

TWENTY-ONE



"THANK you for the ride," I said, popping the car door.

"No bother, Ms. Cosi," the unsmiling Mrs. MacKenzie replied. "I have many errands today. You were just one of them."

As I stepped onto the walkway that led to the St. George Terminal, Mac pulled away from the curb. I noticed, however, that she didn't leave the area. Instead, she swerved the BMW toward the terminal's parking lot.

Odd, I thought.

Either Mrs. MacKenzie was taking the ferry herself today and didn't care for my company, or she was picking someone up on an arriving boat.

As my gaze followed her car into the lot, it snagged once again on that garishly tricked-out SUV that could only belong to Linford's son. Clearly, he'd caught a ferry to Manhattan already—or else he was waiting inside now and I'd be sharing my ferry ride with him, too.

The crowd was light inside the terminal's neo-deco waiting area. The vast space with the soaring ceiling reminded me of one of those big-box Costco-type warehouses, except this structure was trimmed in *Jetsons*-like polished steel and illuminated by flood lamps.

A ferry was docked and waiting, and I quickly boarded, although I needn't have hurried because it wouldn't actually take off for another ten minutes. In the interim, I traversed the flat decks of floating metal and found the little refreshment stand onboard. I stood in line to buy a cup of hot cocoa and was just taking my first sips as the ferry finally chugged out of its slip.

There weren't many passengers for this twenty-minute journey—not surprising¹⁶⁶ at this time of day. Most riders were work commuters who packed the boat before nine and after five. As the engines throbbed, I moved quickly through the cavernous interior, skipping rows of sparsely populated benches for a choice position near the stern.

Despite the near-freezing temperature, I took a spot outside, close to the rail, just above the lapping waves. With the Blend now packed from morning till night and my mind working overtime to decipher the truth about Alf Glockner's tangled life, a few moments of peace was exactly what I needed.

I closed my eyes, and as the crisp salt-tinged wind whipped through my hair, I imagined it was clearing my mind, too. Then I leaned against the metal railing and relished the contrast of cold bracing sea against my cheeks and steaming hot chocolate against my lips.

If I commuted every day on this route, I might have become jaded about the ferry-crossing experience, but I wasn't. Not even close. As the boat swiftly cut a wake through Upper New York Bay, I opened my eyes again, drinking my fill of the cobalt blue chop, glistening in the afternoon sun.

In the distance, a black ocean liner smudged the pale horizon, its most likely destination the renovated docks of the Upper West Side. A sleek white pleasure craft zoomed by at twice our speed, slicing the water with a groove of froth as it veered toward the East River. Behind us, a little orange tug chugged along buoyantly; an FDNY fire boat motored steadily behind it.¹⁶⁷

Soon we were coming up on Liberty Island and its adjacent partner, the old immigration station of Ellis Island, now a historic landmark run by the National Park Service. Finally, there she was, Lady Liberty, soaring right above me, continuing her watch for the world's wretched refuse.

I gawked at the steel-framed sculpture, her copper sheeting oxidized green after more than a century at her post. She looked so strong and sturdy in the middle of the bay, lifting her lamp to light the path to our harbor. Emma Lazarus had called her the "Mother of Exiles," and I thought how right she was as I imagined how

millions of immigrants to this country (my grandmother included) must have felt when they first saw her rising from the water, her gold-leaf torch held high.

When the Lady's noble features finally receded, I turned my attention back to a business that wasn't so noble. Reaching into my shoulder bag, my gloved fingers carefully fished out the manila envelope Mac had handed me.

Inside I found a smaller envelope, this one plain white. Linford's name and address were printed by what appeared to be a standard computer printer. A Santa Claus stamp carried a postmark from Manhattan's busy main branch on Eighth Avenue.

I'd hoped the letter would be handwritten, but no such luck. The writer typed the note and appeared to have printed it with the same computer printer used to address the post-marked envelope:

Dear Omar: I have a new proposition for you. If you care about your son's future, you will read every word of this note and do what it says. I know ¹⁶⁸ all about Junior Linford's little hobbies. Do you know what he is up to in those clubs? I do. If you don't want the NYPD and DEA to know too, then forgive my debt. Just call it an early holiday gift! While you're at it, wire 50K more into my account by Christmas and I will stay quiet for good. My bank account number is below. That will finish our business forever. Bother me or fail to pay and I will tell what I know to the right people. Your son's future is now at stake. Do not try to contact me. Just do what I say in this letter and you will never hear from me again.

