

CHRISTMAS

LOST & FOUND

Carol Newman Cronin

DECEMBER 1983

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by Carol Newman Cronin

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Author's Note

An Australian sailor waits on a small New England island for his true love to come home for Christmas—and discovers that What's Next might actually be quite a bit different.

Christmas Lost & Found

23 December, at last. As Andy slid the boat yard's big shed door closed, he let himself imagine having a *push* with Anna again; lips-tongue, soft-hard. She was coming home to Brenton Island today—but would he even recognize her in winter togs? When they'd said goodbye way back in August, she'd worn a very short skirt and sleeveless jumper. All that tan skin...

He glanced around the shed out toward the harbor, but the ferry wasn't in sight just yet. Running late again; enough time to stop into the office and wish the Brewer family a Happy Christmas. Mother and daughter had both been so kind, the past two months; Henriette had dug up lined pants and a warm jacket, left-behinds from her son that were far more winter-worthy than his own thin Team Australia gear. And Sheila had offered herself.

A sheila actually named Sheila! Cute one, too. But three years younger than him and Anna; still a flighty teenager.

Back in Sydney, it was already Christmas morning. In a few hours, Mum and Dad and baby sis would open the prezzies he'd sent—and then head out to the beach for the family's annual cricket game. He could almost taste that refreshing throat-slide of his first cold beer.

This first Christmas away from home would be much... chillier. Anna's parents didn't know about him yet. And their usual hideaway—her dad's sailboat—was right here in the middle of the boat yard, all covered up tight. Where would they, um, *celebrate*? The beach would be far too cold.

Didn't matter, Andy told himself, pushing a shoulder into the office door. Especially when he looked up at the calendar on the back wall and saw all the days leading up to 23 December finally X'd out.

Bob's eyes were locked on the newspaper spread across his desk.

"Your boat just barely fit into the shed," Andy told him. "Last in and first out, right?"

Such a grump, he didn't even look up. As usual it was Henriette—smiling up from a much neater desk, off to the right—who responded.

"That's great news, Andy! Last year we didn't finish hauling till after New Year's—and we had to shovel snow off the decks. I'll be able to really enjoy tonight's caroling for a change." Her smile faded. "But I'm afraid that's all the work we have for you, till spring."

No surprise. But ever since his team had won the America's Cup back in September, putting away the local boats had kept him gainfully employed here on Anna's island. What next?

He'd worry about that after he saw her again.

"I've written you a very nice reference," Henriette said, handing across an envelope. "Along with a small Christmas bonus."

"Wow, that's so great!" He held up the top corners to read her blocky

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print: Andrew K “Akka” Andrews. His best Team Australia mate had come up with that nickname after learning Andy’s middle initial, and it still sounded strange in flat American vowels.

“You didn’t have to do this,” he told Henriette. “Especially now, when you’re about to lose your house.”

Bob thrashed the paper around, trying to get to the next page.

“Sheila told you that?” Henriette shook her head, freeing a strand of mousy hair from her loose plait. “That girl just can’t keep family news to herself.”

He couldn’t help asking. “Where will you live?”

“Oh don’t you worry about that,” she told him. “There’s always the apartment upstairs! Now go enjoy your holiday—you’ve earned it.”

The office was too small to hide anyone, but he made a show of looking around anyway. “I should say goodbye to Sheila, too.”

“She had a half day at school, so you’ll see her down at the landing. You are meeting the midday ferry?”

He blushed. “Thought I might.”

Henriette nodded. “You’ve been right faithful to that hoity-toity Anna Crosby, even with my precocious daughter doing her damndest to distract you. Can’t blame her, that cute accent of yours would charm the pants off most any girl. So if you ever need a relationship reference...” Her braying laughter made Bob shake his paper all over again.

“Ta, but I’m all set there.” Andy smiled at her. “Happy Christmas, Henriette.”

“Around here, we call it *Merry* Christmas! But as you would say, ‘no worries, mate.’” She winked. “Maybe you can join us for caroling tonight? You have such a lovely voice...”

Did Anna sing? He had no idea.

“Cheers,” he told Henriette, turning to go. “Happy Christmas, Bob.”

He closed the door behind him, picked up his skateboard from its lean against the outside wall, and carried it out to the road. He’d miss working for Henriette. Heaps better than pretending to be a fisherman, dropping hookless lines over the side whenever another team came too close. All last summer, he’d lived in constant dread of either being called out as an America’s Cup spy or mistakenly landing a fish; he wouldn’t have known what to do in either case.

