

Pre-Publication Excerpt

The Uneven Road

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Book Two of
First Light



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BELLASTORIA PRESS
P.O. Box 60341
Longmeadow, Massachusetts 01116

An old man cocked his ear upon a bridge;
He and his friend, their faces to the South,
Had trod the uneven road. Their boots were soiled,
Their Connemara cloth worn out of shape;
They had kept a steady pace as though their beds,
Despite a dwindling and late risen moon,
Were distant. An old man cocked his ear.

William Butler Yeats, "The Phases of the Moon"

1955
Cape Pogue
Chappaquiddick Island
Martha's Vineyard

Chapter 1

“On the grey sand beside the shallow stream”

Josiah

“Izzy, come on! Mom’s waiting for these last buckets of quahogs for the chowder. It’s almost lunch time and I can see boats heading over to the dock already.”

Josiah called to his sister from the base of the rough-hewn steps that led up from the clam flat to the promontory where his family’s house perched overlooking Pogue Bay. Beyond the house were Betty’s cottage and then his family’s Boat House Café itself, where his mother and Betty were busy in the kitchen preparing for the lunch crowd. It was late June, a week before the Fourth of July, and summer people had begun arriving, swelling not only the population of Chappaquiddick but also the number of bowls of chowder his mother needed to fill every day.

It was hot, with not even a light breeze to lift the Stars-and-Stripes. It was his job to raise the flag every morning, the signal that the café was open. He wiped the sweat running down his forehead. He and Izzy had been out in the shallows raking for clams since the tide had run out a few hours ago.

Although she was only seven, Izzy could wield a rake pretty well and usually filled her bucket almost as fast as he could. Her bucket was smaller, of course, suspended like his in the middle of an old inner tube that floated as she moved over her patch of the bed. They each had their own territory. Their dad, Tobias, had settled their squabbling one day last summer when Josiah had thrown up his hands in frustration that he couldn't do his job right when Izzy was close. He worried that he'd accidentally run the rake over her foot or knock her over as he pulled the rake through the sand.

He worried about Izzy a lot. She was five years younger than he was. His parents sometimes called her their miracle baby, a child they never expected to have because his mom had been so sick. He worried because Izzy was a dreamer, her mind often someplace else instead of paying attention—like the day when a monster wave rolling in on East Beach was about to swallow both her and the sand castle she was building. He had raced to pull her away just in time.

He called to her again. She was kneeling at the edge of the shallow pool of stagnant water that filled a dip in the sand along the shore of Shear Pen Pond. She was braced on her hands, staring at something in the water. It made him think of the myth his English teacher had made the class read. Narcissus had admired his reflection so much that he fell in love with it and drowned. Josiah shook off the creepy feeling that came over him. Izzy couldn't drown in that shallow water. Besides, she knew how to swim. His dad had said island children learned to swim almost before they could walk. It was stupid to think Izzy would come to harm watching whatever it was that had so captured her attention.

He stalked over to the water and picked up Izzy's bucket.

"I'm not going to wait for you another minute. Mom needs the clams. Don't be late for lunch."

He shrugged, realizing that she probably hadn't heard him. He knew it would mean that he'd have to come back to get her, but he wasn't going to drag her away. He trudged up the steps with both buckets, the clams knocking together as he swung his arms. It was too hot for chowder, he decided. Instead, he'd eat his clams raw.

He remembered the first time he'd tasted a raw clam. He'd been down on that same beach with his dad, younger than Izzy was now. Tobias had raked up a full bucket and set it on the sand, beckoning Josiah to pick out one clam. Josiah had studied them for a long time and finally pulled one out of the pile, the coarse white and gray striations of its shell swirling with precision from its hinge. Tobias took the clam and slipped a short blade between the two halves, prying them apart to reveal the flesh. He rinsed off the morsel in the sea and handed it to Josiah. He tipped it into his mouth, tasting the brine and feeling the different textures—the soft, tender belly and the tougher foot—against his mouth. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and grinned at his father. Tobias grinned back and then they made their way back up to the house. When Josiah was older, Tobias had taught him how to wield the knife and Josiah had offered his first shucked clam to Izzy, right here on this beach.

Now, when Josiah got to the top of the steps he looked back at his sister, still crouched over the water, oblivious to the heat and the bugs. He turned reluctantly toward the café with his laden buckets, knowing his mother was waiting for him but feeling uneasy about leaving Izzy. His eyes didn't detect any danger—no storm clouds were gathering over East Beach, no brush fires were smoldering on the edge of the woods. But he sensed something hovering over his sister, unseen and menacing, and it made his skin prickle.

