

Missing in Death

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One

On a day kissed gently by summer, three thousand, seven hundred and sixty-one passengers cruised the New York Harbor on the Staten Island Ferry. Two of them had murder on their minds.

The other three thousand, seven hundred and fifty-nine aboard the bright orange ferry christened the *Hillary Rodham Clinton* were simply along for the ride. Most were tourists who happily took their vids and snaps of the re-treating Manhattan skyline or that iconic symbol of freedom, the Statue of Liberty.

Even in 2060, nearly two centuries after she'd first greeted hopeful immigrants to a new world, nobody beat "The Lady."

Those who jockeyed for the best views munched on soy chips, sucked down tubes of soft drinks from the snack bars while the ferry chugged placidly along on calm waters under baby blue skies.

With the bold sun streaming, the scent of sunscreen mixed with the scent of water, many jammed the decks

for the duration of the twenty-five-minute ride from Lower Manhattan to Staten Island. A turbo would have taken half the time, but the ferry wasn't about expediency. It was about tradition.

Most planned to get off at St. George, jam the terminal, then simply load back on again to complete the round trip. It was free, it was summer, it was a pretty way to spend an hour.

Some midday commuters, eschewing the bridges, the turbos, or the air trams, sat inside, out of the biggest crowds, and passed the time with their PPCs or 'links.

Summer meant more kids. Babies cried or slept, toddlers whined or giggled, and parents sought to distract the bored or fractious by pointing out the grand lady or a passing boat.

For Carolee Grogan of Springfield, Missouri, the ferry ride checked off another item on her Must Do list on the family vacation she'd lobbied for. Other Must Dos included the top of the Empire State Building, the Central Park Zoo, the Museum of Natural History, St. Pat's, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (though she wasn't sure she'd successfully harangue her husband and ten- and seven-year-old sons into that one), Ellis Island, Memorial Park, a Broadway show—she didn't care which one—and shopping on Fifth Avenue.

In the spirit of fairness, she'd added on a ballgame at Yankee Stadium, and fully accepted she would have to wander the cathedral of Tiffany's alone while her gang hit the video heaven of Times Square.

At forty-three, Carolee was living a long-cherished dream. She'd finally pushed, shoved and nagged her husband east of the Mississippi.

Could Europe be far behind?

When she started to take a snapshot of her "boys," as she called Steve and their sons, a man standing nearby offered to take one of the whole family. Carolee happily

turned over her camera, posed with her boys with the dignified lady of liberty behind them.

“See.” She gave her husband an elbow poke as they went back to looking out at the water. “He was nice. Not all New Yorkers are rude and nasty.”

“Carolee, he was a tourist, just like us. He’s probably from Toledo or somewhere.” But he smiled when he said it. It was more fun to yank her chain than to admit he was having a pretty good time.

“I’m going to ask him.”

Steve only shook his head as his wife walked over to chat up the picture taker. It was so Carolee. She could—and did—talk to anyone anywhere about anything.

When she came back she offered Steve a smug smile. “He’s from Maryland, *but*,” she added with a quick finger jab, “he’s lived in New York for almost ten years. He’s going over to Staten Island to visit his daughter. She just had a baby. A girl. His wife’s been staying with them the past few days to help out, and she’s meeting him at the terminal. It’s their first grandchild.”

“Did you find out how long he’s been married, where and how he met his wife, who he voted for in the last election?”

She laughed and gave Steve another poke.

“I’m thirsty.”

She glanced down at her youngest. “You know, me, too. Why don’t you and I go get some drinks for everybody.” She grabbed his hand and snaked her way through the people crowded on deck. “Are you having a good time, Pete?”

“It’s pretty neat, but I really want to go see the penguins.”

“Tomorrow, first thing.”

“Can we get a soy dog?”

“Where are you putting them? You had one an hour ago.”

“They smell good.”

Vacation meant indulgence, she decided. “Soy dogs it is.”

“But I have to pee.”

“Okay.” As a veteran mother, she’d scoped out the restrooms when they’d boarded the ferry. Now she detoured to steer them toward the nearest facilities.

And, of course, since Pete mentioned it, now *she* had to pee. She pointed toward the men’s room. “If you get out first, you stand right here. You remember what the ferry staff looks like, the uniforms? If you need help, go right to one of them.”

“Mom, I’m just going to pee.”

“Well, me, too. You wait for me *here* if you get out first.”

She watched him go in, knowing full well he rolled his eyes the minute his back was to her. It amused her as she turned toward the women’s room.

And saw the Out of Order sign.

“Shoot.”

She weighed her options. Hold it until Pete came out, then hold it some more while they got the dogs and drinks—because he’d whine and sulk otherwise—then make her way to the other restroom.

Or . . . maybe she could just peek in. Surely not all the stalls were out of order. She only needed one.

She pushed open the door, hurried in. She didn’t want to leave Pete alone for long.

She made the turn at the line of sinks, her mind on getting the provisions and squeezing back to the rail to watch Staten Island come into view.

She stopped dead, her limbs frozen in shock.

Blood, she thought, could only think, so much blood. The woman on the floor seemed bathed in it.

The man standing over the body held a still-dripping knife in one hand and a stunner in the other.

“I’m sorry,” he said—and, to her shocked mind, sounded sincere.

Even as Carolee sucked in the air to scream, took the first stumbling step back, he triggered the stunner.

“Really very sorry,” he said as Carolee fell to the floor.

