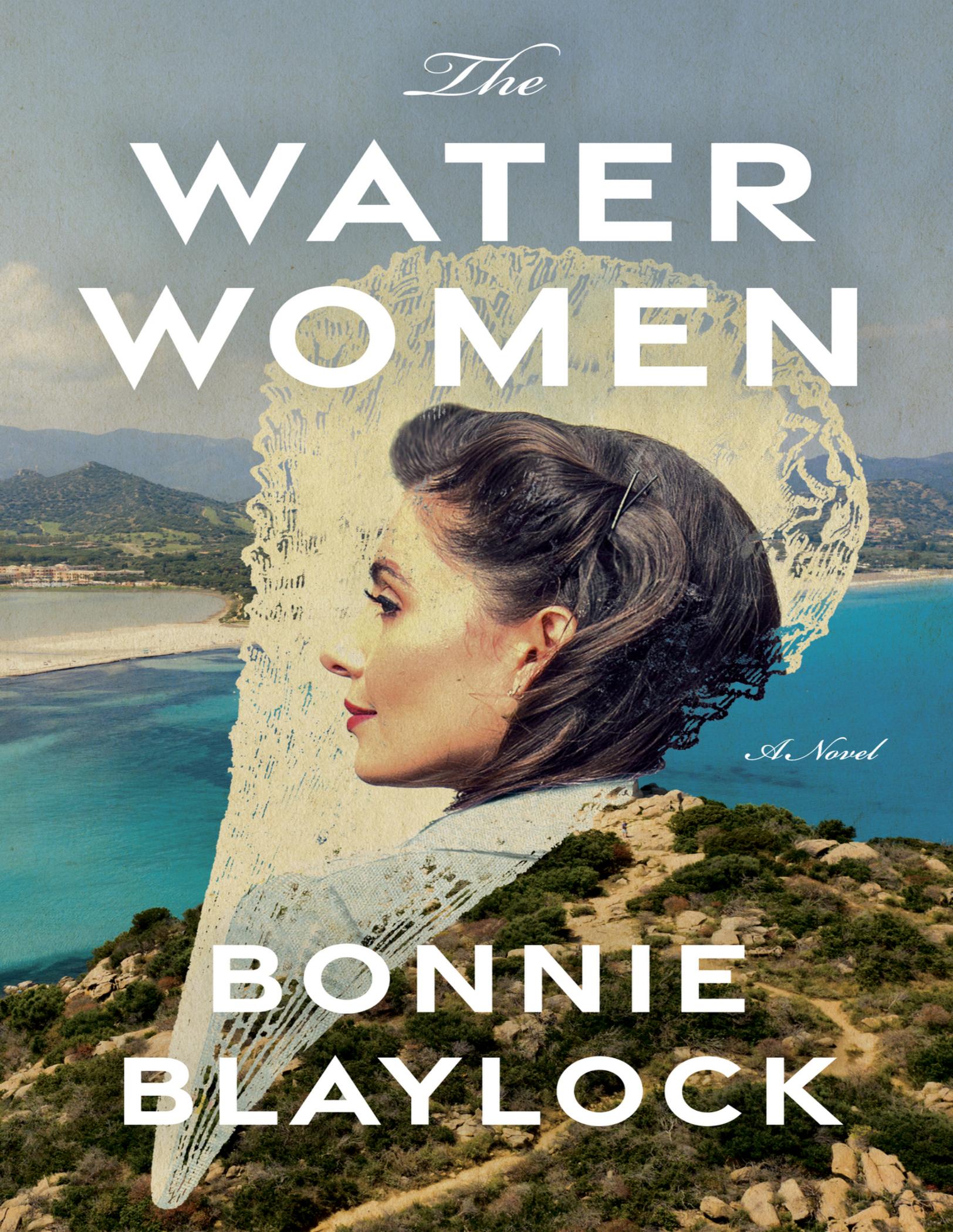


The

WATER WOMEN



A Novel

BONNIE BLAYLOCK

The
**WATER
WOMEN**

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Light to the Hills

The
**WATER
WOMEN**

A Novel

**BONNIE
BLAYLOCK**

LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

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For Samantha

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*Roll on, deep and dark blue ocean, roll. Ten thousand fleets
sweep over thee in vain. Man marks the earth with ruin, but
his control stops with the shore.*

