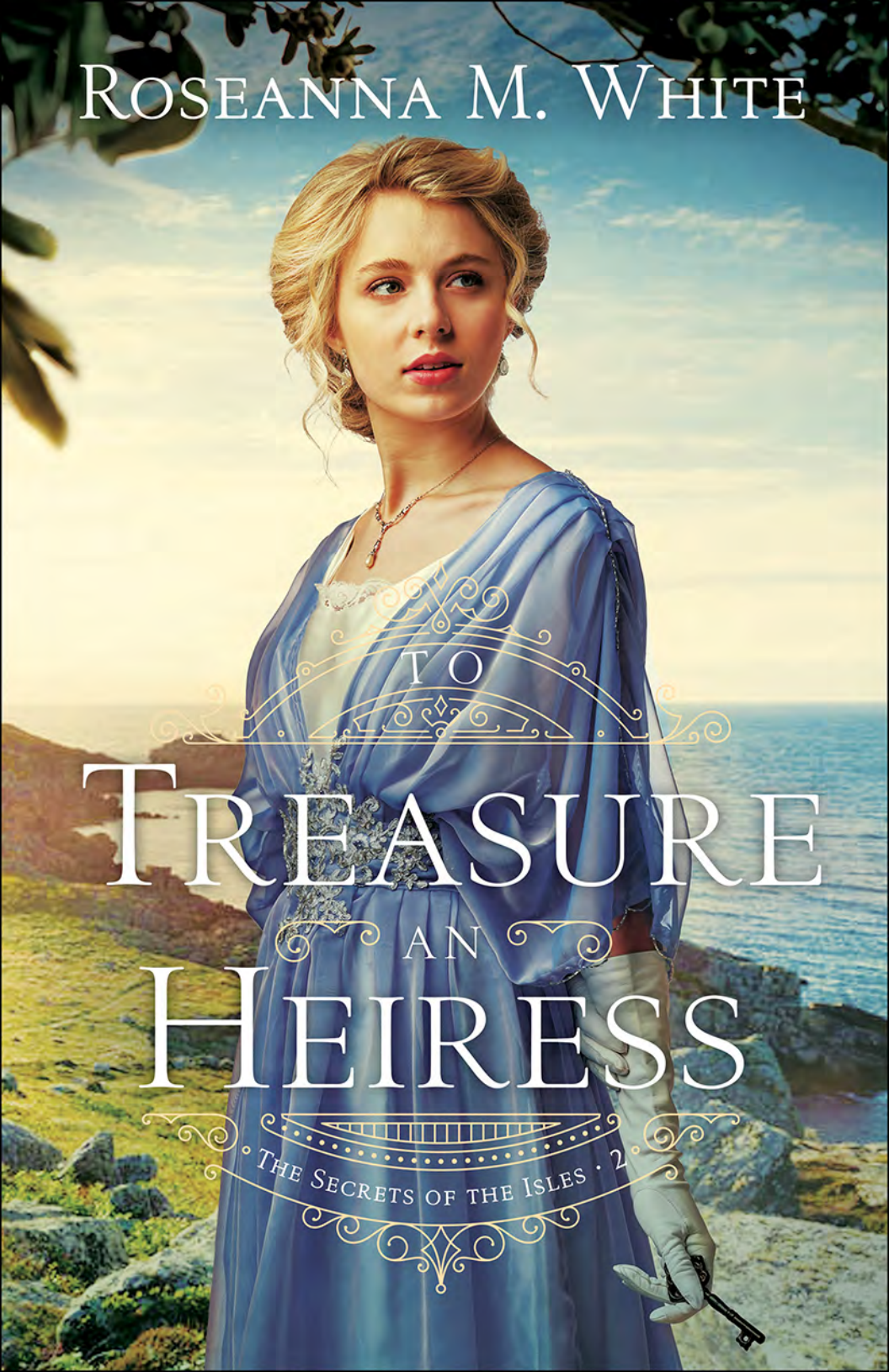


ROSEANNA M. WHITE



TO
TREASURE
AN
HEIRESS

THE SECRETS OF THE ISLES · 2

THE SECRETS OF THE ISLES • 2 •



TO

TREASURE

AN

HEIRESS

ROSEANNA M. WHITE



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

To Treasure an Heiress • Roseanna M. White
Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022 used by permission

© 2022 by Roseanna M. White

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: White, Roseanna M., author.

