



*The*  
**LAMB COVE**  
**PROMISE**

Carol Newman Cronin

by Carol Newman Cronin

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**Author's Note**

Fisher Marty takes his final sail of the year around Brenton Island on a tired but classic 36 foot sloop. Dress warm before you hop onboard—it's not just a “yachtie” pleasure cruise.

Tomorrow, he'd get through Christmas morning by hauling his own boat out of the water. So today was it—the final chance to keep his damn promise to Amanda. Marty pulled on his warmest jacket and lifted the wrinkled box off the mantle. Then he limped down the apartment steps and out into December cold, cardboard corners digging into his right palm.

The boat yard was huge in afternoon shadow. Usually he counted his paces across mud-splattered clamshells, calculating how many more boats he could cram into the storage area, but there was no point now—hauling season was done. And this empty yard in December meant an empty fridge come January.

That's IF he made it through Christmas. Hauling *Sea Witch* would fill up the morning, and a bottle of rum would blot out the afternoon. Maybe he'd even treat himself to a nip or two at breakfast. All this space for his own thirty-six footer, wouldn't matter how sloshed he was running the travel lift.

The winter sun had long since disappeared behind the island's big hill, and the ramp down to the floating dock was half-tide steep with an icy shine to it. He grabbed onto the railing with his left hand and tentatively slid his right boot's toe downhill, until it stopped against the first crosspiece. Swung his left foot forward, groaning at the pain, until that toe touched the next wooden slat. Couldn't fall—might drop her.

The floating dock rocked and clanked under his uneven gait. *Sea Witch* was tied up on the outside face, bow into the wind. He wrapped his free hand around her ice-cold stanchion to pull himself aboard—but his damned hip wouldn't bend enough to step up onto the deck. Instead he sat down and shimmied back against the cabinhouse, lifted each leg aboard with his left hand, and hauled himself back up to standing again. Just getting onto the boat got harder and harder, every goddamn day.

He set the cardboard box down on the cockpit floor like he

always did, right hand cold and clumsy as a lobster claw—should've brought gloves. But it had taken ten minutes just to get down here, and sunset came quick this time of year. Now or never. A light southerly lifted the red streamer at the masthead, like a nod.

He blew enough warmth into his fists to get sailcover off, mainsail raised, docklines cast away. Sitting down would hurt worse than standing, so he lifted the tiller to hip-height and pulled it toward him, chipped varnish catching on his callouses. With his right hand he hauled in the stiff mainsheet, until the trim matched his course and the only sound was the chuckle of bow wave against wood planking. He tried to focus on that, not the ice-edged empty harbor or the box at his feet.

Outside the breakwater, they reunited with the sun. Lamb Cove was around the north side of the island, but that would send them right back into chilly shadow again. Instead Marty trimmed in two feet of mainsheet and let the ebb tide set the boat south. Counterclockwise would only take ten minutes extra, and even these weak December rays were already baking some of the cold from his bones.

That had been Amanda's last word: "cold." Though it could've been old, or bold, or even gold—her tongue hadn't worked right those last few weeks. She'd loved rhyming games; stirring and chopping her way to a fish chowder, she'd yell out some random word from the kitchen and then tack on all the rhymes she could think of. She always pushed him to join the fun, but him and words didn't get along so good.

An unexpected ocean swell lurched him onto the seat and slid the cardboard box to leeward, but neither of them capsized. He toed the box into the forward corner of the cockpit and braced his right foot against the opposite seat. Hard to tell which hurt more, his heart or his hip.

She'd died last Christmas. By then, half their regulars had already hauled out somewhere else. Marty's father might've started the boat yard, but since he passed Amanda's smile was what had kept it going. Customers just couldn't do without what she called "just making nice," so the cancer killed his business too.

The boat pitched into another steep wave and hesitated, almost stopping. *Sea Witch* was hungry for the helm-balance of a jib, but that deck would be just as icy slick as the ramp. The ebb had already set him far enough south to clear the island, so he tacked to port and eased onto a reach. The box just slid itself across the cockpit sole until it fetched up again in the leeward corner, like it was out for a nice easy Sunday sail.

Such a sweet ride this boat, even under main alone. He'd always admired the red hull, so when the owner couldn't cover the yard bill Marty had taken the boat in trade. His first-ever secret from Amanda, because she would've made him promise to sell right away. Boats fetched a way better price in the spring.