Chapter 2

“I have walked and prayed for this young child”

Mae

Mae was shucking quahogs on the wooden table behind the Boat House Café when she saw the tall, athletic woman shepherding three children along the path that led from East Beach. The children, two boys and a girl, looked to be around Jo and Izzy’s ages; and like her own children, they were bursting with pent-up energy after being cooped up inside after three days of unrelenting rain.

The sun had finally broken through this morning, heralding what Mae anticipated would be a busy day at the café as other mothers, driven to distraction trying to contain and entertain their children, would follow.

Most of Mae’s customers arrived at the café by boat, but a new cottage had been built just west of the lighthouse. Mae guessed that the family making its way along the meadow were the people Frank Bennett had told her were renting the new place.

“Yoo-hoo! Is this the Boat House Café?” The woman strode up to Mae, one hand clasping the hand of the little girl,

the youngest of the three children, while the boys ran ahead to the dock.

“Boys, stay away from the edge!”

Mae put down her knife, wiped her hands and stuck one out in greeting.

“This is indeed the café. Welcome! I’m Mae Monroe, the proprietor.”

“I’m Lydia Hammond. This is my daughter, Susan, and the hellions are Richard and Louis. Do you know if there are any other children out here?”

Mae smiled. “There are—my own. I have a son, Jo, who’s twelve, and a daughter, Izzy, who’s seven. From what I can guess, around your children’s ages.”

“Oh, thank God! Frank mentioned there were children nearby, but with all the rain, we haven’t seen another soul—child or adult—since we arrived.”

“Well, come on into the café and we can acquaint the children with one another when mine get back from clamming. Where are you folks from?”

Mae picked up the bowl of shucked clams and led Lydia through the back door and into the kitchen.

Betty, Mae’s best friend and the heart of the Boat House Café, was at the counter, peeling potatoes.

“Mae, have you got some clams ready for the chowder?”

“Here you go. Betty, this is Lydia. She’s renting that new cottage beyond the lighthouse.”

“Welcome, Lydia! How long will you be staying?”

“We’ve rented the cottage for the whole summer. My husband is a cardiologist in Philadelphia and will probably come up on weekends. But I’ll be here with the kids till the end of August. Speaking of which, I better go round up the boys and get them settled at a table before they wind up in the water.”

She moved purposefully through the swinging door into the dining room.

“She seems down-to-earth for a city doctor’s wife,” said Betty, watching her go.

“It will be different, having another family within walking distance of Innisfree,” Mae mused. When she had first returned to Chappaquiddick in 1941, Mae had purchased an abandoned fishing camp on a remote patch of meadow and woods on Cape Pogue, not far from the lighthouse at the northern tip of the island. She had named her land “Innisfree” after the Yeats poem beloved by her Irish mother and as a memento of the cottage across the bay where Mae had grown up, which her mother had also called Innisfree.

“Different good or bad?” Betty never missed an opportunity to zero in on Mae’s concerns.

Mae shrugged. “I’m not sure. I know the kids are lonely sometimes, especially Jo. Having a seven-year-old sister as your only playmate can get old really fast. I was surrounded by siblings and neighbor kids growing up and loved it. I can’t expect Jo and Izzy to appreciate the solitude as Tobias and I do now. I guess I knew this part of the island would change eventually, with more people wanting to stay for longer than a day trip to the beach. I just don’t know if I’m ready for it.”

“Well, one family is not exactly an onslaught. And she seems decent.”

Mae peered through the glass in the door as Lydia corralled her boys at a table near the front of the dining room overlooking the dock. Lydia struck Mae as a woman who had everything effortlessly under control. Despite the rain, she already had a glowing tan and her long-limbed, graceful body looked less like that of a mother of three and more like an Olympic athlete. The figure skater Sonja Henie popped into Mae’s head, an odd image in the midst of this steamy late

June morning. But there was definitely something Nordic about Lydia.

Mae shook off the creeping insecurities Lydia's arrival had unleashed. Betty was right. It would be great for Jo and Izzy to have playmates this summer.

At that moment, Jo pushed open the screen door into the kitchen.

"I brought up the last of the quahogs and left them on the table outside."

"There you are, Jo." Mae looked past him. "Where's Izzy?"

"She's lost in one of her other worlds at the tidal pool. I think she's watching a crab. I brought her bucket up."

"We've already got customers. Please wash up and then take the orders of the family who just arrived. After that, I need you to shuck the clams. Betty and I are going to be too busy between the dining room and the kitchen."

He nodded. She knew he'd be pleased to be trusted with the shucking, less so with working the front of the house. A little too much like her when it came to strangers.

She turned to Betty.