Title: To treasure an heiress / Roseanna M. White.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, a division of
Baker Publishing Group, [2022] | Series: The secrets of the isles ; 2

Identifiers: LCCN 2021032983 | ISBN 9780764237195 (paperback) | ISBN
9780764239892 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493436101 (ebook)

Subjects: GSAFD: Adventure fiction. | Love stories. | LCGFT: Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3623.H578785 T62 2022 | DDC 823/.92—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021032983>

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.

Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Cover photography by Todd Hafermann Photography, Inc

Author is represented by The Steve Laube Agency.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Jennifer Malone Stump,
who ran through childhood with me,
created stories with me,
and found adventure with me in the least likely places.
We never dug up any pirate gold,
but we found treasures untold in our imaginations.

The Isles of Scilly



Cornwall due East 28 miles >

Prologue

7 MAY 1650

TRESCO, ISLES OF SCILLY

Prince . . . or pirate? Rupert felt like neither as he stood on the bluff, the sea beckoning him, the wind whirling about him, and the most beautiful woman in all the world pressed against his chest, her cheeks damp with tears. He hadn't expected this when he came to the Isles of Scilly after being exiled from England for his service to the Crown. He'd expected brothers-in-arms. Compatriots. Soldiers.

"Briallen." Her name whispered from his lips like a blessing, just as she had whispered into his life, into his heart. Only an island lass—that's what society would say, were it here to say it. And his family . . . He could only imagine what his family would think of her. His father, German prince Frederick V. His mother, daughter of James VI of Scotland and I of England. They would look on his precious primrose and see only a thorny vine trying to ensnare him.

She was anything but that. She was his wings. She was his soul. She was his heart. The only person in all his one and thirty years to make him crave home and hearth above the next battle, the next adventure. The only person in all his one and thirty years to make him think it mattered not whether he ever had a palace or an estate or a relative on a throne—that he would live on this bare rock of an

island all his days, no luxuries beyond his next breath, if he could live there with her.

He pressed a kiss to the lips he had memorized with his own. “I love you.”

“And I you.” Her fingers smoothed back a lock of his hair that the wind had torn free, her gaze following its path as she tucked it back into the binding at the nape of his neck. Her lips pressed tight together.

She wouldn’t ask him to stay, he knew she wouldn’t. But she must be thinking it, even as he was.

His own glance darted to the shore, the water, his ship at the ready there in deeper waters, a rowboat waiting to take him to it. They must sail, and soon. Mucknell had already bidden farewell to his own wife, and neither the tide nor the pirate admiral would wait for any man—even if that man *was* a prince. “I could stay. What do the courts of Portugal or the waters of the Caribbean have that Tresco does not?”

Briallen breathed a laugh and rested her head against his chest. “Wealth and treasure and enemies of the Crown for you to rout, that’s what.” Her hand pressed there, just above his heart. “You cannot stay, my love. There is nothing for you here.”

“There is you. You are everything.” Sweet words he had never imagined himself saying—or meaning, at any rate. His whole life, it seemed, had been war. Even as a child he’d trained for it. As only a child, he’d found it. One and thirty, but already he’d been fighting seventeen years. What room did such a life have for love? “Come with me, then.”

He’d asked it before. But as before, she shook her head. “To the courts in Portugal? And leave my parents to face the winter on their own? You know I cannot. Perhaps, had we more time to plan for them . . . but I cannot leave them.” His darling pulled away a few inches, tilting her head back so she could look him in the eye. “I will be here when you return for me. I will wait a thousand years if I must.”

A smile teased his lips. It was likely to be two years, at least, before he could return. The waters around the Isles of Scilly had grown too risky for the pirate fleet, what with Cromwell setting so many of his own hirelings to patrol for them. If he meant to work for the uncle who was king, the cousin who would next rule, he must go. Find richer waters to prowl. Do his part to restore England to its rightful heir.

But *must* held little allure compared to this need to stay with his young bride. His parents would say he shouldn't have married her. His uncle, his cousin would say the same. They'd say he'd ruined his own future hopes by lashing himself to an island lass. If he *did* take her with him to Portugal, it would be pure misery for her.

He'd give it all up and more for her. But it was his sworn duty now to provide for her. And to do that, he must go. There was no living to be earned here on Tresco, not anymore. He sighed, pressed one more kiss to her lips, and reached for the bag at his feet. "I have something for you."

"Rupert." How could her voice be at once chiding and touched? "You've already given me more than I could have ever dreamed."

"Well, you will have to learn to dream bigger." Grinning, he pulled out the trinket box he'd long carried with him. Before, it had held cuff links and medallions and buckles and other assorted whatnot. Now, it held all the coins of silver and gold he could scrounge together. He pressed it into her hands. "'Tisn't much. But enough, I pray, to see you through until I return with a crown or two for that ivory brow of yours."

