

Carol Newman Cronin



O LITTLE TOWN



BRENTON

by Carol Newman Cronin

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Author's Note

A lonely mother braves a Christmas Eve storm to shepherd her caroling group around Brenton Island—and learns a valuable lesson about her own family.

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This year's caroling would likely be as dismal as the weather, Eliza Malloy thought, pulling up her hood as she navigated down her rain-soaked front steps. Only ten islanders had signed up, and that included Doc Emerald's wife—who hopefully would keep those donkey croaks to herself.

But who could really blame the rest of her island neighbors for staying inside on this dreariest of Christmas Eves? Water spackled the front of her winter coat, and a fierce gust blew its fleece-lined hood right off her head. She cinched down the drawstrings, reset her bag on her shoulder, and felt her way out onto the dark road. She could do this.

An hour ago, watching squalls chase across the empty harbor, she'd placed her hand on the telephone to cancel tonight's singing. But instead of lifting the handset, she'd envisioned the alternative: a long, lonely evening of listening to the wind rattle ancient storm windows.

So when darkness had finally erased the storm's fury, she'd turned on every single lamp and dug out this coat and the tallest boots she could find. It was the first Christmas Eve of a new century, and no matter how blue she was tonight—her neighbors, the storm, an empty house on Christmas Eve—she was damn well going out to spread some island cheer.

Last year, two island visitors had joined the caroling group at the last minute. But this morning the ferry had broken down in Newport, and even James and his four commuters had barely managed to make it home.

The gray macadam was slick with leaves, and she'd forgotten her gloves. Stuffing arthritic fingers deep into linty pockets, she wondered: would they even be able to walk against this wind, once they reached the south side of the island?

O LITTLE TOWN OF BRENTON

It had been quite a struggle to get up to the schoolroom this morning, to remind the kids about caroling. Six of the seven kids had dropped their gazes to their desks, but Nathaniel, the newest islander, shot his hand up: Was it going to snow? Two boys in the back row snickered, but Miss Lila just replied, “probably not this year,” before suggesting they sing Jingle Bells for Mrs. Malloy.

This would be Nathaniel’s first Christmas as an orphan. Another reason to bow her head to the stinging rain and keep walking, up the road to the chapel.

The lights either side of the pointy-topped door carried all the way out to the wooden gate. When she extracted her right hand to push it open, her knuckles had already stiffened into a claw. How would she grip the word sheets she’d prepared? Years ago she’d memorized at least two verses of all her favorite carols, but she needed to set a proper example tonight. Last year, there’d been far too much la-la-la-ing.

She climbed three stone steps, lifted the bronze latch to push open the hefty door. But first she let her eyes swing right, to the bench honoring her late husband Declan. So much more welcoming than the island’s last lighthouse keeper had ever been himself! (One of many thoughts she’d kept to herself the past year.)



Inside, squinting against the glare of overhead lights, she dug out her schoolmistress smile. *Reward the ones who show up.* A small group could still bring joy to this rocky island—and this year they needed it more than ever. Who knew when the broken-down ferry would run again?

As captain, James would be taking his ship's failure personally. But she couldn't fix her son, just as she couldn't transform tonight's rain into a festive snowfall for Nathaniel—or magic-wand more singers out of the chapel's woodwork.

She shut the door, silencing the thrashing trees, and closed her eyes to inhale familiar dusty stillness: empty wood pews, a faint whiff of beeswax. When she opened them again, she spotted the Irreverend in the front corner of the room, crouching next to the Christmas tree. White lights bloomed, lighting up his satisfied smile. Which remained in place as he strode toward her.

"Welcome, Eliza. And Merry Christmas Eve!" Unlike so many men (including Declan), he didn't flinch when she met his gaze and held it, eye to eye. "Quite a storm out there!" He rubbed hands up and down his sweated arms, narrowly missing a plastic Rudolf pinned to his left chest. "I wasn't sure anyone would show up at all."

"I'm here," she said firmly, letting her hood drop behind her. Static electricity crackled her gray-streaked hair, so she reached up to smooth down the strands.

"You're not even the first to arrive." The Irreverend pointed to the back corner of the room, where a couple stood holding hands. "Our new harbormaster, and his brand-new wife; I guess they haven't learned about island time yet. And I'm sure all the others will be here soon! I can always stay behind and bring along any stragglers. You're heading clockwise around town, as usual?"