On the first warm day in April, he'd gone for a shakedown sail. Then a second, and a third, until it became an afternoon habit. Like a goddamn yachtie—except he had a mission. Through the long hot summer and lonely fall, he'd brought this box along each day, planning to keep the promise. Hours later, he'd carry it back up to the apartment above the office, place it back on the mantle. Because once he emptied that box, what would be left?

Amanda had predicted he'd procrastinate, which is why she'd tacked on a one-year deadline. Maybe granting her final wishes today would make it possible to dump all his grief and guilt as well. Anyway it was one last escape from the mudpuddle stink of empty yard and all the damn smoke blowing across the road from Mack's woodstove. Smells of dying.

Should've asked Mack to come with him, just in case the breeze piped up or something broke. But the harbormaster was busy with his own last-minute Christmas chore, sneaking his two small boys down to Cochrane's Gallery to buy Mom a special gift. And no other islander was able enough. Even Captain James tied his bowlines half-ass-sideways.

James'd walked past the yard at lunchtime, not-nodding as usual. Marty couldn't even recall what had started their ancient feud. Amanda would've remembered—but then she would've told him to *just go apologize already*.

A set of big waves surged underneath the keel, on their way to crash white against rocky shoreline. Waves from abeam always made Amanda queasy, so she would've pointed out something along the shore as a distraction—maybe the gussied-up Inn, on top of the island's big hill. Christmas lights strung along every goddamn gutter, already lit a full hour before sunset! Owner must be made of money—or in bed with the electric company.

The bilge pump came on, pumped dry, shut off again. *Sea Witch* leaked a good bit, but that's what wooden boats did. Maybe over the winter he'd work up the energy to caulk and paint over her faults, enough to sell her in the spring for a good price. That'd be way less painful than *just making nice* to that crazy couple wanting to buy the yard—his birthright. He shook his head, dislodging the wool cap covering his balding head. Never. Or not until there was nothing else to sell anyway.

Since last Christmas, the list of Amanda's faults had shrunk down to nothing. Why had he scoffed at her for asking after customers' kids and grandkids, and didja have a nice summer? He should've been listening in to learn her tricks, not stomping off to haul another boat or unstep another mast. He hadn't realized how damned important all that was until she wasn't up

to it anymore—and by then it was too late.

The sun was already closing with the horizon as he passed the southwest corner of the island, and the rocky tower of Monument pinged those bright rays right back at him. Like some sort of morse code, to help him navigate around to Amanda's biggest request. Only a half mile to Lamb Cove from here.

What if he just headed up, sailed south with her instead? He'd laid off his yard worker a month ago, and Mack only stopped by when he needed something. Sail away from cold, worry, bills.

Or maybe he should alter course hard to starboard, end it all on Monument Point—*Sea Witch*, Amanda, Marty, all broken up together on that rocky cliff. Mixed into one again by the churning waves.

But it was hardly the boat's fault that his wife had passed and he was broke. He stuck to his original plan, bearing off just enough to clear the outermost rock, gradually easing out the mainsheet until it reached its bitter end.

West Harbor passed by to starboard. When he first made this damn promise he'd imagined a scattering from THAT beach, alongside the tired Indian village where Amanda was born. But she didn't want to be stuck inside a harbor—she wanted to swim free from the north-facing rocks just around the corner, where she'd fished knee-deep between father and brother. Way she remembered it, one of 'em always caught a supper's worth of tasty cod.

Marty probably never would've met her if he hadn't gone ashore and caught a lot of cod himself. When New Bedford's melting pot first stirred them together and she'd told him she spent her first ten years on the island, he figured she was just ribbing him—until she went on and on about all the cod in Lamb Cove.

The jibe around the island's northwest corner knocked him right off his pins and back against the seat back. By the time he pressed himself back up to standing the boat was on a beam reach, main luffing, heading right for the dark rocks on the north shore. This was all happening way too fast. But sunset was close, and he couldn't stand an untrimmed sail. He hauled in six feet of mainsheet, facing to windward so he could brace his right leg against the heel.

In the lee of the island the wind died away, but the bow wake still called out rhymes: *Wave! Brave! Save!* With each word, his heart pounded louder. He reached down to pick her up—but the unexpected slap of a fin startled him, and the box slipped away to land hard on one corner. Would Amanda spill out all over the cockpit sole, another failure? Somehow the cardboard held it together.

Two slaps, then five, then too many to count—all around the boat. Fish boil, in December? Cod had gone years ago, which is why he'd sold his boat and gear and dragged Amanda back home to run the family boat yard. Tautog, or sea bass maybe?