She laughed but didn't lift the lid. She merely traced a finger over his crest, engraved in the wood and leafed in gold. "I will treasure it."

"Nay—*use* it." He leaned down, put his mouth at her ear. Too many sailors loitered on the shore, and one never knew when the wind might snatch one's words and deliver them to another's ear. "If it is not enough, if something happens to me, if you need more . . . inside you will also find a key to fortune enough to set you up for life."

She would know exactly what he meant. But her eyes flashed not with greed but with a stony determination. “Nay. I’ll not be stealing from Mucknell after all he has done for you, dearovim.”

And this was why he loved her. “Only if your survival depends upon it. I would sooner you be a thief than a corpse.”

“And I would sooner die of hunger and fly into the arms of my Savior than feast like a queen in the company of the devil.” The fire in her eyes flamed down again, turned to a merry twinkle. “But perhaps that is too hard for you to understand, *Rupert le diable*.”

He made a show of wincing at the nickname he had earned by the age of three, given to him by his tutors. Rupert the Devil. Yes, he had been a little terror. And, pray God, he still was, to his family’s enemies. But not to her.

A shout came up from the beach, along with the frantic waving of his first mate’s arm.

Briallen surged forward, pressed a fierce kiss to his lips, and then leapt away, the box clutched to her chest. “Go. Now, before I forget why you must.”

He nodded, pivoted, and started down the sandy path toward his ship, his men, and his only hope of a fortune worthy of her. But he had to pause at the bottom and look up once more.

She stood there on the hillock, the wind whipping her dark hair into a storm of onyx, the sky a startling blue behind her, the box still held tight against her chest. He would picture her just so every day. An image to carry with him. He would imagine her standing just like this every morn, every night, with every tide. Waiting for him.

He hastened away, so that he could hasten back to her side. It may be a year, or two, or three, but he would come back to Tresco again. And he would take his princess with him, wherever next he went.

1



11 JULY 1906

SAMSON, ISLES OF SCILLY

Beth Tremayne crept silently through the creaking doorway of the abandoned cottage as the first strokes of dawn painted the sky over the islands. This had been home for most of the summer—this leaking, moldering hovel that hadn't been in use for half a century. She'd come through that door with the dawn dozens of times, crawled into that corner to steal a few hours of sleep, keeping one ear always alert to the sound of anyone coming her way. Once or twice she'd had to make a quick getaway.

No more. She stood here today not in the trousers she'd pilfered a decade ago when her brother outgrew them, but in her usual day dress. Rather than a desperation not to be seen, she had to get home to Tresco before the others awoke, so that no one would know she was gone. She couldn't frighten them again. She couldn't—not with her grandmother only back on her feet a few days.

Guilt didn't just pierce at the thought of the unknown ailment that had felled Mamm-wynn just feet from this door a week ago—it pummeled her. Mamm-wynn, precious Mamm-wynn, one of the only people she had left in the world. Injured not by the heartless,

greedy snakes from whom Beth had thought she had to keep them safe, but by her own aging body, her own endless worry.

Beth had done it to her. Not the reprobate Lorne or the cold-blooded Scofields. *Her*.

She stirred herself and hurried to the corner of the cottage, pried up the rotting board. Last week, when she saw Oliver's letter telling her that Mamm-wynn was unconscious, she hadn't bothered to pause for such trifles as her supplies—she'd simply run to the sloop she'd hidden away and sailed home. But she couldn't risk anyone else finding these things. No other island lads needed to get caught up in this business. And if the other treasure hunters found her maps, her notes . . .

No, that wouldn't do at all.

The board gave way under her hands, and inside the cubby it covered, she found exactly what she'd left there a week ago. The map she'd drawn herself and marked with the locations she'd searched. A few of the letters from the pirate John Mucknell to his wife that she'd copied and made notes on. A book from her grandfather's library that told of all the old, abandoned sites around the isles—prime locations, in her view, for a pirate to have stashed his cache.

A warm summer breeze whispered through the door she'd left open, reminding her to hurry. Beth shoved the lot of it into the satchel she'd brought for that purpose and hurried back out of the cottage, down the hill to where the *Naiad* was anchored—plain as day, there for anyone to see if they looked.

She checked the sun rather than her watch. Just peeking its head above the horizon. Her brother would be stirring soon, ready to take part in the weekly gig race around Tresco. She had to hurry.