—Lord Byron

Allegria
Sardegna 1910

Chapter 1

When Allegra gazed offshore at the dark and roiling sea in storms like this, the ocean seemed almost sentient. The waters bucked and jumped like the wild horses that roamed the center of the island, reckless hooves flying. Rain needled Allegra's face as she tilted her chin skyward for a deep breath of salt air. No solitary swim today, then. The sea's spectacular turquoise churned to deeper hues, midnight blues and violet far offshore. It was a siren's call, but she knew the current's pull would be too strong, even for her.

Allegra had arrived earlier than the others. They'd celebrated her sister Ella's wedding until late yesterday, full of dancing, eating, and music. Her ears still rang with the laughter and bells jingling on the horse's bridle as Ella and Gus had ridden off to their little cottage a short distance away. Ella was the first of their family to leave, although she wasn't the oldest. The house already seemed strangely quiet with her absence. Accustomed to her large family, Allegra hated to think what it might be like to live there without her sisters. They were so close, and especially so in the work they did. Wedding or no, it was the first moon of May, their traditional gathering day, marking the beginning of another season of harvest from the sea. Like the others, Allegra anticipated this day all winter, waiting for the sun to warm the water while the mollusks and other creatures rested beneath the darkened waves. The first moon of May was as much a celebration as her sister's wedding had been. More so, since it meant a dozen women would meet again regularly at the water's edge, chatting and laughing, flitting about like a flock of sandpipers, glad to be free from weather and work that had kept them indoors since late autumn.

As the wind picked up, a trio of white gulls fought against it, pushing for the refuge of the rocky cliffs jutting from the surf. Allegra followed their impulse and hoisted her basket of tools across her back as she turned toward the shore's rim of craggy stone. Pocked with small grottos, most too small to be called proper caves, the rocks absorbed the buffeting Mediterranean waves casually, having resisted them for centuries. Allegra avoided the slippery algae and hidden urchins as she picked her way into a dry nook just large enough for her to shelter in while she waited for the storm to pass and

the women to arrive. The fishy odor of dried seaweed wasn't so overpowering here, and when she stepped out of the wind, quiet enveloped her like a blanket.

Allegra sighed deeply, brushing damp locks from her face. Between foraging for food and the all-consuming work of collecting and weaving the byssus, spare moments came seldom. Her family and their close community of neighbors depended on everyone bearing their share, a work ethic Allegra's mother had ingrained in her early. She sorted through the items in her woven basket, strung with buoys and an anchor weight to hold it in place on the ocean's surface: various knives that she'd strap to a belt for her dive, a glass jar for collecting the byssus, a small net and diving spear (if she happened on an eel or octopus that might do for dinner). All in order, clean and tidy.

Her island of Sardegna was charming and somewhat insulated, wild and untamed in many ways, but despite Allegra wishing it so, the place she called home wasn't beyond being drawn into the world's politics. She wondered if people everywhere in the world struggled like they seemed to in Italy. Some of their mezzadri, or sharecropper, neighbors found themselves tending smaller and smaller plots of land, scarcely enough to feed their families. There was talk of families scraping together what they could and striking off for better prospects in America.

Allegra's family, she knew, would never consider such a thing. Granted, it was hard to find essentials for the pantry, but they were lucky. Lucky they'd been trained to find and use what the land and sea provided. Lucky their fathers and brothers knew how to throw nets and set traps on the ocean floor to keep them fed. There was another reason they would never emigrate: her family's chief concern had always been caring for the *Pinna nobilis*, a unique giant mollusk that rooted itself in the waters of their cove. As long as there had been memory, she and the women of their Hebrew sisterhood carefully cut the keratin threads the mollusks produced and wove them into fine cloth, ornaments, and tapestries: the byssus. It was their sacred oath and duty, passed through generations and guarded through the ages. It bound them to one another, this skill and the honor of carrying its knowledge, and they gave it as a gift to a world that seemed bent on turmoil.

