



Preface

My great grandfather, Captain Isaiah Wallace, owned a schooner and sailed from Nova Scotia along the Maine coast to trade in New York. My grandfather, John Elis Sjostrom, was a Swedish merchant sailor who lost his life at sea at the end of World War I, when my father was five years old. My husband Roy is descended from generations of Maine lightkeepers, from William Gilley on Baker Island to Howard Gilley on Curtis Island. I always thought there should be a story in this connection that Roy and I have to sailors and lights, so I began to read accounts of real life on lighthouse islands. I especially enjoyed *Lighthouse in My Life* by Philmore Wass. The stories of light-keeping families serving on the coast of Maine ignited my imagination.

As I walked with my border collies along the Rockland Breakwater one summer, I began to give voices, faces, and names to the children in my imagined lighthouse family. I listened to their conversations and, as the children talked to one another and to me, I was able to see how they lived and worked alongside their parents. I saw their joys, their struggles, and their adventures. Each child had responsibilities to their parents and to one other, and each had a clearly individual personality.

After doing further research about Maine lightkeepers of the early twentieth century, I began to put together the adventures of the Barton family, the lightkeepers who revealed themselves to me while I was walking the breakwater.

In this way, *Light on Jib Island* was born.

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CHAPTER ONE

Elizabeth

“Ouch!” cried Elizabeth, as she slammed the heavy bureau drawer on her icy fingertips. She stuck the throbbing fingers into her mouth to soothe them. With her other hand she grabbed a pair of woolen long johns from the floor where they had fallen. Then, in one quick movement, she dove back into her bed. Wrapping herself with the well-worn quilt that Nana had made for her, she pulled her socks up to her knees and then wiggled the long johns into place under her nightgown.

“There,” she mumbled, still sucking on her tingling fingers and letting out her breath. “Now maybe I can get some sleep.”

Elizabeth settled herself into the familiar indentation in her mattress, shielding herself as best she could from the frigid air that attacked from all sides of her bedroom in the lighthouse keeper’s house on Jib Island. The great kitchen stove on the first floor did not send much heat to her room, even though Papa filled it full with coal each evening. Elizabeth rubbed her feet back and forth on the flannel sheets to help create a bit of heat from friction. Then she tucked her long skinny feet and long skinny legs up under her nightgown, doing her best to keep warm.

“Breathe slowly, Elizabeth, in and out, in and out,” she said to herself in an effort to calm down and get to sleep. Her thoughts drifted back to a warm June day in Camden, where she had gazed into the window of the Village Shop looking for magazines with photographs of far off places.

* * * *

The Bartons were a lighthouse-keeping family that took great pride in its work and responsibilities. However, at least once a year, when Papa had business on the mainland, the whole family was treated to an adventure. A trip to the mainland was a luxury for a family living on a small island off the coast of Maine. Elizabeth and her three brothers were thrilled to have a chance to visit Camden. The boat ride and a picnic lunch on the shore were always great fun, as was scrambling for penny candy at Dougherty's store.

"Please, may I have two cents worth of licorice," Thomas had called out, his eyes glued to the candy window.

"I'd like some licorice drops and a peppermint stick, please," said Francis.

"Francis, get me some Necco Wafers," said Harry. "I like the chocolate ones."

"Please?" asked Francis.

"Pleeeese," said Harry.

"I am going to get red licorice," Elizabeth said to Mother as she waited her turn.

"We don't have much time to get over to Haskell's to get you some shoes, Elizabeth. Your father will be ready to go quite soon."

"I don't care to have new shoes, Mother," said Elizabeth, as she thought of the covers of the magazines on display.

If only she could buy the *National Geographic* with photos of exotic places on the cover, she would be in heaven. The cover of *Life* for August 1921 featured a young woman being instructed by a handsome naval officer about how to take a sighting with a sextant.

Papa has already begun to teach me how to use a sextant, she thought, but the naval officer was handsome.

