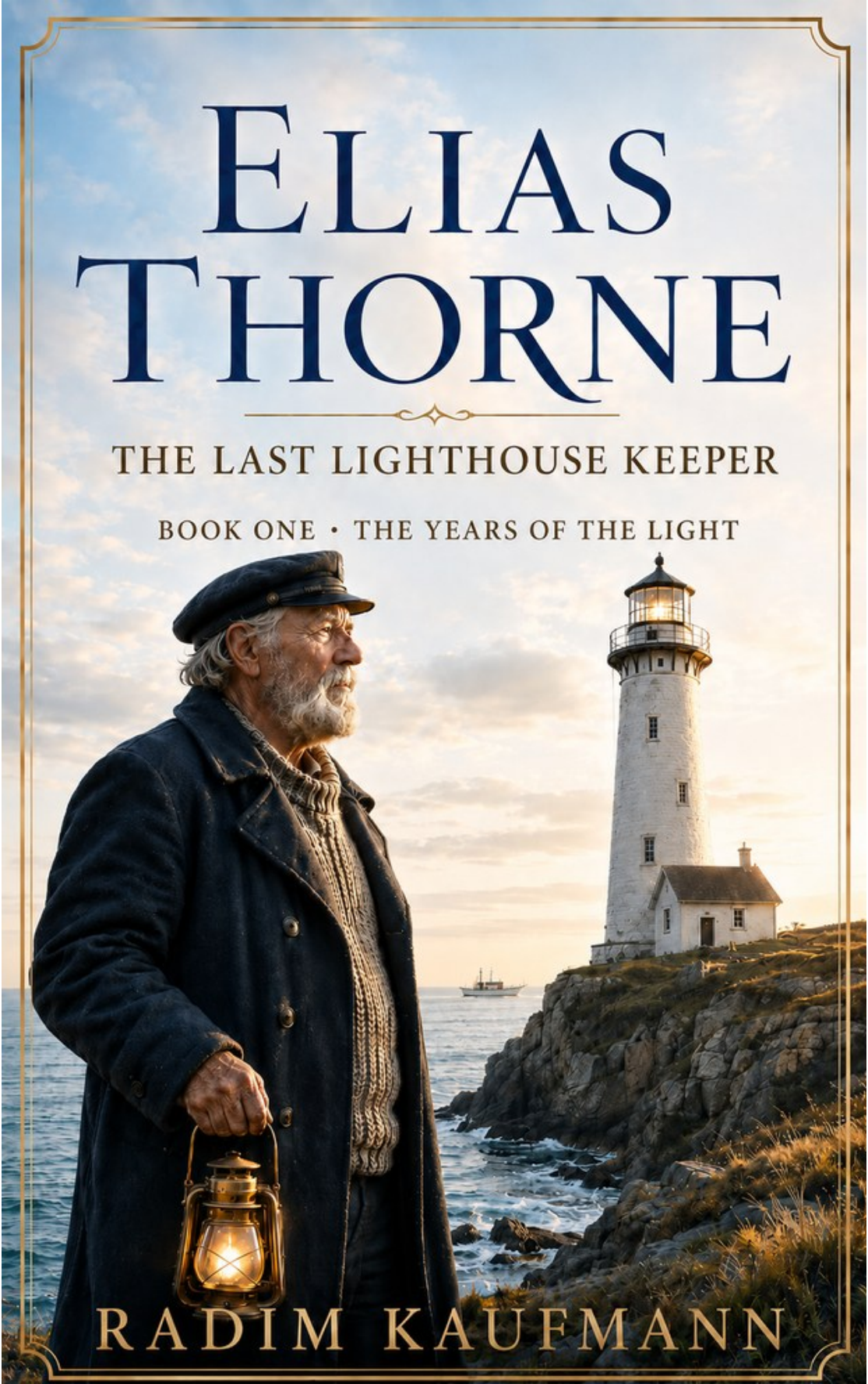
ELIAS THORNE

THE LAST LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER

BOOK ONE • THE YEARS OF THE LIGHT



RADIM KAUFMANN

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BOOK ONE: THE YEARS OF THE LIGHT

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Blackstone Point
Maine, 1921
Lighthouse
School
Harbor
Village
N
"Someone has to see what the men will say never happened."
Scale
0
100
200
300
YARDS

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First Edition · 2026

Author: Radim Kaufmann

ISBN: 9798187764938 (paperback)

radimkaufmann.com

To all the men and women who spent their lives doing their work faithfully without expecting recognition.

And to everyone who has ever wondered whether their life truly mattered.

The sea does not remember our names.
The light does.

— Elias Thorne

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On the eve of automation, an aging lighthouse keeper prepares for his final night of service, unaware that the sea is about to return a century-old secret.