I read the letter twice. It didn't sound like the Alf I knew. Not at all. There was no signature, either. But the bank account number, typed at the bottom of the letter, was a clear lead. The NYPD could definitely check that out—make sure it really was an account controlled by Alfred Glockner. I suspected it wasn't. And if it wasn't, then another name would need to be added to my list of murder suspects.

My trip to Staten Island had yielded good information. I knew then that I'd made a smart decision waiting around for this letter. With the sense of a job well done, I carefully refolded the note and slipped it back into its envelope. Then I placed it into my shoulder bag and firmly zipped it closed.

I'd show the letter to Mike Quinn first. Then we could go to Detective Hong. (I still didn't trust Franco.) I only hoped Omar was right about his son's innocence, ¹⁶⁹ because I knew I couldn't stop Hong from tipping off the narcotics division and DEA, just in case.

I took another sip from my cooling cup and turned my thoughts to Shelly Glockner. Frankly, she struck me as likely a suspect for murdering Alf as Omar Linford. Her husband's life insurance policy was an obvious motive—though I couldn't imagine she would have pulled the trigger on Alf herself. No, for that, someone like Shelly would have used an accomplice—

My mind was so preoccupied with puzzling out the possibilities that I barely registered the clanging steps crossing the deck behind me. Before I could fully turn around, I felt a jolt at my shoulder. Someone had snatched my shoulder bag!

As if in slow motion, I saw my cup of cocoa tumbling from my gloved hands into the churning waters below. Then I followed it—but not of my own accord.

Strong hands lifted me like a sack of green coffee and tossed me right over the rail! The sunny harbor blurred for a moment; then I struck the churning waves. Frozen concrete would have been softer.

The ferry's roiling wake began spinning me literally heels over head. My nose, ears, and mouth filled with freezing water. The cold was mind numbing, but I was so *angry* I used my rage to fight against the shock of it.

Don't panic, Clare! You're a good swimmer! Don't panic!

But I couldn't even tell which way was up. The water was dark and murky, and I was still *spinning*! I was running out of air, too. I had to do something—

My coat!

The long, thick material was heavy with salt water and already half off. I ¹⁷⁰ ripped it free, letting it go. Feeling more than seeing, I noted which way the garment began to sink.

If that way is down, then this way must be up!

I kicked out immediately, shedding my blazer and slacks as I swam, giving my limbs the least possible drag as I propelled myself upward.

Light! I can see light!

I needed air. My lungs were burning so badly that I was ready to give in to the impulse and breathe in water. But I knew it would be the end of me, as good as giving up. So I fixed my gaze on that flickering sunlight above me, pictured the Mother of Exiles holding her golden torch, and stepped up my struggles.

Breaking the surface, I gasped and sputtered, then stared in horror at the vast field of choppy blue waves. The ferry was gone! With hardly any commuters on board, no one had noticed I'd been tossed over the side!

Desperately treading water, I cast about, wondering which way to swim. The cold was excruciating—like a thousand icicles stabbing every pore in my body. Already the bone-deep chill was stiffening my muscles, making it hard to breathe, harder to stay afloat.

No, dammit! I'm not going to die like this!

I thought of my daughter and fought harder to stay conscious, tread water, stay alive. That's when I saw the orange tug and the fireboat! The two vessels had been sailing just behind the ferry!

"Help!" I shouted, the weak sound seemed lost in the splash of waves, the cries of circling gulls.

I yelled again and choked on a wash of briny liquid. I knew I was mere minutes ¹⁷¹—if not seconds—from freezing to death or drowning. That's when I heard the tug's loud horn, male voices shouting—

"To the starboard, Sean!"

"Donnie, toss me that hook!"

"Get a safety line around her!"

"No time, Connor. She's about done. I'm going in!"

I felt the rumble of an engine in the water, smelled diesel fumes. Something big, heavy, and canary yellow hit the water beside me. The splash itself almost sent me under again. Then strong arms closed around my numbed, nearly naked body.

"I got you, honey," a deep voice promised in my ear.

I lifted my face to find a strapping man holding me, his big, reassuring grin wide under a prominent nose and bushy dark eyebrows. "Don't pass out on me now! Hang on!"

I tried to speak, but shivers overwhelmed me and my teeth were chattering like a dentist's wind-up toy.

"Haul her up! Come on, quick! Her lips are turnin' blue!"

