
GULF COAST CHRONICLES • BOOK 3

THE
Magnolia Duchess

A NOVEL

BETH WHITE


Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Beth White, *The Magnolia Duchess*
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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: White, Beth, 1957– author.

Title: The magnolia duchess : a novel / Beth White.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group,
[2016] | Series: Gulf Coast chronicles ; book 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2015045024 | ISBN 9780800721992 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Man-woman relationships—Fiction. | United States—History—
War of 1812—Fiction. | Mobile (Ala.)—History—Fiction. | GSAFD: Christian
fiction. | Love stories. | Historical fiction. g

Classification: LCC PS3623.H5723 M34 2016 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015045024>

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The author is represented by MacGregor Literary, Inc.

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Donna Sularin,
my Betsy-Tacy friend
who wrote stories with me before I knew I could,
and who shared her bountiful library
of Nancy Drew and Trixie Belden books.
My love and admiration know no bounds.

1

AUGUST 13, 1814

MOBILE POINT

She could set fire to the letter in her pocket and it would still be true.

Smearing away tears with the heel of her hand, Fiona slid down from her buckskin mare, Bonnie, and landed barefoot in the sand. She led the horse to the water's edge and splashed along beside her, knee-deep in waves chugging straight up from the Gulf of Mexico. At home, on the bay side of the isthmus, the beach was quieter and gentler, but here on the gulf side the wind tore at her hair and the salt mist stung her eyes. Perfect.

Her brother was on a British prison ship lurking off the coast of North Carolina.

The words from that terrible piece of paper floated like sunspots in front of her eyes. Her twin, the other half of herself, wasn't coming home this time. Sullivan had been at sea since he'd turned fourteen, and in six years had worked his way up to lieutenant in the new American maritime service. His letters

had been full of adventure and optimism, and twice he'd managed a few weeks' leave between assignments.

But this . . . this was so final.

She knew what the British did to prisoners of war. Grandpère Antoine's stories of Revolutionary War days, when he'd been held in the guardhouse at Fort Charlotte, were burned in her brain. Short rations, rancid water, little sleep. Beatings.

She shuddered. Their older brother Léon said a prisoner exchange might be arranged. But who would do that for an insignificant young lieutenant from the backwaters of West Florida?

There had to be a way. Every day since Sullivan left home, she'd prayed for his safety, and God had protected him so far.

There *must* be a way.

She threw her arms around Bonnie's damp neck, pressed her face into the warm hide, and let the tears come. *Please, God, don't take my brother.*

Bonnie blew out a breath and stood patiently, while the waves rolled in, rocking Fiona, wetting her dress from the knees down. Eyes closed, she let her thoughts drift to long-gone, lazy summer days when she and Sullivan had wandered Navy Cove beach, crab buckets banging against their legs and never a care in the world. Then came the year she went to England with Aunt Lyse and Uncle Rafa, leaving Sullivan behind. By the time she returned, he'd become a sea-crazy young man, determined to travel the world on anybody's ship that would take him.

With a sigh, she looked up at the steely sky. What was done couldn't be undone, even by prayer.

The wind picked up, a gust that nearly knocked her off her feet, so she took up the reins once more. Grabbing Bonnie's mane, she hiked up her sodden skirts and swung astride the horse's bare back. Her impulsive ride to the beach was going

to make her late getting supper together. Yesterday's storm had put the men behind at the shipyard. They'd be working until dark tonight and would come home hungry as bears.

She'd ridden a ways down the beach, lost in thought, when Bonnie suddenly shied and stopped. Absently Fiona kicked her in the ribs. Bonnie shook her head and refused to move.

"What's the matter, girl?" Fiona leaned to the side. Bonnie had almost stepped on a pile of seaweed all but covered with wet sand.

Wait, not seaweed. Material. Clothing. A body. A roll of surf washed up, stirred the folds of cloth, but the body did not move. Dead?

Oh, please not dead.

She slid down, throwing the reins to keep Bonnie in check. The body was facedown and hatless. A young man, judging by the thick, wet dark hair. Kneeling, she flipped him over just as another wave crashed in, sousing her. Coughing, shivering, she struggled to her feet and grabbed the man's arms to drag him farther up onto the beach. He was tall and muscular, unbelievably heavy, inert as a sack of potatoes, and the tide was rolling in fast, but she managed to get him out of the reach of the waves. Bonnie wandered after her, snuffling in irritation.

"I know," she panted. "This wasn't in my plan either." Léon was going to grumble about supper being late.

She let go of the young man's arms and dropped to her knees, then put her ear to the wet wool covering his chest, praying for a rise and fall of breath. Maybe . . . maybe there was a faint thud under her cheek.

Tugging and shoving, she got him turned over, facedown again, and pressed the heels of her hands against his back. Push, push, push, wait. He didn't move. She tried again.

