

The background of the cover is a photograph of a sunset. The sky is filled with warm, golden and orange clouds. The sun is a bright, glowing orb just above the horizon. In the foreground, the water of a lake or river is visible, with small ripples. A dark silhouette of a building and trees is visible along the horizon line.

THE  
BOAT  
BEGGARS

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by Carol Newman Cronin

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**Author's Note**

A disgraced captain steals a boat in the final days of the year—with only the best of intentions.

I haven't even made it to the outer edge of the mooring field when I realize I can no longer feel my fingertips. And my ride, Stanley's twenty-four-foot workboat, must be feeling equally out of her comfort zone. *Bessie's* never been out of Newport Harbor, let alone all the way down Narragansett Bay and across four miles of open water. But just a few minutes ago, she started up with a roar—as if trusting me to untie her lines only for a very good reason. So here we are together, the day before New Year's Eve, heading out to Brenton Island on our mission of mercy. Holding her stainless wheel is like gripping an icicle. But without an active hand on the helm, *Bessie's* prone to wandering.

Something else we have in common.

When I got to work this morning, the Newport waterfront was abuzz with news of a broken-down Brenton ferry. Terrible timing, with folks needing to get home—whether escaping that tiny ingrown island or returning to it. Within an hour, all the boatyards had set up a rotating schedule. And I'd watched a parade of scuffed-up vessels—most still wearing Christmas lights—scurry in and out of the harbor, open cockpits jammed with shiny coats and hats. Flat calm all day, but still probably a few waterlogged dress shoes.

I am absolutely sure that Stanley would've joined the party if he was around. My boss doesn't ever feel the cold, and he's a sucker for charity cases—look how patient he's been with me the past six months. But he's off visiting his newest grandchild today.

If I'd asked permission, Stanley would've first said *Bessie* wasn't up to an open water ride—and then reminded me that she wasn't insured to carry passengers. Since what he calls “the incident” last spring, he's been constantly on me to start playing by the rules. Only after hours of pacing around his tiny office do I decide to risk another black mark.

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The keys were in their usual hiding place. I did have second thoughts when my bare hands and neck met bone-chilling air, but I kept on; across frozen ground, down onto floating docks. And as soon as I stepped onboard, *Bessie* seemed to ask: where've you been? Fired up like it was a summer's day, backed out of her slip, and pranced across the harbor.

This boat's almost all open deck, with just a tiny cuddy cabin. Stanley rebuilt her years ago as a family cruiser, but these days she mostly helps out around the yard. As soon as we reach the speed limit buoys, I throttle up—and the wind whips over the windshield. Down under my canvas jacket's corduroy collar. Up the wide ankles of a borrowed worksuit. And worst of all, right through the skin of ten bare fingers. I've never owned gloves, and usually that seems smart; yet another excuse to head south before winter socks in. Now I stuff my right hand under an armpit, trying not to think about palm trees and boat drinks and warm breezes.

I've just swapped my left hand to warm up under the opposite armpit when I spot a familiar workboat speeding north, full of passengers. Predictably, the radio crackles to life; "*Bessie*, this is *Scout*." Matt, the organizer of this ad-hoc ferry service, loves to talk. So even though I don't respond, he continues. "About time you joined the fun, Stan the Man! Lots more islanders waiting, and they'll all be very glad to see you. *Escort*, out."

As we pass port to port, I raise my left hand to mimic a restrained Stanley greeting before turning to port to take his wake bow-on. Moments later, though, I wonder if I should've instead pulled off my hat; make damn sure he saw my distinctive braid. Freezing my ass off to rescue a few desperate islanders might be my best chance to redeem myself with the Newport harbor rats, who now think of me not as the *girl delivery captain* but as *the captain who screwed up so big, she lost her license*.

I glance aft, calculating. We can definitely carry six—though there are no actual seats. But as the cliché-loving Stanley would say, *beggars can't be choosers*. And since it's a good samaritan run, we should be insured. Even with an unlicensed captain.

The Bay widens, so I leave Bessie to wander long enough to check her cuddy cabin for gloves—yes! Too big and rubber-clammy, but now I can keep both hands on the wheel. As *Bessie's* diesel purrs underfoot, throwing a glint of spray back toward land, I grin. We've both spent far too long tied to the dock.

Even the open ocean is glassy, so I turn to study the deck space again; trying to visualize bodies actually crowding onto the engine box. Eight? *Beggars can't be choosers*. And there's still at least an hour till sunset, so I can take it slower on the return run.

Fingers warm at last, this cruise suddenly seems too short. But the next land beyond the island just to starboard is... Bermuda. So, after one more glance at unbroken horizon, I heave a sigh and turn the wheel toward Brenton Harbor. After all, I deserve this cold-air punishment; my actions did cause damage to the vessel under my command, as the Coast Guard put it. Which is why there will be no escaping to the Caribbean this year.