A break in the sky. The sun pierced through the clouds, parting them like a curtain. On cue, the ill-tempered gulls took flight, eager to resume

their endless glide back and forth across the cresting waves, searching for an unwary morsel. Allegra rose, too, lifting her long black skirt trimmed with its traditional red and green and shaking the damp from its folds. A peal of laughter from down the beach reached her ears as she climbed back down the rocks. A group of a dozen women walked toward the shore.

“Lora!” Allegra called and waved, and her oldest sister waved back with a wide smile, beckoning Allegra to join them. For a moment, Allegra pictured Ella raising her arms as they lowered her dress over her head before the ceremony and the unmistakable thickening of Ella’s waist that clearly signaled a child on the way. A twinge of concern pricked at Allegra’s stomach. Two women in their town had died last year giving birth. Children always brought risk.

The dark clouds had already blown several kilometers offshore, receding with the tide, and Allegra shielded her eyes against the sun. Her heart filled with anticipation as she trotted toward the group, and she batted away her momentary concern over Ella. She stripped off her white outer apron and unbuttoned her vest to ready herself for the sweetest part of the day: their collective swim.

They’d dropped their baskets in a circle behind the familiar rock formation and without hesitation began stripping down to their thin cotton undergarments. Although she’d never seen one, Allegra imagined they must resemble a flock of penguins, donned in their traditional black and white garb. Each region of Sardegna had its own variation on the costume, a slightly different waistcoat style or a wider embroidered trim, but the flash of red panel in the folds of the black skirts, the sun-bleached white of the shirts and trim on their caps were the same. It was yet another tradition that linked them and set the people of Sardegna apart from the Italian mainland.

“Watch the waves just past the drop-off,” Allegra said. “That storm current dragged seaweed in, and there could be jellies.”

“Last sting I got stayed red for two days.” This from Danetta, one of the older women, who rubbed her arm in memory of the pain. “Stick with me, Gabriella. I’ll show you what to look for.” Allegra smiled when the shoulders of the youngest among them relaxed.

They helped one another undress, arrange supplies, repair equipment, and sharpen knives against their whetstones. Then, as if conducted by an invisible maestro, they all stood together with their arms outstretched toward the sea. The cool water hissed against the sand and lapped between

their toes. In an odd, singsong mixture of Hebrew, Italian, and Nuragic, they repeated the names in their lineages, paying homage to the mothers and grandmothers who'd spun the byssus thread for centuries.

Something always stirred in Allegra's heart when they did this. She loved being counted as part of this unbroken line, each link connected to the ones before it and the ones after. She imagined their craft, this divine gift, stretching into the future, like the ocean reaching to meet the horizon. The thought made her feel safe somehow, secure in the thought that a part of her and her work would always continue.

Lofty thoughts for a morning swim. With a final prayer of service and pledge to offer this gift where it was needed, they waded in and floated their baskets out past the cresting waves. The women bobbed for a moment in pairs as they breathed in, and one by one, their dark heads disappeared beneath the water like seals. Allegra filled her lungs beside her sister Lora, and with a deep breath and curve of her back, dove to join them.

Chapter 2

The women naturally fanned out across the grassy seabed, inspecting the field of mollusks that grew offshore in a protected lagoon. Allegra noticed Danetta and Gabriella together. Danetta demonstrated how to twist the wrist just so, to wrest the shell from the mud where it was implanted. The warmer days and warming water had softened the mud enough to pry the shells loose without damaging the mollusks' feet. These mollusks were large, a bit over three feet at their height, and it took some strength and maneuvering to budge them from where they'd dug in.

Allegra witnessed Gabriella surfacing two or three times before Danetta went up for her first long breath, and she smiled to herself. It had taken Allegra months to build up enough lung stamina to stay under for more than two minutes. Her mother had led her through practices at home while they did other chores, teaching her to use busy hands to keep her mind off the air demand. It was much easier to hold her breath above water than below, where she had to overcome her mind's distrust of lingering in a place where breath was impossible.