"I'm going to fetch Izzy. If I don't, she'll be there all afternoon."

Mae covered the ground between the café and the steps down to the sand flats on Shear Pen Pond quickly. The lunch crowd was arriving. She could see a couple of boats approaching the dock, and she knew Betty would have her hands full in the kitchen.

She called out to Izzy as she approached the steps, but didn't hear a reply. She was less worried than exasperated. She knew Izzy was a dawdler and a daydreamer. She checked her impatience as she headed down the steps. Just as Jo had described, Izzy was crouched on the sand intently studying a tiny crab inching its way toward the water.

“Izzy, lunch time. Let’s get these rakes put away and you washed up.”

Izzy looked up at Mae, slightly dazed as she was pulled out of her reverie.

Mae was used to seeing her daughter’s attention somewhere other than the present moment, but the expression on Izzy’s face was disturbing. She saw pain, confusion, disorientation. Her little girl was lost somewhere inside herself.

Mae reached out and stroked Izzy’s face. Her skin was hot, more than expected after a morning in the sun.

“Honey, do you feel OK?”

“I feel funny, Mama. All wobbly. That’s why I sat down. I think I’m going to throw up.” And she did, onto the poor crab.

Mae wiped Izzy’s face with the edge of her apron and scooped her up in her arms. She was a lightweight, their hummingbird, Tobias had called her. She flitted from one absorption to another, drinking in the world around her.

Izzy moaned softly in Mae’s arms, where Mae was even more aware of the heat emanating from her daughter’s body. She climbed swiftly up the stairs and into the cottage, where she settled Izzy on her bed.

“I’ll be right back, Hummingbird. I’m just going to run over to the Boat House to let Betty know I’ll be staying with you.”

Mae ran to the café unencumbered by the weight of her daughter. She burst into the kitchen from the back door, out of breath.

Betty wheeled around.

“What’s happened? Something with Izzy?” Betty rushed to Mae’s side.

“She’s sick. Feels like a fever and she just upchucked her breakfast. I’m sorry. You’re going to have to handle lunch

alone while I figure out what's going on. Give my apologies to the new neighbor."

"I'll manage. Jo's taking orders. I think he's trying to make up for the fact that he left his sister. I'll check in on you as soon as it quiets down after lunch."

Mae was sponging Izzy with lukewarm water to cool her when she heard a knock at the door and the voice of Lydia Hammond. She tucked a sheet around Izzy and went to the door.

"I heard from Betty that your little girl is sick. I'm not trying to intrude, but I thought I'd offer my help. I'm a nurse."

"Thanks. I wouldn't want to expose your kids if she has something contagious . . ." Mae looked beyond Lydia, but her children were nowhere in sight.

"I've left them at the café. Betty apparently has things under control with some homemade donuts. Is there somewhere I can wash my hands?"

Mae led her through the house to the kitchen and then to Izzy's room.

Lydia was gentle with Izzy, asking her a few questions before turning to Mae.

"Why don't we let Izzy rest? You and I can talk about what will help her feel better."

Lydia took Mae by the elbow and guided her out to the front porch.

"I'm not going to sugarcoat this. It has all the marks of the early stage of polio. I saw several cases during the '52 epidemic. My recommendation would be to get her to the hospital today. I don't suppose Chappy has an ambulance that could make it out here."

Mae froze as she listened to the words coming out of Lydia's mouth. A part of her resisted what this woman who had swooped so emphatically into their lives was saying. Why

should she trust her or even believe she was a nurse? But if Lydia was right, Izzy was gravely ill. Mae had no choice but to follow her advice. She shook herself out of her numbness.

“There’s a firetruck, but it’d be faster to take her by boat.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Please go back to the café and tell Betty to close up for the rest of the day, and ask Jo to get the boat ready. You probably want to get your children away from here.”

“They were vaccinated this spring. What about yours?”

“The island had a clinic in May. Both kids got shots. I thought the vaccine was supposed to protect them?”

“It should. But no vaccine is 100% effective. At the very least, it may reduce the severity of the infection for your daughter. I’ll get things going while you get her ready to transport. We have a ham radio at our cottage. I can call ahead to the hospital to let them know you’re coming. I’ll see if I can get an ambulance to meet you at the dock.”

Mae nodded. “I’m grateful to you.”

Lydia left for the café while Mae wrapped Izzy in a cotton blanket. She was still burning up as she carried her to the dock.

Jo was waiting at the wheel of the boat and Betty stood ready to cast off as soon as Mae and Izzy were settled in the stern.

“Do you want me to come with? The café is locked up.”

Mae squeezed her hand. “You always know what I need before I do. Yes, come.”