The winds were favoring her this morning, though, and she soon had the *Naiad* under tack and gliding through the familiar waters, back to its home in the quay on Tresco. No one else was there when she returned, praise God. The fishermen were out already, the racers not yet arrived. She dropped anchor and secured her sloop, dashing back up the path toward home. Housewives might be up, stirring

fires and clattering about for their morning tea, but only in their own kitchens. No one was out on the streets to call a hello. No one to wonder where she'd been this time.

No one to chastise her yet again for always craving a taste of Elsewhere, for seeking adventure when she ought to be tucked snug in her bed, content where she was. Or—the one she was awaiting with dread—lecturing her about *still* chasing Mucknell's treasure when it had already cost the Tremayne family so much. Oliver would no doubt deliver that speech any day. The only reason he hadn't already was because he was distracted with his new fiancée.

God bless Libby Sinclair.

She could hear Mrs. Dawe humming in the kitchen when Beth slipped in through the garden door, but she tiptoed by, up the back stairs, and made it to her bedroom without running into Oliver or his guests. *His*, not hers. If it were up to her, she'd toss the lords out on their ears.

Well, she had no argument in particular with Libby's brother, Lord Telford. Except that he was inexplicably friends with that greedy, thieving buffoon, Lord Sheridan.

Her fingers tightened around the strap of her satchel. Lord Insufferable Sheridan would probably snatch it all from her if he saw it. Paw through it. Exclaim over each and every article—*her* search, *her* clues, *her* finds.

But it wasn't just hers anymore. She'd drawn Oliver and their cousin Mabena into it without meaning to—and Mabena had brought her employer, Libby, here. That part, at least, was good. But the fact that *everyone* now knew about Mucknell's treasure . . .

Well, they thought they did. They knew about the silverware they'd dug up together last week. But they seemed to think that was the only piece of the hoard she'd had a lead on.

She knew better—and so did the Scofields, the family she'd thought could be trusted with it all, given that her best friend was the daughter of said family. But they'd betrayed her.

For a moment she stared at her bed, which still felt too soft to her

after weeks of sleeping on the ground. Then she shook herself. She had work to do, and only a few minutes in which she could do it. With silent efficiency, she fished the key to her desk drawer from its hiding place in the heel of her shoe, opened it, and slid these missing pieces into her collection of research, then stashed the weatherworn satchel out of sight.

But she hesitated before closing and locking the drawer again, her fingers hovering over the book that rested on top of her stack. *Treasure Island*. It had been her best friend during the first part of her hunt—and then the missing piece that had bothered her endlessly. She snatched it out, grabbed a few sheets of clean paper and a pencil, and then locked everything away again.

Ollie was up, whistling his way down the corridor. She gave him time to exit before following his invisible footprints downstairs, out the door. He'd have aimed himself straight down the village streets, toward the water and his teammates. Beth turned instead to the bluff, where she could see the racers go by. She chose a spot that would afford her the best view, the same spot where Morgan, their elder brother, had always watched the races.

She settled herself to the ground and ran her fingers over her book.

All right, not *her* book. It was Oliver's—not that her brother had so much as picked it up in a decade. Still, she felt guilty for all the pencil markings she'd put in the margins and crowded between the lines in the last few months. Not guilty enough that she stopped doing it . . . but enough that she'd placed an order for a new one for him. It ought to be arriving any day.

And it wasn't as though she'd set out to ruin it. She'd borrowed it from his shelves simply because *Treasure Island* seemed a rather apropos read when she realized she was on her own treasure hunt, here on her own island. She'd had it with her when she sat in this very spot to read the post that had come for her from her friends the Scofields in London. A letter that had been full of information on what she ought to be looking for, and how she ought to get them

more information. She'd needed somewhere to write it all down. Somewhere that wouldn't cause Ollie or Mamm-wynn to bat an eye at her—which they would certainly do if she carried a thick letter about with her.

And poor *Treasure Island* had been a ready conspirator.

She smiled a bit as she opened the book and drew out the blank paper she'd just tucked in a few minutes before. From her pocket she pulled the pencil. For a moment she stared at the mocking stretch of white, and then she screwed her mouth up and started writing.

Once upon a time, in the islands called Scilly, lived a girl called Elizabeth, who everyone called Beth. Brought up on the sea and the granite and the isles, Beth sought adventure above all. And she found it. First, by exploring every rock and rill of her island home. And then, when the call of romance grew loud in her ears, she turned her sights toward the mainland. But no true love awaited her there, and so home she came once more.