Allegra hoisted shell after shell to the surface, where she used her short knife to cut the filaments that fanned out from the bivalve's clamped halves. This was the byssus. She was careful not to lose a bit of the dark-amber fiber, placing each piece in her basket as she cut it. Once she'd harvested the threads, Allegra dove again and nestled the mollusk's base back into the muddy lagoon bottom so that it could live on.

Closer to shore, the seabed changed from mud to sand, and Allegra noticed a subtle circle of white spots in the sand near a rock. She drew the three-foot spear from her belt and hovered above the pattern to make sure. A slight movement of the sand confirmed her suspicions: a flounder lay partially buried, its gills sending up the barest disturbance of sand. Her well-aimed spear pierced the base of its head, and she pulled it flapping from its hiding place. A school of sargos darted away in a flash of silver, startled by the movement.

"Brava, Allegra." Her mother praised her catch as they swam toward the shore, and Allegra beamed. Contributing to the family table was an added benefit of their diving—and a necessary one because the byssus

brought no income. It was part of their vow that it couldn't be used for personal gain.

Allegra and Lora compared their harvests on the shore as they dried off and dressed. Lora was four years older and, Allegra thought, the prettiest of the three sisters and the responsible one. Ella was more like an ocean breeze, apt to waft in and out quickly, her attention easily stolen. Ella sparked fun and laughter, splashing in the water, hanging on to someone's basket to be dragged in to shore rather than swimming herself. If pressed, Allegra might label herself the quiet one. Pretty enough, tall and slim, with muscled arms and long, dark hair that hung most often under her cap or scarf in a thick braid down her back. She worked hard. At seventeen, she sometimes wondered if she'd marry or have children. It took a patient sort of man to marry a weaver woman, one who knew where he stood when the seasons changed and the days grew warmer, when most days between May and September, he'd wake to find his wife already gone to the shore, tending the byssus rather than his breakfast.

Allegra and her sister linked arms and set off toward home, the flounder she'd snagged still flapping in her basket.

"What do you think Ella's doing?" she asked.

"They're on their honeymoon, sciocca. What do you think?"

Allegra pushed Lora sideways with her hip. "That's not what I meant. Do you think she misses the first harvest this morning?"

Lora shrugged. "I think Ella's mind is elsewhere."

"I'd be sad to miss it. Even for someone like Gus. I still can't believe Mamma agreed to have the wedding so close to first moon."

"*We're* here," Lora replied, as if that made up for their sister's absence. "Anyway, Ella hasn't taken the water oath yet."

Allegra stopped suddenly, jerking Lora backward with her. "You think she won't?"

Lora pulled her forward again. They'd almost reached the small footpath that led to their home beyond the cliff face. "It'll have to be her choice."

"Did she say something to you?" She glanced out at the waves breaking against the shoreline, the gulls squawking overhead, and the line of laughing women laden with baskets walking behind them toward their own homes. It was all she'd ever known, and she loved it entirely.

“No,” Lora admitted. “But Ella’s married now, with babies soon to come.”

“Mamma’s married.” Allegra glanced at Lora. She said nothing about her suspicions or concerns that Ella might already be carrying.

“Yes, but Mamma is a maestra. You know how Ella is. She’d just as soon go cliff jumping with friends as swim with us in the lagoon.”

“We’re water women,” said Allegra, as if that settled it. Her papà was a pescatore, and her brothers would follow. Just as the shepherders knew their trade and the bakers theirs, families inherited the land or business and learned the skills, the younger generation placing their feet in the treads of their fathers and mothers. Allegra’s father appeared at the top of the path and smiled at them. He reached out to take their baskets.

“Flounder,” he exclaimed. “And still fresh.” His large, warm hand rested on Allegra’s head, and for the second time that day, she felt complete, the ground solid beneath her and her task predictably set before her.

The muscles in her arms and legs ached pleasantly, evidence of a day well spent. Ella would return to them soon enough, she believed, and when she did, Allegra wouldn’t feel her absence so keenly. As it was, her thoughts kept returning to her sister repeatedly, like a tongue drawn to the cavity from a lost tooth.