



*A Stranger's Visit
to the Lighthouse*

by Marilyn Turk

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The Departure

Little Bay Lighthouse, Maine,
Christmas Eve, 1895

“You won’t be gone long, will you, John?” Isabel’s hands rested atop the mound of her stomach as she stood in the open door to the lighthouse keeper’s home.

“Don’t you fret, Isabel. I’ll be back long before dusk. I just have a few errands to do in town before meeting your mother on the noon train.” He pulled her close as possible and kissed her forehead. “I’ve got to be back to light the lamps, you know.” Peering down at her with tender eyes, he gave her a wink.

“Yes, I know.” She forced her lips upward into a smile. “Please be careful.”

“I will. You take care of our little one while I’m gone, you hear?” John glanced down at her bulging middle, kissed her again, then turned and walked down the hill to the water where the lighthouse skiff was tied up.

Isabel’s heart twisted as he got in the boat and rowed away. She loved their little island home, but sometimes the loneliness was difficult to bear. *It’s only a few miles to the mainland,* she chided herself. So why did she worry something might keep him from getting back home safely? The same unsettled feeling she got every time John went for supplies crept through her again.

She lifted her gaze to the white lighthouse standing sentinel on the bluff above the water's edge. Not only did it represent John's position, but the tower was also John's pride and joy. Her heart filled with admiration for his dedication to keeping the light burning, the lantern polished and the tower clean, a routine that earned him several keeper awards. Many mariners owed their lives to his faithful commitment.

Isabel closed the door, leaned against it, then sighed. *Relax. You're just overly emotional these days.* She massaged her round middle. The baby would be here soon, and if she'd calculated right, in about two weeks. Perhaps once the baby rested snug in its cradle, she'd stop letting her fears run away with her. Thank God, John was bringing Mother back with him. Isabel missed the company of other women, and it would be especially nice to have her mother with her. When Isabel went into labor, Mother's experience and capable hands could handle any problems that came up.

A ripple of excitement coursed through her at the prospect of showing her mother the cottage. This would be Mother's first visit to the island where they moved when John became keeper of the Little Bay Lighthouse. Isabel had worked hard to make their home as warm and inviting as the home where she'd been raised. She'd sewn ruffled muslin curtains for the windows and crocheted pillows for the furniture, giving the cottage a cozy feeling just right for her and John. And the baby.

As if on cue, the baby kicked. "Soon, little one. Soon, you'll get to see your new home yourself."

A smile eased onto her face as she spoke loving words to the baby. “Your daddy teases me for talking to you, but I know you’re listening.” She patted her stomach and the child inside. “Just wait until you see the lovely crib Daddy made for you.”

Would Mother approve of the baby quilt she’d stitched for the crib? Few women possessed her mother’s talent for making beautiful clothes and furnishings for her home.

“It’s Christmas Eve, Junior. Your grandmother will be here soon.”

A pleasant aroma wafted into the room from the kitchen, reminding her she had a pie in the oven, made with the island’s blueberries she’d canned last summer. She plodded to the stove and bent over to retrieve the pie, then placed it on the table beside the stove to cool. As she straightened, she placed her hands on the small of her back. It felt like it would break. Two more weeks. Could she carry all this weight that much longer?

John leaned backward as he pulled the oars through the water. The tide was coming in, aiding his progress to the mainland. He raised his eyes to the sky above, the clear blue of a cold winter’s day. *Thank God, the weather is nice today.* He hated leaving Isabel alone, especially now, with the birth so near. Isabel said two more weeks. He didn’t know about those things, but figured a woman did.

She tired so easily lately, yet seldom asked for his help, determined to stay strong, even when he knew her fears lay just below the surface. If only he could keep her from worrying. After losing the first child before it was born, Isabel feared she might not be able to carry a child all the way. But this time, by the grace of God, the child was almost here. They’d prayed for a healthy child and soon, their prayer would be answered.

“Lord, be with her and comfort her while I’m away,” he uttered aloud. A breeze blew across the water, ruffling the top, as if in answer.

