

The dock lamp had burned out and the glow from the streetlights behind her feathered away as Jill walked deeper into the darkness. She moved past sailboats and powerboats tied up on each side of the pier, taking care not to trip over the thick weathered planks that had warped up from years of exposure to the salty air.

She paused at a *SeaRay Sundancer*, over 35 feet long. She spotted what she was looking for in an open cardboard box resting next to the motor access panel. Without hesitation, she boarded the boat and retrieved a can of marine motor oil from the box. She shook it—more than half-full.

She carried the oil can to the end of the dock where five wooden rowboats were tied up next to the rental booth. All different colors, the boats were numbered so the kid manning the booth—Melvin? Marvin?—could keep track of which boats were out and for how long. She set the oil on the edge of the pier next to the green rowboat.

Behind the booth, one of the rentals was propped up on cinder blocks, ready for scraping. Almost no one used wooden boats anymore—too much maintenance and much heavier compared to the aluminum alternative. But the wooden rentals had been a mainstay in Cumberton for decades, and their uniqueness was part of what drew in the tourists.

She had to lean her whole body against the bow of the boat to push it off the front blocks. Using both hands, she dragged one of the cinder blocks onto the pier next to the green boat and shoved. The block teetered on the edge then fell over. For a moment she thought it would miss the boat and splash into the water, but the block hit the rail and tumbled forward into the boat.

She paused and blinked. For an instant, the thickness in her head cleared. What was she doing on the public pier? Where was Tony? The last thing she remembered was sitting in the theater with her college friends. Had she been sleepwalking? She stepped back from the boat as if seeing it for the first time. *My God, what was she—?*

A blinding light flashed in her brain, then the thickness returned. Without a further thought, she picked up the oil and boarded the boat.

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It hadn't taken long to get used to the rowing rhythm, and soon she had the boat sliding across the smooth black water. She rowed out about a mile from shore, then dropped the oars. The boat glided to a stop. No moon, no stars. The boat sat dead still as if suspended, weightless, between the black water and the black sky.

The clouds parted and a sliver of moon emerged, casting a sickly thin light across the bay. A dead leaf, gray in the moonlight, floated by and brushed against the boat. Was it a tulip poplar? Or an oak. Looked like an oak. She watched intently as tiny pieces of the leaf flaked away, leaving a spider web of gray overlaying the black water.

"Jilly?"

She looked up. Grampy sat on the stern bench, facing her. The moon draped him in a pale, greenish-yellow hue. In the deepest regions of her brain she was surprised she wasn't surprised to see him. His features somehow looked different.

"It's time, Jilly."

She paused only a moment. She retrieved the can of motor oil by her feet then stood—shouldn't the boat be swaying?—and poured oil along the gunnel rails.

"That's my Jilly girl. Go ahead now. You know what to do."

Jill found a coil of dock line in the bottom of the boat. Once white, it had turned almost black with grime. She tied one end of the line to the cinder block. "Make it tight, Jilly. Don't want the knot to slip. A boatman always makes sure his knots are tight. Gotta be shipshape, don't we, honey?"

"Yes, Grampy, shipshape." She pulled on the knot. Tight. Shipshape. She unbuttoned her shirt—How'd it get so muddy?—and tossed it into the boat. If she were going for a swim, she didn't want to get her clothes wet. The night air felt good on her skin. Where was her bra? Should she be embarrassed showing Grampy her boobs? Nah, he was an old man and he loved her and she loved him and she never wanted anything to happen to him. She slipped off her jeans. She wasn't wearing any underwear. Strange. Why would she go out without wearing underwear? Did she just forget? She must've just forgotten.

She used the other end of the line to tie her ankles together real tight. Pulled, twisted and turned the knot to make sure it wouldn't slip. Shipshape. It took all of her strength to lift the cinder block up onto the bench. She turned for her grandfather's approval. He was gone. Where was he?

"Jilly."

There he was in the water.

"Come on in, honey, the water's fine." He laughed, but his laugh sounded a little weird. Probably 'cause he's in the water. Sound carried differently when it traveled over water. Without another thought, she stood on the bench and pushed the cinder block overboard.

She stood there silently, watching it disappear.

"Come on in, Jilly!" said Grampy. "Jump, honey!"

There he was, not far from the boat, waving, smiling. Except ... except ...