He seemed to be dead.

She sat there with her hands flat against the broad back. What would her brothers have done? She'd heard them talk about breathing into the mouths of men pulled from the sea. Should she try that?

All but blinded by tears, she hauled the poor man onto his back and pushed his hair back from his face to look at him.

She stifled a scream. "Charlie!" Grabbing his face in shaking hands, she tried to make sense of what made no sense. Charlie Kincaid would be across an ocean, in England, not washed up on a beach in West Florida. "Charlie, Charlie, don't be dead! Father in heaven, don't let him be dead!"

Not knowing what else to do, she put her mouth to his and breathed, willing him to come to life. Again she blew air into his lungs. When nothing happened, she sat up panting, searching the familiar but man-grown face. The same, but not the same, as the boy she had known nine years ago. His face had lengthened with slashing angles of brow, cheekbone, and jaw, and he'd grown into the commanding nose. But there were the same ridiculously long, dark eyelashes and a mouth made for smiling and teasing a bookish, horse-crazy little girl.

"Wake up, Charlie," she muttered, "or I'm going to tell your grandfather you're ditching your lessons again."

She bent to seal his lips with hers again, but his chest lurched under her hands. He gave a strangled cough, and water bubbled from his mouth. Relieved, terrified, Fiona scrambled to shove at his shoulder and back until she had him half turned. He continued to cough, weakly at first, then with hoarse, agonized gasps. Fiona pounded his back with all her strength, helping him rid his lungs of the suffocating seawater. "Don't die, don't die, don't die."

Finally she heard him whisper something.

She paused to bend close to his lips. "What?"

“Sto . . .” He wheezed.

“What?”

“I said st . . . stop hitting me,” he choked out. “Headache.”

Abruptly she straightened. “You’re alive! Oh, thank God, you’re alive!”

Charlie winced. “Yes, but would you mind . . . lowering the volume?” He opened his eyes, those familiar, piercing cerulean eyes that she saw in her dreams.

Well, one was blue, and the other had that odd hazel-brown splotch. Perfect, Charlie was not. “It’s so good to see you.”

“Er . . . you too.” He coughed. “Do I know you?”

“You don’t remember me?”

He stared at her, his face sunburnt, sand-encrusted, and bearing a deep, bloody gash over his left eyebrow. But of course he was Charlie. She didn’t know anybody else who had those oddly colored eyes. No wonder he didn’t recognize her, though, for nine years had made a significant difference in her appearance.

As if following her thoughts, Charlie’s gaze traveled downward from her face, and one eyebrow rose with that droll quirk she’d loved so much. “I think I’d remember you if we’d met before.”

Suddenly aware that she all but sat on him, Fiona jumped to her feet. “Oh, you! You haven’t changed one bit—except it used to be Maddy you were drooling over.”

“Maddy who? If there’s another one as pretty as you, I’ve landed in heaven.” He got an elbow underneath him and levered himself to a semi-sitting position. “What’s your name?”

She stared at him in chagrin. “You really don’t remember?”

“Right now I barely know my own name.” He looked around irritably. “If I haven’t broken down the pearly gates, where are we? Did I fall off my horse?”

Fiona looked around and found Bonnie ambling closer,

probably looking for food. “This is *my* horse, Bonnie. You seem to have washed in from the Gulf. There was a storm last night.” She paused. She’d heard of people losing their memory after a head wound. “You had to have been on a ship.” But where was it? Frustrated, she scanned the empty horizon. There wasn’t a hunk of wood or other detritus anywhere to indicate the type of vessel he’d arrived on. She shifted her gaze to the east, where an Indian trail ran toward Perdido Pass and on to Pensacola. Could he have come overland and then gotten injured and washed into the Gulf during the storm?

Clearly no more enlightened than she, Charlie shut his eyes and lay back as if too exhausted to even look at her any longer.

Now what was she going to do? She wasn’t strong enough to lift him onto the horse, and she couldn’t drag him back home to Navy Cove by herself.

“I could go get Léon,” she said doubtfully.

“So there’s a Maddy and a Léon, and a horse named Bonnie. I’ll just call you Duchess.”

She whirled to look at him, and found one eye open—the solid blue one—and his lips curled in a smile. “Then you *do* remember me!” As the only girl in a family full of boys, she’d been called “Duchess” since she was just a little thing.

“I don’t think so.” The smile faded. “That isn’t really your name, is it?”

“Of course not. But I told you about it the night we blew up the—never mind.” Drowning in memory and anxiety and confusion, she dragged in a breath. “I’m Fiona Lanier. My cousin Maddy and my aunt and uncle all stayed at your grandfather’s estate the summer I was eleven years old.”

“If I hadn’t gotten brained and nearly drowned, I’m sure I would remember you,” Charlie said gently. “But don’t you think we ought to get off the beach? Because, and I hate to

mention it, I think the tide is going to carry us back out to sea before very long.”