Isabel sank down in the rocking chair by the fireplace, then pulled a shirt out of the basket of mending beside the chair. Retrieving a needle and thread from her sewing kit, she got to work on John’s shirt. His buttons often ripped off or his shirts got torn when he snagged them cleaning the prisms on the lantern. Mr. Strathmore, the lighthouse supervisor, was very particular about the light keepers’ appearance, so she stayed busy mending John’s clothing, especially his official uniform. She certainly didn’t want to be the reason John got marked off at Mr. Strathmore’s next inspection.

After a while, she lowered the needle and thread, resting the shirt in her lap and leaned her head back. *What was the rest of the family doing?* Isabel’s two sisters, Rachel and Margaret, were probably in the midst of Christmas preparations. Rachel’s five children kept her household lively. Knowing her, she had cooked enough for an army, with all Walter’s family coming over. Would Rachel have more children? Perhaps she was expecting again already. Unlike Isabel, her nest hadn’t stayed empty very long.

Her older sister Margaret would spend Christmas Day with her husband’s parents. Margaret’s husband Samuel was a minister, and their three sons were the spitting image of their father. No doubt one of them would follow him into the ministry. In her mind, Isabel could see Margaret’s home – perfectly decorated for the season, with velvet bows adorning the wreaths and banisters, and candles lit in every window.

Isabel scanned the small sitting room of her home and sighed. It was tiny compared to her sisters' homes. Nothing fancy or elegant by any means. But it was comfortable. And it was home. Finally, after living in a small apartment the first year, then sharing a home with two other keepers and their large families the next, she and John had a home of their own.

She smiled at the little fir John cut for their Christmas tree, holding its own in the corner and adorned with strands of cranberries and ornaments she and John made. It was fun crocheting the snowflakes, but she was especially proud of the crocheted angel perched on the top.

Isabel's gaze traveled down to the little nativity scene beneath the tree. Her heart swelled with pride as she recalled the long hours John put into carving each piece, the care he'd taken to shape the infant in the manger. She'd oohed and aahed over each of the lifelike characters, amazed at her husband's workmanship.

"Nothing but the best for the Lord," he'd said, and it was obvious he strived for perfection as he used his God-given talent.

She tied a knot in the thread at the base of the button, thankful she'd married such a kind, godly man. Thank God, he hadn't taken "no" for an answer when he proposed the first time. She smiled, remembering why John decided to become a light keeper in the first place. Her refusal to marry a sailor prompted him to give up his dream of being captain of his own ship in the Navy, joining the lighthouse service instead. Isabel felt the familiar pang of guilt that accompanied the realization of John's sacrifice for her.

But the life of a lighthouse keeper's wife didn't turn out as she'd expected either, especially now that they lived so far from their families. The thought of spending Christmas without the rest of her relatives threatened to dampen her holiday spirit. But fortunately, Mother

agreed to come, even though she'd miss sharing the holiday with her other daughters and their families.

Isabel finished the mending and pushed herself out of the chair. She shivered and pulled her shawl around her shoulders. Was it getting colder in the house or was it just her body's erratic temperatures lately – hot one moment and cold the next? She threw another log on the fire and then went to the stove to put the teakettle on. As she waited for the whistle of steam, she glanced out the window and gasped.

The Storm

John kept an eye on the darkening sky to the west of town. As he hurried out of the hardware store, he frowned at the building clouds creeping forward, slowly snuffing out the sunshine of the morning. Where had those come from? Mr. Thompson glanced up from carving meat as John entered the butcher shop.

“Mornin,’ John.” He nodded toward the window. “It gettin’ darker out there or is it my imagination?”

“It’s getting darker, I hate to say. Looks like we have a storm coming.”

“Maybe we’ll have snow for Christmas, eh?” Mr. Thompson’s accent gave away his Canadian roots.

“Perhaps. Only I wish the storm would hold off a while longer. If it’s a bad one, I don’t want to be caught in it.”

“So you should go ahead and leave now, eh?”

John shook his head. “Can’t. Isabel’s mother is arriving on the noon train, and I have to fetch her. She’s spending Christmas with us.”

