

Lily's Monster

In a town of one-syllable names, Jonathon Remington Foster stood out like a beached whale at a walleye tournament. He could have gone by Jon, but he refused to give in to the pathological need to shorten everything. This wasn't New York or Chicago, where every letter was precious seconds wasted. It was Lily, MN, population 823. A town where people took twenty minutes to say hello when they passed you on the street, and another thirty to say good-bye. He'd once lost hours of his life listening to a conversation about the color of the sky in relation to the next day's fishing haul.

On Lily Island, mundane was an art form and if you weren't a local, you were off-color. Which was why Cliff had given him the nickname. Since the Chief was the only one who used it and since he signed Jonathon's paycheck, it had to be tolerated.

"What do you think, Doc?"

Jonathon had been thinking of Val, or more precisely, her apple pie. The way she got the crust so flaky, yet so buttery that it melted in your mouth. She was an artist; there was no other way to describe it. An artist who spent every spare second behind the diner counter with her nose buried in a book and the furrow in her brow deepening as the story gripped her. An artist whose apron hugged her curvaceous body the way Jonathon only

dreamed of doing. An artist who smelled of cinnamon and musk as she silently shoved his pie across the counter at him.

So what if her dark eyes narrowed at the sight of him, and her pouty lips pinched flat whenever he spoke to her? These things took time. She was still the loveliest thing on the island, a far cry from the hideous creature Chief Echols was referring to.

“What *is* that?” Jonathon gaped over the full-page newspaper ad spread out across the table, his fork halfway to his mouth.

“That’s Lilith,” Cliff said, a note of pride in his voice.

“Lilith.” Jonathon scraped aside a splatter of pie filling for a better look at the cat-like whiskers and sharp ears; the writhing, scaly body with claw-like appendages; the tail that could slap the paint off a pickup truck. Block letters at the bottom of the ad announced that Mose Bacon was offering a \$100,000 reward for anyone who brought in the lake monster, dead or alive.

Jonathon whistled. “This can’t be legal. It’s liable to cause a panic.”

“If by panic, you mean a fear that they’ll run short of fishing gear and bait, you’d be right.” Cliff nodded toward the back window, and Jonathon turned to see the line of sun-baked tourists and wizened fisherman headed down to the pier.

“Does he do this every year?”

“First time that I can recall,” said Cliff, leaning back in the booth so that the buttons strained the front of his flannel shirt. “But then it’s been a while since things were this bad. He’s just trying to make a living. Besides, much as I hate to admit it, tourists are good for the economy.”

“My opinion, Chief?” Guy Stanton turned in the booth behind Cliff and leaned a bristled arm across the back of their shared plastic seat. “Tourists bring pollution. And pollution brings on bad weather. Look at all that El Poyo shit.”

“I believe it’s El Nino, Guy. And the tourists bring in money, along with all that pollution. So what are you worried about? The fish will still bite, weather or not.” Cliff winked at Jonathon.

Jonathon sighed. If the locals insisted on interrupting their private conversations, it should be for something important. A wild bear attack, or a missing boater. Anything but the usual chit chat about hunting or fishing. Or lake monsters. Then maybe he could make a useful contribution, instead of feeling like the fifth wheel on their recreational vehicles.

“What about their money? Those people are struggling, too. Mose is giving them hope of this windfall in exchange for their last dollars. It’s unethical.”

“People spend their money on all kinds of crazy things. Who’s to say that a little vacation on the island is any worse than drinking it away? Or buying one of them travel trailers and hittin’ the open road?”

Jonathon ignored the look of naked longing on Cliff’s face. “He’s luring them here under false pretenses.”

“What makes you so sure it’s false?”

“You can’t be serious. You believe in this little fairy tale?”

“As long as I’ve lived in Lily, there’s been talk of a monster in those waters,” he answered, waving his hand in the general direction of Lake Superior. “Every so often,

someone comes up with a blurry photograph, or a story about how they were dragged for miles behind the ferocious beast before their line snapped.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

But before Cliff could claim yea or nay on the Lilith issue, they were interrupted by the chirp of his cell phone.

