

A woman with her hair styled in an updo with blue flowers, wearing a purple dress with a floral pattern and a pearl necklace, stands in a garden archway. The background is a lush garden with green foliage and a path leading away.

ROSEANNA M. WHITE

THE
NATURE
OF A
LADY

THE SECRETS OF THE ISLES · 1

THE SECRETS OF THE ISLES • I •



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OF A

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ROSEANNA M. WHITE



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To all my readers named Elizabeth.
The sheer number of you inspired this tale of mistaken identity,
and I pray you enjoy it.

The Isles of Scilly



Cornwall due East 28 miles >

Prologue

19 JULY 1645

THE WATERS AROUND SCILLY

He was a prince at sea. That's what John Mucknell shouted whenever battle was upon him.

Even before he'd stolen the East India Company ship, against whose deck his feet were now braced. Even before he'd presented himself and the *John* to the exiled Prince of Wales, offering their services against those blasted Parliamentarians who had taken over their country. Even before he'd been knighted and named vice admiral of this new royal fleet.

Pirate fleet, the enemy said. Mucknell's lips twitched up as he watched the enemy craft close in. He was a prince at sea, a cockney. And, yes, a thief and a pirate. But it was the blighted Roundheads who had forced him to these straits. When his rightful sovereign was forced to barricade himself on an island to escape his enemies and found himself in desperate need of supplies, what course of action was there but to rob the ships passing by? And if the richest prizes were usually from the East India Company, under whose banner Mucknell had worked and kowtowed for so many useless years . . . shame, that.

“Admiral?” His first mate slid to his side, keeping his voice low. “There’s no way we’ll be able to slip by them into the harbor.”

“Nay.” Mucknell didn’t even need to raise his spyglass to see that three Parliamentary ships had completely cut off the path to his base in the Isles of Scilly, off the coast of Cornwall. He’d met the *Constant Warwick* once already today, near Land’s End, and they’d both gotten in a few good shots.

Shots that had left them both weakened. But the enemy had now rendezvoused with the *Cygnets* and the *Expedition*. And Mucknell’s fleet . . . well, they were pirates. There’d be no help for him, unless he could lure the enemy into range of the isles’ batteries, but that wasn’t likely.

“Our course of action, sir?”

The wind blew, snapping the sails taut overhead and lifting strands of hair from Mucknell’s shoulder. His mouth ached for a sip of rum, but he’d not indulge it, not until this crisis was well past. His fingers twitched over the pommel of his sword. His mind, sharp and fogless, spun through what he knew.

His hold was loaded with the booty from a significant haul—one that the Prince of Wales would be most eager to receive: much-needed supplies of food and cloth and metal, casks of wine, spices.

Silver.

Mucknell’s fingers traced the circle of the pommel. Silver and more silver. Some of which he’d decided wouldn’t be among the cache he turned over. He’d branded his own name on the crate, making it clear to his men that this one wouldn’t be off-loaded with the rest. It was a man’s right, after all, to take a fee. And his would be the pieces already engraved with his wife’s name, as if they’d been made for her.

His gaze flicked toward St. Mary’s Island—so close, but too far to be of any help. Was his Lizza there, watching from a lookout? Or at their house on Tresco? She never breathed a word of her distaste for his new career. She just went where he asked her to go. Uprooted herself from their comfortable, if bare, life in London and followed him here to the very edges of England.

In moments like these, he knew she deserved better than a scoundrel like him for a husband. But she'd never say such a thing. Not his Lizza.

He'd get that silver to her. And the rest of the supplies to his prince. He'd outfox that triple-strength enemy bearing toward him. Somehow. He'd win. Because Vice Admiral Sir John Mucknell might be a pirate, but he was blamed well the best pirate these waters had ever seen.

As the closest of the enemy ships drew near, he pulled out his sword and held it high—the signal all his men would recognize as their cue to man their stations. And he shouted the words that were their battle cry.

“I am a prince at sea! I am the proudest man upon the face of the earth. I am an Englishman, and were I to be born again, I would be born an Englishman. I am a cockney. . . .”