I wait until we're inside the long breakwater to bring Bessie down to half-throttle. Before my eyes can fully adjust to the shadow of the island's big hill, I hear a cheer across empty harbor; quite a crowd on the town dock. As we approach, a guy in a worksuit clips a handheld VHF to his left pocket and points to the outer face of a floating dock. It isn't until he's reaching out to grab *Bessie's* spring line that I recognize—James.

“Thanks for coming over,” he says, his smile wide and natural for once. Which sends me back almost two decades, to the day he first asked me to be his *mate*—in all senses of the word, as it turned out. The smile that launched my life as a delivery captain.

Former life.

Just as he crouches down to cleat off the line, both VHF's pipe up; a stereo announcement that another workboat's heading this way, full of passengers. I didn't think to ask Matt before I left the dock if there was anyone waiting. But when he responds, he thanks “Stanley and Bessie” for the extra run, adding that we are probably picking up out on Brenton by now. “Or if not, let us know where you are.”

“Long trip for Bessie,” James says, pushing back up to standing. “How many you think you can...” The warm smile disappears. “Wait—you're not Stanley.”

“And you're still stating the obvious—”

Of course as soon as he hears my voice, those bushy eyebrows push together into one.

“Didn't you lose your license?”

I snort. “Good to see you too.” And it actually is, even in an insulated one-piece suit. Eyes so piercingly blue that skinny-dipping in the Caribbean, they had perfectly matched the water around his smile.

But when I move over to the rail, he steps back. As if there's a minimum distance alarm he doesn't want to set off.

“Heard there's free coffee,” I say, just as I realize that my cold-stiffened knees won't bend enough to swing a leg onto

the dock. Instead I place my butt on the coaming like a duffer and swivel both sneakers around. “True?”

“If they haven’t run out.” James is already halfway up the ramp. “But no dilly-dallying—lots of folks waiting.”

“Don’t worry. I got no running lights.”

James glances back at Bessie. “Isn’t that also an insurance requirement?”

*Beggars can’t be choosers*, I want to remind him. Instead I follow him up the ice-slick ramp—though not down the gangway onto his precious ferry.

I’d forgotten about the crowd until they all press toward me.

“Small boat,” a skinny guy remarks. “How many can you take?”

“Figure that out after I get some coffee in me.” I count seven others. Who all, instead of heading down the bouncy ramp to claim a spot onboard, follow me up the steps to the coffee shop.

Inside smells of sweat and worry. A half-dozen people, several overnight bags, one huge suitcase. I didn’t factor in luggage.

“How many can you take?” A portly man rises from his seat.

“Six.” My lips are mumble-numb, so I hold up five fingers and a thumb.

“Well I’ve got a very important—”

“We all need to get ashore, Chase!” A blond woman in a

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bright blue wool coat says. “And I’ve been waiting since noon.”

The others begin talking over each other, and a bare-armed woman grabs my sleeve to pull me away.

“Thanks for coming all the way out here! Can I get you a hot beverage? I make a mean latte.” She lets go to detour behind an empty glass case, swipes on an overhead light. “Dark so early this time of year!”

Lattes take forever. “Just coffee, with milk if you’ve got it.”

“Haven’t run out of either yet.” She sets a very full cup down between us. “No lids, sorry. I guess arguing is thirsty work!” She cocks her head toward the crowd.

“I can’t take them all,” I admit. “How...”

“Most are just here for the show, to be honest. If it was me, I’d make ‘em all come up with a good reason.” She winks. “That’ll weed out the gawkers.”

I wrap all ten fingers around the cup’s heat and wonder if there’s a back entrance. I’m better slinging varnish than making tough choices. But glancing out a darkening window, there’s no time to waste.

“Okay!” When I hold up one hand, someone whistles the crowd quiet. “Somehow we have to decide which six of you most deserve the dubious honor of riding ashore on Bessie. Any ideas?”

Silence.

“Then how about each of you states a reason for—”



“That’s not fair!” the large man says. “I’ll pay you handsomely for the—”

“Not insured for paying passengers,” I tell him, taking in his creased pants. “And you might not want to risk that suit on—”

“I’ve worked on the ferry,” calls the skinny kid from the dock. “James trained me himself. I can handle your ropes!”

Jeez Louise, where’s that back door?

When the big guy drops back onto his chair, I spot a woman in the far corner. She’s pressing the head of a tiny baby against her chest, only one small bag next to her chair.

Can I just refuse anyone with too much baggage? I hide my grin behind a sip of quickly cooling coffee.

“What we need is a jury,” I say. I don’t want to be the only one playing God.