But beating the Americans at their own game had been bloody *great*.

After the big victory party, all his mates had flown back to Oz for a huge ticker tape parade; they’d even met the Prime Minister. He’d returned his support boat to Brenton Boat Yard—and then accepted the first job offer he got. Cashed in his ticket home, found a cheap room, saved up for Anna’s return. Kept hands and mind busy, while his aching heart waited for a blue air

letter from across the Atlantic.

He had enough money to get through the holidays. But after that, what next?



In January, Anna would return to university in Providence. With an America's Cup win, a local reference, and an accent that apparently sounded quite exotic... surely he could find work nearby? Plenty of boats around, even now that the America's Cup had gone home to Oz.

Just past the sharp bend in the empty road, he skidded to a stop to rip open the envelope. A typed letter enclosed a crisp fifty dollar bill—aces! He could take Anna to dinner up at Clark's Inn. Heaps better than caroling.

She'd been the best part of the summer—right up till 15 August, when she'd left for a term in London. Her only letter had arrived eight days after the Cup win; a quick congratulations to him and his "fishing," followed by endless raves about her new life and a "very inspiring" professor. Andy had written back right away to tell her he was sticking around, "so I'll be easy to find when you come home." But Anna hadn't responded; every time he checked in at the island's tiny post office, the old biddy behind the counter just shook her head.

Does she write to her parents? he wanted to ask. But he knew she wouldn't answer—and she guarded the island's mail too closely to see for himself.

Despite the bloody radio silence he'd written once a week, trying to make his life sound just as exciting as the London art world. Each morning, he cooked himself a scramble and whizzed off down the hill, though he never quite managed to chat up Anna's father before the lawyer boarded the early ferry. After a mugup at the Bean, he'd head over to the yard. Unstepping masts and lifting boats onto dry land made the hours pass quick as a flash—and each afternoon, he'd smile up at another black X on that calendar.

It was the evenings that dragged on, dark and endless. Back inside that drafty house, he'd make himself supper and join Mrs. Comstock in the living room for Jeopardy. Then he'd head up to his room and fall asleep over one of her horse-racing mysteries. On Saturdays, he treated himself to a few pints up at the Inn; *cheaper than a bloody shrink*, he told himself each week.

As the sun set earlier and earlier and rose later and later, he wondered if he should just go home—before he actually went crazy. November and December meant summer to him, but each day Brenton Island only grew colder and grayer. The last few mornings, there'd been a skim of ice on the

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inside of his bedroom window!

But today all of that shivering, all of that yelling questions that were really answers at the bloody tube, all that waiting for what would happen next... it was finally going to pay out.

When he reached the town landing, Andy stepped off the skateboard and tucked it under his left arm to pick his way down the icy hill. Time for another mugup, plus a snack to tide him over.

The Bean's steps were icy too, so today he grabbed the railing and hauled himself up like a local. Yesterday, he'd hit a slippery patch and fallen right on his bum; the bruise looked like a bite mark. Maybe it would make Anna jealous?

(At home, even if he whiffed Uncle Dan's cricket pitches again this year, warm sand would cushion his fall.)

As he crossed the coffeeshop's deck and stood the skateboard on end against wood shingles, sunlight glinted off spotless windows like a signaling mirror. Was it Mum, begging him to come home? Or his old boss from Team Australia, offering up another spying job? Australian yachting must be in a complete uproar, just trying to imagine an America's Cup in Perth—the back of the beyond, even for a Sydney-raised kid.

Or maybe that flicker and wink was Anna: *See you soon, my love!* The thought bloomed warm in his chest.

Before going inside, he checked his watch; half past twelve, and the ferry still hadn't made the turn around the end of Bird Island. Sighing, he leaned into the huge wreath on the door to push it open; time to tamp down his frustration with a bagel and cream cheese.

Six full tables, and everyone seemed to be laughing or yelling or both. The narrow bar to his left, which had the best view of the dock, was empty—but so were the pastry plates on top of the counter to his right; nothing but crumbs.

"Whole island came down to meet the ferry today," Janice said, drying her hands on an apron covered in red and white reindeer. "I left a message ashore for Captain Roman, asked him to pick up a couple dozen more bagels. God knows if he'll remember." She rolled her eyes up to the low ceiling.

"Just my tea then," Andy said. "Want me to—"

"No need, I've got it now!"

"Ta—thanks." A few weeks ago, he'd finally convinced her to steep the teabag in a separate pot. Much better flavor, though still not nearly as strong as the mugups his mum brewed, every morning and afternoon, right through the worst heat of summer.