Before Eliza could respond, the front door creaked and his gaze darted past her. "Ah, here's Lila. And Nathaniel! Wait until you hear that boy *sing*..."

The door opened again, almost knocking over little Nathaniel. The Irreverend hurried over, blocking Eliza's view of the latest arrival. "Come in, come in!"

The new harbormaster and his wife remained beside the piano, so she stomped over to them. These were Declan's boots, she realized. Ah well.

"Thanks for joining our little caroling group!" She laced on her smile again. "I'm Eliza Malloy."

"From Malloy House?" The slender woman smiled up at her, still holding tight to her husband's hand. "We're almost neighbors then—we're renting the Mayhew cottage. I'm Jenna Bourne. I mean, Whylan," she added, beaming a shy smile up to her right. "This is Mack."

"Nice to meet you, Miz Malloy." The dark-haired man winked. "Your son got me this job, so thanks for having him!" His right fist gripped a travel mug, and his goofy smile suggested its contents were spiked. "You must be a tough lady, not letting a big storm interfere with caroling."

Eliza slid her waterproof tote off her shoulder and pulled out two copies of stapled paper. "Here are the song sheets. We use some local words, especially O Little..." sensing someone too close behind her, she turned to find Nathaniel.

"Merry Christmas, Ms. Malloy!" the boy said. His pants no longer reached his sneakers, and even his white socks were mud-splattered. But his smile was clear and bright. "My very first Brenton carol sing!"

At least one of her volunteers was enthusiastic.

"Merry Christmas, Nathaniel," Eliza replied, handing him a song sheet. "Did you bring your Aunt Anna?"

He shook his head. "She didn't even want me to come out, but—"

"Sorry we're late," Lila murmured, giving Eliza an eye roll over Nathaniel's head. "It's quite fierce over by the lighthouse."

Nathaniel smiled up at his teacher. "Ms. Lila picked me up at my aunt's house—our house," he corrected himself. "Can we

stop there? She made a ton of cookies.”

Two months ago, a tragic accident had forced Anna Crosby back to the tiny island where she grew up—and transformed her from London art gallery owner to full-time parent. Had she adjusted as well as Nathaniel? Eliza didn’t know her well enough to ask.

“Of course we’ll stop at *your* house,” Eliza told him, dropping her right hand onto his damp jacket shoulder. “And you get to pick our first carol, okay?”

“That’s easy—Rudolf!” He swiveled to face the piano and picked out the melody; the only sour note was the instrument’s fault. The boy had musical training, then! No wonder he was so excited.



The door swung open again, revealing the always-tardy Emeralds. “Almost got blown off the road,” the doctor grumbled, leaving his wife to make sure the chapel door latched behind them. “We cancelling?”

Eliza tried to carry some of Nathaniel’s enthusiasm over to the elderly pair. “We can’t control the weather, but we *can* spread some holiday cheer! I even have song sheets this year.” She made herself offer one to Josephine as well, but both waved her off; they knew all the carols by heart, the doctor insisted. “We might sing a second verse,” Eliza warned, even as two pairs of lips pursed and two hatless white heads continued to shake back and forth, in unison.

Three unknown voices, plus two growlers. Could Eliza and Lila carry this tiny group on their own?

Oh thank the Lord, Willie was here too. She loved catching

his sweet tenor trailing down from a tall ladder, as he slapped paint onto whichever island house was most in need...though he did tend to drift off-key. He was standing alone, hands stuffed into rain jacket pockets, gaze fixed on—Lila. Hmm.

Jenna Whyland walked over to hand back their song sheets. “Thanks, we’ve got the—”

“Expecting anybody else?” the Irreverend asked, just as the door pushed open again. Chase Comstock, in a bright red sou’wester rain hat. Eliza offered him Jenna’s song sheet but the banker shook his head, launching raindrops out into the room.

“If I don’t know the words, I’ll just make ‘em up.” He hadn’t closed the door behind him either.

She went over to push it shut, but first she glanced out into the chapel yard; had the rain let up just a little? And just beyond Declan’s bench, a dark shadow nodded his wide-brimmed hat at her—Sachem Tony!

Since Declan died, he’d stopped by every few days to check on Eliza. Every year she asked Tony to join the caroling, and he always said no—though this year he’d finally taught her two Native American holiday songs that she’d stapled into her song sheets. Now here he was.