Jonathon drummed his fingers on the table and craned his neck for a glimpse of Val’s sweet face as Cliff muttered a series of “No’s” and “I can’t believe its.” If the diner weren’t so crowded, she would be reading. Last week, it had been Rex Stout, and they’d actually had a seven-minute conversation before she remembered she didn’t like him.

Now she was near the front window, looking especially fine with the hot flush of irritation in her cheeks as she catered to an annoying tourist. His buffed nails and a diamond pinky ring glittered under the fluorescent lights as he held his mug high and demanded a refill.

“Who the hell does he think he is?” Jonathon muttered.

Guy snorted. “That’s her ex.”

“Husband?” Jonathon’s heart thudded in protest.

“Boyfriend,” Guy corrected, leaning further over the top of the booth. “From her college days, back in Duluth. She used to bring him home on weekends. He’s some kind of salesman now. Fresh off the boat from Australia. Rumor is they’re gettin’ back together.”

“He hardly seems her type.”

Guy shrugged. “He’s rich.”

Cliff finished his call just as Val's ex reached over and gave her jean-clad bottom a noisy slap. Jonathon was halfway out of the booth before the phone had snapped shut, but Cliff held him back with one arm as he pulled on his windbreaker with the other.

"Looks like our argument is moot," he said. "Someone's brought in Lilith."

Jonathon paced the worn wooden boards of the dock, assaulted by the smell of dead fish and wet flannel. This was not the life he'd planned. He'd expected it to be hard, working his way up the career ladder. He'd joined the FBI fresh out of college, starting out in the Violent Crimes unit where he'd endured the requisite sleepless nights conducting—and interrupting—business on dirty street corners in the darkest parts of the city. After eight years, there had been an opening in NCAVC, the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crimes, and he'd jumped at it.

One bad split-second decision later and one drug deal gone south, and he was no longer climbing the ladder; he was lying at the bottom of it. After that, it wasn't so much a question of whether he'd be able to salvage his career as how far away he had to get from Virginia to do so. The answer had been roughly 1,500 miles, and mostly because this had been the only job he'd been offered.

"Help me out," Mose called, jerking Jonathon from his not-so-pleasant thoughts.

He leaned forward and held the bow of the boat while Mose looped the rope around the piling and climbed out.

"Where's Cliff?" Mose asked.

Jonathon jerked his head toward the parking lot. "Crowd control. He's afraid they'll get riled up once they hear the news." It was a job Jonathon usually hated, dealing with large men in hip waders and Minnesota accents, but today he would have preferred it. He cleared his throat. "So. The monster?"

Mose was a stooped man to begin with, but the question seemed to shrink him. His shoulders slouched, and with a heavy sigh he turned and led Jonathon into the bait shop.

The room was small, cramped shelving and a wide counter taking up most of the space. The walls were covered with various fishing accoutrements, lures and nets and a hundred other things that Jonathon had never used and would injure himself with if he tried.

Mose spread a stack of photos across the counter.

The fisherman in the pictures looked tiny compared to the gigantic beast beside him. It might have been three, even four times his size, but the way the fish was curled across the dock was hard to tell. In fact, most of the details were fuzzy. There were fins of some kind, and the face had whiskers similar to the ad in the paper, but beyond that there was no proof it was even aquatic.

All Jonathon knew for certain was that the fisherman was Val's butt-slapper ex-boyfriend.

He slid the photos back across the counter with one finger. "Is this all you've got? Photos are easy to doctor."

"I took 'em," Mose answered, shaking his head.

"And what is it you want me to do, exactly?"

Mose looked surprised. "Prove it's a fake, a' course."

The light dawned on Jonathon. Cliff wasn't handling crowd control. He'd sent him in here alone as payback for questioning their legend. Now it would be his job to prove—or disprove—this fish story.

It was a test.

"But you put up the reward. You must have expected this."

Mose dropped his gaze to the scuffed countertop. "Look," he said softly. "Lilith makes a good story. But fact is, I don't have a hundred grand to shell out to this guy."

"You want me to prove he's lying so you don't have to pay."

"It ain't about the money," Mose protested, but as Jonathon glanced around the room, he knew that wasn't true. Mose had a wife and five kids to feed, and his business had taken a bad hit when the economy tanked. Fishing excursions were a luxury few could afford anymore.