Then, one day, this island lass found a treasure map hidden away in her grandfather's house, which had once been the home of a pirate king. "Could it be?" said she. "The long-lost treasure of Mucknell the Menace?" Knowing not whether she should dare to hope, she remembered her dearest friend from her year at school—sweet Emily, whose father was of great renown. "A trustee is he," thought Beth to herself, "of the greatest museum in all the land. If it be true, he will know, and if false, he shall advise."

And so off she sent her map to grand old London Town, where the earl of renown declared, "By Jove! Follow this map, dear girl, and it'll lead you to the pirate's hoard! And anything you find, you may send my way. For I have a friend who will pay you well."

Visions of Seasons swimming in her head, fair Beth set out to unlock the secrets of the map. But wanting to keep her family from thinking her foolish, she convinced her brother, Good Vicar Oliver, to let her spend the summer on the next island over, so in secrecy she might search.

Little did she know that this friend of the earl was none other than the Nefarious Marquess of SheriDoom. And when he heard

that pirate treasure could be found in the isles, he sent his henchman with vile intent. Lorne was the henchman's name, and black was his soul.

Now, Beth had spent her whole life long learning every secret of her island home. Quickly she gathered every clue to be found, which lit a fuse of envy in evil Lorne. "I must," said he, "find the secrets too." And so he hired an innocent lad to aid him.

But when the lad realized how dark was Lorne's heart, he cried, "Nay!" and tried to break free, receiving as a reward a hero's death at the hand of a villain true.

She pulled her pencil from the page, squeezing her eyes shut. Poor Johnnie. He'd deserved so much more than what he'd gotten. He'd deserved a future, a wife, a brood of children to run over the islands just as he had once done. Not a blow to the head in Piper's Hole and a mother who would mourn him the rest of her days.

Beth sniffed and opened her eyes again, staring at the page. It was rubbish. She'd never let another soul look at it.

But she had to get it down. Tell Johnnie's tale, and her own stupid part in it. Sucking in a breath, she bent over the page again.

Devastated by the downfall of her young friend, fair Beth knew what to do when a threat landed on her own rented doorstep: "Tread with care, O Lady Fair, or yours will be the next to pay."

Frightened for the good vicar her brother and their aging grandmother, Beth made the only decision she could. To her sloop she flew, with supplies to see her through, and off to another isle she sailed. Using the secrets she'd learned of her home, she hid her boat and herself during every day, and by night she sailed and searched.

But what Beth couldn't know was that her cousin came home while she was away, bringing with her another lady called—

No, the rhythm of that was all wrong. Beth gnawed on her lip and crossed out the last line.

But while Beth hid away, home came her cousin, alarmed at the cessation of letters. And in her care was another lady so fair, also called Elizabeth, it seemed. Into Beth's rented cottage the two soon settled . . . and into Beth's sad troubles they stumbled. For the wicked son of the earl mistook one for the other when he came to check on her finds. "The treasure," he demanded of this second Elizabeth, "or soon you will pay. For SheriDoom demands his prize."

So, the unwitting Elizabeth stepped into Beth's shoes . . . and into good Oliver's heart. While they strove to solve the mystery, they soon fell in love, bringing hope from the ashes of tragedy.

But their cousin was struck, and their grandfather too, and their grandmother dear fell ill in shock. So, home Beth flew to those she loved best, only to discover that even that refuge had been compromised.

For the Nefarious SheriDoom had descended upon the isles. He had stolen fair Beth's most prized possession already and now threatened to steal any treasure she found. For no amount of pirate gold could satiate his greed, and no price was too steep for his seeking.

Together, the friends soon followed the map to a castle of crumbling stone. Down they dug, in search of the silver that the earl of renown said they'd find. And there, in a crate of splintering wood, branded with the crest of the pirate king, did it lie. Silver—not nuggets nor bars nor doubloons, but fashioned as knives, forks, and spoons. With "Elizabeth" etched into every piece—the gift, one time, for a queen.

But the wicked earl's son and the vile henchman Lorne had put their evil heads together by now. They captured Beth's cousin, along with her beau, and soon came for Beth as well. But it was Elizabeth they found and mistook her again and swept her away to a cave. Only by the grace of the good God above, and the foresight of Beth's valiant grand-dame, were this lady fair and the good vicar able to triumph over the vicious Lorne.

In shackles that fellow was soon marched away—but the tale was far from complete. For the wicked son of the earl got away, and SheriDoom hunkered to wait. "We'll find the rest," he threatened and boomed, "and then to my coffers it goes."

Fair Beth swore it wouldn't but swore it in silence. For she knew that wisdom said, "Wait." There was clearly more treasure waiting to be found, treasure that would bring the hunters to her door. And only one way to fend them all off: she must be the first to discover it.