Her smile widened as she pressed the door shut; with the Sachem’s solid baritone, they now had better than a snowball’s chance of staying in tune.

Everyone who’d signed up was here, so she nodded to the Irreverend; his two-fingered whistle silenced the chatter.

“Welcome to the thirteenth year of island caroling,” he began, in a voice far too loud for this tiny gathering. “And thanks to Eliza Malloy for her tireless organizing. Every single one of—”

“We’re running a bit late,” Eliza interrupted. “Perhaps we could just get started?”

“Oh, of course, I didn’t...” He waved his hand in the air.

“The floor is yours.”

“Thank you so much for coming out on such a stormy evening!” Eliza began. “I’m a bit—” No! She wouldn’t share her disappointment about their small numbers, or grouse about the weather. *Reward the ones who are here.*

“We’ll go clockwise through town,” she continued. “I have song sheets for anyone who—”

“Those papers’ll either blow away or be too wet to read,” Doc Emerald predicted. “We should just head straight up to the Inn!” A low rumble of agreement circled the room.

Eliza held up her hand and used what Dec would’ve called her schoolmarm voice. “There will be no cancellation, and we are going to do our usual loop. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Ms. Malloy,” Nathaniel squeaked.

“Yes, Ms. Malloy,” Mack mimicked, raising his travel mug with a smile.

Perhaps she should’ve brought her own spiked beverage.

“We’ll finish up at the Inn,” she added, though most of them knew that already. “Richie Clark is making hot chocolate and... other warming beverages!”

“Now you’re talkin’!” Mack raised his cup again—just as the Irreverend let forth another piercing whistle.

She wouldn’t mention the chowder Richie had promised; last year, by the time they showed up, there’d been nothing but a ladle inside the tall soup pot. “Now, Nathaniel: what song are we singing first?”

“Rudolph!” the boy yelled, in his outside voice.

“Rudolph it is—but shh, Nathaniel—not yet! Let’s wait till we’re outside and can all start together...”

She led them out the front door and through the chapel gate, ignoring Declan’s now lonely bench; once the music started, the Sachem would join in.



As soon as she turned to face her carolers, rain pelted her exposed skin. Everyone was focused on zipping up jackets, pulling on mittens, and gust-proofing hoods and hats. But as soon as Eliza blew a G on her pitchpipe and started to sing “Rudolph, the red-nosed reindeer,” Nathaniel and Lila and Jenna and Mack all joined in—on key. Walking downhill, away from the rain, she heard the new voices behind her already adjusting to each other: a choir quorum. Maybe they would be okay after all.

The Irreverend waved from the chapel doorway, though there would be no other stragglers. Maybe he just wanted to stay dry for a bit longer.

When the pavement ended at North Road, she turned right—and turned on her flashlight, letting the beam lag behind her to warn of an especially large pothole. Another flashlight turned on; someone else had come prepared.

The summer cottages that looked north toward the mainland were all dark. But thanks to Mack’s pre-lubricated vocal chords, *Rudolf* morphed right into *Frosty*. That took them all the way around the bend to Malloy Cottage, where half the lights she’d strung up on the porch had already blown free—and wind-driven rain blasted her face and hands once again. She forced her too-large boots to slog on, wishing she’d asked James to come over so they could pause for a carol or two inside the glassed-in porch. But she hadn’t wanted to impose on his Christmas Eve. With Barb up at the bakery, or out somewhere? She didn’t even know.

Last winter’s accident had left him so scarred—both inside and out—though it wasn’t until she’d received that letter from his ex-girlfriend that Eliza had understood why. Maybe it would

be better not to know quite so much; she couldn't ever ask him about it.

Just like his father. He'd better figure out a way to let go of his regrets—before they ate him up from the inside, too.

The road over the marsh bridge was especially dark, and two more flashlights clicked on behind her. Eliza focused on the string of lights ahead—but Mack and Jenna lived in the Mayhew cottage now. No point in caroling at an empty house, so instead she turned left into the boat yard driveway.

Jenna squeaked out *Have a Holly Jolly Christmas*, quickly backed up by Mack's booming bass. That carried the group across the clamshell driveway and around the biggest mudpuddle on the entire island. The boat yard office was dark, but there was a light on in the upstairs apartment.