Jo pulled away from the dock as Betty clambered aboard. Within minutes they were slipping through the Gut, the narrow mouth of the bay, and speeding across the water to Oak Bluffs.

“We need to get word to Tobias,” Mae mouthed to Betty over the drone of the engine.

“I’ll take care of it when we get to shore. Let’s hope Lydia got through and an ambulance is waiting for you.”

As Jo skimmed into the harbor they could see the flashing lights. He maneuvered the boat into a slip and arms were reaching out for Izzy before he had killed the engine.

Mae climbed up to follow.

“I’ll stay behind with Jo to get the boat secured. We’ll meet you at the hospital.” Betty gave Mae a hug.

The ride to the hospital was a blur of activity and questions as the rescue squad took Izzy’s vital signs, inserted an IV and asked Mae about Izzy’s symptoms. As she answered, she sought reassurance that the situation was not as dire as she feared from Lydia’s diagnosis.

“My neighbor, a nurse, thought it might be polio,” she whispered, turning away briefly from Izzy’s frightened face.

The two technicians looked at one another across Izzy.

“We had another case a couple of days ago. A child from the elementary school, a second-grader.”

“Izzy is in second grade.” Mae rubbed her forehead. She didn’t want this other piece of information, this accumulating evidence that Lydia might, after all, be right.

“Mama, it hurts,” Izzy whimpered.

“I know, Hummingbird. I’m sorry. We’ll be there soon and the doctor will help make you better.”

Mae wanted to believe that Izzy would be made better, but everything she knew about polio offered little hope.

Izzy was Tobias and Mae’s miracle child, born against challenging odds. When Mae had given birth to Josiah in 1943, she and Tobias were together, but not married. Because of tribal issues stirred up by Tobias’ cousin Sadie, Mae did not want to stand in the way of Tobias’ leadership of the tribe. But then Mae had been diagnosed with cancer. It was during her treatment that her older sister, Kathleen, attempted to gain custody of Jo and remove him from Mae’s

care. The crisis rallied support for Mae and Tobias from islanders and tribal members, and Mae agreed to marry Tobias to strengthen their legal standing as Josiah's parents. Mae had already lost a child—a daughter—to stillbirth, when she had been very young and alone, before returning to Chappy. To have another child snatched from her was more than she could bear. But Mae and Tobias prevailed in court, Mae's cancer went into remission, and the marriage Mae had feared would hold Tobias back had instead flourished. Tobias was elected sachem, or chief, taking on the mantle his father had borne before him.

One shadow hovered over them, however. Mae's doctors informed her that because of the side effects of her chemotherapy, she'd most likely not have any more children. She and Tobias had accepted the news. She was alive. Josiah was safe with them. They were grateful for all they had.

And then Mae had become pregnant. Her doctors cautioned her to expect a difficult pregnancy that might end in miscarriage or stillbirth. Every day she held onto the baby was a gift. The fear of delivering another dead baby, like her first child so many years before, was never far from her thoughts.

Izzy had been born a month early, a tiny, squalling bundle who spent her first weeks in an incubator. But she lived and went on to thrive. Watching her daughter now in the ambulance, tethered to an IV and in pain, Mae had visions both of Izzy's past in the incubator and possible future in an iron lung. She tried futilely to push that image out of her mind.

You cannot dwell on what might be, she screamed to herself, or it will steal the energy you need to deal with what is here and now.

The ambulance came to a halt at the emergency entrance of the hospital and the doors were pulled open by staff waiting for them. Mae scrambled out as they lifted Izzy's

stretcher and placed her on a gurney. She did not let go of Izzy's hand as she was rushed through corridors Mae knew only too well.

Their destination was an empty room at the end of a hall that was closed off from the rest of the hospital.

"We're putting your daughter in isolation as a precaution, Mrs. Monroe. If she does have polio, we don't want her near other children."

"The ambulance workers told me there was another child on the island diagnosed with polio. Where is he?"

"He's been sent to Boston. He needed an iron lung and we weren't equipped to treat him here."

"Will my daughter also be sent away?" Mae gripped Izzy's hand tighter.

"Doctor will decide. First we need to get her settled and confirm what we're dealing with. I'm going to ask you to leave now, Mrs. Monroe. We shouldn't have let you come this far in the first place."

"I don't want to leave her. She's only a baby. You can see how frightened she is and how much she's hurting."

"That's out of the question, Mrs. Monroe. The protocol for polio is strict quarantine, even from parents. You can wait in the family lounge on the pediatric ward. Someone will come to you when we have more information. I have to insist."

The nurse was rigid and implacable.

Mae gathered Izzy in her arms.

"I won't be far away, little bird. Be as brave as I know you are."