I think I blacked out at that point because the next thing I felt was a cold steel deck behind my back and bare legs. My camisole was soaked and half torn off, my lace bra leaving very little to the men's imaginations. I tried to speak, but strong, warm hands were pushing down on my diaphragm—hard enough to force salty water up my throat and out.

Gagging and sputtering, I finally realized that half a dozen burly firemen were standing around me, all in bright yellow FDNY life jackets.

"You're okay, ma'am. Let's get you warm."

As I sat up, a number of large hands wrapped thick blankets around me.

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"Is there anyone we can contact for you?" asked one of the firemen.

"M-m-m-mike," I stammered. "Mike Quinn. He works at the—"

"I know Big Mike!" The dark-haired man who'd jumped into the water to save me patted my shoulder. "I'll put in a call. What's your name?"

I told him, my voice weak as I pulled the blankets closer around me. The deck was so cold! I tried to rise but stumbled. Several firemen instantly came to my aid. One simply hoisted me up and carried me inside the fireboat. The cabin was warm, and the man placed me on an aluminum-framed canvas stretcher and piled on another blanket, which I appreciated, even if I couldn't thank him.

I was shivering so hard now I couldn't speak. I couldn't see straight, either, but I think that was because my eyes were still stinging from the salt water. A new blanket was tossed over me, this one electric. The warmth felt delicious, like a fortifying drink I could gulp and swallow.

A few minutes later, I was starting to feel better and began to sit up. The dark-haired fireman who'd pulled me out of the water had been watching over me close by. He quickly returned to my side in sweats and a T-shirt, a towel around his neck, and handed me a cup of strong tea.

"No need to worry, pretty lady. You'll be okay. You said your name's Clare Cosi?"

"Clare," I repeated.

"I'm Sean. I just talked to Big Mike, *personally*. He'll be at the FDNY dock when we pull in."

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"Thank you," I said.

"You were lucky we saw you. You wouldn't have lasted five minutes out there."

I sipped the tea but then felt woozy again. "I think I have to—"

Sean took my cup as I fell back on the stretcher. While I closed my eyes again, I could feel him tucking the blankets closer around me.

"You're in shock, pretty lady, just rest . . ."

The next thing I remember was the fireboat bumping up against a dock, men shouting to each other as the fire crew secured the vessel. A few minutes later, I heard whispers, felt a hovering presence.

I opened my eyes and stared up at an absolutely immense man, probably in his late forties, with bright scarlet hair, a cleft chin, and an absurdly large handlebar mustache (circa 1890). He stared at me, too, the skin around his blue gray eyes crinkling with amusement. Behind him, the rest of the fireboat's crew gathered, obviously curious.

"I've had many a damsel call out my name in her darkest hour—or in the dark of night," the big man loudly announced to his audience. "But I think I would have remembered *this* one."

"Excuse me?" I propped myself on my elbows. "Who are you?"

"Captain Michael Quinn of the FDNY, darlin'. Big Mike to my friends and a holy Irish terror to all others."

He smiled, a single gold tooth flashing, as he stroked his crimson mustache. "They told me your name's Clare Cosi and said you asked for me. How did you end up in the drink?"

"I was pushed off the ferry. My handbag was stolen."

Big Mike gestured to a member of the crew. "Radio the terminal. It's probably too late to stop the assailant from getting away, but maybe we can recover this poor woman's purse."

The imposing fireman faced me again. "I thought these boys probably got it wrong, Clare, so I put in a call of my own before I came down here. You were looking for Little Mikey, right? Sixth Precinct. My cousin, Mike Quinn, the cop?"

"Detective," I clarified.

"Black sheep," he replied.

"Black sheep?" I repeated. "Mike's not a black sheep. He's not *little*, either. He's one of New York's finest."

The firemen watching us exchanged amused glances. Big Mike raised a bushy red eyebrow. "He's little compared to me, darlin'. And the Quinns are firefighters. New York's *bravest*. Little Mikey's the only *cop* in our clan." He cast a glance at his brothers in boots. "Black sheep."

The men laughed, and then a voice called from the deck. "Here come the boys in blue!"

A minute later, Detective Mike Quinn entered the fireboat's cabin, pushing through a wall of doting firemen to get to me. Dropping down beside the stretcher, he hugged me tightly.

"Clare, sweetheart, are you okay? What happened?"

"I'm fine," I said, soaking up his steady warmth. "I was on the ferry. My bag was snatched, then I got picked up and tossed over the side."

"Who did it, Clare? Did you see the person?"

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