The Saturday Evening Post celebrated the Fourth of July with a portrait of a young woman in a Revolutionary War uniform. Elizabeth laughed out loud and pointed to the covers.

"Mother, look! These magazines show that girls can do lots of things besides housework."

"Of course they can, Elizabeth, after they finish the dishes!" said Mother, as she tousled her daughter's hair and kept moving out the door

and up the sidewalk.

Just then, instead of seeing magazines, Elizabeth was surprised to see her reflection looking back at her from the large store window. Her eyes scanned the deep-set brown eyes and brown wavy hair that were just like her mother's; the full bow lips, more like her father's; and the tall, gawky frame covered by a mid-calf navy dress with white buttons down the front and a white collar. It seemed an odd sight to a girl of twelve years who was seeing her whole self all at once for the first time.

Is this really me? she wondered as she turned away.

She turned and skipped along to catch up with her mother, who was heading into the shoe store. After they had settled on a pair of brown lace-up oxfords, which Elizabeth immediately put on, the two headed back toward the harbor to find the boys.

Elizabeth slapped her new shoes on the pavement. They began to rub blisters on her ankles as she moved on toward the wharf.

"There they are, Mother." Soon she and her mother had caught up with and passed the boys as they all headed for the dock.

"Look out where you're walking," Francis snapped. Her oldest brother had no tolerance for daydreaming. "Just 'cause you got new shoes, don't think you can walk all over people."

Francis needed new boots, but did not get them this trip. Elizabeth, though, would have traded her shoes for many other things more precious to her.

The children started to run when they saw Papa waiting for them near the dock. He smiled to see his family running toward him and reached out to help Mother with her packages.

"Would you like a piece of licorice?" Harry shouted as a bit of black goo escaped the corners of his mouth.

"Thanks, Harry," said Papa, as he took a piece and popped it into his mouth. Then he headed for the boat with Harry close behind.

"We need to get back. The seas are picking up and it won't be light much longer," said Papa.

The snap of the wind against her loose window casement snatched Elizabeth out of June in Camden and brought her back to the freezing air of November on Jib Island. She wriggled again under the blankets to find a warm place and squeezed her eyes, pretending to be in the warm winter sun somewhere in Brazil or maybe even Tahiti. Even her Nana's quilt didn't seem heavy enough in this cold.

It was the first cold night in a long time that she had slept without her grandmother. Nana was the kind of grandmother who made everything better. If you were cold, she helped warm you. If you were angry, she soothed you. If you were sad, she cheered you up.

Even though the room was dark and empty, Elizabeth could see the lighthouse light burning through the window, holding her to her island home. It was cold for November and Nana's absence seemed to lower the temperature even more, as the chill permeated her small frame. Nana was her protection from the chill and from the kind of aloneness an only daughter could feel in this family; however, Nana would not be back until spring.

Elizabeth couldn't stand to think about how long the winter would be. By the time she saw her grandmother again it would be 1922, and she would be thirteen years old. Each breath brought icy air deep into her lungs and she felt the snow drifts piling up inside—from her toes through her legs and into her body. The frozen air poked at her skin with every movement.

"It's freezin', Nana," she would have said, if Nana had been there.

"Never mind," Nana would have advised. "Think of that day last June when we thought we'd melt by the stove, tryin' t'get the dandelion greens canned. Mercy, what a day!"

Snuggled up to Nana, rubbing her arms and legs against Nana's thick flannel gown, she would have fallen asleep. Nana always made the bed warmer and sleep come more easily, as she hummed a hymn in the tiny bedroom. Nana's voice was soft as goose down, and it stroked her mind with feathered chords until sleep took her.

Tonight, through the window, Elizabeth could see the lighthouse light and the eerie glow it gave the sky: a nightlight of moonbeams, as the fog patches drifted in and out about the house and tower. Like Nana, the

light always surrounded Elizabeth with comfort. Not as exciting as her dreams of far off places, but the comfort of her home and her place in the great, huge world.