Izzy bit her lip and her eyes filled with tears. She clung to Mae.

"Please don't leave me. I'm scared."

"Have courage, Izzy. Even when we are afraid we can be brave."

Mae reluctantly extracted herself from Izzy's fragile hold before the nurse pulled her away.

With leaden feet she located the pediatric lounge and then burst into tears.

Chapter 3

“The key is turned on our uncertainty”

Mae

Betty and Josiah joined Mae an hour later.

“We’ve been on a wild goose chase trying to find you. Where’s Izzy? How’s Izzy? Do they know for sure yet what she’s got?”

Mae shook her head. “I don’t know anything yet and they’re keeping her isolated, in quarantine. Did you reach Tobias?”

“I managed to get the Coast Guard to raise him by radio and alert him, but it could be several hours before he makes it back from the fishing grounds.”

“Mom, is Izzy going to be alright?” Jo had been a rock getting them from Innisfree to Oak Bluffs. His maturity and calmness were so much a reflection of Tobias. But he was only twelve. Mae put her arm around him. She knew he was too old to hug, especially in public (although the lounge was blessedly empty at the moment). But she could read the strain on his face. Now that he no longer had the concrete task of

getting his sister safely and quickly to OB, his sense of helplessness was bubbling to the surface. She recognized it because she felt it herself. To be forced to do nothing but sit and wait was excruciating.

“The doctors and nurses are taking good care of her, Jo.” She had to believe that. But she ached for her children—for her daughter suffering from what could be a devastating disease; for her son flailing in worry for his baby sister.

“Do you remember how tiny Izzy was when she was born, but how feisty she was? Bawling with lungs that were too small to be making that much noise? Your sister is a survivor. She’ll come through this. I know she will.”

It was late afternoon before a doctor appeared in the lounge. Mae jumped to her feet.

“Mrs. Monroe? I’m Dr. Davenport, the pediatric resident. I’ve examined your daughter and run some tests. I’m sorry, but we’ve confirmed it is polio.”

Betty held onto Mae.

“What now? Will she be paralyzed? Will she be able to breathe on her own?”

“It’s too early to tell. The disease is progressive and it may take some time before we know how severe it will be. In some cases the disease is very mild, but I don’t want to raise your expectations. Isabella isn’t a robust child; it’s not clear if she has the resources to fight the infection.”

“What are you doing for her? When can I see her?”

“There’s no cure, Mrs. Monroe. We are giving her medication for the pain and she’s in an oxygen tent. But I’m afraid you can’t be with her. She has to remain in quarantine.”

“For how long? Surely I can see her through a glass, even if I can’t touch her.”

“Once she’s stable, we can move her to a room with a glass partition. But tonight that would be too disruptive. I

suggest you leave and get some rest. Isabella will be hospitalized for months before she'll be able to come home."

And then he left.

Mae turned to Betty and collapsed in her arms, sobbing. Josiah turned to the couch and drove his fist into the pillow.

"I don't want to leave, even though I can't be with her. I want to be close at hand if anything changes."

"We should stay at least until Tobias gets here. The hospital won't let you spend the night, but the season is still early. We can probably find a couple of rooms in town to get some sleep and be back early in the morning. Why don't I go hunt around to see what I can turn up?" Betty hugged Mae and wiped her tears.

"Can I go with Betty, Ma? This place is giving me the creeps."

Mae nodded. He needed another job to quell the frustration. "Go on, help Betty. I'll wait for Dad."

After they left, Mae paced the room, wondering how many hours, days, and weeks she'd be wearing out the floor beneath her feet with her steps. Her back was to the door when Tobias arrived, but she could smell him, the familiar tang of sea and fish that marked him and announced his arrival home each night.

She turned and ran into his embrace. He bent to her and held her wordlessly, each of them imparting what strength they had to the other; each of them drawing from one another what they needed.

"I turned and headed to port as soon as the Coast Guard reached me. Tell me everything. All I knew was that she'd been brought here, but not why. Was it an accident?"

Mae took him and sat him down and then recounted every piercing moment of this harrowing day. When she had finished he pulled her into his lap and rocked with her as he sobbed.

By the time Betty and Jo returned they were spent. Mae came awake from her exhausted doze, raising her head from Tobias's embrace.

"We found a couple of rooms at a boarding house not far from East Chop. We can walk from here. The woman who runs it has some cold chicken and potato salad set aside for us. Let's get some rest. We've got plenty to do tomorrow."

The four of them moved together down the hall, arms entwined, heads bowed.