“Oh!” With a start Fiona realized he was right. The surf had crawled inland until the waves had almost reached Charlie’s feet.

He was on his elbow again, clearly intending to stand up. She shrieked. “No! You’ll faint!”

But he rolled to his knees. “I’ll be fine,” he managed, panting. “Do you have a saddle for that horse?”

“Of course I do, but it’s at home. I just came out for a quick ride on the beach.” Suddenly she remembered the letter. How could she have forgotten Sullivan? She wrung her hands. Now she had an injured British aristocrat to care for, and Léon was going to be mad as a wet hen.

“All right, well, bareback it’ll be then.” Charlie was on his feet, swaying like a man coming off a five-day bender. He lurched at Bonnie, who quite understandably pranced away from him. Charlie landed on his rear and began to curse in Spanish.

Laughing in spite of their predicament, Fiona grabbed Bonnie’s reins. “Shhh, it’s okay, girl. He looks like a lunatic, but he can’t hurt you.”

Charlie snarled and began again in French.

She let him run down, then said, “I’m sorry she hurt your feelings, but she doesn’t like to be mounted from the right.” She reached down a hand. “If you can stand again, I’ll give you a leg up.”

“She didn’t hurt my *feelings*, it’s my *bum* that aches.” But he laughed and grasped her wrist, coming to his feet with surprising agility. She let him regain his balance with a hand on her shoulder. He was so tall that the top of her head barely reached his lips. She looked up at him, trying to find the boy she’d known in this mysterious stranger.

He stared back at her, his expression just as muddled as she felt. “I *do* know you, somehow,” he muttered. “I just can’t remember . . . You said my name is Charlie, and that’s right. You mentioned my grandfather. Where is he? Did he bring me here?”

“No, he’s—” Did he know he was English? Did he know there was a war between their two countries? “I don’t know how you got here. This is Mobile Point, the isthmus that separates Mobile Bay from the Gulf of Mexico. I live about two miles across on the bay side, at Navy Cove.”

Charlie squeezed her shoulder in friendly fashion. “All right, then, duchess of Navy Cove, if you’d be so kind as to cup your hands, I’ll endeavor to boost myself onto your trusty steed. Then I’ll swing you up, and we’ll away.” He grimaced. “We’d do it the other way ’round, except I fear I’m not exactly in fine fettle at the moment.”

The deed was accomplished with more comedic effect than grace, but in a few moments Fiona grasped Charlie’s extended hand and let him pull her up behind him onto Bonnie’s back. She put her arms around his waist and took the reins, clicking her tongue to give Bonnie leave to walk.

She had ridden astride behind her brothers all her life, but this . . . clutching Charlie-the-stranger round the waist just to stay on, her shins bare and feet dangling, was another kettle of fish entirely. Not only was it awkward and uncomfortable, but she had enough sense to know that it was highly improper. Mama would not have approved. Maddy would definitely not approve. Léon would likely challenge Charlie to pistols at dawn.

None of them must ever know. She and Charlie would enter the barn from the back, put the horse away, and hope nobody saw them. She could pretend Charlie had walked all the way from New Orleans. Or something.

There had to be some way to explain his presence, his injury, his obvious Englishness.

Oh, dear Lord, what was she going to do?



By the time they rode the scant mile across the sandy, jungle-like spit of land, Charlie felt as if an army of Goths had marched around in his head, leaving death, decay, and destruction in its wake. No wonder he couldn't remember this beautiful girl named Fiona, much less her cousin Maddy or her brother Léon. She had rattled on about her family behind his shoulder, as if silence terrified her.

When they at last reached the edge of the woods, where three more horses grazed in a grassy field outside a large, well-kept barn, Fiona clutched Charlie's coat. "Stop! I don't want my brother to see you."

"Why?"

"Because . . . because he doesn't like the British."

"Why not?"

"It's a long story."

"Are we in a hurry?" He hoped not. In spite of the headache, he was rather enjoying the feel of her slim form pressed against his back.

"I'm supposed to fix supper for everybody, and . . ." She paused as if searching for another excuse, then released a gusty sigh. "My brother Sullivan says if you have to lie, you'd best stick as close to the truth as possible. I'll tell them you washed up on the beach, and you don't remember who you are."

"Sullivan? Another brother? Will he also object if he finds out I'm British?"

"I'm sure he would if he saw you, but he's on a prison ship off the coast of Carolina."

He turned to look at her. The words had been spoken stiffly, without inflection, but there was no mistaking the tremble of her lips. Suddenly the pain in his head roared, and nausea overtook him. “Miss Fiona, I . . . I fear I’m about to cast up my accounts. Perhaps you’d better look the other way.” He leaned over the horse’s neck.