Racing across New York Harbor in a turbo wasn't how Lieutenant Eve Dallas expected to spend her afternoon. She'd played second lead that morning to her partner's primary role in the unfortunate demise of Vickie Trender, the third wife of the unrepentant Alan Trender, who'd smashed her skull with an inferior bottle of California chardonnay.

According to the new widower, it wasn't accurate to say he'd bashed her brains out when she simply hadn't had any brains to begin with.

While the prosecutor and the counsel for the defense hammered out a plea arrangement, Eve had made a dent in her paperwork, discussed strategy with two of her detectives on an ongoing case and congratulated another on closing one.

A pretty good day, in her estimation.

Now, she and Peabody, her partner, were speeding across the water in a boat she judged to be about the size of a surfboard toward the orange hulk of a ferry stalled halfway between Manhattan and Staten Island.

“This is absolutely mag!” Peabody stood near the bow, her square-jawed face lifted to the wind, her short, flippy hair flying.

“Why?”

“Jeez, Dallas!” Peabody lowered her shades down her nose, exposing delighted brown eyes. “We're getting a boat ride. We're on the water. Half the time you can forget Manhattan's an island.”

“That's what I like about it. Out here, it makes you wonder, how come it doesn't sink? All that weight—the buildings, the streets, the people. It should go down like a stone.”

“Come on.” With a laugh, Peabody pushed her shades back in place. “Statue of Liberty,” she pointed out. “She’s the best.”

Eve wouldn’t argue. She’d come close to dying inside the landmark, fighting radical terrorists bent on blowing it up. Even now, she could look at its lines, its grandeur, and see her husband, bleeding, clinging to a ledge outside the proud face.

They’d survived that one, she mused, and Roarke had diffused the bomb, saved the day. Symbols mattered, and because they’d fought and bled, people could chug by on the ferry every day and snap their pictures of freedom.

That was fine, that was the job. What she didn’t get was why Homicide had to zip off the island because the Department of Transportation cops couldn’t find a passenger.

Blood all over a bathroom and a missing woman. Interesting, sure, she decided, but not really her turf. In fact, it wasn’t turf at all. It was water. It was a big orange boat on the water.

Why didn’t boats sink? The errant thought reminded her that sometimes they did, and she decided not to dwell on it.

When the turbo approached that big orange boat, she noted people ranged along the rail on the tiers of decks. Some of them waved.

Beside her, Peabody waved back.

“Cut it out,” Eve ordered.

“Sorry. It’s knee-jerk. Looks like DOT sent out backup,” she commented, nodding toward the turbos at the base of the ferry with the Department of Transportation logo emblazoned on the hull. “I hope she didn’t fall over. Or jump. But somebody would notice that, right?”

“More likely she wandered off from the passenger areas, got lost and is currently trying to wander back.”

“Blood,” Peabody reminded her, and Eve shrugged.

“Let’s just wait and see.”

That, too, was part of the job—the waiting and seeing. She'd been a cop for a dozen years and knew the dangers of jumping to conclusions.

She shifted her weight as the turbo slowed, bracing on long legs while she scanned the rails, the faces, the open areas. Her short hair fluttered around her face while those eyes—golden brown, long and cop-flat—studied what might or might not be a crime scene.

When the turbo was secured, she stepped off.

She judged the man who stepped forward to offer his hand as late twenties. He wore the casual summer khakis and light blue shirt with its DOT emblem well. Sun-streaked hair waved around a face tanned by sun or design. Pale green eyes contrasted with the deeper tone, and added an intensity.

“Lieutenant, Detective, I’m Inspector Warren. I’m glad you’re here.”

“You haven’t located your passenger, Inspector?”

“No. A search is still under way.” He gestured for them to walk with him. “We’ve added a dozen officers to the DOT crew aboard to complete the search, and to secure the area where the missing woman was last seen.”

They started up a set of stairs.

“How many passengers aboard?”

“The ticker counted three thousand, seven hundred and sixty-one boarding at Whitehall.”

“Inspector, it wouldn’t be procedure to call Homicide on a missing passenger.”

“No, but none of this is hitting SOP. I have to tell you, Lieutenant, it doesn’t make sense.” He took the next set of stairs, glancing over at the people hugging the rail. “I don’t mind admitting, this situation is above my pay grade. And right now, most of the passengers are being patient. It’s mostly tourists, and this is kind of an adventure. But if we hold the ferry here much longer, it’s not going to be pretty.”

Eve stepped onto the next deck where DOT officials had cordoned off a path. “Why don’t you give me a rundown, Inspector?”

“The missing woman is Carolee Grogan, tourist from Missouri, on board with her husband and two sons. Age forty-three. I’ve got her description and a photo taken aboard this afternoon. She and her youngest went to get drinks, hit the johns first. He went into the men’s, and she was going into the women’s. Told him to wait for her right outside if he got out first. He waited, and she didn’t come out.”

Warren paused outside the restroom area, nodded to another DOT official on the women’s room door. “Nobody else went in or out either. After a few minutes, he called her on his ’link. She didn’t answer. He called his father, and the father and the other son came over. The father, Steven Grogan, asked a woman—ah, Sara Hunning—if she’d go in and check on his wife.”

Warren opened the door. “And this is what she found inside.”

Eve stepped in behind Warren. She smelled the blood immediately. A homicide cop gets a nose for it. It soured the citrusy/sterilized odor of the air in the black-and-white room with its steel sinks, and around the dividing wall, the white-doored stalls.

It washed over the floor, a spreading dark pool that snaked in trails across the white, slashed over the stall doors, the opposing wall, like abstract graffiti.

“If that’s Grogan’s,” Eve said, “you’re not looking for a missing passenger. You’re looking for a dead one.”