

# Kristin Crump

# Fading Light

**T**he telephone's insistent ringing could be heard in the laundry room where Marcy Crawford stood, ironing her uniform. After several moments the machine picked up the call as she waited to see who was on the other end of the line. She hated telemarketers. Hearing her husband Jim's voice, however, she sat the iron down and sprinted for the kitchen. He didn't call from Diego Garcia often, and she didn't want to miss a chance to talk to him, even if he was coming home soon.

"It's me. Thought I'd catch you since you don't have to be to work for a while. Anyway . . ."

"I'm here," Marcy said, picking up the receiver.

"I thought I wasn't going to get a chance to tell you the good news in

person, so to speak," Jim said, laughing at his own joke.

Marcy half-smiled at his humor. He always thought he was funnier than everyone else did. She could picture him in the tropical setting, tanned and muscular, dark hair and green eyes. It wasn't why she had married him, but she enjoyed the envious looks she received from other women.

". . . I got the go ahead yesterday evening, but I didn't want to call you then, because of the time difference."

"What are you talking about?" Marcy asked.

"Haven't you been listening? I'm staying on for another deployment. VP-22's short on first classes, so I asked if I could fill in. My CO approved it. They're going to put me in Maintenance Control.

# Krump

This could be just what I need to put me over the top for the Chief selections this year."

Marcy heard the excitement in Jim's voice, but all she felt was an emptiness in the pit of her stomach. She hated being alone and she couldn't help thinking about another six months by herself. He'd already been gone for eight with his own squadron, since he'd been on the first crew to leave. She'd even been planning a surprise party for his return, which should have happened next weekend.

Then, in the background, she heard a feminine giggle.

"Where are you?"

"Over at the barracks, sitting outside, watching the sunrise. It's beautiful here."

"Someone with you?" Marcy pressed.

"No. Why?"

"I heard someone in the background."

"What are you getting at?" Jim asked, an edge to his voice. He didn't like being questioned.

"Nothing."

Neither of them said anything for a few moments.

"Gotta go. I'll call you again soon. Bye." The line on the other end of the phone went dead.

I should have known, Marcy thought, staring at the receiver in her hand. It wasn't the first time. She knew he'd had affairs before. It didn't bother her too much. If he was discreet. She'd married Jim for companionship, not love. She understood when he found someone else to occupy his time and physical

needs, since she wasn't enthusiastic about meeting them herself. They lived separate lives, each taking care of themselves, but they both knew when the workday ended they had someone to come home to. They had a good life together; they shared the same goals.

She'd always been focused on her career. Within the Navy she'd found the family she hadn't had growing up. She'd found acceptance and people who believed in her. The feeling of belonging was the most important aspect of her life.

The insistent beeping of a disconnected line finally brought her back to the present. Hanging up the phone, she pushed thoughts of Jim to the back of her mind and headed down the hall to finish her ironing. She had Captains Call this afternoon. They were giving her a letter of commendation. She had to look her best. Not that she ever left the house in anything less than a perfectly pressed, starched and creased uniform. She always tried to make a good impression. Appearances were the most important aspect of life in the Navy.

The stillness of the house surrounded Marcy as she crept around the living room. She had found everything but her keys. They were not in her purse or lying on the counter in the kitchen. Carefully moving cans, bottles and papers, she prayed she wasn't making enough noise to wake Julie, sleeping in the far bedroom.

Marcy been invited to a party the evening before. Julie Holbrook, a second class AT in her shop, had thrown a get together at her house for people in the squadron. Julie lived on the other side of

the island. Marcy had been reluctant to go at first, since she didn't like driving at night, but her friends finally talked her into it. That, and the loneliness she'd felt since Jim had called last month, combined to convince her to get out of the house for a while.

Between the music, playing loudly in the background, the drinks and the conversation, Marcy found herself having a good time and laughing with the people around her. At the end of the evening though, she'd realized she shouldn't drive home. Instead of getting a ride with someone, she'd taken Julie up on her offer to stay the night.

