

Carol
Newman
Cronin

EVE OF
COOPERATION

by Carol Newman Cronin

Copyright ©2023 by Carol Newman Cronin

Author's Note

An off-season visiting yacht delivers an unexpected gift
to Cooperation Island.

On a balmy Christmas Eve in a year that could be this one, Harbormaster Mack glances out across a sun-sparkled Brenton Harbor—and spots a pair of white triangles above the black rocks of long breakwater. Sailboat, big one. Reaching this way.

The others gathered around the Bean's outside table don't even notice, so Mack points. "Yachties. Looks like they're coming into the harbor."

"Maybe Santa's trying to reduce his carbon footprint this year," Barb the baker says.

"Hope he doesn't bring me another hand-knit reindeer hat," replies Chase, who's taking a rare day off from his ever-important banking tasks in Newport.

When the white bow rounds the end of the breakwater, it's more beautifully curved than expected. And cutting through the dark water so smooth and easy, she's probably not even kicking up much of a wake.

"Where's that guy going?" Doc Emerald asks. "Hauling season's over."

"Too big for Brenton Boat Yard," Mack replies. "What a cool boat!"

With four miles of open water between their island and the entrance to Narragansett Bay, pleasure boats are a winter rarity. So everyone—even the stiff-necked banker, who has

to rotate his whole bulk—pauses to watch the jib roll up around the headstay.

“Maybe they’ll pick up a mooring,” the Irreverend suggests, raising an eyebrow at Mack. “Better yet, tie up to the dock. Only another week to balance the town books, and every little bit helps.”

But not even halfway across the harbor, the gorgeous hull pirouettes into the wind to drop her mainsail. As soon as she coasts to a stop, a large hook of an anchor clanks down into the water. They probably didn’t even bother starting up the motor, and nobody’s up on the bow.

“Better watch out for the big rock,” the doctor warns, though it’s actually on the opposite shoreline.

“He’s fine there,” Mack says. “Probably ten feet of water, even with this full-moon low tide.” But it’s not a very friendly location, to either the residents or town finances. Mooring and dock fees are their primary income, after all—and just a tiny drop in the bucket compared to keeping up all that brightwork.

“Maybe he’ll drag, and you can offer him half price,” the Irreverend says. “Better than no money at all.”

The boat settles astern, then stops. Holds steady and white against the breakwater’s bumpy profile.

“We should charge for anchoring,” Doc Emerald says.

“After all, the guy’s on island property!”

Mack stands up, if only to escape the inanity of landlubbers discussing harbor business. “I’ll go have a chat.”

“Invite the crew to the carol sing tonight,” the Irreverend suggests, always eager for more voices.

“Probably just here for lunch. Come on, Chester—boat ride!”

Mack’s aging black Lab presses to his feet and leads the way down the dock, though he does need some help making the low-tide leap into the harbormaster boat. The outboard starts right up, and as Mack idles across the harbor he admires the visitor’s long overhangs and varnished trim—she’s much bigger and shinier than any of their local boats. But it’s also much chillier out here than back on the sun-warmed, wind-sheltered, deck of the island’s only coffee shop.

The only person on deck is still furling the mainsail when Mack approaches, so he swings around the transom to check the name: wow—an East Coast legend! And a looker, too. Can he possibly convince the captain to tie up at the dock?

The guy steps down from the cabin house and pulls back the fluorescent hood of his foulweather gear jacket, revealing a dark blue watch cap. Only the eyes are visible above a high

collar, so it's the voice that first clues Mack in—a woman! He reaches a hand out to grab the shiny toerail, trying to keep his smile from growing larger and less professional.

“Help you?” She must be freezing—though she's much better dressed than Mack. His own canvas jacket and pants block out most of the wind, but the stainless boat wheel has chilled his fingers and he's wishing he'd traded his ball cap for a thick beanie like hers.

“Came to offer you a spot on the town dock,” Mack says, meeting her piercing blue eyes. “Half price... call it a Christmas special.”

“No thanks. I like my privacy.”

“Mooring, then? I'll even give you a ride ashore, save you the row.” A small inflatable dinghy with stubby oars dangles off the narrow transom. “Coffee shop's nice and warm today, though they're already out of fresh scones.”

Again, the captain shakes her blue hat. “All set right here. Thanks to a great windlass.”

“Wow, raving about your windlass! What's so special about it?”

“Got a minute? I love to show it off.” She unhooks a gate in the lifelines and steps back, waving him onboard.

During the busy summer, he always says no to such invitations. But what the hell, there's nothing else that needs

doing today. And she sure is a beauty—the boat, that is.

Mack hands up a bow line and steps onto teak decks. “You stay, Chester.” Heaven forbid those long toenails scratch any of this beautiful wood.

“He’s welcome too—I love dogs.”

“Okay—here boy.” Mack pats his own leg. “You can do it.”

“How old is he?”

“Just turned twelve last Tuesday.”

“Wow, he’s doing great.”