The thickness faded again, like she'd just awakened from a deep sleep. Wait, no, she must still be dreaming 'cause she was standing naked on the bench seat of a rowboat in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay. She heard a low hum and looked down to see the sound came from the friction of a black line rubbing across the boat's edge. Something on the end of the line must be awfully heavy to make the line run that fast. She followed the line back to—Oh, my God! The line was tied to her ankles and—someone was treading water next to the boat. Grampy? Impossible, Grampy was—the man in the water had no eyes and no

mouth. Just a black hole that opened on the side of his face. She shrieked as loud as she could, but knew no one could hear her.

She felt the line scratch her ankle. She saw in an instant she would be yanked overboard. She crouched and grabbed the line to slow it down, but the weight was too heavy. She jumped off the bench and tried to use the gunnel as leverage to stop the pull of the line, slowing it down some. If she could just untie the knot around her ankles . . . yet if she let go to free the knot, the line would pull her into the water.

The muscles in her arms weakened, her hands bled from the rope burns. She screamed again, but she was too far out for anyone to hear.

Her eyes fell on the oarlock. A chance, but she had to pull the oar out of the lock. She tried to kick it loose, but the instant she lifted her foot she was yanked forward. She quickly replanted her leg to maintain the brace against the weight, then clamped the oar between her knees and tried to lift it. Her legs were slick with sweat and she couldn't get a grip. She tried again, pressing her legs together as hard as possible and this time the oar moved, but she couldn't maintain the hold and the oar slipped back into the setting. The line was digging deeper into her flesh and her hands were now slippery with blood, making the line even more difficult to hold.

She knew she had only one more chance. This time she squatted deep and sat on the oar. She crossed her legs, clamping it hard against her body, then stood up straight. The oar lifted it from its setting. Yes! She released the pressure and the oar dropped between her legs, hit the bench and bounced overboard.

She looped the line around the lock. Immediately, she felt the tension slack. She twisted the line around two more times for good measure. It was holding! She let one hand fall from the line, then the other. Thank you, God! Only one oar left, but she could use it to paddle back as soon as she untied the line. She bent down to her feet and attacked the knot. Damn, it was so tight.

"Shipshape, Jilly, shipshape!"

The voice was coming from the water, from that thing. She couldn't spare a second to look up. The knot was impossible—no, wait, one of the loops loosened. Just a touch. A bit more and she'd be able to—

*Snap.*

The weight on the line had ripped the oarlock completely out of the railing. The line was running free. She reached for it, then felt a tremendous yank as if something or someone was pulling on the line from the depths below. In a split second she was overboard.

She struggled to tread water; with her ankles tied together she had to move like a mermaid. She'd grown up by the bay and was a strong swimmer, but the weight was heavy.

Her head slipped below the surface. No! She would not drown! Summoning all of her remaining strength, she undulated her hips and knifed up to the surface. She pulled her long red hair from her face. The boat was right

there! She reached up and was able to curl her fingers around the railing. She caught her breath. If she could just hold on until—

“Want a hand, Jilly?”

She looked up. The thing, the Grumpy thing was now in the boat. He—it—reached down and touched her bare shoulder. She watched in horror as its flesh dropped into the water like overcooked meat from the shank, leaving nothing but greasy black bone. He laughed and pulled his arm back. She didn’t scream. She had to keep all her wits about her and concentrate. Maybe if she swung back and forth she’d be able to get her elbow over the rail and—her fingers were slipping. The rail was covered in something slick. She tightened her grip, but it wasn’t working.

She smelled something. What was it? Cookies. Burnt cookies. Not chocolate chip, more like—

The thing leaned over the rail, inches from her face. Its putrid breath compelled her stomach to convulse violently, and she had to fight to keep the bile from rising in her throat.

“Time to go, Jilly.”

God help me! She felt a tickling across her breasts and looked down to see a swarm of shiny black waterbugs tightly circling her. She tried to dig her nails into the wooden rail and squeeze her fingers as hard as she could. For a moment she didn’t move. Then the muscles in her fingers weakened and her grip slowly curled under the railing. No! No! No!

Wait. Of course. This is a dream. Has to be. She laughed to herself, hoping she would remember everything in the morning so she could tell Tony. He’d probably tease her for dreaming she was naked.

The tickling became more pronounced, and she looked down again. The bugs had formed two long lines. With military precision, each line scaled one of her breasts, circling the rounded flesh like a conquering army. Deeper into the water she saw the Grumpy thing looking up at her, smiling, beckoning.

And she knew she wasn’t dreaming.

She willed the muscles in her fingers to hold, but they were numb and could no longer respond. Her grip released.

She didn’t scream. Instead, she used her last breath to whisper, “Beware the Light.”

Then Jill Louise Bryant slid silently down into the black glass.