“That so? I’m sure Isabel will be happy to have her mum.” Mr. Thompson wrapped up some steaks in butcher paper and wiped his hands on his apron. “How’s your wife doing? ‘Bout time for the babe, isn’t it?”

“She’s fine, thank you, but stays pretty tired these days. Isabel says the baby is due in two more weeks.”

“Her mother’s staying until after the baby’s born, I hope? We men aren’t much use with babies. When Gretchen had all ours, she and her mum shooed me out of the house. Fine with me, too. I was always afraid I’d drop one of the little ‘uns or do something wrong.”

John observed the large man’s hands, big as the hams hanging behind him. He could no doubt hold an infant in one of them. He couldn’t contain his chuckle imagining the big man afraid of holding a little baby.

“I’m thankful her mother agreed to come. Isabel’s been pretty lonely without her family around her this time of year. Plus, I think she’s nervous about ... being alone ... at a time like this. Neither of us is” – Heat flooded his face. “You know ... experienced.”

“You best stay out of their way too. Just jump when they say jump.” Mr. Thompson pointed a finger at him.

“Isn’t that what we do anyway, Mr. Thompson? To keep our women happy?”

Both men laughed out loud. Then Mr. Thompson crossed his arms. “So what can I do for you today, John? Need a ham?”

“Certainly do. We’d hoped to have it for Christmas dinner.” John looked over his shoulder at the window. What started out as a bright sunny winter day had become dark and ominous.

“It’ll keep. You can have it later, if not tomorrow.”

“But Isabel is counting on it.” She also counted on him being there. Maybe the storm would blow through quickly.

“Here ya’ go.” Mr. Thompson passed the wrapped ham across the counter. “And here, take some of this sausage. Smoked it myself.”

John reached in his pocket for his money, but the big man held up his hand.

“No. It’s a gift. Merry Christmas. May God bless you and the misses with a healthy baby.”

“Thank you. Merry Christmas to you and your family as well.” John tipped his cap, then left the store and headed for the train station.

When he reached the depot, the train hadn’t arrived yet. John began pacing the platform. He pulled out his pocket watch. Fifteen minutes late. Couldn’t the train be early today?

He pictured Isabel waiting and watching for him at the window, creases of concern marring her sweet face. She was so excited about Christmas and had gone to such effort to decorate their little home for the holiday. He couldn’t bear seeing her disappointment if things didn’t go as she’d planned. His gut wrenched. Dear Isabel. She’d worry herself sick if he didn’t get back today. She certainly didn’t need something else to be concerned about.

“Just got a wire about heavy snow up the line slowing things down.” John overheard the clerk at the ticket window tell the man in front of him.

As John stared down the tracks, strong winds began to blow. John pulled up his collar and closed the top of his coat, as did the others waiting on the platform. He glanced at the clock hanging above the depot door. “Now it’s thirty minutes late,” he muttered to himself.

Finally, John heard the train whistle in the distance, and he blew out a sigh of relief. As the train rolled in, the wind howled like a wounded animal. Snow began falling in huge wet drops while the train huffed and puffed into the station, its giant wheels squealing to a stop.

“John! Yoohoo. Over here!”

John followed the voice and saw his plump mother-in-law descending the steps of one of the cars. He rushed over to help her down.

“Welcome, Mother Harris. Did you have a pleasant journey?”

“I’m so glad to see you, John. We stopped several times to shovel snow off the tracks. Thank God, it’s not bad here.”

Not yet, but taking the boat back out in the weather was out of the question. John could see the water from where he stood, the rolling, angry sea already too much for the skiff to handle. He couldn’t take the chance of the small boat capsizing in the rough waves.

“I’m afraid we can’t leave now, Mother Harris.” He grabbed her suitcase. “We’ll have to wait until the storm passes. I pray that will be soon.” Motioning across the street, he said, “Meanwhile, let’s get something hot to drink in the hotel dining room.”

Isabel gaped at the black clouds creeping toward the lighthouse while frigid fingers of wind slipped through the cracks around the window. Frothy waves churned up the unsuspecting sea and sent them crashing into the shore, splashing against the rocks. Isabel gripped the edges of her shawl and hugged herself against the scene as well as the chill.