He could feel the tension in the air that whipped around him, feel the energy of his men as they laid hold of their ropes and ammunition and torches and aimed the twenty-one guns on the starboard side toward the enemy, who had spilled the wind in her sails to slow and meet him. He could feel his crew waiting for his final cry.

“And that's my glory!”

1



5 JUNE 1906

PENZANCE, CORNWALL, ENGLAND

More beauty than Lady Elizabeth Sinclair had ever thought possible beckoned to her—a turquoise sea, blue sky wisped with soft white clouds, birds cartwheeling through the air, islands studding it all with the promise of life she'd never had the opportunity to examine up close. The only thing standing between it and her was a woman whose eyes were growing worryingly watery.

The last thing she ever wanted was to make her mother cry. Or at least, that had always been the case before. Just now, something else had stolen that “last thing she wanted to do” ranking.

The last thing she currently wanted to do was give in to her brother's machinations to marry her off to his school chum. Which meant she might have to harden her heart to her mother's distress. “Mama . . .” She sucked in a breath only to find it as shaky as her mother's. Hardening her heart was easier decided than done. “It's only a summer.”

“I know.” Her mother pasted a wobbly smile into place and gave Libby's fingers a squeeze. She'd scarcely let go of them since they debarked the train and made their way to the ferry. “And it'll do you good. I know that too. Even so.”

She didn't need to voice her concerns. She'd done that already a dozen times since Libby came to her with this plan a week ago. They'd never been more than a few miles apart. Libby had never been on her own—and even though she technically wouldn't be alone now either, a lady's maid who was only two years Libby's senior wasn't exactly a full-fledged chaperone. She'd know no one on the islands. She'd be lonely. What if something happened to her? What if something happened at home? Or with her sister? Proper young ladies simply didn't run off to the Isles of Scilly for the summer by themselves.

The thing was, Libby had already proven herself an absolute failure at being a proper young lady. And when her brother had announced at breakfast eight days ago, with that frustrating "I know what's best for you" look, that he'd spare her any further embarrassment and arrange a match with Sheridan, her options for the summer had shrunk considerably.

It wasn't that Lord Sheridan wasn't a good man. It was just that she didn't really like him. He went ever on about archaeology. And she went ever on about the nature that his digs upended. And it only took about five minutes for both of them to be either bored out of their minds or seething at each other.

For the life of her, she couldn't determine why Sheridan would have agreed to her brother's plotting. Maybe he hadn't yet. Maybe Bram meant to inform Sheridan of his brilliant new plan in the same heavy-handed way he'd informed her. Though why a marquess would feel any obligation to obey an earl, she couldn't imagine.

Sheridan would object, if given enough time to really contemplate what Bram was demanding of him. That was how it always worked with Sheridan—he'd go along, follow her brother mindlessly for a while, and then he'd get that look on his face and declare, "I say, old chap. That is, what were you thinking of? That won't do."

She just had to give him time enough to come to the conclusion that she'd make him a lousy wife before her brother could get wedding plans made to the point that neither could back out without damaging their reputation. The summer to think about it—that was

what Sheridan needed. She'd never seen him take longer than three months to wake up to Bram's manipulations.

Never in her life had *she* disobeyed her brother though. Or, before that, their father. The very idea of it made her stomach squirm like the beetle she'd found digging its way through the garden at the inn this morning. But Bram had finally pushed her too far. It was one thing to inform her that she *would* be fitted for a new wardrobe for the Season and set up rules for what she could do when wearing it. It was quite another to simply state that he'd decided on a husband for her.

Mama sighed and turned her face into the breeze, toward the ferry. Her blinking was too quick to bespeak anything but a continued struggle. But her voice sounded steady—if a bit tight—when she said, “You’re going to have such a lovely time exploring and cataloguing. I only wish we knew someone on the islands. There are surely a few of our acquaintances holidaying there this year.”

Libby shot a look over her shoulder at her lady's maid for fortification. Mabena Moon gave her that same muted grin she always did when they were in company with anyone else in Libby's family. The one that everyone assumed was merely a polite acknowledgment instead of a sign of shared secrets. “I won't be alone, Mama. Moon's entire family is there. You read the telegram she got in response—they're most happy to keep an eye on me.”