After long, tense, minutes of searching she finally found her keys hanging on a hook beside the front door. In her rush to get out of the house she'd missed them until, looking out the front window at the pre-dawn fog, she noticed something out of the corner of her eye. Julie must have hung them there last night so they wouldn't get lost or mistakenly picked up by someone else.

Pushing aside the voice inside her head whispering she was a coward, Marcy reached for the door handle. At the same time as her hand closed on the cool silver knob, she heard the creek of floorboards in the hallway. A few seconds later, Julie came around the corner, bleary eyed and naked, her short hair tousled from sleep. Taking in the scene in front of her, Julie gave Marcy a small smile and headed for the kitchen.

"Making a break for it so early in the morning? Don't you even want some coffee first?" Julie asked, opening a

cupboard and taking out the filters and a bag of beans.

Julie was a true Seattleite when it came to coffee. She never bought the already ground, mass produced cans of Folgers or Maxwell House Marcy always kept stocked in her pantry. Instead, she preferred to buy small bags of gourmet beans and grind them herself. Coffee had been one the subjects they had talked about last night, along with a variety of other topics.

Marcy didn't reply, standing by the door with her fingers still resting on the handle. Silently she debated with herself about whether to run out of the house and call Julie later, or to stay and settle things face to face. The smell of freshly brewing coffee finally helped to make up her mind. She took her hand from the door and set her purse down.

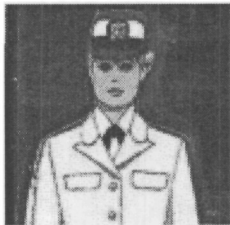
Walking into the kitchen, Marcy pulled out a chair at the table and sat down, watching Julie as she moved around the kitchen, taking out cups, sugar and creamer. On one hand Marcy was shocked by Julie's nakedness and the fact that she didn't seem in the least embarrassed by it. On the other she admired her for it.

"Am I embarrassing you? I'll go put on a robe if you'd be more comfortable?" Julie asked.

"It's your house," Marcy replied, looking down at her hand playing with the edge of the placemat in front of her.

Julie laughed, "I'll get my robe," she said, leaving the kitchen.

Marcy heard a closet door open and close at the other end of the house, and



when Julie reappeared she wore a brightly colored oriental robe. The red silk, etched with threads of gold in the pattern of dragons molded itself to her body, the large flowing sleeves emphasizing the delicate bones of her wrists and hands. Marcy guessed she'd bought the garment on a deployment to Japan, since she'd seen them there herself, but had never purchased one. They had always seemed too daring for her, but on Julie, it seemed appropriate.

Marcy had thought seeing Julie clothed would help to quiet some of the uneasiness she felt, but it hadn't. Thoughts of everything that had happened between them the night before still ran rampant through her mind. The image of her hands on Julie's body, and Julie's on hers, made her heart race and her legs weak. Marcy kept repeating the words, "It was a mistake," silently to herself, but she knew they were a lie. What she had felt last night had been more powerful and right than anything else she could remember. Especially when she contrasted them with how she felt when with her husband.

Marcy's thoughts were suddenly interrupted as Julie set a cup of coffee in front of her.

"You said you liked cream and sugar, but I didn't know how much," Julie said, taking the seat across from Marcy, her own cup in her hand.

Marcy reached for the sugar cubes and creamer, her mind racing, trying to find the right words. She knew she had to explain that last night could never happen again. If anyone ever found out, not only would it end her marriage, it

could end any chance she had of reaching her goals in the Navy. Homosexuality, though passably tolerated, still wasn't completely accepted, especially among the upper ranks. But Marcy wasn't gay. Was she? No, she wasn't. She was sure. It had been an accident. An experiment. Lots of people did that.

"You're awfully quiet this morning," Julie said, breaking into Marcy's thoughts once again.

Marcy didn't reply. She knew the words she should say, but couldn't get them from her mind to her tongue.

"So, how many women have you been with?" Julie asked, watching Marcy's face.

"None. I'm not gay," Marcy blurted out before she could stop herself.

Julie started to laugh.

"Damn it," Marcy said as she angrily pushed back her chair and stood up. "Don't you realize what could happen if Jim finds out, not to mention what people in the squadron would say if they knew."