Fisher Marty hadn't spoken to the Malloys in years, but maybe his wife Amanda would open the door. Eliza caught her breath and joined in for the final words of the holly-jolly chorus: "...this year!" As she turned to face her singers, she spotted the Sachem at the back of the group, nodding his support. He'd spent a lifetime trying to get along with grouching neighbors. "Best approach?" he'd told her just the other day. "Try to kill 'em with kindness."

The Irreverend pushed forward to murmur right into her ear. "Don't be expecting much of a reception. Marty's mad at the whole world—he's not even talking to me right now. And Amanda hasn't been feeling well, I hear."

"Well then, they could definitely use some holiday cheer." In a louder voice, she asked, "How about our local favorite?"

Nathaniel looked up at her, quizzically. "Page three," she told him. He pulled her song sheets out of a dry pocket, flipped pages, and held up the words in front of him, all toothy smile and correct posture, awaiting her cue. Had he sung in a real chorus, in

his previous life?

Eliza piped a G and began. *O Little Town of Bren-ton, how still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars...*

The stars weren't visible tonight, of course. The only light above was the one lit window, so she turned to face it, leaning back into the Sachem's rich baritone—as if that voice could actually support her.

The apartment light shut off. Several voices behind her trailed off into silence. She kept singing, even though she could barely make out the dark shingles right in front of her. And after *O Little Town*, she warbled right into *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*—if only to drown out the unwelcoming whistle of wind-thrashed sailboat rigs.

Doc Emerald stomped away, shaking his head; his wife followed, and after a moment the Irreverend did too. But the rest stayed with her, almost shouting their requests for figgy pudding; James' favorite line, until he got too old for caroling.

After that Willie's tenor dropped away—but he didn't abandon his spot behind Lila.

When the song ended, the window remained dark. As she turned away to follow the others back out to the road, Eliza resolved to return tomorrow with the last of her cookies. If singing couldn't end this stupid feud, maybe homemade baked goods—

Dammit, she'd stepped right into that puddle. A trickle seeped between her left toes; Dec's old boot must have a leak.



Ahead, what had been a solid quorum of carolers was now a

line of bedraggled rain jackets. Had the Emeralds and the Irreverend gone home, or headed straight up the hill to the Inn? No—there they were, waiting in the shelter of Willie’s well-lit front porch. When the painter and Lila and Nathaniel turned left toward town, the deserters rejoined them.

Thank goodness.

The Sachem walked alone, so Eliza fell into step beside him.

“Thanks for joining us,” she said, “even though it meant leaving Mémé alone. Or did the kids make it home?”

“They were all supposed to be on that afternoon boat,” Sachem replied, shrugging rain-sodden canvas shoulders. “Mavis and her husband gave up and went back to Narragansett. Joe managed to catch a ride, thanks to James.”

“And... Joe’s wife?”

He shook his head. “No idea what’s going on there. But Mémé’ll pry it out of him, even if it takes all evening.” He smiled, a missing right tooth gaping dark in an otherwise white lineup.

“Mothers and sons...” Eliza tucked her hand into his elbow. “Makes even the strongest marriages seem like straw in the wind.”

“Yup. Which is why I was able to sneak off and sing with you tonight!”

They walked on, past the museum and the tie-dyed art gallery. On their left, a single streetlight illuminated sheets of rain—and the empty ferry dock. The tiny captain’s cottage was also empty. James lived there—officially, at least. Maybe next year, they should do their caroling in daylight, when there were actually people out and about? Or schedule a rain date. Eliza’s left boot now carried its own tiny puddle.

Even Prime’s Market was dark inside; after six, already? They must’ve lingered at the boat yard longer than she realized.

Her right thumb ached, so she unzipped her jacket just enough to sneak her hand inside it, searching out the warmth under her left armpit. Ahh, that was better.

Sam Prime and his wife lived next door to the store, and both their girls were home from boarding school. A menorah in the front window had four candles burning, but surely they'd enjoy some cheery holiday music? She stepped up onto their narrow porch, grateful for the momentary shelter.

"What should we sing for the Prime family?" she asked the group on the lawn behind her, reluctantly extracting her right hand to grab the pitchpipe.

The Emeralds looked down at their feet. Willie shrugged. Mack leaned over to whisper something in Jenna's ear; she giggled. To Eliza's right, a loose downspout rattled in the wind.

"Rudolph?" Nathaniel, of course.

"We already singed—sanged—sung that one," Mack said. Upending his cup, he added, "Verbs—so damned illogical."