I’m totally winging it when I point to the two loudest people in the room. “Up here, big guy—and you too,” I tell the skinny one. They both come forward. “Now, we’re gonna listen to your neighbors explain why they absolutely have to go ashore *right now*.”

My two helpers are staring at me, trying to figure out how this affects their own chances—and I don’t have any idea, so I just keep blathering on.

“I’ll break any ties,” I tell everyone. “And there is a much bigger boat on its way—so every single one of you is gonna make it ashore today.” Unless Quincy’s decided to go warm his favorite barstool instead.

“Now, who wants to start?”

No one.

“Make it quick—I got no running lights.”

“I need to get ashore to visit my mom. In the hospital,” a tiny woman with a long braid says. “I’m Lila, by the way. And—”

“That’s good. Sir?”

The frowning guy sitting across from Lila stands up, as if to speak—and instead scurries across the room to pull open the door. A draft of cold air swirls around my ankles before it clatters shut behind him. Someone titters, then laughs.

“He’s been looking for an excuse all day,” Lila says, rubbing at her eyes.

*One down*, I think, before nodding to the mother. “What about you?”

“My brother’s wife is about to go into labor,” she says. “They’ve got a two year old who can’t be left alone.”

“Finally, a reason that really can’t wait! Who else?” I focus on a dough-faced woman.

“Me? Oh, I, uh—just really need to get away from the grumpy James!”

More laughter. Girlfriend?

A text beeps: Stanley. “Where’s my boat?”

Damn. Back earlier than expected.

I return my phone to its pocket. “Denied,” I tell the woman. “Anyone else?”

Just as predicted, the group quickly whittles itself down to five — and that includes my two judges. They all follow me out, the skinny guy wheeling Lila’s huge suitcase.

James is waiting at the top of the ferry gangway.

“Stanley okay?” he asks.

“Visiting his new grandkid.” I want to promise he’ll be back out here tomorrow, but I also very much want my promises to mean something again.

“Thanks for coming out,” James says. “We all really appreciate it. And good luck with all your...”

Before he can finish, I skid down the ramp.

Once we’re all onboard, even five seems like a crowd. “Why don’t you take the cabin,” I tell the mother, who’s wrapped herself and her baby inside a fluffy Santa-red coat. “Keep that little guy out of the wind.” Smiling her thanks, she disappears down the short ladder.

“Rest of you need to take a—”

“But there’s no benches!” the large man points out.

“There’s a nice warm engine box.” As they all settle, I wonder if I should give a safety talk. Instead I point to the woman nearest the dock. “Lila is it?—could you cast off?” Just the one line; another risky move I wouldn’t admit to Stanley.

“I’ll get it,” the skinny guy says, already hopping over the rail. “Like I said, I knows my ropes.”

My phone pings again, but I focus on backing out into an already dusky harbor. The island’s shadow, I remind myself,

glancing at the clock. Still a half hour to sunset.

I pull on the work gloves again, also warmed by the happy babble behind me. Outside the breakwater, Bessie climbs up to twelve knots despite the extra load. I gratefully pat the hatch coaming; back before full dark means one less rule broken.

The two Newport Bridge towers greet me like old friends; they're the first sight of safe landfall, after an offshore passage. Who needs palm trees and boat drinks when there's a spectacular sunset to port, and a mirror of red-tinted water all the way up Narragansett Bay?

Halfway to Castle Hill, the big guy says he's freezing to death and asks for a blanket. Before I can respond, Lila says that singing always keeps them warm caroling—and starts in on Jingle Bells. The other woman joins in, and soon the two men's voices are harmonizing. Who'd've thought.

When that song ends, the deckhand-wannabe asks for my favorite carol—and surprisingly, they all know it. "*I saw three ships come sailing in,*" he sings, before improvising to match the moment: "*on New Year's Eve—or the day before...*" I glance over my shoulder—and receive a flirty wink as the verse finishes: "On New Year's Eve in the morning."

Next he ad libs: "*And now I thank this captain fair, for driving us, for driving us.*" I smile, but keep my eyes on the glassy water ahead. One more wink might lead to an after-party that would be far too embarrassing... *On New Year's Eve, in the Morning.*

It's not until we're rounding the stone certainty of Fort Adams that I realize: I never texted Stanley back. Dammit, what an idiot! All I can do now is get Bessie and her passengers safely back to the dock before it's completely dark. Without

breaking any more rules—so I force myself to slow down at the speed limit buoys.

When the skinny guy calls, “Three cheers for the captain!”, the response is loud enough to echo off the waterfront buildings. Nice to be appreciated for once, even as lights come on along the shoreline.