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About the Setting

Blackstone Point is on no map. The coast it was made from is.

Historical Note

The characters are invented. The work is not.

A Note on Records, Logs, and Memory

Three books: the official log, the Parker–Thorne Family Journal, and the gray notebook. None of them holds the whole of a person.

Acknowledgments

To those who keep small things until someone asks whom they belonged to.

About the Author

Radim Kaufmann

Introduction

The sea keeps no archives.

It does not preserve monuments. It does not build museums. It does not care about memory, justice, or grief. Every wave that reaches the shore erases something. Every tide carries away a fragment of a story that once seemed important.

Yet along the coasts of the world, people spent centuries resisting that forgetting. They built lights.

Not grand lights meant to celebrate victory or wealth, but practical lights meant to guide strangers safely through darkness. Small lights. Solitary lights. Lights maintained through storms, through winter nights, through endless years of repetition.

The people who kept those lights rarely became famous. History remembers explorers, presidents, generals, inventors, and kings. It rarely remembers the man who climbed the same stairs every evening for fifty years. It rarely remembers the woman who cleaned the lens after every storm. It rarely remembers those whose greatest achievement was simply that other people arrived home safely.

Yet civilization is built as much by such people as by any conqueror or ruler. Perhaps more. For every celebrated figure who changed history, there were thousands of ordinary men and women who quietly prevented disaster.

This is their story. Or rather, it is the story of one of them.

His name was Elias Thorne. By the autumn of 1987 he was seventy-two years old. His hands carried the marks of salt, rope, iron, and cold winters. His face had been shaped by Atlantic winds more than by age. He had spent so many years listening to the sea that silence itself had come to seem unnatural to him.

He had never traveled far. He had never written a famous book. He had never held political office. Few people beyond the coast of Maine even knew his name. Yet for half a century, every ship that passed Blackstone Point depended upon a light that he maintained.

For most of his life, Elias believed that was enough. Then the world changed. Technology arrived. Machines became reliable. Automation replaced tradition. One by one, the lighthouse keepers vanished from the American coastline. The lights remained. The keepers did not.

In October 1987, Blackstone Point Lighthouse was scheduled to become fully automated. At dawn, Elias Thorne would leave for the last time. No successor would arrive. No apprentice would continue the work. No member of the Thorne family would climb the tower again. A century of service would end with a single sunrise.

That should have been the end of the story. But endings are rarely as simple as they appear. For hidden within the stones of Blackstone Point lay a secret older than Elias himself — a secret that had survived storms, wars, shipwrecks and generations, passed from keeper to keeper since 1887. And as the final night approached, the sea seemed determined to return what history had tried to bury.

The sea remembers nothing. But sometimes people do. And sometimes that is enough.

PART I

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THE LIGHT

CHAPTER ONE

The Last Night

October 15, 1987 · Blackstone Point, Maine

Some nights a man knows he will remember for the rest of his life.
And some nights he knows he would rather forget.

— Elias Thorne

THE PATH TO THE LIGHT

On the coast of Maine there are evenings when the world seems to slow for a few hours. The sea grows calm, the wind dies down, and the sun hangs low over the horizon, turning the ocean into an endless field of blue and gold. Such an evening was settling over Blackstone Point on the day Elias Thorne set out along the path to the lighthouse for the last time.

Dry autumn grass rustled under his feet. The air was fresh but not cold; a few white clouds drifted over the sea, and to the west the sun was sinking slowly toward the water. It was a beautiful day — one of those days that remind a man why he stayed somewhere his whole life.

Years ago a visitor from Boston had asked him a question he would hear countless times afterward. “Were you never tempted to leave?” Elias had only smiled — not because the question was foolish, but because he never quite understood it. Leave for where? The city? An office? The world of traffic lights and crowds and noise? Every man has his place. Some need streets, some need fields — and some need the sea. Elias was the last kind, and he always had been.

He remembered sitting as a small boy on the very rocks he was passing now. He had not known then that he would one day be a keeper; he knew only that he loved to watch the ships. He could sit on the shore for hours and imagine where they had come from — Norway, Iceland, England, Canada. He invented stories about the sailors standing on their decks, pictured distant harbors, and when he tired of imagining, he simply listened to the gulls.

He smiled. In sixty years the gulls had hardly changed: still as loud, still as brazen, still convinced the whole coast belonged to them. One of them swept low over the path just then and veered off toward the sea. “You haven’t improved either,” Elias muttered. The gull answered with an indignant shriek, and Elias laughed. A man who lives on the coast long enough begins to talk to the birds — and lives there long enough that it no longer strikes him as strange.