Marcy stood staring at Julie, her fists clenched at her side and tears in her eyes. Her whole body shook.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have laughed," Julie said, rising from the table and coming around to Marcy. Gently taking her by the arm, she led her into the living room.

As Julie settled herself on the far sofa cushion, her legs tucked under her, Marcy gazed out the front window. She could see the fog turning from a dark gray mass to a lighter opaque, telling her the sun was making its appearance. She knew if she left soon, it might still be thick enough to hide her return home from the



prying eyes of the neighbors. Usually she hated early autumn, finding the dense mist that covered the island depressing since it reinforced her loneliness and insecurities. For the first time she saw it as her ally.

"I really am sorry. It never occurred to me that I might be your first. Have you ever thought about doing something like this before?" Julie stared at her, her head tilted to the side.

"No." She continued to gaze out the window.

"Do you love your husband?"

"We have a good time together and we rarely argue. We stay focused on our careers."

After a few moments of silence, Julie said, "You know, I think that's just about the saddest thing I've ever heard."

"Lots of couples have marriages like ours. It doesn't make us bad people."

"Of course it doesn't," Julie said, "but going through life without being in love?"

"I never said I didn't love Jim. Besides, I guess you're an expert on the subject?"

"Not an expert, no. I've been in love though. Twice. It didn't work out either time, but still—"

"I guess we have different ways of looking at things."

"Maybe, maybe not."

The calm, collected way Julie responded to her comments made Marcy even more frustrated. Why did she have to be so logical? Why didn't this situation bother her, too? Marcy knew she needed to leave. This was getting her nowhere

She was only becoming more confused by the minute.

"Last night was a mistake," Marcy said.

"Was it?"

"Yes, it was. It can never happen again. There's too much at stake," Marcy replied. "I need to get home. Jim might call and he'll wonder where I am if I don't answer."

"Really. How often does he call?" Julie asked.

Marcy couldn't help the guilty flush that crept over her face, and she couldn't bring herself to meet Julie's eyes. Jim didn't call. She hadn't heard from him since he'd called to tell her he was staying six months with another squadron. She'd tried to call him a few times, but he hadn't been home.

"I thought so," Julie said.

"It doesn't matter. I still need to go."

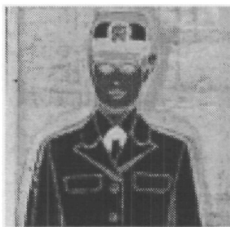
Julie swung her legs over the edge of the sofa and sat up, her elbows braced on her knees.

"Be honest, last night was great. We both know it. It's not like I'm asking you to move in or anything." Julie stopped and took a deep breath before continuing. "Jim's not coming home for another five months, right? Why don't we just give it a chance and see how it goes? No one will find out if we're careful, and I'm not going to tell anyone. Are you?"

"I don't think so. It's just too risky," Marcy replied.

"What are you so afraid of?" Julie asked.

"Are you insane? This could end any chances I have of future advancement for one. It would definitely end my



marriage. Do I need to go on, or is that enough for you?"

"All right. Why don't you stay and finish your coffee? There's no harm in us sitting and talking is there?"

Marcy didn't want to leave and return to her empty house, with only the television to keep her company until Monday rolled around and she could go back to work. Putting her misgivings in a dark corner of her mind, she smiled at Julie for the first time that morning.

"No. There's no harm in that," Marcy said.

Through the passenger window of the car Marcy watched the ordered chaos of activity on Naval Air Station Whidbey Island while Jim expertly guided the car through the maze of white cinder block buildings containing living quarters and administrative offices. He drove as though he hadn't been gone for over a year. He'd returned the previous weekend. She hadn't bothered to meet his plane when it landed at the base airport.

As Jim swung the car onto the main avenue separating the bulk of the base from the hangars, large battleship gray Quonset huts came into view, dotting the asphalt of the flight line. From between the buildings small specks of blue could be seen as they hurried about their daily activities. At the far edge of the base, A-6's were practicing landings and take-offs on the runway, probably preparing for carrier maneuvers. Outside the confines of the car she knew the smell of JP-5 aircraft fuel, salt from Puget Sound, the whining of jet engines and the throaty hum of turbine props would be in the air,

combining to form the unique atmosphere she loved. Inside though, the mutual silence continued as they neared the security gate leading to Marcy's squadron. They'd limited their conversation on the drive to the base to occasional comments about the scenery.