Wincing, he leaned out over the leeward lifelines to stare down past the red-gold reflections—into dark water shiny and alive with schooling cod. His mouth watered. Fresh fillets for Christmas dinner—Amanda would love that!

But Amanda was in that damn box.

Years ago, she'd told him that the quickest way to heaven was to be a cod's supper. "Full circle of life," she'd called it. Back when they'd assumed a full life circle would take a whole lot more years to sail around, both for the cod and for Amanda.

"Cod's way too smart to eat a human," Marty had retorted. *Especially now that you've been cooked down to ash and bone.*

Hell and damn, he'd sailed them right past Lamb Cove.

*Just keep going, come back tomorrow.* He could hardly feel

his fingertips anymore. Instead, planting his right boot against another fall, he jibed around again. This was where she really wanted to be, and he hadn't got much else right the past twenty years.

His hip throbbed. Should've brought some aspirin—or better yet, that bottle of rum.

He sailed past the westerly end of the cove again before tacking around, then hitched mainsheet around tiller to hold the boat on course. Right in the middle of the fish boil he pried open the cardboard with his rigging knife—only to find a sealed plastic bag inside. He cut that open too, but by then the rocks guarding the cove's eastern end were looming. He grabbed the helm with his free hand, bore off thirty degrees.

If he jibed back around again, she'd blow all over the cockpit. Screw it—close enough, and the fish still slapped all around them like a police escort. He tied off the tiller once more, clenched his teeth against another groan, stepped up onto the cockpit seat.

“This is what you wanted,” he told her. “Swim with the damn cod. Maybe they'll even make supper out of you, that full circle thing like you said. See, I did listen.” He paused. “*Cod. God.*” Searched for a third rhyme, but all he could come up with was *scrod*.

Leaning out as far as he dared, he upended the box—careful to hold back the plastic bag. The ash swirled away to leeward, darkening red-tinted water.

Damn thing was empty way too soon. He closed the lid, pressed the sides between his palms. Gazed aft, trying to spot where she'd gone, but even the cod had disappeared. “Didn't get this quite right neither...”

The mainsail luffed, so he glanced forward—Jesus, he was about to run the bow up on the next point! He dropped the box

onto the cockpit sole, where it capsized at last—no longer anchored by Amanda. Lurched for the tiller, pushed it away. Two big rocks slid by to starboard, almost close enough to touch.

Back out in open water he checked astern one last time, but the still water shimmered only with the fast-fading red of sunset. Ahead was darkness. He had to feel his way past the shortcut and around Bird Island, until he could ride the last of the ebb tide south enough to tack safe for the harbor entrance. The Inn's Christmas lights killed his night vision, and only the regular sweep of lighthouse beam kept him from plowing into the rocky breakwater. Once he'd rounded the end of it, a still harbor mirrored just enough light to find his way.

When he passed the town dock, the ferry's wheelhouse winked—as if welcoming him back. Ferry would need a winter haulout, maybe some engine work. But Captain James would go ashore for all that. How many times had Amanda told him to just go apologize? He sure was tired of not-nodding to the guy. Couldn't be any harder than what he'd just done, keeping his Lamb Cove Promise.

Not quite Lamb Cove. Not much of a ceremony. But the cod had attended, and that's what mattered to Amanda.

Back at the dock, he managed to furl the main with cold-clumsy fingers and clamber off the boat. He had already pulled himself halfway up the even steeper ramp when he remembered the box—dammit to hell. He slipped and slid back down to the boat, hobbled aboard, and bent over just enough to pick it up—much lighter now. He was panting with pain, but if he sat down he might never get up again. So he crawled off the boat and across the dock to the ramp, until he could latch onto the sturdy railing and crab himself up, one agonizing step-and-grip at a time.

When he reached the top, flashes of red and green lit up the

yard. What the—was he hallucinating now from the pain? He blinked, twice. Saw the same damn string of twinkling lights, outlining his doorway.

Christmas lights should be all white, steady, and hung on a tree inside. Only navigation marks should blink on and off like that. What trespassing islander had dared to put up this gawdy insult?

He hobbled straight across the muddy yard, white breaths gasping out into winter night, and reached up to grab the wires. Instead his fingers closed around a postcard. Squinting, he could just pick out a childish scrawl in red marker.

“Dear Mr. Marty, now Santa will find your house too! Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! Sincerely, Jeffrey Mackenzie Whylan.” Mack’s son, the older one. Writing already?

