister of a duke, Ella, and pretty as a picture. You can have any gentleman you want. Don't set your sights on that one. For my sake, I beg you. I don't think I can watch him break the heart of another of my dearest friends without taking drastic measures, and I would hate to leave poor little Addie an orphan."

And Brice accused *Ella* of being dramatic. "Lady Melissa, wasn't it?"

"*Oui*. He courted her for nearly a year, enticed her to lie to her mother and meet him in Eden Dale when she was visiting us at Whitby Park, made all manner of promises, declared his love, and then . . ." She snapped her fingers, and the muscle in her jaw pulsed from where she clenched her teeth. "Just like that, he marries another. Without even the decency to tell Melissa before it was announced in the papers. Without the decency to face her since, for that matter, though he claims to be a new man. Well." She lifted her chin, the set of her mouth going smug. "That's about to change."

Alarm beat a rapid pulse in Ella's chest. She pulled Brook to

a halt at the base of the stairs that led to the guest room where her riding habit waited. “What are you planning?”

When Brook grinned in that particular way, trouble always followed. “Did I not mention that my cousin is due to join us tomorrow? I keep forgetting to bring it up, it seems. . . .”

“Brook.” Admonition—and perhaps a dose of horror—saturated Ella’s tone. She leaned close so any passing servants wouldn’t hear her words. “Have you no compassion whatsoever? You’re going to sic your cousin on him without so much as warning him to brace himself? Are you mad? She’s *terrifying*.”

Brook—who, granted, could make Melissa look tame in comparison—merely laughed. “That’s exactly what your brother said when she forced him to take her to Hyde Park the day she discovered Cayton was engaged.”

Though Cayton was likely halfway up the tower stairs by now, Ella looked over her shoulder. “He probably has good reason for not wanting to face her—these days, I mean. Not that I intend to make excuses for how he treated her.”

“Ella, I know you always want to see the best in everyone, but trust me—it’s high time those two clear the air. They will either end up engaged before the night is out or part amicably. Either way, an improvement over the current situation.”

Engaged by the end of the week—was that what Brook’s cousin would be hoping for? Recalling those deep green eyes, the way his hair fell so perfectly over his forehead, Ella had to think it was. She knew for a fact that Lady Melissa Harrington had been collecting proposals for the last two seasons, turning them all down—and this must be why. Because she still loved Cayton, and now that his wife had passed away . . .

Oh, drat it all. For just a moment there she had thought . . .

Brook and Justin had found their love story while dealing with the Fire Eyes nonsense. Brice and Rowena too. For one

instant, with his hands on her waist, she had imagined the same for herself. Love and adventure, hand in hand.

But no. Life didn't work that way, and fleeting impressions certainly couldn't be trusted. That ache pulsing, Ella shook it all away. Even long-standing impressions couldn't be trusted. If she hadn't been able to gauge the nature of her oldest friend correctly, she certainly wouldn't assume she saw anything but good looks in a man she'd known all of a blink.

She'd do better to focus on diamonds.