Except on holidays. Today, she'd be downing a beer while cheering on her nephew's at-bat—by far the worst cricket player in the family. His throat clogged with homesickness.

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“Maybe you’ll finally get your Christmas present today?” Janice handed over a white china mug and steaming stainless pot. “Unless Anna ran into an air traffic delay.”

Like this island-born sheila knew anything about international travel.

“Personally, I would’ve left town right after those crazy Irishmen blew up that huge department store,” she continued. “Right in the middle of London! Have you even heard from Anna since then? Her ma was quite worried, though I haven’t seen her in several...”

Andy dropped three coins on the counter and turned away, because otherwise Janice would just keep talking.

He never should’ve confided in her. But Anna’s arrival was a happier subject than the usual Janice topics; her kid’s teething, the ridiculous price of cream cheese, and how much weight she could take off before she came up preggers again.

He sat in front of the icy window and dunked the teabag several times before filling the mug. The harbor was so empty now! Of course he’d lifted out almost all the boats that had swung on those moorings, including the little sailboat where he’d first spotted Anna; sitting in the cockpit, painting sunset. He’d taken a swim off the Team Australia boat and just happened to pause for breath within easy chatting distance. The very next evening, she’d invited him aboard; it was only a few nights later when they’d first... but he shouldn’t think about that right now.

Unstepping the mast on that sweet boat had been like meeting up again with an old friend. A few days after he lifted her lovingly out of the water, a skinny balding man had set a ladder against the rail and climbed aboard. When Andy had offered to help with the “winterizing”—a word he’d recently learned from Henriette—Mr. Crosby had frowned. “No thanks—I sure don’t need any more yard bills.”

He’d wanted to climb up the ladder anyway—if only to ask if there’d been any word from London. Instead Andy had headed into the office to glare up at the calendar; all those empty days until 23 December.

He’d been counting down to this day for weeks! If the ferry didn’t show up soon, he’d—

What—throw a temper tantrum? The locals—currently grouching about the island’s zero chance of a white Christmas—would look at him even more strangely.

All he could do was sit tight. Just like spying on those other America’s Cup teams; his current project required more patience than skill.

“Warming up nicely, Andy,” Mayor Frank said, pausing on his way to the counter. “Even that black ice you found yesterday has melted! Ferry’s on its way, I promise...”

He turned to Janice. “Caroline and her husband can’t make it home this

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year. So I might be able to finish writing *A History of Brenton Island*. Do you know the story of...”

Janice refilled his mug but then turned away to brew a fresh pot of coffee, so the mayor headed back to his seat.

A few months ago, the mayor had informed Andy that Mrs. Comstock was running an illegal boarding house. “But I’m not gonna make a fuss; she’s not well, you know. *Cancer*,” he’d breathed, pulling away as if it might be contagious. Everyone out here shared far too much personal information—except for Anna’s dad and that tight-lipped postmistress.

Surely Anna’s mum would be meeting her husband and daughter on today’s ferry? Maybe she was already here, sitting at one of those tables! But just as Andy glanced over his left shoulder to check, the mayor stood up to pronounce: “Thar—she—blows!” And every head in the room turned toward the front window.

“Has to say that every time he spots the damn ferry,” Janice grumbled, rolling her eyes at Andy. “Lately it’s just plain annoying.”



Through the lacy frosted window, the vessel heading for the dock looked more like a fishing boat gone to seed than a dependable form of transportation. Over a summer of watching the faded blue hull come and go, the Homer’s profile had grown almost as familiar as Anna’s. Now, admiring the flared bow pushing across glassy harbor, Andy’s heart began to pound. Carrying his true love home for the holidays, shouldn’t the ancient ferry look more... festive?

Engines revved for the tight spin into the dock, sparking an embarrassing memory. Last Saturday, on the ferry back from Newport after Christmas shopping, he’d stood up just as that sharp turn started—and almost tumbled into Sheila’s lap. She’d taken the seat right next to him even though there were only three other people in the passenger area, and for the entire forty-minute ride she had shared a giggly description of all the presents she’d bought. “Yours is a secret, though,” she’d told him at least twice. She’d had two beers with lunch, she admitted, thanks to her fake ID—and those batting eyelashes.