What a refreshingly open grin. Especially when he was gazing down at his new wife.

The Irreverend stepped up to join Eliza on the porch. "How about we hear a few angels sing?"

"Excellent—one of my favorites." Eliza piped an E. "Would you get us started?"

He closed his eyes, clasped his hands in front. "*It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious...*"

His voice was so lovely, they all just listened. Eliza closed her eyes too.

From angels bending...

An alto harmony wove itself around the melody. Nathaniel! Perhaps they could figure out some musical training for him? Couldn't let that voice—and all that enthusiasm—wither away.

Peace on the earth, goodwill...

Lila and Willie chimed in together, an octave apart: *“from heaven's all-gracious King.”*

And Eliza herself joined in for the last two lines:

*The world in solemn stillness lay,
to hear the angels sing.*

The Irreverend began the second verse—and even Eliza stumbled a bit on those awkward middle lines. When they finished, a silence fell. Angels singing, above the noise of Babel—currently represented by a rattling off-beat gutter.

Eliza peeked back at the group; Lila had leaned her knitted red cap against Willie's shoulder. Maybe this caroling thing was a good idea after all.

“Enough of these ungrateful folks,” Doc Emerald said, stomping away through a soggy garden bed. The rest followed.

Just as she rejoined the others on the road, a drip found its way inside Eliza's open collar that slid a shiver down her back. Cocoa might not be strong enough this year, by the time they got to the Inn.



Up the hill to the right, houses crowded side by side along a high east-facing bluff—and two of them glistened with Christmas lights. Finally, a bit of island cheer! Ocean waves crashed huge and unseen against the rocks below. But the biggest hill guarded these homes against the full brunt of tonight's southerly wind, so maybe their occupants would brave the weather to come out and say hello?

For the first time in years, the rental cottage's untrimmed hedge had been draped in multi-colored lights. Eliza was just about to suggest Good King Wenceslas when the door squeaked

open.

“So nice to see y’all!” Black-framed glasses roamed over the group. “Can I make a request?”

Kevin, she remembered. An islander’s cousin, in need of peace and quiet.

“Sure thing!” Mack replied.

“A cliché, I know... but my favorite is Silent Night.”

Behind her, the Sachem began singing—and the rest of the group turned to stare. They probably hadn’t even realized he’d been trailing along, the baritone bedrock of this sodden choir.

All is calm, all is bright...

Eliza joined in, closing her eyes again. Even Mrs. Emerald’s croaking couldn’t spoil the three part harmony they sent up into the racing clouds and out across the frenzied ocean. Who knew what miracles such mediocre but heartfelt music might bring on this stormy Christmas Eve?

They completed all three verses, though even the Sachem fell back on la-la-la for the last one. Eliza and Lila and the Irreverend knew the words, and apparently that was good enough for Kevin. He applauded, hollering, “Another one, please! Any local favorites?”

O Little Town, but we already—

“Rudolf, the red-nosed...” Nathaniel sang, and before she could shush him everyone else joined in too. On an island this small, they shouldn’t have to repeat any carols. But just like in the classroom, sometimes the best magic happened when she let go of the lesson plan.

By the time Nathaniel got to “you’ll go down in hiss-sto-ree,” Kevin had chimed in too. Eliza pulled her right hand out of its warm pocket and managed to close fingers against thumb, signaling Nathaniel to stop. Nodding at her, he fell silent; cheeks bright red, eyes sparkling. Joy.

Before Kevin could request another, Eliza waved goodbye to his stocky silhouette. “Merry Christmas!”

“Same to you! Maybe I’ll join the fun next year...”

Her right thumb was really throbbing now, so she stuck it under her armpit again—even though it left her neck exposed to the relentless rain. Her left foot was completely numb. Only a few more steps before she could thaw out in front of a roaring fire... with a hot toddy, perhaps?

The Crosby cottage was crisply outlined in white lights, including the front door. *Lit up like a goddamn Christmas tree*, she heard Declan say, inside her head. “*Must be in bed with the electric...*” To drown him out, she started singing the first song that came into her head: “O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree! How lovely are...”

Anna was hovering just inside her all-glass storm door. Once they all piled up onto her deep porch she offered around a plateful of red- and green-sprinkled sugar cookies. Her smile lingered longest on Nathaniel, of course. Another mother-son bond, with a strange twist. What would it be like taking over as a parent, eight years too late?