Mae slept fitfully, even wrapped in Tobias' arms. At four in the morning she slipped from the unfamiliar bed and stood at the window. A street lamp across the way cast a hazy puddle of yellow light on the road. A dog barked in the distance. A milk truck rumbled past the house, most likely on its way to meet the early ferry. Mae pressed her forehead against the window frame and closed her eyes, longing for the silence and darkness of Innisfree, for the peace of the moment before she found Izzy on the clam flat.

It had been less than twenty-four hours since Lydia Hammond's arrival with her children had signaled a change in the environment at Cape Pogue. How trivial that change now appeared to Mae, and how selfish. Despite the thirteen years she had been with Tobias, her giving birth and mothering two children and her deep and abiding friendship with Betty, a hidden part of her still clung to the independent, isolated young woman who had first set foot on Cape Pogue in 1941 and made it her own.

Izzy's horrific diagnosis had smacked her in the gut, stealing from her all the self-assurance and fierceness that had sustained her in her long climb back to wholeness.

The early morning breeze was unusually chilly and Mae rubbed her arms as she shivered by the open window. But she knew she was trembling from more than the brisk air. She was frightened and helpless and overwhelmed by the chasm

that had split her soul in two. She lashed out for the second time in her life at a God who was once again taking a daughter from her.

By the time Tobias woke up at six Mae was dressed and sitting at a small table crammed into a corner of the room.

“When did you get up?” he asked, swinging his long legs over the side of the bed and moving across the room to her side. “I didn’t sense you leave. I’m sorry.”

He put his arms around her and kissed the top of her head.

She stroked his hand.

“It’s OK. You were exhausted. I didn’t want to wake you. I couldn’t sleep.”

“You’re making a list.” He tapped the scrap of paper on the table. “Good.”

“I want to go to the hospital. Even if they won’t let us see her, I need to be there.”

“Give me five minutes to wash up and dress. I’ll walk with you.”

When they arrived at the hospital the front door was locked and the entry hall looked dim and empty through the glass.

“Let’s try the emergency entrance. Someone has to be there.”

When they pushed open the door into the ER a single nurse was on duty at the desk. From her posture and the dark circles under her eyes, it appeared she’d been there all night. But despite her obvious fatigue, she greeted them with recognition and concern.

“Mae, Tobias! What brings you here? Are you having a breathing problem?”

Tess Boudreau had cared for Mae during her cancer treatment and often stopped at the café for lunch on her day off.

“It’s not me. It’s Izzy.”

Tess looked behind them, searching for Izzy.

“Where is she? What’s wrong?”

“She’s upstairs in isolation with polio. An ambulance brought her in yesterday around noon. Tess, they won’t let us see her. Something about quarantine. She’s all alone.”

Tess came out from behind the desk and hugged Mae.

“My shift ends in about ten minutes. As soon as the day nurse arrives and I brief her, I’ll go up and see what I can learn.”

“Why are you here and not on the cancer floor?”

She shrugged. “Paul got laid off. I’m trying to work additional shifts to help out. Night duty pays extra. The cafeteria is open if you want to grab a cup of coffee while you wait for me. At this hour, it’ll be a fresh pot. I’ll come get you there.”

They turned toward the breakfast aromas seeping through the corridor.

“I wish Tess had been on duty yesterday. Izzy needed someone she knows and trusts, not some officious bitch lecturing me about disease protocol.”

Tobias took two steaming cups from the server behind the counter and placed them on a tray.

“Are you hungry?” he asked. But he didn’t push her to eat something.

They found a table where Tess would be able to spot them quickly. The cafeteria had been empty when they arrived, but was beginning to fill up with nurses and doctors drifting in at the end of the night shift.

Mae sipped the hot liquid absentmindedly, keeping her eyes on the door. Her foot tapped impatiently on the floor. Tobias reached a hand under the table and placed it on her knee to still her.

“She’ll be here soon. Tess will help us.”

“Can I get you a cup of coffee?” Tobias offered Tess when she arrived.

“No, thanks. I need to go home and sleep. Here’s what I learned: She had a quiet night. They gave her a mild analgesic for the pain, which is mostly in her legs, and her fever is dropping. They are keeping her in the oxygen tent, but so far her breathing is normal. The paralysis seems to be limited to her legs.”

“Paralysis?” Mae’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“That’s what polio does, Mae.”

“I know. I know. I just wanted to hold out hope that it might be something else. When can we see her?”

“Even I couldn’t see her. I only got to read her chart. The government has set out strict guidelines since the epidemic in ’52. I’m afraid it will be weeks before they lift the quarantine.”

“The nurse last night said they would move her to a room with a glass wall. I need to see her, Tess.”