To cope, he’d knocked back two beers from his own rucksack. Which was still no excuse for his next barmy move, once the ferry was safely tied up to the dock; he’d stopped alongside the wheelhouse door to introduce himself to the captain as “a fellow marine professional.” But before he could ask *why*

the bloody hell do you come into the dock like that, the bloody bastard had bolted—right out through the far door.

Sheila had stumbled into him from behind. “Don’t even try talking to Captain Roman,” she’d instructed, grabbing onto Andy’s elbow to pull him up the narrow wood gangway. “My mom says he was already a little strange *before* he went to Vietnam, and since he came home he’s been terrified of strangers. One day so many tourists showed up, he ran away! His dad had to go peel him off some park—”

“And this bloke is a ferry captain?” He’d stretched his left arm overhead—if only to remove her hand from the crook of his elbow.

“Oh he’s fine now,” Sheila insisted. “His dad built that wall between the wheelhouse and the passenger area, and hired a deckhand-slash-babysitter. Happy as a clam now—as long as strangers stay the hell out of his wheelhouse! Now, how about a drink up at the Inn? I’m buying. Regular bartender’s off this weekend, and Richie Clark never checks IDs.”

He’d begged off, which meant skipping his usual Saturday night pint. So it had been another evening of Jeopardy’s answer-questions—spiced up by Mrs. Comstock’s snores from the couch.

Today the ferry captain nudged in against the pilings gentle as a kitten’s whisker, and soon the very first passenger was trekking up onto the dock. Behind Andy, a chair scraped as a large woman stood up. “That’s my daughter. Home from cooking school to make our Christmas dinner!” She ran out the door and down the steps, straight at a girl carrying a large white sack. The mother threw her arms around the whole package, just as two teenaged boys darted by and jostled into them. “Sorry!” one called, already following his friend up the hill, school rucksacks bouncing against their backs.

The rest of the travelers streamed up onto the dock in a jostle of reds; hats, scarves, jackets, gift bags. Everyone was smiling—and most were waving as well.

He couldn’t see properly from here! After dropping his dishes on the counter, Andy followed the locals outside. It had definitely warmed up, and the harbor sparkled blue and gold.

The day Anna left had been sunny and calm too, perfect weather for her flouncy polka-dot mini skirt and red jumper. Would she’d be sporting a red wool coat? And maybe a matching beret to tamp down her auburn hair. She’d definitely be more smartly dressed than any other islander.

No one had her sexy stride. As the crowd began to thin—heading to the Bean, or dragging loaded wagons up the hill—he couldn’t see Anna’s father, either. Maybe they’d stopped for lunch in—

“Andy?” Janice had come up behind him, his forgotten skateboard covering most of her ridiculous reindeer apron. “You forgot this.” He took it, thanked her, and started to turn back toward the ferry, but she kept talking

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anyway.

“Also, I thought you should know... Peter just picked up his Christmas pies.” At his blank look, she added, “Peter Crosby—Anna’s dad? I guess Pete Junior’s home from college, so he took the day off. And I just happened to ask him a simple neighborly question; are *all* your kids coming home for Christmas?” She cupped an elbow in each hand. “Pete’s his favorite, so I had to specifically ask: *what about Anna?* He said she’s... going skiing. In the Alps. With her favorite art professor.”

His throat closed up. All these months, he’d been so sure of her steadiness; sure that this day would be the final X on the calendar of what’s next.

“No consolation for you,” Janice continued, “but Peter is totally pissed off! They just got the news yesterday, and of course that expensive plane ticket was non-refundable.” She reached out to rest a ringed hand on his crossed arms. “Sorry. I know how much you were looking forward to—”

“She promised,” he choked out, as a tear ran down his right cheek. “She bloody promised!”

Janice reached up and pulled him in against her soft chest. “I know just how you feel,” she said, patting his back. “When I was just about your age, I got stood up right before Christmas. And his name was Andy! Andy Pierce; thought I’d never get over him.” Her chest heaved with a huge sigh that morphed into a chuckle. “A week later, I met my husband at a New Year’s Eve party. Now I can barely remember that other guy...”

When he could finally control his snuffling, Andy pulled away from the motherly embrace. Rubbed a jacket sleeve across nose and cheeks in a futile attempt to dry them. “Ta, Janice. I’m just—homesick...”

No more boats to haul—and now, no more girlfriend. A double whammy of *What Next*.

He had enough saved for an air ticket back to Sydney. But his room was paid up through the end of the year, and his shelf in Mrs. Comstock’s fridge held enough ham and eggs for another week at least. Along with several cans of that piss they called beer here in—

“Well would you look at that!” Janice’s gaze locked on something over his shoulder. Raising one eyebrow, she added, “Someone’s very happy to see you... I’ll leave you two alone then.”