I’m turning to starboard for Bessie’s slip when the large man stands up and strides forward. Before I can wonder how much oil and dirt are now stuck to his fancy suit pants, he points to the next landing. “That’s the ferry dock.” All those chins shiver, with cold or annoyance or maybe both.

*Beggars can’t be choosers.*

I shake my head. “Those are reserved for actual ferry boats.” Even though I’ve broken that rule too, waiting for dock space.

Now, of course, Stanley’s is completely empty—except for one tall figure that I recognize as the man himself. Arms crossed, not leaning against a nearby piling as he usually would. Mad as hell, because it’s so dark now the dock lights are coming on. I swallow hard. Can’t I do anything right anymore?

He doesn’t know I’m on a mercy mission, I remind myself. Probably looks like a holiday joyride.

The eager deckhand tosses the dockline on Stanley’s nod, and once it’s cleated I back down into the fendered float. The kid hops ashore with the stern line, and Stanley leans over to grab the line I coiled on the bow before leaving this slip. Just a few hours ago, but an emotional lifetime: from the high of helping others and being appreciated, to the low of well-deserved anger.

“Thank you! Thanks a lot! Happy New Year!” My passengers climb onto the dock. “Bye, thanks again!”

Stanley nods at each one, not smiling.

I’ve forgotten all about the woman in the cabin until a red hood pop up the ladder. “I’m so grateful to you,” she says, zipping her puffy jacket over the sleeping baby. “I don’t know what—”

“Need a ride somewhere?” I ask, if only to avoid Stanley’s stare.

“My brother’s picking me up.” She sits down on the rail to swing her legs over, and Stanley moves at last to help.

“How old?” he asks, pointing to the tiny hat inside her jacket.

“Two weeks today!”

“A week older than my newest granddaughter,” he replies. “Happy New Year to you both.”

She thanks him, and then turns back to smile at me one last time. “Happy New Year! I hope you’re able to spend it with family too.”

Not bloody likely. The closest thing I have to family is about to ream me out for stealing his workboat.

Before he can start, I try to explain. “The Brenton ferry broke down,” I tell him, around numb lips. “All the other yards have been in and out all day. You would’ve gone too!”

“Yup. But it’s my boat,” he says, arms tightening over chest once more.

I shut down Bessie's engine. Pull off the gloves, return them to the shelf. Can't I just stay here too?

In the silence, the cooling diesel ticks.

"They needed our help," I tell him, desperate to fill the chill between us. "That woman—" I point at the red jacket just before it disappears. "Her sister-in-law's in labor, so she's going to babysit. I did a good deed!" I take a deep breath, blow it out. "But I'm sorry I pissed you off." Again.

"I'm not pissed off," Stanley says, those meaty hands disappearing into pockets at last. "But I was very worried. When I got back here, no one's around and the boat's gone. And then you didn't respond..." he frowns out at the harbor. "Bad things can happen this time of year."

"I meant to text you back," I mumble. But he doesn't make the predictable response: *actions speak louder than words*.

When I shiver, he notices.

"Right nice thing you did, going out there. I know how much you hate the cold." At last, a smile. "How about a little single malt reward?"

My mouth waters. We haven't shared a dram since last May's disaster.

"Though you'll have to admire a sickening number of photos of my new granddaughter," Stanley continues. "And please tell me she's cute—even if her face reminds you of a mushroom anchor, too."

One open palm reaches across the rail. I've never needed help climbing on or off a boat, but I grab on and let his warmth steady my single step onto the dock.

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“And then we’ll make a plan for more Brenton runs tomorrow. Sound good?”

“Sounds great. Like all my wishes coming true,” I tell him, as I tuck a hand into the elbow of his jacket. “Happy New Year, Stan the Man.”



## **About the Author**

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## The Boat Beggars

## Chapter One

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

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

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

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

So there'd be no ferry this morning, a complete

upheaval of Brenton's usual Wednesday routine. Even non-commuting locals had drifted down here in search of news—and then lingered to enjoy the first warm day of the year, filling every open seat. Which led, of course, to speculating with their neighbors: *What really happened between James and his boss yesterday afternoon? Could the ferry even run without Captain James? Did I hear James was dealing drugs?* Each time he heard his name, the scar on his left temple throbbed.

Though that could be last night's beers.

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

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

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

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

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

“Bagel’s hard as a rock.”

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

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

Patty rubbed a ringless hand against the left side of that baby-bulge. “Billy got ‘stuck’ in Newport last night.” Her fingers made air-quotes. “He was way too happy about—”

“Patty!”

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

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

Patty picked up her glass pot.

“Yesterday’s *Journal*, too—not that you care.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tell him what?

To avoid any additional grooming tips as Patty

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

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

“Ah! Thar she blows!”

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

But today he watched, steaming, from the beach.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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