Papa never failed to light the lamp one-half hour before sunset and to put it out one-half hour before sunrise. It shone into her window on the mainland side of Jib, and cast its broad beams out toward England.

The long arms of light stroked the rough North Atlantic like the arms of a strong swimmer taming the waves with their power. They stretched toward the east and toward the north and south of Jib Island. Of course, the light didn't reach England, but it did reach out far enough to warn ships away from the rocky Maine coast. The ships that sailed from Maine and Canada with cargoes of pulpwood, and back to Canada with freight from the southern states, the Caribbean and even South America, relied on these lights. Their captains watched for and counted on the lighthouses, which were distinguished by their different light signals, to get them through the treacherous waters and the rocky shoals off the Maine coast.

It was not stormy tonight, but Elizabeth listened to the sound of the foghorn with its long, low moan. The foghorn was new to Jib Island. Just a year ago they had used a fog bell, which was operated by a winding mechanism. Papa had allowed all the children to watch the lighthouse engineers install the new system and explained how the horn worked. The new foghorn was powered by a coal-fired engine and was called a Daboll Trumpet, named for its inventor, Celadon Leeds Daboll. The low howl of the horn sounded spooky to the children.

"Don't like it, Papa," said Harry, who was then only three years old. "It ith thcaaaary."

Papa laughed and took Harry in his arms. He blew a low moan in Harry's ear and asked,

"Am I thcaaaary, Harry?"

"No, silly Papa."

"Then the new horn can't be thcaaaary either, can it Harry? Just pretend it's me, blowing in your ear."

Papa put Harry down and tickled him.

Elizabeth hoped the next day would be bright and sunny. The chil-

dren would all have their chores to do. Fourteen-year-old Francis always worked with the men. Thomas, who was ten, did odd jobs inside and outside, and Elizabeth worked in the kitchen with Mother. Harry did his best to get in the way. The chores would keep her mind off all the things that whirled around in her head tonight. She and her brothers would be so busy that the day would fly by. In a lighthouse family everyone worked.

Thomas always said, "This is a very, very important job," as he took it upon himself to be in charge during chore time, even bossing Elizabeth and Francis.

"We must make the house spotless," he insisted as he scrubbed the stairs down.

"Spotless," mimicked four-year-old Harry, with his brows knit together and lips pressed tight, dripping water on Thomas's clean wood steps.

The children knew that when they polished brass or carried oil, everything they did was for the smooth operation of the lighthouse station. Papa was quite serious when he talked about the responsibilities of a lighthouse family. His handsome face and strong shoulders were more noticeable in his navy blue lightkeeper's uniform with the shiny brass buttons. His round cap looked rather like the ones worn by train conductors with a flat top and a short, round beak that framed his straight nose and strong chin.

Elizabeth thought Papa the most handsome man she had ever seen. The ship's captain that she would marry would have to be as handsome as Papa and have eyes as blue as his, as well as the nose of a Greek god. Elizabeth had seen the pictures of Greek and Roman deities and knew that Papa's strong good looks came from another place and time. In Elizabeth's eyes, his perfection extended to all he was and all he did.

The children watched Papa's deep-sea eyes and listened as he told of shipwrecks caused by a failed light. Everyone worked on Jib Island to keep the equipment and buildings in perfect condition and to keep the light and horn running without fail.

"The boats need us," repeated Harry.

"The boats need you to get to bed, Harry, so that you can get up and do your jobs tomorrow," Mother said as she winked at the older chil-

dren, while taking Harry by the hand up the stairs amid his protestations and their giggles.

"I am big. I can stay up like Thomas. I'm four," he said, holding up four fingers for all to see. "Four is big, not little."