“Oh, Charlie, I’m sorry!” She slid to the ground. “Here, get down before you fall. I’ll hold your head.”

“No—”

But she was already pulling him toward her, and he had no choice but to awkwardly slip-slide down from the horse. He managed to stagger off behind a tree, where he knelt and proceeded to be violently sick. The world turned green, then blue, then dark purple. His shoulder hit the tree hard as everything went black.

He woke sometime later in a shadowed room with a streak of dying sunlight slipping under the curtain over the single window. The aroma of food, perhaps roasted chicken, turned his stomach, and he rolled over, covering his mouth and nose.

“Charlie! Be still! You’ll start your head bleeding again.” Fiona’s voice came from the open doorway. He heard her hurried steps approaching.

He gained control of the gagging sensation. “Somebody just . . . shoot me.”

“That’s not funny. You’re lucky to be alive.” She sounded aggrieved, justifiably, he supposed. He would be an inconvenient houseguest.

He rolled onto his back and touched the thick bandage holding his forehead together. It hurt like blazes. “Where are we?”

“My bedroom. It’s next to the kitchen, where I can keep an eye on you.”

“Your brother allowed this?” He squinted upward at Fiona.

“It was his idea.” Swathed in a big white apron, she flitted about, tucking the coverlet over him and adjusting the curtain. “He’s really a very kind man, Charlie. He wouldn’t throw you out in this condition—in fact, he and Oliver carried you in.”

“Oliver?”

“My cousin.”

“How many cousins do you have? Never mind.” He could only take in so much information at a time. Strange that he could carry on a conversation, understand basic concepts like cousins and brothers and aprons, yet couldn’t remember what he’d done yesterday. Fiona had called him by name. Somehow she knew him, yet she wanted to hide his identity from the rest of her family. “Sit down so I can see you,” he said abruptly.

Her hands went to fists at her hips. “You are not my lord, and I am certainly not your servant.”

“That’s not what I meant.” But had there been a note of imperiousness in his voice? He sighed. “Miss Fiona, you must forgive any bad habits from—from my past. I am of course grateful for your rescue. I owe you my life, I’m certain. I merely want to look at your face when we talk. Please?”

The fists relaxed. She went to the kitchen, returned with a ladder-back chair, and set it down close to the bed. Seating herself, she turned a pair of big blue eyes upon him, along with a faint smile.

He felt better immediately and caught her hand to bring it to his lips. “Thank you. Now, please, where are we?”

“I told you—”

“Yes, yes, your bedroom, but what country? What city?”

“Charlie, this is America. Navy Cove isn’t really a city. It’s just a little community near the fort—Fort Bowyer. The closest city is Mobile, but that’s half a day’s sail up the bay.”

Thinking made his head hurt, but he gave it his best effort.

Try as he might, however, he had no recollection of traveling toward a city called Mobile. “What year?”

She stared at him. “1814. What is the last thing you remember?”

He hesitated. “I was sent down from Eton.” Everything after that was a jagged blur.

Her eyes widened. “You don’t remember meeting me and my family?”

“No. But if you tell me I did, I’ll have to believe you.”

“This is insane.”

“I’m not insane. I just don’t—”

“I didn’t mean—”

They stared at one another for a long moment. Fiona bit her lip.

Charlie closed his eyes. “My head hurts.”

He felt a small callused hand laid gently upon his brow. “I’m sorry,” Fiona said. “I think you’d better rest, so I’ll leave you alone. But first, do you want something to eat?”

Charlie’s stomach rumbled. He laughed. “I don’t know how one can be sick and hungry at the same time. But something smells good.”

“Dumplings. I’ll fix you a plate.” Her thumb gently brushed his eyelid. “There’s a doctor in Mobile. I could send for him.”

Alarmed, he looked up at her. “No, you’re right. The fewer people who see me the better. A good night’s sleep will put me right as rain.”

“I hope so.” Fiona withdrew her hand and rose. “I’ll bring you something to eat.”

He watched her disappear into the kitchen again. Not daring to sit up, he carefully turned his head to look around. The dying light revealed a small room, barely larger than a closet, with walls made of some rough plaster-like material and a

high-beamed ceiling. He ran his hand along the wall to his left. It felt like seashells embedded in the plaster. Strange.

It seemed the Laniers were not wealthy people.

So how would a young lady living in an American coastal village cross paths with the son of a British earl? He picked through their conversation on the beach. She claimed to have visited his grandfather's estate with her aunt, uncle, and cousin . . . Maddy? Yes, that was the name. He had no memory of such a meeting, but neither could he deny it.

One thing he knew for certain. Concentration on anything beyond his physical body was cursed painful. He must lie very still and allow his head to heal—and hope the protective brothers and other assorted relatives of his attending angel did not decide to put a period to his existence for reasons beyond his control.