Ahead of him the white tower had come into view. In the gold light of late afternoon it looked almost ceremonial. Visitors always expected a lighthouse to seem lonely, but Blackstone Point had never been lonely; it belonged to the landscape as naturally as the rocks, the grass, the ocean. It belonged here. So did Elias.

Off to the left a fishing boat moved slowly across the water, a small silhouette against the endless surface. Elias watched it for a while. He did not know it. Once he had known every boat along this coast, every captain, every fisherman, every crew — but times were changing. New boats came; the old fishermen left. So did the keepers. And yet the thought brought him no sadness, only a strange kind of gratitude.

He had had a good life. That was the truth of it. Not a great life, perhaps, by the measure of newspapers or politicians — but a good one. He had watched his daughter grow up. He had loved his wife. He had weathered storms. He had pulled from the sea several people who were living still. He had known thousands of sunrises over the Atlantic, and every evening he had fallen asleep knowing that his work had meant something. How many men can say as much?

The wind freshened. Only slightly — but Elias sensed the change at once. Fifty years of service teach a man to notice what others never register. He looked to the southeast. Far out over the ocean, a thin gray line had appeared on the horizon. Clouds. Still distant, still innocent. He marked them all the same. The sea always whispers first; only afterward does it begin to scream.

He walked on. The sun lay against the white tower, the windows of the keeper's house glowed with warm light, gulls wheeled above the headland, and the Atlantic shimmered like polished glass. It was a beautiful evening — and that was precisely why it felt strange to him. Sometimes a man knows that something is coming. Not because he sees it, not because he understands it. He simply feels it — the way a sailor feels a change in the weather, the way birds feel the approach of winter, the way the sea knows a storm before the sky does.

At the first steps up to the lighthouse he stopped. He laid his hand on the old wooden rail, looked at the ocean, then at the tower — and smiled. "Well, then," he said quietly. "Let's get to work." It was only another shift. And, at the same time, the last. And between those two truths lay the whole of his life.

THE LANTERN

The tower door closed behind him with a soft click, and the sound was swallowed at once by the familiar quiet. Not complete silence — lighthouses were never wholly silent. Something was always creaking somewhere, the wind was always

WHISPERING SOMEWHERE, THE DISTANT SEA WAS ALWAYS THERE TO BE HEARD. And yet Elias felt the same thing every time: the feeling of coming home.

He set the lantern on the small table by the door and began to climb. The spiral staircase wound upward around the stone walls just as it had decades ago, and Elias knew every step of it, every rail, every repair, every scratch. He knew where his father had once replaced a damaged piece of metal. He knew where William Parker, the keeper who had served here before his father, had sealed a crack after one winter storm. No one had shown him that. It was written down. He even knew where, as a small boy, he had slipped and skinned his knee. A man can hold a whole life in his memory — and sometimes an ordinary staircase is all it takes.

When at last he opened the door of the lantern room, he paused a moment. Though he had stepped inside a thousand times. Though he had spent most of his life here. Though he knew every screw and every pane of glass. He still paused — because the room was beautiful.

The late-afternoon sun poured through the glass walls and spread across the great Fresnel lens at the center of the room. Hundreds of cut faces caught the light, broke it, multiplied it, transformed it, until golden reflections danced across the floor, the walls, the brass machinery, and the whole lantern seemed to catch fire from within.

Every visitor always looked outward — at the ocean, the coast, the view. Elias always looked inward. At the lens. To his mind it was the lens that was the true wonder; not the tower, not the sea, not the lighthouse, but the human idea — the power to take a small flame and turn it into a light that could be seen miles away.

He crossed to the brass frame and laid his hand on it. The metal was pleasantly warm from the sun. “You still look better than I do,” he said quietly, and smiled. Anyone who heard him would have thought he had lost his mind. But every lighthouse keeper, sooner or later, begins to talk to things — to the lens, to the stairs, to the wind, to the sea. When a man spends decades in one place, he stops drawing a line between objects and memories. And this room was full of both.

He stepped to the glass. The Atlantic glowed a deep blue below him, gulls wheeled over the water, and somewhere far off, almost at the limit of sight, the surface gleamed all the way to the horizon. Many people travel their whole lives to find a place where they will be happy. Elias had sometimes felt that he had simply been lucky — that he had found his at the very start. He had never longed for New York, or Boston, or the great cities; he had never longed to be rich, never to be famous. It was enough to know that every night he would light the light, and every morning put it out again. To some that would seem a small thing. Not to him.

He glanced at the clock. Soon it would be time to prepare the lantern — one of his last shifts. The thought, to his surprise, did not sadden him; if anything, it stirred a strange gratitude. How many men are given the chance to take their leave of a place they loved? How

many know in advance when the last chapter of their life will close? Most do not. He did. And in that there was something rare.