Eliza shrugged away her pointless wonderings. Impossible to know what went on inside other houses; she didn’t even know where her own son was tonight.

She was aching to see James. He hadn’t come by after work; she’d only heard about the ferry breakdown from Lila. Was he enjoying a quiet night at Barb’s house, right across the road? She hoped not; nothing festive about that dark rain-bitten exterior. Maybe his unofficial girlfriend was in one of her moods.

“Thank you for coming out on such a nasty night!” Anna said, as soon as they paused to consider another verse.

“Nathaniel, would you like to come inside now? You’re soaked. I’ve got the wood stove going...” She was wearing only a gauzy

blouse, so it must be quite warm inside.

“I’ll come in!” Mack called out. “It’s freezing out here.”

Everyone laughed, except Nathaniel; he shook his head. “I want to keep singing.” His lips were quivering with cold, Eliza realized.

“I’ll bring him home right after we finish up,” Lila promised. “He’s been a big help.”

“Such a nice voice,” Eliza added. “We’d hate to lose him.”

Was it her imagination, or did Nathaniel stand just a little bit taller?

“Okay, but come straight back down the hill as soon as you’re done.” Letting the storm door close, Anna waved goodbye as her nephew and the rest of the carolers traipsed back out into damp darkness.



No one even paused at the bakery path. Eliza could feel the group’s energy revving up; like sprinters, shifting into overdrive for the final lap. They all knew this last bit would be the windiest. At least the rain had backed off a little.

She tugged her zipper up tight to her chin, pulled the straps of her bag all the way up onto her right shoulder, and stuffed fists back into jacket pockets, trying to ignore the bakery’s dark loom. She hadn’t complimented James enough. She’d been so worried about playing favorites in the schoolroom that she hadn’t praised him at all, even at home. Was that why he was so hard on himself?

Ah well, at thirty years old he wasn’t likely to listen to her now. But Nathaniel, leading the singers up the road with his newly straightened back; she could help him grow to his full

potential. She'd speak with Lila about singing lessons, once they were all warm and dry again.

On their left, the Emeralds' daughter waved from inside; her mother hesitated, but Doc Emerald kept moving—toward those free drinks up at the Inn. All the other houses along this stretch were empty, lit up only by the swoop of lighthouse beam every six seconds.

Where the road started its steepest climb, high walls blocked the wind's now icy sting. In the dark patches between lighthouse beams, Eliza spotted a pale yellow light swinging up ahead; not rhythmic enough to be automated. Was it Declan's ghost, signaling to her? Long ago, he'd waved a similar lantern to warn off a ship that got too close to the rocks. As if he could ever be even half as visible as the tall light he'd tended so lovingly.

Had her husband ever complimented their only son?

She shook off that question, blinked twice, and recognized the lamp swinger as Will the writer. "I just adore carolers," he called, "but I figured you'd be too cold and wet by now to make it all the way down to my house."

His house. The lighthouse cottage, where she'd first fallen for Declan over a lumpy bowl of oatmeal. Where she'd raised James, and buried three miscarriages. So many memories down that dark driveway.

"Merry Christmas, Will!" Eliza managed, though she didn't pause her steps or propose a fresh carol. She was very nearly sung out.

"Aren't you going to..." he paused. "Ah well, happy holidays!"

"Happy holidays..." Mack sang, and the group joined in. But no one knew the rest of the words, so the song tapered off to la-la-la and then—when the wall's protection ended—to a silent wind-thrashed slog.

O LITTLE TOWN OF BRENTON

Leaning into the strongest gusts, Eliza fought her way up to the very crest of the hill. The Inn's spotlights sparkled, lighting up the enormous Comstock house to her right; she wasn't surprised when Chase peeled off into his own yard.



The brightness ahead inspired a vision: peeling off her drenched coat, wrapping her knuckles around a hot toddy, maybe even ditching her leaky boots and drying her socks in front of a crackling fire. But first they needed one more upbeat song; Richie would've oversold the caroling to his guests, so they'd be expecting a properly festive arrival.

She was halfway down the bumpy driveway before the perfect tune came to her. "Dashing through the snow," she sang, "in a one horse open—"

"Golf cart..." Mack sang, around a chuckle.

"O'er the fields we go," the others chimed in, "Laughing all the way—ha ha ha!"