Chester manages to get his front paws up onto the rail and then across to the sailboat, and with just a slight tug on his collar he hops his stiff back legs onboard too. When the woman pats his head, he sits down and leans in against her yellow waterproof pant leg. Already right at home.

After tying the harbormaster boat off to a stern cleat, Mack follows his dog and this unexpected captain up to a spacious bow. The windlass is as shiny as everything else, but otherwise it doesn’t look like anything special. There is a modern bowsprit, and a hefty snubbing line runs over its roller and down to the anchor chain. Only ten minutes after sailing into a strange harbor, she’s already done everything right; there’ll be no dragging tonight, even with the stormy forecast.

They talk about anchor specs and chain storage for far longer than most people would tolerate, and as he follows her back to the cockpit Mack asks when the boat was built. “1970,” she says proudly. “Built to last, not like now. Even the hardware’s mostly original, though the decks have been replaced twice.” She leans in to mock-whisper, “Fake wood — don’t tell anyone.”

“Wow, I never would’ve guessed.” He squats to pat Chester, who’s curled up on a cockpit seat behind a varnished coaming. “Such a cool boat!” he gushes, which probably makes him sound like a complete moron—or even worse, a landlubber. Then he repeats himself—both because it’s true, and because it’s simply impossible to make numb lips form anything more impressive.

She pushes open the companion hatch, releasing a welcome gust of warmth. He can no longer feel his toes.

“Coffee?” the woman asks, before disappearing down what must be a very steep ladder.

Chester’s eyes follow her, though his graying chin whiskers don’t leave their pillow of front paws.

“Better stay right there, buddy.” Even two-legged Mack has to turn himself around to face the ladder so he doesn’t lose his footing.

By the time his rubber soles touch something large

enough to plant both feet, his host is spooning grounds into an old-fashioned but shiny percolator. When she fills it from the tap, he presses back against the ladder to stay out of her way. The boat is deeper but not as wide as a modern one this size—though he’s never been below on a boat this big. Forward of the galley and nav table is a step down into the main salon—or rather *saloon*, on such a classic boat.

The woman lights a burner, adjusts the heat.

“Quite a stove,” Mack says, wanting to press toward its silvery warmth.

“That’s original too,” she says, settling the coffee pot over the flame. “Works great. Oven’s a bit quirky, but I’m not much of a baker anyway. Not much of a cook either...”

“How long have you owned this boat?”

“Jeez Louise—she’s not mine!” Her smile disappears. “I’m the captain.”

Oops.

What’s your name? But she’s still glaring.

“I’m Charlie,” she says, as if he actually spoke. Sticks out a sun-freckled hand.

“Mack.” Her grip is solid, and surprisingly warm. “I’m the Brenton harbormaster.”

“Figured. Either that, or you rolled a drunk and stole his boat.” Her smile returns, and when she pulls off her watch

cap and jacket there's a rough braid streaming brown and gold between the shoulder straps of her foulweather gear pants, straight down the back of a navy sweater. Army Navy surplus, he'd be willing to bet.

The coffee burbles, so she bends down to adjust the flame. "Harbormastering must be pretty boring this time of year."

"Plenty to do, year-round," he replies—his stock response whenever the islanders suggest making his job part-time. "But shouldn't this lovely vessel be tucked away in some cozy shed by now?"

"Actually, I should be in the much cozier Caribbean. But we ran into some serious delays during the fall yard period, and I missed the delivery window. The owner's gone off skiing for the holidays, and it was so nice today I figured I'd come out and see how Brenton Islanders celebrate Christmas."

"By yourself?"

"As per usual." She winks. "Unless I find... company."

Mack swallows hard and manages to hold her gaze.

"Lots of friendly folks out here."

"How 'bout a bar that serves single malt?"

"The Inn has a cheap local rum that won't kill you. I'm planning on a few shots of that myself, help lubricate my

non-existent singing voice before tonight's caroling. Nice view, too, from up there," he adds, wishing for enough saliva to swallow. "They say you can see Scotland."

"After how many cocktails?"

He matches her grin. "Exactly."

The coffee's glass top is bubbling, so she shuts off the burner and fills two waiting mugs. "How do you take it?"

"Black's fine."

"Not on my watch." She moves the mugs to her right just enough to lift the lid of what must be a built-in icebox. Holds up a container of whole milk. "Join me?"

"Sure, even better."

The china mug she hands over warms his palms, and he lifts it to inhale steaming comfort.

"Cheers, Mack," she says, clinking her own milk-lightened coffee against his. "Here's to new... friends."

About the Author

Carol Newman Cronin

is an award-winning writer
and a 2004 Olympian.

www.carolnewmancronin.com

Books by Carol Newman Cronin

Ferry to Cooperation Island

Game of Sails

Cape Cod Surprise

Oliver's Surprise

Want more?

**Turn the page to read
the first chapter of**
Ferry to Cooperation Island

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

in paperback, ebook, and audio

Learn more: www.carolnewmancronin.com