Oh no. Not today. Not a storm on Christmas Eve. The clock dinged once, drawing her attention to the mantle. *One o’clock.* Mother’s train should have arrived, and John would have met her by now. What if they were in the boat in this weather? Her chest tightened as a vision of the skiff fighting turbulent waves forced its way into her mind.

Shoving her worrisome thoughts aside, she checked the large pot of vegetable soup simmering on the back of the stove. As she lifted the lid, she inhaled the aroma of fresh onions

and carrots, then stirred the contents. John loved her good, hearty soup. She imagined the smile on his face when he returned to be welcomed home with a hot bowl of the broth. She removed the towel from the bread she'd made yesterday and cut several thick slices. Everything would be ready when they arrived. If only they could beat the storm.

She poured another cup of hot tea, then returned to the parlor and placed the cup on a side table beside the large family Bible. As light inside the house faded, dimmed by the absence of sunlight through the windows, Isabel lit the kerosene lamp so she could see to read. The Bible was marked with passages of comfort she went to when fear threatened her peace. Her favorite Scriptures were in the book of Psalms that promised God's presence and comfort and told her to "fear not."

How she yearned to immerse herself in those words. She closed her eyes and recited them from memory as gale-force winds blew against the house, whistling through the cracks.

"What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee."

A tinkling patter of icy rain began to pelt the windows.

Opening her eyes, she flipped to the bookmark in Isaiah. "Fear not, for I am with thee."

Through the clamor outside, Isabel heard a mournful "meow."

Miss Kitty! Poor cat. Isabel scrambled out of the chair and opened the door enough for her striped feline to rush in, soaked and shivering.

"Oh Miss Kitty. I'm so sorry." Isabel scooped up the drenched cat, wrapping the kitty in her shawl. She settled back into the chair and stroked the animal, drying it at the same time.

"This is no time to be out hunting mice, is it?"

Miss Kitty had been a gift from John last year after she lost the baby. He told her he'd found the tiny kitten in a pile of trash in town near the harbor, saying it appeared to have lost its

mother. The kitten proved to be a godsend for Isabel, giving her comfort and distraction when she needed it most.

“We girls need to stick together, don’t we?” The cat answered with a soft meow, as if thanking Isabel for letting it inside.

Isabel’s tension eased as she pet the soft yellow fur. The cat purred, nestled in her lap, content to be inside and out of the storm. *If only I could relax like her.*

A voice inside her head said “Trust me.”

Yes, Lord, I want to.

What could she do to keep busy? Isabel reviewed a mental list of things she’d meant to accomplish before Christmas arrived. Make the pie – done, cook soup – done, mend John’s clothes – done, dust the furniture – done, finish John’s present. Oh! She’d almost forgotten. She lifted the sleeping cat from her lap and placed it on the sofa, undisturbed.

Isabel went into the bedroom and opened a trunk that rested at the end of the bed. She removed several blankets before she found what she was looking for. As she took out the bottom blanket, she unfolded it. Inside lay a knit cap, gloves and scarf, made of dark blue wool yarn. She ran her fingers over the soft material, feeling its warmth. John certainly needed these things in their Maine winters. His old ones were so worn out that even mending didn’t help. If only he had them now.

There were just a few finishing touches to put on her handiwork and she planned to do so while he was gone today. Returning to the parlor, she stole a glance at the window. The wind howled a warning to stay inside while the storm still raged outside, sleet pinging against the house. Surely John had stayed in town to wait out the storm. Would he have risked his and her

mother's safety to get back, just so she wouldn't be afraid? She shook her head. No. He was the one with the level head.

As she settled back in her rocker with her knitting, she began to pray for John and for her mother. She prayed for her sisters and their families, for sailors at sea, and for anyone else caught in the storm. Then she prayed for the baby. She hoped for a boy, a John Junior. She envisioned a little mirror image of her husband trotting around behind him. She smiled at the picture in her mind, her heart warming with joy. Yet, she'd be thankful for a healthy baby girl as well.