Motion caught her eye, and she looked up, watching the two five-man gigs race by on their outbound leg of the race. She watched them until they were out of sight and then looked back to her paper. And heaved a sigh. Ridiculous, of course. She'd known it would be. Everything she tried to write down was.

She folded the papers and shoved them back into *Treasure Island*, then flipped through the familiar typed pages, to the last note she'd scrawled in the margin before she'd accidentally dropped the tome in her harried flight from St. Mary's Island nearly two months ago.

Thieves will end up with empty pockets.

She'd scratched the words onto the page in a rage, which had boiled down to a low fury while she was hunkering out of sight on Samson for six weeks, trying to find the long-lost pirate treasure without putting Ollie or Mamm-wynn at risk. Living on her wits, her fishing skills, and the store of necessities she'd taken with her to the abandoned cottages. That fury had flared up again, though, when she came back to Tresco a week ago.

When she saw, in her own house, the man behind the thievery. Guest of her brother. Unapologetic and arrogant and obstinately refusing to see reason when she told him point-blank that the trinket box the Scofields had sold to him had not been theirs to sell. And she had not given them permission. It was stolen goods, nothing more. But the irritating man wouldn't listen.

"Well now. This is quite a vista, isn't it? I daresay I wouldn't grow tired of that view. Or, well . . . I suppose I might. Any view can grow old after time enough. Don't you think?"

Her shoulders went tight as springs at the very voice she least wanted to hear, but she didn't give Lord Arrogance Personified

Sheridan the pleasure of seeing her reaction. Nor did she dignify his observation with a reply.

Even if it *was* the very thing she'd thought herself countless times.

She loved the islands. They'd always been home. But they weren't *all*. There was so much more world out there, just begging to be seen. Explored. Discovered.

Why could her brother never understand that?

Her silence didn't seem to shout to Lord Sheridan that he ought to keep on meandering, unfortunately. He crouched down beside her, his gaze on the water but his presence so very *there* that she couldn't help but scowl at him.

This was all his fault. All of it. Not, of course, that she'd found those letters from the islands' most famous pirate in the foundation of her grandfather's cottage. But he was the one who promised the Scofields he'd buy anything they found. He was the one who threw so much money at them that they thought they ought to start a bidding war with some other antiquities hound with more money than sense. He was the one—blast him—who had offered such a ridiculous sum for her most prized heirloom that the Scofields sold it to him without even asking her first.

She'd have it back. She would. It was the last thing her mother had given her—a gift for her seventeenth birthday, just a week before her mother's death. He'd had no right to buy it. It wasn't for sale, it oughtn't to have been sold. It was stolen goods, and if she thought she had a hope of winning in a court of law against a family as powerful and connected as Lord Scofield's, she'd sue them, and him, for its return.

But an island miss, a vicar's sister, a girl with nothing more to her family name than a small estate on the Cornwall mainland, wouldn't stand a chance against an earl and a marquess.

Besides. The Earl of Scofield may be a money-grubbing thief, but his daughter was one of her dearest friends.

As for the Marquess of Sheridan . . . he'd made himself comfortable on her bluff, just as he had in her home, and reclined back on

his elbows as if he hadn't a care in the world. As if his cutthroat determination to collect antiquities hadn't very nearly gotten her killed once already. As if he had some right to be here still, "helping" search for more of Mucknell's treasure. As if he had a claim to it.

"Remarkable, really." He nodded to the sea.

She blinked, not certain what conversation he'd been having in his head while she flayed him in her own, but she knew that his observation didn't directly follow his thought about growing tired of vistas. "What is?" She mentally slapped herself for asking. In their weeklong acquaintance, she'd already learned that it took nothing more than a single word to get Lord Sheridan talking.

So why in the world couldn't she keep her stupid mouth from giving him those single words?

"The color of the water. It looks nearly Caribbean, doesn't it?" His lips twitched up. "Were I Libby—Lady Elizabeth, I mean—I'd wonder why. Some . . . what's-it-called or such in the water? Micro . . . things. Or minerals. Maybe you care for such things too?"

He glanced over at her with a lift of his auburn brows.

She made a point of looking away, toward the waters. Had she met him some other way, in some other place, perhaps she'd think him handsome. If he weren't a low-down, mean-spirited, dirty rotten thief. "No. Oliver has always been the one to ask such questions." A memory cartwheeled through her mind, pulling a smile to her lips despite the company. "My mother always marveled at how the three of us were so different. She said that Morgan would be eternally grateful for the beauty of the water, as if it were a special gift from God to him. Oliver would wonder why it was so blue, and I . . ."