“And she needs to see you, too. My advice is to go up there now and talk to the physician on duty. I heard from the nurse leaving her shift they’ve called in an infectious disease specialist from Hyannis. He’s supposed to arrive on the first ferry.”

“Thank you, Tess.”

“Least I could do. She’ll get good care, Mae. She has a long road ahead of her, but if anyone can handle a situation like this, it’s you and Tobias. I gotta go get some sleep.”

She slid her chair from the table, gave each of them a squeeze of her hand and left quietly on her white, rubber-soled shoes.

Mae’s coffee was cold and she pushed it away.

“Let’s go find the doctor.”

The formerly dim and empty hospital lobby was now lit and bustling. Mae and Tobias approached the front desk, staffed by a member of the hospital’s women’s auxiliary.

“Our daughter was admitted to the children’s ward yesterday and we’d like to speak to the specialist who’s been called in to treat her.”

Mae hoped the gray-haired woman in the volunteer smock would not prove to be as officious and obstructionist as the nurse yesterday, and forced herself to remain quiet while the woman checked the patient list and made a call to the ward.

“They tell me the doctor is seeing your daughter now. Please go to the parents’ lounge. He’ll meet you there.”

They made their way to the ward. The day before, Mae had been so focused on Izzy that she had barely been aware of her surroundings. But this morning the smells and sounds of the hospital assaulted her, ripping open the wounds of her own treatment eight years before. By all accounts, Mae knew that no one who cared for her then expected her to be walking these hallways now.

Tobias seemed to be reading her thoughts.

“You have survived for a reason and this is it. To see our daughter through this so she can be her own survivor.”

They waited over an hour in the lounge. Betty and Josiah joined them—Jo as anxious as his parents; Betty a dynamo, ready to fix whatever was broken in this shattered family.

“I’ve already started making calls, pulling in favors to get help to keep the Boat House open.”

Mae smiled at Betty’s take-charge action. When Mae had first arrived back on Martha’s Vineyard and established the Boat House Café at Innisfree, she had, by choice, led an isolated life. The women in Edgartown had found her strange, an object of derisive gossip or simply someone to be ignored because she wasn’t like them, married and safe in their snug houses in town. It was Betty, a waitress at the Vineyard Haven Inn Mae had met her first night back on the island, who had offered Mae a friendship she didn’t know she

needed. It had begun with Betty's straightforward honesty and humor, followed by the offer of an extra pair of hands in the kitchen as the Boat House began to succeed. They had been friends for fourteen years—years marked by both harsh challenges and deep joy. Mae knew that Betty had her back this time, as she always had in the past. The café was vital to the Monroes' financial security. They were moving into high summer and their peak business. Closing while Izzy was hospitalized was out of the question.

“Jo and I will go back to Innisfree this afternoon and get the place ready for business tomorrow. He understands he can be more help to you there than pacing the floor here. Let me worry about him so you don't have to.”

“Is that OK, Ma and Dad? I'll only go if you say so.”

Tobias took him by the shoulders. At twelve, he was already almost as tall as Tobias.

“Betty's right, Jo. You can be an enormous help at the Boat House.”

When the doctor finally arrived, they clustered around him. Tobias took Mae's hand; Betty circled Jo with a comforting arm.

“Mr. and Mrs. Monroe, Isabella came through the night with no additional paralysis beyond her left leg. It's still early, but I think the prognosis is good that this will be a mild case of polio. There's no sign that her chest muscles are involved and she's breathing normally.”

Mae leaned into Tobias, relief spreading across her face.

“I'm going to be blunt, however. She still has a long way to go in her recovery, and there is always the possibility that the virus will spread to other muscles. But with rest and pain medication and isolation, she has a very good chance.”

“Of walking again?” Tobias asked hopefully.

“With braces, most likely yes. But you need to understand, there is no cure for polio. I meant, she has a

good chance of *surviving*. My first impression of her was that she is a frail child, but I've revised that assessment. She's stronger than she looks. Your daughter is quite a fighter."

"When can we see her?"

"Apparently the hospital needs a few days to prepare a quarantine ward with interior window walls. But she's in a first-floor isolation room right now. I can lead you outside and you'll be able to look in on her. But I have to caution you, we can't open the window. You'll be able to see her, but not touch her."

They trooped out behind the doctor to a room in the rear of the hospital. The window the doctor indicated was small and multi-paned, but Mae and Tobias could stand together and see within to a dim interior with a single hospital bed enveloped in an oxygen tent. Through its rippled and not quite clear surface, they saw Izzy. A nurse got Izzy's attention and pointed to the window. Izzy turned her head. Mae and Tobias waved. A smile spread across Izzy's pale face as Mae touched her fingers to her lips and then blew the kiss to her daughter.