As she rocked, her eyelids grew heavy. Her hands dropped in her lap as the rhythm of the storm droned a curious lullaby.

"It looks like we'll have to stay here for the night." John turned from the window to face his mother-in-law.

"Oh dear. I was afraid of that." Mother Harris cast an anxious glance at the window of the hotel dining room as she held a hot cup of tea. "I hate for Isabel to be alone tonight."

"I do too." John clenched his fingers into fists and rammed them into his pockets. "We have no choice. One thing I learned from my sailing days is to stay in port when the weather is dangerous."

"Yes, of course. I certainly don't relish the thought of being in a boat in this storm. Do you think Isabel will be all right? Is she getting along okay with the baby's time so near?"

John nodded. "She's well, just tired. Eager for the baby to be born though."

"She's wanted a baby so long. I know she wishes for a family like her sisters have."

The older woman stood and smoothed her long skirt. “Are you certain they have enough rooms tonight? The hotel may be full with Christmas visitors or stranded travelers like us.”

“I’ll check at the front desk.” John looked toward the lobby. “If they only have one room, you can have it and I’ll sleep downstairs in a chair. Wait here until I find out.” He strode over to the desk and after a few moments with the clerk, returned.

“We’re in luck. Got the last two rooms – well mine’s more of a broom closet, but it’s shelter.” John forced a smile.

“My dear, I don’t believe in luck. It’s God’s providence we’re here and not out in the storm.” Mother Harris nodded her head in emphasis.

“You’re right, Mother Harris. If we’d been in the boat when the storm hit, we’d be in serious trouble.”

“I do hope she gets some rest tonight and doesn’t stay up worrying about us. She’s always been such a worrier.”

“I hope so too. I haven’t left her overnight by herself since we moved to the island.”

“I’m sure she’s capable of taking care of herself. She won’t do anything that will jeopardize the safety of the baby.”

Alarm slammed into John’s gut with nearly the same force as the gale. He clapped his hand over his mouth.

“What is it, John?” His mother-in-law’s brow wrinkled in concern.

“The light. I won’t be there to light the lamps. I hope she doesn’t attempt to do that herself.”

“Oh my. Do you really think she would?”

“She knows how important it is, to me and to anyone out at sea, to have the light burning. She’s accompanied me up the tower in the past when I lit the wicks, but not since she’s gotten so large with the baby.” John didn’t want Isabel’s mother to know just how unsafe it could be for Isabel to attempt to climb the narrow winding stairs in her condition. *God, if she tries and falls, I’ll never forgive myself.*

Mother Harris laid her hand on John’s arm. “John, we need to pray for Isabel.”

John bowed his head as the woman prayed. “Dear Lord, please take care of Isabel and send your comfort during this time. Protect her, guard her with your angels, and keep both her and the baby safe. Amen.”

John lifted his head and gave his mother-in-law a hug. “Thank you. I felt a sense of peace when you prayed, and trust that Isabel will too.”

The Stranger

Isabel lifted her head, groggy from her nap. As her eyes came into focus, she jerked awake. What time was it? She scanned the room, dark now save for the glow from the kerosene lamp. Was it evening yet?

She squinted to see the time on the clock. *Five o'clock*. A rush of anxiety quickened her pulse. John and Mother weren't here. And they wouldn't be arriving now that it was dark. Alone ... on Christmas Eve. This was not what she'd planned. She envisioned sitting around their small dining table with John and Mother, enjoying hot soup and fresh bread, laughing and talking, relishing each other's company.

But now, she was alone. Except for Miss Kitty, who wasn't much of a conversationalist. Might as well remove the soup from the heat. No one would be joining her tonight. As she moved her body, stiff from sitting so long, to the kitchen, she tried to see outside, but could see nothing but darkness. Daytime ended early this time of year, plus the storm had removed all light. She paused and listened. Save for the ticking of the clock, it was quiet. The rain had stopped. *Thank God, the storm has passed.*

She ladled some soup into a bowl for herself as her stomach growled its impatience.