"Bells on—"

"Bobtail ring!" a loud voice up ahead chimed in, off-key; Richie Clark had opened the wreath-covered front door to dance a drunken jig of greeting. "Making spirits bright... what fun it is to laugh and sing a sleighing song tonight! Oh—"

"Jingle bells, jingle bells..."

They circled up for a rousing chorus around Richie's antics. Several boisterous voices joined in from inside, and Eliza spotted a couple kissing at the bottom of the carpeted staircase.

As soon as they finished the chorus, Richie beckoned them inside. "Drinks on the house for all carol singers!"



The Irreverend and Mack and Jenna pressed through the doorway, followed closely by the Emeralds. Lila grabbed Nathaniel's hand and turned him back toward Anna's house, as promised. Willie watched them go, took a tentative step toward shelter—and then spun on his heel to trot up the driveway, back into icy darkness. *Good choice, Willie.*

By the time Eliza turned toward the door, it had swung shut again. On either side of the stoop, freezing rain pinged against misted windows. It was cold enough to snow...

She wasn't ready to go inside yet, to break the spell of this wind-whipped night and its unexpected joy. So she simply stood, ignoring numb toes and throbbing knuckles, admiring the jaunty swing of homemade wreath—and the flakes of gray paint it knocked off the front door. An evergreen mother, scraping children from her nest.

She needed to do the same. Let James make his own mistakes. Keep quiet, even now that she knew too much.

The Sachem was still hovering behind her, she realized. "Going in?" she asked her friend, surprised.

"All those people," Sachem said. "I like it better out here."

"Remember your pledge, to get to know..."

"Each and every white islander." The wind kicked his hat forward, so he raised one hand to press it back into place. "Easier said than done. I'm not even supposed to go in this door." On the west side of the Inn was an entrance marked "Indians Only," though it hadn't been used in years.

"Richie's drunk—he won't even notice."

But instead of joining her on the stoop Sachem Tony dropped

his head back, as if asking the rainclouds—racing low over the Inn, from dark to light and then back to dark again—for guidance. And sure enough, the icy raindrops whitened into huge snowflakes that swirled around his hat brim. How lovely! She hoped Nathaniel and Lila and Willie hadn't made it back to Anna's warm house quite yet.



She stepped to her left, letting the porch light illuminate all those festive flakes—and the Sachem's closed eyes. Perhaps James wasn't the only one she hadn't thanked enough.

"I won't go in there alone," she said quietly. "And I've got your back—just as you've had mine, the past two years."

He opened his eyes and nodded, just once. Before he could change his mind, she reached for the door handle—but it opened all on its own, revealing a familiar profile.

"Merry Christmas Mom," James said. "And Uncle Tony—what a nice surprise!"

She smiled up at him, blinking away a snowflake. "Merry Christmas, my son."

"Well don't just stand there," he replied. "Dad wouldn't like me wasting all this heat—even if it is coming out of Richie's inheritance."

The Sachem chuckled.

Inside, Mack started yet another chorus of Jingle Bells. And that unknown couple was still kissing. Both dressed in red, it was hard to tell quite where one body ended and the other began.

"Mom?"

James' most prominent cowlick—a curl of thick brown hair just above his left temple—had been resisting a comb since he

was two years old. Tonight, it looped around his most visible scar from fifteen months ago. Maybe, for the past twenty-eight years, those strands had been nothing but an empty frame—and now they had something to highlight.

“You enjoy your evening,” she told her son. “I’m all sung out.”

“Not surprising, on such a nasty night.” James nodded past her. “You’ll walk her home, Uncle Tony?”

“Of course.”

The Sachem knew damn well she could walk herself home. And it was high time for him to get back to his own family. But her son’s concern warmed her, all the way down to those numb toes.

“Merry Christmas, James.”

“Merry Christmas, Mom. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The door closed, and she wiped at her cheeks. Trying to pretend the dampness was just melting snow.

“Hard to let our kids make their own mistakes,” the Sachem said quietly.

“Damn hard.” Wanting to add: *Did you hear something about James?* The Sachem’s own son was still—she assumed—James’ best friend.

None of her business.

“Thank you for singing with us,” she said instead, taking that firm elbow once again for the short walk up the drive, to where she’d turn left and he’d turn right. “That was the very best Christmas gift of all.”

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.”

Ferry to Cooperation Island is available

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