He turned to see dark hair and a red coat, waving and running right at him. Could it be—

Sheila. Damn. He wanted to follow Janice back inside, drown his sorrows in a fresh pot of her weak tea.

“So nice of you to meet me!” Sheila said, opening her arms for a hug. When he kept his own fists jammed into the pockets of her big brother’s jacket, she grabbed onto his left elbow instead. “My Akka,” she added,

making it sound like yak. All wrong.

“Ready for your Christmas present?” she asked next, already pulling him up the hill. Away from the empty ferry. Away from the only prezzie that counted. Toward whatever this red-coated sheila had in mind.

Bloody hell. But Jeopardy wouldn’t come on for six more hours. He let himself be led up the landing, toward a new plan.



At the top, Sheila turned left. He was quite ready for a drink, but—
“I thought the Inn bartender wouldn’t serve you,” he said. Laws were laws, though in Australia the weak beer Americans got so aggro about would barely be considered an alcoholic beverage.

“He won’t. And the Inn doesn’t serve... Aussie beer.” She pointed at her rucksack, which was sagging against that cute blue-jeaned bum.

His mouth watered. “You’ve got...”

“Six cans of Fosters. And a blanket, for the beach. After that, maybe we’ll go caroling! They never have enough male voices.”

He managed a smile. “Your mum suggested that too.”

“Yeah, she loves it. Kind of a multi-generational thing, but surprisingly fun anyway. Because everyone’s totally lit by then.”

“Lit?”

“Drunk.” She giggled. “Christmas Eve is the one night of the year when everyone loosens up around here. Especially when it’s not raining or freezing cold. Like my new coat?” She stepped away from him, holding out her arms like a runway model. “I traded with a friend from school. She said it brought out the color in my cheeks.”

That it did.

A gull cawed. Andy turned back to the harbor one last time. Except for all those empty moorings and an icy sheen on top of the breakwater, it could still be August. The day Anna left him behind.

He needed to find something else to work toward. And right now, Sheila and her Fosters were the best bloody *something else* in sight.

“Never been to the Brenton beach,” he told her, cocking out his elbow until she latched onto it again. “But back home in Australia, that’s exactly where I’d be today. We always have a family cricket match, and everyone plays; Mum and Dad and my little sister Caroline, plus two uncles, three aunts, and six cousins. Kind of like your caroling, I guess—since we’re all definitely, what did you call it? *Lit*.” He swallowed, willing his eyes to stay dry. At least

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until they reached the top of the steep hill.

“All drinking Fosters, of course!”

“A local dark beer, actually. Even the best cooler can’t possibly keep a Fosters cold enough, not sitting on a hot beach in the Christmas sun.”

“Well these are definitely cold,” Sheila said. “Feels like there’s an icepack against my lower back! Here’s the way down.” She pulled her hand free to turn onto a footpath so narrow he’d never even noticed it, and led him over a steep bluff and down to a rocky beach with dark brown sand. At the water’s edge, tiny birds chased the waves away—and then turned to be chased back up to dry land again. Surprisingly warm, thanks to sunshine and the big bluff. If he closed his eyes, he could almost imagine he was standing on the shoreline of Sydney Harbor...

“Ooh, this blanket isn’t quite as big as I thought! We’ll have to sit kinda close.”

This wasn’t home. And Anna had flitted off to someone else. But there was cold beer and a steady smile right in front of him, so he sat down. Ready for that first refreshing throat-slide—and whatever happened after that.

Sheila handed him a big blue can and Andy popped it open, expecting her to guzzle down her own like a thirsty teenager. Instead she held it up and waited for him to meet her gaze.

“I know I’m not Anna,” she said. “But being here with you is my very best present, so thank you. Merry Christmas, my Akka. No, wait—I’ve been practicing!” She sat up tall, took a deep breath, and pronounced: “My Aah-kaah.”

He smiled. “That’s just about right.”

By now, Henriette would’ve put another black X right through 23 December. A different day than expected, creating a different path to *what’s next*. And, maybe quite soon, he’d be having a *pash* with a different... Sheila.

“Happy Christmas.” He leaned left until their jacket shoulders touched and clinked his can against hers. “Here’s to... the best prezzie of all.”

About the Author

Carol Newman Cronin

is an award-winning writer
and a 2004 Olympian.

www.carolnewmancronin.com

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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*

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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.

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“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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