

Pre-Publication Excerpt

Island Legacy

Book Three of First Light

LINDA CARDILLO

The Eye of the Storm

The storm was worsening. Elizabeth had forgotten what a New England hurricane sounded like. The shrieking wind, the groaning response of the house to the buffeting and pounding, even the restless breathing of everyone gathered for shelter, served only to heighten Elizabeth's anxiety. She felt only slightly safer at Cove Meadow than if she and Matteo had been trapped at Innisfree.

Peering out the unshuttered window over the sink, she strained to see if Matteo was on his way back to the house as Caleb had said. Then she heard his voice behind her in the mudroom off the kitchen and turned in relief. She wanted to pull him close, confirm with her touch that he was safe, but she refrained. He'd hate to be coddled like a baby in front of the men. Instead, she scanned Josiah's face for what she hoped would be reassurance, not greater concern. But what she found was wariness and exhaustion as he peeled off his dripping rain gear.

Matteo walked into the kitchen smelling of goat and tracking in a trail of must and straw.

Caleb raised his arm in a high-five to him.

"Thanks for the help, Matt. If the goats had panicked and escaped the barn we'd still be out there."

Elizabeth watched her son's face light up from Caleb's praise and silently admitted that here was one more thing she owed the ranger on this harrowing day. She tried not to think of Matteo's outburst the night before, the searing emptiness of not having a father who could offer the kind of recognition Caleb had just given him.

She should feel grateful, she told herself. But she didn't. Instead, she felt her relief in Caleb's kindness to her son was a betrayal. It should have been Antonio acknowledging Matteo. Knowing that could never be made her desperate to ensure that Antonio's film kept him alive for his son.

Her dismay must have been broadcasting itself on her face, because she caught Caleb looking at her once again as if she had slapped him.

“I’ve made a fresh pot of coffee,” Grace called from the living room. “Does anyone want a cup?” She seemed to have sensed the tension in the kitchen and intervened to defuse it.

At the same time, Izzy came into the kitchen bearing towels and handed one to each of the men and Matteo.

Taking her cues from Izzy and Grace, who seemed to be carrying on with serene confidence, Elizabeth refrained from expressing her rising panic. Instead, she turned to Grace. “I’m exhausted. Can you point me in the direction of a place to crash? Matteo, how about you?”

Matteo rolled his eyes. “Not yet.”

“You might want to wash up before you bed down for the night,” Caleb suggested. “Let me show you.”

Caleb led Matteo out of the kitchen, lantern in hand.

Elizabeth watched them silently, feeling once again that her son had slipped from her grasp.

Grace called to her gently. “Don’t worry. He’s in good hands. Let me show you where you and Matt can sleep.”

Elizabeth followed her, too tired to watch over her son and realizing how ridiculous that was. He’d already been out in the storm.

“We’ve put the elders in the bedrooms. I hope you don’t mind sleeping on the couch.”

“Oh, Grace, I’m so grateful for a roof over our heads. I’m happy to sleep on the floor if someone else needs a bed.”

“No need. Caleb’s already claimed the floor.” She pointed to what looked like an army-issue bedroll in the corner.

Elizabeth helped Grace make up the couch and an air mattress for Matteo. It unsettled her that Caleb would be sleeping nearby, but couldn’t explain even to herself why.

“Josiah will be monitoring the weather on our short-wave. Try to get some rest, and don’t fret about Matt staying up. Caleb will keep him from doing anything stupid. I’ll leave this lantern here for you on the table.”

“Good night, Grace. And thank you.”

She didn’t believe she could follow Grace’s comforting suggestion with the house groaning around her and the rain lashing in fury on the roof and against the shutters. But her physical exhaustion and depleted emotional reserves undid her and she drifted unwillingly into a dream-ravaged sleep.

Around 3 a.m. she bolted awake, not from the crash of a limb or the boom of a churning wind, but from the silence. Except for the steady whoosh of breathing that she recognized as her son’s in deep slumber on the mattress behind the couch, the house was eerily quiet. She remembered once reading about the unnatural absence of sound in the eye of a storm and the treacherous lure to the unsuspecting that the danger was past.