A beat of silence descended, punctuated by the ringing of the bell on the ferry calling all passengers to board. Her trunks were already stowed, her ticket purchased. All she had to do was walk up the gangplank and the adventure would begin. An entire summer on England's most unique island chain. A subtropical climate that produced plants she'd be able to see nowhere else in the country. Birds her eyes had never beheld. Seals. Ocean creatures she'd not even learned the names of yet.

She could almost hear her magnifying glasses calling to her from her trunk. And her microscope sang a siren's song in her ears. She had fresh notebooks waiting to be filled. Pencils in every shade, sharpened and expectant. Watercolors snug in their cases. A book on the classifications

of life on the Isles of Scilly on the tip-top of her trunk, so she could snatch it out the moment she arrived in her summer cottage.

Then it struck—the tidal wave of uncertainty. What did Libby know of the world, of independent life? She'd never been away from home, not really. She was barely twenty. And if she couldn't get on in the society in which she'd been raised, how did she expect to get on there, with strangers?

Her fingers were the ones to tighten around her mother's this time. "Are you certain you don't want to join me?"

Mama chuckled and released her hand. "Had I not promised Edith I would be with her for her lying-in, I would be there in a heartbeat."

Mention of her older sister, the eldest of the three Sinclair children, made Libby's lips twist into a wince before she could stop the reaction. Another reason this holiday had sounded so alluring when Mabena whispered the suggestion after Bram's high-handed declaration last week. Her other option, if she didn't want to spend the whole summer scowling at Sheridan across the breakfast room at Telford Hall while she waited for him to come to his senses, was to join her mother at Edith's.

And none of them were ever happy when she and Edith were in the same room. "Give her my love. And if you wanted *not* to include her judgment on my holiday in your letters, I'd not complain about the lack."

With another chuckle, Mama stepped back, folded her arms across her middle, and nodded toward the boat. Even with emotion waging a war against the composure on her face, Augusta, Lady Telford was the image of a grace Libby could never make herself aspire to, despite admiring it in her mother. "Enjoy yourself, my darling. Try not to ruin too many dresses. And do make an effort to see who from our acquaintances are summering there and send me a wire with their names. I'll make any introductions I can through telegrams and letters."

"Yes, Mama." She'd make an effort. It would be a paltry one, but Mama wouldn't honestly expect anything more from her. Libby grinned, leaned over to kiss her mother's cheek, and waited.

Mama swallowed. Gave her another smile that was trying too hard. “Off you go, then. Don’t miss the ferry. Moon, I’m trusting you to see my daughter is well cared for.”

Mabena’s nod was solemn. Though when Mama waved them onward, Libby exchanged a grin with her maid that nearly gave way to a squeal of excitement. Mabena must be excited to see her family again. And Libby . . . Libby could hardly believe that she’d actually pulled this off. She’d actually let a cottage for the summer without her brother’s knowledge. She’d actually get to put a few leagues of distance between herself and the society that had decided she wasn’t quite what they were looking for in an earl’s sister.

Another call from the ship’s bell had her and Mabena both picking up their pace, each clutching the smaller bags they carried with one hand and using the other to hang on to their hats, since the wind was greedily trying to steal them. A laugh spilled from Libby’s lips as they charged up the gangway at a pace too quick to be ladylike.

But that didn’t matter. Not now. They were on their way.

Once aboard, Mabena let out a gusty breath of relief. “There, now. We made it. And not a moment too soon.”

Indeed, with a final *clang*, the gangway was taken in and the ferry pulled away. Libby took up position at the rails so she could wave to Mama. Her mother blew her a kiss and shouted something that was lost to wind and water slapping the hull and the steam engine’s chug and clamor. Good wishes, no doubt, to match her brave smile.

Libby held her place for a minute more and then spun to take in the world. St. Michael’s Mount, its causeway currently under water, jutted out of the sea to her left, the ancient castle reigning over the small town of Marazion. Gulls swooped and called. And likely countless fish darted beneath the waves, if she could but see them.

Beside her, Mabena chuckled and placed a restraining hand upon her arm. “Easy now, Lady Elizabeth. We don’t need you falling in to get a closer look.”