As Jim pulled into a visitors' space and parked, he turned to look at her. "Do you think you'll be getting a ride home tonight after work, or should I come and get you?"

"I'll ask one of the guys for a ride," Marcy said.

"It won't be a problem for me to drive down," Jim said, staring intently at her.

"I'll be fine. It's hard to tell how late I'll be," Marcy said, reaching for the door handle, anxious to be out of the car.

"I'd really like you to come home as early as possible," Jim said, putting his hand on her arm to stop her from leaving.

Marcy didn't respond, or look at him. She didn't need to ask why he wanted her to come home. She knew he wanted to talk to her, to find out why she'd been avoiding him since he'd come home. He'd also want to know why she'd come in last night and gotten drunk, finally falling asleep in a recliner in the living room, instead of going upstairs to their bed. She wished she could have a cigarette. She didn't smoke in her house or car. Jim was an ex-smoker.

When she didn't answer him he turned to look out the windshield. Just inside the security gate Julie stood talking to the young airman standing watch outside the guardhouse.

"Isn't that second class in your shop?" he asked.

"Why?" Marcy noticed the look of distaste that crossed his face.

"Nothing. I just don't think her kind have any business in the military," Jim said.

"What do you mean, her kind?" Marcy asked, her shoulders tensing and hands balling into fists.

"Homosexuals."

"How the hell do you know she's gay? You've only met her a couple times."

"You can tell," Jim replied. "Look at her uniform for Christ's sake."

Though Julie wasn't completely within regulation, with her too long hair, wrinkled coveralls and unpolished boots, she loved the military as much as Marcy did. Just in a different way. Julie enjoyed fixing the airplanes, figuring out what was wrong with them and then following her reasoning to the end. She was one of the best technicians in the shop. Just because she didn't go along with all of the bullshit military life sometimes entailed it didn't mean she wasn't dedicated to her job. Julie just didn't understand why you had to play the game in order to get ahead. Marcy understood it all too well.

"There's an old saying you might not be familiar with. 'Don't judge a book by its cover,'" Marcy said with a slight smile that held no trace of humor.

"I'm also friends with people in your squadron, in case you've forgotten. I know what they say about her," Jim replied. "I know the law says we can't do anything as long as they aren't blatant about it, thanks to Clinton. I just don't agree with it. You can't count on them if

it comes to a life or death situation," he added, shrugging his shoulders.

"You can be such an ass," Marcy said, again preparing to get out of the car.

"What's your problem?" Jim asked. "This used to be something we agreed on."

"Things change. Especially after fourteen months."

Jim didn't reply. They'd already had this argument. He'd tried to convince her his reasons for staying in Diego Garcia were completely career motivated. She knew better. She'd heard the rumors. He'd fallen in love with the woman he'd been seeing; he'd even contemplated asking Marcy for a divorce so they could get married. Then he'd been dumped.

From what she'd heard he'd taken it pretty hard, but she hadn't been able to feel sorry for him. When he'd come home he'd expected to fall back on her and have someone to soothe his wounded pride and ego. She'd asked him about the divorce.

He'd denied it too quickly. After that she'd spent as little time as possible in the same room with him.

"Look, I have to go. We'll talk about this later," Marcy said, stepping from the car and slamming the door behind her.

Approaching the entrance to the security gate, she heard Jim backing out of the parking space and gave a sigh of relief as he left. Julie and the young airman stopped talking as she neared them. Julie smiled at her.

"Hi, Julie. Hi, Josh," Marcy greeted them, fishing in her pocket for her ID.



"Hi," Julie said.

"Hi, Marcy," Josh said, looking at her, then at Julie.

"What's up?" Marcy asked, sensing an undertone passing between them.

"I've been on watch since nine o'clock this morning. Do you think I could just go home when I'm done in a couple of hours, or do I have to work tonight?" Josh asked.

"I haven't been in the shop yet. Let me see what's going on. Stop by after you're relieved, and I'll let you know. If there's not much to do, I don't see why you can't."