She got up as quietly as she could and stood for a moment watching Matteo sprawled across the mattress, his long legs hanging over the edge. She remembered how mesmerized she’d been by him when he slept as an infant, his face a reflection of milk-sated bliss. Although he was wordless, she’d learned quickly to understand his needs. She’d been a confident mother then, a “natural,” Antonio had murmured to her in their bed as she’d nursed Matteo. She no longer believed she deserved that label. She shivered in the dampness that had seeped into the house. The fire in the woodstove had burned down. She pulled from the couch the woven blanket she’d burrowed under and wrapped it around herself as she carefully padded around Matteo and into the kitchen.

The pot of coffee Grace had made earlier in the evening sat on the stove. Elizabeth retrieved a clean cup from the dish drainer and found a lighter on the counter. It took

her a few seconds to get a flame to light the burner, but finally a wavering blue tongue of fire spit out of the nozzle and the gas ring on the range came to life in a burst of light.

She was pouring herself the reheated coffee when a voice broke the storm's soundless center. She jumped and nearly dropped the cup.

"I could use a cup of that as well." It was Caleb in the doorway, his flashlight casting a pale blue light on the sharp planes of his face, exaggerating the weariness and fatigue Elizabeth assumed was a mirror image of her own.

She handed him the cup she'd just poured and took another for herself.

Caleb moved further into the kitchen, shut the door behind him and sat at the table.

"No point in waking everybody else up."

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you."

"You didn't. I was already awake."

"The silence . . ."

"Yeah. It's far more ominous than the howling. A hidden killer, teasing its victims with the deceptive belief that the danger is past."

"How close do you think we are to the wall? When will it descend again?"

"Not sure. My dad is keeping tabs on things. He'd be sounding the alarm if we were at risk."

"It's been a long time since I've been in the middle of a hurricane. I think Matteo is finding it exciting rather than threatening."

"I did, too, at his age. Look, I may be out of place saying this, but it's okay to let him be a kid."

"And you think I'm not? I didn't hold him back from going out to the barn with you tonight." Elizabeth could sense the defensiveness in her voice, her posture.

"And good for you! I mean it. You said the words that gave him permission. But you should have seen your face."

“What about my face?” But Elizabeth already knew the answer.

“The last thing you wanted was for him to leave the safety of his mama. And you especially didn’t want him spending time with me.”

The physical and emotional tolls of the last twenty-four hours had finally drained Elizabeth to the point where she had no inner resources left to hear Caleb’s comment as anything other than an attack on her.

“Has it somehow become your summer project to deliberately antagonize me? You’re right about one thing. I’m not looking for a surrogate father for Matteo. He has a family full of role models and doesn’t need someone influencing him who has such a negative view of me. Look, I brought Matteo to Innisfree to heal us both and to find a new equilibrium as a family without a husband and father. That’s been hard enough. But from my first day at Cape Poge, you’ve treated me as an interloper, someone who doesn’t belong. Why? What difference should it make to you that I’ve set up housekeeping at Innisfree? Your mother and Izzy seem grateful that I’m there, that the place hasn’t been abandoned.”

Elizabeth stood up. “Whatever is bugging you—about me or Innisfree or something that has nothing to do with either—leave me out of it. And leave my son alone.”

She wanted to slam a door or throw the coffee cup against the wall. But she swallowed the anger she could only attribute to sleep deprivation and the oppressive anxiety wrought by the storm. She was a guest of Caleb and his family and had absorbed lessons of how one should behave under stress from none other than her grandmother. Elizabeth knew Lydia would have been appalled to hear her outburst. Elizabeth was appalled herself. But she couldn’t take back what she’d just said. Somehow, in her exhausted and raw emotional state, she’d spoken what she truly felt

about the enigmatic and judgmental man still sitting at the table.

She put the coffee cup in the sink, gathered up her blanket and left the kitchen.

She went back to the couch, knowing that she was too wired to attempt sleep but trapped into waiting out the storm. She wrapped herself up and turned away from the room. If Caleb followed her, he'd be confronted with her back. She sank into her misery, engulfed by the loneliness that had been her constant state since Antonio's death. She tried to stifle the sobs rising to the surface, but at that moment nature echoed her despair as the wall of the hurricane came roaring back across the bay. To Elizabeth, the storm seemed even more ferocious than the evening before, and she gave herself up to her own fury.

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