"All right, little one. I suppose you're hungry too." She patted her tummy. Carrying the bowl, she walked to the table and set it down. She grabbed the back of the wooden chair to pull it out, then stopped and tilted her head. What was that noise?

Was someone knocking at the door? Yes, that was knocking she heard. Her heart raced, beating wildly in her chest. Could it be John? Oh my, they did come! They'd made it!

She hurried to the door and unbolted the latch. She pulled it open, ready to leap into John's arms, but he wasn't there. Her hand flew to her mouth, and she sucked in a breath. Standing in front of her was a man she'd never seen before. His soaking hat pulled over his ears, he shivered from the cold.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry to bother you, but my boat wrecked on the rocks below. I saw the light from your house and hoped to find someone here who could help me."

Isabel shuddered as cold wind forced its way through the open door. She studied the stranger. She'd never let a man in the house without John being there. But the poor man was freezing. Where else could he go? How could she send him away, knowing she could give him shelter? What if John was in the same situation and sought help? She hoped someone would be compassionate enough to let him in.

"My husband's not here right now. He went into town today for supplies, but he's been delayed by the storm." The man lifted his clear blue eyes to her, appealing, and her heart went out to him. She didn't know why, but she wasn't afraid of him. "Please come in out of the cold."

"Thank you, ma'am. You are very kind." He entered and stood dripping by the door.

"Please. Let me take your hat and coat." Isabel reached for the wet garments. "Warm yourself by the fire."

"Thank you." The stranger walked to the fireplace and glanced back at her. "Would you like me to throw on another log? The fire is quite low."

"Oh yes, please. I needed to do that. It will probably be much colder tonight." Isabel watched the tall, blond-haired man bend over to pick up the logs from the pile beside the fireplace.

He threw on the wood, then stoked the fire with the poker. "There, that should do it." He brushed his hands off together.

Isabel gestured to the chair beside the fireplace. "Please sit down and get comfortable. Have you been out in this weather a long time?"

The man nodded and smiled. "Quite a while. Perhaps I should introduce myself. My name is Gabe Goodman."

"Isabel. Isabel Morgan. My husband is John." She settled on the sofa beside Miss Kitty and reached out to stroke the curled-up cat, who lifted her head to meow her appreciation.

"I've heard of him. He was in the Navy, wasn't he?"

Isabel raised her eyebrows. "Yes, how did you know?"

"We have a mutual friend."

"Oh?" Isabel cocked her head. "I'm afraid I don't know many of John's Navy mates." She studied Mr. Goodman. Warmth and sincerity radiated from the man. Why did she feel so comfortable around him as if he was a friend and not a stranger?

He scanned the room, then motioned to the Christmas tree. "What charming Christmas decorations you have. I especially like the nativity."

Isabel followed his gaze to look at the tree "Thank you. John carved it." A deep sigh escaped from her.

"Is everything all right?" Mr. Goodman's face registered concern.

"Yes, well I hope so." Should she confide in this stranger? "I'm just a bit worried about my husband and my mother. John was supposed to meet my mother's train and bring her back here today. They haven't returned yet, and with this storm ..."

“You’re worried something has happened to them?” He finished her sentence for her.

Isabel nodded, then lowered her eyes, fighting the tears that threatened to form.

“I’m sure they’re fine. Your husband knows the sea and wouldn’t take any chances that would harm your mother.”

She raised her head to look at Mr. Goodman. “I know you’re right. I shouldn’t worry so.”

Mr. Goodman pointed to the open Bible on the chairside table and nodded. “I’m sure you know the Good Book tells you not to worry or be afraid.”

“Yes, I’ve been reading it today, telling myself to ‘fear not’ like it says. Perhaps I’m just selfish. I really wanted to spend Christmas Eve with my family, with John and Mother.”

“That’s a normal desire for most people. Nothing to feel guilty about.”

“What about you, Mr. Goodman? Do you have family?” Isabel bit her tongue. She didn’t mean to pry into his personal life.

Mr. Goodman chuckled and spread out his arms. “I have a very large family. Seems like I have family everywhere I go.”