Blast. She hadn't meant to talk to him. She *never* meant to talk to him. So why had she ended up doing just that each and every day since she came home?

"And you?"

She sighed. "I would wonder where the water could take me."

He chuckled. Probably thinking her a stupid girl, full of dreams that would never come true.

But no. His chuckle wasn't cruel, and she wasn't so unfair as to pretend it was. It was empathetic. As was his smile. "That *is* the thing about it. I think, anyway. The going, I mean. Or rather, that it's a veritable portal to anywhere in the world."

Beth closed the book in her lap and watched the waves roll in. "It is the thing, indeed."

He nodded, stretched out his long legs, and crossed them at the ankles. "Do you miss him?"

She drew in a long breath. No question about which "him" he meant. Morgan had been gone for only two years—finally snatched by one of the ailments that had plagued him since he was a lad—but she felt the ache of it daily, just as she felt the gaping hole of their parents, who had died only a year earlier. "He never missed a Wednesday morning race. He could never participate—he was too weak. But he'd always be right here in this spot, no matter how ill he was. If he couldn't walk down, he'd ask Mr. Dawe to wheel him in his chair. He had to cheer on Ollie." She breathed a laugh and shook her head. "In a lot of ways, Morgan lived through us."

His nod was simple. Sincere. "And still does."

Double blast. That was the sort of observation that made it very hard to remember that she didn't like him one bit.

"Do you ever race?" He nodded to the point, around which the rowers had still not appeared. "Or—well, I suppose I don't know if you could. If they'd let you, I mean. That is—girls. Are they allowed?"

She chuckled at the thought of pulling at the oars, sandwiched between her brother and his best friend, Enyon Thorne. Or even funnier, in the opposing boat with Casek Wearne—the giant of a headmaster who had long been Oliver's rival and was now betrothed to their cousin Mabena.

Leave for a few weeks, and the strangest things could happen.

Who'd have ever thought tempestuous Mabena would end up with him?

But then, who'd have thought that while she was away, her brother would fall in love too?

She shook her head. "It's never come up. Not to say it won't at some point, I'm certain. But for now, none of us girls have any desire to get in the middle of that. Far more fun to watch, and then to take our gigs out later without all that male competitiveness."

"But you watch from here? I think—didn't Lady Elizabeth say something about the beach?"

Lady Elizabeth—the girl whose finger now bore Mother's ring. Apparently one of the reasons she'd been happy to come to the Scillies with Mabena was to escape a marriage to the very gentleman beside Beth now, which Lord Telford—Sheridan's best friend—was trying to arrange. *That* motivation Beth could well imagine.

She sneaked another look at his lordship. Handsome enough, yes. But he was a blithering dunderhead, so obsessed with his archaeological and historical pursuits that he didn't care who he stepped on to get his hands on his next prize. It served him right to have his would-be fiancée snatched from his grasp by Beth's brother.

And just to poke at him, she ignored the question about why she preferred to watch from the bluff versus the beach and said, "Speaking of Libby. I expect you're quite fond of her."

"Oh. Ah." He cleared his throat, but it did nothing to keep a blush from staining his neck. "She's . . . well, a fine young lady. To be certain. And your brother! They make a fine pair. Wish them every happiness. And more."

He didn't exactly sound heartbroken. More's the pity. "More than every happiness? Wouldn't that then get into things that are *not* happiness? Rather rude of you."

The man didn't seem to know when he was being insulted. He laughed and sat back up. "You know what I mean."

"Do I?" She traced a finger along the engraving on the cover, with its gold leaf spelling out the letters. *T - R - E - A - S - U - R - E*.

“For all I know, you wish them ill. After all, Lord Telford brought you here to convince her to marry you, didn’t he? And from what I’m told, you were game.”

“Well. Somewhat. That is—willing, I suppose, at the time.” He shrugged and lifted a hand to shield his eyes from the morning sun. “She’s a nice girl. Deserves a husband who will respect her. Indulge her . . . unique interests.”

The fact that she would spend the entire day after the gig race in the botanical gardens, he meant, studying and drawing each specimen she could find, and then adding the Latin names to them when she joined Mamm-wynn for tea. With Oliver’s help, of course. He’d been tending the exotic plants in the Abbey Gardens alongside the official gardener, Mr. Menna, for years. “And you really don’t mind that husband being my brother instead of you?”