Underneath it, his mother had added: “Mack and the boys caught five cod just in time for supper! Please come share them with us.” In much smaller letters was a P.S.: “Captain James will be here too.”

He shoved open the door and almost tripped over a stack of firewood, cut to length for his stove.

*Charity, rarity, not fair-ity.*

He wanted to kick at the logs, tear down the lights, curse his nosy neighbors. Instead he forced himself to *just make nice*: take enough deep breaths to haul himself up the stairs and across the dark apartment. Set the too-light box down on the mantle and square up its corners, just so. Take off his warm jacket, blow warmth between his hands, and finally: uncork his reward. No need for a glass—he lifted the bottle straight to his mouth.

The rum burned across his tongue and down his throat, firing up a fresh stomach-rumble of anticipation. Cod for supper. At the same table as Captain James. Circle of life, indeed.

*Apology, psychology, biology.*

## THE LAMB COVE PROMISE

“Good one!” Amanda’s voice was so strong and young, he turned to glance through the kitchen doorway. But she was swimming free with the cod now, not stirring chowder on a tired stove.

Still, if she kept talking and he learned to listen, maybe he could master this *just make nice* thing? Save his business, stop not-nodding at his neighbor... maybe even keep *Sea Witch*.

He lifted the bottle again to toast the box. “Cheers, Amanda. Thank you. And... Merry Christmas.”

**About the Author**

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## Chapter One

James wasn't actually reading the newspaper—he was hiding behind it. Hiding from the crowd surrounding him, on the outside deck of the Brenton Bean. Hiding from the blinding glare of May sun on glassy harbor. Hiding, most of all, from what lay in between: that empty ferry dock.

If only the flimsy paper could block out sound as well. Tucked into the most protected corner of the coffee shop's open deck, chair backed up against shingled exterior, he was still well within earshot of the stranded commuters who'd washed up at tables along the outside railing. Their worrying pecked at his hangover like a seagull feeding frenzy: without the ferry, how would they ever get ashore to their jobs? They were all so desperate to get off this island. And for the first time in sixteen years, James was too.

He should've delivered them to the dock in Newport just over two hours ago. Right now he should be motoring back to Brenton, spray flying and diesels rumbling, already tasting his daily bagel-and-coffee reward. But yesterday he'd been fired. So instead of clutching a wooden wheel, he was crushing limp newsprint.

The rumors were partly true; he *had* been caught with one tiny bag of marijuana, bought to ease a friend's pain. But he hadn't attacked his boss; he'd made a feeble attempt to reclaim the baggie. Reach, grab, hold up his hands as soon as Lloyd started screaming. Nothing that merited calling the cops—the guy just had a screw loose.

So there'd be no ferry this morning, a complete upheaval of Brenton's usual Wednesday routine. Even non-commuting locals had drifted down here in search of news—and then lingered to enjoy the first warm day of the year, filling every open seat. Which led, of course, to speculating with their neighbors: *What really happened between James and his boss yesterday afternoon? Could the ferry even run without Captain James? Did*

*I hear James was dealing drugs?* Each time he heard his name, the scar on his left temple throbbed.

Though that could be last night's beers.

To his left was the door to inside, and just beyond it was the least popular table out here—occupied by a pair of stranded tourists. The wife proposed a bet on the ferry's exact arrival time, loser to buy the first round of martinis once they made it safely ashore. Birdwatchers, probably. The husband swiveled his head around to ask the regulars, "When's it supposed to get here again?"

Over at the big table, the animated weather discussion went quiet. Five pairs of eyes dropped down to stare into white china mugs. Only Mayor Frank—who just couldn't leave anyone's question unanswered, even when he was wrong—replied: "Eleven-ten." Adding with less certainty, after a glance at his watch, "Might be a little late today."

The storm door opened, whacking into the birdwatchers' table. "Oops, sorry!" Patty said, smiling. "Busy as Fourth of July out here."

James lifted his newspaper back into guard position, but those light blue Crocs stopped beside him anyway. The waitress carried a steaming glass coffee pot just above that huge apron-covered belly. Twins, maybe?

Mugs were already waving over at the big table, but Patty focused on James. "Still have to eat, ya know." She topped off his coffee and set her pot down next to his plate. "Or did you finally realize peanut butter just doesn't go with pumpernickel?"

"Bagel's hard as a rock."

"That's 'cause it's yesterday's—Barb didn't make her delivery this morning." Those brown eyes bored into him. "I heard you two had words last night."