Libby shot her friend a smile. “No more of that—not this summer. It’ll just be us, Mabena. No one even needs to know that I’m Bram’s

sister. I think . . . I think I'll just be *Libby* until we go home again. Libby Sinclair. No 'my lady' nonsense."

She expected a smile of pleasure. A nod. Quick agreement. Instead, thunder flashed through Mabena's deep brown eyes. "That will never do, my lady. You *are* His Lordship's sister. You can't just pretend otherwise. And I had better not either, lest I forget myself when we go back to Somerset."

For a long moment, Libby just listened to the splash of water as the boat sliced through it, wishing one of her magnifying glasses could help her see what this heavy thing was inside her chest. Wishing there were a Latin name for the feeling of disappointment—no, discomfort. No . . . she didn't *know* the word for this feeling that always seized her when someone disapproved of her.

Which was all the time, lately. She could all but see her sister's perfect face looking at her in utter dismay, hear her voice saying, "*For heaven's sake, Elizabeth, can't you just be a proper young lady for a day in your life?*"

Mabena's sigh joined the wind jostling them for elbow space at the rail, and she leaned closer until their shoulders just brushed. "You know it isn't that I don't want to be so informal, my lady. It's just that it would be so easy to do that I honestly do fear I'd forget myself when we go back again. And I don't relish losing this position when your mum or brother realize we're friends. We walk a fine enough line as it is."

She knew that. She did. As indulgent as Mama was about the microscope and slides and endless supply of sketchbooks, she wouldn't budge on some things—the lines between the classes high on the list. Loyalty and some affection between a lady's maid and a lady was acceptable. Friendship was something else. Friendship required equality, and *that* she'd never grant.

Were she a braver girl, Libby would defy that unspoken dictate and argue the point. She'd declare that she didn't care who Mabena's parents were or where she was from, they *were* friends and that was that. They understood each other. Shared a fascination with the natural

world—something Libby couldn't claim about any of the gentlemen's daughters she knew. While they recoiled in horror at a worm or an insect, she leaned in for a closer look. They were too different.

In those ways, Mabena was much more like her. But in others, they were different too. She *did* need to protect her position—something Libby never had to worry about. She'd better remember that and help her guard it. With a matching sigh, Libby nodded.

"Now, you needn't look so sad, my lady. St. Mary's is one of the prettiest places on earth, and you're going to have a fine time cataloguing every creature and plant you can find. Don't worry so over a trifle like what name I'll call you." Mabena's eyes, when Libby looked over at her, flashed with laughter. "Perhaps I'll just take up calling you *Mea Domina*. That's your Latin designation, isn't it?"

Libby laughed and then leaned over the rail again to watch the world swimming by beneath them. Not that she could see much through the froth of their wake, but the glimpses were fascinating. She ought to have convinced her family to spend more time at the seashore. How lucky Mabena was to have grown up with such variety of life at her fingertips. "I'm looking forward to meeting your family. They'll be there to greet the ferry, right?"

"Ah . . ." Mabena cleared her throat in a way Libby had never heard her do before. She lifted her gaze from the water to her friend's face. It had a strange look upon it. A bit sheepish. A bit . . . guilty? "It was a friend of mine who sent that telegram, my lady, not my mother. My family's all on Tresco. We'll be summering on St. Mary's. Not that the two aren't close enough to go between—by boat—and I'm sure you *will* meet them, but they're not down the lane as I led your mother to believe."

"Then why . . . ?" She didn't even know what to ask. Where to begin. She felt no stab of anxiety over realizing there *wouldn't* be a family a few paces away to see to her comfort and care—that hardly mattered. But hadn't Mabena's idea for a visit sprung from the desire to see her family again?

"Tresco's too small to support as many tourists. We'd never have

found a place to let there at such a late date.” The twinkle returned to Mabena’s dark eyes. “And besides—there’s a reason I left the isles. Being near family is all well and good, but being able to breathe without them asking if you find the air satisfactory has its merits too. A bit of distance between us and them will be a good thing.”

She could hardly argue with that, given her reasons for wanting this holiday. Perhaps Mabena had a brother like Bram. Not that she’d ever mentioned any siblings. Or really spoken much of her family at all, come to think of it.