Because she was none too certain they should trust him as Ollie had so quickly done. He might *seem* affable enough, but they oughtn’t to forget that he’d employed two different men to hunt for any artifacts they could find related to Mucknell and one of his associates, Prince Rupert of the Rhine, knowing well how fierce the competition could become. No, not just knowing it—*counting* on it. Hoping for it. He had *deliberately* pitted two artifact hunters against each other.

Johnnie Rosedew had died because of this man’s drive to possess what wasn’t his.

His lordship could say all he wanted that he’d never sanctioned such actions. Just as he could say he’d make no attempt to hold Libby to the engagement her brother had tried to arrange. But saying things didn’t make them so.

Yet he looked utterly sincere—and charmingly self-deprecating too—when he said, “Actually . . . I’m a bit relieved. She’s terrifying sometimes—Libby. When any wildlife is at stake. You may have noticed? Lectured me for an hour last Christmas about some moss my digs had upended. Or lichen? Maybe it was a fern.”

Another snort of laughter snuck its way from her throat. Libby

would no doubt remember exactly which specimen had been in danger. “I can’t say as I find it particularly terrifying, though I’ve certainly noticed the tendency. But then, we all tend to be rather protective of our plants around here.” She swept out a hand to encompass the islands at large. “Without the flower industry, the Scillies would still be poverty-stricken, as we were centuries ago.”

His gaze followed the circle of her hand and then landed back on her. “Mm. So rich in history though. I’m hoping to explore while I’m here. The Druid cairns, I mean. Not just for Mucknell and Rupert. They’re everywhere, aren’t they? The stones?”

“You can hardly take a walk without stumbling over one.” Her fingers twitched on the cover of the book. Druids weren’t her particular interest right now, nor were cairns or standing stones or anything else so ancient. She wanted to explore history only two-and-a-half centuries past—but she still thought Mucknell may have used some of the more ancient sites for his own hiding places, and it wouldn’t do to have Sheridan stumbling across them. “My grandfather will take you about, if you wish. And tell you any tale you’d like about them. Some may even be true.” Tas-gwyn could be trusted to steer his lordship wherever Beth asked him to.

When Sheridan grinned, she could nearly believe he was just an oblivious, coddled lord who really hadn’t meant any ill. “There’s always a kernel, right? Of truth, I mean. In every legend and all the lore.”

“Well. Depending on your definition of *kernel*.” Tas-gwyn Gibson’s tales were far more imagination than anything, much of the time, and all the more entertaining for his embellishments. Her favorite pastime as a girl—other than exploring the islands—was curling up in his lap and listening to story after story. He would take her away with those tales, without ever leaving his house.

And when Tas-gwyn wasn’t there to regale her, Mother had been the one to pull her close and whisper her favorite stories. So many times had Beth snuggled close and said, “Tell me of the pirate and the princess!”

And no matter how many times she'd told it before, her mother would smile, smooth a hand over Beth's hair, and settle in for the telling. "*Once there lived, and once there was, a beautiful maiden at the edge of the world. She made her home here on the islands, where the sea surrounded them day and night, bringing them life and bringing them death. And one day, it brought her a prince. . . .*"

She flipped open the cover of *Treasure Island* again, barely able to stop from reaching for the nub of a pencil in her pocket. So many times had she tried to write down that story. Too many to count. But it was never right. She could never capture the cadence of her mother's voice, the way she would drop it to a whisper in one moment and then imitate the crashing of a wave in the next. She kept trying though, over and again, through the years.

Maybe it was the blank page's fault that the words were never right. Maybe if she wrote it here first, as she'd done the silly little fairy tale she'd made up to catalogue the items she was searching for evidence of . . .

"Oh, is that *the* copy of *Treasure Island*? The one you made the notations in?" A hand appeared in her line of vision, reaching for the book.

She snatched it away, holding it out of reach. Instinct, mostly. And a sound one. She scowled at him. "My copy, yes." No point in quibbling about whether it technically still belonged to her brother. "And there are no notations of any interest to you."

Lord Sheridan didn't look the slightest bit abashed, though he at least put his hand back where it belonged. "Libby made it sound so intriguing."

Beth still fought back a wave of embarrassment every time she thought of her brother's new fiancée having studied her notes. Reading each and every one. Using them, if unwittingly, to take on Beth's role in the treasure hunt.

Those words had never been meant for anyone else's eyes. And they still weren't. "They are hardly intriguing. Idle musings, nothing more."

His brows lifted. “Then why not show me?”

As if he had to ask. “Because the last time I ‘showed’ something to someone even remotely associated with you, it was stolen from me. I’ve learned my lesson. You’re a thief, Lord Sheridan, and I don’t mean to let you touch anything else I hold dear.”