"There's guys out there who've searched their whole lives for a shot at her. And this schmuck nabs her in half a day?" He shook his head. "It smells . . ."

Fishy? Jonathon thought, groaning inwardly. "Did you actually see him bring in . . . Lilith?"

Mose shook his head. "I was in my shop. All of a sudden, there's a ruckus out on the dock. So I goes down, and there's Frank, holdin' that thing. He says he wants the money." He shook his head sadly. "I'll lose the business and my house if I have to pay."

It was on the tip of Jonathon's tongue to suggest that he should have thought of that earlier. Then he remembered Frank's hand on Val's butt.

"Did he rent his equipment from you?" he asked instead.

“Nope. Had his own rig.”

“Have you seen it?”

“Nope.”

Jonathon glanced out at the pier, where several boats bobbed near the docks, along with dozens of others moored out in the harbor. “I’ll go talk to him, I guess, and take a look at the fish. Do you know where he’s staying?”

Mose scratched his armpit, apparently a sign of deep concentration. “Bea’s, I think,” he said at last.

Bea owned the town’s only four-star accommodations. Bea’s B&B. Jonathon suspected she’d changed her name just for the alliteration, but he hadn’t found anyone who would confirm it. Island folks stuck together. Still, this Frank was more of an outsider than he was, and he made a mental note to talk to Bea. He left Mose pondering his financial downfall and headed back to the pier where Cliff was trading fish stories with the crowd.

“. . . and then the line snapped, and I never did get a good look at her,” Cliff continued, shaking his head as the other man guffawed and slapped him on the back.

They snapped to attention as Jonathon approached. “You seen it? Is it her?”

As it would be pointless to draw attention to the grammatical errors, Jonathon didn’t try. Instead, he shrugged. “I only saw photos. But I doubt it.”

The man brightened. “Told you it’s a fake.”

“Of course it’s a fake. Lilith doesn’t exist.”

Jonathon’s statement was met with blank stares and absolute silence.

“Lilith or not,” Cliff said, taking pity on him, “Mose is going to have to pay up unless someone can prove this guy wrong.”

“That’s going to be a problem. How do you prove the fish *isn’t* Lilith? Mose was pretty vague on his specifications. Lilith, dead or alive. No size requirements, no identifying features.”

Cliff rocked back on his heels and studied the sky for a moment. “If I were you, I’d start by identifying the species of this so-called monster. You’re the forensic bi-o-logist.” He spoke slowly, stressing every syllable of Jonathon’s title.

“My area of expertise is botany,” he protested, “not ichthyology. Plants, not fish,” he translated for the other fishermen.

“You’re smart. I’m sure you can verify the specimen.”

“Fine. I’ll send it to the state lab . . .”

“No can do,” Cliff interrupted.

“What? Why?”

“The crime lab won’t take it. This isn’t a criminal matter.”

“Then why are we involved?”

Cliff grinned. “When I heard who it was brought in Lilith, I figured you’d love the chance to prove the SOB wrong.”

* * *

Cliff was asleep at his desk when Jonathon returned to the station several hours later, but Kate wasn’t. As dispatcher, it was her job to remain alert. As office manager, it was her job to keep the office clean and organized, and her steely gaze told Jonathon that

his appearance had not gone unnoticed. He gulped, and snuck a glance at the professional wrestling poster of herself she kept tacked over her desk. He'd heard stories of men confessing at the mere sight of Kat "Cradle Hold" Kelly, and he couldn't blame them. He wouldn't want to have a run in with her in a dark alley. Hell, he didn't want to have a run-in in their well-lit office.

To his immense relief, after studying his soaked clothing and the puddle forming under his boots, Kate merely sighed and went to get a towel.

"Where you been, Doc?"

"Fishing."

Cliff cracked an eyelid. "Most folks do it from inside the boat."

Jonathon ignored the dig and laid the towel on a chair before he sat down to remove his boots.

Cliff let his own boots slide off the filing cabinet with a clatter, then rose and ambled through the swinging half-door that separated their desks from the outer office.

"Just idle curiosity?" he asked. "Or maybe you think Lilith's still out there."