“We’ve nearly two and a half hours on the ferry. Why don’t we find a place to sit? You can get out a sketchbook.”

An obvious ploy, but given the beauty surrounding them, she decided to let herself be redirected. There would be plenty of time over the summer to pry a bit more information out of her maid. For now, it was enough to soak in this new world surrounding her. And easy enough to get lost in it.

She’d filled three pages with sketches of the birds and fish she glimpsed and was putting down a rough image of the Isles of Scilly themselves, emerging from the sea, when they chugged into St. Mary’s Sound. She closed her book and tucked it and her pencil back into her bag as Mabena pointed to the sights visible from their course.

“That opening there is Porthellick Bay. And there, that giant pile of rocks—that’s Giant’s Castle.”

Libby’s lips turned up at the whimsy.

The narration continued with a list of names Libby would never be able to keep straight, at least not until she’d explored them for herself. Finally, they docked at the quay in Hugh Town with a whistle and a clang of the bell.

Mabena patted her arm. “Just sit tight for a moment, my lady, while I direct them on what to do with our trunks. I’ve arranged transport for those, but we’ll walk to the cottage through the town from here. I thought you’d enjoy that.”

“Perfect.” And indeed it was. She happily sat and soaked in the bustle until Mabena signaled her to debark, and then she happily

strolled through the quaint little seaside town by her maid's side, trying to catalogue absolutely everything she saw. Squat little houses of granite, flowering shrubs hugging their corners. Shops with darling little signs dangling outside them, proclaiming the wares within. Oceanic birds swooping and calling overhead.

It only got better when they left the town behind and took to the road meandering along the seashore. Grasses bent in the steady wind, and she spotted heather unlike any she'd seen before. Rocks cropped up here and there, promising ample places to sit when she explored. And the sky overhead stretched blue and promising.

Soon, cottages came into view, their sizes varying. Near the larger ones she spotted families of obvious wealth, playing at a seaside holiday. From these she averted her face and hoped against hope that Mama was wrong and none of them would recognize her.

Mabena pulled a folded slip of paper from her pocket and, fighting the wind at every step, opened it. She checked something about their surroundings, though Libby had spotted no road sign to tell them where they were, but her maid nodded and pointed toward a lovely small cottage at the end of the lane. "There we are. Our home for the rest of the summer."

Was there something odd in her voice, or was the distortion just from the wind? Libby put it out of her mind for now and focused on the granite building abutting the old garrison wall that her friend indicated. The location was ideal—they'd have views of the other islands, the water, and the town down below. Even from here she could spot a path to the water through the high grasses. And best of all, there were no other houses sharing walls or gardens. She'd have privacy to do whatever she pleased.

As they neared, she spotted a woman of middling years rounding the corner, shielding her eyes from the sun to watch them approach.

"That would be Mrs. Pepper, I imagine. The landlady." Mabena nodded in satisfaction. "With our keys and no doubt something to sign to let the place officially. I told her which ferry we'd be on." She darted a glance at Libby. "Could we give her your name? If I mention mine, my family will hear of it before the tide goes out."

“No objections from me.” It was properly exciting, actually. A holiday cottage, let in her name. She could hardly have helped smiling even had she wanted to as she strode to the matronly woman awaiting them. “How do you do?” she said the moment she was near enough. “Are you the landlady?”

The woman gave a brisk nod, her eyes taking them in with a few quick darting glances that seemed to dismiss Mabena in a second and measure Libby from her new hat to the shoes she’d already muddied. “Mrs. Pepper. You’ll be the young miss who wired about letting the place, then?”

“I am.” More or less. She smiled anew. “Elizabeth Sinclair.”

“Another Elizabeth, is it?” The woman turned with a baffling huff of frustration and waved for them to follow her to the door. “May you be more dependable than the last. That one left me high and dry after sweet-talking me into promising her the whole summer but letting her pay week by week, she did. And then vanished before the second month is out, as good sense should have told me she’d do.”

Libby blinked at the woman’s back . . . and at the deluge of information she had absolutely no need of. “Well, how fortuitous that we were able to take over the vacancy, then. I was quite afraid we’d decided on our plans too late to find anything half as lovely as this.”

