

The Three Students

by Juliet Robinson

'We're going to have to dump the water reserves.' The captain sounded serenely calm, though her face was taut and grey.

The grey was not too dissimilar to that of Yolanda's bloated face which stared unseeingly at us from the deck. I had found her body twenty minutes ago when checking on a blockage in the water system. Peering down into the dark I had dropped my flashlight in shock when her face leered back up at me.

'Dumping the water is the least of our problems,' I grumbled.

The Captain chuckled dryly. 'You know me, I like to focus on the things I can fix.'

'Thirteen days from land and we have a murderer on the ship.'

'At least the bad weather's broken,' the Captain said, matter-of-factly.

'Yeah, we can sip cocktails with the killer on the upper deck,' I wasn't buying into her calm. 'Why did they scalp her?'

Yolanda's beautiful red hair had been cut away. She looked different without it. I mean she was bloated and dead, so different was a given, but the absence of her hair was somehow more striking. Like her essence had dissipated.

The Captain ignored my question, she wasn't one for speculation.

'We need to speak to her supervisor, we need to review the security tapes and we need to start interviewing people.'

'Or we could just lock all our passengers up in the hold.'

The Captain laughed, 'You suggested that the first night of our voyage.'

‘The idea has merit and more so now!’ I muttered.

The next morning the Captain and I sat waiting for Yolanda’s fellow students. Everyone on board now knew about our grisly discovery and a palpable tension clouded the ship. A curfew had been imposed, those not attending to duties were to remain in their cabins. A rule of two had also come into place. We were all buddied up and ready to go. Nobody was to walk the ship alone.

The door to the ready room opened and the three remaining students and their supervisor hustled in, cramping the confined space.

The Captain smiled in greeting, but it wasn’t a genuine smile. It didn’t touch her eyes. I shuffled to my feet and stood to attention behind her as the students planted bums on the stools set out for them. Their supervisor Professor White turned to leave then, remembering the rule of two, bounced uncertainly on his feet. He glanced at the Captain, who gestured at the bench by the door. He sat and began to pick at his nails.

‘So, the last time the three of you claim to have seen Yolanda was at dinner?’

I watched them intently as the students nodded affirmation. Two young men and one woman, who had been Yolanda’s bunkmate. To me they looked to be barely out of their teens but I am a poor judge of age. The dark-haired lad, Bowlen, was agitated and sweated visibly. The blonde, good looking fellow Arendt was a mask of constructed calm and the girl, Gail rocked back and forth, eyes darting all over. Predictably she spoke first.

‘I ate with her, she wanted pudding. I was tired, I left and was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow,’ the words tumbled from her mouth. They were rehearsed.

The Captain shifted in her seat and leant towards her but before she could speak a shadow blocked the light from the porthole. A large figure was walking the promenade deck, heading sternwards. We all turned, watching their progress as they passed the second porthole.

‘Nobody should be out there just now,’ the Captain said, leaping to her feet and dashing towards the door.

I followed on her heels but before she even reached it an ear-splitting scream wailed through the ship and, as if in answer, the engines spluttered and coughed before grinding to a halt.