What a curious thing to say. “So you have relatives near here? I expect they’re worried about you, too.” She scolded herself for only thinking of her own situation.

Mr. Goodman lifted his face and sniffed. “Something smells wonderful.”

“Oh my goodness. I’m so sorry, I forgot to offer you anything.” Isabel jumped to her feet. “I have some fresh-made soup. In fact, I was about to have some when you arrived. Would you like a bowl?”

“Warm soup – just what a body needs in this cold weather! I’d greatly appreciate it, that is, if you can spare any. But please don’t go to any trouble for me.”

“It’s quite all right.” She tried to hurry across the room, but her weight slowed her.

From the corner of her eye, Isabel saw Mr. Goodman watching her as she crossed the room. He stood and followed her to the kitchen. Isabel’s face warmed, embarrassed by her clumsy gait.

“Children are a gift from God.” A broad smile spread across the man’s face. “Your first?”

Her breath caught. She forced a swallow, and nodded. *Was that a lie? Her first baby was already with the Lord.* She reached for a bowl and filled it with soup, placed it on a plate, then laid a slice of bread beside it, her back to the man.

“May I pray for you?” Mr. Goodman offered.

How did the man know her fears? Isabel nodded and bowed her head. “Please.”

Mr. Goodman placed his hand on her shoulder. Ordinarily, she’d recoil from a stranger’s touch, but instead of fear, his hand released warmth through her. “Lord, we know that you are with Isabel and the baby, and you will take care of them both. We also know you are with John and Mrs. Harris, and you will protect them as well.”

Isabel turned to face him and hand him the soup and bread. Tears filled her eyes as she said, “Thank you.” Something he’d said piqued her curiosity, but she couldn’t remember what it was.

“All will be well.” He glanced down at the food in his hands and took a deep whiff. “This looks delicious! Thank you.”

She nodded and motioned to the dining table where her soup still sat, cold.

“Won’t you join me?” At her hesitation, he pleaded, “Please. I’m sure you need the nourishment. Have you eaten today?”

She hadn't. In fact, she'd forgotten about eating since Mr. Goodman arrived. She shook her head, suddenly feeling very tired.

Mr. Goodman placed his food on the table and pointed to her chair. "Sit down, please. I'll heat up your soup."

She tried to protest, but just didn't have the energy. He pulled out the chair for her, and she obliged and sat. Then he removed her bowl, carried it to the kitchen, and returned it with steaming soup. After he placed it in front of her, he seated himself.

The man bowed his head and Isabel did likewise.

"Our Father, thank you for this blessing of food, a warm house and the kindness of this dear lady. Amen."

Isabel nodded. "Amen."

The warm broth trickled down her throat, soothing as it did. She was glad she'd made it, and happy she had something to offer the man.

"This is wonderful." Mr. Goodman wasted no time emptying his bowl.

Good as it tasted, Isabel couldn't eat much. She sipped the soup little by little, feeling full despite the small amount.

"So your husband John is the light keeper?"

Isabel's spoon fell from her hand, clattering on the table. "Oh my. The light! I have to light the lantern!"

Isabel stood to leave, but a pain shot through her abdomen making her breath catch. She grabbed the back of the chair to steady herself. A jolt of fear coursed through her. Why did she have that pain? Was something wrong with the baby?

Goodman jumped to his feet and rushed to her side. “I don’t think you’re in any condition to go to the lighthouse.”

“But I must! John’s not here, and I’ll have to do it.”

“I’ll do it for you. You need to lie down.”

Isabel opened her mouth to object, but couldn’t speak. She leaned against Mr. Goodman for support as he helped her to the parlor where she lay down on the sofa.

“You know what to do?” She gasped for breath as she tried to talk.

Mr. Goodman looked down on her, his face glowing with kindness. “I do. I’ve helped many light keepers before. You just close your eyes and rest. Everything will be fine.”

Why did she trust this stranger? Yet, his voice conveyed peace. *Fear not* echoed in her mind, so she complied.

The Homecoming

Bright rays of sunlight streaked across the new-fallen snow as John and Mrs. Harris climbed into the boat at dawn and pushed away from town.