“All I needed to know, miss, is that the money you wired to the bank yesterday came through without a hitch. Here.” She opened the front door for them and held its key up, which dangled from her fingers. “You mentioned catering, aye? My daughter or I will bring a basket once a day with all the fixings you’ll need. I trust your maid can discern what to do with it.”

Mabena’s hum vibrated with irritation, but Libby didn’t look back at her to see if she was glowering. She simply took the key ring. “Yes. Thank you.”

“She’ll take any laundry you have for us at the same time. Mind, that’s extra. You pay by the article, as you would at any fancy hotel in London.”

She’d never stayed in a fancy hotel in London—they had a town-

house, after all—but she saw no reason to point that out. Mama had sent her ample funds to see her through the summer. “That sounds reasonable.” She tried to peek past Mrs. Pepper into the house. It was the size of their gardener’s cottage at Telford Hall. It wouldn’t take long to explore, but she’d like to get about it so she could get everything where she wanted and escape back to the out of doors.

Apparently, Mrs. Pepper was no more eager to dawdle. “The lease is on the table, miss. Read and sign it at your leisure, and Kayna or I will fetch it back tomorrow when we bring your meals. There are supplies enough in there now for this evening and breakfast. And a few little guidebooks, if you’ve a curiosity about the place. If you need anything more, your girl can find us at the corner of Garrison Lane and Well Lane. Mr. Pepper or I will see you have anything you need.”

Because her bank’s wire had gone through without a hitch, no doubt. The woman certainly didn’t seem to welcome her with anything like warmth. But that was all right. Libby didn’t need her for a friend. Clutching her valise in her hands, she smiled again. “Thank you, Mrs. Pepper. I’m certain we’ll find everything perfectly satisfactory.”

“Good.” With that, the woman finally cleared the doorway and strode away.

Mabena let out a huff. “The Peppers. Never much got along with them.”

Having no commentary on the family as a whole, Libby merely grinned and charged into her new home, while Mabena announced that their trunks were arriving and she’d oversee their being brought in.

The living area was small indeed. But prettily decorated, and the windows looked out over the bay and the wall of the garrison. Adjoining it was a tiny little kitchen with a table right there among the shelves and the stove. It would be like sneaking down for a midnight biscuit, only for every meal—eating right there in the kitchen. She hurried to look at the other rooms, finding the necessary and bathtub and two bedrooms of nearly equal size. She chose the one with the harbor view, affording her a lovely sight of the other islands.

It had a small desk by the window, which would be perfect for her microscope. It hadn't space enough to hold all her art supplies, but she could designate part of the chest of drawers for that. She moved to it now and opened the top drawer.

And froze. Inside were blouses. A lovely shawl in heather blue. And a book lying open on the top, pages down. *Treasure Island*. Libby picked it up, her brows knotting when she saw the pages had folded on themselves. Her stomach twisted. The book had clearly been dropped into the drawer, not *placed* there. She smoothed the pages, her frown increasing. Was that handwriting amid the printed words?

What had Mrs. Pepper said about the previous occupant? That she'd "vanished before the second month was out." Vanished . . . but left her things behind.

"In here, then."

At Mabena's brusque voice, Libby moved the book behind her back, not ready to have it snatched away just yet. Mabena was looking over her shoulder as she entered, clearly leading someone in. Though when she turned back around, her gaze seemed to take the situation in with startling speed. She frowned. "What's this? You can't have unpacked already. You hadn't clothing in your valise."

Libby rocked on her heels and shrugged. She should probably show the book to Mabena, but she'd rather examine it first. "Not mine, but the drawers are already full."

Mabena's huff sounded irritated. But her eyes sparked with . . . something. Curiosity? Or did she feel the same uncanny dread that coursed through Libby's veins? Regardless, she stalked over to the dresser and simply scooped out the stranger's things. "I'll take care of it. And of your unpacking. Go on outside. I know you want to."

Because it was expected of her, Libby grinned. But she felt a bit guilty as she slipped by the stevedore and out the door, clutching the book to her stomach once she was past.

Everything always made more sense out in nature. And *this* . . . this could use a good dose of sense. Currently, it had none.