"Is there a chair I could have? I'd like to sit here for a while to let Izzy know that I'm near."

"I'll find one, Ma." Jo dashed inside and returned with a folding chair. Mae didn't ask where he'd found it, but simply settled into it.

"Thanks, Jo. Now, I think it's time for everyone to get back to work. For the time being, this is my job, being the face at the window for Izzy."

Betty nodded and gently led Jo away. "Come on, buddy. We've got a restaurant to run."

Tobias stood behind Mae and kneaded her shoulders.

"I'm not going to cry as long as I'm in front of this window," she said.

“I know. Stay as long as you can. I’ll bring you some lunch. Is there anything else you need or want?”

“I want to go back to the day before yesterday. Since I can’t, please go to the library and find everything you can about polio. I need to understand this enemy that has attacked our daughter if I’m to be any help to her.”

“I will. We’ll fight this, Mae.” He kissed her, which brought another smile to Izzy’s face, and waved to his daughter.

Mae stayed until sunset and returned the next day and the next, until Izzy was moved to the newly created quarantine ward, where there was a small lounge for parents overlooking three patient rooms.

“Are you expecting more cases?” Mae asked the nurse.

She nodded. “We’ve already had a third case diagnosed. Another second grader. For a community this size, it feels like an epidemic. We’re preparing for the worst.”

Mae settled in, watching over her daughter, struggling with her sense of helplessness and devouring everything she could on polio. She cooked Izzy’s favorite foods, read out loud to her through the intercom and brought her beloved doll and coloring books when she was well enough to enjoy them.

She knew that her vigil with Izzy as well as the care the nurses and doctors were providing only offered her daughter comfort, not a cure. The medical staff eased her pain; Mae eased her loneliness. But none of them could unlock the paralysis in her leg. Izzy was “lucky,” the nurses told her. The first child diagnosed, the little boy, was in an iron lung in Boston.

As she sat on the other side of the window, unable to hold her child, Mae felt her own paralysis. A spirit that had once soared, like the ospreys at Innisfree, was now stilled, confined within the glass-walled prison of the hospital.

The Uneven Road

Book Two of First Light

by Linda Cardillo

Available in March 2016
on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Bellastoria Press and at
independent bookstores and online retailers

For more information, visit www.lindacardillo.com

Linda Cardillo is the award-winning author of the critically acclaimed novels *Dancing on Sunday Afternoons*, *Across the Table* and *The Boat House Café*. In an earlier life she worked as an editor of college textbooks before earning an MBA at Harvard Business School at a time when women made up only 15% of the class. Armed with her Harvard degree, she managed the circulation of *Inc.* magazine during its successful start-up, founded a catering business and then built a career as the author of several works of nonfiction, from articles in *The New York Times* to books on marketing and corporate policy. She later went on to teach creative writing before her debut novel, *Dancing on Sunday Afternoons*, launched Harlequin's Everlasting Love series.

Linda's 2014 novel, *The Boat House Café*, was the opening book in her First Light series. She is also at work on a trilogy set in 16th century Italy. With Ann DeFee, she is the co-founder of Bellastoria Press (www.bellastoriapress.com), an independent publisher of books about the search for connection with the world and one another, told with compassion and humor. Visit her website at www.lindacardillo.com; follow her on Facebook at Linda Cardillo, Author; or write to her at linda@lindacardillo.com.

Praise for *The Boat House Café, Book One of First Light*

"Cardillo evokes the clapboard ports of New England with sensuous prose. . . A sympathetic depiction of the oft-forgotten New England Native American heritage in this picturesque corner of the Vineyard."—Kirkus Reviews

"In this beautiful, lyrical novel, Linda Cardillo creates a fierce, strong-willed heroine, unafraid of hard work, solitude, or the judgment of her fellow islanders."—Judith Arnold, USA Today Bestselling Author

"The Boat House Café is a delicious read, which I devoured in a single sitting. Linda Cardillo's writing is sensuous and full of feeling without being sentimental. The beautiful prose carried me to the island community of Martha's Vineyard and into the lives of Mae Keaney and Tobias Monroe. The principal characters evoke compassion with their flaws and inspire with their strength. The supporting cast adds the rich texture of conflicting cultures. Although set in the 1940's, the challenges of identity, loyalty and authenticity make this story more than relevant for today's reader. If you have been to Martha's Vineyard, this is a must read. If you have not set foot on Chappaquiddick, The Boat House Café will bind you with the spell of "First Light". Cardillo's sense of place mixed with genuine emotion is a recipe that truly does "nurture the soul." I am hungry for the sequel."—B. L. Moulton