He paused with one sock in hand and studied his pink, prune-like toes. "Do you?"

The chief stroked his strawberry beard and gazed out the window. "Hard to say, hard to say."

"I was looking for witnesses. Did you know, I can't find a single person who actually saw Frank Ashcroft out on the lake?"

"It could happen. Some guys are pretty secretive about their fishing spots."

"I found his boat docked out in the bay. He's rigged up some sort of giant net contraption."

“I’m not going to ask how you know that.”

Jonathon stood and began toweling off his hair. “It was on deck, in plain sight. I had Mose bring the boat up along side. I never touched it, just leaned over to get a good look.” He slapped at his wet pants. “Way over.”

Cliff’s lips twitched. “That’s one way to get your sea legs.”

“It was a huge net. Perfect for catching a giant fish. And I can’t help but wonder how this guy ends up on our island, equipped to catch a monster, before the reward is even announced.”

Cliff gave this some thought. “Maybe he’s one of those conspiracy theorists, believes the government is hiding proof of monsters in our lakes.”

“If that were true, he’d have contacted the media already.”

The chief pulled the coffee pot off the hotplate and filled a chipped mug, then patted his breast pocket for sugar packets. Kate felt that the body was a temple, and she barely tolerated coffee in the office, much less the artificial additives to go in it. “That’s odd, isn’t it?”

“What?” Jonathon squeezed water out of his shirttails and onto the towel.

“Why hasn’t he made an official announcement? Called a press conference?” He fished in his pocket and came up empty. “I’m sure one of the Universities would offer him some money to study her.”

Their eyes met.

“She’s a fake,” Cliff said, sipping the black brew with an exaggerated wince.

“And the bastard knows it. This was a scam from the beginning.”

Cliff clapped him on the shoulder. "Nice to see your loyalties have shifted, Doc. Now how do we prove it?"

Jonathon's face tightened as he strode to his desk, pulled open a drawer, and drew out a pair of latex gloves. "Kate, call over to Bea's and have Ashcroft bring us the fish."

"Right now?"

"If the lab won't dissect the fish, I'll do it myself."

They both stared at him, Cliff's mug halfway to his mouth, Kate's hand resting on the telephone receiver.

"You ever gutted a fish, Doc?"

Jonathon had never touched a fish, other than Val's Friday special dunked in tartar sauce, and only then so he wouldn't look like an idiot.

It was much the same incentive that drove him now.

"I'll need permission to dissect the fish." Jonathon pushed a piece of paper across the table.

Frank Ashcroft signed it and pushed it back. "Just let me know when I can collect my money."

"Just a couple of questions. You're the one who suggested the reward, aren't you?"

"According to who?" Ashcroft crossed his legs and draped an arm casually across his knee.

"Mose Bacon, when I ask him."

Ashcroft waved a hand in the air. "Mose and I were drinking. Hard to say who came up with the idea first."

"I'll say. It was you," Jonathon said. "You're the one who brought over the net to catch her, remember?"

Ashcroft flushed. "Lilith intrigues me. I'll admit I might have been a little more prepared than some. But that didn't guarantee I'd catch her. And Mose can hardly complain. He made money off the deal."

Jonathon stared him down, gripping the edge of his desk. "Only until he pays you a hundred grand. Then he'll be flat broke."

"That reminds me. When do I get the money?"

"First we'll need the samples."

Ashcroft leaned forward. "You're more than welcome to examine my fish. But let me make one thing perfectly clear. I am not footing the bill for any of this. You're the ones who don't believe me. You can pay to prove me wrong."

Jonathon felt his temper flare, but he forced himself to concentrate. "Prove you wrong? That's an odd choice of words. I would have chosen 'prove me right,' and gone for the assumption of innocence."

"I brought in Lilith, just like the poster said, and I want the reward."

"I'm sure you do," Kate murmured as she approached the desk. To Jonathon, she announced, "We're all ready for you."

"Excellent." Jonathon made a show of pulling on his rubber gloves. "Shall we go, Mr. Ashcroft? Or would you prefer to wait out here? This could get messy, and those shoes look expensive."