Elizabeth thought about the day four years ago when Mother had brought Harry back to Jib from the mainland. He was already a month old and had fat, pink cheeks. Mother didn't have pink cheeks, though. Her hair had its first touches of gray. Her eyes were not sparkling, her steps were slower, and she had to rest at the top of the wooden stairs that led to the boat dock. Papa had told them about her illness, but Elizabeth wasn't sure what he was saying.

"Is she going to die?" Elizabeth asked. "Will she be back soon?" "Why is she so sick?"

Her brothers just sat on the kitchen benches and swung their feet and looked at the floor. Only Elizabeth pounded Papa with questions.

"I don't know, Lizzie," he'd said, trying to take her in his arms and comfort her as she swallowed her sobs, his own eyes glistening with tears held back. She refused his comfort.

"Mother wanted Harry, Lizzie," Papa said. "She says he's a beautiful baby and we'll all love him."

"I'll never love him if he comes here and Mother doesn't. I'll never, ever love him," Elizabeth screamed as she ran up to her room.

Nana had gone after her and she had let Nana hold her as she wept. Nana's arms encircled her heaving body.

"Your mother will be home, my Rosebud; she'll be home. With God's help, she'll be home. Now say your prayers with me for Mother, say your prayers."

It was Nana's prayers that brought Mother home with Harry that sunny, Sunday morning and, as sick as she looked to Elizabeth, Mother's smile said, "Everything will be all right."

The next morning Mother did her best to make a fresh start with Elizabeth. As she stirred the porridge on the stove she said, "Lizzie, set the table now, please, and after breakfast I need you to clean up the dishes, as I promised Papa that I would iron the lens cover this morning."

"Sure, Mother," Elizabeth said, eager to please her mother after her

tantrum the evening before. "Of course you know Papa will say that you ironed it perfectly, once again." Mother and Elizabeth laughed at predictable Papa.

When he did say exactly that this morning and smiled and winked at Mother, giving her shoulders a squeeze before he took the cover out to the tower, Mother pretended to be unaffected by his praise and played at pushing him out the door.

The children giggled while Nana chuckled and said, "Blow on out the door, Mr. Windbag."

"Out the door," said Harry.

Nana knew all about the workings of the lighthouse too. Her husband had been lost at sea long ago when Papa had been just a boy; she knew why the light had to be run with perfection. Maybe a good lighthouse keeper could have saved her captain. But it was a futile thought.

Reliving these days helped Elizabeth to relax, and her bed felt a bit warmer. Her thoughts rolled back to the morning. She did miss Nana and grew sad as she remembered Nana's preparations for leaving.

Nana's black coat and hat had hung on the pegged clothes tree in the corner of Elizabeth's room, ready to go. In the summer, the clothes cast strange shadows as they covered the pegs, becoming spooks during the long evenings when Elizabeth went to bed before it was quite dark. They would name the shadows after the people in Boston who lived in Nana's neighborhood.

"Why, how do you do this evening, Mr. Codfish," Nana would say, referring to a grumpy old man who lived on the ground floor of her building and always complained about the weather, the condition of the streets, the taxes, the woman who lived above him, and just about anything else. "Homely as a codfish!" she'd described him.

"I do believe Mrs. Rosy Nosey is with us tonight, Nana," Elizabeth would declare, talking about the woman across from Nana's doorway, who watched everyone's comings and goings and reported on these with regularity to anyone who would listen. Nana thought that Mrs. Rosey Nosey was very free with her gossip.

"Did you know, Mrs. Barton," she had said to Nana once, "Mr. James has been seen walking in town with a lady? I think there might be

a wedding soon.”

Nana had replied that Mrs. Rosy Nosey needed to mind her own business.

Elizabeth imagined the tall building where her grandmother lived, with a wide sidewalk in front of it, street lamps that glowed all night, and a trolley car at the corner that could take her anywhere in Boston. She could picture it, although she had never been there. Next spring she would be allowed to go for a two-week visit to Boston, live in Nana’s apartment and see all the sights. Papa had promised.