"Okay." Josh made an attempt to give her a smile, but it fell short.

"Are you on your way into the hangar, or over to the smoking area?" Julie asked.

"Smoking area. I've still got about half an hour before I'm due in for pass down," Marcy said, consulting her watch.

"I'll join you. It's hard to tell what they'd find for me to do if I went in now. See ya," Julie said to Josh, before turning to walk away.

Marcy looked at Josh and noticed his eyes moving from her to Julie. The look on his face made her nervous. She had seen it too often lately.

"So, what were you two in such deep conversation about?" Marcy asked heading for the alley separating two of the hangars.

"He was asking me if I thought you'd let him go after his watch."

"Why was he asking you?" Marcy demanded, a note of panic in her voice.

"How should I know? Ask him."

Marcy didn't reply. As they walked, she ignored the members of her squadron

they encountered. Julie called out greetings and witty comments, but Marcy's stride and purposeful attitude didn't encourage stopping for conversation, so the two of them continued walking until they reached the end of the hangars, then veered right.

The smoking area sat between the back of a small gray storage building and the security fence. With the use of expectedly military logic, someone had decided it would be a good idea to place three wooden picnic tables in the space. Unfortunately, since the climate in Whidbey Island tended toward rain ninety-percent of the time, and there was no shelter over the tables, they were usually ignored in preference of huddling under the overhanging bit of roof the small building provided.

Today, however, the sky was uncharacteristically clear so Marcy walked over to the farthest of the tables. Sitting near the corner of the tabletop with her feet resting flat on the bench seat, she finally lit the cigarette she'd been craving earlier.

Julie took a seat on the table next to Marcy. They were close enough so they could talk without being overheard, but far enough away to avoid suspicion.

Marcy didn't feel like breaking the silence between them yet, so she turned to look out at the flight line instead. The beautiful landscape in this area of the country had always fascinated her. From where she sat she could make out the Olympic Mountains in the distance, their jagged lines etched into the sky. The sun had just started its descent toward the horizon, but since they were so far north and the sun set so early, it wouldn't be

long before the skyline would be a fiery combination of reds, oranges, and purples. If the sky stayed clear tonight, and there wasn't much work to do, she knew she'd find a few minutes to go out away from the lights of the hangars and watch the stars. She always hoped to see at least a few shooting stars as they made their rapid descent toward the earth.

Marcy knew the main reason she loved it so much here. The towering mountains and lush green of the trees were nothing like the flat brown state of Texas she had left behind at eighteen. The same age her mother had been when she had given birth to a baby she neither wanted nor cared about. Most of Marcy's life had been spent with her grandparents. A couple that weren't any fonder of the idea of raising a child than their daughter had been. They saw it as their duty though, as good Southern Baptists. A fact they had enjoyed reminding her and others of as often as possible. She hadn't spoken to them since she left and as far as she was concerned she didn't have any family in the civilian world.

"Why didn't you just let Josh go?" Julie asked, finally breaking the silence. "Damnit, I've got responsibilities," Marcy said. "There are plenty of times I've stood watch in the middle of night, then gone straight out to an aircraft afterward for an o'five hundred preflight. I know his type, and one of two things will happen to him in the future. Scenario one, he'll get out when his enlistment is over, take the college money, go back to school and after graduation, find a job in which he'll be as lazy as he is now. Scenario two, he'll

get some girl knocked up, and have to stay in to support his new wife and kid. He'll probably end up going back to the barracks and drinking half the night away with his buddies anyway."

"Not everyone fits neatly into the pigeon hole you put them in. Passing judgment on people really is one of your worst faults," Julie said.

"I know. I hate all the changes I see going on around me, though. I love the Navy. It's the only place I've ever belonged. It's just not as disciplined as it used to be."

"You have to admit some changes are for the better," Julie said, reaching over and laying her hand on Marcy's.

Marcy didn't say anything as she quickly removed her hand from Julie's, glancing around to make sure nobody had seen.

Julie sighed and decided to change the subject, "You and Jim seemed to be having a pretty heated conversation in the parking lot."