“It’s a beautiful Christmas morn.” John scanned the countryside, cloaked in a blanket of white.

“Yes, indeed.” Mother Harris nodded. “Snow has a way of making everything look so clean and pure.”

“Thank God, we have no wind today, or it’d be much colder.” John cut a path through the water with each pull of the oars.

“The sun is warm despite the cold air. We couldn’t have asked for a more beautiful day.” Mrs. Harris lifted her face to the sun.

It took little time to cover the distance to the lighthouse on the calm water. John rowed up to the shore, leaped out and pulled the skiff up on the sand so his mother-in-law could step out on dry land. She scanned the surroundings as her smile widened.

“How lovely, John! What a charming little island.”

John tied up the boat, then reached for her hand to help her up the slope. “Isabel and I think so, but it’s especially pretty today, covered in snow.”

“There’s smoke coming from the chimney. She must be up and about now,” Mother Harris said, looking uphill at the cottage.

“The light is on in the lighthouse.” John observed the lantern slowly rotating in the tower nearby. How did she manage to light it? “I better put it out before we go to the house.”

John hurried into the tower and ran up the stairs. He snuffed out the lantern and closed the curtains, then rushed back down where Mother Harris waited at the foot of the stairs.

They continued across the snow to the cottage. When the two reached the door, they found it unbolted. John shoved the door open.

“Isabel?” Mother Harris called out as they entered.

She faced John, her eyebrows knit together. “Where could she be?”

“Isabel?” John pushed away the encroaching anxiety. What if she climbed up the stairs and then collapsed with exhaustion?

It took no time for them to realize she wasn’t in the parlor or the kitchen. Together they went to the bedroom, John holding his breath. *Please let her be all right.*

Isabel lay still on the bed.

John hurried over to her. “Isabel, are you feeling well?” He clasped her hand, relieved to find it warm.

“Isabel, dear, it’s Mother. We’re here.” She leaned over her daughter’s form.

Isabel’s eyes fluttered open, then widened.

“Mother?” She turned her head and saw her husband. “John. You’re here.”

“Yes, we’re here darling.” John bent over his wife and kissed her. “I’m sorry we couldn’t get here yesterday. The storm proved too rough for us to make the attempt.”

A smile eased across Isabel’s face as her eyes moistened with tears. “I know, dear. I’m just happy you’ve arrived safely.” Then her smile disappeared. “I’m so sorry about the light, John. I wanted to light it for you, but I was just too tired.”

“What do you mean? The light was on when we got here. I just put it out.”

Isabel's face brightened. "Mr. Goodman must've done it! He's such a nice man. Have you met him?"

John exchanged glances with Mother Harris, and they both shook their heads.

"We didn't see anyone. Who is Mr. Goodman?" Who was this man who'd been in his home with Isabel? John racked his brain trying to remember someone named Goodman.

"He's the man that came last night when his boat wrecked on the rocks. He said he knew you, from the Navy. I was a little scared about letting a stranger in the house at first, but he didn't seem like a stranger. He was more like a friend."

John worked his jaw, certain he didn't know a Goodman. "There's no wrecked boat down below. Where is this Mr. Goodman?"

"I don't know. The last thing I remember is him helping me to the sofa. I wasn't feeling well. He told me not to worry, that he'd light the lantern."

"But where is his boat? How did he leave?" John restrained himself from running out to search for the man.

Isabel moved her head from side to side. "I'm just thankful he was here. He prayed with me, and I felt such peace about your safety and the baby." Her eyes widened. "Oh! I just remembered what he said when he prayed. He asked God to watch over John and Mrs. Harris. Mother, I never told him your name. How did he know?"

"Who was this stranger who claimed to know us?" John said.

Mother Harris nodded and patted Isabel on the hand. "He was an answer to our prayer, John. That's who he was."

Just then, Isabel gasped and cried out, her eyes darting to her mother. “Mother, I think the baby’s coming!”

Mother Harris moved closer to her daughter’s side and waved John away. “John, you best make yourself scarce for a while. Looks like another prayer is about to be answered, just in time for Christmas.”

The End

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