More than words. His fortieth birthday meal, dumped into the bakery's trash bin. An overreaction, even for Barb.

Patty rubbed a ringless hand against the left side of that baby-bulge. "Billy got 'stuck' in Newport last night." Her fingers

made air-quotes. “He was way too happy about—”

“Patty!”

She swiveled toward the big table just long enough to shake her head at Mayor Frank. When she turned back to James, a frown had wrinkled up her forehead and she opened and closed her mouth twice, before finally managing, “No hat today? And those eyebrows! One of these days, a laughing gull’s gonna fly in there, build a nest.” Her own brows had been carefully plucked. “How about a quick trim, once this crowd gets tired of waiting for their ferry? Betcha don’t have any other plans today. . . just sayin’.”

James snapped the newspaper up between them, mixing burnt coffee aroma with his own unwashed sweatshirt and the ebb-tide odor of drying-out seaweed.

Patty picked up her glass pot. “Yesterday’s *Journal*, too—not that you care.”

Of course. . . today’s newspapers wouldn’t arrive unless the ferry did.

Sighing, James let the paper drop and raised his left hand to pat down the hair standing off his forehead. It just stood right back up again.

The harbor was a windless mirror, from empty dock out to rocky breakwater. Beyond the entrance, eddies of ebb tide swirled out toward Bird Island, the uninhabited rock that kept this harbor so well protected. Out there, on the water, he knew what to do—because boats were so easy to handle: Goose the throttles forward to cruising speed. Adjust for set and drift. Listen for the port engine’s ping, telling him it needed oil again. What he couldn’t navigate was people. . . and all this damned uncertainty.

Starved for fresh news, the chatter around him faded, revealing more normal island sounds; wavelets tumbling pebbles along the tide line. An osprey chirping overhead. The whack of storm door against square metal table. Yesterday, it all would’ve blended together into a comforting symphony. Today, not

knowing when he'd leave the island again, each noise clanged like a jail cell door.

"You tell him?" Mayor Frank was mostly hidden behind Patty's bulk, but his raspy voice still carried.

Patty glanced back at James, shaking her head. "Didn't dare." She poured the last of the coffee into the mayor's waiting mug.

Tell him what?

To avoid any additional grooming tips as Patty carried her empty pot inside, James stared down through the black grate of tabletop until he heard the door click shut behind her. If only the dried paint on his jeans could be read like tea leaves.

When he looked up again, he caught Mayor Frank frowning at him—until those thick glasses swiveled back out to check the harbor.

"Ah! Thar she blows!"

Beyond the breakwater's jagged top edge, two white bumps motored steadily north. Radar dome and life raft canister, riding proud on top of the ferry's wheelhouse. Their familiar shapes—and the slate blue superstructure—were surprisingly distinct against the dark backdrop of Bird Island. For Mayor Frank—and everyone else out here, except James—this was the view of a normal morning: his ferry, steaming proudly home.

But today he watched, steaming, from the beach.

The commuter chatter started up again, giddy with relief. First thing tomorrow morning, their ferry would be there to take them ashore. Which meant that today, they could all enjoy an unexpected day off.

"Told you it would be here," Mayor Frank said, to no one in particular. "Just like Lloyd promised." *Lloyd*. James's boss—ex-boss—must've dragged some drunk captain off a Newport barstool last night.

But as soon as the white hull cleared the end of the breakwater, the bow wave diminished. Drunk or sober, the scab of a captain knew enough not to come into a strange harbor above idle.

“It’s slowing down,” the birdwatcher wife said.

“Gotta be at least five minutes away still,” her husband replied, smiling.

Four and a half, James silently corrected, sliding back his sweatshirt cuff to check his watch. Already eight minutes late.

“Guess I’m buying those martinis.” The wife was smiling too. “But I don’t care—we’re getting off this island at last!”

Some damned stranger had started those quirky engines. Pressed his own thumb and forefinger into the two varnished dents on the wheel’s king spoke. Soon he would pivot into the dock and smile at his departing passengers—if there even were any, on a Wednesday morning in May.

From the far end of the big table, Harbormaster Mack caught James’s eye and shrugged, as if apologizing for what he was about to say. Then he drained his mug, clunked it down, and stood up—waking Chester the dog, who’d been asleep under the table.

“Ferry’s here!” Mack announced in his public servant’s voice, as Chester shook himself to standing. “Everything’s back to normal now.”

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