Ashcroft paled, but stood and followed Jonathon down the hall to the tiled room in the back of the building, which served as the town morgue. With their small population and limited budget, they weren't equipped to do any kind of lab work, despite Jonathon's qualifications. But people died, and if it happened when passage to the mainland was halted, this was where they stored the bodies.

The room had been cleaned, thanks to Kate. The stainless steel table gleamed back a reflection of silvery green scales. Fluorescent lights blazed down on the monster, giving Jonathon his first close-up look at the alleged creature that some men had waited their entire lives to see.

She wasn't pretty.

She smelled of dank and muck, of dirty places far beneath the surface of the water, spaces light had never reached. But more noticeable than the smell were the fiery red spikes along her dorsal fin and the long strands beneath her chin, which gave her the appearance of a giant, water-dwelling dragon. One dead eye stared up at him, daring him to question her existence. Jonathon blinked first.

"We measured her when we brought her in," Cliff said from the back of the room. "Twenty-four feet, seven inches long."

"There were no specifics on length," Ashcroft was quick to point out.

"Just putting it on the record."

Jonathon ignored the back and forth and tried to concentrate on pushing his scalpel through the scaly flesh. This was really Cliff's area of expertise. But he recognized that this case, as much as it was a case, was a sort of trial by fire, and he was determined not to get burned. So he slit open the stomach cavity and ignored the lurch in

his own gut as brackish water spilled out onto the table. With a tweezers, he pushed aside stones and other debris, praying he'd find something. There was only one way he could think of to could discredit Ashcroft, and only if the fish cooperated.

It had.

He savored the jolt of adrenaline as he pulled a long, brown, strand from the belly of the fish and laid it gently in the petri dish on the table.

“What's that?” Ashcroft asked, his voice sharp.

“That is going to make Mose Bacon a very happy man.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“This is Thalassia,” Jonathon said.

The others looked blank.

“Also known as Turtle Grass.”

Still no response.

“Seaweed,” Jonathon sighed. “This type is most commonly found in the ocean off the coast of Australia. Where you've recently traveled. Quite a coincidence, wouldn't you say Mr. Ashcroft?”

“I'll be goddamned,” Cliff said. “You brought that fish here with you all the way from Australia?”

Ashcroft bristled. “I don't have to listen to this BS.”

Kate cracked her neck and laid a meaty hand on his arm. “I think it would be a good idea to hear him out.”

“This fish didn't come out of this lake, or any other body of fresh water.”

“Why here?” Cliff asked him. “Why now?”

Under the weight of their glares and Kate's hand, Ashcroft seemed to deflate. "I found this thing washed up on the beach last month. I thought I'd found an honest to God sea monster. But the fisherman down there, they just laughed. Then I remembered the stories Val used to tell me about Lilith."

"They laughed at you because this isn't a monster. It's an oarfish," said Cliff.

Ashcroft scowled. "It isn't like anyone knows that."

Apparently only Cliff, who hadn't cared to share that bit of information. Which Jonathon guessed had been the point all along.

"What are you doing to do to me?"

"I think the money you've spent on your little scam is some punishment. Plane tickets, boat rentals." Cliff clucked his tongue. "Like my grandma always used to say, don't spend the egg money before the chickens lay. Other than that, I suggest you get out of town as fast as those Eye-talian loafers will carry you. I'll even send Kate here along to keep you company until the next ferry."

By the time they'd given Mose the good news and disposed of the fish, both Kate and Ashcroft had beaten them to the diner. One of them was holding court with a table of fishermen hanging on her every word, while the other glowered in the corner. Ashcroft rallied from his sour mood only long enough to slide his hand along Val's butt as she walked past his table.

"He's got some nerve--"

Jonathon broke off as Val pivoted and dumped an entire coffee pot into her ex's lap, then sashayed back behind the counter, her cheerful whistle almost drowning out Ashcroft's screams. Jonathon caught a hint of a smile swimming in her dark eyes as she dished up a heaping serving of pie and slid it across the counter.

"Thanks. But I didn't order - "

"It's on the house," she said, lowering one lash in a slow wink that sent shivers down his spine. She propped her elbows on the counter and rested her chin in her hands. "Did I ever tell you about the time I saw Lilith?"