"He knows something's going on," Marcy said, getting up from the table and starting to pace.

"When are you going to tell him?"

"What do you mean?"

"You are going to tell him the truth, aren't you?" Julie asked

Marcy took a deep breath. "Julie, can we talk about this later?" It struck her as odd that this was twice in the same day she'd posed that question to someone.

"No," Julie said, staring at her.

After a few moments Marcy stopped and faced her. "Julie, I'm sorry. I know I said I would, but I just can't. I've agonized over this, believe me, but it





could mean the end of my career. You know it's a 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy. If I told him, all he'd have to do is report it and I'd be finished. Even if they didn't kick me out, any chance I have of making rank or getting into an Officers Training Program would be shot. I'd never be more than what I am now, a 'first class' running the night shift in an AT shop."

"What the hell are you going to do then?"

"I love you, you have to know that, but you can't expect me to be willing to give up my career. It's the only thing I'm sure of right now." Marcy shook her head. "I knew you wouldn't understand. You've never had to make this kind of decision."

After Marcy finished speaking, they both remained quiet for a while. Marcy went back to staring out at the flight line, and Julie stared at her.

"It's a wonder your eyes aren't brown instead of blue, you're so full of shit," Julie said quietly. "So I haven't been married, and I don't see the Navy as the end all, be all of my existence. At least I don't pretend to be something I'm not, making myself miserable in the process. Let me tell you something I do understand. I understand what it's like to lie awake at night, wishing sometimes life wasn't so hard for the person you loved. Trying to figure out ways to make it easier, and knowing you can't. You can try to lie to yourself and say the first time we were together was an accident, that we both drank too much, but what about the last five months? You want this as much as I do. You just don't want it to cost you anything." As Julie finished speaking she turned her gaze to her hands, which were clenched together on her lap.

Marcy heard the hurt and anger in Julie's voice as she spoke. She knew she should get up and walk away, leaving things as they were, but she just couldn't do it. She loved her too much. She had to try to make her understand.

She walked over and stood close to where Julie sat. She wanted to reach out and touch her, but didn't. "Do you think this is easy for me? If you do, you're wrong. I hate this as much as you do. I know this wasn't an accident, or caused by a night of drunken carelessness. Well, maybe in the beginning I thought it was," Marcy said with a slight smile. "I've come to realize though that I needed you. Hell, I still do. That doesn't change the fact I have to make a choice. I know it's not what you would've done. Please try and understand. The Navy is my home, my family. It's the only thing I've ever been any good at. It's all I know. I can't give up everything I've worked so hard for. Not for something I can't be sure will work out."

"Are you so sure the color of your uniform or how many ribbons you have on your chest will be enough?" Julie asked as she stood up to face Marcy. They were so close it would have only taken a step to bring them together.

"No, but I do know I have a future here. Can you say the same about us?" Marcy asked.

"I could, but would you believe me?"

"Probably not," Marcy said, as she reached out to take Julie's hand without thinking.

Before Julie could reply, Marcy heard the sounds of someone approaching the smoking area, but she wasn't quick enough to respond, as Jim came around the corner of the building.



"There you are. You forgot your gloves in the car," Jim said, the scene in front of him slowly sinking in. His steps slowed and the smile died from his face. Marcy watched his hand holding the gloves clench around them.

Marcy dropped Julie's hand and stepped away from her. As she did she knew it was the one thing she could've done that could never be taken back. Until that point, if she had wanted to, all the words that had been spoken could be undone. Hurt feelings could be mended, and decisions changed. Now, things were severed forever.

Out of the corner of her eye Marcy could see Julie square her shoulders as she stared at Jim, almost daring him to voice the thoughts they both knew were going through his mind.

Julie finally broke the silence. "Guess I better get inside and change to go home," she said before walking away. She held her head high and didn't glance at Jim as she passed him.



Marcy watched her go and felt her heart break. This was the way things had to be. She stared at Jim a few moments longer and then turned to look out over the flight line, hugging her arms around her.

She'd been wrong about the sunset. It wasn't a colorful, brilliant display, but instead just a whisper of fading light as the darkness forced the sun back behind the horizon where it belonged.

# Fading Light