A faint gust of wind passed over the ocean, and the gulls changed the line of their flight. He saw it at once — just as he caught the slight change of light on the distant horizon. It was nothing dramatic; perhaps no one else would have seen it at all. But fifty years of service teach a man to watch even the smallest changes. He looked to the southeast. Only for a moment. Then he went back to his work.

And yet, somewhere deep in his mind, a small question remained. Unspoken. Almost invisible. Like the first cloud in an otherwise clear sky. And questions like that are sometimes the most dangerous of all.

THE LIGHT ON THE HORIZON

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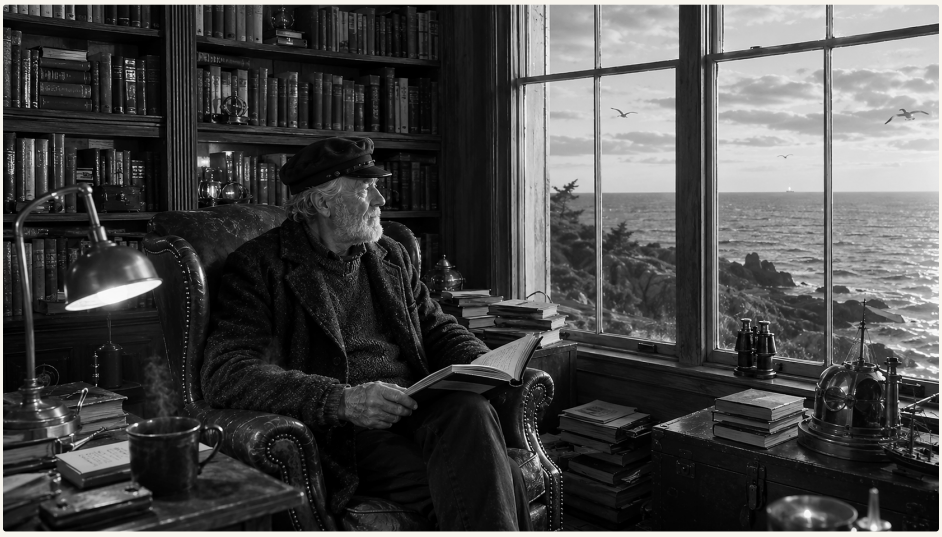

Evening was one of his favorite parts of the day. Not morning, not noon — evening, when the work was done and the world fell quiet.

Elias sat in his old leather armchair by the window, an open book in his hands — an edition of Stevenson he had owned for nearly thirty years. The binding was worn, the corners rounded soft with handling, and here and there on the pages were small notes in ordinary pencil. He never remembered writing them; he knew only that they were his.

A small table stood beside the chair, and on it a cup of coffee from which a thin ribbon of steam still rose. The desk lamp threw warm light across the pages, and beyond the window the Atlantic stretched away — blue, calm, endless.

When he was young, he had thought the ocean was vast. Now he knew the ocean was not vast. Time was vast; the ocean was only its mirror. The thought made him smile. He would never have dared say such things aloud — people would decide he had lived alone too long. Perhaps they would be right.

Beyond the window the gulls let themselves be carried on the wind, and long bands of light shimmered across the water. It was one of those evenings when a man does not want to close his book, or turn up the lamp — the day has not yet ended, the night has not yet begun. And it is in that narrow band that memories are most often born.

He turned a page, read a few paragraphs, then a few more — and at last realized that for some minutes he had not been reading at all. His eyes had followed the lines, but his mind had been elsewhere. It happens to every reader. Sometimes a book is only a bridge: a man begins to read a stranger's story and ends in his own.

Elias laid his forefinger between the pages and looked out the window. The coast below him glowed in the last light of the day — rocks, pines, sea. All of it looked familiar, almost eternal.

And it was just then that he noticed something. At first he paid it no attention; it was only a small point on the horizon, so faint that most people would have overlooked it. Elias would have overlooked it too — had he not watched the sea his whole life.

He narrowed his eyes. The point stayed where it was. It did not move. It did not blink. It did not look like a fishing boat, or a buoy, or a reflection of the sun. It was simply there — small, distant, indistinct.

He leaned forward a little. He was no longer looking at the book; he was looking at the horizon. For a moment it occurred to him that it might be a ship, but he dismissed the idea at once: a ship would move, and this point held still. He watched it another minute. Then another. At last he closed the book — and that, in itself, was unusual, for Stevenson generally lost only to truly interesting things.

And the light on the horizon was beginning to be interesting. Not because it was strange. Not because it was frightening. But because it had not been there the day before. And Elias Thorne was a man who remembered such things very well.

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